

The Forward Eagle

Compiled Weekly

"Let us endeavor mutually to enlighten one another."

June 15, 2026

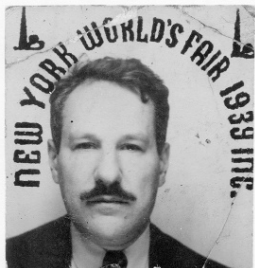
Vol IV Number 23

Page 1 of 1

Book Review

1.

Barnett Newman: Here by Amy Newman [no relation]. Princeton University Press. 728pp.



Barnett Newman's 1939 NY World's Fair press credentials

The New York School painters were late developers. The discovery of their respective idioms was followed by retrenchment: the staking of a claim, a rapid survey of the territory, a resistance to further change. There was a notable indifference to individual development as a measure of value. As Mark Rothko said in 1957, "If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over, and again" or, in Barnett Newman's version: "I think a man spends his whole lifetime painting one picture."

Newman is the limit case. No training, no apprenticeship, no early work to speak of, but a loud prelude, played out in public, before his solitary moment of vision. He had several early lives, as teacher, activist, newspaperman manqué, writer of manifestos, organizer of exhibitions and spokesman for his contemporaries, none of them as a painter. He started to paint in earnest in 1948, in his early forties. As late as 1947, when pressed by Jack Tworkov, he conceded, "Well, essentially, I'm a writer."

Unusually, if not uniquely among the painters who became his peers, Newman was a New Yorker. He was born in 1905 on the Lower East Side, the eldest son of Jewish immigrants who had come to New York from Russia only five years earlier. By the time he was ten, his father's garment company was successful enough for the family to move to a leafier neighborhood in the Bronx. The city was his cave of making, and he filled it with his personality, his volubility and his stratagems. He even ran briefly for mayor, in 1933, on an anarchist-inspired arts and civil liberties platform. But he was also a contrarian, and had he won, he would have demanded a recount. All of which is the focus of this first and revelatory biography. The book reads as a portrait of long-vanished New York. It takes all of 600 pages for Amy Newman [no relation] to show what the painter's placeless compositions owe to time and place, and how his self-fashioning preceded his art. Once the former was complete, the latter could begin.

Biographer Newman listens closely to what the artist Newman had to say. The teller and the tale are difficult to separate. After Newman began to paint his monochrome fields, broad geometric planes and vertical bands, there followed two decades of work before his death in 1970. He painted some 100-odd canvases, one sixth of which were painted in the first year or so after his breakthrough. Mark Rothko, within the same timeframe, painted six times as many. As did Jackson Pollock, in far less time. There were only a handful of solo Newman exhibitions. His second showing at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951 was less of a success than his first, a year earlier, which had sold to a family friend only one picture. It was not until his 1958 and 1959 exhibitions that his work, all of it a restatement of the same pictorial discoveries, found a measure of acceptance. Looked at differently, it took no time at all, a decade or so.

The tenacity was also a form of procrastination. "I was against the idea of a project for myself," Newman said later. Meanwhile he hugged the shore, dismissing the idea of art as a career on account of its bohemian irregularity, but also because a career

in art, with a regular output and a timetable of annual showings, indicated a lack of seriousness. From here on, he would write exclusively in the service of a new art in America, and against the institutions that impeded it. The Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929, was in his sights as a baleful example, showcasing European past mastery instead of encouraging a nascent American present.

From the start, Newman declared that his paintings were not depictions of some pure idea, but "specific and separate embodiments of feeling," and that they must measure up to a reality that now included Pearl Harbor, the unfolding European horrors and the destruction of a people. In the words of a famous letter to the *New York Times* of June 1943, drafted jointly with Rothko: "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial, and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless". Newman always maintained that his paintings were not abstractions, while insisting on their radically reduced means: "All these guys were dribbling paint, and schmearing paint. I wanted to do it with nothing."



Onement, I by Barnett Newman, 1948.
Oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas
27 1/4" x 16 1/4"

Many artists of The New York School were from places outside of New York City, but Newman was the definition of the urban man. He was the consummate New Yorker, with an unstudied ease in making the city work for him. It was as if he had stepped out of Damon Runyon short story. Newman was a writer who regarded his suit as the first sentence of his day's story. He looked the part, which included knowing the cheap places to drink and eat well, the lowdown on the fights, the horses and baseball. He was a night-owl worthy of city lore.

He knew the last remaining dive on lower Second Avenue that had a music-playing puppet-limb orchestrion, and the oldest fish restaurant in Brooklyn, Gage & Tollner, the one from 1892 that still had walls of arched, cherry-framed mirrors and gaslight fixtures. He was welcomed by the chefs of obscure but authentic restaurants. He knew that when everything else was closed for the night

Ratner's, the Lower East Side dairy restaurant, would still be going strong.

Newman had a formal feeling about each urban moment as a matrix of possibilities, made to measure. *Here* rightly devotes many pages to his appetite for rituals. He dressed with theatrical discretion: tweeds, silk bow-ties, fedoras. (Later on, he would sport a monocle.) If he was going to become an artist, he would do it as the last gentleman, in a suit, because artists should assert their dignity, which included being as well turned-out as bankers. When he got going, he tailored his reputation with the same care. He curated his own shows, gave his works retrospective titles that cue our responses, watched over their cargo of meanings and disagreed with those who agreed with what they thought he was up to.

In 1947, Newman's father, Abraham, died. Almost immediately, Barnett quit his job as a teacher, and six months later he painted "Onement I." A small canvas, it looks prepared rather than painted. It consists of an uneven wash of Indian red that he bisected with a strip of commercial masking tape one inch wide. Tape was to become a constant resource, used to reserve an area or areas of canvas ("zips") for separate treatment, after the tape was lifted. But in "Onement I," he left the tape and painted over it with a lighter orange cadmium red, squeezed from the tube and worked over with a palette knife, hurriedly, as if to hold it in place or bury it. The monochrome wash of the canvas is noncommittal, two variations on a single hue. It resembles a colour test as much as a composition, with an air of expectation as to what might happen next. At which point, Newman stopped. The painting was untitled, and was long thought to be unfinished.

It is referred to in this biography as "very likely the first unmediated moment in Barney's oppressively mediated life", referring to the network of obligations and the whirlwind sociability. The canvas looked like a statement of intent, and Newman took months to work out what was intended. But he felt at home with uncertainty as never before. The formula of one or more vertical zips set against a monochrome field became his one resource, repeated for the next two decades. At the same time Newman vowed never to copy himself.

In 1965, Newman said that he hoped his work "has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness and, at the same time, of his connection to others, who are also separate." The early canvases are typically six or seven feet high; from close up, their scale is human rather than heroic, "a felt thing." The zip seems to reflect the viewer's stance and confirm the viewer's presence, just as Newman insisted that all his paintings have a top and a bottom.

Word of the Week

The New York School

/ðəˌnu ˈjɔrk sku:l/

The **New York School** was an informal group of American poets, painters, dancers, and musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s in New York City. They often drew inspiration from surrealism and the contemporary avant-garde art movements, in particular action painting, abstract expressionism, jazz, improvisational theater, experimental music, and the interaction of friends in the New York City art world's vanguard circle.

The Forward Eagle

is published weekly by the Column Press Co., NYC.

Tim Forward, Editor