

## Ascents & sensibility

Paul Richard

National Gallery showcases Philip Guston's rich canvases in its bright and airy tower.



*"Rug" (1976) is one of Guston's later paintings. His background included time as a muralist -- protesting Mexican fascism or extolling public works. (National Gallery Of Art)*

Being a low city, Washington does not have many rooms high up in towers, which is a shame, because there's something special about rooms high up in towers.

The one in the fairy tales is found in the turret, at the top of the winding stair. It feels sky-touched and sort of exclusive. Princesses get to go there, and their rescuers, and witches, but not everybody else does.

The Tower Gallery in the National Gallery of Art, kept dim for the past 18 years, has just been awakened by uncovering a skylight and letting in the light.

I.M. Pei, its architect, put it at the highest point of the southwest corner of his sharp-angled, romantic East Building on the Mall. Not everybody finds it. It isn't a secret, but almost. To reach "In the Tower: Philip Guston" you have to climb Pei's formal staircase, cross his bridge, take another set of steps, turn left and right and left again, then ascend a spiral stair.

Up and up you go until, on arriving, you discover you're in a room deep as a well and you're standing at the bottom. The walls are 33 feet high and windowless. Light pours in through the top, and only through the top. You can't help looking up.

This light is different. It's not the sort of light you get in most museums. Because it changes as the clouds change, it breathes. The floor isn't the gray carpet of most museums, it's more like a castle's -- wood boards, pegged oak. The floor plan is a truncated triangle. The art is different, too.

Usually the National Gallery presents 20th-century New York paintings unlike Guston's, paintings that are monuments of dignity. Barnett Newman's solemn "Stations of the Cross," Mark Rothko's clouds, Jackson Pollock's mists are visions as august, decorous and stately as the National Gallery itself. No grinning allowed.

Guston's paintings of hairy knees and cigarette butts are another kettle of fish.

Philip Guston (1913-1980) had two fames.

He got his first fame as an original abstract expressionist, as one of that heroic band of fast-brushed action painters who fought to carry New York art up from figuration to new and abstract heights.



*"Midnight Pass Road"; National Gallery Of Art*

With Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Arshile Gorky and David Smith, with whom he worked and showed, Guston advanced ever upward, until -- unlike the others -- he decided, ah, the hell with it, and went the other way.

That's how he won his second fame. By puncturing high abstraction. He did this with startling pictures, first shown in 1970, that pelted it with clumsy shoes, stogies and banana skins, brought it back to earth, returned it to the low.

That was not foreseen. He'd been so high-minded. In 1962 (with Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell and Rothko), he'd resigned from the Sidney Janis Gallery to protest a pop-art exhibition, as if pop were desecration, and now here he was cartooning. The man had helped invent all-over field painting, and now he was littering his fields with rubbish -- booze bottles, clothes irons, window shades, Klansmen's hoods, bricks.

What made this so surprising wasn't just the splat! that his art made when it landed. It was how slowly he had climbed.

People had taken him seriously. He had the best credentials.

He'd come from far away. (Born poor in Montreal, the youngest of seven children, he'd been raised as Philip Goldstein in Southern California.) In 1931 he joined the John Reed Club, a Marxist group. In 1934, galvanized by the Mexican muralists, he put anti-fascist murals on Mexican walls. By 1935 he was working in Manhattan, painting public murals for the WPA. Also, he had suffered. He'd been broke in the Depression, and as a kid had found his junkman father's corpse hanging in the garden shed, and people liked to think that they sensed this in his pictures. The old existential shudder -- a sure token of authenticity in abstract-expressionist circles -- seemed to unsettle his art.

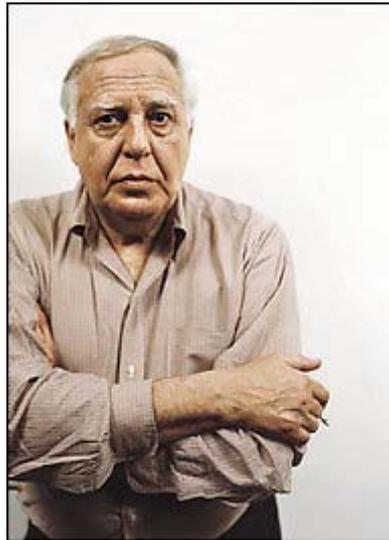
The man was pedigreed. Out in California he'd been Pollock's high school buddy (talk about connections); they'd been expelled from school together for satirizing the popularity of jocks.

Eventually the honors flowed, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947, a Prix de Rome in 1948, a retrospective exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 1962. Then he jumped.

Some of his colleagues (though not Bill de Kooning) were certain he had lost it. How else to explain his plunge from aesthetic elevation? Old friends severed friendships. Some, responding as the folkies had when Dylan went electric, saw a pathetic downfall, a willful insult or both.

In 1970, writing in the New York Times under the headline "A Mandarin Pretending to Be a Stumblebum," critic Hilton Kramer reacted as he might have to a stinky, disappointing, dishonest skid row drunk.

The Tower Gallery was long kept dim to protect five late "cut-outs" by Henri Matisse, which could stand the room's height but not its brightness, lest their colors bleach. Now they hang in subdued light downstairs in the concourse. "They want four candlepower, not 400," says curator Harry Cooper.



*Philip Guston, in 1976, was a contemporary of Pollock's and Rothko's, among others. He initially achieved fame as an abstract expressionist, but later work was cartoonish and heavy with pinks, reds and grays. (By Steven Sloman, New York)*

Matisse's scissored, glued-down papers were painted with watercolor, which can't take daylight. Oil paint is tougher. Oils look great in daylight. Guston's do especially. Under electric illumination, the colors he preferred -- pinks and reds and grays -- become tones more than colors, but not here. In daylight his deep grays look as deep as ashes in the ashtray, and his whitened pinks start pulsing like blood beneath an old man's skin. It turns out that Guston, unlike most New York painters, was a colorist. Who knew?

The sky was needed. So was something else. In 2007, when Cooper, who organized this small smart show, was hired from the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard to take charge of the gallery's department of modern and contemporary art, its orthodox displays were ready for a change. Well, here it is.

R. Crumb's "Keep on Truckin'," a kind of visual footnote to the wall text -- with all its goofy vigor, its jaunty pointed elbows and its shoe-sole point of view -- is among the first things that you see.

Guston's move toward cartooning didn't undo him. He came out on top.

It is clear, in retrospect, that his timing was right. The old notion that cartoons had no place in advanced art already was being blown away by pop and Crumb. The conviction, widely held in those days, that painting by its nature was certain to keep getting ever more abstract already had proved preposterous. To younger artists Guston wasn't a bum, but a liberator. He hadn't

crashed, he had triumphed. If he hadn't, he wouldn't be having this one-man exhibition in its high place on the Mall.

Still, we shouldn't be too hard on Kramer, whose wrinkled nose, correctly, had detected something foul. Guston's late oils do have a whiff of the gutter, or if not the gutter, something close. To get into his art is to go down in the dumps.

Look at "Rug" (1976). It's as if you're sitting pantless in a small, bleak room, looking down, too depressed to lift your head. All you see is the bare wall, and the rug and the baseboard, and your thick shoes and your naked knees. Yesterday was hopeless, tomorrow will be, too, so the knees keep reproducing, replicating, throwing off suggestions of plumbing, and legs like Olive Oyl's, and stacked corpses, pointless thoughts.

"There is nothing to do now but paint my life," Guston wrote in 1972. "My dreams, surroundings, predicament, desperation . . ." Not much of a life. One of Guston's oils is called "Painting, Smoking, Eating" (1973), which pretty much sums it up.

"In "Midnight Pass Road" (1975) he seems to be stuck at his studio table. What does he see? Not much: the green lampshade, a coffee cup, a sagging flower, a stretched canvas (waiting to be painted), a ghostly thought of his wife (distressed, of course, her hand over her eyes), a triangle, a ruler, his watch. Time passes. Nothing happens.

"The sense of being thrust into a scurvy internalized world is almost unbearable," wrote scholar Robert Hughes. "Guston may have been the first painter to paint that frame of mind so well known to artists and writers: slothful regression. You pee in the sink. You put out your cigarette in the coffee cup."

Guston may have been the first artist to depict the place, but Herman Melville had been there, and so had W.B. Yeats. In 1939, at the end of his life, he had also lost what had worked so well before. He couldn't go up and out. Guston couldn't, either. So Yeats went in and down:

Now that my ladder's gone,

I must lie down where all the ladders start

In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

Guston, who smoked three packs a day, died of a heart attack at 66.

You might expect his pictures, the late ones in the tower, would turn out to be downers. They're not, of course, they're lifters. That's why they're art.

Courage shines out of them. Light shines out of them. And, right from the core of all that sad, dim wreckage, so does a saving nutty glee.

"If someone bursts out laughing in front of my painting," he wrote, "that is exactly what I want."

**Washington Post, Washington, 7 mar. 2009, Arts & Living, online. Disponível em <[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)>. Acesso em: 12 mar. 2009.**