

Oils by giant of NY

School go on display

More than a decade before his abstract expressionist works ignited the New York art scene, Philip Guston had already mastered representational art by imitating Renaissance greats.

Prodigiously talented as a teenager, Guston was told by a mentor that even he couldn't aspire to be another Michaelangelo.

"*El Greco?*" he replied, revealing the scope of his ambition.

Philip Guston, a retrospective with 79 of his acclaimed works — mostly large-format oil on canvas — opened last week at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The show, organized by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, will be on view through Jan. 4, 2004.

Known for his fluent brush strokes, brilliant colors and genius for synthesizing, Guston was a fast and productive artist.

"There are 20 crucial minutes in the evolution of each

of my paintings. The closer I get to that time — those 20 minutes — the more intensely subjective I become," he wrote in 1966, describing his creative process.

David Minthorn

Associated Press
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Born in Montreal in 1913 to Russian-Jewish immigrants and raised in Los Angeles, Guston overcame poverty, the suicide of his father and dropping out of high school to forge a 50-year career in the avant-garde, producing some of the most compelling oil paintings in American modern art.

Guston and Jackson Pollock were high school chums in Los Angeles before Guston, whose original surname was Goldstein, dropped out and supported himself in a variety of jobs, including being a movie extra. He moved to

New York in 1935 after art training in Los Angeles and renewed his acquaintance with Pollock and others of the New York School.

From 1930 to his death from a heart attack in 1980, Guston was at the forefront of experimental waves that broke over American art and seized the creative initiative from Europe. His depiction of social and political themes mirrors the turmoil spanning the Depression, World War II, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and Watergate.

The Met show takes viewers through Guston's realism of the 1930s, which included murals for public buildings, his personal symbolism of the 1940s, abstract expressionism of the 1950s and the figural style of the last 15 years of his career.

Highlights include *Mother and Child* (1930), the Guernicalike *Bombardment* (1937-38), *The Tormentors* (1947-48), depicting Holocaust victims, and *White Painting*

(1951), which documents his transition from symbolic realism to abstraction.

Guston's refocus on abstract expressionism is visible in *Zone* (1953-54), *Painting* (1954) and *To Fellini* (1958).

By the late 1960s, he had migrated to a new figural style depicting people as caricatures and using narrative elements to comment on raging social issues.

The subjects include hooded Ku Klux Klan figures, reprising realist images from the 1930s, and the artist in everyday scenes.

Guston's new style, unveiled at a 1970 Marlboro Gallery exhibit in New York, triggered dismay from patrons who had paid large sums for his vividly colored abstract expressionist works and felt that their investments were now threatened, curator Michael Auping said.

The turnaround coincided with his alienation from the New York City art scene and his move, with his

wife Musa, to the art colony of Woodstock in upstate New York.

Painting, Smoking, Eating (1973), *Couple in Bed* (1977) and *The Street* (1977) are among his masterpieces from that period on display at the Met.

His abhorrence of American politics of the time reached an apotheosis in *San Clemente* (1975), a shocking vision of Richard Nixon a year after his resignation as president.

He's a cartoonish figure shown walking on a beach in a black suit with an American flag in his lapel, one leg swollen grotesquely from phlebitis, a tear dripping from his eye and his nose shaped like a huge scrotum.

The work, from a private collection, is being exhibited for the first time at the Met show.

The retrospective opened earlier this year in Fort Worth. The last stop is the Royal Academy of Arts, London, from Jan. 24 through April 12, 2004.



AP/The Metropolitan Museum

Philip Guston's *Mother and Child*, 1930. More than a decade before his abstract expressionist works ignited the New York art scene, Guston had already mastered representational art by imitating Renaissance greats.