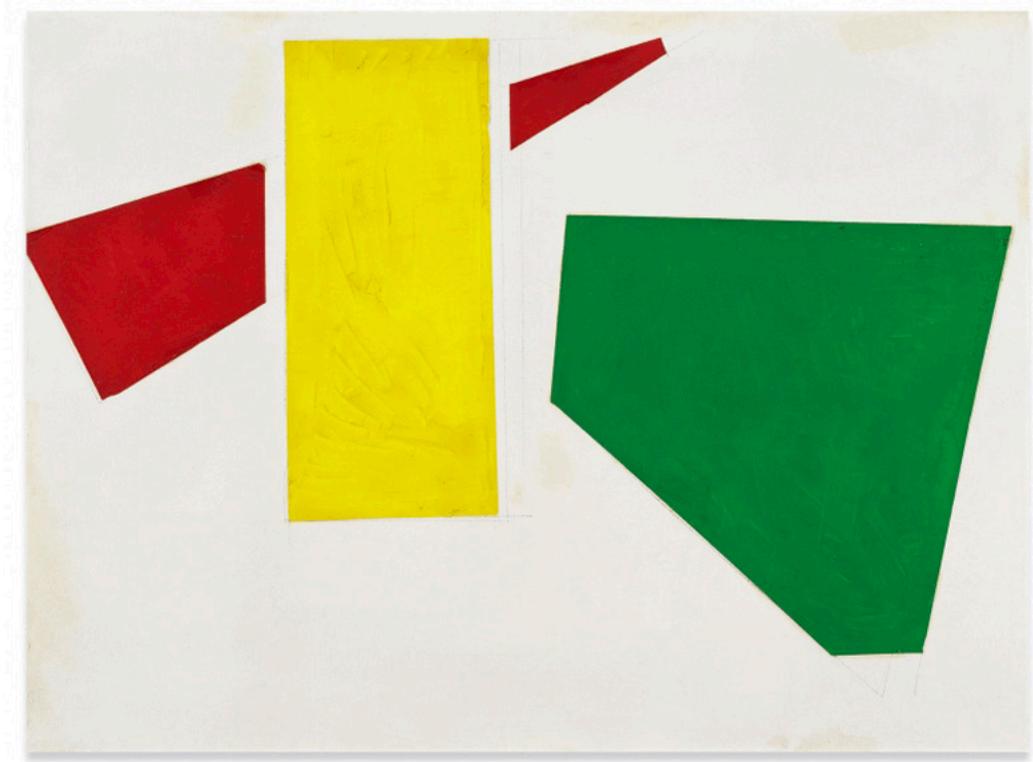




Hans Hofmann at Miles McEnery Gallery

D. Dominick Lombardi January 2022

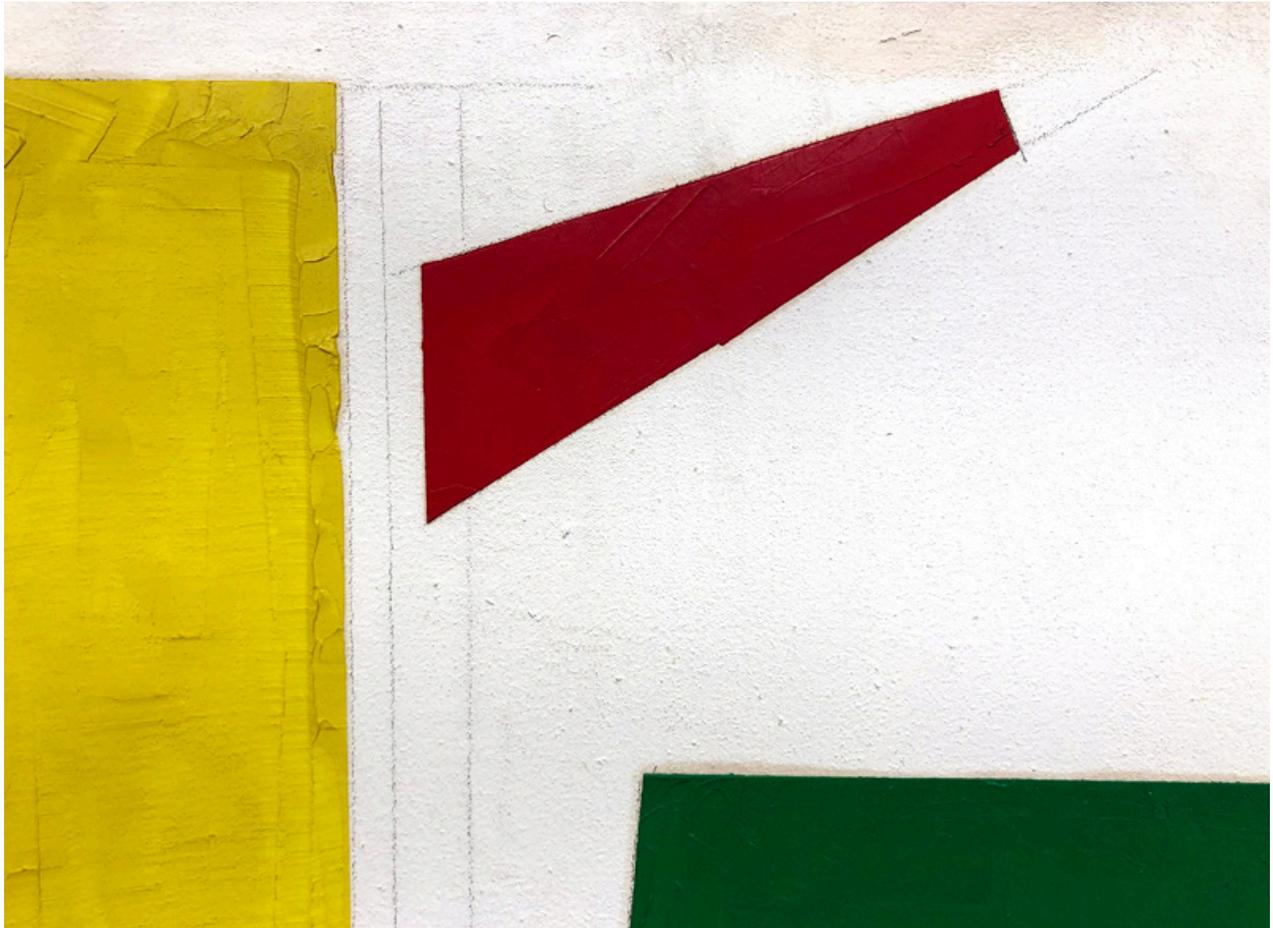


Push and Pull [Study for Chimbote Mural], 1950, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches
(all photos courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery unless otherwise noted)

Hans Hofmann's Chimbote Mural paintings, on view through the 29th of January at Miles McEnery Gallery, clearly articulate Hofmann's dazzling contribution to the doctrines of Modern Art. Often times, when his name is mentioned in conversation, you might first hear what an important teacher he was, perhaps suggesting his artistic output was not quite equal to his teaching skills. For those individuals, you need to take a trip to 520 West 21st Street, where Hofmann's true greatness as an artist is in full view.

In 1950, when all of these assembled works were painted, Hofmann was asked by the art dealer Samuel Kootz, and the architects Josep Sert and Paul Lester Wiener, to design a Modernist mural for the Peruvian town of Chimbote. The plan was to eventually fabricate his art as a mosaic mural, but

unfortunately, the project was never completed. Lucky for us, the original nine, roughly 7 foot tall panels and one smaller horizontal canvas have been reunited for public display in New York, before they move on to two venues in Germany: the Museum Pfalzalerie Kaiserslautern and the Museum Lothar Fischer.



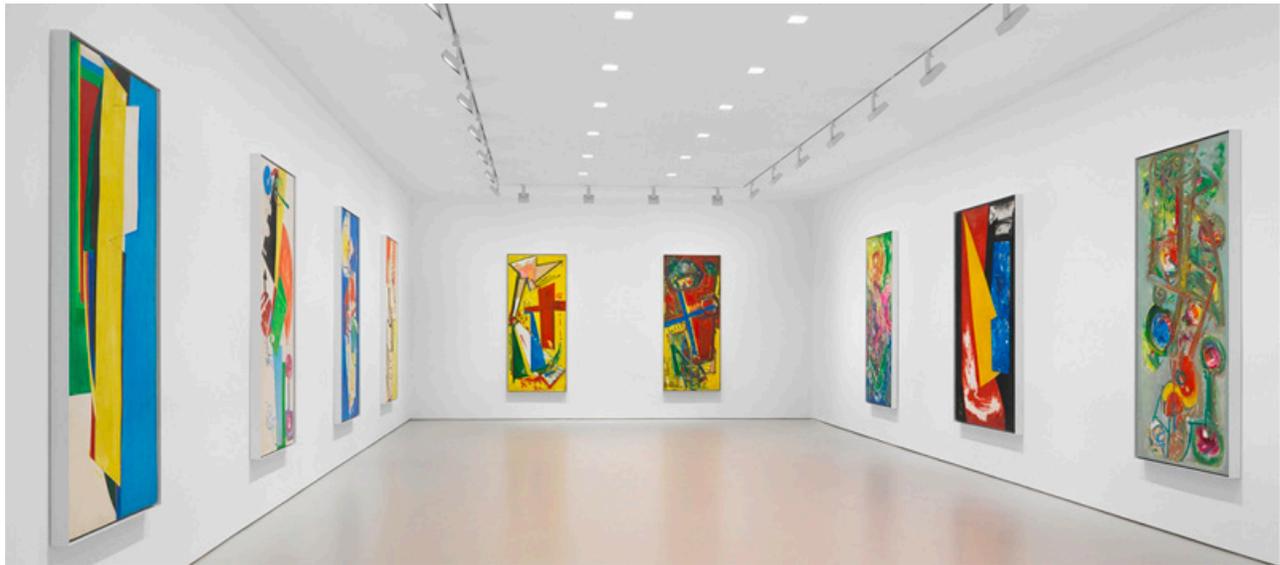
Push and Pull [Study for Chimbote Mural] (detail), 1950, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches
(photo courtesy of the author)

Entering the space from the right, there is the exhibition's lone horizontal work Push and Pull [Study for Chimbote Mural] – easily the most distilled in content, with subtle detail like the unutilized preliminary pencil lines that appear throughout, or the ripples of paint caused by a palette knife applications, and the lifting up of masking tape at some heavily painted corners. Equal to any non-representational hard edge painting I can think of, this work clearly demonstrates Hofmann's ability to project the dynamics of space and depth, while handling strong, buoyant color with formidable finesse.

Looking left from there, the installation of the nine vertical paintings form a sort of a chapel effect, where wildly diverse mindscapes project a powerful, and relentlessly experimental soul. First, looking right to left, is Mural Fragment (Chimbote) [Study for Chimbote Mural] where a one-eyed totemic

being – surging with energy – looms large as soothsayer. Viewers might notice a bit of paper peeking through at the bottom left corner, as you follow the swishes of mixing/painting colors across the surface of this panel seemingly produced by a frenzied series of subconscious gestures and turbulent, visceral prompts.

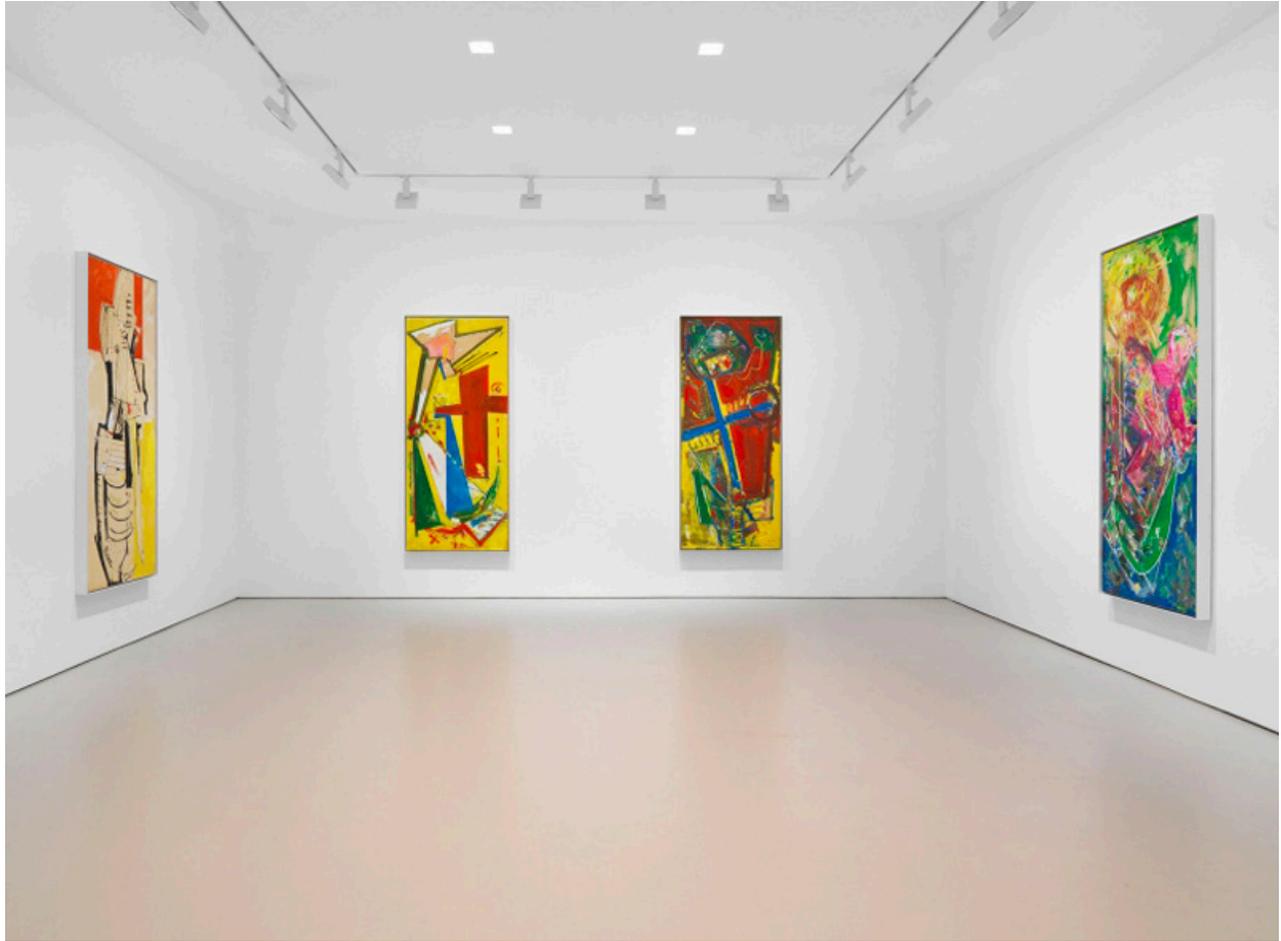
To the left is Chimbote Mural (Fragment of Part I) Chimbote Red Yellow Blue Black [Study for Chimbote Mural]. In this instance, the primaries punctuate a black space, sometimes clouded by white, as hard shapes interlock, jostling for notice. Unlike the previous work, there is far more consistency of color, somewhat less tactile quality, and an emphasis on movement that oddly personifies the forms.



Hans Hofmann, Miles McEnery Gallery, Installation View

Next is Preliminary Sketches for Chimbote Mural No. I [Study for Chimbote Mural], where palette knife applications, dried or drying paint scrapings, wild brushwork and direct paint from tube trails creates an uninhibited figure that dances under the sun. Like a broken stained glass window in a tornado, the movement in this work is quite unpredictable, while the periodic portions of unpainted paper, especially at the upper section, adds insight into Hofmann's early planning.

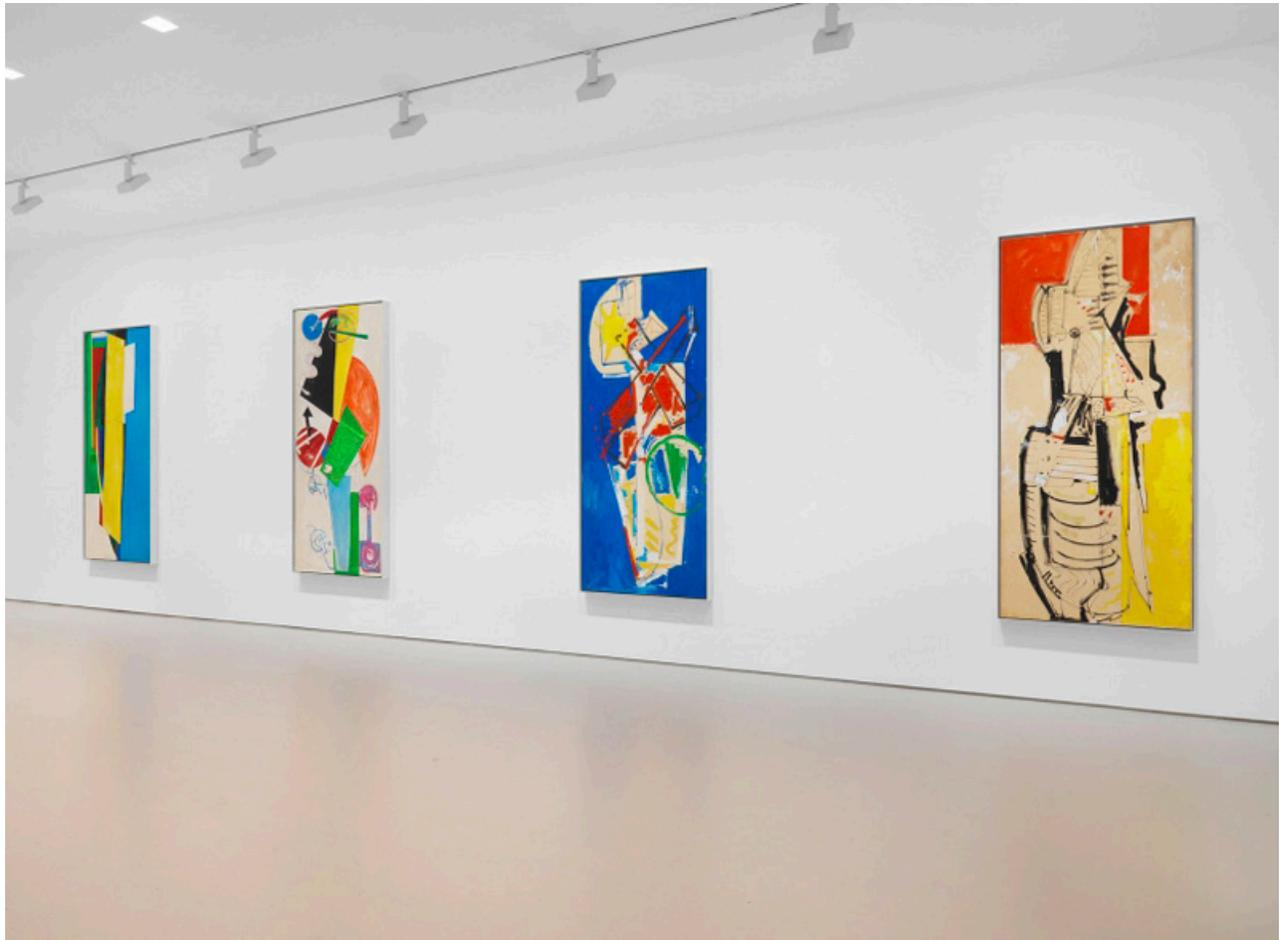
On the adjacent wall are two cross-based paintings. On the right is The Cross (Sketch for Mosaic) [Study for Chimbote Mural], where more paper and preliminary lines reappear, as well as some significant trails through wet oils created with the pointed end of the brush handle. The tilt of the blue cross, and the edition of a bulbous 'head' adds significant animation to the main structure, and the use of primary colors, pentagons, circles, trapezoids and light and dark accent lines gives the entire field a frantic feel, as if it was painted in a trance-like state over a short period of time.



Hans Hofmann, Miles McEnery Gallery, Installation View

Conversely, the relative clarity of the forms and composition of [Study for Mosaic Cross] [Study for Chimbote Mural] somehow seems even more immediate, although I suspect more time was taken to plan and execute this second cross-related narrative. From a technical standpoint, there is a noticeable increase in experimentation with very thinned-out oil paints, adding thin drips of color here and there, while the arching green horn pointing up toward three red dashes at the bottom right adds just the right amount of angst. It is also clear at this point that the relevancy of this work, as it relates to the current trends in art, is becoming more and more obvious, and I suggest that young painters would benefit greatly in seeing the brilliance of this particular combination of yellow, red, blue and green in all its jumping geometric glory.

On the next wall are four paintings, which generally speaking, are more distilled but equally potent. Farthest to the right is Study for Mosaic—Chimbote [Study for Chimbote Mural], a dazzling mix of drawing, painting and design that may remind some of Wifredo Lam, as it has a similar aesthetic with its spiritual or ritualistic feel. A master of color, especially as it relates to space and perspective, Hofmann shows us an innate ability to blend experimental techniques with tried and true theory.



Hans Hofmann, Miles McEnery Gallery, Installation View

To the left is [Study for Chimbote Mural], another work that has a cross, this time in a bit more dynamic perspective floating with other elements in a peaceful blue field. In this instance, I like thinking about how much different this painting must have looked when first completed, before the paper underneath the applied paint darkened with age. You can get some idea of the change in the paper's color when you compare the white corrections near the bottom of the large vertical form, which were made to firm up its edges. Then you might look at the yellow lines painted on top of that area, or at the sun at the apex of the composition, and see a yellow that has become, over time, much closer to the tone of the aged paper, but no less integral to this composition.

Chimbote Mural Fragment of Part II [Study for Chimbote Mural] has a lot of the same properties as the previous work, with the addition of what can be classified as the artist's Surrealist tendencies. Here, I am reminded of the playfulness of Miro, relative to the overall impression of the somewhat precarious placement of shapes, which are anchored to one another in such a way that it implies the various weight differences of the various parts. Additionally, the overt expression on the heavily abstracted 'face' at the top gives this painting its distinctive, somewhat distressed narrative quality.



Chimbote Mural Fragment of Part II [Study for Chimbote Mural] (detail), 1950, oil on board, 84 1/4 x 36 1/4 inches
(photo courtesy of the author)

Lastly, Chimbote Mural Fragment of Part I [Study for Chimbote Mural] is perhaps the artist's most studied and tweaked work. Slight adjustments in the forms are everywhere, where the blue meets the white, the various modulations in the greens, the changes in the yellows and the deepening of the reds all reveal the artist's main concern, that Push/Pull of space that Hofmann is most noted for.

If you have not already figured it out, I see this exhibition as pure joy, stimulating intellectually, formidable in its experimentation and quite the history lesson as Hofmann gives us not only his creative overdrive, but also a pretty nice overview of what Modern Art had been up to for the past 40 odd years prior to 1950.