

# *Green Sea*

1976 by Philip Guston



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THE  
ART INSTITUTE  
OF  
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## Poster Packet

Department of Museum Education

Division of Student and Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

Philip Guston (American, b. Canada, 1913–1980)

*Green Sea*, 1976

Oil on canvas, 177.8 x 294.6 cm (70 x 116 1/2 in.)

Restricted gift of Mrs. Frederic G. Pick; Grant J. Pick, Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester, and Twentieth-Century Discretionary funds; and anonymous gift.

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“I wanted to tell stories!”<sup>1</sup> This is how painter Philip Guston explained the radical transformation of his paintings from delicate abstractions early in his career to **surreal, apocalyptic** narratives later on. The works executed in the last decade of his life depict a world populated by hooded figures, disembodied body parts, clocks, light bulbs, and various tools and materials found in a painter’s studio. Guston shocked the art world when he unveiled his new paintings in 1970, not only because they were **representational**, which went against the artistic trend at the time, but also because they were painted in a crude, cartoonish **style**.

*Green Sea* is an example of Guston’s late work. The painting shows an image to which Guston returned many times: a tangle of skinny legs and clunky shoes with studded soles turned outward. The mass of limbs sits atop a horizon line, below which a green sea ripples with wavy black squiggles. The glaring dirty whites, pinks, and oranges of the sky contrast with the darker reds and greens of the legs, shoes, and sea.

Guston’s late paintings were not well received because representational painting was considered to be a dead art form in the 1960s. Much of the art that was considered advanced at the time was abstract, such as color-field painting and Minimalism. Moreover, the narratives depicted in Guston’s works bring up a lot of questions that do not have easy answers. In *Green Sea*, for instance, why are the legs not attached to bodies? Why are they all tangled together? Why is such a strange, foreboding image painted in such a goofy, cartoonish manner? Guston’s early artistic life in the 1930s was framed by the Great Depression and World War II. These tumultuous world events, as well as imagery drawn from his personal experiences, have defined his work throughout his career.

## *About the Artist*

Philip Guston was born in Montreal, Canada in 1913. He was the youngest of seven children in a Jewish family that had fled persecution from Odessa, Russia. When Guston was seven, the family moved to Los Angeles so that his father, Louis, could find better work. He failed to do so, and committed suicide when Guston was only ten or eleven. Guston would experience another loss in his family when his older brother died of injuries suffered in a car accident.

Guston, who had shown a proficiency in art as a young boy, began to spend hours alone after his father’s death making cartoons in a closet illuminated by a single, bare light bulb. He loved comic strips. When he was thirteen, his mother enrolled him in a correspondence course at the Cleveland School of Cartooning but he soon grew bored and quit after only a couple of lessons. He later enrolled at Manual Arts High School, where he met fellow student Jackson Pollock, who shared his enthusiasm for art. (Pollock would go on to be a celebrated American artist.) They were expelled for distributing leaflets lampooning the English department and criticizing the popularity of sports at the school. Although Pollock was readmitted, Guston did not return. His only additional formal education was at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. He received a scholarship but only attended for three months before dropping out. The curriculum at Otis was very conservative, requiring students to draw from plaster casts. Guston tried at one point to make the drawings more interesting by piling the plaster casts into a huge heap, a stunt that gained him some notoriety among his peers.

After leaving Otis, Guston set about becoming an artist on his own, supporting himself with a series of odd jobs, including working as an extra in the film industry in Hollywood. (Guston was a huge fan of movies throughout his life.) Guston immersed himself in the history of art, copying reproductions of Italian Renaissance painters like Michelangelo and Piero della Francesca from books at the Los Angeles Public Library. Guston’s love of monumental **frescoes** from the **Renaissance** combined with the dire political climate of the **Great Depression** led him to undertake the social art of **murals**. In 1931, Guston and several other young artists painted portable murals for the John Reed Club, a **Marxist** organization. The murals were intended to depict the plight of “the American Negro.” Right-wing vandals defaced Guston’s mural, which pictured a bound man being whipped by members of the **Ku Klux Klan**. Undeterred, Guston continued painting murals for the

next ten years, moving to New York City in 1935 to work in the murals department of the **Works Progress Administration (WPA)**.

### *Guston's Art*

In the 1940s, Guston stopped painting murals and began a more solitary and self-reflective studio practice. In 1941, after leaving New York to teach at the University of Iowa and Washington University in St. Louis, he began to make **easel paintings**. Unlike his murals, which clearly communicated their messages in a public setting, Guston's new paintings were mysterious in appearance and ambiguous in their meaning. They pictured groups of children posed in allegorical tableaux or playing at war in cramped, urban settings with piles of junk underfoot.

He soon entered a crisis, however, doubting the quality of his recent accomplishments in painting. His work quickly became more **abstract**. The contours of the hoods, urban architecture, and other images that had played prominent roles in his earlier murals and paintings transformed into abstract lines drawn over heavy black backgrounds. By the early 1950s, all remnants of his earlier subject matter had disappeared. All that remained were quivering lines, gathering together in the middle of his canvases. The short lines, usually painted in vertical or horizontal dashes, recall the **crosshatching** technique he learned as a youth copying comic strips, but the short lines no longer described specific forms.

At this point, Guston was looking for a way to make his paintings more spontaneous in the way they were made and direct in what they communicated. Guston began to paint while standing extremely close to the canvas, so that the painting took up his entire field of vision. "I forced myself to paint the entire work without stepping back to look at it."<sup>2</sup> By painting so closely to the canvas, Guston could more fully enter and remain inside one of his paintings while working on it by removing the outside world from his peripheral vision. Guston, along with fellow artists Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and others, became part of a generation of New York-based abstract painters called the **Abstract Expressionists**. They typically made large, almost mural-scale, abstract paintings, and were characterized by spontaneity and **improvisation** in their execution. Guston's works, however, were sometimes referred to as "Abstract Impressionist" because his brushstrokes were delicate

and his use of color was comparable to Monet's.

Guston's short, stubby brushstrokes eventually assembled into larger, irregular shapes stacked on top of one another. The reappearance of more solid—but still abstract—forms developed into black, white, and gray paintings during the 1960s, in which massive, squared, black figures emerge from gray and white backgrounds. The heavy forms, while not specifically representing anything, are reminiscent of heads, buildings, books, and tombstones.

The culture of the 1960s, however, caused Guston to re-examine his art: "... when the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of a man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue. I thought there must be some way I could do something about it. I knew ahead of me a road was laying. A very crude, inchoate road. I wanted to be complete again, as I was when I was a kid. . . . Wanted to be whole between what I thought and what I felt."<sup>3</sup> In 1970 Guston debuted a new body of work at a gallery in New York City. The new paintings featured a gang of hooded figures, recognizable as members of the Ku Klux Klan, cavorting through desolate cityscapes in cartoonish buggies. The pictures also showed the figures making and looking at paintings, and sitting in sparsely furnished rooms smoking and talking.

Critics, as well as many fellow artists, strongly disliked Guston's new works when they were first shown. They thought that he had betrayed the cause of abstraction by reintroducing representational objects into his paintings. Some people accused Guston of hopping onto the **Pop Art** trend by making figurative work that alludes to sources in pop culture and mass media. Guston was disappointed with the critical reception of his new paintings, and decided to leave New York City for good, moving permanently to Woodstock, New York for the remainder of his life.

The solitude provided by Woodstock allowed Guston to fully enter the world of his paintings. The hooded figures largely disappeared from his subsequent work, but a new cast of characters and objects appeared: disembodied heads with huge eyeballs, legs, shoes, bare light bulbs, beds, cigarettes, bottles, paintbrushes, pots of paint, trashcan lids, hellish pits, and wide open bodies of water.



Many of these images came from his immediate environment in his studio. The disembodied head is often interpreted as a stand-in for the painter himself: a blob-like head with a single eye that stares at various objects by pressing its eyeball against them. Some of the images came from Guston's past. He had painted the Ku Klux Klan when he was a young muralist, and the trashcan lids appear in his pictures of boys playing war games. The light bulbs in his paintings may refer to the single, bare light bulb illuminating the closet where he made drawings when he was a child. Some have even speculated that the skinny legs in so many of his late pictures have their source in his older brother, when his legs were injured in an automobile accident. Other images, like the whips and dark pits, probably come from the early Renaissance paintings that Guston loved so much, such as Piero della Francesca's *The Flagellation* (c. 1469). In his late works, the way that he frequently piles objects on top of one another, such as the tangle of legs in *Green Sea*, brings to mind the pile of plaster casts he made at Otis Art Institute as well as the clusters of brushstrokes in his abstract works from the 1950s and 1960s. Guston put all of this imagery to new use, turning them into characters in a mysterious or funny drama. Many of Guston's late paintings depict his daily life and concerns, but some of his other late paintings are more surreal and apocalyptic, like *Green Sea*, with its strange tangle of scrawny legs and clunky shoes.

Guston's late paintings tend to be quite large. *Green Sea* measures nearly six feet in height and ten feet across. The dimensions are reminiscent of the murals Guston painted as a young man. The scale and horizontal orientation also suggest a movie screen.

The jumbled groups of legs that appear in so many of Guston's late paintings are usually pictured undergoing various tribulations. In *Green Sea*, the legs appear to be lost at sea, afloat on a festering green body of water. In other paintings, the legs are thrown into dark pits, threatened by whips, hung over walls, and spat out of giant mouths. The legs in *Green Sea* are typically quite skinny and presumably weak. On the other hand, the sense of scale in the painting is uncertain; the legs are looming on the horizon, and therefore possibly gigantic. Whether they are pathetic or monstrous, the legs are probably immobilized since they are all tangled together in a large knot.

Guston first made pictures of the sea during World War II in illustrations of survival-at-sea exercises for Fortune magazine. In several of his later works, a flood carries away numerous disembodied heads. These

examples have the sea in common as a setting for scenes of conflict and struggle. It is not evident that something calamitous is transpiring in *Green Sea*, however. Guston might picture here the calm after the storm, with the legs being quietly carried off toward some unknown destination. Another possibility is that the legs are rising over the horizon, like faraway ships. Ultimately, the narrative remains ambiguous, allowing us to create our own stories while looking at the painting.

#### Notes

1. Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 153.
2. Michael Auping, "Impure Thoughts: On Guston's Abstraction" in *Philip Guston: A Retrospective* (Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth/Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 40.
3. Mayer, p. 171.

## ***Glossary***

### **abstract** (adj)

not recognizable; lacking pictorial representation or narrative content but utilizing color, form, and texture for expressive or decorative purposes

### **Abstract Expressionism** (n)

the art movement characterized by monumental canvases and a bold new visual vocabulary and technique that emerged in New York after World War II; the first American style to have worldwide impact. Inspired by Surrealism's emphasis on the unconscious, Abstract Expressionist artists sought spontaneous personal expression through dynamic applications of paint. Innovative approaches included the poured, dripped, or splattered pigment of Jackson Pollock, the use of housepainters' brushes, and the application of stained color with sponges or soaked cloths.

### **allegory** (n)

a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another

### **apocalyptic** (adj)

predicting or presaging imminent disaster and total or universal destruction

### **crosshatch** (v)

to mark or shade with two or more intersecting series of parallel lines.

### **easel painting** (n)

a small painting on canvas, often executed on an easel and usually intended to be framed and hung on a wall, although it may be displayed on an easel

### **frescoes** (n)

wall painting technique in which pigments are dissolved in water only and then applied to fresh, wet lime plaster

### **Great Depression** (n)

period of drastic economic decline following the stock market crash of October 1929 and continuing until 1940. It was characterized by decreasing business activity and high rates of unemployment.

### **improvisation** (n)

an act performed or composed spontaneously, without previous preparation or rehearsal

### **Ku Klux Klan** (n)

a secret society of white Southerners in the United States, organized at the close of the Civil War and aimed at suppressing the newly acquired rights of blacks. Subsequently revived during World War I and in the 1960s in response to the Civil Rights Movement, its members dress in white sheets and hoods.

### **Marxism** (n)

the political and economic philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in which the concept of class struggle plays a central role in understanding society's allegedly inevitable development from bourgeois oppression under capitalism to a socialist and ultimately classless society

### **mural** (n)

a large picture painted or affixed directly to the wall or ceiling

### **New Deal** (n)

the domestic policies introduced under the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1932–45, which stressed government aid and special programs to help the needy and improve conditions for workers

### **Pop Art** (n)

an art movement that began in the US in the 1950s and reached its peak of activity in the 1960s, which chose as its subject matter the anonymous, everyday, standardized, and banal iconography in American life, such as comic strips, billboards, commercial products, and celebrity images, and dealt with them typically in such forms as outsize commercially smooth paintings, mechanically reproduced silk screens, large-scale facsimiles, and soft sculptures

### **Renaissance** (n)

from the French word *renaissance* ("rebirth"); in 15th- and 16th-century Europe, a revival of learning, literature, art, and architecture that emphasized and often imitated classical examples from ancient Greece and Rome. Although the Renaissance was centered in Italy, various aspects of it also appeared in Northern Europe (particularly Flanders, the Netherlands, and Germany), especially during the 16th century

### **representational** (adj)

representing the appearance of an object or figure in the real world

**surreal** (adj)

having the disorienting, hallucinatory quality of a dream; unreal, fantastic

**style** (n)

distinctive manner of expression (as in writing, speech, or art)

### **Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project**

**(WPA)** (n)

a relief program for artists created in 1935 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The WPA also included the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Writer's Project, and the Federal Music Project, all of which offered employment to critics, actors, writers, and musicians. All of these programs ended in 1943.

## ***Classroom Applications***

### **The Character of Everyday Objects**

- Philip Guston painted everyday objects like clocks and shoes as if they were characters in a narrative rather than inanimate objects in a still life. Make a list of everyday objects with students, and then have them choose two to three objects to play main characters in a dramatic scene. Students should assign personality traits to the different objects. A book, for instance, might be shy and intelligent. Students can then write either a short story or draw a comic strip in which the objects they chose play the main characters.

### **Junkyard Still Life**

- When Guston went to art school as a young man, he piled the plaster casts that he was instructed to draw into a heap to make them more interesting. Later in life, he frequently painted objects in big piles, some of which he collected from a local dump. Have students bring in an object that they find visually interesting. It can be an article of clothing, a toy, or a vegetable, for example. Arrange the objects in a huge pile in the middle of the classroom or in several piles around the room. What objects can be clearly seen? Which are partly concealed? What shapes are the objects in the pile and how do they fit together? What is the shape of the whole pile? Have students draw from the stack of objects.

## **The Politics of Paintings**

- Guston, along with some other young artists, painted a portable mural in 1931 showing an African American man being assaulted by a member of the Ku Klux Klan. In the late 1960s, he returned to this subject matter, painting hooded figures wandering through an apocalyptic landscape. Guston had this to say about these latter paintings: "When the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of a man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue. I thought there must be some way I could do something about it." Have students write an essay reflecting on Guston's transition from abstraction to representational imagery. Why did Guston radically change his style so late in his career? Why did he choose to paint images of the Ku Klux Klan? What was Guston's relationship to the Civil Rights Movement?

### **Surreal Comic Strip**

- Guston taught himself how to draw by copying comic strips out of newspapers. Later in life, he returned to a cartoon-like style, as in *Green Sea*. Guston's painting, however, also differs from most comic strips in significant ways: it has only one "frame," no dialogue or clear storyline, and is nearly 10 feet long and 6 feet tall. Discuss the similarities and differences between *Green Sea* and comic strips, using the funnies from a newspaper for an example. Using a copy machine, enlarge a single frame from a comic strip so that it fills up an 8 1/2 x 11" sheet of white paper. Instruct students to change the meaning of the comic by removing or adding characters, objects, and dialogue, as well as by altering the setting. What would happen, for instance, if you removed a character's arms, torso, and head and left only their legs intact?

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Written by Elijah Burgher, Teacher Resource Center Assistant,  
Museum Education

Editors: Lara Taylor, Coordinator of Communications, Museum  
Education; Tanya Brown Merriman, Associate Director of Teacher  
Programs, Museum Education; James Rondeau, Frances and Thomas  
Dittmer Curator of Contemporary Art; Elizabeth Boyne, Assistant  
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