

# ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## Abstract Expressionism

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Visual Arts, Art History, Aesthetics

### 1. Core Definition

Abstract Expressionism is recognized as the pivotal post-World War II art movement, emerging predominantly in New York City during the 1940s and achieving global dominance throughout the 1950s. It represents a fundamental shift in the center of the Western art world from Paris to New York and is characterized by a profound emphasis on psychological depth, emotional intensity, and the spontaneous execution of form. The movement, often labeled the **New York School**, was unified not by a single style but by a shared ethos: a rejection of traditional pictorial representation and a belief that the canvas served as an arena for existential engagement. Unlike earlier forms of non-representational art, Abstract Expressionism sought to manifest the artist's inner turmoil and subconscious expression directly onto the material surface, making the process of creation as important as the final artifact. This approach aligns closely with the concept of **artistic intention**, a psychological concept popular in the 1950s, where the work's meaning was fundamentally tied to the artist's message or emotional state during its making.

While the term "Abstract Expressionism" suggests a blend of geometric abstraction and emotional German Expressionism, the American movement forged a unique identity deeply influenced by Surrealism's emphasis on automatism and psychoanalysis. The works produced were typically non-objective, large-scale, and overwhelming in their immersive quality, designed to confront the viewer with raw, unmediated feeling. Key practitioners sought to create a universal visual language that transcended the horrors of the preceding global conflicts, viewing art as a moral and spiritual imperative in a fragmented world. The movement officially crystallized in exhibitions like the landmark 1951 show at the Museum of Modern Art, "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America," solidifying its status as the leading edge of modern art and confirming the arrival of a distinctive American aesthetic.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Context

The term **Abstract Expressionism** was first applied to American art in 1946 by the art critic Robert Coates in *The New Yorker*, though it had been used earlier (in 1919) to describe certain works by Wassily Kandinsky. Coates utilized the phrase to categorize the chaotic, emotionally charged paintings that were starting to appear in New York galleries, particularly those displaying large, gestural marks. The movement's true intellectual and spiritual foundation, however, lies in the unique historical convergence of European émigrés fleeing Nazi persecution and a burgeoning group of ambitious, post-Depression American artists. Figures like Hans Hofmann and the influx of Surrealists, including André Breton, Max Ernst, and Roberto Matta, transplanted European avant-

garde ideas to Manhattan, particularly the Surrealist interest in the unconscious mind and automatic drawing, which provided a crucial conceptual framework for the emerging American painters.

The economic and political environment of the 1940s was also critical. The collapse of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) art projects forced artists to seek individual rather than governmental patronage, leading to more radical and personalized artistic statements. Furthermore, the intellectual climate in New York was steeped in existential philosophy and Jungian psychology, encouraging artists to delve into mythology, primitive art, and the depths of the psyche for subject matter, rather than relying on external reality. This shift resulted in an art form that prioritized internal experience and the heroic individual struggle of the artist. The scale of the work also reflected American ambition and the perceived grandeur of the continent, breaking away from the easel traditions of European painting to embrace mural-sized canvases that envelop the viewer.

### 3. Dual Pillars: Action Painting

Abstract Expressionism is generally divided into two main stylistic tendencies, the first of which is **Action Painting**, or Gestural Abstraction. This style is perhaps the most iconic representation of the movement and is intimately associated with artists like **Jackson Pollock**, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. Action Painting emphasizes the physical act of painting as a spontaneous, often ritualistic, performance. The canvas is treated as the 'arena'--a phrase famously coined by critic Harold Rosenberg--where the artist physically engages with the materials, leaving behind palpable traces of movement, energy, and decision-making. The resulting surface is typically dense, layered, and texturally rich, preserving the history of the encounter between artist and medium.

**Spontaneity and Process:** The focus is on uninhibited, immediate execution. The artist attempts to bypass conscious control, allowing the subconscious to guide the application of paint. This technique often involves unconventional methods, such as dripping, flinging, or sweeping paint across the canvas without touching the brush directly to the surface in a controlled manner.

**Jackson Pollock's Technique:** The most renowned example of Action Painting is Pollock's innovative 'drip' technique. By laying large canvases on the floor and moving around them, pouring and splashing paint from cans or sticks, Pollock merged drawing and painting into a continuous, all-over field where no single focal point dominates. This method inherently embodies the artist's movement and rhythm, making the body central to the artwork's creation.

**The Aesthetic of Engagement:** Action painting is fundamentally indexical; the painting serves as a record of the artist's action, intention, and emotional state at a specific point in time. The dense, calligraphic energy often communicates feelings of angst, power, or profound psychological intensity, directly reflecting the belief that the artwork should be a direct conduit of the artist's inner

life.

## 4. Dual Pillars: Color Field Abstraction

The second major stream within Abstract Expressionism is **Color Field Painting**, which offered a quieter, more contemplative counterpart to the frantic energy of Action Painting. Key figures in this camp include Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still. Color Field artists rejected the frenetic brushwork and linear complexity of their gestural colleagues, opting instead for large, unified fields of color that were typically stained or thinly washed onto unprimed canvas. This technique allowed the color to soak into the fabric, creating a seamless, atmospheric effect that eliminated the illusion of depth and emphasized flatness.

**Immersion and Scale:** Color Field canvases are generally vast, intended to envelop the viewer and create a total environment. This scale is crucial to the sensory experience, as the sheer expanse of color is meant to elicit a sublime or spiritual response, transforming the viewing experience into one of deep meditation or contemplation.

**Emphasis on Color:** Unlike Action Painting, where line and texture dominate, Color Field painting prioritizes color itself as the primary vehicle for emotional and conceptual content. Rothko, for instance, used hazy, stacked rectangles of contrasting yet complementary hues to create shimmering, emotionally resonant spaces, often describing his paintings as dramas played out by color.

**The Sublime and Spiritual Aspiration:** Many Color Field painters, particularly Newman, aimed for the 'Sublime'--an experience of overwhelming awe or terror derived from the infinite or absolute. Newman's characteristic "zips" (thin vertical bands cutting across the expansive color fields) served not as compositional elements but as markers of human presence in a vast, overwhelming void, injecting a human measure into the infinite expanse of color.

## 5. Key Figures and the New York School

The movement was geographically centered around Manhattan, specifically the area surrounding Greenwich Village, and the artists involved became collectively known as the **New York School**. This group maintained close social and intellectual ties, meeting regularly at locations like the Cedar Tavern to debate aesthetics and philosophy, solidifying a communal identity despite their stylistic divergences. The core figures were often older than subsequent generations and had matured during the economic hardships of the 1930s, contributing to the movement's characteristic seriousness and intensity.

The most significant figure remains **Jackson Pollock**, whose drip paintings from the late 1940s definitively broke with European traditions of easel painting and ushered in the era of all-over

composition. Close behind him was **Willem de Kooning**, whose work typically vacillated between aggressive abstraction and ferocious figurative elements, most famously in his series of "Woman" paintings, which explored the raw physicality of paint application in relation to the figure. These two figures defined the maximalist, gestural wing of the movement.

Leading the minimalist, Color Field faction were **Mark Rothko** and **Barnett Newman**. Rothko famously restricted his palette and compositional elements to floating, luminous rectangles, aiming for transcendence and tragedy. Newman, conversely, used highly saturated, uniform fields punctuated by stark vertical lines, seeking to create abstract works with philosophical weight that could rival the history paintings of the past. Other vital contributors included Clyfford Still, whose jagged, heavily impastoed forms were entirely unique; Robert Motherwell, who provided important intellectual leadership; and Lee Krasner, a vital pioneer who often faced marginalization due to her gender but whose work equally explored gestural abstraction.

## 6. Significance and Global Impact

Abstract Expressionism holds monumental historical significance, primarily because it fundamentally transformed the geographical and aesthetic landscape of modern art. Before the 1940s, Paris had reigned supreme as the global capital of artistic innovation; AE definitively shifted this epicenter to New York, establishing American art as a dominant international force. This cultural ascendance was actively promoted by the U.S. government during the Cold War as a symbol of American artistic freedom and individualism, contrasting sharply with the state-controlled realism of the Soviet bloc.

Aesthetically, the movement's most profound impact was its insistence on the canvas as an autonomous object defined by the artist's process and emotion, rather than a window onto the world. This focus on process over product paved the way for radical future movements. The scale, flatness, and emphasis on the medium itself directly influenced Post-Painterly Abstraction (Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland), Minimalism (Donald Judd, Carl Andre), and ultimately laid the groundwork for Conceptual Art. The freedom Abstract Expressionists asserted--the freedom to abandon geometry, the figure, and conventional composition--became the baseline for artistic experimentation for decades to follow, defining the sensibility of modernism's later phase.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its critical acclaim and market success, Abstract Expressionism faced significant philosophical and practical critiques. One major line of criticism centered on its perceived elitism and inaccessibility. Critics argued that the movement's reliance on deep philosophical and psychological concepts, coupled with its non-objective nature, alienated the general public, resulting in art that could only be appreciated or understood by a small, intellectual elite. This was

compounded by the increasingly commercialized market for these works, which saw prices skyrocket, further distancing the movement from populist appeal.

Secondly, the movement, particularly Action Painting, was criticized for potentially prioritizing spectacle over substance. The performative nature of artists like Pollock was sometimes dismissed as mere theatricality or an aggressive display of ego, leading some detractors to question the sincerity and depth of the emotional content supposedly conveyed. Furthermore, feminist critics later pointed out the severe gender imbalance within the "heroic" narrative of the New York School, noting that crucial female contributors like Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning were systematically marginalized by art historians and critics who privileged the masculine, emotionally intense persona of the male abstract expressionist. Finally, the emphasis on American individualism and its geopolitical exploitation during the Cold War drew criticism for turning a complex aesthetic movement into a tool of cultural propaganda, stripping it of its radical, anti-establishment roots.

### Further Reading

[Abstract Expressionism - Wikipedia](#)

[Abstract Expressionism Definition - Tate Modern](#)

[The Collection: Abstract Expressionism - MoMA](#)

[Jackson Pollock - Wikipedia](#)