

Critics have endlessly parsed the psychological content of Neel's art and have found her life story so compelling that almost nothing has been written about her formal strategies. In a 2007 documentary film, artist, curator, and critic Robert Storr states that Neel did not "fret over the structure"<sup>3</sup> of her paintings but seemed instinctively to situate her sitters within the frame of the canvas in a way that seems inevitably right. Nevertheless, she employed a number of compositional strategies to invigorate the image or comment on the subject. Art historian Pamela Allara noted, "She is not concerned with the physical setting but with the manner in which the figure occupies pictorial space. The relationship between the proportions of the figure and the proportions of the canvas form the fundamental proposition."<sup>4</sup> While essentially agreeing with both observations, I would argue that, in some cases, Neel paid enough attention to the details of the structure of her compositions to alter them in significant ways when she thought that she had made a false start. Painting directly, without making preliminary drawings, she often made revisions on the canvas that provide a chronicle of her second thoughts and abandoned compositional ploys for the engaged viewer. Neel frequently gave considerable thought to the placement of her sitters within the frame of the painting and did not hesitate to revise her initial compositional tactics when she thought that a more nuanced *mise-en-scène* would both convey a more acute sense of the sitter's personality and create a more compelling work of art. Because critics have written at great length about a relatively small number of Neel's best-known paintings, I have chosen to discuss several works that, in my estimation, are important but have received less attention than they merit.

One of the compositional strategies that Neel frequently employed was angling her sitters to create a dynamic movement across the picture plane; she preferred showing her subjects' heads in seven-eighths profile, just slightly off center. On the rare occasions that she painted her subjects head-on, she carefully constructed slight imbalances within the composition, to avoid stasis. Even in *Joe Gould* of 1933 (plate 45), which initially seems centered and symmetrical, she placed the main figure slightly to the left so that it partially overlaps the framing figure on that side of the canvas. In her first portrait of Max White

(plate 9), painted in 1935, however, the novelist's torso faces the viewer four-square, but his massive, elongated head torques slightly to the viewer's left so that the left side of the face is lit while the proper<sup>5</sup> right side remains in shadow.<sup>6</sup> The asymmetrical placement of his arms and hands creates a further inner dichotomy so that the sitter's left shoulder forms a straight diagonal, as does his upper arm, while the outline of his right shoulder forms a flattened U-shape, which Neel echoes with the inward curve of the upper arm, a device that she consciously created by scraping back that area, although she allowed traces to remain when she laid down the background. By placing White's left elbow lower than his right so that it grazes the interior "horizon," Neel shifted the weight of the painting slightly to the right, thus avoiding an overly balanced composition. The pale, thinly brushed, upper two-thirds of the background, an unspecified shallow space, thrusts the figure forward. The underlayer of this background is the same color as the chair seat between White's legs, while the outer layer, a thinned, more neutral shade, overlays the blue green base coat, except at the upper corners. The dark area of the floor forms a recessive foil for the subject's hands. Neel paid considerable attention to the subject's left hand, with its abnormally long forefinger, articulating the joints and depicting the fingernails in realistic detail, especially the blackened nail of the middle finger. She treated White's right hand more cursorily, merely sketching in the nails, except for the odd space between the thumb and the forefinger, which appears as a stunted sixth digit. Rather than cropping the top of the head, a frequent practice to make the figure appear more frontal, she stresses its three-dimensional illusion by giving it a more classical placement within the painting's structure.<sup>7</sup>

The full-frontal figure of *Hartley* (1966) (plate 17) occupies the pictorial space in a very different way. Although Neel here leaves considerable space above the subject's head, the figure is more extrusive. His knees seem to invade the viewer's space, and one elbow touches the right edge of the canvas, while the other is barely contained. The chair envelops her younger son from forehead to groin, but Hartley's arms and legs violate this enclosure, forming three triangles; the rhomboid that his arm placement creates forms an internal framing device for his head, while the outline of the recess behind his chair accentuates the narrow vertical space from which he seems to want



Fig. 1 Paul Cézanne,  
*The Garden at Les Lauves*  
(*Le Jardin des Lauves*),  
c. 1906, oil on canvas,  
25 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 31 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches  
(65.4 × 81 cm), The  
Phillips Collection,  
Washington, D.C.

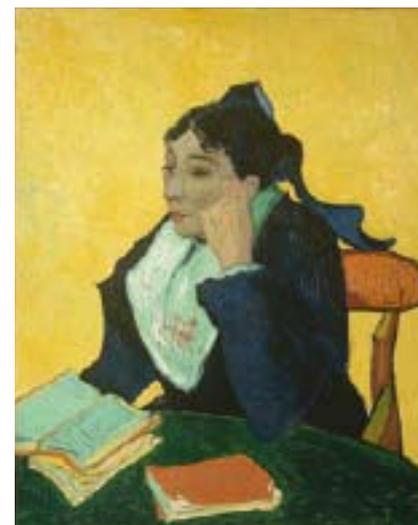
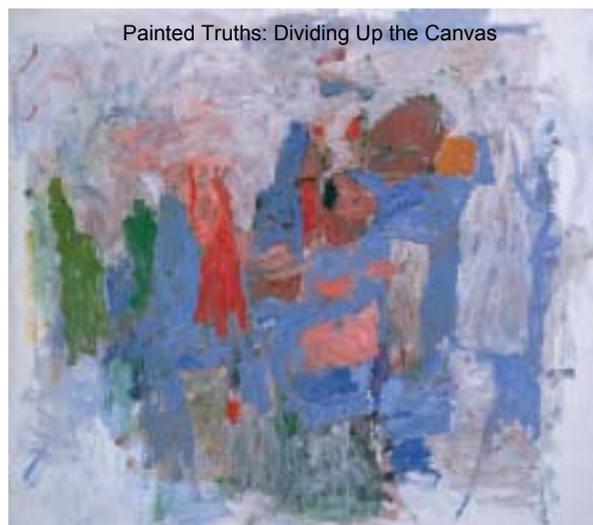


Fig. 2 Francisco José  
de Goya y Lucientes,  
*Portrait of Francisco Bayeu*  
(*Retrato de don Francisco*  
*Bayeu*), 1795, oil on  
canvas, 44 × 33 inches  
(112 × 84 cm), Museo  
Nacional del Prado,  
Madrid.

to escape.<sup>8</sup> The dado on the angled sidewall at the right of the painting, which Neel arbitrarily extends through the recess, imprisons the cocked arm, while the section between the molding and the forearm echoes the geometry of the sitter's arms.

Whereas in *Max White* Neel had painted a fully worked but indistinct background, thirty years later, when she painted *Hartley*, she demonstrated far greater confidence by merely indicating the setting while leaving most of the ground unworked. Fully aware of art historical precedents, she said of this strategy to critic Judith Higgins: "In old-fashioned art, they drew things in, but they hid their tracks; they finished everything. . . . That finish to me is insipid. But the characteristic of modern art is to let the drawing show through. Look at Matisse. His drawing always shows through plainly. And Cézanne's late work—a lot of it was very unfinished"<sup>9</sup> (fig. 1). Using a severely limited palette of pale earth tones, Neel created internal variation with her brushwork, from dry brushing above the head to rich impasto in the T-shirt, in which she composes a white tonality that actually contains every other color in the painting. Here she followed one of her greatest heroes, Goya, who demonstrated his mastery of the variations of white in such works as *Portrait of Francisco Bayeu* (fig. 2). Although she employed a fully loaded brush to create the highlights in the shirt, she reversed her technique in the pale green pants, leaving raw canvas for the highlights.

As was her practice throughout her career, Neel achieved dynamism through imperfect pairing. Whereas she painted *Hartley*'s right ear with considerable attention to detail, she was much more schematic in her treatment of the highlighted left one, which she positioned slightly higher on his head. Nowhere is her use of unequal doubles more apparent than in her treatment of eyes, which never exactly mirror each other. Herein she followed the dictum of the portrait and genre painter Robert Henri, whose influence was still potent at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women when Neel was a student.<sup>10</sup> In his manual of compiled lectures, *The Art Spirit*,<sup>11</sup> Henri wrote that one eye was always "dominant."<sup>12</sup> Here *Hartley*'s right eye dominates with its arched brow, fully raised lid, and double highlights in the iris emerging insistently from the shadowed side of his face; the other eyelid droops slightly and the brow flattens.



On rare occasions, Neel struggled with the composition, as a close examination of *Psychiatrist's Wife (Elsie Rubin)* (1957) (plate 13) reveals. Unusually for the artist, the outline of only the head and the right arm remains visible, indicating that she changed the placement of the figure at the painting's right side, a conjecture that the partially un-reworked scraping and repainting of the shoulder and neck affirm. The painting is atypical in a number of ways, not the least of which is Neel's attention to "girly things," such as fingernail polish and jewelry, that she normally glossed over or asked the sitter to remove.<sup>13</sup> Painted in 1957, two years after she began attending meetings of The Club, an artists' discussion and debating group founded by nonrepresentational gestural painters and anti-academic sculptors,<sup>14</sup> the background demonstrates the influence that Abstract Expressionist brushwork had on her style, here indicated by her absorption of Philip Guston's midcareer coloration and touch (fig. 3).

Close scrutiny from the left under raking light reveals that the white table in the immediate foreground is an afterthought; the subject's left arm, which the table abruptly amputates at mid-forearm, originally continued to her knee, as the pentimento attests. Furthermore, the subject's right elbow is not anchored to the table, nor does the white curve of the tabletop extend to the edge of the painting. Neel overpainted the areas to the right and left of the elbow as she did the balancing shadow on the left arm and the highlight above the neckline of the dress, which she decided to treat as reflected light from the table. The last-minute addition of the table is a brilliant solution. One will never know at what point Neel perceived the similarity in pose to Van Gogh's *L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux (Marie Julien, 1848-1911)* (fig. 4), but the reference, albeit mirrored, to this painting, which she must have known well from visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is inescapable, and Neel greatly admired Van Gogh's work. Not only is the table a magnificent compositional detail of pure painting, with the colors of the background emerging from the semitransparent overlay of white, it also counterbalances the extruding three-dimensionality of the head, with the subject's light-devouring velvet dress forming a recessive transitional passage.

Neel again seated the subject at a table in her 1965 portrait *Maynard Stone* (plate 18). Like *Frank O'Hara, No. 2* (1960) (plate 15), the image shown in this

Fig. 3 Philip Guston, *Passage*, 1957, oil on canvas, 65 × 74¼ inches (165.1 × 188.6 cm), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Caroline Wiess Law, 2004.20.

Fig. 4 Vincent van Gogh, *L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux (Marie Julien, 1848-1911)*, 1888-89, oil on canvas, 36 × 29 inches (91.4 × 73.7 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn, 1951 (51.112.3).



Fig. 5 Alice Neel,  
*Maynard Stone* (first  
version), 1964, 36 ×  
24 inches (91.4 × 61 cm),  
Estate of Alice Neel.

Fig. 6 Chaim Soutine,  
*Best Man*, 1924–25,  
oil on canvas, 39¼ ×  
32 inches (100 × 81 cm),  
Musée de l'Orangerie,  
Paris.

exhibition is a second version that she painted after having executed a more conventional portrait of the art-history student (fig. 5).<sup>15</sup> In this work, she seems to have planned the table as an integral part of the composition from the start. Interestingly, however, Neel rethought the proportions of the canvas, transferring it to a new stretcher to add approximately three inches at the top and two at the bottom, to intensify the verticality of the image that the table may have subverted. The odd sprout of hair at the top of Stone's head bears out the supposition that the restretching was a late decision.

The table bisects the canvas, allowing Neel to establish an asymmetrical duality between the upper and lower parts of the painting. Stone's legs do not seem to connect to his torso in a natural way, unless the sitter had assumed an extremely uncomfortable pose. In fact, Neel composed the legs more to echo the uprights of the steam radiator behind the sitter than to translate characteristic body language. Furthermore, the post of the chair back between the subject and the radiator does not conform to the chair legs that poke out from under the table. In the upper section, she painted Stone's left ear with fidelity but treated his right one as merely a shape that initiates a dialogue with the dark shadow on his forehead. As she did with eyes, Neel painted a dominant and a passive hand. While the right hand follows conventional proportions, the left is much more expressionistic, conveying a psychological state rather than anatomical accuracy. Especially in her treatment of the left thumb, which she situated arbitrarily and made exaggeratedly spatulate, Neel acknowledged the influence of the emotional distortions of Chaim Soutine's treatment of hands, as in *Best Man* (fig. 6).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when she often attended lectures and panel discussions at The Club, Neel began to adapt the gestural brushwork of the action painters as a formal rather than a mimetic strategy. An early example is *Baron's Aunt* (plate 63) of 1959. Although the upper right area of the canvas is primarily raw, she created an assertive negative space by laying down discrete painterly strokes in colors she used elsewhere in the painting—the green of the shadow under the subject's nose, the mustard yellow of the shadow on the bust behind her, and the blue gray of the horizontal stroke above the arbitrarily dark shadow over the sitter's right shoulder. The impasto of the