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PRESS RELEASE

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ADOLPH GOTTLIEB. A RETROSPECTIVE

Curated by Luca Massimo Barbero

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

Press conference: Friday, September 3, 12 noon, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

From September 4 to January 9, 2011 the Peggy Guggenheim Collection presents *Adolph Gottlieb. A Retrospective*, the first retrospective exhibition of this great American Abstract Expressionist painter to be shown in Italy. Like those previously dedicated to William Baziotes and Richard Pousette-Dart at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, this exhibition brings to Italy a better understanding of a generation of New York artists that in the 1950s came to form American Abstract Expressionism. The origins of this movement in the 1940s is closely linked to the career of Peggy Guggenheim herself, and to her New York museum-gallery Art of This Century.

The exhibition has been organized in partnership with the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York, which has lent numerous paintings and sculptures from its holdings. The exhibition also benefits from loans from the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Musée national d'art moderne (Centre Pompidou), Paris, the American Contemporary Art Gallery, Munich, and from several private collectors.

The career of Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974), charismatic artist and thinker, is closely tied to that of other exponents of American Abstract Expressionism: for example, from the early 1930s he had firm friendships with Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. Rothko shared with Gottlieb the quest for a new pictorial language based on personal artistic expression, and was a founding member with him of "The Ten" in 1935. In 1941 Gottlieb and Rothko together resolved to explore mythical and Jungian subject matter, thus initiating an important early phase of the nascent New York school of painters, and signalling for the first time an avant-garde that was independent of European prototypes. Again with Rothko, Gottlieb was the author of a now-historic letter to *The New York Times* of 13 June 1943, considered the first public statement of theories underlying what was later to be known as American Abstract Expressionism. In spring 1950 he organized a group of artists to protest the position of the Metropolitan Museum of Art towards contemporary American art, a group labeled 'The Irascibles' by an article in *The New York Herald Tribune*, and presented to a much larger public through an iconic photograph by Nina Leen published in *Life* magazine. The photograph included Baziotes Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Newman, Pollock, Pousette-Dart, and Clyfford Still, as well as Gottlieb himself. In 1958-59, a touring exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art, that included Gottlieb and several of these same artists, was titled *The New American Painting*. However, as Sanford Hirsch, Executive Director of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, notes in the catalogue: "Gottlieb is labeled an Abstract Expressionist painter, and it is true that he was one of the founders of Abstract Expressionism and one of its major artists through the 1940s and 1950s. However, the term itself is too narrow to comprehend the breadth of Gottlieb's art and its impact on his colleagues, audiences, and the art that would follow." This exhibition sets out to reveal the diversity of Gottlieb's production, and its ceaseless evolution, according to his own aphorism: "Different times require different images."

The exhibition opens with paintings, drawings and etchings from the 1930s, including portraits of Rothko and another close friend Milton Avery, as well as allusions to an important sojourn in Arizona in 1937-38. Next comes a numerous selection, for the first time in Italy, of the first cohesive series of Gottlieb's paintings, the *Pictographs*, begun in 1941, the year of Pearl Harbor and America's entry to World War II. These place Gottlieb, alongside Rothko and a few others such as Arshile Gorky and Pollock, among the pioneers of the new American avant-garde. Typically a grid segments the picture surface; inside its compartments Gottlieb placed symbols,

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whether a hand, an eye, or hieroglyphs of his own invention that blend American Indian or other primitive ritual imagery with allusions to Greek mythology. They influenced a specific formal component of Abstract Expressionism, the 'allover' composition, which disperses pictorial incident evenly across the picture surface. Having exhausted the visual possibilities of the *Pictograph*, Gottlieb developed novel compositional types such as the *Labyrinths* (beginning with *Labyrinth #1*, 1950, in the exhibition) and *Imaginary Landscapes* from 1951, such as *Sea and Tide* (1952, in the exhibition). In the first group the grid of the *Pictographs* either takes over and dominates the painting, or becomes transparent, revealing concealed brushwork in the depths of the painting. In the second the composition splits into two zones, with celestial bodies in the upper part and an imaginary, vigorously brushed 'landscape' below. These works coincide with Gottlieb's growing commercial and critical success in the mid 1950s. In 1956, the lower part of the *Imaginary Landscapes* detached itself from the picture edges to become an independent floating form in vertical compositions known as the *Bursts*, Gottlieb's best known works. A jury headed by Italian critic and historian Giulio Carlo Argan awarded Gottlieb first prize at the 1963 São Paulo Biennial. In the 1960s, notwithstanding the emergence of Pop Art, antithesis of Abstract Expressionism, Gottlieb's painting was perceived as a prophetic and vital source of Minimal art. The exhibition also includes a selection of Gottlieb's sculptures, made from colored cardboard and presented in the company of the cosmic images that inspired them. The exhibition closes with a series of late works in which the explosive *Burst* contracts into more geometric and cooler discs, painted in the years prior to his death aged almost 71 in 1974.

The exhibition has been generously supported by the Regione del Veneto, by the Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Illinois and by Intrapresae Collezione Guggenheim. Hangar Design Group created the graphic design for communications. Clear Channel, Radio Italia and Corriere della Sera are media partners.

The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Implicit in such activities is the belief that art has the potential both to distinguish cultures and to unite them.

The fully illustrated exhibition catalogue by Giunti Editore, in English and Italian, includes essays by Luca Massimo Barbero, Associate Curator of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, and by Pepe Karmel, Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of Fine Arts, New York University.

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