

## Docent Touring Guide

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In her Taschen publication *Abstract Expressionism* (2016), Barbara Hess characterized abstract expressionism (AE) as “a constant searching for oneself”. Hess suggested that that the AEs, themselves, mainly painters in New York after the end of WWII, eschewed labeling. In fact, Willem de Kooning told Alfred Barr, the head of MOMA, at a panel discussion in 1950, “It is disastrous to *name* ourselves”.

But the name stuck and AE became the dominant American fine art “ism” from the end of WWII to the early-sixties when pop art (Warhol, Lichtenstein et al) captured the public’s attention, as well as that of the critics and the gallerists. But during the fifties—the time of McCarthyism, “Mad Men”’s Don Draper and Rosie the Riveter’s conversion into June Cleaver—the AE’s (Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem deKooning and their mostly male colleagues) captured the American art world’s limelight.

This wonderful exhibit ably debunks the operative term in the foregoing paragraph--“mostly male”. ABEX wasn't exclusively male. And it's best included women, exemplified by the 12 whose works we have here at PSAM.

WABEX—curated last year in Denver by Gwen Chanzit, and beautifully catalogued by Joan Marter—shows us that WABEX's 12 women belonged on the same seats of the same bus as their male counterparts.

There's a good movie available on NETFLIX, "Pollock" starring Ed Harris as Jackson Pollock and Marsha Gaye Harden as his wife, Lee Krasner. In an early scene, Krasner invites the young, emerging Pollock over to her apartment/studio to see her work. Pollock sets the tone for the rest of the movie by saying to Krasner, "Not bad for a **woman** painter."

Not bad, indeed, as we will soon see. But the subtext of WABEX can't be ignored: These women painters, by and large, didn't achieve the critical or financial success of their male counterparts. Many endured personal demons. Interestingly, three of the women in this show employed male *noms de plume* for marketing purposes: Lena Krasner was Lee Krasner; a young Grace Hartigan was, for a while, George Hartigan; and Mary Joan DeFeo became Jay DeFeo.

Abstract. Expressionism. Two adjectives forever linked.

Action Painting. Gestural. Colorful. Textual.

Let's break down AE.

"Abstract". Easy enough. Two dimensional. No vanishing point. Objects aren't painted. Rather, **colors**, **shapes**, and **lines** are.

But what about "Expressionism"—the second half of AE? Elaine deKooning said, "When I start [painting] I don't know what's going to happen...When you're dancing you don't stop to think: now I'll take a step,.... you allow it to flow." Hans Hoffmann a German who came to the States in the late-20s and who many consider to be the guru of American AE taught several of these women (and their male peers). In a 1948 essay "Search For the Real", Hoffman wrote of AE's essentials: **tension ("push and pull")**, a

**flat plane, a point of departure** that is, something that inspired an AE to pick up her brush or palette knife and engage in the act—the action—of painting.

American AE is rooted in European expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. See, for example early-20th century work by the Europeans Karl Schmidt-Rotluff and Wassily Kandinsky. (Tabs 1 & 2). The American AE's benefitted by their exposure to European modernists, some of whom fled Hitler and wound up in New York.

New York was home for the most of these collaborative AEs. Their studios were in lower Manhattan, as were the bars where they hung out and the famous invitation-only Eighth Street Club where they traded ideas about painting. That Club included several women featured in WABEX, including Perle Fine and Helen Frankenthaler.

The gallerists that embraced the AEs were uptown, as were the powerful critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg who got the AEs press coverage and gallery space. Two Life Magazine features, one in 1951 and another in 1957 featuring Women AEs introduced Middle America to AE. (Tabs 3 & 4).

9 of the 12 women in WABEX based themselves in New York in the 50s, although two, Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan, left town to follow men to Paris and Baltimore. For a while, their careers suffered as a result.

Three women in the show, Sonia Gechtoff, Jay DeFeo and Deborah Remington painted in San Francisco (SF). The SF art scene in the 50s was quite different from that in New York. For one thing, Greenberg and Rosenberg were in New York; for another, so were the rich folks who were beginning to buy AE. Pictures of the SF AEs often have them seated with jazz musicians and beat poets. If New York AEs were collaborative, the SF AEs were downright communal. Notably, two of the SF women in this show—

Gechtoff and Remington—are on the record as having not been exposed to sexism as they navigated the SF AE world.

Who are these woman? What distinguishes them? What inspired them? What became of them?<sup>1</sup> Three—Mary Abbott, Sonia Gechtoff and Judith Godwin are still living. One—Helen Frankenthaler called me on the phone one day (a nice story best shared over a cup of coffee).

### **Mary Abbott (born 1921)**

An ancestor of John Adams and a *Glamour* magazine cover model before she turned to art full time, Mary Abbott has been a fixture in the New York art world for decades, having been one of the first women to join the AE's invitation-only 8th Street Club in the late 40s. Abbott was a protege of her Hamptons neighbor, Willem deKooning. As Aliza Edelman delicately put it in her biography of Abbott for the WABEX Catalogue, deKooning “was a key figure in her personal life and artistic development.”<sup>2</sup>

Nature inspired Abbott's art. In her terms, “I realized ...I was seeing nature from the outside. Everything changed—my whole way of thinking...So the rest of my life I paint to get with [nature] again.”

Consider Abbott's “All Green” (1954) (Catalogue p. 75). Abbott and her husband regularly “wintered” in the Caribbean where she became enchanted by the lush island

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<sup>1</sup> In preparing for this assignment, I found the Denver Art Museum's docent *Touring Notes* to be invaluable. They're available on the PSAM's docent webpage. Easy to read and quite comprehensive, they add quite a bit to one's understanding of WABEX. If you are planning to include WABEX in general (or even children's tours), I recommend them.

YouTube video interviews of (or about) many of the women in this show are quite easy to find, fun to watch and they proved to be useful.

<sup>2</sup> See this flattering 2102 Huffington Post article about Abbott by Diane Saxton. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-saxton/mary-abbott-quintessentia\\_b\\_1862702.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-saxton/mary-abbott-quintessentia_b_1862702.html)

jungles. Inspired by tropical lushness, one imagines Abbott transporting herself to the Caribbean as she was painting "All Green"-- and that the curators selected "All Green" for WABEX because they, too, could feel the tropical atmosphere as they looked at the painting. Do you?

"All Green" exemplifies "all over" painting. There's no focal point.

### **Jay DeFeo (1929-1989)**

Well-known during her lifetime within the SF arts community, Jay DeFeo is now viewed as a singularly important AE as a result of her masterwork "White Rose". (Tab 5). "White Rose's" trek from Fillmore St. to storage at the SF MOMA and then to its own wall in the new Whitney in New York is pretty cool. This mammoth sculpture-like piece contains over 2000 pounds of paint, plaster and sand. DeFeo created it over a span of eight years. Her studio was her and her family's small apartment on Fillmore St. in SF. Her "easel's" location: the front bay window of that apartment. DeFeo was basically broke as she painted "White Rose". The DeFeos were evicted, and "White Rose" had to be taken by crane out of their front, second floor Fillmore St. window—after the entire window and its framing had been removed. DeFeo's husband is on record saying that, by the time they were evicted, the apartment's floor was so covered with paint that crossing was like walking on a wet sponge.

"Incision" (1958-61) (Catalogue p. 79) is one of three DeFeos in WABEX and reflects the technique she employed in "White Rose". DeFeo mixes media in "Incision"; here oil paint and string. It has almost 500 pounds of paint.

DeFeo died young of lung cancer, as one might imagine given the chemically-cramped quarters within which she worked.

### Elaine deKooning (1918-1989)

Elaine Fried took her husband, Willem's, surname when she married him in December 1943. She learned to draw from her mother. "EDK" (as she signed her canvases) was so good a child portraitist that she made money in grade school by drawing pictures of her classmates and selling those images to their parents.

Willem deKooning and Jackson Pollock, by the early-40s, had caught the eye of Peggy Guggenheim, a wealthy art patron who underwrote their and other AE's careers until she moved to Venice in 1947. Their careers were off to a fast start. EDK and Perle Fine and Mary Abbott also were busy creating AE in the 40s, but they didn't prosper like their male peers. Notably, Life's famous 1951 photograph of famous AEs, "The Irascibles" includes only one woman.

Has the art world had a decades-long gender bias? The marketplace might give us the answer.<sup>3</sup> Numbers don't lie.

After she and Willem deKooning separated in 1957, EDK took her colorful, gestural talents and returned to portraiture—with considerable success. The White House commissioned her to paint JFK's portrait while he was vacationing at the family's Palm Beach compound. It's now in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. (Tab 6). After her Kennedy coup, EDK spent several years painting portraits of wealthy patrons, and made a good living doing so.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bonham's, an auction house, the 5 paintings that brought the highest prices in the first decade of the 21st century were all painted by men: **Pollock** \$155.5M; **W. deKooning** \$149.5M; Klimt \$144.8M; Picasso \$106.5M; and Picasso \$104.2M.

Compare those numbers with artNews's Top 5 Most Expensive Women Artists at Auction in 2015: O'Keefe \$44.4M; Bourgeois \$28.2M; **Joan Mitchell** \$11.9M, Morisot \$10.9M; and Goncharova \$10.8M. No other woman AE made artNews' Top 10.

EDK's AE painting is rooted in her experience at the now-defunct Black Mountain College (BMC) in North Carolina, where Willem deKooning taught in 1948. While at BMC, EDK created a series of abstract enamel paintings on wrapping paper that disappeared until they were discovered in 1985, a discovery that further assured her place in AE's Pantheon.

EDK's "Bullfight" (1959) (Catalogue, pp. 84-85) germinated from time she spent in Mexico. Of all the women in WABEX, EDK's work is the most representational. "Bill" (Catalogue p. 81), "Bill at St. Mark's" (Catalogue p. 83) and "Falling Man" (Catalogue p. 84) all show torsos, but not much in the way of features. Rather, they're more about color and gesture. Sweeping brushstrokes that EDK made with her **arm**, not her **wrist**. In the electrifying "Bullfight", there's a bull's torso and, in front of the bull, a matador. There may be images in "Bullfight", but the painting's story is told by its colors and the left-to-tight movement.

### **Perle Fine (1905-1988)**

Pictured in the WABEX Catalogue with her gaze and an unfiltered cigarette both pointing toward a canvas (p. 174), Perle Fine brought both painting and collage to AE. Fine was well-received by her peers and critics (if not by the marketplace) and, like many of the other New York-rooted AEs, made a mid-career move from lower Manhattan to The Hamptons.

Fine's "Summer I" (1958-59) (Catalogue p. 88) and "Image d'Hiver" (1958) ("Image of Winter" in English) (Catalogue p. 89) typify Hans Hoffmann's directive to "push and pull". These paintings are certainly well-titled. One reflects bright summery colors; the other suggests a bleak wintry landscape—snow and barren trees. Each painting

has tension. Horizontal and vertical. Competing colors (“Summer I”). Black and white (“Image d’Hiver”). Fine used collage—texture—in each. Where are the focal points in these paintings? The blank space at 2 o’clock in “Image d’Hiver”? The white brush-strokes toward the right edge of “SummerI”? Or are there no focal points?

Is Fine filling these paintings with action to keep us staring at them?

What does the metallic collage add to the works?

### **Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011)**

Joan Mitchell’s work might be getting the highest auction prices today, but from when she broke into the New York AE scene in 1950 until she died in 2011, Helen Frankenthaler was the #1 woman AE, by most accounts. EDK switched back to portraiture (albeit while employing techniques she learned as an AE). Krasner, despite a solid body of AE work in the late 50s and 60s, never emerged from Pollock’s shadow.

Frankenthaler never ventured away from AE. She, along with Mark Rothko and others pioneered an AE style, **color field painting**, which differed technique-wise from the **gestural action** painting of artists such as Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Abbott.

Somewhat ironically, Frankenthaler moved toward color field painting after watching Pollock drip paint on canvasses placed on the floor of his studio in the Hamptons. Frankenthaler adopted Pollock’s posture in applying paint—she, too, began putting her canvases on the floor. But she painted in a totally different fashion. Frankenthaler would dilute paint with turpentine—make it **thinner**—and then use rags or sponges to move the paint across the raw, absorbent canvas.



WABEX includes four Frankenthal oils. “Untitled” (1951) (Catalogue p. 91) is not a color field painting. Frankenthal was most likely facing the canvas as she painted it. Note also its composition: bright colors, black outlines and biomorphic shapes.

Compare “Untitled” to “Mountain Storm” (1955) (Catalogue p. 93), “Jacob’s Ladder” (1957) (Catalogue p. 94) or “Western Dream” (1957) (Catalogue p. 95). Each of the latter is more subdued, and it’s the **colors** not the action that dominate the images.

The critic Clement Greenberg was a big fan of Frankenthaler, and he helped her build a national reputation. Tab 7 is from from the Smithsonian’s archives and shows Frankenthaler, Greenberg, Pollock and Krasner at a beach with an “unidentified child”.

Frankenthaler came from money—not from Abbott’s kind of money—but from enough to bankroll a very good arts education. Her father was a physician in Manhattan and she went to exclusive private schools and Bennington College in Vermont where she studied under Rufino Tomayo, a famous Mexican modernist whose colorful work materially influenced her. Bennington and Tomayo pointed Frankenthaler back to New York and to quick, enduring success.

### **Sonia Gechtoff (born 1926)**

Philadelphia born, raised and educated (she was taught to paint by her artist father and earned a BFA from the Philadelphia Museum School of Art), Sylvia Gechtoff has been in AE’s inner circle ever since she moved in 1951 from Philadelphia to SF where she stayed through the 50s before moving to New York. Gechtoff found early success in AE circles. In 1953, one of her paintings was selected for the Guggenheim’s “Younger American Painters” show alongside works by Pollock, Willem deKooning and

others. In 1958, her work was shown at the Brussels Worlds Fair. In 1960, she was featured in the Whitney's "Young America" exhibit.

After moving to New York Gechtoff taught at several art schools and has continued to focus on AE. In New York, Gechtoff experienced art world gender bias that she hadn't felt in SF. At times, Gechtoff has been outspoken in comparing her SF and New York experiences.

At 90, Gechtoff still maintains a studio.

Gechtoff is known for bright, bold works on large (but not giant) canvasses. She acknowledges being inspired by the work of Clyfford Still, who also influenced many other SF-based AEs in the 40s and 50s.

Gechtoff's "The Beginning" (1960) (Catalogue p. 102) is worth a look. Painted after she moved to New York, Gechtoff created "The Beginning" with a palette knife, not with brushes. Using a painting by the Renaissance painter Giotto as **point of departure** into abstraction, Gechtoff employed cascading colors (greens and blues) as a backdrop, before inserting abstracted cherubs (putti) in referencing Giotto 1304 "Crucifixion".

### **Judith Godwin (born 1930)**

I recommend the Denver Art Museum's videotaped interview of Judith Godwin, which is playing at PSAM in connection with WABEX. She speaks with intelligence and power of the extra-high hurdles WAEs faced in the early-50s. In that interview Godwin captures the reason WABEX was curated.

From rural Virginia, Godwin followed an older sister to Mary Baldwin, one of those all-female "finishing school" colleges (most of which no longer exist); thought it

“too social” and transferred to what is now Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, from which she graduated. She then headed straight to New York and its AE crowd. Godwin studied with Hans Hoffmann. Most significantly, she became lifelong friends with the dancer/choreographer Martha Graham.

“Martha Graham—Lamentation” (p. 105 in the WABEX catalogue) is an homage to Graham. Lamentation is the name of one of Graham’s dances. A “lamentation” is also an expression of sorrow or regret. Godwin’s “Lamentation” arguably reflects Graham moving across a stage shrouded like mourner, as suggested by its dark palette and diagonal lines.

### **Grace Hartigan (1922-2008)**

Having once painted as “George” Hartigan, Grace Hartigan had the good sense to reclaim “Grace” and characterize herself as a “painter”, not an “artist” and certainly not a “woman painter”. Married several times, a decades-long alcoholic and the survivor of a 1978 suicide attempt (“a bottle of pills and a bottle of vodka”), Hartigan got her act together and spent the last decades of her life championing women painters.

As did EDK, Hartigan moved away from AE in the 60s so she could earn a living. But her post AE work borrows heavily from her 50s AE work, four paintings from which are in WABEX. Commentators have noted that Hartigan’s 1960s “Reisterstown Mall” series (which capture’s Baltimore’s “Baltimoreness” and which she painted after she left New York for good), relate directly back to her AE years.

Hartigan was well-received by the New York critics. She was one of only two women (the other was Sonia Gechtoff) whose work traveled with those of many of “The Irascibles” to the 1958 Brussels Worlds Fair, where Europe first met American AE.

“The Creeks” (1957) (Catalogue p. 114) is a giant “all over” painting. Hartigan covered the canvas in reds and then, in her words “captured the space” with a series of black-outlined two-dimensional planes.

Hartigan was among the first women AEs to have one of her works acquired by MOMA.

### **Lee Krasner (1908-1984)**

When Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner moved from Manhattan and bought a place in the Hamptons, Pollock commandeered a large outbuilding for his studio and made Krasner use a small room in their house as hers. It was Pollock’s decision; Krasner didn’t have a vote. That “arrangement” gave Pollock room to create the large-scale drip paintings for which he is so well known. It also forced Krasner to paint “small”. Right after Pollock was killed in 1956, Krasner took over Pollock’s studio and began painting large abstracts such as “Charred Landscape” (1960) (Catalogue pp.124-125). By finally being able to paint on a 70” x 98” canvas, Krasner was able to emerge from Pollock’s large—one might argue misogynist—shadow. The Denver Art Museum’s *Touring Notes* quote Krasner on the issue of men and women and art: “[Jackson] wouldn’t let me go out and get a job to support him...it wasn’t he who was stopping me, but the whole milieu in which we lived, which I accepted.”

Well-trained in fine art (she studied at Cooper Union in New York, the National Academy of design and, later, with Hans Hoffmann), Krasner was a WPA muralist in the 30s, during which period she learned how to craft large-scale, representational images. In the late 30s, after having worked with Hoffmann and having been influenced by surrealism, Krasner gravitated toward AE, but her work was by-and-large small-scale while

she and Pollock were together. In fact, a 1946 Krasner calligraphic series was captioned “Little Images”.

Two of Krasner's works in WABEX, “The Seasons” (1957) (Catalogue pp. 120-121 and “Charred Landscape” reflect both Krasner's having drawn inspiration from nature and her belief that “life is a pendulum”—one day your up, another day you’re down. Compare the vibrancy of “The Seasons” to the bleakness of “Charred Landscape”. “The Seasons” is alive; not “Charred Landscape”. Yet each is magnetic in its own way. It’s not hard to imagine what Krasner was feeling as she created each of these works.

Which painting would you want in your house, "The Seasons" or "Charred Landscape"? Both?

### **Joan Mitchell (1925-1992)**

Born in Chicago into a wealthy family (her father as a successful physician and amateur artist and her grandfather was a nationally-known engineer/architect), Mitchell’s precocity as an artist was evident early on. She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. She married a childhood friend, a publisher named Barney Rosset, followed him to New York and broke quickly into the AE scene in lower Manhattan, appearing in the “groundbreaking” 9th Street Show put on by the AEs themselves. Mitchell did a lot of her early-AE painting in the Hamptons, as did the deKoonings, Pollock and Krasner and Mary Abbott. After leaving Rosset, Mitchell fell for a Quebecois artist cum race car driver, Jean-Paul Riopelle who was then living in France. Mitchell abandoned New York, followed Riopelle to France and moved in with him outside of Paris in a 19th century farmhouse in a village where Monet once painted.

Even though AE fell from critical favor in the 60s, Mitchell stuck with it throughout her career. But she suffered economically for more than a decade. That ended when she was featured in a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1974. According to her biographer Patricia Albers, the critics didn't rave about her work, but the public responded positively and Mitchell's star began again to rise.

Mitchell's star rose through no help from Joan Mitchell, however. Even in the eyes of her friends, Mitchell was very difficult to deal with; she was uncompromising and volatile. She had a serious alcohol problem.

But the art? Mitchell's AE has been among the most enduring. She labored over her work. She painted slowly. She'd apply some paint to a large canvas, walk to the end of the studio, "feel" that which she had thus far painted and then soldier on. A chapter in one Mitchell catalogue is captioned "A Rage to Paint" and its author, Linda Nochlin, wrote, "Mitchell's rage to paint by a very specific battle between containment and chaos." A good example in the WABEX show might be "East Ninth Street" (1956) (Catalogue p. 133). There are chaotic oranges and blues moving furiously on the huge canvas, but they're "contained" in its center (orange) and lower third (blue).

Mitchell on the public's appreciation of AE: "People will never understand what we are doing if they can't feel."

Today, Mitchell is arguably at to top of the critics' WABEX "A List". One of her paintings sold for \$11.9M in 2015. (Tab 8).

### **Deborah Remington (1930-2010)**

SF's Deborah Remington shared Sonia Gechtoff's view of men and women and the 50's SF art scene: she felt that she was respected as an artist, not as a woman

artist. As did Gechtoff, Remington studied first at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art. She later earned a BFA at the California School of Fine Art. After college, Remington spent two years traveling and studying in Asia—an experience that thereafter informed her AE painting. In 1954, the 24-year-old Remington and several male painters founded the Six Gallery in SF where, in 1955, the poet Alan Ginsberg first read his famous “Howl” in public. Remington spent several decades teaching at prestigious art schools in SF and New York, having moved to New York in 1965. She moved of from AE in the late 60s, as other modern art genres were coming into vogue..

Remington’s AE hallmark is “Minimum Color, Maximum Texture.”

"Exodus" (1960) (Catalogue p. 143) is a good example of **gestural AE action** painting. Remington began her "Exodus" brush strokes well-before any brush touched the canvas. She painted with her arm, not just her wrist and fingers. She also brought **action** to “Exodus” by texturizing the painting with thick paint—impasto, in art lingo.

Note Remington’s signature in “Exodus”. It’s carved into the paint. Why do you think she did that? Why did she name it "Exodus"?

### **Ethel Schwabacher (1903-1984)**

The oldest of the women in WABEX, Ethel Schwabacher exposed herself to the New York art world as a young woman. She studied at the famous Art Students League and painted for several years in France in the 20s and 30s. Her mentor in New York was the Russian immigrant Arshile Gorky, a world-renown abstract artist himself and, like the surrealists, cubists and German Expressionists, an inspiration to New York’s AE community. Well-wired into New York’s art scene, the wealthy Schwabacher organized Gorky’s 1948 memorial service at the Whitney Museum.

An interesting aside about Schwabacher: It wasn't all about the art. In the 1950s, the New York City public school system was effectively segregated. Schwabacher—a volunteer to the school board—spent several years helping to rectify that.

Not as well-known as the other women in this show (for one thing, she didn't run with the 8th Street Club set and her husband was a successful lawyer (as her son still is)), Schwabacher holds her own with her WABEX peers. Schwabacher wasn't in it for the money; as a matter of fact, her three paintings on display at WABEX aren't in museums; they're owned by her son and daughter.

Schwabacher's resume notes the her points of departure into abstraction are myth and her experience with psychoanalysis. "Antigone 1" (1958) (Catalogue pp. 148-149) is a huge painting. The entire canvas is covered with paint, mainly reds. It has three blocks of color in the center which are connected at the top with a black and yellow bar.

Antigone was Oedipus's daughter who met the untimely end of being locked alive in a tomb as a result of having defied authority by trying to find a burial place for her brother. What inspired Schwabacher to label this painting "Antigone"?



Thanks. -- Could Not Have Done This Without

Eileen Fitzpatrick

Sandy Friedman

Richard Proctor

Vinny Stoppia

Sidney Williams

Tab 1 -- Karl Schmidt-Ratluff



Tab 2 -- Wassily Kandinsky



Tab 3 --"The Irascibles" 1951



Tab 4 -- Helen Frankenthaler 1957



Tab 5 -- "White Rose" Jay DeFeo



Tab 6 -- JFK by EDK



Tab 7 -- Greenberg, Frankenthaler, Pollock, Krasner and "Unidentified Child"





Tab 8 -- Joan Mitchell "Untitled" (1960)

