

THE LAND OF THE STARS:
THE ORIGIN OF CY TWOMBLY'S AESTHETIC

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I would like to thank the Washington and Lee University Archives for bringing the photo of the backdrop to my attention. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

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Introduction

Cy Twombly, one of the twentieth century's most celebrated abstract artists, owes his start and continued success to the small southern town of Lexington, Virginia. While other art historians, such as Kirk Varnedoe and Richard Leeman, acknowledge that Lexington was a point of interest for Twombly, they all agree that it was Europe that played the larger role in his works.¹ However, it was in Lexington that Twombly first found the inspiration that created the basis of his oeuvre. I maintain that it was Lexington, not Europe that influenced Twombly the most.

My thesis focuses on a little-known backdrop Twombly painted for a children's Christmas program in 1953. The backdrop was first brought to my attention after *The News-Gazette*, the local Lexington newspaper, ran an archival photo to highlight a talk the Rockbridge Historical Society was hosting about Twombly.² Interestingly, the backdrop does not appear in any of the Twombly literature; it seems the work had been forgotten and discarded, though it represents one of - if not the - largest work created solely by the famed artist.³ Though absent from any existing scholarship on the artist's

¹ Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly: a monograph*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2005). See also Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

² "Twombly Next Up In Artists Series," *The News-Gazette*, January 22, 2014, 6B.

³ In 2009, the Louvre commissioned Twombly to create the ceiling in the Salle de Bronzes. At 3,750 square feet, the ceiling is the largest painting completed by Twombly. However, for the sake of my argument, he had numerous assistants help him with the work and therefore, the work cannot be credited solely to him. Also, he departs from his typical style in this work in order to ensure the work fit it with the collection of classical bronzes housed in the gallery. He took into consideration the architecture and the purpose of the building and designed the ceiling from that. It was created in sections and hung like wallpaper. Therefore, the ceiling, while an important aspect of Twombly's career, does not necessarily fit in with what my argument and investigation into his stylistic advancements.

work, I argue that this backdrop marks the earliest instance of several artistic devices Twombly would employ in his later painting: grandiose size, classical subject matter, naïve composition, and the combination of text and image. Using a biographical methodology as well as extensive hands-on research and firsthand accounts from the people who grew up with Twombly, such as Sally Mann, Martha Daura, and Lisa Tracy, I will present my thesis through two case studies, comparing the 1953 backdrop with one of his later paintings, *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catallus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* (1994), one of his largest canvases. This monumental work took him twenty-two years to complete, and it was one that he could only complete once he came back to Lexington. It encompasses all aspects of the unique aesthetic that he began to develop during his youth in the small town. The comparison of his two largest works, while aesthetically different but thematically similar, shows the extent of Lexington's influence in his works throughout his career; specifically how the early work sets a precedent for the artistic elements found in the later work.

In Chapter One, I will discuss Twombly's early life up to the completion of the backdrop, notably the influence of Pierre Daura and Sheldon Cheney. Chapter Two will focus on the history of the backdrop and its aesthetic elements that make up the artist's unique style. Finally, Chapter Three will examine *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* to illustrate the development of the stylistic concepts throughout his career in the second half of the twentieth century, which were first illustrated in the backdrop.

Chapter One:

Early Life

Twombly's roots in Lexington extend back to his birth on April 25, 1928 at the city's Stonewall Jackson Hospital. Born Edwin Parker Twombly, Jr., his father, a major league baseball player, had received the nickname "Cy," referring to legendary baseball pitcher Cy Young, and passed it down to his second child and only son. The elder Twombly coached almost every sport at Lexington's Washington and Lee University and served as the athletic director from 1954 to 1968.⁴ Having no interest in sports, Twombly, Jr. turned his attentions instead to art. Even from a young age, he demonstrated great artistic talent. At the age of twelve, his mother gave him Jean Cassou's 1940 *Picasso* monograph, which featured Picasso's portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter on its cover.⁵ This cover inspired Twombly to recreate the image, resulting in the first painting he remembered making. Impressed with his skill and natural talent, his parents signed him up for art classes. Because of Lexington's small size, art classes were few and far between. Fortunately for Twombly, a renowned avant-garde artist, Pierre Daura, had recently taken up residence in nearby Rockbridge Baths and agreed to give him lessons.

A Spanish artist, Daura and his American wife owned a summer home at nearby Rockbridge Baths, having moved from Europe to the area in 1939 at the onset of the Second World War. Not only did Daura teach Twombly artistic techniques and critique his early works, but he also talked to him about the modernist painters with whom he had

⁴ Pamela H. Simpson, "Cy Twombly, The Lexington Connection," *Shenandoah* (2007): 9.

⁵ Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 11. The edition was presumably Jean Cassou, *Picasso* (London-Paris-New York: The Hyperion Press, 1940).

worked with in Paris, such as Joaquín Torres-García and Fernand Léger.⁶ Daura – whose own teacher was José Ruiz, Picasso’s father – had taken part in the European avant-garde as a member of the *Cercle et Carré* group in France during the Twenties and Thirties. While short-lived, *Cercle et Carré* played an integral role in the development of abstraction.⁷ The group, formed by Daura, Torres-García, and Michel Seuphor stemmed chiefly from Daura and Torres-García’s friendship, which began in 1926 and grew as the two exchanged beliefs about what art should be. Together, these artists opposed the illusionistic and self-indulgent ideology of Surrealism and instead sought inspiration in the art and ideas of earlier abstract artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich, for whom simple geometric objects, such as a circle or a square, have the ability to represent an abundance of meanings. For Daura, art needed to represent a universal truth; in order to accomplish this, he wrote, “the shapes and colors should be sufficient by themselves. This is the purpose of a picture. Pure painting...”⁸ Torres-García, too, believed that art served as a connection to the cosmos, stating that true meaning lies not in imitation but “rather in the qualities and structures...in the tones and ways of opposing and discriminating between them, in something non-descriptive: rhythms, tonalities, arabesques, proportions.”⁹ Both artists understood that the formal qualities of a work had the ability to illustrate a greater truth about humanity.

⁶ “Le Pinceau Errant,” *Telerama* (July 13, 2011) and email from Martha Daura to Sally Nexsen, March 3, 2014.

⁷ Lynn Boland, “Inscribing a Circle,” in *Cercle et Carré*, ed. Lynn Boland, (Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art, 2013), 13. All the information regarding the *Cercle et Carré* group comes from this source.

⁸ From the Daura Diaries dated August 7, 1928, Daura Archive in Lynn Boland, “Inscribing a Circle,” *Cercle et Carré* (Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art, 2013), 25.

⁹ Joaquín Torres-García, “The New Art of America” in *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, ed. Patrick Frank (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 137-140.

Cercle et Carré would dissolve after a few years, though when Daura moved to Virginia, he continued to practice the central beliefs of *Cercle et Carré*, focusing on the concepts of structure and construction in abstracted works that retained representational qualities. From an early age, then, Daura exposed the young Twombly to art that, while representational in concept, was formally abstracted. Studying at the Daura home also introduced Twombly to prehistoric art. Daura's wife had studied cave art while in France and had great interest in art of ancient peoples.¹⁰ In 1944, Daura completed a portrait of his pupil. (Fig. 1) Although not representative of the *Cercle et Carré* ideals, the portrait of the young Twombly still manages to capture the essence of the young artist as a contemplative, subdued man through its use of color.¹¹

Twombly was fascinated by Daura's stories about modern art, and for his sixteenth birthday, Twombly's mother gave him *A Primer of Modern Art* by Sheldon Cheney.¹² While art historians acknowledge Twombly's use of the book in a strictly biographical sense, none examine the extent of its influence in his stylistic development. For Twombly, this book reinforced Daura's insights into modern art. It applauded modern artists for their courage to explore the visionary movement while at the same time it criticized bourgeois artistic preferences. These modern artists, Cheney wrote,

¹⁰ Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 14

¹¹ According to Pierre Daura's daughter, Martha, in 1966 she gave Twombly several pieces of art that he had done while he was studying with her father. In return, he was to give her the portrait of himself done by her father. However, when she went to collect the portrait, Twombly informed her that his son, Alessandro, had seen the portrait and announced, "Father, I have to have this portrait when you are gone. You cannot give it away." Martha, rather than being upset at the outcome of the exchange, was pleased that a member of the Twombly family wanted to keep a Daura painting (Email to Sally Nexsen from Martha Daura, March 3, 2014). Image credit Laura Valeri, Associate Curator of European Art, Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia. Martha Daura,

¹² Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 11.

concerned themselves more with imperfect aesthetics to illustrate the connection between art and life than with depicting reality, and in so doing, they were the originators of contemporary creativity.¹³ Cheney stated that the most important aspect of art is for it to relate an experience or emotion to the viewer apart from the emotions of objective beauty.¹⁴ Importantly, he blamed education and those highly educated for limiting the aesthetics of what society perceives as good art – an idea that would reverberate in Twombly's later paintings.¹⁵ For the majority of society, Cheney argued, good art reflects a form of imitation. This stems from the ancient Greeks, who strived to perfect proportions and created the idealized form. It is through this act of imitating that art becomes unemotional, pictorial, and reasonable. The viewer rates art by its objective beauty rather than for the emotional response the work might entice. Cheney believed that artists should look back, past the Greeks, to prehistoric cave art.¹⁶ According to Cheney, the lack of intellect of prehistoric man allowed him to create drawings that, while simplistic, were emotionally charged. Even though these early artists strived to create somewhat realistic images, the lack of knowledge and resources forced them to be creative in their endeavor to make drawings. Cheney argued that knowledge limits one's expression in that one becomes preoccupied with perspective and background.¹⁷ Primitive, prehistoric art did not concern itself with trivial aspects and instead focused on the thing or figure itself. Cheney maintained that for modern expressionism to take place, art must revert back to the directness of the image and use that as a starting point.

¹³ Sheldon Cheney, *A Primer of Modern Art* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

Cheney makes it clear in his book that the key to creating new, meaningful art is to break away from the ideals of the bourgeoisie. One way of doing this is to look back to prehistoric art, but another way, and one that Twombly also employs in his work, is to revert to a more childish aesthetic. Children, like prehistoric people, lack the knowledge that inhibits educated adults to understand and recognize emotional and expressive images. Children have a naïve sense of the world and therefore a different understanding of worldly things than adults. They see simpler aspects. Cheney believes that by looking at children's art as well as prehistoric art, an artist can depict images that contain an emotional response to a certain aspect of humanity. Twombly "devoured" Cheney's book, and its influence, as we will see, is evident in his backdrop as well as later works.¹⁸

Twombly graduated from Lexington High School in 1947 and subsequently moved to Boston to study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. After two years in Boston and at the urging of his parents, Twombly enrolled in the inaugural art program at Washington and Lee University in 1949. He returned to Lexington and studied under the program head, Marion Junkin. Junkin quickly realized Twombly's advanced talent and encouraged his student to transfer to the Arts Students League in New York, where he himself had studied. Thanks to scholarship money from the Art Students League and a grant from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Twombly moved to New York in September 1950. Both Junkin and Daura wrote letters of recommendation for the grant awarded from the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, with Daura saying Twombly was "the most promising young art student [he] ever came across."¹⁹ Junkin meanwhile

¹⁸ Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 11.

¹⁹ Daura's letter dated May 6, 1950 in Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 12.

pointed towards Twombly's future, writing that "he will develop into a poet in paint and that it will be a strong poetry as he is not easily changed from his purpose."²⁰ These recommendations from his Lexington-based teachers helped secure Twombly's acceptance to the Art Students League.

In New York, Twombly learned more from watching other students work and visiting museums and galleries than he did from his actual teachers. He saw paintings by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline, all of whom had studied briefly at the Arts Students League during the 1920s and 1930s.²¹ These paintings by his predecessors helped him move away from figurative aspects of his work and into a simpler form of abstraction. This shift in artistic style caused the League to take note of the artist. Starting in 1951, he showed his work in Art Student League exhibitions and was offered his first solo show at Seven Stairs Gallery in Chicago.²² More important, however, was his newfound relationship with another fellow young artist, Robert Rauschenberg, whom he met at the Art Students League. Rauschenberg convinced Twombly to spend the summer with him at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and it was there during the summer of 1951 that Twombly created some of the earliest oil paintings that he credits solely to himself.²³

From this period, both *Untitled* and *Landscape* reflect the contemporary art seen in New York. (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 respectively) However, the aspects of the late 1940s expressionism mix with the cave painting style that has its roots in Twombly's early Lexington days. In these two non-figurative paintings, Twombly utilizes a simplistic

²⁰ Simpson, "Cy Twombly, The Lexington Connection," 10.

²¹ Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 12.

²² Simpson, "Cy Twombly, The Lexington Connection," 10.

²³ Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 13.

color scheme and linear composition, which give the paintings a prehistoric and archaic quality. Each of the paintings has an earth-toned palette that makes the black and white linear aspects stand out. These qualities demonstrate Daura's ideals as well as the beliefs laid out in Cheney's book on modern art and showcase the direction in which Twombly was taking his art. His influences in Lexington guided him towards an art filled with expression and meaning rather than strictly figural and literal. The Cheney book that his mother had given him drew attention to the importance of understanding ancient artistic styles as the starting point to creating truly modern art, while Daura's wife had a pronounced interest in prehistoric cave art with which Twombly would have come into contact during his lessons with Daura.²⁴ Daura's wife likely owned, or had at least come into contact with, copies of the first photographs of Lascaux that emerged in the 1940s, having studied cave art while still back in France. Both paintings contain linear, non-figurative forms in a simple, earth-toned color palette, much like one would see in prehistoric cave paintings. These exemplify how Twombly recognized the importance in recalling an ancient style in his search for his own artistic identity.

While at Black Mountain College, Twombly came into contact with a well-known art dealer, Sam Kootz, who was impressed with Twombly's work and offered him a spot in a two-person show in 1951. The show was not well received, with one critic describing the work as "dour" and "grimy."²⁵ Twombly, again, decided to enroll in the winter 1952 session at Black Mountain College. While there, he applied for a traveling fellowship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to explore Europe for a few months with Rauschenberg. Another letter of recommendation from former teacher Junkin cemented

²⁴ Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 14.

²⁵ James Fitzsimmons, "New Talent," *Art Digest*, vol. 26, no. 6 (December 15, 1951), 20.

his being awarded the prestigious fellowship, and in August 1952, Twombly and Rauschenberg left the United States and sailed for Europe. During this trip, the two first spent time in Rome before heading down to North Africa. Here, Twombly experienced first-hand the ancient and prehistoric art that first inspired him. He also discovered his love of the Mediterranean and its culture.

By May 1953, Twombly and Rauschenberg arrived back in New York, where they had a joint show at the Stable Gallery. Twombly's work had been further reduced to lines and simple colors. Again, the show was met with negative criticism, which left Twombly with an unfavorable impression of the New York art world. In late autumn of 1953, he was drafted by the U.S. Army and sent to Camp Gordon in Augusta, Georgia where he served as a cryptologist. While on leave, he came back to Lexington in order to spend the Christmas season with his family. It was during this time in December 1953 that Twombly painted the backdrop for a local children's play, *The Little Comet*.

Chapter Two:

The Backdrop

The Little Comet was written and directed by Rev. Thomas V. Barrett specifically for the children of Ann Smith School, an elementary school in Lexington. Information is scant, though through archival newspapers I have pieced together elements of the narrative. It seems that *The Little Comet* tells the story of a comet who agrees to go on a dangerous journey and ultimately transforms into the Star of Bethlehem.²⁶ The comet travels through the Land of the Stars and meets characters such as the Great Star Maker, Mars, Jupiter, Venus, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the Milky Way, Mary and Joseph, the Three Kings, angels, shepherds, snowflakes, and raindrops. The play took place in the Lexington High School Auditorium on December 19, 1953.

No concrete information remains about the details of the commission, though according to Lisa Tracy, who played the lead role of the Little Comet, it is possible that it was Marion Junkin who suggested that Barrett ask Twombly to create the backdrop.²⁷ (Fig. 4) Barrett had moved to Lexington after Twombly had already left to continue his studies, and therefore, he would not have known him personally. However, Junkin attended R.E. Lee Episcopal Church, where Barrett was the Reverend. Junkin had stayed in contact with Twombly while he was away and would have known he was coming back home for Christmas.

²⁶ "Ann Smith Pupils to Give Play on December 19th," *The Lexington Gazette*, December 9, 1953, A1.

²⁷ Lisa Tracy in discussion with the author, March 13, 2014.

Twombly's backdrop depicts the story's Land of the Stars. Sadly, the backdrop has since been lost or destroyed, but in the only known surviving photograph from the play, one sees his interpretation of the cosmic realm. He paints a dark background on which he intermittently places different constellations and cosmic deities using a light paint color, probably white. Instead of only supplying the stars that make up each constellation, Twombly outlines each of the figures; from left to right, one can easily identify Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, and Pegasus. Twombly also depicted Mars and Neptune on a panel situated beyond the frame of the photograph that served as the stage's left wing.²⁸

The photograph shows how Twombly incorporated his mature artistic style into the backdrop for the children's play. The backdrop represents numerous firsts for the young artist including the use of a large-scale canvas, the employment of a naïve composition, a reference to historical subject matter, and the combination of text and images. All of these aspects would later become part of Twombly's signature style.

The backdrop marks Twombly's first truly large-scale painting. Some of his previous works had been large, roughly seven feet wide. However, based on the photograph, I estimate that the main section of the backdrop was at least seven feet tall by twelve feet wide with two adjoining sections serving as wings and adding to those dimensions. While Twombly might not have realized the potential of working on such a large canvas before embarking on the backdrop, his use of increasingly larger canvases throughout his later career suggests this first experience was both important and inspirational.

²⁸ Lisa Tracy, March 13, 2014.

The backdrop's color scheme and simple, linear forms showcase his interest in the naïve art that Cheney encouraged in his book, as well as the ideals that Daura taught. Both Cheney and Daura had emphasized the importance of the emotional aspect of a painting rather than the actual pictorial quality. The fact that the backdrop was done for a children's play represents an untrained quality. Twombly's interest in child's art falls under Cheney's ideas that in order to truly illustrate an emotion, one must move away from knowledge and into a state of unknowing. Both children and prehistoric peoples represent this unknowing state of mind. In order to ensure the emotional impact of the backdrop, Twombly refers to the prehistoric cave art that Cheney wrote embodied true expressionism. Twombly completed the backdrop shortly after he returned from Europe, with the images of actual prehistoric cave drawing and archaic forms still fresh in his mind. The simplistic color scheme – again, probably consisting of black or dark blue and white – recalls Twombly's early works, such as *Untitled* from 1951 and *Tiznit* from 1953. Most of his work up to this point had been reduced to monochrome. It is not until later that Twombly would inject bright colors into his canvases. By reducing the backdrop to such simplistic terms, Twombly demonstrates his knowledge of allowing art to express emotion.

Twombly's mature painting would frequently return to the subject of classical myths or variations of myths. Wary of overemphasizing the importance of the 1953 backdrop, it is interesting to note that this was one of the first instances of Twombly turning his attention to this subject matter. The fact that Twombly depicts figures from classical mythology explicitly rather than allegorically, meanwhile, illustrates an important difference between his early and later works. The backdrop suggests his desire

to capture his subjects' essence anthropomorphically; he creates the cosmic deities from constellations and then outlines their forms to ensure clarity. By contrast, in later works, Twombly merely *alludes* to figures, often reducing a form to a single line. This perhaps invokes classical deities' ability to effortlessly shift form from the physical to the eternal. Twombly's interest in not only mythology but also in poetry and philosophy began when he studied at Washington and Lee. He realized at his young age that literature, like art, had the ability to represent the essence of humanity in emotion and expression. The backdrop, as a visual representation of classical mythology in the form of celestial figures, showcases his early attempt to combine the two art forms in a way that would impact the viewer.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the backdrop is the first instance of Twombly's combining text with images, an artistic device that he would later adopt as a staple. Scholars have widely held that Twombly's union of image and text began a year later, in 1954; in fact, the backdrop appears to be his first instance of combining images and text. In the backdrop, again presumably for the sake of clarity, he includes the name of each figure right below the image. The purpose of the words adds to the semantics of the image, meaning that the words not only identify the figure but also establish the greater purpose of the figure. For example, the figure in the left of the photograph of the backdrop would remain unknown if not for the name listed beside it. "Jupiter" identifies the figure as Jupiter, the king of all gods and the god of the sky and lightning. In the greater picture, Jupiter as the king represents justice in that he rules over the universe and is charge of ensuring justice for all. By showing Jupiter in this form, Twombly shows how the idea of the king of the gods and god of the sky represents the universal need for

justice. Twombly's inclusion of a specific figure to stand for a universal theme or idea in the work demonstrates how this work holds greater meaning than what appears on the surface. This first occurrence of combination of text and imagery creates a clear meaning in Twombly's efforts to depict a universal feeling, which he also employs in his later works.

For Twombly, the road to artistic fame was not an easy one. While his mentors sang his praises and recognized his talent from the beginning, the New York art world rejected his shows. It was in Lexington where he originally thrived. Thanks to influences found there, he established his unique artistic style. Throughout the events in his life, Twombly continued to return to these first aesthetics formed in Lexington, including them in almost all of his work from the second half of the twentieth century. While not every work incorporates all the aspects first seen in the backdrop, one of his later paintings does showcase the grandiose size, classical subject matter, naïve composition, and integration of text and image of the Land of the Stars backdrop. Twombly's 1994 *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* demonstrates the numerous qualities typical of a Twombly painting all illustrated in a single work.

Chapter Three:

Later Work: *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*

In order to appreciate the important artistic precedent set by Twombly's work on the 1953 backdrop, it is useful to consider it alongside his later painting, *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*. (Fig. 5) For twenty years, Twombly had been working on a massive canvas measuring fifty-two feet long. For years the unfinished painting had hung on the walls of his home in Rome, but he lacked the inspiration to complete it.²⁹ Frustrated, he eventually took the painting down and reopened the windows on that wall, thereby eliminating the space needed to work on the massive painting. In the 1990s, the Menil Collection announced the plans for a building dedicated to housing Twombly's works. Involved in the construction and planning processes, Twombly designed a room large enough to house the unfinished painting. Twombly shipped the canvas to Lexington, where he worked on it in a friend's warehouse near his house.³⁰ Once back home, Twombly found inspiration to complete the canvases in one winter.

Twombly divided this painting, which he later titled *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, into three sections – not unlike the backdrop, coincidentally. Two panels measure 400 cm by 297 cm, and the middle panel measures 400 cm by 990 cm. The triptych hangs flat against the wall with all the panels connected to create a continuous painting. Twombly intended for the painting to be read from right

²⁹ David Sylvester, "Cy Twombly 2000," in *Interviews with American Artists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 175.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

to left, starting with the more colorful sections and moving towards the black and white areas.³¹ This specific directional reading also plays in to the content of the work.

Described in more detail later in the chapter, the painting illustrates the story of Catullus leaving Asia Minor for his home in Rome. To make this journey, Catullus traveled from east to west, or right to left, which Twombly emphasizes through the direction of the composition.

On the far right, the small panel contains colorful splotches of yellow, red, orange, purple, and black all placed on an off-white background, which is continuous throughout the entire work. In the upper right corner of the panel, Twombly includes a line from a poem that reads, “How you gaze beyond... ..and yet there on the other shore under the dark gaze sun in your eyes you were the other side the other dawn the other birth and yet there you were in the vast time by drop.” The poem, written in red paint, leads down to the first of the seemingly sporadic blotches, which run off the side of the canvas. The rest of the patches of paint vertically divide the painting in half with a dark, almost black, area in the middle of the canvas. All of the colored painted sections contain drips that pull the focus downward. While the main painted areas consist of splotches of paint, some also contain linear, colored pencil under drawings. These add a sense of exactness and purpose to the otherwise irregular globs of paint.

The central panel, the largest of the three, contains colored oil paint as well as pencil markings. The right side, as a continuation of the first panel, consists of colored blotches. However, the emphasis falls less on black in this portion of the panel and more on the colors. Warmer colors are on top and cooler colors make up the lower part. The

³¹ Leeman, *Cy Twombly: a monograph*, 254.

downward paint drippings lend a sense of verticality to this part of the canvas. To the left of this area, large circles made from black pencil mark the change from bright colors to simple pencil marks. The penciled circles also shift the vertical focus of the first and the start of the central panels to a more horizontal one. Traces of pale yellow diagonals starting at the colored sections and continuing past the circle add to the change from a vertical to a horizontal movement. Starting at this point, the painting only occurs in the bottom half of the canvas. At the middle point of the canvas, a dark blue diagonal leading away from the circle marks the end of the use of color. From this point on, white paint and dark pencil comprise the composition with groups of vertical pencil scratches occupying the rest of the lower part of this central canvas. At the left edge of this canvas, Twombly includes another line of poetry, this time written in light grey pencil. He inscribes, "Shining white air trembling in white light reflected in the white flat sea."

The left panel, the same size as the first, contains vertical scratches similar to those found in the left portion of the central panel. Again, located only in the bottom section as in the central panel, the top half remains blank. Pencil as well as white paint constructs the scratches. The use of white paint softens the harshness of the pencil lines and creates a more fluid movement to the end of the panel. Even though the composition is a triptych, the organization of colors and lines throughout creates continuity between the three sections.

In this work, Twombly combines all the elements of his artistic style into one painting. The aesthetics he first explored in the 1953 backdrop, the large-scale canvas, the naïve composition, the use of subject matter from antiquity, and the combination of text with images, come together again in the painting that he could only complete once he

brought it back in Lexington. *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* demonstrates how the ideas and beliefs about art first introduced to him during his youth in Lexington permeate his artistic career and resulted in an artistic style different than other artists working before, during, and after him.

While Twombly was renowned for his mammoth scaled paintings, some of which measure thirteen feet by twenty-one feet for example, this 1994 work and the backdrop represent the largest. It is also interesting to note that both paintings are divided into three parts but read as continuous images. The size of Twombly's canvases allowed him to explore the ideas of using color and form to inject meaning into a work. The large canvases left room for empty background space to offset the other figurations in the painting. This blank space adds meaning to the areas where Twombly applies his paint. Seen in the 1953 backdrop, the solid, dark background highlights the stars and cosmic figures; all the attention focuses on the figures. As first implemented in this backdrop, Twombly recalls Cheney's book and applies the aesthetics of prehistoric cave art in order to create a work of art representing the origins of emotional representation. The celestial figures on the backdrop resemble those figures prehistoric man drew on cave walls. The simplistic form and absence of unnecessary imagery showcases the rawness of human emotion. While not as explicit as in the backdrop, *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* also contains the elements of prehistoric art. The white background allows the splotches of color, pencil markings, and writing to form the central point rather than those aspects competing with a detailed background for attention. The central focus on the areas that Twombly paints shows how the focus should be on those regions and that there is deeper meaning to be extracted from them. Instead of illustrating

recognizable forms, Twombly injects meaning in the seemingly random areas of paint or markings through the use of color and line. The large size of Twombly's canvas allows him to leave the majority of the background as a blank color. A smaller scale would force him to paint more of the surface area and the paintings would lose their prehistoric qualities and thus the understanding that there is a deeper meaning embedded in the works.

Twombly employed large-scale canvases not only in *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* but also in the majority of his works after 1953. In 1955, he completed a series of dark ground paintings, one of which he titled *Panorama*. (Fig. 6) This painting, similar to the backdrop in terms of simplistic color scheme and linear markings, demonstrates how Twombly applied the large-scale aspect he worked with in the backdrop to his canvases. The canvas measures about eight feet by eleven feet and demonstrates how the large canvas allows more room for blank space to offset the focus of the painting. Twombly continued to paint on immense surfaces as seen in *Untitled* from 1970 as well as in *Untitled (A Painting in 3 Parts)* from 1992. (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 respectively) The 1970 work measures about thirteen by twenty-one feet while the 1992 work measures a total of about seven by almost 10 feet, each section being a little over seven by three feet. These two paintings illustrate the aesthetic of applying a minimal background in order to highlight the figurations included in the work as a way to draw attention to them. The size of each of these canvases from different decades of Twombly's career demonstrates how the large scale of the backdrop played an influential role in his later works. In each work, Twombly paints a minimal background in order to

ensure the focus lies on the other sections of the work, an aspect made possible through the use of massive canvases.

Building on the large-scale size of his canvases, Twombly creates compositions that contain a naïve quality to them, especially seen in the 1994 *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* and the 1953 backdrop but not limited to only these two works. The artist's aesthetic contains childlike qualities prevalent throughout his entire career. In his 1961 *Ferragosto IV*, Twombly actually paints with his hands, leaving a red handprint in the middle of the five by six and a half foot composition, much like a child creating a finger painting. (Fig. 9) *Untitled* from 1990 also demonstrates his continual use of naïve compositions. (Fig. 10) The abstracted painting of a flower in bold hues of blue, green, and red depicts the most simplistic version of a flower, similar to how a child would portray a flower. By reducing the image to minimal forms, he represents an unnaturalistic but recognizable figure. This also resembles cave art in the reduction of an object to its most simple, discernable form.

In *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, the style in which Twombly paints can be perceived as childish: it appears he applies paint to the canvas haphazardly on the right and then, as he moves to the left, changes his mind and makes seemingly random markings and scratches in pencil. The paint and markings resemble a child's finger painting and attempt to create a recognizable image through the use of minimal shapes and lines. The distinction between background and figures lends to a childish art aesthetic in that the focus remains on the primary purpose of the painting instead of the unnecessary elements like the background. In children's paintings, as well as in prehistoric art, the minimal background permits the painted figures to take

precedence in the painting. The meaning of the painting lies with in the figural elements rather than with the background.

Twombly always had a fascination with children's art. Perhaps it stemmed from Cheney's belief that the educated were the people destroying art. One must revert back to a state of lesser knowledge such as a child or even as far back as the prehistoric societies in order to tap into the creative, emotional portion of the human mind. Twombly himself collected children's art, perhaps as a way to make his mind and thoughts resemble that of a child. According to George Bent, Professor of Art History at Washington and Lee, Twombly visited an art show being held at Washington and Lee during one of his stays in Lexington; many local artists, as well as children, were showing their work there. By this time, Twombly was famous in the small town, and the people at the art show eagerly watched to see if Twombly would want to purchase their art. While he did not purchase any of the recognized artists' works, he did buy several children's finger paintings. Twombly saw in children's art that simple forms and seemingly accidental effects could transform from meaningless chaos into a form of great, complex art.³² These grand notions of using a child's innocence to depict a greater truth about the world originate in his backdrop. While the backdrop lacks the finger painting, random quality of the 1994 *Untitled* as well as other works leading up to that painting, the fact that he created the backdrop for a children's play illustrates the naivety found in Twombly's works.

From a purely visual standpoint, the subject matter of the 1994 painting is not clear like that of the backdrop. However, the title provides a wealth of explanation. The title comes from a poem by Catullus, but numerous other literary allusions can be found

³² Kirk Varnedoe, "Your Kid Could *Not* Do This, and Other Reflections on Cy Twombly," *MoMA* 18 (1994): 19.

within the painting such as Rilke, Seferis, Archilochus, and Burton.³³ All of these literary allusions play into the same central idea of Catullus. Catullus, a Latin poet during the late Roman Republic dating from about 84 to 54 B.C.E., wrote poetry that centered on events that occurred in his life. Twombly, an avid poetry lover ever since his time at Washington and Lee, was very familiar with Catullus' poetry.³⁴ However, Twombly suffered from dyslexia, so while he enjoyed poetry, he often misread the lines.³⁵ In many instances when he included verse as an aspect of his paintings, he combined lines of verse or changed the wording around. Such is the case in the title of this 1994 work. The actual line of verse reads "Say goodbye, Catullus, to the plains of Asia Minor," but Twombly changed "plains" to "shores."³⁶ This could be due to his dyslexia in that he understood the overall content of the poetry but did not actually reiterate the poem in its exact form. The verse from which Twombly chose to title the painting describes the time when Catullus had sailed to Bithynia, a region of Asia Minor, to bury his brother who had died there.³⁷ Catullus, overcome with grief, sailed back to Rome. Twombly depicts the moment when Catullus leaves Asia Minor. As a reflection of this, he intended for the viewer to read the painting from right to left or east to west, the direction Catullus would have been traveling on his journey home.

Twombly uses the connection to the ancient past to illustrate a meaning that transcends time. Twombly himself stated that the painting is "about life's fleetingness.

³³ Leeman, *Cy Twombly: a monograph*, 253.

³⁴ Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, 176.

³⁵ George Bent, Professor of Art History, Washington and Lee University, in an email with Sally Nexsen, March 2014.

³⁶ Leeman, *Cy Twombly: a monograph*, 253. Original text: "Linqantur Phrygii, Catulle, campi" *Carmina* 46, 4

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

It's a passage."³⁸ Much like the backdrop, he looks back to ancient sources for inspiration in order to create significance that has as much of an effect on current time as it did in the past, a central idea in Cheney's book. While the backdrop illustrates figures from classical mythology, the same idea of persistence throughout time is present.

Mythological figures represented certain emotions or symbols that would prove to be vital aspects of life, no matter the time period. For example, the centrally depicted figure in the backdrop depicts Venus, the goddess of love. Love surpasses time in that humans have and will continue to experience the emotion of love. The presence of Venus illustrates the knowledge that love always occurs. The same goes for the theme of *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*; life is a journey that comes to an end upon death. Nothing can change that. The fleetingness of life represents an aspect of humanity that transcends time, much like love. Throughout his career, as well as illustrated in his first and close to last large-scale paintings, Twombly chooses subject matter from ancient sources as a way to reveal a greater truth about humanity.

Subject matter drawing from previous sources also plays an important role throughout his whole career. In 1961, Twombly painted *School of Athens*. (Fig. 11) Like *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, the title plays a crucial part in the understanding of the image. *School of Athens* relates to the 1509 Raphael fresco of the same name. Without knowledge of the title, the abstracted formal elements of the painting do not blatantly illustrate this reference, similar to the relationship between the title and the visual content of the 1994 work. Twombly found inspiration for his work in literary as well as other artistic sources as a way to draw on the idea that the

³⁸ Ibid., 278.

basic ideals of humanity permeate throughout history. Raphael's *School of Athens* illustrates ideas of philosophy, poetry, art, and other classical humanistic elements; ideas that exist through time. Therefore, Twombly's reference to this Renaissance painting depicts how the basic ideals of humans exist throughout history. The idea that aspects of humanity persist through time exists in the majority of his works beginning with the backdrop and continuing through *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*.

In numerous locations on the massive 1994 canvas, Twombly includes lines of poetry that, while at times illegible, demonstrate one of his most notable aesthetic qualities: the combination of text and imagery on a single canvas. As noted, the backdrop marks the first instance of this in Twombly's career. However, he only includes the name of each of the figures illustrated rather than complete verses of poetry, and he clearly drafts each label. As his career progressed, he began to include more and more words or lettering before culminating in the incorporation of more complete verses or phrases. In 1975, he painted *Apollo*, a four and a half by four-foot canvas comprised solely of words. (Fig. 12) He painted "Apollo" prominently on the upper half in black and purple paint and included two lists below written in black. One list contains different names, all designations for Apollo, while the other lists different animals associated with the god. The use of words on this particular canvas acts the same as the words on the 1953 backdrop. They serve to explicitly state what the painting regards. Even though the painting contains only words, the painting represents Apollo. Whereas in the backdrop Twombly includes a figure to serve as a visual representation of the label, in the 1975

work he includes other names as a form of illustrating the focus of the painting, that being Apollo.

Similar to the backdrop, Twombly combines image and text seen in his 1983 painting *Anabasis (Xenophon)*. (Fig. 13) In this painting, he includes the name “Anabasis” at the top of the canvas and paints an abstracted image underneath. Anabasis refers to the most famous book by Xenophon, the ancient Greek writer, and tells the story of the Army of Ten Thousand’s expedition, led by Cyrus the Younger, from the coastline to the interior of Babylon to capture Persia. Even though the battle resulted in a victory for the Greeks, Cyrus died in battle, rendering the victory meaningless. Twombly utilized text and images to showcase this instance of the fleetingness of life. The image below “Anabasis” would lack context if not for the inclusion of words on the canvas. Twombly’s use of words creates clarity and also adds dimension to the idea of expansive human emotions and beliefs.

Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor) includes verses of poetry that are only semi-legible.³⁹ Even if the lines were completely legible, they do not typically recall direct quotes from a poem. Twombly, the artist that he was, chose lines of verse for their poetic quality. He took artistic liberty, again perhaps due to his dyslexia and not reading the literature exactly as intended, and changed words if he thought it sounded better.⁴⁰ In that same sense, he combined multiple texts in order to create a new, expressive verse. He often found inspiration in the early literature that he had read at

³⁹ According to Sally Mann, one of the workers in the warehouse where Twombly was painting *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* added his own words to the painting and signed his name. Rather than covering up the intrusion, Twombly left the young man’s artistic addition to the work.

⁴⁰ Leeman, *Cy Twombly: a monograph*, 96.

Washington and Lee such as ancient mythology, philosophy, pastoral and romantic.⁴¹ Through this intertextuality, Twombly created a symbol of “vast, branching culture suddenly condensed on the surface of a canvas in a heap of broken images.”⁴² He produced paintings throughout his career that encompassed the breadth of humanity, an aspect that both Cheney and Daura encouraged when discussing the direction in which art needed to go in.

In discussing *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, all of the aspects that make up this painting have their origins in the 1953 backdrop. The size, composition, subject matter, and inclusion of text represent typical Twombly features that, when included on one canvas, create a painting filled with deep meaning. In the 1994 work, Twombly exemplifies the fleeting passage of life, a basic human idea that transcends time. While he does not come back to this specific theme in every work he creates throughout his career, the aesthetic qualities found in this work permeate his other works. All four aspects demonstrate those found in Twombly’s 1953 backdrop and illustrate the development of his unique aesthetic.

⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴² Ibid.

Conclusion

After the Menil installed *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, a young French woman visited the gallery.⁴³ When the guard walked into the room, he found her stripped naked, looking at the painting. The guard, after recovering from shock, told the woman that she must put her clothes back on, or she will become more famous than Twombly. She did as she was instructed, but on the way out, she wrote in the guestbook: “This painting makes me want to run naked.” Twombly loved this story for the fact that his work had the ability to connect with people on an emotional level. He wanted his work to generate the feelings that every human has experienced throughout history. It was through the aesthetics originating with the 1953 backdrop for *The Little Comet* and continuing through *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* that Twombly accomplished his goal as an artist.

Twombly’s 1953 backdrop, though widely unrecognized, serves as an important precedent for his mature style. This was the first instance where, in a naïve composition, Twombly included text. It was also his first work on such large scale, and the first occasion that he so explicitly referenced mythological subject matter. Twombly applied these qualities to his works for the rest of his career, developing them into the unique style that he is remembered for today. Starting at a young age, Twombly gained the knowledge to pursue a different aesthetic. Daura educated and encouraged Twombly to create art with an emotional and expressive response, a feat he accomplished with the backdrop through the use of prehistoric aesthetics, large scale, text, and mythological

⁴³ Ralph Blumenthal, “A Celebratory Splash for an Enigmatic Figure,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2005.

subject matter. As he developed as an artist, he learned how to further pull out humanity's emotions by incorporating the elements from the backdrop into his later works while at the same time bringing in new components such as color and different materials. His works leading up to the completion of *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* serve as examples of the establishment of his style. It is in the massive work though, especially when compared to the backdrop, that one can see the how Twombly never abandoned his youthful desire to produce art that generated an expressive response through the aesthetics set in motion by his childhood influences.

APPENDIX A



Fig. 1
Pierre Daura, *Untitled (Cy Twombly)*, 1944



Fig. 2
Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1951

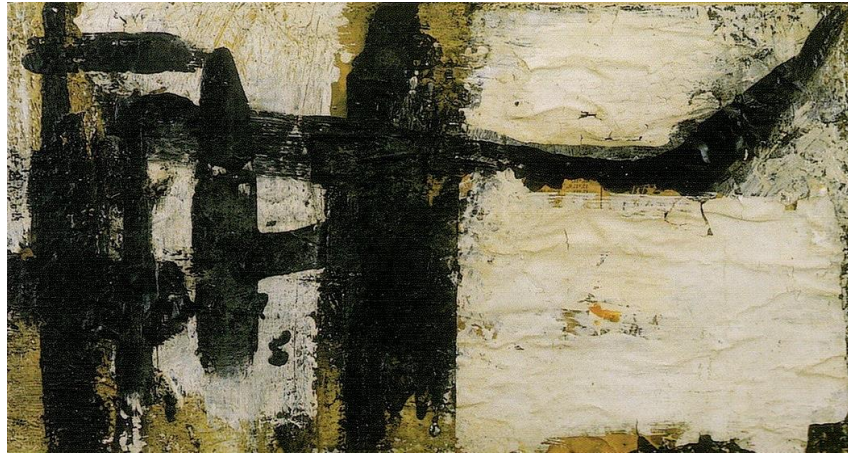


Fig. 3
Cy Twombly, *Landscape*, 1951



Fig. 4
Cy Twombly, *Untitled Backdrop (Land of the Stars)*, 1953



Fig. 5
Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, 1994



Fig. 6
Cy Twombly, *Panorama*, 1955

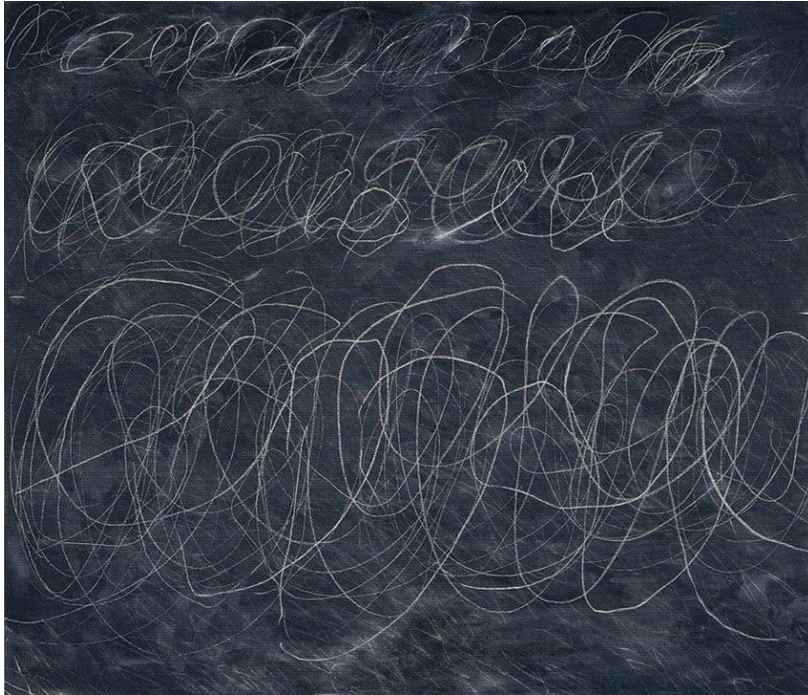


Fig. 7
Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1970



Fig. 8
Cy Twombly, *Untitled (A Painting in 3 Parts)*, 1992



Fig. 9
Cy Twombly, *Ferragosto IV*, 1961



Fig. 10
Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1990



Fig. 11
Cy Twombly, *School of Athens*, 1961

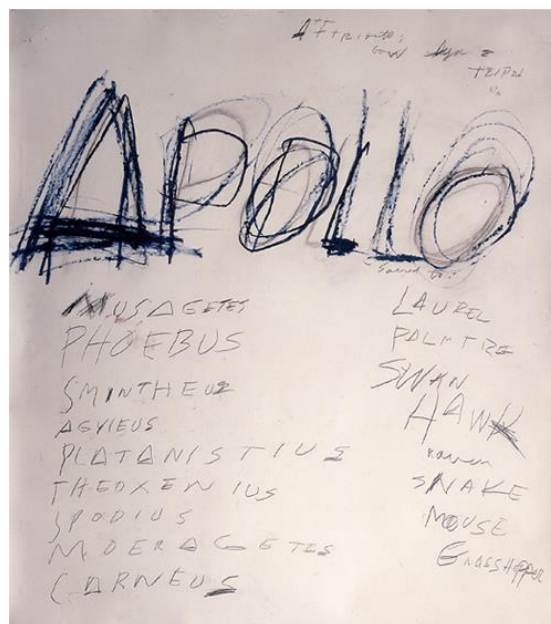


Fig. 12
Cy Twombly, *Apollo*, 1975

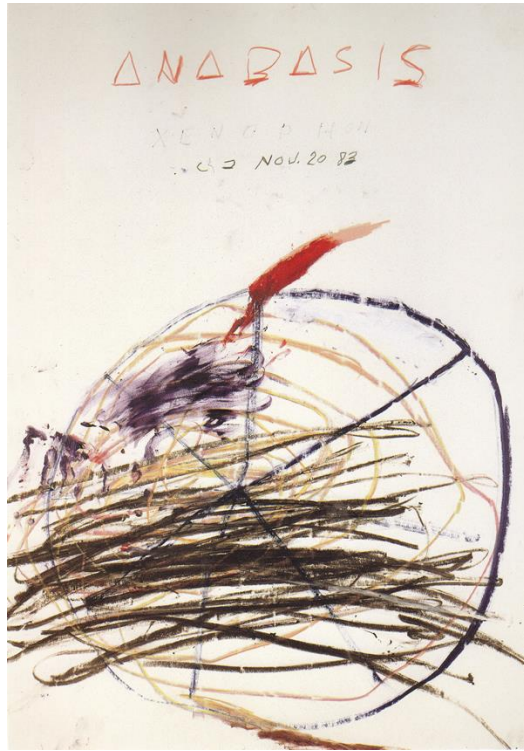


Fig. 13
Cy Twombly, *Anabasis (Xenophon)*, 1983

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