# MORRIS LOUIS
(1912-1962)

## The Emergence of Morris Louis

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Little more than twenty years after his death in 1962, the reputation of Morris Louis is securely established. An extensive bibliography and exhibition history, as well as the presence of his paintings in the collections of almost seventy museums around the globe, provide clear testimony to this fact. Yet, astonishingly, that part of his career on which his reputation is based lasted only five years, during which time he produced close to six hundred paintings. Of these, about four hundred are enormous, mural-sized canvases. The artist who produced this remarkable oeuvre remains an elusive, enigmatic figure to this day.

A loner, especially during the years of his greatest achievement, Louis had few friends and rarely discussed his art with anyone—not even his wife. Never part of the New York art world except for a few years spent working for the Works Progress Administration in New York during the 1930s, he chose instead the relative isolation of Baltimore and, later, Washington, D.C. Even after he had achieved some success, toward the end of his tragically short career, he still worked alone in a studio so small that he could only work on one canvas at a time. In fact, in the case of the largest paintings from his series of Unfurleds, he could only work on half of a canvas at a time. His exhibitions afforded him the only opportunity to see his pictures properly stretched, hung, and lit. As a result, major changes in his painting often followed his exhibitions. Despite these limitations, between 1958 and 1962 Louis produced three major series of paintings—the Veils, the Unfurleds, and the Stripes, each numbering more than one hundred canvases—which share an astounding coherence and consistent level of achievement.

Though perhaps not sufficient time in which to achieve a broad historical perspective, twenty years certainly provides distance enough to bring into focus Louis's development and emergence as a major figure in the world of contemporary art. The dramatic changes in that world since 1962 facilitate the effort, since the primary features of Louis's art and the critical dialogue that accompanied it already seem to belong more to history than to the present. For example, in contrast to today's art-media superheroes aged thirty or less, Louis belonged to a generation that served long apprenticeships. He considered himself a professional artist from the time that he graduated from the Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts in Baltimore in 1932, but even the most enthusiastic of his supporters view his Veil paintings of 1954 as his first fully original achievements. They received their first public exposure only in 1959 when Clement Greenberg included them in an exhibition at French & Company in New York. Louis was forty-six years old and had only three more years left to live.

He had pursued his career with total dedication from the start, but little evidence exists from the years before 1954 to prepare us for the originality and quality of his mature paintings. Baltimore's art community, including the Maryland Institute, was profoundly conservative in the 1930s and 1940s. When the Cone sisters of Baltimore, encouraged by their friend Gertrude Stein, collected paintings by such artists as Picasso and Matisse, Baltimoreans were shocked by their acquisitions and considered the sisters more than a little eccentric. Instructors at the Institute considered Cézanne's paintings subversive. While struggling as a student in this milieu, Louis also had to contend with family opposition; a career as a painter hardly seemed promising when compared with the careers in medicine and pharmacy chosen by his three brothers.

The painter Charles Schucker, Louis's closest friend at the Maryland Institute, describes Louis during these years as "fairly tense, animated and very bright," a heavy smoker, a loner who had no other close friends, and a man totally committed to his art despite his family's reservations. Schucker recalls Louis's "natural facility or talent, a feeling for paint and for color in relation to the surfaces" despite a "built-in handicap, one of the saving graces of his talent: he couldn't realize, he couldn't make anything."

The awkwardness of Louis's early figurative paintings confirm this assessment. Louis tried hard to overcome it, as his friend explained: "When he'd get interested in something he'd practically wear it out. He had this ability to select something and stick to it. For example, when he was trying to make one figure sit in a space, he'd do twenty or thirty versions with hardly any difference between them."[i] That work pattern would serve Louis well when he came to his mature series, in which the most subtle refinements distinguish one painting from another.

Sometime in 1936, Louis moved to New York, where he lived until 1943. These years also demonstrate more hard work than success. Like many other now-famous members of his generation—and it is often forgotten that Louis was Jackson Pollock's exact contemporary—Louis joined the Easel Division of the WPA Federal Art Project. His extant paintings from these years (cat. nos. 1–12) contain little evidence of great talent. His subjects include scenes of poverty, workmen, and landscapes inspired by a trip to New England. His palette is muddy and dark, the pictures "handled in the key of the Mexicans," as Joseph Solman observed in 1937 in Louis's first review and last mention in print for sixteen years.[ii]

In a letter written a month before his twenty-ninth birthday in 1941 to his brother Joseph, Louis revealed the attitude he held toward his career: "As to the painting, I know that I'd have had a gallery long ago had it been in me to popularize my style. However, that is not the case, and so I have to play for big stakes in hopes that some highly reputable joint will handle the stuff some day." ("Some day" was thirteen years later, when the Kootz Gallery in New York included three of Louis's paintings in an exhibition called "Emerging Talent.") Louis went on to consider his own personality and to describe his life in New York:

> Had I been interested in medicine, for instance, I would go in for research, new fields, etc. That is the kind of make-up I have and it would not be good for me to try to change. I'm willing to gamble that some day I'll be in a big spot. As long as I can keep going I don't mind taking in a movie every two weeks instead of weekly. It is a small sacrifice and I assure you that I'm eating plenty and feeling fine. I really have suffered nothing by staying in NY and have gained a feeling I'm on my own, which is important.[iii]

On his return to Baltimore, Louis lived with and was supported by his family until his marriage in 1947, when he moved into his wife's apartment in a suburb of Washington. For the next few years he participated in the Maryland Artists' annual exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, winning prizes in 1949 and 1950, and attracting the attention of a group of local artists who asked him to teach them. Louis taught for several years, but his wife, who worked as a writer and editor for the United States Public Health Service, as an elementary school teacher, and later as a school principal, was the chief support of the household. She was far more involved in her own professional fields than in Louis's world of art, but she believed in him completely and provided essential moral support during the difficult years.

Most of Louis's paintings from 1946 to 1950 (cat. nos. 13–26), as well as the drawings from this period, are not strikingly original considering their date. They do reveal a gradual coming to terms with the art of such major figures as Picasso, Matisse, and Miró, whose work Louis must have seen during his years in New York.[iv] He finally began to move away from the conservative subjects, scale, palette, and techniques of his early work toward a more experimental approach clearly inspired by the spatial ambiguities of cubism and the liberating drawing techniques of surrealist automatism (see especially cat. nos. 16–21, 23).

In 1950, Louis accepted a commission from the United States Public Health Service to design an exhibition on tuberculosis. The typescript of an essay now in the files of the Morris

Louis Archives, apparently written by Louis in conjunction with this project, includes the following passage:

> It is valuable to note that Rorschach gave importance to the order of the picture in identical fashion that the artist most usually builds any picture. The first importance of the form content is one which leads artists to usually begin their work by giving this their attention. As the theme develops color is added, particularly for shock value in paintings. It would be an error, however, to say that this is a stereotype which is universal in pictures. At times the opposites are ingeniously used to achieve an unlooked-for end. (Witness Guernica whose shock lies in the very fact that color is totally absent and the black, gray and white treatment of the particular theme serves to give it great force.) But, having determined the validity of using certain pictures in the Rorschach method of testing personalities, it is wise to investigate further possibilities of other types of pictures for the same end. Is not a realistic picture also a shock picture when it is confronting the spectator who has been put to study a group of "abstractions." And would the spectator be able to distinguish order from confusion in some pictures which tend to give the impression of one but are the synthesis of the other? And what would be the spectator's reaction in terms of shock to either the right or left identical half of the inkblot, totally destroying its symmetry, after being subjected to the serenity of symmetries? These are some of the questions which come to mind as this particular scientific datum is made use of today in many kinds of institutions.

With his vision broadening, Louis became receptive to the issues raised by his American contemporaries, the Abstract Expressionists. The *Charred Journal* series of 1951 (cat. nos. 30–36) establishes a clear dialogue with Jackson Pollock's draftsmanship and suggestive figuration within the confines of Louis's more conventional easel scale. The *Tranquilities* collages of 1952–53 (cat. nos. 40–42) echo Robert Motherwell's series of Elegies to the Spanish Republic in form, while the dress-pattern tissue paper with which Louis made them sets a lighter tone. (Louis rarely used materials other than paint and canvas unless he ran short of them, but his limited finances made it impossible for him to buy supplies in large quantities until 1960.) Louis also demonstrated an interest in Willem de Kooning; *Silver Discs* and related paintings from 1953 (cat. nos. 44–47) suggest De Kooning's compressed spatial energies.

Louis's interest in the issues of contemporary painting did not evolve in a vacuum. In 1952, Louis and his wife moved into Washington; soon thereafter he began teaching at the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts, where he met Kenneth Noland, a fellow instructor. They became close friends, drawn together by their total commitment to painting and by their enthusiasm for the work of Pollock and Motherwell. By 1952, Noland had studied with Ilya Bolotowsky at Black Mountain College and with Ossip Zadkine in Paris. Twelve years younger than Louis, Noland was far more sophisticated about the art world and knew many more of its participants. Noland introduced Louis to David Smith at about this time. Smith was an important model for both Washington artists; he stressed the importance of working in series and of always having a large supply of materials at hand.

When Noland and Louis first visited New York together, in April 1953, Noland introduced Louis to Clement Greenberg. The influential art critic played crucial roles in Louis's career: he provided a critical eye and acted as a sounding board, introduced Louis to key artists and their work, interested dealers and collectors in Louis's paintings, arranged several one-man exhibitions and saw to it that Louis was included in important group exhibitions. He also wrote a major essay in 1960 that spotlighted Louis and Noland internationally, and after Louis's death in 1962 served as the primary advisor to the Louis Estate until 1970.

Louis respected and trusted Greenberg and clearly benefited from their friendship. But the extent of Greenberg's influence on the artist has been exaggerated. For example, Louis's repudiation and destruction of the paintings he created from 1955 through 1957 clearly was due partially to the critic's low opinion of them. On the other hand, the Unfurled series of 1960–61, which Greenberg maintains Louis considered his greatest achievement, was begun and completed during a period when the two men did not see each other. In fact, when Louis first showed Greenberg the Unfurleds, in August 1960, together with the Column paintings from 1960, it was the latter pictures that sparked Greenberg's enthusiasm. (It must be noted, however, that in Louis's studio, it would have been extremely difficult to show the Unfurleds to advantage, with the canvases rolled out on the floor, whereas the much smaller Column paintings could be seen far more readily.)

From the beginning of their relationship, Greenberg held an important place in Louis's life. In April 1953, the critic introduced him to Franz Kline and Helen Frankenthaler and their paintings. Louis clearly was ripe for the eye-opening experience of that weekend, during which he also saw paintings by Jackson Pollock (probably for the first time in the original). The openness, energy, and expansive scale of Pollock's and Kline's work, as well as Frankenthaler's liberated techniques and her extension of Pollock's ideas (particularly notable in her masterpiece *Mountains and Sea*, which Louis and Noland saw in her studio) stimulated the two Washington artists. After they returned home, the two worked together for a few weeks. On large, unstretched canvases, they experimented with new techniques of paint application. Noland later described their collaboration as "jam painting like jazz" in an effort "to break down their previous assumptions about painting."[v]

Compared to what he had just seen in New York, Louis likely found his *Charred Journal* and *Tranquilities* paintings rather tame. He had the perfect opportunity to take a comprehensive look at his recent work a week after his return, when his first one-man show opened at the Washington Workshop. In the exhibition's catalogue, Leon Berkowitz compared Louis's calligraphy to that of Klee and Miró. Leslie Judd Portner, critic for the *Washington Post*, described the work of the "young newcomer from Baltimore" (Louis was forty-one) as varying "between an amorphous expressionism and a highly structural linear approach." She praised its "strong cohesion, whether the forms are nebulous and free, or whether an architectural structure binds them in severely controlled geometries."[vi] The conservative side of Louis's work may be inferred from the positive reception accorded it by local critics, who greeted with hesitancy contemporary Abstract Expressionist paintings then on view elsewhere in Washington: Motherwell and Adolph Gottlieb were included in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's biennial, and Catholic University (where Noland taught) mounted a show of De Kooning, Pollock, Jack Tworkov, Esteban Vincente, and Philip Guston.

This exhibition marked the end of a phase of Louis's art. Following the heady experimental work sessions with Noland, Louis began to come to terms with the multitude of important new work and ideas he had been exposed to in the course of a few weeks. He repudiated his conservative easel scale and tentative approach to new techniques. Among the first of his new paintings was *Trellis* (cat. no. 48), a canvas 6 1/2 by 8 1/2 feet, whose airy, free conception suggests the grape arbor of its title. Clearly indebted to Frankenthaler's provocative dialogue with nature and the materials of art, *Trellis* is far more resolved than three other contemporary paintings, *Dark Thrust*, *Landscape (Mid-day)*, and *Untitled (#13 Experiment)* (cat. nos. 49–51). In these pictures Louis introduced the stain technique, pouring diluted black and ocher across unprimed, unstretched canvas. In the first two he superimposed a brushed layer of impasto reminiscent of Kline. All three were painted on canvases that were later cropped for stretching, a compositional device that Louis was to employ for the rest of his career.

In January 1954 Greenberg included *Trellis* and *Silver Discs* in "Emerging Talent," an exhibition he organized for the Kootz Gallery in New York, giving Louis his first exposure in that city since the 1939 World's Fair. Of the eleven artists shown, Louis was one of two singled out in a sensitive review by James Fitzsimmons for *Art Digest*. He found the show to signal "a new trend . . . toward a synthesis of expressive and formal values," and he observed that "tomorrow's vanguard art will probably be abstract expressive (rather than expressionist)." He noted that in Louis's "mural-sized, vast" pictures, "the excitement of the painting, the effect of hurtling movement seems to come largely from a most effective use of line: taut, springy, strategically placed."[vii]

Between January and early June 1954 Louis painted his first series of Veils (cat. nos. 52–67). Nothing in his previous work prepares us for their subtleties and originality. Sixteen pictures comprise this group, allied more by their similar size and stain technique than by the degree of coherence characteristic of the later Veil series. Evidently feeling his way into a new scale and format, Louis worked with both vertical and horizontal rectangles. Indeed, several pictures from this group (cat. nos. 61–64) were begun with vertical pours of paint that, in the finished picture, became underlying horizontal layers when Louis decided to reorient the canvas horizontally.

In these first Veils, Louis explored the potentials of his newly developed stain technique. With one exception (cat. no. 53), he subdued his colors either by extensive thinning or by veiling them with layers of diluted black. In some, he created a limitless field by extending the color off the edge on all sides. In others, he floated the image, resembling a colored cloud, in the center. More often, he pulled the composition together by anchoring the image to the bottom edge, emphasizing the sense of gravitational flow that directed his liquid paint off the canvas. These Veils share a delicacy of color and spatial expansiveness new in Louis's work. They indicate a profound understanding of Pollock as well as of Frankenthaler's perception of the means to expand Pollock's achievement.

At Greenberg's suggestion, Louis shipped nine paintings to Pierre Matisse in New York in June 1954, hoping to convince the art dealer to represent him. Seven were Veils, but the other two were different, as Louis explained to Greenberg:

> All are about the same large size but in my mind 2 of them are different than the continuity of simple pattern & slow motion of the majority. These 2 are the rougher ones with lots of black & white areas. Maybe these are lousy enough to interest me now &

> make me want to explore this further. The others I feel I've about done all I feel like doing about that episode.[viii]

*Untitled* (cat. no. 68) is one of the "rougher ones" Louis described. Its bright planes of stained color are overlaid with black and white impasto, and its turgid surface shares more with the De Kooning/Kline/Frankenthaler hybrids of 1953 than with the lyrical delicacy of the Veils.

Louis never made it clear why he waited slightly more than three years to explore the potential of his Veil paintings. They had pointed him in a direction that would have taken him beyond the general style of late Abstract Expressionism, which was often characterized more by rhetoric than by conviction. Instead, by early June 1954, he had already begun to plumb the "rough" Abstract Expressionist style that was to absorb his energies until early in 1958. A thoughtful letter he wrote to Greenberg on 1 June 1954 in his moment of vacillation provides a partial explanation:

> I've painted a bit more since my last writing—the more I paint the more I'm aware of a difference in my approach and others. Am distrustful of over-simplifications but nonetheless think that there is nothing very new in any period of art: what is true is that it is only something new for the painter & that this thin edge is what matters. I suspect it is possible to relate every bit of abs. exp. to other art in a breakdown. It comes out new & different when art history is submerged and making a painting is a simple experience not precisely like any the artist had before.
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> I believe I spoke to David [Smith] about a related point of difference between myself as affected by paintings and most other painters I've known: I don't care a great deal about the positive accomplishments in their work or my own since that leads to an end. I look at paintings from the negative side, what is left out is useful only as that leads to the next try and the next. In this sense the positive accomplishments of Pollack *[sic]* or anyone else has little meaning for me & I acknowledge a debt to bad, but not indifferent, paintings and to students who so ineptly paint an invention of what they feel, what little they know. The art experience in these often surpass Picasso and the muscular painters. I doubt that this backing-in approach is new either for, with all this, the painting seems to establish some bond with art; historically it also becomes engulfed.
>
> Too, I can't help but with, right or wrong, to take issue with those whose fetish is promoting painting from the stomach, orgasm or mouth. The psychology becomes a

> conformity to a mode of bad taste which rivals the good Anglo-Saxons and the difference adds up to the sameness of focus. A school of non-conformists exists waiting for the next to negate it in turn.[ix]

This statement seems to imply that Louis thought the Veils represented “an end,” and that the “next try” lay more in the direction of the vigorous, compressed space he had introduced into his work in 1953 rather than in the Veils’ “simple pattern and slow motion.”

Louis’s willingness—or compulsion—to change and his concomitant refusal to settle into a formula permitted him to achieve success in three distinct series—the Veils, the Unfurleds, and the Stripes—in only a few years. His early struggles did not culminate in a single, powerful conception, as in the work of Rothko, Newman, or Still. Instead, like the next generation that included Stella and Noland, he continued to push himself, never willing to accept a single image as his definitive pictorial statement.

When Greenberg visited Louis in April 1955 he was disappointed to find him engaged in “Tenth Street touch” paintings, a term the critic had coined to designate the style of many of De Kooning’s followers. He suggested more frequent visits to New York galleries and studios to help the artist comprehend their weaknesses. Despite Greenberg’s negative response, Louis exhibited his rough paintings in his second one-man show at the Washington Workshop in 1955, at the Barnett Aden Gallery in Washington in 1956, at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in May 1957, and in his first one-man show in New York, which was held at the Martha Jackson Gallery in November 1957. (Greenberg lent the 1954 Veil painting *Salient* [cat. no. 63] to the Jackson show, but the other paintings were all from 1955–57.) By the closing of that exhibition, Louis had come to share the critic’s negative opinion of his recent work. He expressed his supreme dissatisfaction by destroying all of the paintings from 1955–57 still in his possession. Based upon his order receipts for canvas during those years and the average size of his pictures, he apparently destroyed more than 300 paintings. Only nine canvases survived his radical editing; three others are known from photographs (cat. nos. 69–80).

Reviewing the Martha Jackson show, Dore Ashton observed that “the paradox in the best of the large abstractions by Morris Louis . . . is that though they are spontaneous in character, their appeal to emotion and sense seems the result of a thoughtfully paced search.” She concluded on a less positive note: “Not all of Louis’s paintings, however, give the feeling of completeness. In some, the means . . . are blatantly insistent. Where Louis has added an applique of yellow, red, or silver [see cat. nos. 77–79], the rest of the forms and colors become meaningless components."[x] Louis had attempted to forge a synthesis between the fluid surface unity of his early Veils and the vigorous draftsmanship and intense color contrasts of his 1953 pictures. Now he repudiated that effort—for the time being—and took up the challenge of his Veils.

Louis himself provided the evidence that dates his resumption of the Veils. In July 1958 he wrote to Greenberg, "As surprising was the purchase by one Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd of Philadelphia and D.C. of one of the recent large ones I'd shown her in the spring."[xi] The picture under discussion, *Untitled* (cat. no. 81), reveals the revised Veil image in its fully mature form. If there were transitional paintings between this type of Veil and the pictures in the Jackson show, no traces remain. It seems more likely that Louis went back to a 1954 painting like *Intrigue* (cat. no. 60) for inspiration. He enlarged his format dramatically, from the dimensions of 6 1/2 by 8 1/2 feet for *Intrigue* to those of 8 by 14 feet (or more) for the 1958–59 Veils. In the newer series, he chose to anchor the image firmly to the bottom, setting it off starkly against the unpainted field.

In comparison to the degree of change from picture to picture prior to 1958, the compositions of the next fourteen months at first seem monomorphic. Diversity of figuration yielded to the single Veil image—an image so ideally suited to the poured-paint stain technique that it becomes a simile for the technique that created it. Louis thoroughly controlled his materials, even as he benefitted from their inherent accidents—as had Pollock and Frankenthaler. He worked with his canvas tacked to a work stretcher; variation in the angled placement of the stretcher, the tautness or slackness of the canvas, the viscosity and hue of the paint, the amount of paint poured, and the direction of the pour became his creative means.[xii] He channeled the chaotic draftsmanship of the previous paintings into disciplined, sophisticated, highly evocative images.

Louis discovered in 1958 that the Veil concept could be expanded considerably beyond that "end" he perceived in 1954. During the fourteen months he expended on the series, he produced 126 enormous paintings, roughly one painting every three days. While the paintings in this first mature series display remarkable consistency and resolution, five compositional types are evident.

The first group is the "triadic" Veils (cat. nos. 81–137), in which two vertical lines, the traces left by the vertical braces of the work stretcher, divide the image internally into three unequal sections. The "split" Veils are readily identified as those images literally separated into sections, isolated sculpturally against the unpainted field (cat. nos. 139–52). The "monadic"

Veils share a more planar compositional continuity within the image (cat. nos. 153–77, 183–88). The fourth group, the “vertical” Veils, are those few painted on a vertical, rather than horizontal, rectangle (cat. nos. 178–82). The last group, the “Italian” Veils (cat. nos. 189–205), so named because some of them were first exhibited in Milan, return to the dimensions (6 1/2 by 8 1/2 feet) of the 1954 Veils.

The order in which these groups of Veils have been identified and catalogued here represents the general order in which Louis developed the series, in the view of this author. Thus, he apparently began with the subdued tonalities of the bronze triadic Veils, developing a wide range of smoldering color effects: intense hues flicker around the edges of the bronzed mass, as in *Beth Lamed* (cat. no. 90), or the center is set off by dark framing wings, as in *Beth Chet* (cat. no. 121). Other triadic Veils, like *Lower Spectrum* (cat. no. 104), are characterized by sharper distinctions between color areas, which take the form of spiked and jagged peaks, like those in Clyfford Still’s paintings. In a few exceptional triadic Veils, like *Tet* (cat. no. 125) and *Blue Veil* (cat. no. 126), Louis chose not to employ the bronzed scrim. Instead, the surface exudes glorious greens, blues, and violets, whose coolness is heightened by the contrasting tongues of yellow and orange that protrude across the top edge.

By eliminating the triadic Veils’ vertical subdivisions, Louis produced more expansive images in his monadic Veils. In *Dalet Heh* (cat. no. 161) color planes alone divide the image internally, a far more subtle division than that used in the triadic Veils. *Bower* (cat. no. 167) appears especially rich in coloration, its bronzed center fading to green at the bottom, its mass framed by a sliver of orange on the left and a broad swath of black on the right. *Beth Rash* (cat. no. 186) and *Dalet Tet* (cat. no. 184) are composed of abutted narrow pours of many vivid hues over which Louis poured a velvety black wash; brilliant plumes and smaller flickers of color across the top descend into the nearly opaque field. *Dalet Tet*, unusual in its restrained verticality, is abstract in form relative to the earlier more gestural, undulating Veil images of 1958.

*Beth Chaf* (cat. no. 182), the most successful of the few vertical Veils, derives its stunning power and sense of baroque exuberance from the twisting trajectories of vibrant pink and orange, set off by the single curving rivulet of saturated blue-green. Several of the small Italian Veils echo this marvelous intensity of hue, most notably *Italian Spring* (cat. no. 202). Such unbridled colorism in concert with dynamic form was unprecedented in the Veil series. It marked Louis’s desire to reconfront those very issues he had rejected little more than a year before.

Just as the Martha Jackson exhibition had signaled the end of one direction in Louis's work, a major exhibition of twenty-three Veils—fourteen from 1958–59 together with nine from 1954—at French & Company in New York in April 1959 not only provided the first public exposure of the Veil series but also heralded its conclusion. Given the museum scale of the exhibition, made possible by the gallery's spacious new Contemporary Department; that its organizer was Clement Greenberg; and that it followed in the same space Barnett Newman's first New York show in more than a decade, Louis was practically guaranteed a large audience.

For the most part, the reviews were positive. Stuart Preston, critic for the *New York Times*, observed that "Louis translates the chromatic calculations of Rothko into something that might be called chromatic mysticism."[xiii] Martica Sawin noted in *Arts* that the Veils belonged "to a particular realm of experience to which the works of Rothko and Newman, in their different ways, also pertain."[xiv] In a second review, for *Art International*, she discussed both Newman's and Louis's exhibitions at French & Company; while she was critical of Newman, she admired Louis's "thin films of exquisite color, overlaid to fantastic depths without appreciable change in surface. They are paintings of incredible delicacy on an enormous scale. . . . Louis is very much apart from New York School painting, yet he is seriously engaged in a totally independent effort to extend painting frontiers."[xv]

Far more instrumental in expanding Louis's reputation was William Rubin's essay "Younger American Painters," which appeared in the January 1960 issue of *Art International*. Labeling the Veil exhibition "one of the most significant in years," Rubin praised Louis for his "virtuosity" and for "the effortlessness and delicacy of the results." He was critical of the sculptural isolation of the veil image on the unpainted field, but noted that the artist had "transcended this limitation" in later paintings that "reinforce my feeling that he may be emerging with a painterly profile comparable in stature to those of the 'first wave' pioneers."[xvi]

By the time Rubin's essay was published, Louis had completed his Veils and had practically another year's work, stored on rolls in his basement, behind him. He had not slackened his pace. In the fourteen or fifteen months between the last Veils and the first Unfurleds, the next major series, Louis painted at least one hundred more mural-sized paintings (cat. nos. 207–306). Although many of these pictures are gloriously colored and strongly composed, no single strong idea has taken hold of them and lifted them to the level of the major series. For Louis, this was a time of searching and experimentation rather than of resolution.

During this period, Louis subjected virtually every feature of the Veils to such careful scrutiny that the series appears to have undergone a radical dissection. The precise order of these paintings is unknown, but it is clear that certain ideas held enough potential to be pursued in subseries, while others lasted no more than a painting or two. Issues that likely emerged directly from the Veils were picked up and dropped, to be later reexamined and synthesized with other compositional or coloristic notions. Very few of these "Themes and Variations," however, possess either the evocative subtlety of the Veils or the assurance and *éclat* of the Unfurleds.

Assuming that the abstract planarity of the Italian Veils marked the end of that series, pictures like *Taper and Spread* (cat. no. 211) probably represent one of Louis's next directions. These spare compositions based upon two or three flat color planes (cat. nos. 208–18), usually verticals separated by strips of unpainted canvas, reveal a direct confrontation with Newman's paintings. In the *Taper and Spread* group, Louis also rejected the imagery of figure against ground that he used for the Veils, in favor of an all-over composition, which he had previously employed in his work from 1953, 1954, and 1955–57.

*Seal* (cat. no. 219)—selected as the cover illustration for Louis's second exhibition at French & Company—hovers between the simple, planar paintings mentioned above and a group that seems to have culminated in the Florals. Gradually opening up the field with an increasing multiplicity of hues whose contours become ever more active, Louis reintroduced the gestural activity he had disciplined in the Veils. *Addition* and related pictures (cat. nos. 221–28) and the series of *Para* paintings (cat. nos. 229–34) move in the direction of bold colorism akin to Matisse. *Para I* (cat. no. 229), with its undulating, almost figural vertical colors framed dramatically at both sides by black, appears especially Matissean. Louis took a similar approach in the later *Saf* and *Ambi* series (cat. nos. 243–52), but in these pictures he used a veil-like shape in an attempt to impose compositional order.

The Florals (cat. nos. 238–42, 260–83) are among the most successful of Louis's 1959–60 Themes and Variations. The majority are characterized by a hovering mass of intense, discrete hues, which are unified by a veiled wash. In the best of these paintings, Louis achieved a delicate balance between gesturalism and colorism without sacrificing compositional coherence. This was obviously his goal during this period of searching, but it often remained just beyond his grasp. The loose structure of many of the Themes and Variations paintings reflects Louis's willingness to experiment as well as his failure to find a solution to the problem.

Probably toward the end of this period, Louis reimposed compositional discipline. In the finger Veils (cat. nos. 284–89), Louis increasingly separated the vivid colors he used, pouring them in controlled, nearly vertical channels so that the outer contours assumed the tapering slant of the Veils' silhouette. The focus of *Twined Columns I* and *II* (cat. nos. 290, 291) is almost entirely on those lateral sides; this experiment may well have propelled Louis into his Columns (cat. nos. 293–306), characterized by a spare structure strongly reminiscent of Newman's mature paintings.

Only one major exhibition has focused on these paintings from 1959–60: Louis's second one-man show of twenty-one pictures selected by Greenberg for French & Company, which opened in March 1960. Two months later the critic published in *Art International* a major essay, "Louis and Noland," his most impassioned championing of specific artists since his reviews of Pollock in the 1940s and of David Smith in the 1950s. He explored the advantages of working outside of New York: "From Washington you can keep in steady contact with the New York art scene without being subjected as constantly to its pressures to conform. . . ." He noted that Louis had "found himself only some seven or eight years ago" when his first viewing of Pollock's work and Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* led him "to change his direction abruptly." And he continued,

> Abandoning Cubism with a completeness for which there was no precedent in either influence, he began to feel, think and conceive almost exclusively in terms of open color. . . ." His revulsion against Cubism was a revulsion against the sculptural. Cubism meant shapes, and shaped meant armatures of light and dark. Colors meant areas and zones, and the interpenetration of these, which could be achieved by variations of hue better than by variations of value. Recognitions like these liberated Louis's originality along with his hitherto dormant gift for color.

Then, Greenberg explained Louis's stain technique, observing,

> The effect conveys a sense not only of color as somehow disembodied, and therefore more purely optical, but also of color as a thing that opens and expands the picture plane. The suppression of the difference between painted and unpainted surfaces causes pictorial space to leak through—or rather, to seem about to leak through—the framing edges of the picture into the space beyond them.

This latter quality was linked inevitably, in the critic's view, to Louis's use of huge canvases, due to "the need to have the picture occupy so much of one's visual field that it loses its character as a discrete tactile object and thereby becomes that much more purely a picture, a strictly visual entity." Greenberg concluded by agreeing with William Rubin's assessment that Louis was among the very few artists who approached the stature of the "first wave" pioneers of Abstract Expressionism.[xvii]

Finally, at the age of forty-seven, Louis was launched. Following the advice of his brother William, Lawrence Rubin drew up a contract with Louis and began to buy paintings to promote in Europe. When French & Company closed its Contemporary Department in 1960, Andre Emmerich became Louis's dealer in the United States. And the paintings finally began to sell. Louis had waited a long time for any financial return from his art. During the period from 1948 through 1956 he made only one major sale, of $500; he also sold a few paintings to friends, at prices of about $25 apiece. In 1957, one painting was sold for $450. Six paintings were sold in 1958, bringing Louis $5,500. In 1959, four more sales gave Louis $2,450. But in 1960, Louis received $8,620 from the sale of nine paintings, and in 1961 fourteen pictures would be sold for a total of $13,750.[xviii]

Louis took advantage of his improved financial status in 1960 by acquiring larger supplies of painting materials than had ever before been possible. This included nearly one thousand yards of canvas and sixteen gallons of Bocour's new formula of Magna paint, whose fluid consistency contributed in no small measure to the striking achievement of the Unfurled series. Louis began that series in the summer of 1960 and completed it by the following April. Maintaining the pace he had established as early as 1955, he painted almost 120 Unfurleds in roughly eight months, a feat requiring astounding concentration and energy.

The Veils are clearly Louis's most romantic paintings, capable of stimulating an extraordinary range of intensely subjective responses. But the Unfurleds present his most audacious, innovative pictorial statement. According to Greenberg, Louis believed this series to be his greatest achievement. How frustrating for Louis, then, that only two pictures from the series were exhibited during his lifetime—*Delta* (cat. no. 325) and *Alpha* (cat. no. 335), which were included in the one-man show Greenberg organized for Bennington College that opened in October 1960. Louis never even saw that exhibition, which means that he never had the opportunity to see a single Unfurled painting properly stretched and hung. Since French & Company had closed its large space, the first New York gallery exhibition of the Unfurleds could not be held until the Andre Emmerich Gallery moved into larger quarters on 57th Street, which were inaugurated by an exhibition of the Unfurleds in October 1964, two years after Louis's death.

Like the Veils, the Unfurleds appear remarkably consistent and fully resolved relative to the work that preceded them. The overwhelming impact of this series stems as much from its simplicity of composition as from the complexity of its effect. The basic pictorial components are readily described: two triangular zones of color rivulets confront each other across a huge center wedge of intensely white, unpainted canvas. With the directness and seeming inevitability so often characteristic of masterpieces, the Unfurleds provided Louis with the ideal framework in which to exploit his urge toward active draftsmanship and colorism without sacrificing structural coherence, a problem that had long preoccupied him.

He had nearly touched upon the solution in the *Omega* series (cat. nos. 253–57) of 1959–60. Although these pictures have been exhibited as vertical rectangles, they obviously were derived from such horizontal compositions as those of the *Ambi* series (cat. nos. 249–52). Viewed horizontally, the Omegas demonstrate traces of the outer silhouette of the Veils and their exploitation of gravitational effects. Viewed vertically, the same paintings prefigure the Unfurleds in the way Louis used the unpainted canvas to unify discrete color rivulets, rather than superimposing a veiling wash.

The Omegas may have resulted from a direct effort by Louis to avoid comparisons with the paintings of Clyfford Still, which some of the 1959–60 paintings had prompted. In his essay of 1960, Greenberg had stated that "before [Louis] so much as caught a glimpse of anything by Still, Newman, or Rothko, he had aligned his art with theirs."[xix] As late as May 1962, letters between Louis and the critic discuss that very claim. Greenberg wrote, "if you want to back me up on that, you'd better stop letting Still bug you—you ought to have too much confidence in yourself for that."[xx] The letter from Louis that occasioned this remark has not come to light, but in his reply to Greenberg he wrote, "I'm rather sure I'm not bugged by Still tho' I suppose it sounded like that. My real point, on which I was corrected, was that he had considerably influenced and damaged the younger painters as had de Kooning. Apparently I was wrong."[xxi]

Louis's stained surface obviously bears no relation to the incrustations of Still's paintings, but the jagged figuration, interlocking planes, use of closely valued hues to reduce spatial recession, and the proliferation of warm, earth tones are shared features. In fact, Greenberg had praised those very features of Still's work in his well-known 1955 essay, "'American-Type' Painting."[xxii] With the Unfurleds, painted within a few months of the Omegas, Louis extended the pictorial concepts shared with Still into an innovative realm.

Louis found his way gradually to the composition that was to characterize the Unfurleds, working out various possibilities in a decidedly logical manner in the "proto-Unfurleds" (cat.

nos. 307–24). (Some of these paintings previously have been called "Japanese banners.") *Delta Psi* (cat. no. 307) introduces the primary elements of the Unfurleds: broad areas of unpainted canvas on which discrete, narrow streams of color are poured from the vertical edge of the work stretcher and directed (probably along indented channels of the canvas) along a steep diagonal toward the bottom. The birdlike silhouette at the origin of the pour—caused by paint dripping from its container—and the gentle taper of the lines impart an organic quality reminiscent of the biomorphic forms often produced by surrealist-inspired automatic drawing. Louis, however, was drawing on a nine-by-eight-foot canvas; he relied on his fluid medium, mobile work stretcher, and canvas channels to impart an immediacy to his draftsmanship.

In the rest of the proto-Unfurleds, Louis positioned and repositioned clusters of color rivulets in every conceivable relationship to one another and to the reserved areas of unpainted canvas. In several instances he created a diagonal swath of color across the center, in others he worked with a tentlike cluster of color pours, and in a few he restricted the color to the edges of an unpainted center field. In retrospect, the proto-Unfurleds assume the character of monumental preparatory studies, worked out in full scale on canvas rather than in the pages of a sketchbook. They reflect the unfolding of a thought process given physical form.

In considering the Unfurled series, the exigencies of Louis's cramped working conditions and the care exercised by his estate in documenting the paintings provide crucial evidence that helps clarify his goals.[xxiii] As soon as the paint was dry, Louis rolled paintings for storage. Canvases were rolled around each other in groups; the number of paintings on a single roll was determined by its weight, because Louis carried them to the basement or a second-floor storage area.

Since only two Unfurleds had been exhibited, and there exists little evidence to suggest that he showed many of them to studio visitors, most of the rolled Unfurleds remained undisturbed until the estate took inventory. At that time, paintings were rolled out one by one and numbered in the order in which they were seen. In the case of the Unfurleds, small groups of consecutive estate numbers clearly indicate paintings that were made within days of each other. These groups demonstrate clearly that in this series, Louis focused primarily on color relationships and secondarily on linear and compositional refinements.

This is especially true of the "broad rivulet" Unfurleds, those with only four or five colors on each side of the canvas, their paths often following a branching trajectory. Two paintings from this group with the consecutive Morris Louis Estate [ML] numbers 3-20 and 3-21, *Delta Iota* (cat. no. 358) and *Gamma Beta* (cat. no. 359), clarify Louis's thinking about color relationships. *Delta Iota* directly opposes symmetrically placed primary hues. *Gamma Beta* employs the same palette on its right side, the colors poured almost identically and applied in the same order. But Louis added one blue pour on the right, and also made the left side entirely different, using secondary and earth colors. This decision to compose almost exclusively with the six basic prismatic hues is evident in many other Unfurleds as well, with variations stemming from the order of the colors and linear subtleties alone. *Alpha Epsilon* (cat. no. 340), a compositional variation, presents the most striking use of primary/secondary color contrasts; the three primary hues extending across the left half of the canvas face off against the three secondary colors on the right, with unifying black pours stretching from lower left to upper right. The picture's powerful effect is emphasized by the length of the canvas, nearly twenty feet across.

The color effects of these paintings recall Matisse's observation, "Thus it is that simple colors can act upon the inner feelings with all the more force because they are simple. A blue, for instance, accompanied by the shimmer of its complementaries, acts upon the feelings like a sharp blow on a gong. The same with red and yellow; the artist must be able to sound them when he needs to."[xxiv] Although Louis, unfortunately, never explained his own attitude toward color, he advised his students to "study Matisse to understand color."[xxv]

Consecutive estate-numbered paintings also reveal Louis's experimentation with the size of the Unfurleds. *Delta Epsilon* (cat. no. 367) and *Gamma Sigma* (cat. no. 368), ML 3-75 and 3-76, display a nearly identical order of colors poured in similar configurations. But the former picture is 12 1/2 feet long, a customary length for paintings in the series, while the latter is nearly 20 feet long, placing it in a group of only about ten Unfurleds whose lengths range from 18 to 24 feet. Louis here experimented literally with stretching out one successful composition. By nearly doubling the breadth of the unpainted center, he sacrificed the compositional tautness characteristic of the most successful paintings in the series.

The most sustained accomplishments in the Unfurled series are to be found within the group of "narrow rivulet" versions (cat. nos. 383–423). Unlike the broad rivulet versions, where the discrete colors and specificity of their poured contours convey a sense of immediacy and of the artist's active presence, the narrow rivulet versions seem almost self-generated and somehow more distant, assured pictures. Indeed, seeing pictures of equal dimensions from both groups hung in the same room gives one the sense that the broad rivulet pictures are closer physically to one's eyes than the narrow rivulet pictures. Their multiplicity of colors—as many as fourteen on each side of the canvas—and their vibrating contours challenge one's powers of perception. Only by studying these pictures at length can one fully appreciate their uniqueness and come to understand Louis's intentions and the path he took to achieve them.

The colors of *Beta Gamma* (cat. no. 385), as well as those of several other Unfurleds in this group, bleed and overlap, thus reducing to a minimum the channels between pours. Whether Louis desired this effect or encountered difficulties in separating so many colors in such a restricted space is not known. In contrast, *Beta Kappa* (cat. no. 422) shares with the majority of narrow rivulet Unfurleds a crispness of line and color resulting from the unpainted margins reserved between each color.

Especially crucial in these pictures are the hue and the degree of tautness or slackness, concavity or convexity of the two innermost rivulets. They define the contours of the center wedge, an element as essential as the color zones to the paintings' success. Equally crucial in establishing compositional strength is the fifth or sixth rivulet from the top, whose trajectory bends away from the diagonal to follow a more vertical path. If each color zone is perceived as a bisected arch, then this directional shift is analogous to the haunch of the arch. Certainly, the monumental scale and clarity of the pictorial structure derived from the three interlocked triangles facilitate an architectural analogy. Along this haunch, where the color flow (or thrust) changes, Louis usually introduces a clear shift in the hue or value pattern. He also does this near the outermost corners, generally in the third or fourth rivulet from the corner. Changes in both of these places maintain the tautness of the composition by precluding the fading or buckling of the color zone.

In effect, Louis took a major step beyond Pollock's notion of all-over composition. In the Unfurleds, the entire canvas contributes dynamically to the pictorial structure even though as much as two-thirds of it remains unpainted.[xxvi] Louis put behind him the dilemma of figure versus ground that had troubled him in 1959–60, as well as his indebtedness to Pollock, Newman, and Still. By relying on the near-geometric unity that results from dividing a rectangle into three interlocked triangles, creating two color areas that appear simultaneously to press inward and outward, Louis achieved a composition of dynamic equilibrium. In attaining complex compositional results from simple elements, Louis's success is comparable with that of Mondrian, despite the dramatic difference in the appearance and scale of their paintings.

Both drawing and color relationships contribute elements essential to the Unfurleds' power. Louis absolutely identified drawing and painting, color and line in this series. His masterful control of the pouring technique permitted him to retain the sensitivity of gestural handwriting on a monumental scale. He also discovered that his composition provided a flexible structure with which to explore an enormous range of color relationships. After he expanded the prismatic palette of the broad rivulet versions to include a variety of earth colors, it led him to play with harmonic balancing as well as extremes of color contrasts within a single color zone as well as chiasmically back and forth across the center wedge. In *Delta Theta* (cat. no. 423), for example, the left side is predominantly light in hue and warm in tone, while the right side is darker and cool. But a few darker, cool colors are introduced on the left and a few warmer, light ones on the right so as to establish a dialogue across the center chasm.

It is not surprising that Louis considered the Unfurleds his greatest achievement. During the preceding decade he had struggled repeatedly to strike a balance between forceful composition, vibrant color, and gestural drawing. He failed because these elements had seemed to oppose one another; each time he gave full rein to one, it resulted in the suppression of the other. But the audacious simplicity of the Unfurleds' composition supported equally color intensity and gestural drawing.

The achievement of such pictures is all the more extraordinary considering the severe restrictions of Louis's working space and, even more, that he never saw one of these paintings under satisfactory viewing conditions. Since few members of the New York art community would go out of their way to see the exhibition at Bennington College that included two Unfurleds, the series remained virtually unknown until 1963, when one Unfurled painting was included in Louis's memorial exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Early in 1961 Louis moved in a radically different direction. By the end of April he was confident enough about his newest paintings, the Stripes, to discuss with Andre Emmerich an exhibition of them in October. No period of experimentation like that which followed the Veils seems to have intervened between the Unfurleds and the Stripes. Instead, Louis picked up a theme introduced early in 1960—the Column paintings—and developed its full potential. He had already released two Columns to Emmerich, *Picture with Red Stripe* (cat. no. 294) and *Picture with Blue Stripe* (cat. no. 298), but now he explained to his dealer, "Since these [Stripe] pictures are similar to the 2 you had stretched but much better, would you not especially show the ones you have around."[xxvii]

Louis first showed the Stripe paintings to Greenberg in his studio at the end of April, and was heartened by his positive response. In a letter to the artist following his visit, Greenberg pointedly discussed one crucial aspect of the Stripe paintings: they were practically the only pictures since the Italian Veils that were small enough to be exhibited in either Andre Emmerich's New York gallery or Lawrence Rubin's in Paris. Greenberg commented:

> I myself find that the smaller you paint lately, the more pungent your pictures get. This reaction has nothing to do with sales concerns on my part; it's a pure and simple reaction. Thus I noticed that leaving less bare canvas on either side of the Pillar form strengthened the picture and made it more emphatic. I want you to know that this is what I honestly and nakedly felt, and still would have had your 14-footers been selling so much that there was a shortage of them. The last thing I want is for an artist of your stature to do violence to his art simply in order to sell it.[xxviii]

In point of fact, Louis's two major series, the Veils and Unfurleds, were simply too large to be exhibited in available gallery space. In addition, collectors thought them to be too large for their homes. As William Rubin observed in a letter to the artist, "By now the three European collectors with homes big enough to house your pictures have them."[xxix]

Louis's situation contrasted markedly with that of his friend Kenneth Noland, whose paintings tended to be much smaller and could therefore be shown to advantage in the same galleries that represented Louis. In March 1961, Louis went to New York to see Noland's first one-man show at the Emmerich Gallery. He could not have failed to observe the scale of Noland's target paintings relative to the gallery space. Noland was exhibiting regularly his most recent work in New York and Paris, while Louis was restricted to showing his small Veils, now two years old, and had to keep his recently completed Unfurleds rolled up in storage. One can readily imagine his desire by the spring of 1961 to work on a smaller scale without compromising his previous level of achievement.

Yet, the Stripes—or Pillars as the earliest of them were called—were not small paintings. Louis painted them on a work stretcher that measured 6 1/2 by 9 feet. Before being cropped and stretched, the Pillars were identical in size to the 1954 Veils, the Italian Veils, some of the 1959–60 Florals, and the Columns. Greenberg's suggestion that Louis reduce the bare space around his Pillars was heeded only gradually. Those he exhibited in 1961 at Emmerich's measured as much as 7 1/2 by 5 feet.

Louis's extraordinary concentration and productivity never slackened until June 1962, when lung cancer forced him to stop painting entirely. During the preceding fifteen or sixteen months he painted about 230 Stripe pictures. Stylistic comparisons of dated with undated paintings suggest that as few as 65 were made in 1961 and as many as 165 in 1962, despite the fact that he worked on the series for three fewer months in the second year. This partially reflects his work practice, for with the 1961 Pillars he stretched only one painting from the 6 1/2-by-9 foot canvas. But in the narrow Stripe paintings of 1962, he painted as many as four or five pictures across that same 9-foot width, cutting them apart after the paint had dried. The actual painting time was probably about the same, but it yielded as many as five narrow Stripe paintings to one Pillar.

The power of the Unfurleds was related directly to their monumental scale, but Louis seems to have recognized the potential for adapting many of their key features to a smaller format. The primary adaptation in the Pillars consisted in the application of abutted and overlapping bands of color compressed into vertical stacks. In essence, Louis integrated the Veils' figural component (previously distilled in the Columns) with the Unfurleds' colorism, imparting to each an entirely new effectiveness.

The essential new feature was compositional: Louis introduced asymmetry as a dynamic structural device. The Veils, Columns, and Unfurleds were essentially symmetrical paintings. Only the most subtle, internal asymmetries activate the Veils, and the asymmetrical color patterns of many Unfurleds serve a similar function in those decidedly symmetrical compositions. Half of the Pillars Louis exhibited in 1961 at the Emmerich Gallery were symmetrical, most strikingly *Color Barrier* (cat. no. 430), in which symmetrically arranged color bands comprise an image exactly centered between the unpainted areas on either side. But the other five pictures exhibited, including *Earth Gamut* (cat. no. 425) and *Sky Gamut* (cat. no. 454), display pillars placed dramatically off-center, emphasizing the role of the unpainted canvas as an active compositional element rather than a neutral carrier for the color.

Unstretched Pillars in the Louis Estate disclosed that in some cases the image was actually painted off-center on the rectangle and stretched so as to preserve that asymmetry. In other cases, however, a pillar that had been painted in the center of the canvas was marked by Louis for cropping and stretching as an asymmetrical image. With the Unfurleds, cropping contributed nothing to the pictures' composition. With the Veils, cropping was essential only in determining the amount of unpainted margin framing the image. But in the Stripes, Louis utilized cropping as a crucial compositional element.[xxx]

Reviews of Louis's 1961 exhibition were mixed. One anonymous reviewer disparagingly termed the Pillars "spectrum-striped beach towels draped over dressing screens."[xxxi] Irving Sandler, however, gave the paintings far more serious consideration. He wrote:

> Like Albers, Morris Louis is concerned with the particular kind of visual excitement that color can create, but unlike Albers whose pictures are ascetic and didactic, Louis' are sensuous and hedonistic. He is as involved with the careful relation of hues, but his large works are more spontaneous. . . . He attempts to produce an all-over resonance that animates the colored and bare areas alike. He does not choose his hues according to any apparent scheme, but the differing widths, densities, and brightnesses of the color bands are adjusted to this end. . . . The soft edges of the paint-soaked forms are contrasted with the regularity of the designs.[xxxii]

The most influential review was Brian O'Doherty's in the *New York Times*. He praised the artist's "intelligence and invention" in the creation of "bands [that] jostle, squeeze, push and argue with each other, giving each pillar considerable optical excitement." Some of his praise was tempered: "Such aggressive ambiguities of vision become a little intolerable except in those that are most controlled. . . ." But he concluded on a positive note when he stated, "this is an attempt of rare intelligence to exploit visual phenomena through color."[xxxiii]

Later in 1961, Louis began to paint double-stack Stripe compositions in which he entirely rejected symmetry and expanded the coloristic complexities of the series. Not only are color stacks placed off-center on the field, but the two stacks are often dramatically different in width. *Unfolding Light* (cat. no. 474) exemplifies Louis's increased emphasis on the interaction between painted and unpainted areas as compositional forces, as well as on the color dialogue between the two painted areas. As in the Unfurleds, the bands that delimit color areas set this dialogue in motion, initiating the pattern of color vibrations and elisions that imparts a unique character to each picture.[xxxiv]

Louis introduced a more dramatic change in the Stripes in the spring of 1962. After a visit to Washington late in March, Greenberg wrote to the artist, "As usual, your paintings continue to haunt me. But first time I felt they were beyond my eye for time being. Which, for me, means everything."[xxxxv] The paintings that posed this challenge are likely some of the same ones Andre Emmerich saw on a visit ten days later, seven of which he took back to New York. These new paintings were composed of much narrower, more regular stripes than had been characteristic of the earlier Pillars. Among those consigned to Emmerich were single- and double-stack vertical stripes, including *Illumination* (cat. no. 588) and *One and Two* (cat. no. 578), and two horizontal compositions, *Partition* (cat. no. 647) and *Pogo* (cat. no. 648).

Louis had considered a horizontal hanging of his Stripe paintings from the beginning. He even had suggested to the collector who bought *Apex* (cat. no. 509) that she could "hang it horizontally if that suited her better."[xxxvi] In 1962 Louis painted a group of Stripe pictures (cat. nos. 638–52) in which, rather than cantilevering stripes out from one edge, as would be the case with a horizontal hanging of *Apex*, he positioned the color stacks so that they are entirely surrounded by unpainted canvas. In pictorial terms, he exploited the inherent visual buoyancy of this format; as a result of reducing the height to as little as 14 inches relative to a length as great at 115 inches, the color becomes disembodied and hovers in space.

In the summer of 1962, just before illness and surgery forced him to stop painting, Louis pushed the composition of his Stripe paintings in an unexpected direction. Three canvases on which stripes floated in the center, as in the horizontal pictures, were marked for stretching as squares with the bands of color positioned diagonally. Several letters between Louis and Emmerich in July and August discuss this issue, since the paintings were being prepared for exhibition in October. A letter to Greenberg explained Louis's hope that these diagonal stripes would "make a transition move from the vertical picture I'd done for so long to the big unfurling ones such as used at Bennington. . . . I'd like to use them in Oct. show so as to make possible the large unfurling ones next time."[xxxvii] He was referring to *Delta* and *Alpha* (cat. nos. 325 and 335), which share with all the Unfurleds a diagonally structured composition. Louis clearly found it frustrating that he could not exhibit the Unfurleds in New York. He anticipated Emmerich's move into larger quarters and hoped that the three diagonal Stripes would set the stage for an exhibition of the Unfurleds.

The Stripes that were constructed on a taut diagonal, *Hot Half* (cat. no. 653), *Equator* (cat. no. 654), and *No End* (cat. no. 655), are far more abstract than the more gestural Unfurleds. In *Hot Half* especially, the equal widths of the six stripes, the clarity of color contrasts and elisions, and the blatant asymmetry of the structure infuse the painting with a vigor that belies its actual size. Colors race across the field of vision, energized by the vibrating contrast of the red and green center, which is only slightly tempered by its more subtle yellow and ocher neighbors. The large, lower unpainted triangle gently abuts the long yellow stripe, in contrast to the tension between the orange band (fully 30 inches shorter than the yellow) that stresses the isosceles regularity of the upper unpainted triangle. The exceptional quality of this picture, like the Unfurleds to which Louis related it, stems from its absolute integration of color and composition as pictorial coequals.

Louis died just one month before the opening of his October 1962 exhibition at the Andre Emmerich Gallery. He never even saw the paintings stretched. Just as the show unexpectedly became a memorial, so its many reviews also served as obituaries. Brian O'Doherty wrote an extraordinarily thoughtful piece:

> Although few people who see the exhibition will have any idea of what it's all about, his work is original, spare, strange. Extremely simple in format, it is complex in aims and efforts. . . .
>
> By this stage it becomes obvious that the late Mr. Louis's paintings happen more in the eye than on the canvas. Their importance lies in the fact that they precisely define the capacities of the eye to separate, combine and resolve colors in a sharply controlled situation. Although many will not allow themselves or their eyes to tolerate this investigation, the eye is the organ on which the artist plays. Mr. Louis played on it almost like a master, curiously, sometimes coldly, but often with an aseptic warmth—like a nurse's smile. . . .
>
> Mr. Louis's method of conjugating his color bands could be called a sort of color grammar. These last works are tighter and more precise, the grammar is more knowing, the conjugations are more controlled. . . .
>
> . . . To put it another way, he follows the great example of those (like Josef Albers or, less often, Mark Rothko) who measure that fascinating interval between reality (what is actually on the canvas) and appearance (what it looks like). . . .[xxxviii]

O'Doherty had opened that same review by stating, "General recognition was just about to come to Morris Louis when he died suddenly last month at the age of 49." His observation was far more accurate than he could have anticipated. Louis's exhibition history tells the story: two exhibitions in 1959; six in 1960; seven in 1961; eleven in 1962, including one-man shows in Paris, Dusseldorf, and Stuttgart in addition to the one in New York; seventeen in 1963, including a major memorial retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; nineteen in 1964, including a featured position in the Venice Biennale; and ten in 1965, including a European traveling retrospective. Exhibitions would continue at frequent intervals, including in 1967 the first retrospective to tour American museums, a show curated by Michael Fried, who published his major monograph on the artist in 1970. Despite this broad exposure, for many years Louis's

Stripe paintings, because of their smaller size (relative to his other pictures), remained his most exhibited, collected, and best-known works.

The Stripe paintings had made such a powerful impression when first shown in 1961 and 1962 that Lawrence Alloway, the curator of Louis's 1963 Guggenheim Museum memorial exhibition, excluded them and focused exclusively on the paintings from 1954–1960. The seventeen pictures shown included Veils from 1954 and 1958, Florals and a Column painting from 1959–60, and one Unfurled. Louis certainly had not suffered from a lack of exposure prior to 1963, but Alloway observed in his catalogue essay that "an artist can live out of sight behind his notices and, even, behind his exhibitions."

Viewers of the Stripe paintings had perceived their startling formal asceticism that, together with Newman's "zips," heralded the minimalist art of the later 1960s. But Louis's work from 1954 to 1960 made apparent his affinities with his chronological contemporaries, the Abstract Expressionists. Alloway emphasized this in his essay:

> There are two reasons for suggesting that he is relatable to the original generation, rather than to numerous younger artists and later arrivals. First is the fact that his art shares formal characteristics stated by the 1903–1913 generation, which include large size, sensitivity to the material properties of paint, and a powerful use of color. Second is the fact that his art has an emotional fullness and resonance which parallels the grandeur attained by the art of this generation. There is a majestic power, derived from the interplay between simplicity and intensity of feeling which characterizes the best of their work.[xxxix]

Like Gorky, whom he knew and admired, Louis occupies a position between two generations, or, as Daniel Robbins phrased it, "at the juncture of two traditions."[xl] Debates about Gorky continue to this day, forty-five years after his death: Was he the last of the surrealists or the first of the Abstract Expressionists? Like Louis, Gorky died tragically young, full of promise, little known except among other artists. Similarly, at the time of their deaths little was known about the facts of their lives or about their ideas concerning art. And, equally in the case of both artists, those who survived them—especially other artists—have speculated about the direction they might have pursued. As Harry Rand mused in his monograph on Gorky, "Would the scale of his paintings have increased at the same rate, eventually to reach the large sizes his contemporaries favored, or would he, ultimately the conservative, have shied away from such massiveness and found a restrained solution? Would Gorky's technique have undergone a profound alteration in favor of a more spacious, looser deployment of paint?"[xli]

By making Louis's entire oeuvre available for the first time, this catalogue raisonné clarifies his often conflicting impulses, which can be identified as the dominant features of those two traditions. Was Morris Louis an Abstract Expressionist or a color field minimalist? When he lost his balance and leaned too far in either direction—becoming too much of the former in 1955–57 and too much of the latter in some of the narrow Stripe paintings of 1962—the results are equally disappointing. The overwhelming effect of his mature paintings arises from Louis's success in combining resonant, evocative nuances with the strength of structural logic.

NOTES

i. Charles Schucker, interview with the author, 23 June 1978, and transcript of an interview conducted by Dr. Anita Faatz on 18 November 1970, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

ii. Joseph Solman, "Exhibitions: Lonergan and a Baltimore Group," *Art Front* 3, no. 2 (March 1937), p. 16.

iii. Morris Louis, letter to Joseph Bernstein, 31 October 1941, Morris Louis Archives. More of the text of this letter, as well as other letters written by Louis, and detailed biographical information are contained in the Biographical Outline of this catalogue raisonné.

iv. For more extensive information on Louis's early career and on his drawings, see Diane Headley [Upright], *The Drawings of Morris Louis* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1979).

v. James M. Truitt, "Art-Arid D.C. Harbors Touted 'New' Painters," *Washington Post*, 21 December 1961, p. A20.

vi. Leslie Judd Portner, "Art in Washington: One a Newcomer, One a Veteran," *Washington Post*, 12 April 1953, p. L3.

vii. James Fitzsimmons, "A Critic Picks Some Promising Painters," *Art Digest* 28 (15 January 1954), p. 10.

viii. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 6 June 1954, Clement Greenberg Correspondence, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

ix. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 1 June 1954, Clement Greenberg Correspondence.

x. Dore Ashton, “Art: Large Abstractions,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1957, p. 38.

xi. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 21 July 1958, Clement Greenberg Correspondence.

xii. See “The Technique of Morris Louis,” pp. 49–58, for a more detailed explanation of Louis’s painting techniques in the Veils and other series.

xiii. Stuart Preston, “Sculpture and Paint,” *New York Times*, 26 April 1959, p. X17.

xiv. M. S. [Martica Sawin], “In the Galleries: Morris Louis,” *Arts* 33 (May 1959), p. 59.

xv. Martica Sawin, “New York Letter,” *Art International* 3 (May–June 1959), pp. 48–49.

xvi. William Rubin, “Younger American Painters,” *Art International* 4 (January 1960), p. 28.

xvii. Clement Greenberg, “Louis and Noland,” *Art International* 4 (May 1960), pp. 26–29.

xviii. Information about Louis’s sale appears in a memorandum prepared by the lawyer for the Louis Estate, I. S. Weissbrodt; it is found in the Morris Louis Archives.

xix. Clement Greenberg, “Louis and Noland,” p. 28.

xx. Clement Greenberg, letter to Morris Louis, 31 May 1962, Morris Louis Archives.

xxi. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 2 June 1962, Clement Greenberg Correspondence.

xxii. Clement Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” *Partisan Review* (Spring 1955), reprinted with revisions in *Art and Culture* (Boston: 1961), pp. 208–29. Still responded to that essay in a letter to the critic: “. . . you said many right and pertinent things about my work, e.g., the assault on Cubist unities, the handling of ‘edges,’ the subordination of taste, value contrasts, and the characterization of my influence and ideas on the art world today.” Clyfford Still, letter to Clement Greenberg, 12 April 1955, Clement Greenberg Correspondence.

xxiii. See “The Practice of Morris Louis,” pp. 35–48, for an explanation of the documentation provided by the Louis Estate.

xxiv. Quote in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: 1951), p. 288.

xxv. Helen Jacobson, “As I Remember Morris Louis,” *Ten Washington Artists 1950–1970* (Edmonton Art Gallery, 1970), p. 9.

xxvi. As Walter Darby Bannard remarked, “Louis found, for painting, the terrific binding power of the rectangle itself.” See Bannard’s “Quality, Style and Olitski,” *Artforum* 11 (October 1972), p. 66.

xxvii. Morris Louis, letter to Andre Emmerich, 29 April 1961, Morris Louis Archives.

xxviii. Clement Greenberg, letter to Morris Louis, 3 May 1961, Morris Louis Archives.

xxix. William Rubin, undated letter to Morris Louis, postmarked 11 May 1961.

xxx. See "The Practice of Morris Louis," pp. 35–48, for a discussion of this issue in greater depth.

xxxi. Unsigned review, *Arts* 36 (November 1961), p. 47.

xxxii. Irving Sandler, "New York Letter," *Art International* 5 (October 1961), p. 56.

xxxiii. Brian O'Doherty, "Art: Three Creators of Clear Illusions," *New York Times*, 5 October 1961, p. 34.

xxxiv. As John Elderfield noted, "It is as if the kinds of color adjustments to be found on one side of the unfurleds were made the entire subject of these paintings." See *Morris Louis* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1974), p. 65.

xxxv. Clement Greenberg, letter to Morris Louis, 23 March 1962, Morris Louis Archives.

xxxvi. Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd, letter to the author, 15 October 1975.

xxxvii. Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 18 July 1962, Clement Greenberg Correspondence. The diagonal stretching is discussed in greater detail in "The Practice of Morris Louis," pp. 35–48.

xxxviii. Brian O'Doherty, "Art: Morris Louis Plays on the Eye," *New York Times*, 20 October 1962, p. 22.

xxxix. Lawrence Alloway, "Notes on Morris Louis," *Morris Louis 1912–1962* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1963).

xl. Daniel Robbins, "Morris Louis at the Juncture of Two Traditions," *Quadrum* 18 (1965), pp. 41–54, 181.

xli. Harry Rand, *Arshile Gorky, The Implications of Symbols* (London: 1980), p. 208.