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RA

Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus

Abstract Expressionism

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Ben Street

For the Learning Department
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Abstract Expressionism

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FRONT COVER Cat. 72, Clyfford Still, **PH-4**, 1952 (detail)

FRONT COVER Cat. 65, Jackson Pollock, **Blue poles**, 1952 (detail)

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'Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or "life", we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.'

Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', 1948

Introduction: What is Abstract Expressionism?

The term 'Abstract Expressionism' presents us with difficulties from the beginning. It is generally used to describe a group of artists who lived and worked in the United States during the years following the Second World War (1939–1945). They were mostly painters and sculptors, mostly male and mostly based in New York City. The writer Robert Coates coined the term in 1946 in an article for the *New Yorker* magazine to identify a new American art that placed equal emphasis on abstract forms and expressive mark-making. But Abstract Expressionism is not a style. Far from it. The artists associated with the term, including Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Clyfford Still (1904–1980), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970), were fiercely independent, and their works were so specific and personal to each of them that it is almost impossible to confuse the work of one artist with that of another. And yet, despite the fact that many of the artists disliked the term, no other name has managed to stick. Finding common ground between the disparate works associated with Abstract Expressionism then, is challenging, and yet there are certain common ideas, approaches and influences that can help to draw connections between them. One notable characteristic of the paintings from this period is their scale: works by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock tend to dwarf the viewer, creating an experience that is overwhelming and absorbing, not just visually but physically. Another specific feature of paintings by these artists is a certain kind of highly-expressive painted mark. Though not always entirely abstract, the paintings and sculptures of Abstract Expressionism place a special emphasis on the gesture made by the artist's hand, which for these artists gave their work authenticity and individuality.

Despite the discontent surrounding its definition, Abstract Expressionism has been seen as the triumphal entry of the United States into the international modern art scene. In the years before these artists emerged, many American artists compared their own work unfavourably with that of artists working in Europe, such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and the Surrealist Joan Miró (1893–1983). Works by these artists and others like them could be seen at New York museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 1929, and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which opened in 1939 and later became the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Smaller galleries such as 291, which opened in 1905 and showed works by European and American modernists until 1917, and Art of This Century, which opened in 1942 and showcased Peggy Guggenheim's collection of mostly Surrealist and Abstract art, provided further opportunities for young artists to see work by an earlier generation of modern artists.

The United States certainly had no lack of great modern artists in the early twentieth century, but their work was rarely seen outside the museums and galleries

Designed by Isambard Thomas, London. Printed by Geoff Neal Group

of America. Abstract Expressionism was the first uniquely North American art phenomenon that decisively affected the course of international modern art. In time, its impact was felt across the Americas, Europe and as far afield as Japan.

To achieve this breakthrough, young artists drew influence from a variety of sources, from experimental European models, such as Cubism and Surrealism, to Mexican mural painters, known for working at a vast scale. Just as crucial was the Federal Art Project. Launched in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression (1929–1943), as part of the New Deal, the FAP granted artists employment at a time of economic downturn. Artists who would later go on to achieve great success as abstract painters in the 1940s and '50s were commissioned to paint public works of art, mostly realistic large-scale murals for buildings such as schools, train stations and libraries. The FAP employed many of the artists involved in Abstract Expressionism, including Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Many of the Abstract Expressionists met as part of such projects. It was their first experience of painting on a very large scale.

Abstract Expressionists were inspired by the epic natural landscapes of the western U.S., and were buoyed by the surge in economic and cultural self-confidence after the Second World War. The war had also brought tragedy and barbarism on an unprecedented scale, and several artists sought to evoke this tragedy through sombre, memorial-like paintings. Though many were immigrants to the Americas from Western Europe and other countries, Abstract Expressionist artists created a new artistic language which reflected its place in history and was uniquely American. The legacy of Abstract Expressionism is wide-ranging and profound and its influence continues, as seen in this exhibition at the Royal Academy, the first of its kind in the United Kingdom since 1959.

Paint, Canvas, Action: Jackson Pollock

When Jackson Pollock was asked what his favourite contemporary painting was in the U.S., his answer was *Prometheus*, a huge mural painted in the dining hall of Pomona College, California, in 1930 by the Mexican painter José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949). Pollock's choice sheds interesting light on his own work. Although representational rather than abstract, Orozco's mural is a dynamic, energetic and emotionally intense work, in which figures and flames completely fill the arched space. Pollock's later abstract paintings, such as *Blue poles*, 1952, have some of the qualities of mural paintings. In fact, his first major large-scale work is entitled *Mural*, 1943. Another important precedent was Picasso's painting *Guernica*, 1937, then on public display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Its dynamic energy, maintained across the vast surface of the canvas, and restricted palette, would prove influential to Pollock, although his paintings were made in a radically different way.

Cat. 65 Pollock made *Blue poles* at the peak of his success and notoriety. His development as an artist involved a series of experiments with artistic style. Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), under whom Pollock studied at the Art Students League in New York in the early 1930s, taught Pollock the art of mural painting, making large, enveloping works on a grand scale. Benton was a Regionalist painter, one of several artists who focused on scenes of small-town America, and Pollock's earliest paintings show the strong influence of his teacher's subject matter. Paintings such as *Untitled (Self-portrait)*, c. 1930–33 show both the small scale of Pollock's early work and its reliance on Benton's somewhat distorted realism. A little later, Pollock worked through the influence of the European artists he admired, including Picasso, Joan Miró and Max Ernst (1891–1976), whose works he saw at the Art of This Century gallery owned by Peggy Guggenheim.

In the late 1940s, Pollock had his breakthrough and began using a technique that overturned all conventional expectations of how a painting should be made. When he created *Blue poles*, he started by unfurling a large roll of canvas onto the floor of his studio, a barn-like building near East Hampton, New York. He then applied a layer of black emulsion straight from the can, dripping it carefully from a height onto the canvas, using a stick or dried paintbrush. At the edges of the work, one can discern footprints in this first layer of paint: there is even a barefoot print in the top-right corner. Pollock embraced the act of creating a painting as a kind of performance, as though the canvas were a stage. After completing the first layer of paint, Pollock tacked the canvas onto the wall of his studio, as is evidenced by the downward flow of white paint drips.

For the subsequent layers of paint, Pollock laid the canvas back down on the floor and applied veils of strong colour by dripping, pouring and spattering paint from as high as 70 cm (2 ft) above the canvas. Look closely at a single colour layer in *Blue poles* and it is evident that Pollock did indeed 'draw' in the air with paint and allow it to fall directly onto the painting. Some of the paint was applied using glass basting tubes, which afforded a more controlled, pen-like line. Fragments of glass left in the surface of *Blue poles* are the broken remains of these tubes. Having completed the layers of strong colour, Pollock left the canvas to dry.

A close look at the painting reveals that the 'poles' which give the work its title were laid on when the previous layers were fully dry: there's no blurring or mixing of the earlier paint. Using a piece of wood that he had covered in dark blue paint, Pollock then printed the rhythmic pattern onto the canvas. Finally, he created the impression that the poles were interwoven with the surface by adding some final, delicate skeins of paint.

The same year Pollock made this painting, the critic Harold Rosenberg used the term 'action painting' to describe the work of Pollock and other painters of the time, saying, 'At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act [...]. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.' While this description does not apply to



the work of all artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, it is an appropriate description of Pollock's paintings. The subject of the painting is nothing other than the act of painting itself.

Why do you think Pollock chose to make the work *Blue poles* on such a large scale?

When Pollock made this work, why do you think he chose to break the traditional rules of painting?

When asked if he painted scenes from nature, Pollock replied, 'I am Nature.' What relationship do you see between this painting and the natural world?

Cat. 65

Jackson Pollock
Blue poles, 1952

Enamel and aluminium paint
with glass on canvas,
212.1 × 488.9 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
© The Pollock-Krasner Foundation ARS, NY and
DACS, London 2016

A Bridge Between Worlds: Arshile Gorky

As radical as Pollock was, there were artists working earlier in the U.S. who could be said to have paved the way for the Abstract Expressionists. Most important of all, perhaps, was Arshile Gorky, who arrived in the United States in 1920, having fled persecution in Armenia. Gorky settled in New York and while there made a concentrated study of the work of European modernists such as Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Despite having some art training, Gorky was for the most part self-taught. When Surrealist artists fled war-torn Europe for the United States in the early 1940s, Gorky became a point of contact, and their innovations moved his art in new directions. The Surrealist notion of automatism – making a painting or drawing without intervention from the conscious mind, and thereby creating an authentic expression of the subconscious – was of huge importance to Gorky.

Cat. 17 When comparing Gorky's *Water of the Flowery Mill*, 1944, with Joan Miró's *The Birth of the World*, 1925, (Fig. 1) with its background layer composed of diluted oil paint dripped down the canvas, the Surrealist influence on Gorky's work is evident. Gorky's *Water of the Flowery Mill* is, in fact, an important link between the traditions of Surrealism and the burgeoning techniques of Abstract

'Abstraction allows man to see with his mind what he cannot see physically with his eyes [...]. Abstract art enables the artist to perceive beyond the tangible, to extract the infinite out of the finite.'

Arshile Gorky, quoted by Debora Stewart in *Abstract Art Painting: Expressions in Mixed Media*, 2015

Cat. 17
Arshile Gorky
***Water of the Flowery Mill*, 1944**
Oil on canvas,
107.3 × 123.8 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016
Photo © 2016, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
/ Art Resource / Scala, Florence



Fig. 1
Joan Miró
***Birth of the World*, 1925.**
Oil on canvas,
250.8 × 200 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Scala,
Florence

Expressionist painting. The forms in Gorky's work teeter on the brink of being recognisably organic. Fascinated by biomorphism, Gorky depicted shapes that resemble limbs, orifices, leaves and feathers, which rustle on the canvas. Much of Gorky's mature painting, before his death in 1948, is an abstracted reflection on landscape, often that of his Armenian homeland.

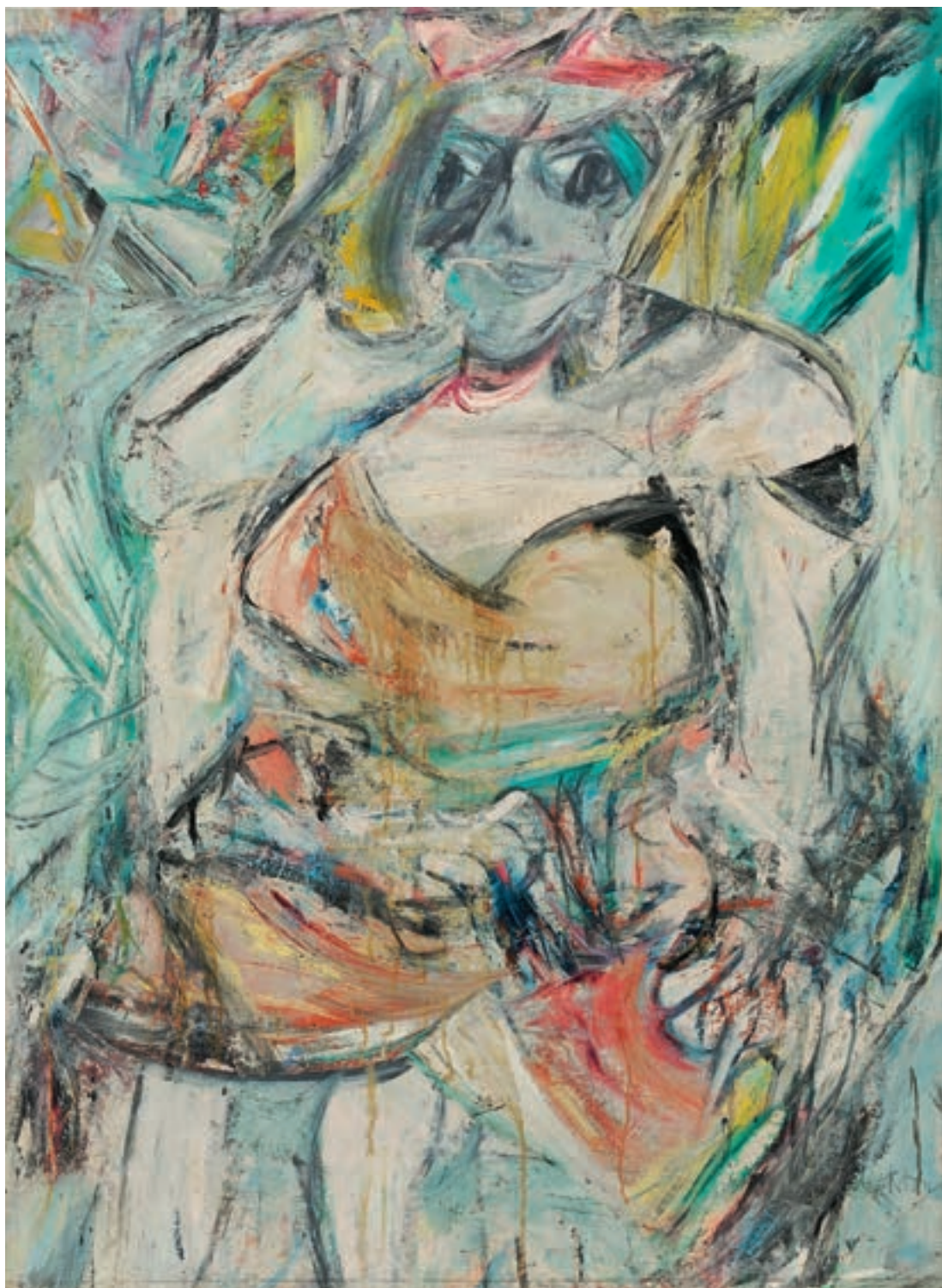
In *Water of the Flowery Mill*, Gorky used new approaches to painting. He thinned his oil paint with turpentine to such an extent that it behaved like watercolour, fading and dribbling away off the bottom edge of the canvas. The overall composition does not have a single, clear focal point and the paint extends to the very edges of the canvas. These effects became characteristic of the work of the younger American artists who saw Gorky as an inspiration, and there are similar qualities in Pollock's classic drip paintings, in stained canvases by Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) and even in Mark Rothko's, pulsing, throbbing colours.

How has Gorky attempted to evoke natural forms in the painting *Water of the Flowery Mill*?

How would you describe the various ways Gorky uses paint in this work?

Back to the Figure: Willem de Kooning

Cat. 69 In *Woman II*, 1952, a female figure sits in the centre of the composition, her hands in her lap. Willem de Kooning placed particular emphasis on her eyes, which is perhaps a reference to Picasso, in whose 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* the women have similar piercingly dark gazes. The form of the female figure appears and disappears before the viewer's eyes: the line of a shoulder curves and vanishes into thin air; the outline of her bust and arms is repeated several times and remains unresolved. In some areas, the space around the figure has as much focus and density of paint as the figure itself. Around her head, streaks of yellow that suggest blonde hair escape into a jagged, aggressive abstract pattern that is no longer recognisable as anything. The layers of mark-making remain visible across the surface of the canvas, suggesting a sustained struggle with representation. On the left side of the painting, fragments of charcoal are visible, embedded in the surface where de Kooning drew directly into the wet paint. Brown paint, thinned with turpentine, drips down the figure's chest and blurs the form of



Cat. 69

Willem de Kooning *Woman II*, 1952

Oil, enamel and charcoal on
canvas, 149.9 × 109.3 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of
Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, 1955
© 2016 The Willem de Kooning Foundation /
ARS, NY and DACS, London
Photo © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New
York / Scala, Florence

the arms. The painting is a medley of experimental painting techniques, held together by de Kooning's confident and distinctive line.

Willem de Kooning is in some ways an unusual figure in Abstract Expressionism, even though he was absolutely central to its development. Like some of the other key figures of the movement, he was an immigrant to the United States, from the Netherlands. Unlike some of his contemporaries, though, de Kooning benefited from a traditional art training in his hometown of Rotterdam and had worked as a commercial artist, a trade he continued to pursue after he arrived in New York in 1926, as a stowaway on a steamship at the age of 22. His abstract paintings of the 1940s made him one of the most revered painters in the New York City art scene at the time. And yet, perhaps because of his academic training, de Kooning repeatedly returned to images of the human body, as seen in *Woman II*. This painting is part of a series of depictions of female figures that the artist began in the late 1940s. These women, sometimes voluptuous and sensual, sometimes aggressive and monstrous, were inspired in part by the work of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), one of de Kooning's favourite painters, Cubist portraits by Picasso, ancient Mesopotamian sculptures, and by images of pin-up girls from magazines. One of Abstract Expressionism's most famous critical champions, the writer Clement Greenberg, strongly discouraged de Kooning's return to figurative art at this time, as did other painters. Later, de Kooning acknowledged the strangeness of his decision, saying, 'It's really absurd to make an image, like a human image, with paint today, when you think about it [...]. But then all of a sudden it was even more absurd not to do it.'

Discuss de Kooning's treatment of background and foreground in this painting. How are they similar, and how are they different?

Do you think *Woman II* by de Kooning is abstract? Why, or why not?

A New Generation: Helen Frankenthaler

Part of a second wave of Abstract Expressionist painters, Helen Frankenthaler's principal development of the language of abstract painting began in 1952, with her celebrated painting *Mountains and Sea*. Laying the canvas flat on the floor, Frankenthaler poured paint thinned with turpentine over areas of the unprimed surface, so that the translucent colour stained deep into the weave of the canvas. The effect, inspired in part by Gorky's handling of paint, as well as Pollock's method of working, is lyrical, ethereal and evocative of landscape, whilst remaining abstract in form. A similar quality can be seen in Frankenthaler's *Europa* from 1957. The differing intensities of colour show how the artist varied the dilution of the paint, which gives an unusual sense of depth to the painting: looking closely, certain marks appear further forward than others. Unlike Pollock, who allowed the paint to drip and mingle on the surface, Frankenthaler exerts more control by applying the

paint in expressive brushmarks – loops, curves and arabesques – that sink or sit on the surface, depending on their consistency.

Cat. 89 Frankenthaler's *Europa* is a loose variation on an Italian Renaissance painting that belongs to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston: Titian's *Rape of Europa*, c.1560–62, (Fig. 2) in which the god Jupiter, disguised as a bull, abducts the princess Europa, who is shown flailing, panicked, on the bull's back. In Frankenthaler's painting, the pink figure that runs diagonally across the canvas represents the princess, transformed into a wobbly, fluid form with outstretched limbs. Beneath the pink figure, and to the right, is the rounded and muscular form of the bull. Frankenthaler has excised the remaining details of the Titian – including landscape details and attendant *putti* (little cupids) – to focus instead on reimagining the painting's atmosphere of chaos and transformation. The watery effect of the stained colours suggests instability and disorder, while the repeated curved marks underscore the sense of movement. Frankenthaler's painting hovers between the figurative and the abstract: recognisable, though abstracted, forms compete for space with abstract blotches and sprays.

Frankenthaler's work of the 1950s formed a bridge from Abstract Expressionism into a style of painting that would later be known as Colour Field Painting. Colour Field painters such as Kenneth Noland (1924–2010) and Morris Louis (1912–1962) would focus principally on applying washes of paint onto the canvas, creating stains of deep colour that avoided the gestural focus and mystical content of Abstract Expressionism. Frankenthaler's work is somewhere between the two: staining the canvas to create coloured areas, but retaining the archetypal Abstract Expressionist mark to evoke the artist's own physical presence in the work.

Compare Titian's *Rape of Europa* with Frankenthaler's *Europa* painting. Can you describe Frankenthaler's interpretation of the Titian painting? How are they similar? And how are they different?



Cat. 89
Helen Frankenthaler
***Europa*, 1957**
Oil on canvas,
177.8 × 138.4 cm

Courtesy Gagosian Gallery
© 2015 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. /
ARS, NY and DACS, London
Photo © Robert McKeever

Fig.2
Titian
***Rape of Europa*,**
1559–62
Oil on canvas, 178 × 205cm

© Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston
Bridgeman Images





'The material called iron or steel I hold in high respect. What it can do in arriving at a form economically, no other material can do [...]. What associations it possesses are those of this century: power, structure, movement, progress, suspensions, destruction, brutality.'
David Smith, 'The New Sculpture', 1952

Cat. 115
David Smith
Volton XVIII, 1963
Steel, 278.1 × 170.2 × 38.1 cm

The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection.
© Estate of David Smith/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2016

New Dimensions: David Smith

Cat. 115 Although Abstract Expressionism is often thought of as a movement centred on painting, many of its major figures at some point experimented with creating art in three dimensions. David Smith (1906–1965) is generally considered the principal Abstract Expressionist sculptor. Many of his works began as drawn ideas, and his sculptures often resemble what he referred to as 'drawings in space'.

Born in Decatur, Indiana, Smith at the age of 19 worked as a welder and riveter in a car factory, where he learned about steel and the processes required to work it. Artistically, he started his career as a Cubist-inspired painter but soon moved into welded sculpture, making use of industrial materials such as steel and aluminium as well as found objects. The influence of Cubism's fragmented forms and use of ordinary objects is evident in his sculpture *Volton XVIII*, 1963.

In 1963, the Italian government commissioned Smith to make two sculptures for a festival in the town of Spoleto, and gave him a former steel factory in Voltri, near Genoa, to use as a studio. In a burst of creative energy, Smith made 27 pieces over a 30-day period, constructing sculptural forms, including *Volton XVIII*, out of discarded tools, machine parts and scraps that he found in the factory. A spanner gives the sculpture its legs, pliers bridge the gap between the open, curved element and a cluster of smaller pieces, while washers create a pattern of open circles.

By refusing to transform the found elements of his piece, Smith reminds the viewer that these elements were sourced from a factory, so that the action of the artist's manufacture, similar to Pollock's 'action painting', is evident. Rather than carve or cast his sculpture, as was the convention in three-dimensional art at the time, he welded the pieces together, a process associated with industrial manufacturing. Far more immediate than the traditional sculptural process of casting bronze, welding allowed Smith to work spontaneously, much as a painter does. The restless, tumbling flow of energy in *Volton XVIII* and the apparent suspension of elements in space recall the dynamic compositions of painters such as de Kooning. The sculpture seems caught between careful design and the spontaneous accumulation of elements, in a way comparable to Pollock's use of dripped emulsion.

After the exhibition in Italy, Smith had all the sculptures he made shipped back to his studio in upstate New York, where he displayed them in a huge field, making the connection between the flow and unity of the work with the rhythms of the natural world.

Do you see any similarities or differences between Smith's sculpture and some of the paintings in the exhibition?

Describe Smith's approach to creating sculpture in comparison to traditional approaches to the medium.

Nothing but Painting: Ad Reinhardt

Cat. 117 At first glance, *Abstract Painting, No. 23* appears to be a completely black square. But, as we look at the actual painting our eyes gradually adjust to its darkness and a symmetrical cross shape is revealed, filling the canvas, painted in extremely dark shades of blue and red. There is, in fact, no pure black in this painting. Instead, Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967) has carefully layered very dark shades of colour in matte oil paint. He mixed black and a little red (or blue) oil paint in a small jar, which he then filled with turpentine. After leaving the mixture to settle for at least a week, the artist drained off the turpentine along with the lighter part of the oil paint, leaving a very thick, very dark residue, like silt. The resulting mixture, applied in several layers, was very dense and dry and had lost all of its sheen, thereby preventing the gallery lights from bouncing off the surface. As a result, the brushstrokes are almost invisible, allowing for what Reinhardt considered a more

**'The less an artist
obtrudes himself in his
painting, the purer and
clearer his aims.'**
Ad Reinhardt, 'Twelve Rules
for a New Academy', 1953

Cat. 117
Ad Reinhardt
Abstract Painting,
No. 23, 1963
Oil on canvas,
152.4 × 152.4 cm

© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016;
courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London



direct relationship with colour in its purest form.

The effect of the artist's deeply considered approach reflects his interest in Eastern philosophy. Reinhardt was inspired by Zen Buddhism, with its focus on ascetic detachment from the material world and emphasis on quiet meditation. This work seems to reflect some of these qualities and the artist's interest in slowing down the experience of looking. By reducing all visual stimuli, including colour, shape and texture, to an absolute minimum, he sought to give his viewers a pure and unmediated experience of art.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Reinhardt did not start his career as a figurative painter. His early work, much inspired by the Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), focused on geometric grids covering the surface of his paintings. In his later work, there is a gradual simplification of form – the grids become blockier and more austere – and Reinhardt's approach to colour becomes increasingly dense and complex. After a period of painting monochrome canvases all red, blue or white, in 1955 Reinhardt decided to devote himself entirely to painting square canvases in shades so dark they initially read as black, but have other colours which reveal themselves only after careful and sustained looking. He continued to work in this way until his death in 1967.

For Reinhardt, the tradition of painting was in a sort of crisis, and he believed that it would only survive by following a set of fixed conventions or rules. To that end, he devised a standard square format for his paintings, inspired, he claimed, by the human body because the canvas was 'as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms'. And he wrote 'Twelve Rules for a New Academy' that include 'no texture', 'no brushwork', 'no forms' and 'no design'. Placing these strict limitations on the act of painting was a means to celebrate the richness of art itself.

This painting is distinctively different to the works of other painters of the time. Some viewed Reinhardt as a sometimes antagonistic figure who disliked the grand pretensions and dramatic expressiveness of some of the Abstract Expressionists, upholding that 'Art is art. Everything else is everything else'.

Discuss the role of restrictions and rules in making art. Can they ever be of advantage to an artist?

Total Immersion: Mark Rothko

Cat. 91 *No. 15* from 1957 is characteristic of Mark Rothko's mature painting. Two rectangular bands in a greenish hue float against a blue background. A closer look reveals more complex colour relationships than are initially apparent: each band is fringed with a range of different tones painted in dry, loose brushstrokes. Like Gorky, Frankenthaler, Reinhardt and other artists, Rothko used turpentine to create very thin layers of paint which he applied in washes of pale colour, gradually building up his forms. He allowed some of the earlier layers to show through, creating a sense of deep space and encouraging his viewers to feel absorbed by

the painting. The fringes of turquoise around the darker green forms are glimpses of these previous layers. To complete the work, Rothko then used expressive brushstrokes with a thicker mixture of paint, which gave the work a range of colour, tone and density of paint.

The size of *No. 15* and its lack of any representational content means the viewer is unable to establish a sense of relative size. Is what we are seeing galactic in scale, or simply that of a large landscape? Key to Rothko's approach is the notion of the sublime: an experience so overwhelming as to inspire dumbstruck awe, much explored by J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), from whom Rothko drew a lot of inspiration. By layering veils of colour, Rothko delays our experience of the work, slowing down the resolution of the composition. In the artist's words, 'a painting is not about experience, it is an experience.'

To place works such as *No. 15* in the same art historical category as the dynamic, almost violent, mark-making of Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock seems contradictory. The difference between Rothko's work and that of the likes of de Kooning and Pollock is a useful reminder of the awkwardness of the use of such categories in visual art. How can all of these artworks be classified as Abstract Expressionism? Certainly, Rothko's abstractions eschewed Pollock's interest in

Cat. 91
Mark Rothko
No. 15, 1957
Oil on canvas, 261.6 × 295.9 cm

Private collection
© 1998 Kate Rothko Pritzell & Christopher Rothko ARS, NY and DACS, London



'I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on – and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that they communicate those basic human emotions [...]. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.'

Mark Rothko, quoted by Selden Rodman in *Conversations with Artists*, 1957

recording the physical movements of the painter's body; instead, he carefully set layered areas of paint with vague, almost fuzzy edges in vertical arrangements against a field of muted colour. In front of Rothko's paintings, the viewer feels immersed in colour as though submerged in water. The effect is meditative, calm, and occasionally melancholy. For Rothko, abstraction was a more articulate method of expression than written or spoken language to address the kind of philosophical and emotional territory he sought to explore in his work.

What were Rothko's methods for generating such emotional responses in the viewer? In earlier centuries, representational art would address tragic themes from mythology or history; for Rothko, only pure abstraction was appropriate for a modern expression of such ideas. Like many of his contemporaries, Rothko refused to have his works framed, considering such an approach distracting. By making paintings on a vast scale and preferring them to be hung comparatively low, he encouraged viewers to immerse themselves in their mysterious depths, to feel both swallowed up by them and to experience them intimately, without the distancing effect of gold frames or high placement upon the wall. Eschewing descriptive titles, Rothko simply numbered his canvases, encouraging viewers to engage directly with his work.

Rothko was born in the Russian Empire (present-day Latvia) and emigrated with his family to Portland, Oregon, at the age of 10. Like many other painters of his time, Rothko was largely self-taught. Having studied liberal arts at Yale University, he moved to New York in 1925 and took informal classes in painting. Initially inspired by the Surrealists, he moved into pure abstraction in the late 1940s. For him, abstract painting was the most successful and powerful means of articulating ideas that started in his studies of classical philosophy and literature. To that end, he became increasingly interested in the art of the past – especially the frescoes in Pompeii and the architecture of Michelangelo, both of which he saw on a visit to Italy in 1950. He sought to create in his own work the scale, grandeur and emotional resonance that he experienced in front of these Italian examples. Struck by the experience of entering spaces transformed by the presence of painted walls, he increasingly attempted to control the way in which his work was seen, manipulating light and architecture to give his paintings a greater sense of solemnity and power.

Why do you think Rothko turned to abstract painting to express ideas of 'tragedy, ecstasy and doom'? How effectively does Rothko's painting convey those ideas?

What is the effect of Rothko's use of colour and shape in his work?

Painting as Landscape: Clyfford Still

What is characteristically 'American' about Abstract Expressionism? One answer to this complex question might be in its sense of scale. This scale can evoke the enormous vistas of the North American landscape, where many of the

Abstract Expressionists were born and raised, as well as the huge, sublime nineteenth-century American landscapes by artists such as Frederic Church (1826–1900), Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) and Thomas Doughty (1793–1856), as well as the sense of national self-confidence in the U.S. after the Second World War. The sheer size of Abstract Expressionist canvases could emphasise many of the artists' intentions to address grand and timeless themes in their work, as well as to enable a more overwhelming visual and physical experience for its viewers. For Clyfford Still, scale had an important relationship with the natural landscapes of North America, but principally – like Rothko – he intended his work to make a powerful emotional and spiritual address to the viewer. In his words, his paintings are not 'paintings in the usual sense: they are life and death merging in fearful union.'

Cat. 72 As with Rothko, the titles of Still's paintings intentionally give nothing away. *PH-4*, 1952, is titled, as are all of his paintings, with initials and a number. Nevertheless, there is something in the painting's huge expanse that might recall a landscape – or perhaps the experience of facing a majestic vista, such as those of the artist's youth in the grand, sweeping terrain of Washington State and Alberta, Canada. Despite living in New York and exhibiting with his fellow Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s, by the early 1960s Still had turned his back on the art world and moved to a farm in Maryland.

His rejection of what he saw as the excessively commercial art world and his unwillingness to sell much of his work during his lifetime explains why his work has not been widely seen. Approximately 94 per cent of Still's paintings were in his possession when he died in 1980. In 2011, a museum dedicated to the artist's work opened in Denver, Colorado. Thanks to the Clyfford Still Museum, the source of most of the Still paintings on loan to this exhibition, the artist's somewhat overlooked position in art history is gradually changing.

Looking closely at Still's work, one can get a sense of what prompted an awed Jackson Pollock to say, in 1955, 'Clyfford Still makes the rest of us look academic.' The paint that describes Still's monumental forms has been applied with a palette knife in a range of strokes – some dabbed thickly, others dragged, giving the distinctively jagged edges to his ragged shapes. The luminosity and heat of the orange is generated through a careful layering of brushstrokes and colour in intense hues: the density of paint is uneven across the surface, which gives the painting a flame-like flickering effect. Rejecting symmetry and balance, Still creates an off-kilter composition that has a buzzing sense of visual energy. By allowing the forms to run off the edge of the canvas, Still implies an unlimited vista of abstract colour. The effect is at once epic and delicate.

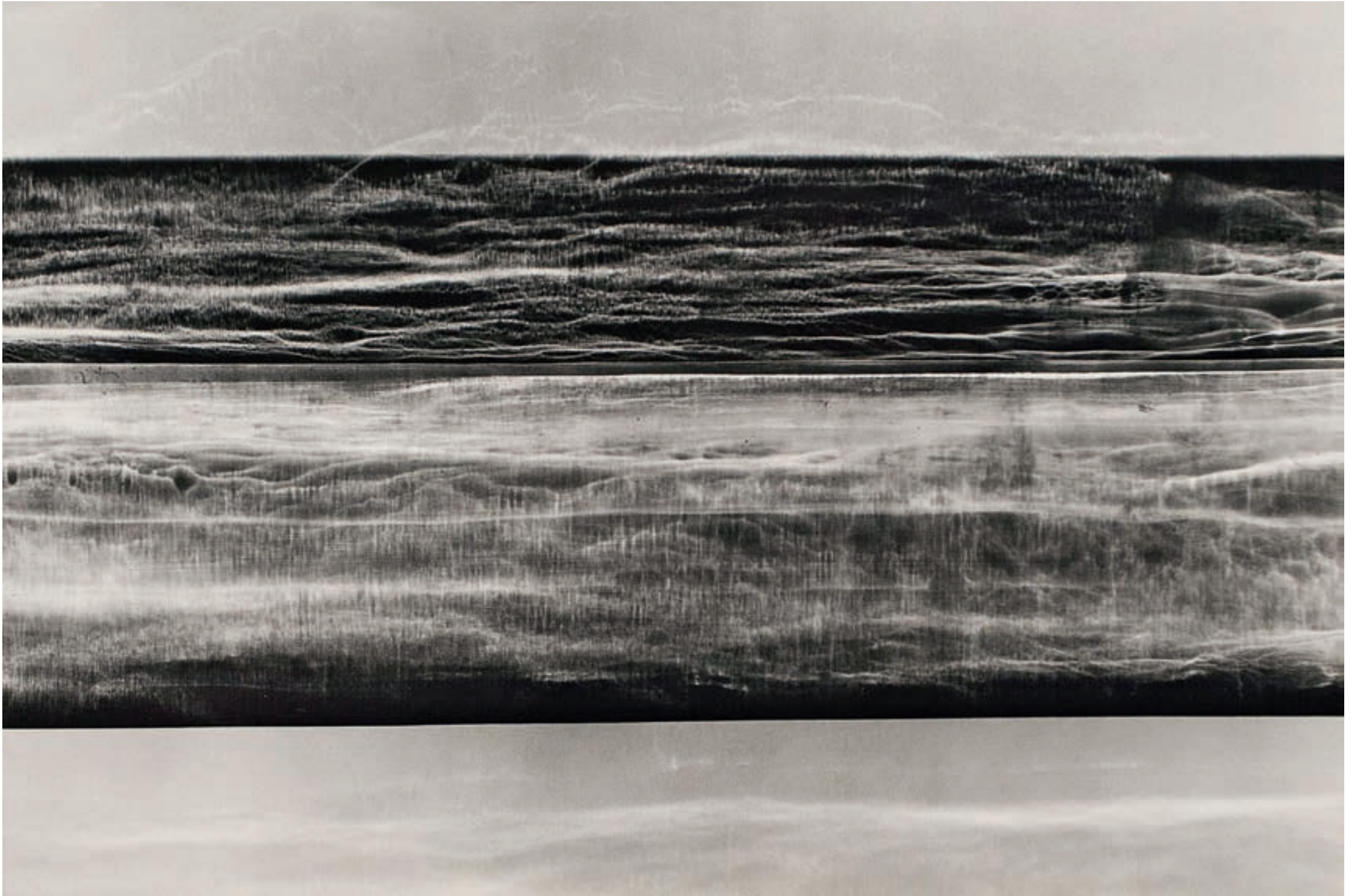
Discuss the relationship between Still's *PH-4* painting and the North American landscape.

Assess Still's technique. What is the effect of the diversity of marks that he used?

Cat. 72
Clyfford Still
***PH-4*, 1952**
Oil on canvas,
299.7 × 232.4 cm

Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
© City and County of Denver / DACS 2016
Photo courtesy the Clyfford Still Museum,
Denver, CO





Camera as Canvas: Barbara Morgan

Cat. 158 Photographers, too, used experimental techniques to capture the effects of dynamic motion and abstract gesture. Barbara Morgan (1902–1992) had a pioneering interest in the abstract mark that predates many of the most celebrated works of mature Abstract Expressionism. Like her contemporaries Herbert Matter (1907–1984), Aaron Siskind (1903–1991) and Gjon Mili (1904–1984), Morgan pushed the limits of conventional photography, using double exposures, unusual light effects and photomontage to lend photography some of the expressive qualities of the drawn or painted mark. Morgan also painted abstractions, but is much better known for her work with the camera, principally for her images of contemporary dancers made in the 1930s and '40s. In her more recognisable photographs, dancers are captured in action, their bodies and garments forming abstract patterns under dramatic lighting that exaggerates the sense of spontaneous movement. Her abstract photographs, such as *Light Waves*, 1945, capture what she called 'rhythmic vitality': streaks of light, created using a hand-held torch in a darkened photographic studio, are captured in a multiple-exposure image. The effect is that of the crackling energy of light, like a revelation of something that, to the naked eye, was completely hidden by darkness. For Morgan, photography was a way of making an inner source of energy visible. The comparison with the intentions of many Abstract Expressionist painters is striking: Morgan's work captures the rhythms of the body's movements, as in the work of Pollock, and suggests an almost mystical dimension of experience, echoing Rothko and Still.

There is an obvious visual parallel between Morgan's photograph and the work of ink on paper by the Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman (Fig. 3). Newman's abstract paintings centred on a singular visual idea: what he called 'the zip', a vertical stripe bisecting the paper or canvas, which appeared to start outside it and continue beyond it. In Newman's ink drawing, a thick black line slices through the white space of the paper, with two thinner parallel lines on either side. The application of ink in the central band is deliberately thinned down and dry, rendering the action of the artist's hand immediately apparent. By allowing the lines to cross the top and bottom borders of the paper, Newman gives his work its intended spiritual dimension, suggesting that what we see is a mere fragment of a potentially enormous space. Both Newman's *Untitled* and Morgan's *Light Waves*, then, suggest glimpses of something beyond the merely visual: a hidden plane of existence only visible through the medium of visual art.

Compare the photograph *Light Waves* with the work on paper by Barnett Newman. How do these two artists use their respective medium to create abstract forms?

Cat. 158
Barbara Morgan
***Light Waves*, 1945**
Gelatin silver print,
22 cm × 33 cm

Private collection
© Barbara and Willard Morgan Photographs
and Papers
Photo © UCLA Library Special Collections,
courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, NY

**'I'm not just a
"photographer" or a
"painter", but a visually
aware human being
searching out ways to
communicate the
intensities of life!'**
Barbara Morgan, quoted by
Deba P. Patnaik in *Barbara
Morgan, Masters of
Photography*, 1999



Fig 3.
Barnett Newman
***Untitled*, 1959**
Brush and black ink on
paper, 96.2 × 61 cm
Private collection

**'The thing that interests
me is that today painters
do not have to go to a
subject-matter outside
themselves. Modern
painters work in a
different way. They work
from within.'**
Jackson Pollock, in an
interview with William
Wright, 1950

Conclusion: What is Abstract Expressionism?

Abstract Expressionism is really too limited a term for the broad range of artists and approaches it is charged with encompassing. However, as a period of art, it emerged at a time when the idea of individual freedom was increasingly celebrated in U.S. culture and politics. Its expression of the subjective experience of the artist is one common thread that runs through the work of all of the artists associated with the term. That expression is best encapsulated by each artist's focus on the gesture, whether dripped, poured, brushed, constructed or even photographed.

A subjective and free expression of individual experience lies at the core of the work of the Abstract Expressionists. Famously, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funded exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism abroad as an attempt to promote the notion of cultural freedom in the United States in contrast to the perceived restrictions of the Soviet Union. The U.S. government tried to reinterpret works by Rothko and Pollock to transmit certain political messages, which the artists themselves did not want to be associated with, and the paintings were not made to articulate.

The artists associated with Abstract Expressionism attempted to express their own personal and subjective responses to the world – to the landscapes they lived in, to the tragedies of history, to the history of art, to the memory of loss, to the experience of painting itself. Though its sources and references are many and varied, there is no doubt that it was what its few proponents at the time claimed it to be: 'the new American painting', as described by one of its chief supporters, the art critic Clement Greenberg. For the generations of artists who came after Abstract Expressionism, its legacy was daunting, but it also encouraged a liberated approach to making art. Performance artists took inspiration from Pollock's work – such as the famous and widely circulated 1950 photographs of him at work by Hans Namuth (1915–1990) – to make art that focused on the movement of the artist's body in space. The brute matter-of-fact quality, and simplified compositions of some of the Abstract Expressionist works proved important for the Minimalist painters and sculptors of the late 1950s. Even those artists who seemed to reject the movement – most notably Pop artists, who emerged in the early 1960s – showed, however discreetly, the influence of the scale and compositional devices of artists like Newman and Rothko. Even today, the legacy of Abstract Expressionism continues.

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Cat. 17
Arshile Gorky
Water of the Flowery
Mill, 1944
(detail)

