

## Motherwell's Mistakes

By Laura Fravel

*The Checkered Skirt*—recently back on view in the Museum's Modern and Contemporary galleries—belongs to a group of abstract figure paintings that Robert Motherwell created in the late 1940s through a deliberate process of trial and error. The artist would begin a painting without any preconceived idea of what the final composition should look like and would build up the surface as he continued to revise and edit the picture. Describing this process, Motherwell wrote, "I begin painting with a series of mistakes. The painting comes out of the correction of mistakes by feeling . . . The final picture is the process arrested at the moment when what I was looking for flashes into view."<sup>1</sup>

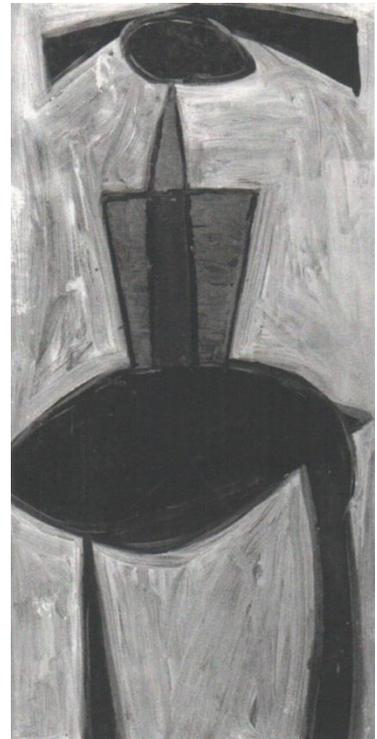
This painting was first shown at the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery in March 1948 with the title *The Checkered Skirt*. However, Motherwell would often continue to work on a picture after it was exhibited. Recent scholarship suggests that the NCMA's painting may have been shown two months later at the Kootz Gallery, but retitled (and reworked?) as *Young Girl*.<sup>2</sup>

"Young Girl" is written on the back of the NCMA's painting, though it does not appear to be in the artist's handwriting. Motherwell's archive includes a photograph of a painting titled *Young Girl* from 1947 (now unlocated). This prompted the question: Could this missing Motherwell be hiding under the NCMA's painting?

To answer this question, the Museum's conservators X-rayed our painting to see if another composition was hiding underneath. Though we did not find *Young Girl*, we did gain insight into how the artist developed his composition.

Motherwell wrote, "My pictures have layers of mistakes buried in them—an X-ray would disclose crimes—layers of consciousness, of willing."<sup>3</sup> The layers buried under the surface of *The Checkered Skirt* show a process based on chance and intuition—what Motherwell would have called "quickenened subjectivity." Innumerable visions and revisions lead to a climactic "Eureka!" moment.

The X-ray reveals that the artist began with three rounded shapes. He continued to add abstract figural elements, or trim them by masking areas under the white overpaint (a bit like covering errors with Wite-Out.) A photograph of the painting under UV light shows that the artist covered over crescent shapes around the torso (perhaps arms?). Some of the major changes to *The Checkered Skirt* are still visible to the naked eye. Motherwell raised the figure's head and shoulders and replaced rounded hips with an angular, houselike shape. The pigtailed silhouette in the final composition is built of precariously balanced elements.



Photograph from the Robert Motherwell card file index at the Dedalus Foundation Archives

<sup>1</sup> Robert Motherwell, Artist's Statement, in "Motherwell: Opening April 28<sup>th</sup> thru May 17<sup>th</sup>" (New York: Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> See Jack Flam, Katy Rogers, and Tim Clifford, *Robert Motherwell: Paintings and Collages: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1941–91 (Vol. 2: Paintings on Canvas and Panel)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 40–41.

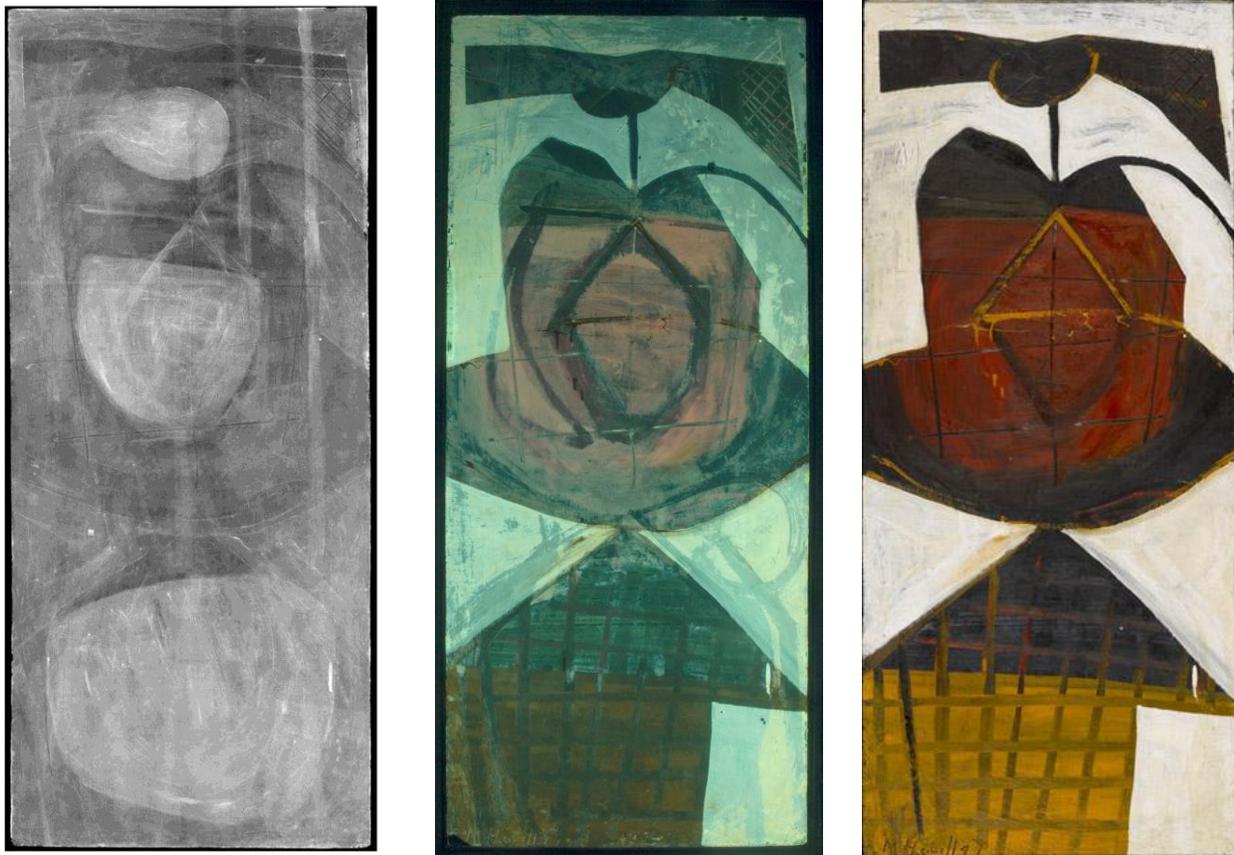
<sup>3</sup> Motherwell, Artist's Statement, 1947.

After seeing Motherwell's show at the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery in 1948, critic Clement Greenberg wrote that *Young Girl* was one of the most successful paintings in the exhibition, noting that the artist's work is best when "architectural simplicity conceals toil and care."<sup>4</sup>

The NCMA's analysis of *The Checkered Skirt* may not have found *Young Girl* hiding underneath, but it did reveal the time, labor, and consideration that went into building a seemingly effortless composition. I appreciate *The Checkered Skirt* more now that I've seen Motherwell's mistakes. The mistakes show the care that went into crafting the final painting.

*Laura Fravel is the Goodnight/Mellon curatorial research assistant at the NCMA.*

Robert Motherwell, *The Checkered Skirt (The Young Girl)*, 1947, oil on fiberboard, 48 7/8 x 21 5/8 in., Gift of the Olsen Foundation, 1958, shown under X-ray, ultraviolet light (UV), and natural light



<sup>4</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Art," *Nation* vol. 166 no. 22 (May 29, 1948), p. 613.