

A STUDY ON ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

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Abstract: *Abstract Expressionism is an artistic movement of the mid-20th century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing especially an artist's liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and usually nonrepresentational means. The abstract expressionists were mostly based in New York City, and also became known as the New York school. The name evokes their aim to make art that while abstract was also expressive or emotional in its effect. They were inspired by the surrealist idea that art should come from the unconscious mind, and by the automatism of artist Joan Miró. Abstract expressionism is the term applied to new forms of abstract art developed by American painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning in the 1940s and 1950s. It is often characterised by gestural brush-strokes or mark-making, and the impression of spontaneity.*

Keywords: *Abstract Expressionism, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning*

INTRODUCTION

Abstract expressionism is a post-World War II art movement in American painting, developed in New York in the 1940s. It was the first specifically American movement to achieve international influence and put New York City at the center of the western art world, a role formerly filled by Paris. Although the term *abstract expressionism* was first applied to American art in 1946 by the art critic Robert Coates, it had been first used in Germany in 1919 in the magazine *Der Sturm*, regarding German Expressionism. In the United States, Alfred Barr was the first to use this term in 1929 in relation to works by Wassily Kandinsky.

Abstract Expressionism grew out of Surrealism. Gottlieb's *Eyes of Oedipus* and Pollock's *Eyes in the Heat* retain the non-geometric biomorphic imagery favoured by the Surrealists. David Smith's sculpture, created from agricultural implements, suggests action suspended. By the mid-1950s Rothko had established his colour Field style and Borduas was pursuing his "all-over" painting. De Kooning carried Abstract Expressionism into the 1960s. Abstract Expressionists can broadly be divided into two groups. The Action painters, a term coined by the critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952, included Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. Their paintings are full of drama, with the paint applied urgently and passionately. The colour Field painters, championed by critic Clement Greenberg, include Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still. Their paintings are quieter and emphasize the emotional force of colour.

Political instability in Europe in the 1930s brought several leading Surrealists to New York, and many of the Abstract Expressionists were profoundly influenced by Surrealism's focus on mining the unconscious. It encouraged their interest in myth and archetypal symbols and it shaped their understanding of painting itself as a struggle between self-expression and the chaos of the subconscious. Most of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism matured in the 1930s. They were influenced by the era's leftist politics, and came to value an art grounded in personal experience. Few would maintain their earlier radical political views, but many continued to adopt the posture of outspoken *avant-gardists*. Having matured as artists at a time when America suffered economically and felt culturally isolated and provincial, the Abstract Expressionists were later welcomed as the first authentically American *avant-garde*. Their art was championed for being emphatically American in spirit - monumental in scale, romantic in mood, and expressive of a rugged individual freedom.

Although the movement has been largely depicted throughout historical documentation as one belonging to the paint-splattered, heroic male artist, there were several important female Abstract Expressionists that arose out of New York and San Francisco during the 1940s and '50s who now receive credit as elemental members of the canon.

CONCEPTS AND STYLES

Surrealism

Surrealism was an original influence on the themes and concepts of the Abstract Expressionists. Although the American painters were uneasy with the overt Freudian symbolism of the European movement, they were still inspired by its interests in the unconscious, as well as its strain of primitivism and preoccupation with mythology. Many were particularly interested in the ideas of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, who believed that elements of a collective unconscious had been handed down through the ages by means of archetypal symbols, or primordial images, which had become recurrent motifs.

Before he was making his drip paintings, Pollock's interest in primeval themes appeared often. In his *She-Wolf* piece, which he described "came into existence because I had to paint it," a somber wolf is overlaid with lines and swirls. Although the artist refused to discuss its content, it was made as the world struggled with global crisis and has been compared to the myth of the city of Rome's birth in which the wolf suckled the twin founders Romulus and Remus. Another artist, Adolph Gottlieb, frequently included archetypal symbolism in his paintings. A cross, an egg, or an arrow might appear to express basic psychological ideas that were universally familiar.

Action Painting

In Action painting, the "act" of painting becomes the content of the work – so the image reflects the raw emotions held by the artist while creating it. Action painters poured, dripped, and splattered paint on to the canvas. Hans Hoffman was among the first to do this, but Pollock took the technique to its logical conclusion – he abandoned the restrictions of brushes and upright easels to create images that he described as "energy and motion made visible". These pictures, full of restlessness and flux, with no one part of the picture more important than another,

were said to be "all – over" in style. Rosenberg summed up Action Painting "What was to go on canvas was not a picture but an event". Pollock's work, in particular, looked forward to the performance art and happenings of the 1960s.

Greenberg also championed Pollock's "drip" paintings in a formalist regard (as an exciting and vast new way to look at color splotches and spontaneous paint forms) although the work was most known for catapulting Abstract Expressionism's other main style - that of action painting. Harold Rosenberg, another important critic of the time, explained in a 1952 article for ART News entitled "The American Action Painters": "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act - rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

Rosenberg presented an insightful realization of what painters like Pollock, Kline and de Kooning all had in common. For them, the painting was seen only as a physical manifestation of the actual work of art, which was the process of making the painting. The spontaneous actions of the painter, the random drips and brush strokes, all represented a struggle or dance with the subconscious to unloose its contents through pure expression.

But this creative process was not without considerations toward control either. Pollock considered his drip technique to be, at least in part, a means of harnessing his unconscious; the effects thus laid bare for all to see on the surface of the canvas. But like many others, Pollock also insisted on an element of control in his method - as he once said, "No chaos, damn it!" - and he believed that the "drips" were powerfully expressive, rather than being merely random accumulations of paint. Indeed, they were self-expressive. Many Abstract Expressionists whose embrace of chaos was balanced by an impulse toward control shared the ambivalence in Pollock's attitude. This paradox explains much of the energetic tumult one finds in the work of many so-called "action painters" including de Kooning, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell. In part it led to the "all-over" effect, which one sees in Pollock's mature work, and in de Kooning's abstract paintings of the late 1940s, in which forms seem to be dispersed evenly across the canvas - composure in the midst of chaos.

Many Abstract Expressionists of the time straddled both Color Field and Action Painting with their work. In Helen Frankenthaler's early career, her canvases were a mix of pleasant blotches of color interspersed with loosely strategic forms. But she would go on to become one of the most famous Color Field painters of our time with her signature giant canvases stained with large washes of color, laid down in very physical fashion by large mops and squeegees.

Colour Field

Where Action painting was bold and assertive, Colour Field painting was contemplative and carefully constructed. The works consist of large expanses of colour, often without strong contrasts of tone or obvious focal points. Many Colour Field paintings were intended to create transcendental feelings of awe and wonder. Newman said his art was "religious" and concerned with the "sublime". Rothko said his work was about "the basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom". The huge size of many of these paintings does seem to overwhelm the viewer, inducing a feeling of isolation in a limitless world. If Action painting was the result of a heightened state of consciousness on the part of the painter, Colour Field painting was intended to create a heightened state of consciousness on the part of the viewer.

The emerging Abstract Expressionist artists had an impetus to move away from the biomorphic Surrealism of Miró and Picasso, and toward an increasingly reductive style that emphasized a more personal expression. Still, Rothko, and Newman are typical of this progression as they ventured into the world of color as expressive, emotional object in its own right. Still created canvases marked by bold colors that were torn up and ruptured by other juxtaposing textures and forms, angular, uneven and vivid. Rothko experimented with abstract symbols in the early 1940s before moving towards entirely abstract fields of color. Newman similarly sought an approach that might strip away all extraneous motifs and communicate everything through one powerfully resonant symbol. Newman's 'zip' paintings presented vertical bands of color painted down the center of a canvas, which served to unify rather than divide the piece.

Although some would later argue that Color Field Painting represented a new manifestation of a long tradition of sublime landscape, noted theorist of the time Clement Greenberg viewed the work of Still, Rothko, and Newman as an evolution of formalism thus defining a fresh stream within Abstract Expressionism. Formalism was not interested in the contents of the work as much as analyzing the lines, color, and forms presented - a dissection of the way paintings were made and their purely visual aspects.

IMPORTANT PAINTERS OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

JACKSON POLLOCK

Jackson Pollock (January 28, 1912 – August 11, 1956) was an American painter and a leading exponent of Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism. Fellow Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning said, "He broke the ice for the rest of us." He was well known for his unique style of drip painting. Drip painting is a form of abstract art in which paint is dripped or poured on to the canvas. He began making his drip paintings in 1947. They established his reputation and completely revolutionized the way a painting was supposed to be made. Instead of using an easel, Pollock laid the canvas on the floor. Instead of using brushes, he poured the paint from a can and dripped it from sticks. He also revolutionized the idea of composition. Pollock moved over and sometimes through the canvas with free, dance – like gestures. This created an "all – over" style, where no part of a picture was more significant than any other. The composition had no focal points, and often the centre was no more important than the edges. They were pictures, Pollock said, with "no beginning or end". The drip paintings earned Pollock notoriety as well as acclaim. Dubbed "Jack the Dripper" by Time magazine, he was the first American painter to become a star, and he lived up to the reputation, drinking hard and living recklessly. His well-known famous paintings are Man with Hand Plow, Moon Women, Eyes in the Heat, etc.

MARK ROTHKO

"If you are only moved by colour relationships, you are missing the point. I am interested in expressing the big emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom."-Mark Rothko

A prominent figure among the New York School painters, Mark Rothko moved through many artistic styles until reaching his signature 1950s motif of soft, rectangular forms floating on a stained field of color. Heavily influenced by mythology and philosophy, he was insistent that his art was filled with content, and brimming with ideas. A fierce champion of social revolutionary thought, and the right to self-expression, Rothko also expounded his views in numerous essays and critical reviews.

He was highly informed by Nietzsche, Greek mythology, and his Russian-Jewish heritage, Rothko's art was profoundly imbued with emotional content that he articulated through a range of styles that evolved from figurative to abstract. Rothko's early figurative work - including landscapes, still lifes, figure studies, and portraits - demonstrated an ability to blend Expressionism and Surrealism. His search for new forms of expression led to his Color Field paintings, which employed shimmering color to convey a sense of spirituality. Rothko maintained the social revolutionary ideas of his youth throughout his life. In particular he supported artists' total freedom of expression, which he felt was compromised by the market. This belief often put him at odds with the art world establishment, leading him to publicly respond to critics, and occasionally refuse commissions, sales and exhibitions. His important work arts are Crucifixion (1935), Entrance to Subway (1938), Oedipus (1944), etc.

WILLEM DE KOONING

Willem de Kooning (April 24, 1904 – March 19, 1997) was a Dutch abstract expressionist artist. Along with Pollock and Rothko, de Kooning is the most celebrated Abstract Expressionist. His brushwork was bold and spontaneous and, by painting without using preliminary studies, he gave his pictures a thrilling physical immediacy. Throughout his career, de Kooning was happy making abstract and figurative work. He is best known for a series of provocative paintings of women (Women nos I-VI) he made in the early 1950s. With their toothy snarls, pendulous breasts, and vacuous eyes – all rendered with slashing, impassioned brushstrokes and dripping paint – these women were crude, ferocious, and comical. This non – traditional way of depicting women shocked the public and some critics, while fellow Abstract Expressionists considered de Kooning's use of figurative representation to be regressive. In the late 1950s, de Kooning painted a series of landscapes. These evolved from complex exercises in composition and colour to images of broadly painted simplicity. By the 1960s, de Kooning painted a series of landscapes. These evolved from complex exercises in composition and colour to images of broadly painted simplicity. By the 1960s, he was showing women in the landscape with flamboyant, liquid brushstrokes, revealing a painter at peace in his new Island home; His paintings are Painting, Woman I, etc.

CONCLUSION

"Abstract Expressionism" was never an ideal label for the movement, which developed in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. It was somehow meant to encompass not only the work of painters who filled their canvases with fields of color and abstract forms, but also those who attacked their canvases with a vigorous gestural expressionism. Still Abstract Expressionism has become the most accepted term for a group of artists who held much in common. All were committed to art as expressions of the self, born out of profound emotion and universal themes, and most were shaped by the legacy of Surrealism, a movement that they translated into a new style fitted to the post-war mood of anxiety and trauma. In their success, these New York painters robbed Paris of its mantle as leader of modern art, and set the stage for America's dominance of the international art world.

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