Selections from the

Anderson Graphic Arts Collection:

ROBERT MOTHERWELL’S A LA PINTURA

A la pintura

FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO
Robert Motherwell was the only artist that Tatyana Grosman, director of Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), invited to create images for a book of his own choice. She had first proposed the project in 1957, but Motherwell put her off until 1967 when he found A la pintura, an ode to painting written by the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti. Sections of Alberti’s work are titled Black, Blue, Red, and White and extol the glories of color with references to the great painters Titian, Manet, El Greco, Titian, Picasso, and others. Motherwell attempted to match his abstract iconography with Alberti’s descriptions of the essences and diverse perceptions of various colors by using the motif of his Open series of paintings in which a U-shaped window is drawn on a field of intense color. “My iconography can cope with, say, the blueness of blues, light and air and color, walls, perspective, and a general sense of the Mediterranean; with solitude, weight, intensities, placing, decisiveness, and ambiguities . . . .” he said in a 1972 description of the beginning of the project.¹

To translate these complex ideas into illustrations, Motherwell chose the techniques of intaglio which had been recently introduced at ULAE; he was assisted by printer Donn Steward. Motherwell later credited Steward with providing the appropriate printmaking medium that would replicate the effect of his painted brush strokes and also with finding technical solutions to his intentions of having both subtle and intense color fields. The two collaborated steadily for four and one-half years, in more than forty sessions, to produce the aquatints that illustrate twenty-one of the twenty-four pages of the book. Each page is a single composition in which the aquatints are juxtaposed with stanzas of the poem printed in English and Spanish in separate colors. This combination of word and image throughout creates dynamic interactions on successive pages as words interact with image and images link and interact with each other. However, Motherwell envisioned that the large pages should rest in a specially designed box, and that each should be viewed and considered, one at a time, through a transparent Plexiglas box cover.

A la pintura was a success as soon as it was published in 1972. There was a much-anticipated exhibition of the book that year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Curator John McKendry declared in the exhibition catalogue that the book was so important that “if all of his paintings and other works were to be destroyed, if only this book were to survive, Motherwell would still be seen as a major artist of the twentieth century.”² Today, almost twenty years later, A la pintura continues to be hailed as a masterpiece of the genre and one of the most important artist’s books of this century.

¹ Quoted by Stephanie C. Terenzio in The Prints of Robert Motherwell (see catalogue raisonné references), 65.
Robert Motherwell
American, 1915–1991

A la pintura (To Painting)
by Rafael Alberti, Spanish, b. 1902

Published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York, 1972

The text is excerpted from Selected Poems written by Alberti, edited and translated by Ben Belitt, and published with the permission of the poet, the translator, the University of California Press, and the Regents of the University of California.

The book consists of twenty-four unbound pages. Twenty-one pages contain images by Motherwell (nineteen aquatints and/or sugar-lift aquatints, most with etching, soft-ground etching, and/or line-block printing; one etching and one soft-ground etching). The paper is white wove J. B. Green paper. The page size is 25 9/16 x 37 15/16 in.

Each page is marked in the lower margin with two yellow ochre ink stamps for the edition number (this number is 15/40), the artist and the title of the book (Robert Motherwell A la pintura), plus the chop mark of the publisher, ULAE. The colophon page is signed and numbered 15/40 by Motherwell in brown ink at right center.

Designed by Motherwell, the housing is a white Formica-laminated box with a Plexiglas top, brass handles, and a sliding drawer with brass nautical fittings, measuring 28 x 40 x 6 in.

The edition is forty, plus eight sets of artist’s proofs numbered I–VIII, two sets of printers proofs marked PP x2, one set of poet’s proofs marked P.R.A. 1/1, and one set of translator’s proofs marked B.B. 1/1. Over 240 unique trial proofs were also produced.

The printer for the intaglio plates was Donn Steward. The text was hand set and printed on letterpress by Juda Rosenberg. The first set of typography was proofed by Esther Pullman.

Catalogue raisonné references:

A la pintura/To Painting

Contents, followed by the date of completion:

Frontispiece, 1971
Title page, A la pintura/To Painting, 1971
Preface, From 'La arboleda perdida,' 1959, 1969
To the Palette/A la paleta, 1971
Black/Negro 1–3, 1968
Untitled (Black 4), 1969
Untitled (Black 5–11), 1971
Blue/Azul 1–3, 1969
Untitled (Blue 4), 1971
Untitled (Blue 5), 1969
Untitled (Blue 6–11), 1971
Untitled (Blue 12–13), 1971
Red/Rojo 1–3, 1971
Untitled (Red 4–7), 1969
Untitled (Red 8–11), 1971
White/Blanco 1–2, 1971
Untitled (White 3–6), 1971
Untitled (White 7–9), 1971
Untitled (White 10–13), 1972
Untitled (White 14–15), 1972
To the Paintbrush/A la pincel, 1969
End page, 1971
Table of Contents, 1972 (not exhibited)
Colophon page, 1972

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco,
Anderson Graphic Arts Collection,
Gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson
Charitable Foundation
1996.74.319.1–24