

PATHS TO THE ABSOLUTE

The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts have been delivered annually since 1952 at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, with the goal of bringing “the people of the United States the results of the best contemporary thought and scholarship bearing upon the subject of the Fine Arts.” As publication was always an essential part of the vision for the Mellon Lectures, a relationship was established between the National Gallery and the Bollingen Foundation for a series of books based on the talks. The first book in the series was published in 1953, and since 1967 all lectures have been published by Princeton University Press as part of the Bollingen Series. Now, for the first time, all the books in the series are available in one or more formats, including paperback and e-book, making many volumes that have long been out of print accessible to future generations of readers.

This edition is supported by a gift in memory of Charles Scribner, Jr., former trustee and president of Princeton University Press. The Press is grateful to the Scribner family for their formative and enduring support, and for their commitment to preserving the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts for posterity.

Images in this edition may have been altered in size and color from their appearance in the original print editions to make this book available in accessible formats.

PATHS TO THE ABSOLUTE

Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky,
Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still

JOHN GOLDING

The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1997

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Bollingen Series XXXV · 48 ✂

Princeton University Press

Princeton, New Jersey

For Helen and Phil

Copyright © 2000 by the Trustees of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Published in North America by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

This is the forty-eighth volume of the A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts,
which are delivered annually at the National Gallery of Art, Washington.
The volumes of lectures constitute Number XXXV in the Bollingen Series,
sponsored by the Bollingen Foundation.

All Rights Reserved

Designed by Keith Lovegrove
Composed in Sabon MT

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Golding, John.

Paths to the absolute : Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and
Still / John Golding.

p. cm. — (The A.W. Mellon lectures in the fine arts ; 1997) (Bollingen series ; XXXV, 48)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-04896-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Painting, European. 2. Painting, Abstract—Europe. 3. Painting, Modern—20th
century—Europe. 4. Painting, American. 5. Painting, Abstract—United States. 6. Painting,
Modern—20th century—United States. I. Title. II. Series. III. Series: Bollingen series ;
XXXV, 48

ND458.5.A37 G65 2000

759.06'52—dc21

00-023172

New paperback printing 2023

ISBN (paper) 978-0-691-25293-3

ISBN (ebook) 978-0-691-25294-0

The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts

Delivered at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C

- 1952 Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*
- 1953 Sir Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Form*
- 1954 Sir Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture*
- 1955 Etienne Gilson, *Art and Reality*
- 1956 E. H. Gombrich, *The Visible World and the Language of Art*
- 1957 Sigfried Giedion, *Constancy and Change in Art and Architecture*
- 1958 Sir Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin and French Classicism*
- 1959 Naum Gabo, *A Sculptor's View of the Fine Arts*
- 1960 Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, *Horace Walpole*
- 1961 André Grabar, *Christian Iconography and the Christian Religion in Antiquity*
- 1962 Kathleen Raine, *William Blake and Traditional Mythology*
- 1963 Sir John Pope-Hennessy, *Artist and Individual: Some Aspects of the Renaissance Portrait*
- 1964 Jakob Rosenberg, *On Quality in Art: Criteria of Excellence, Past and Present*
- 1965 Sir Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*
- 1966 Lord David Cecil, *Dreamer or Visionary: A Study of English Romantic Painting*
- 1967 Mario Praz, *On the Parallel of Literature and the Visual Arts*
- 1968 Stephen Spender, *Imaginative Literature and Painting*
- 1969 Jacob Bronowski, *Art as a Mode of Knowledge*
- 1970 Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, *Some Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Architecture*
- 1971 T. S. R. Boase, *Vasari: The Man and the Book*
- 1972 Ludwig H. Heydenreich, *Leonardo da Vinci*
- 1973 Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art*
- 1974 H. W. Janson, *Nineteenth-Century Sculpture Reconsidered*
- 1975 H. C. Robbins Landon, *Music in Europe in the Year 1776*
- 1976 Peter von Blanckenhagen, *Aspects of Classical Art*
- 1977 André Chastel, *The Sack of Rome: 1527*
- 1978 Joseph W. Alsop, *The History of Art Collecting*
- 1979 John Rewald, *Cézanne and America*
- 1980 Peter Kidson, *Principles of Design in Ancient and Medieval Architecture*
- 1981 John Harris, *Palladian Architecture in England, 1615-1760*
- 1982 Leo Steinberg, *The Burden of Michelangelo's Painting*
- 1983 Vincent Scully, *The Shape of France*
- 1984 Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*
- 1985 James S. Ackerman, *The Villa in History*
- 1986 Lukas Foss, *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Composer*
- 1987 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons*
- 1988 John Shearman, *Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*
- 1989 Oleg Grabar, *Intermediary Demons: Toward a Theory of Ornament*
- 1990 Jennifer Montagu, *Gold, Silver, and Bronze: Metal Sculpture of the Roman Baroque*
- 1991 Willibald Sauerländer, *Changing Faces: Art and Physiognomy through the Ages*
- 1992 Anthony Hecht, *On the Laws of the Poetic Art*
- 1993 Sir John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*
- 1994 Jonathan Brown, *Kings and Connoisseurs: Collecting Art in Seventeenth-Century Europe*
- 1995 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*
- 1996 Pierre Rosenberg, *From Drawing to Painting: Poussin, Watteau, Fragonard, David, and Ingres*
- 1997 John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*
- 1998 Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*
- 1999 Carlo Bertelli, *Transitions*