section of "The Genius of Rome" is unabashed, drop-jawed astonishment at the presence of two of Caravaggio's most deservedly celebrated works: the *Madonna di Loreto* (c. 1604–05), which usually occupies a dim chapel on the north aisle of Sant' Agostino, near the Piazza Navona, and *The Entombment* (c. 1602–03), originally in the Chiesa Nuova, now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana. In the former, an elderly man and woman, devout peasants on a pilgrimage, kneel before a handsome young woman struggling to support the weight of a robust toddler who gazes intently at the rapt couple; delicately outlined halos signal the divinity of the mother and child, although the shaft of cool light that illuminates them from above does this to even greater effect. *The Entombment* is as complex as the *Madonna di Loreto* is economical. A frozen cascade of mourning women descends toward the powerful body of the dead Christ, a luminous, strangely vital corpse who seems at once to weigh heavily on the figures who support him and to be magically suspended for the contemplation of the worshipper. *The Entombment* insists that attention be paid; Nicodemus stares straight out and captures the gaze of the viewer.

If you can tear yourself away from these delights—although the opportunity to see the *Madonna di Loreto* in decent light and at an informative distance is almost worth the trip to London alone—the room discloses other impressive inclusions: some of Rubens's large studies for alternate versions of his revolutionary altarpiece for the Chiesa Nuova; an elegant Guido Reni of St. Filippo Neri himself, from the same church; and a dramatically lit Guercino of the Magdalen. Once the surprise of the Caravaggios being in London wears off, and you stop wondering whether Sant' Agostino is closed for restoration, cross-connections among all the various images in the room begin to declare themselves. You notice poses and compositional echoes that speak of common sources, as well as of the influence of the exhibition's three stars. Unfortunately, perceiving these reverberations is not always enriching. A rather silly *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1617, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Arras), by the French painter, sometime resident of Rome, Claude Vignon, is even sillier once you realize its clumsy debt to Caravaggio's harrowing version of the theme in San Luigi dei Francesi.

The catalogue of "The Genius of Rome" assembles informative essays by an international team of scholars, with their themes roughly paralleling the organization of the exhibition. Edited by the show's curator, Beverly Louise Brown, who also furnished several key essays, it is dedicated to the memory of Francis Haskell, best known as the author of *Painters and Patrons* (rev. ed. 1980), a definitive study of patronage in Baroque Rome. The catalogue is a fitting tribute to this brilliant scholar who died last year: a handsome, scrupulously researched volume, with a wealth of information, including plates and entries for all works exhibited in both London and Rome, plus many helpful comparative images, and, as a bonus, color reproductions that are noticeably less awful than in many other Royal Academy publications. Seeing "The Genius of Rome" made me hunt for my copy of Haskell's dense, absorbing account of the formation of the Baroque city—largely the core of modern Rome. Now if I can find a way to justify a trip to Italy this summer.

Exhibition notes

"John Walker: Time and Tides,"
at Knoedler & Company, New York.
January 18–March 3, 2001

An English-born resident of Boston, John Walker paints on the littorals of abstraction, informed by its history and aims, but not willing to forsake the bedrock of representation and go fully into the non-objective sea. Of course, this aesthetic position has its own vaunted history, one primarily concerned, like Walker, with abstracting the landscape. To his landscapes, which hover

with certainty between the purely abstract and expressionist representation, Walker brings a vigorous brush and a keen eye for the effects of changing light and weather on the Maine coast. But his new show, "Time and Tides," was divided into two parts: the landscapes and several large canvases that deal with World War I. Viewing it, I was reminded of the importance for an artist of seeing, of having the experience of direct observation.

Turbulent and suffused by haunting, heavily applied autumnal tones, the landscapes are all dominated by a filled-in figure-eight shape, or variations on it, glimmering on the water. In *Fading Storm, Outgoing Tide* (2000), the canvas divides into three broad sectors: a burst of orange-yellow oil interrupting the wide, horizontal brushstrokes of dark paint in the sky's notched rectangle; on the right side, the land occupies an upright and narrow rectangle, in which streaks of green, yellow, and white emerge from among a welter of blues, blacks, and browns; the figure-eight, itself divided lengthwise into brownish yellow and whitish portions, sits in the sea's wide, dark rectangle. Walker is an expressionist in the sense that, for him, emotion is conveyed by color and in eloquent, and rawly energetic, brushstrokes. For instance, the warm reds and oranges in the sea and land give *October Low Tide, Maine* (2000) a valedictory calm, while the blacks and grays of the sky loom like cold winter. My only reservation about these excellent abstracted landscapes is that, by allowing the figure-eight shape to reappear in all of them, it assumes the importance of a symbol, and thereby risks imposing a willed significance on the series. Still, Walker achieves an emotional intensity, which, I suspect, comes from his observation and engagement with the natural world.

The "war paintings," as Jack Flam calls them in the catalogue essay, substitute message and subject matter for the landscape's observed engagement, and, because of this emotional distance (and, yes, willed significance again), they feel at once overblown and aesthetically underwhelming. A number of the artist's family members, including his father, saw action in the Great War, but Walker addresses this fact by covering his canvases with painted quotations from Wilfred Owen, David Jones, and the contemporary poet Rosanna Warren, adding a cross-hatched fence and, off to the side, a uniformed figure surmounted by a sheep's skull. Whereas the landscapes are large—84 x 66 inches on the high end—the war paintings are enormous, fit only for a museum, which further reinforces the sense of striving for importance. Frankly, unless an artist integrates words into the pictorial language of a work, as Picasso and Braque did early in the century, scant pleasure is to be gained by filling the canvas with words, no matter how stirring. Suffice it to say that, in Walker's case, a picture is worth any number of words.

"Nell Blaine: The Abstract Work,"
at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.
January 27–March 10, 2001

Like Walker, the American artist Nell Blaine (1922–1996) was also concerned with the interplay of abstraction and representation, although she eschewed pure abstraction for most of her painting life, preferring instead landscape, still life, and portraiture—the work upon which her reputation rests. Encountering Blaine's abstractions from the Forties caused a jolt of delighted surprise. Completed before she turned thirty, Blaine's abstract phase began while she was studying with Hans Hoffman and continued through her inclusion in Peggy Guggenheim's important "The Women" show at Art of this Century (when Blaine was only twenty-one) and her first solo exhibition at the Jane Street Gallery, ending around the time the Jane Street Group dispersed at the end of the decade.

Despite her obvious indebtedness to Léger and Mondrian, Blaine's abstract work—hard-edged, favoring pure colors, black outlines, and biomorphic forms—shows both remarkable plastic ability and