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A Pair of Inner Men



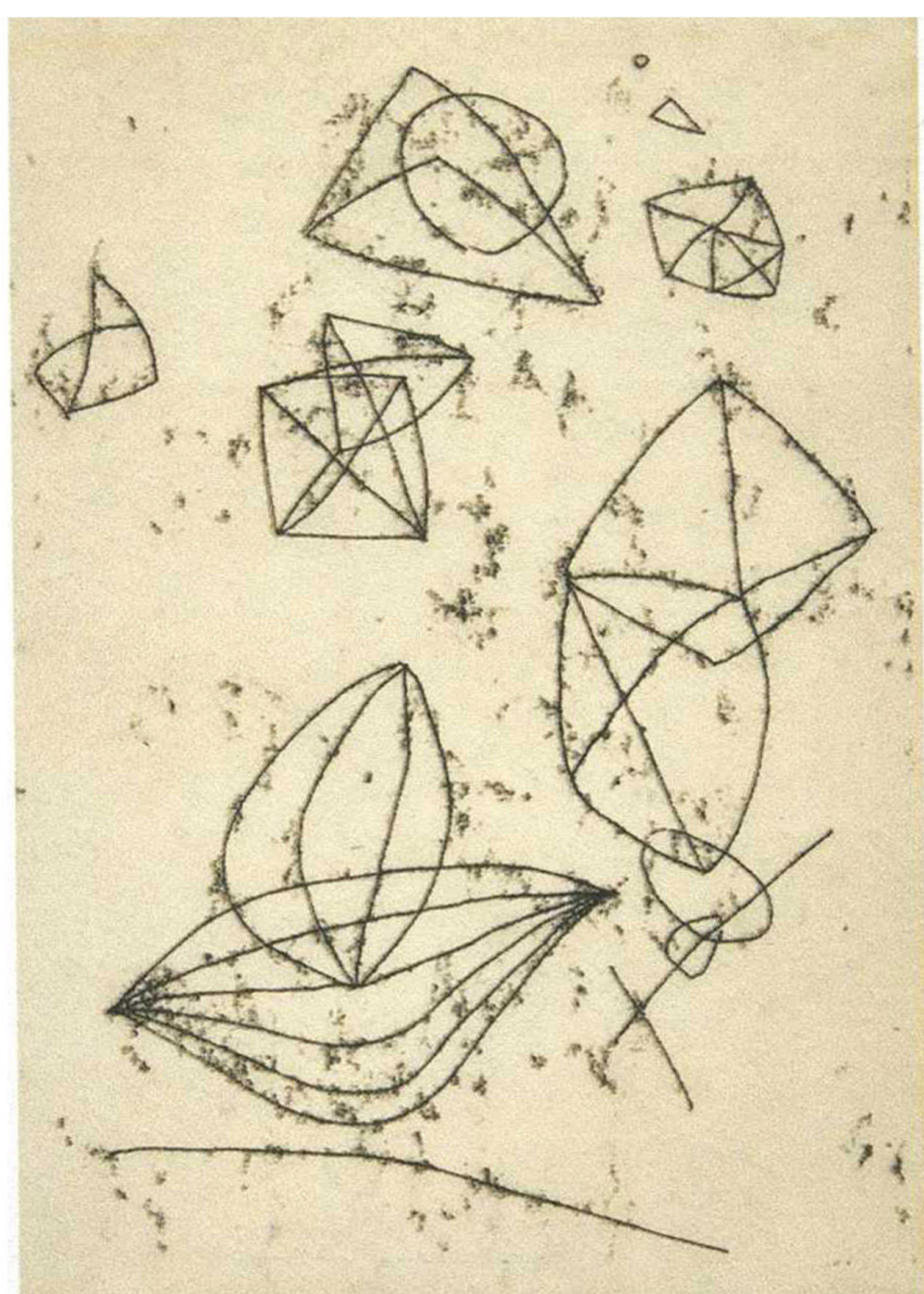
Gottlieb's toothy "Alkahest"

The trend among certain younger artists of today is toward painting the "inner man"—his feelings, rather than the street he walks on, the house he lives in, or the red barn he keeps his cow in. Currently two of the more individual members of this group, Adolph Gottlieb of Brooklyn, N. Y., and Harry Bertoia of Santa Monica, Calif., have a joint show at the Nierendorf Gallery in New York.

Artist With Teeth: In 1936, while attending the opening of the now defunct Municipal Art Gallery, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia of New York looked at a big fat nude by Adolph Gottlieb and exploded: "If that's art, then I'm a Tammany politician." Gottlieb's work has changed a lot since then but La Guardia still has no intention of joining the Wigwam. To the layman, Gottlieb's "pictographs," as he calls his present paintings, look like the scribblings of 5-year-olds. But to the modern art devotee, they are warmly colored, evocative canvases recalling ancient hieroglyphics.

Like most modern art, Gottlieb's work has no "perspective." Structurally it is divided into irregular rectangles. In the painting called "Augury," for instance, these spaces are occupied by primitively drawn snakes, birds, masks, eyes, and teeth. Gottlieb often uses teeth—which to him symbolize violence—single eyes, and half profiles. Occasionally he paints a whole front face. In one case this is a rectangle drawn, as a child might do it, with a triangle for cap and holes for nose and other features. He says: "My whole conception is primitive—of a certain brutality. I think life is a mixture of brutality and beauty."

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Harry Bertoia: "Monoprint, Synchrony Series" (1943)

Gottlieb, who was born in New York 42 years ago, expects few people to like his work and is amazed that his admirers include critics, several dealers, and many individual collectors. One collector, the Scotsman Kenneth MacPherson, has just purchased six large Gottliebs for a price that makes the artist financially secure for a year. MacPherson plans to hang these, along with his Miro and Braque, in the 85-foot-long living room of his Le Corbusier-designed Swiss home on the shores of Lake Geneva.

Artist With Shoes: Harry Bertoia is an Italian peasant's son who makes highly sophisticated pictures called "monoprints" (one-of-a-kind prints). In his labored but philosophical language, the blue-eyed, black-haired artist explains that his pictures represent "both the inner soul and the outer universe." Their drawing is sometimes reminiscent of that on walls of prehistoric caves; their delicate linear patterns recall the work of the German artist, the late Paul Klee; and very often they suggest that Bertoia has taken his designs from the heavens. He is an avid stargazer.

Bertoia's print methods are all his own and are highly variable. In general, he uses printer's ink on Chinese rice paper. His tools are ingrained maple or masonite blocks, a rosewood stylus, and his own spatula-shaped fingertips and heavy palms.

Bertoia was born in Northern Italy 30 years ago. At 15, offered the choice of going to Venice for a free artistic education or to the United States with his father, Bertoia chose the United States. He had heard that people wear shoes every day here.