

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Virginia-Born Artist Cy Twombly Explores Morocco Through Early Works Made  
During His Transformative VMFA Fellowship**  
Straight From Morocco, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Presents *Cy Twombly, Morocco, 1952/1953*



*Untitled (Cy, North Africa)*, Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925–2008), 1952, gelatin silver print,  
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

**Richmond, VA** — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) is excited to announce the exhibition *Cy Twombly, Morocco, 1952/1953* featuring early works by the celebrated artist's travels to North Africa. This exhibition is on view now through January 7, 2024. Admission is free.

Visitors to the exhibition will explore Twombly's affinity for Morocco through his sketches, photographs and paintings, as well as his letters and other archival materials from VMFA's Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library. *Cy Twombly, Morocco, 1952/1953* is curated by Nicola Del Roscio and presented in partnership with the Cy Twombly Foundation and the Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio. The exhibition was previously on view at the Musée

Yves Saint Laurent in Marrakech, Morocco, and is organized for VMFA by Valerie Cassel Oliver, the museum's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

"We are thrilled to present *Cy Twombly, Morocco, 1952/1953*, a special exhibition showcasing the artistic brilliance of this world-renowned artist," said Alex Nyerges, VMFA's Director and CEO. "The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is fortunate to have a deep and longstanding connection to Twombly, who was born and raised in Lexington, Virginia. The museum funded the artist's trip to Morocco through a fellowship in 1952, and this exhibition is the first to explore the impact that his time in North Africa had on his work and ideas. First shown at the Musée Yves Saint Laurent in Marrakech, this exhibition has traveled straight to Twombly's home state where the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts can share the artist's groundbreaking work and inspirations with our visitors."

In the fall of 1952, when Europe was beginning to recover from widespread destruction of World War II, Cy Twombly (American, 1928–2011) received a fellowship from VMFA and shortly after departed for his first trip to Europe and North Africa. He met up with fellow artist Robert Rauschenberg in the Moroccan city of Casablanca in October 1952, and during their extended stay in Morocco they visited Marrakech, the Atlas Mountains and Tangier.

They also spent time with the expatriate writer Paul Bowles in Tétouan and explored nearby villages and Roman ruins, which fueled Twombly's career-long engagement with the ancient world and history as a metaphor for contemporary life. The artist gained exposure to masks and other ritual objects from neighboring African countries during his stay in Morocco, as well as the tombs in the Jewish cemetery in Marrakech. The visual memory of the Jewish cemetery's whitewashed gravestones would inform his later sculpture.

In February 1953, the two artists left Morocco and travelled to Italy, where Twombly's interest in North Africa continued, as seen in the sketches he made of African artifacts that he saw at the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome. These sketches form a collective body of studies known as his *North African Sketchbook* (1953). The reference to the cultural-geographic area indicates that Twombly's previous encounters with North African art and culture not only continued to work in his memory, but also guided his later artistic efforts.

"What I am trying to establish is that Modern Art is not dislocated, but something with roots, tradition and community," Twombly wrote in his 1952 fellowship application to VMFA, included in the exhibition. The subsequent eight-month trip to Italy and Morocco marked a pivotal moment, a period that would become foundational in the 25-year-old student's artistic development.

When describing his travels in Morocco to Leslie Cheek, then director of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Twombly said, "It has been like one enormous awakening of finding many wonderful rooms in a house that you never knew existed." The artist, fascinated with the classical world of antiquity, became equally intrigued by the cultural expressions of indigenous peoples, including the Amazigh (Berber) tribes of Morocco.

Given travel constraints and limited studio space, Twombly could not make large scale paintings during his stay in Morocco. As a result, he drew in sketchbooks and experimented with photography as a practical and compact mode of artistic expression. Twombly's photographs, taken with a secondhand Rolleiflex Twin Lens Reflex camera borrowed from Rauschenberg, make up much of the surviving work from this trip and are as artistic as they are documentary.

Twombly's Moroccan-inspired paintings that he completed after returning home from his eight-month stay in Morocco and Italy further enhance our understanding of the artist's engagement with antiquity and history. These paintings often embody metaphors of archeology through their creation and treatment. He coated his canvases with a putty of white paint that he physically manipulated, echoing the archaeological processes of accumulation and abstraction, building up and unearthing. Twombly saw these paintings as emblematic of his interpretation of Morocco's historical periods.

“Twombly’s travels expanded his understanding of painting as he leaned into the world of archaeology and ruins,” said Cassel Oliver. “He desired that there be no restoration for some of his works, hoping they would themselves one day become relics, as seen in the artist’s handwritten note on the back of the 1953 painting *Volubilis*, which reads ‘Do not ever clean or restore this painting.’”

Many of the paintings that Twombly made after returning to the United States are titled after Moroccan towns, including *Volubilis*, *Tiznit* and *Ouarzazate*, and were shown at New York’s Stable Gallery in the fall of 1953. *Volubilis* takes its name from an ancient city at the base of the Atlas Mountains that served as an important outpost of the Roman empire. Twombly participated in an archaeological excavation there for the first and only time during his lifetime. *Ouarzazate* also appears in the exhibition at VMFA, on loan from the artist’s son, Alessandro Cyrus Twombly.

This exhibition is generously supported by the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation in honor of the artist's centennial. Visit [www.vmfa.museum](http://www.vmfa.museum) for information about *Cy Twombly, Morocco, 1952/1953*.

### **About Cy Twombly**

Born Edwin Parker “Cy” Twombly, Jr., the artist inherited his name and nickname from his father, a former pitcher for the Chicago White Sox. Born and raised in Lexington, Virginia, Twombly went on to spend much of his life in Italy while continuing to return to his birthplace.

Twombly expressed interest in drawing and painting from an early age. His early drawings and paintings were influenced by ancient Mediterranean history and geography, Greek and Roman mythology and epic poetry. He went on to study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and then the Art Students League in New York City where he was exposed to the Abstract Expressionist movement.

After receiving a fellowship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1952, Twombly embarked on a transformative journey to Morocco and Italy that infused his artistic practice with newfound inspirations and techniques.

He was a pioneer in his photographic experimentation, pushing the boundaries of traditional artistic conventions. A blend of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and graffiti art, Twombly’s paintings are imbued with a sense of rhythm and movement. In his artistic evolution, Twombly continuously blurred artistic mediums, offering worlds of iconography, metaphor and myth as he transcribed ancient knowledge through his contemporary artworks.

### **About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts**

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA’s permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation’s finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, previously the largest in its history. A new expansion, the McGlothlin Wing II, is planned to open in 2028. Comprising more than 170,000 square feet, it will be the largest expansion in the museum’s history and will make VMFA the fifth largest art museum in the United States.

**The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit [www.vmfa.museum](http://www.vmfa.museum).**

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**Media Contacts**

Jan Hatchette | 804.204.2721 | [jan.hatchette@vmfa.museum](mailto:jan.hatchette@vmfa.museum)  
Amy Peck | 804.773.1791 | [amy.peck@vmfa.museum](mailto:amy.peck@vmfa.museum)  
MacLaine Bamberger | 804.204.2717 | [maclaine.bamberger@vmfa.museum](mailto:maclaine.bamberger@vmfa.museum)

200 N. Arthur Ashe Blvd., Richmond, VA 23220