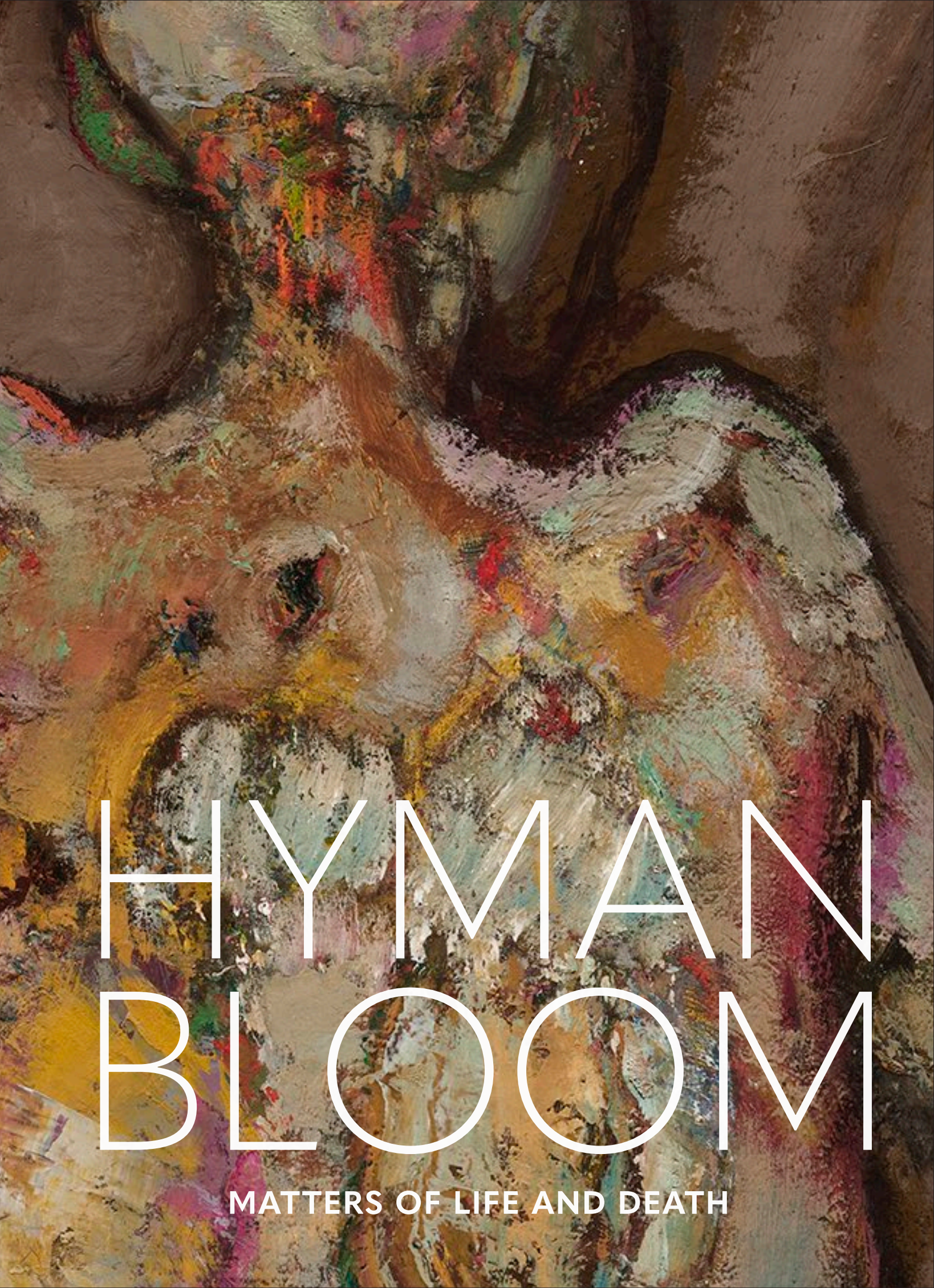
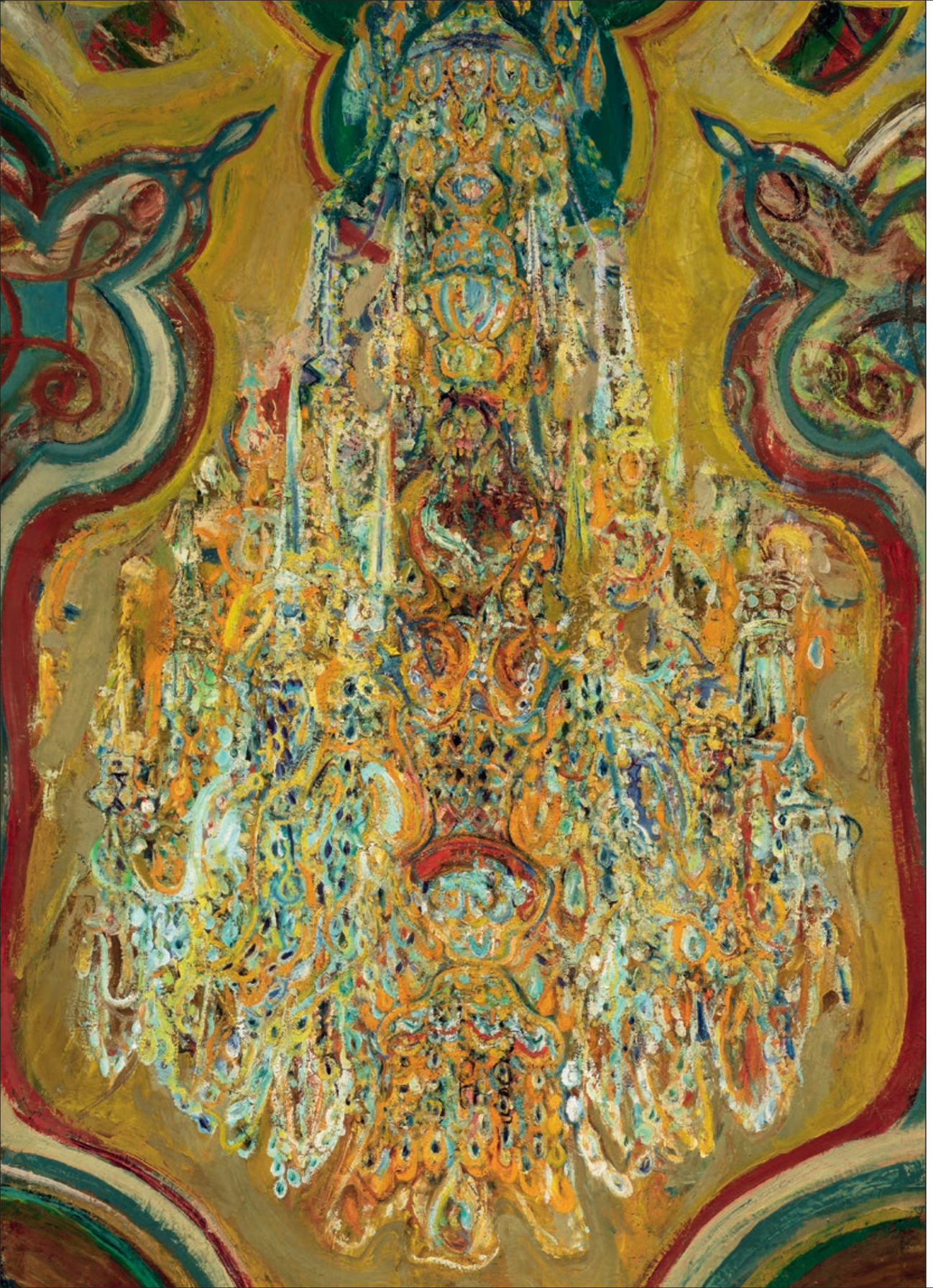


HYMAN BLOOM

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH



HYMAN BLOOM

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Erica E. Hirshler
with an essay by Naomi Slipp

MFA Publications
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

CONTENTS

A Body of Work

ERICA E. HIRSHLER

On January 21, 1942, six weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into a transformative world war, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened *Americans 1942*, the first in a new series of annual exhibitions meant to offer a "continuing survey of American art." Curator Dorothy Miller, who had selected work by young painters and sculptors from across the country, declared, "All of this is possible only in the liberty which our democracy gives to the artist. . . . [N]o regimentations, no compulsions or restrictions could call forth such richly various expressions of a people's creative spirit."[1] At the moment when abstraction was seemingly on the rise, works by sixteen of the eighteen participants in the show were figurative, albeit with varying strains of mysticism or surrealism. According to *Time* magazine, the most "striking discoveries" were two painters, Morris Graves and Hyman Bloom, who had now been "chaperoned" into the upper echelons of the art world by "Manhattan's stylish Museum of Modern Art."[2]

Miller deliberately featured younger artists—like Bloom, then twenty-eight—who had received little if any national attention. Nine of Bloom's paintings appeared in the show, but alone among the others included, Bloom had refused to submit a personal statement for the accompanying publication. "The lack of information about me for the catalogue shouldn't annoy you," he wrote to Miller. "I hope it doesn't. Lack of information about the painter might lead people more deeply into the paintings, assuming they've discovered some interest in them. At least their curiosity can't be dissipated in side issues."[3]

Leading people more deeply into things was a calling for Bloom; his paintings were the medium through which he and his public were able to explore life's mysteries and incongruities. Bloom's canvases were physical vehicles intended to evoke, and provoke, contemplation of the spiritual. His

FIG. 3. *Portrait of a Young Man Bending to the Right*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 53.3 x 38.4 cm (21 x 15⅛ in.)

the surface of things. Nowhere is that process more scrupulously explored than in his studies of the human form, both alive and dead. Bloom embraced the subject throughout his career; it was for him a "permanent and ever-changing" theme, the thread tying everything together.

Figure drawing was fundamental to an artistic education, and a comprehensive knowledge of human anatomy had always been integral to a painter's

FIG. 4. Hans Holbein (German, about 1497–1543), *Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521–22. Oil on linden wood, 32.4 x 202.1 cm (12¾ x 79½ in.)

understanding of how bodies look and move. Bloom's earliest work is rooted in that tradition; his carefully contoured studies of boxers and wrestlers demonstrate his interest in exploring muscles and flesh in action. Realism intertwines with fantasy in such early drawings as *Man Breaking Bonds on a Wheel* (pl. 2), which seems inspired by sources that range from Michelangelo to the fantasy strongmen of the 1920s pulp-fiction magazine *Weird Tales*. In early oil sketches of athletes, with thickly applied paint in broad strokes, Bloom added heft and solidity to his figure studies (fig. 3).

Bloom's omnivorous eye soon turned to the armature of the body. His *Skeleton* of 1936 marks the beginning of his engagement with still life in its most literal sense, life stilled, as well as with the expressive possibilities of paint (pl. 6). His decision to use a long, horizontal format links his composition to the traditional shelf-like designs of the predellas created for the bases of Renaissance altarpieces, while his uncompromising observation again recalls the works of old masters, particularly examples like Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ in the Tomb* (fig. 4). At the same time, Bloom's viewer might be looking down into an archaeological dig, the narrow rectangle of canvas emulating both the carefully crafted shaft of a grave and the scientific precision of an excavation. The skeleton is complete and slightly bent, as if confined by the small space into which it has been placed; the skull is at a different angle from the body, head raised, the jaw open as if emitting a silent scream.

The archaeological aspects of Bloom's *Skeleton* bring to mind contemporary events that were widely covered in the press and captured popular attention. In 1936 an ancient skeleton was discovered in a peat bog in Sweden, the so-called Bocksten Man, his bones constrained in a similarly narrow arrangement. In 1939 the massive discovery of Anglo-Saxon treasures at Sutton Hoo in England was made public, a find complete with jewels, helmets, and ships, as well as a significant number of graves. Bloom made overt references to archaeology in the series of treasure-map paintings he made a few years later, based generally on site plans that he saw in scholarly journals (pls. 21, 23, 24, 26; fig. 5).[6] Just as his skeletons seem archaeological, his

Life after Death

ERICA E. HIRSHLER

Reputations have lives of their own. Like people, they rise and fall. But they can be resurrected. Why should we not revive Hyman Bloom? Prolific and talented, active at the center of the art world in the United States and widely admired in his day, Bloom has since been overlooked by most and forgotten by many. "Life is short, and Art long," wrote the Greek physician Hippocrates in his *Aphorisms*. Intended for doctors, whose craft takes time to master that their patients may not have, these words have also often been borrowed and applied to the fine arts, where they stand as an admonition that works of art last longer than their makers. Art *is* long, and within each new context in which it survives, it continually deserves fresh assessments. As historians, charged with questioning the accounts we receive and with fashioning more complex and inclusive narratives, we owe it to Bloom to restore his contributions and his place.

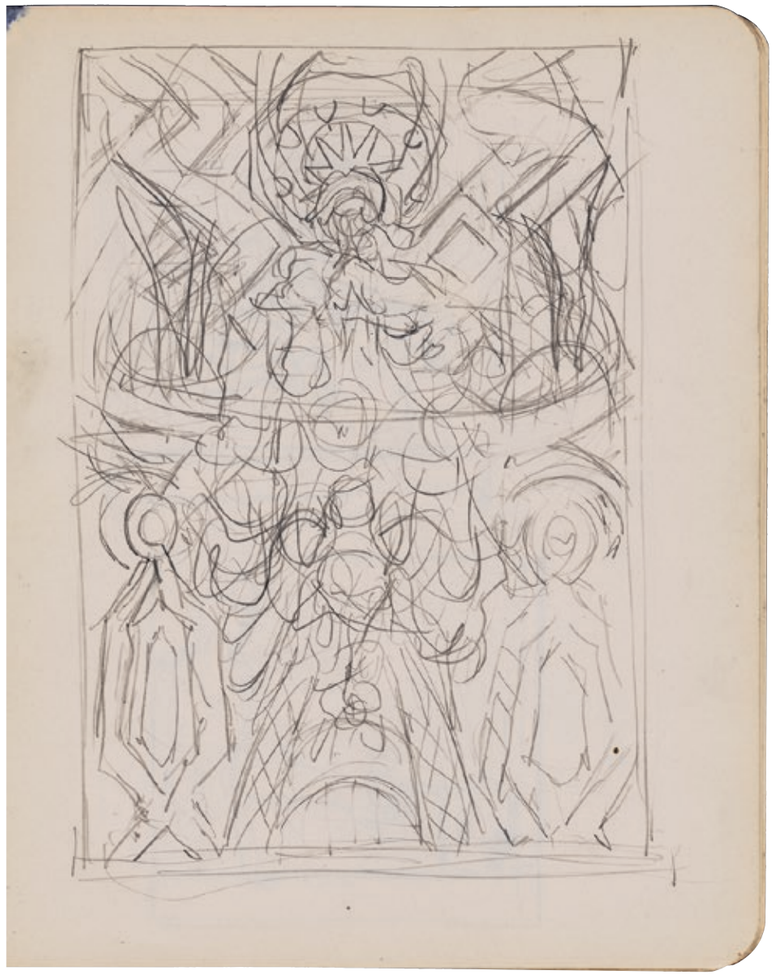
The usual discussion of American art between 1935 and 1965 follows the rise of abstraction, a chronicle that has seldom held a place for figurative expressionists such as Bloom and others like him (Ivan Albright, Rico Lebrun, Elaine de Kooning, David Park, among so many others). On the website of the teaching resource Smarthistory, for example, art in the 1930s is currently defined by Jacob Lawrence, Grant Wood, Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper, and Norman Rockwell, while the postwar period consists of the abstract expressionists, the New York school, and pop art.[1] This is the arc that led Irving Sandler to title his 1970 history of abstract expressionism *The Triumph of American Painting* and Serge Guilbaut, in a provocative 1984 cultural study, to describe how New York had stolen the very idea of modern art from postwar Europe, aided and abetted by the U.S. government and the CIA, which found useful Cold War propaganda in the individualism and freedom of

FIG. 18. *The Synagogue*, about 1940. Oil on canvas,
165.7 x 118.7 cm (65¼ x 46¾ in.)

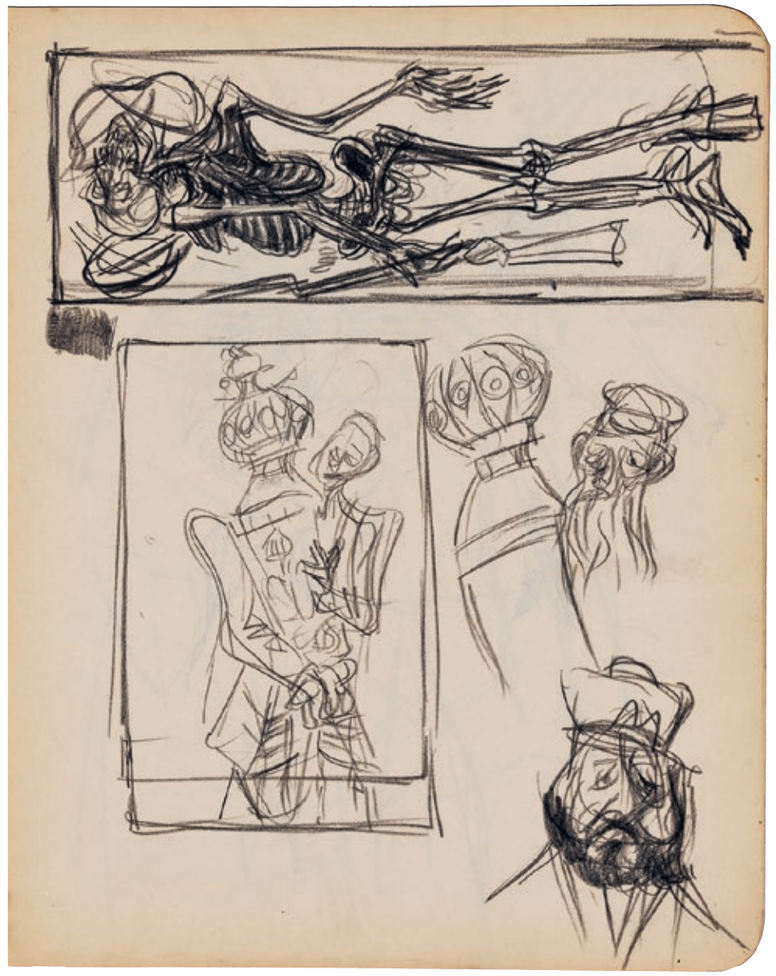
30, 31). Bloom's paintings also entered museum collections in these years. The Museum of Modern Art made good on its investment in Bloom, immediately acquiring two paintings from the 1942 show, *The Bride* (pl. 13) and *The Synagogue* (fig. 18), and helping to facilitate other sales. Within a week of that show's opening, William Constable, curator of paintings at the Boston

FIG. 19. *Christmas Tree*, 1939. Oil on canvas,
128.3 x 71.8 cm (50½ x 28¼ in.)

museum, had written to MoMA director Alfred Barr about buying Bloom's *Jew with Torah* (about 1940), but the painting had already been sold to Thomas Adler; the MFA's first Bloom, *Christmas Tree*, came in 1952 (fig. 19).[20] The Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, then under the leadership of Bartlett Hayes, bought *Treasure Map* (pl. 23) in 1946, the



7
Sketchbook page with drawing of synagogue interior, 1940s
Conté crayon on paper, 25.4 x 21 cm (10 x 8¼ in.)

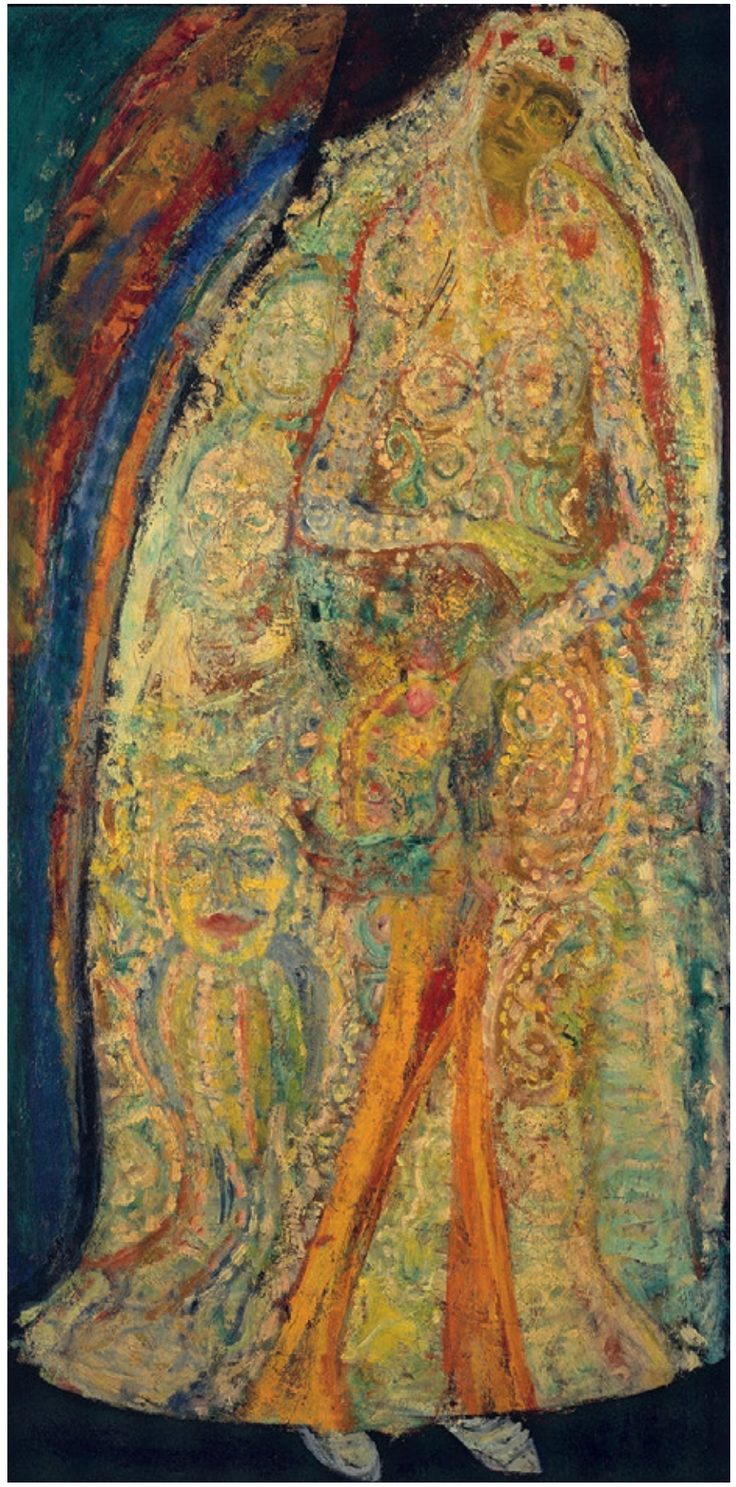


8
Sketchbook page with drawings of skeleton and rabbis, undated
Conté crayon on paper, 25.4 x 21 cm (10 x 8¼ in.)

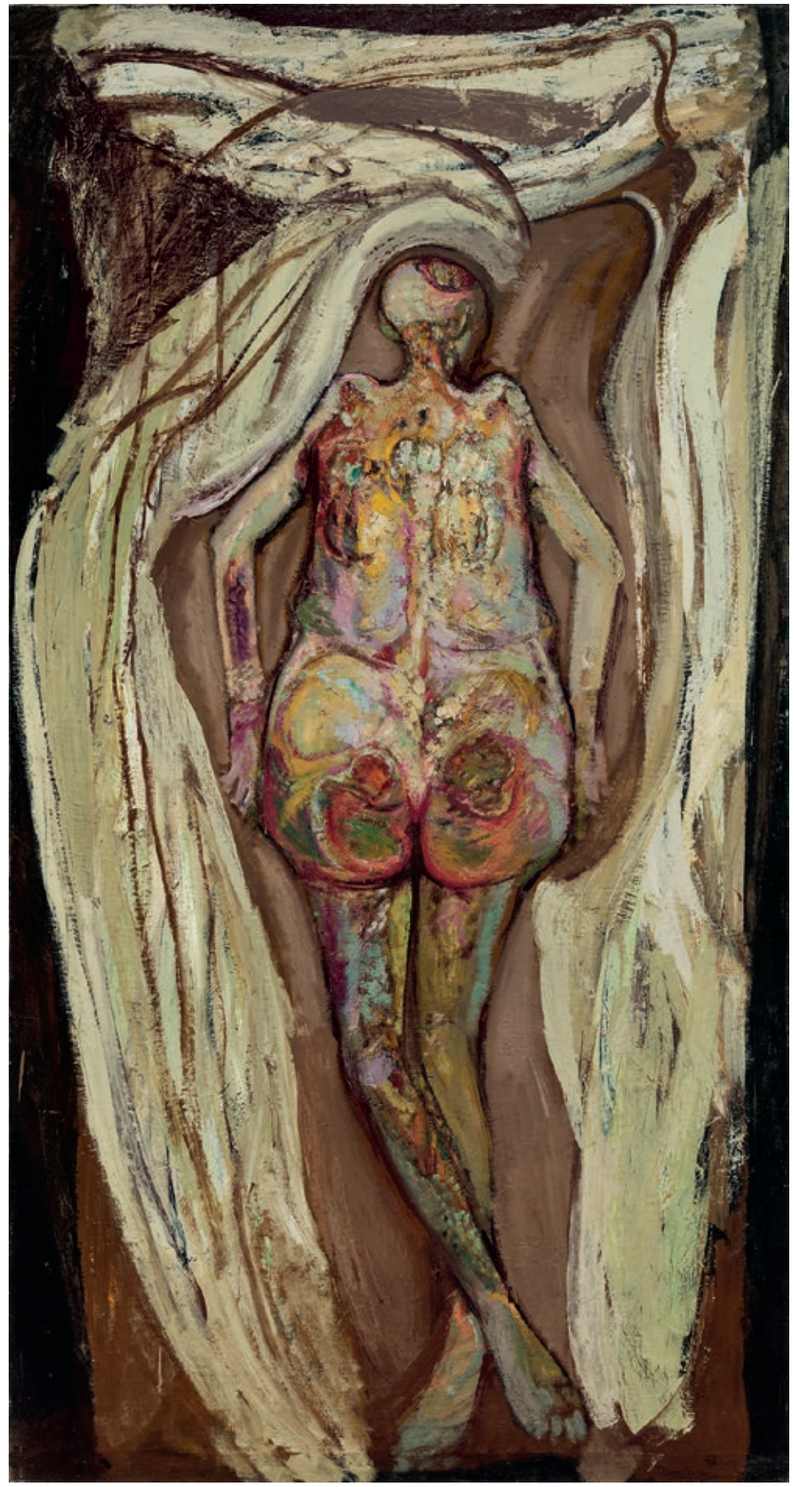
9
Skeleton in a Red Dress, about 1942–45
Oil on canvas, 137.2 x 50.8 cm (54 x 20 in.)

10
Christmas Tree, 1944
Oil on canvas, 127.6 x 77.5 cm (50¼ x 30½ in.)

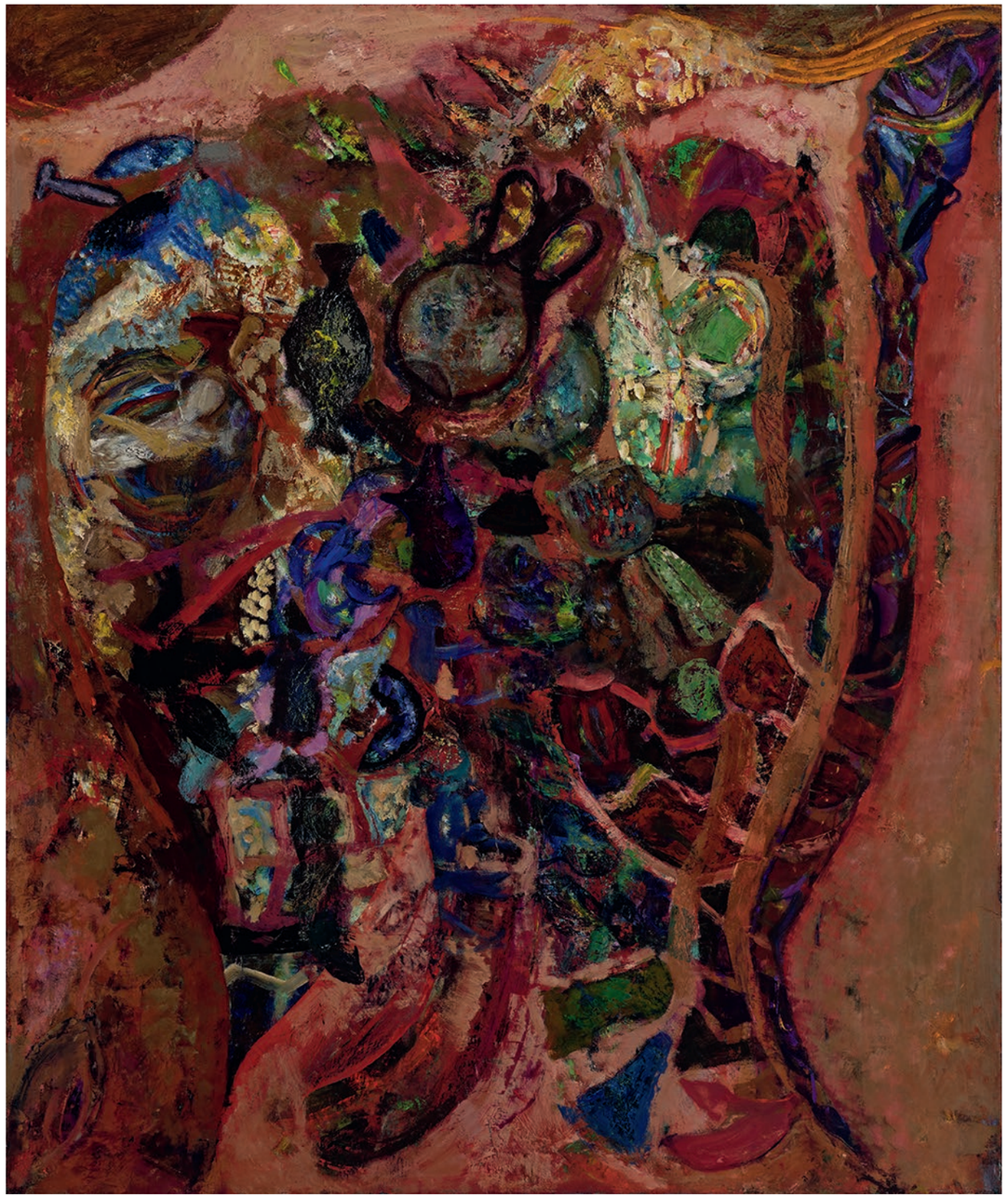
13
The Bride, 1941
Oil on canvas, 51.1 x 126.7 cm (20⅛ x 49⅞ in.)



14
The Bride, 1943–45
Oil on canvas, 126 x 65.1 cm (49⅝ x 25⅝ in.)



15
Female Corpse, Back View, 1947
Oil on canvas, 173.7 x 92.4 cm (68⅜ x 36⅜ in.)



21
Archaeological Treasure, 1945
Oil on canvas, 109.2 x 91.4 cm (43 x 36 in.)

27
Nude Woman, undated
Black and white chalk, charcoal, and graphite on paper, 57 x 77.2 cm (22½ x 30⅜ in.)