

Abstract Expressionism

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Unit 1 – Abstract Expressionism: An Introduction

1.1 Defining Abstract Expressionism: Key Characteristics and Principles

Abstract Expressionism revolutionized art with its bold, spontaneous approach. Artists like Pollock and Rothko broke free from traditional forms, using gestural brushwork and non-representational shapes to convey raw emotions and explore the medium's inherent properties.

The movement emphasized the act of creation over the final product. Painters tapped into their subconscious, embracing accidents and intuition. This process-driven approach celebrated individual expression and challenged conventional notions of composition and planning.

Key Characteristics of Abstract Expressionism

Features of Abstract Expressionism

- Spontaneous and gestural brushwork conveys a sense of energy and movement through visible brushstrokes and drips emphasizing the physical act of painting
- Non-representational forms reject realistic or recognizable subject matter focusing on abstract shapes, lines, and colors to explore the inherent properties of the medium
- Emotional intensity expresses the artist's inner feelings and psyche conveying raw, primal emotions through bold, expressive colors (vibrant reds, deep blues) and dynamic compositions

Action vs color field painting

- Action painting emphasizes the physical act and process of painting with spontaneous and improvisational application of paint exemplified by Jackson Pollock's drip paintings
- Placing the canvas on the floor using unconventional tools (sticks, hardened brushes) to create a web of intricate, overlapping lines and splatters
- Color field painting focuses on large areas of flat, solid color exploring color's emotional and psychological effects as seen in Mark Rothko's signature style
- Large, rectangular canvases with horizontal bands of color featuring subtle gradations and blurred edges evoking a meditative, contemplative state

Process and Subconscious in Abstract Expressionism

Process over product in art

- Emphasis on the act of painting itself through a spontaneous, intuitive approach embracing accidents, drips, and splatters as part of the work
- Valuing the artist's personal expression and unique gesture with each brushstroke recording the artist's presence and energy celebrating the individual's creative process
- Rejection of traditional notions of composition and planning allowing the painting to evolve organically by responding to the canvas in the moment without preconceived ideas

Subconscious in artistic creation

- Influence of Surrealism and its emphasis on the subconscious using automatic drawing and writing techniques to tap into the artist's inner psyche and dreams
- Automatism as a means of accessing the subconscious through spontaneous, uncontrolled application of paint allowing the hand to move freely without conscious intervention
- Belief in the authenticity of the subconscious revealing the artist's true self and emotions as an unfiltered expression of the inner world
- Examples of artists exploring automatism include: 1. Jackson Pollock's action paintings 2. Willem de Kooning's gestural abstractions 3. Robert Motherwell's "Elegy to the Spanish Republic" series

1.2 Historical Context: Post-World War II America

After World War II, America experienced a boom in consumerism and suburbanization, alongside Cold War tensions and McCarthyism. This climate of conformity and paranoia sparked a cultural shift towards individualism and self-expression, influencing the arts profoundly.

Abstract Expressionism emerged as a response to these changes, rejecting traditional forms and embracing spontaneity. Influenced by European avant-garde movements, artists sought new ways to convey emotion and tap into the subconscious, reflecting the era's complexities.

Post-World War II America

Post-WWII climate in America

- Social climate
 - Increased consumerism and economic prosperity driven by post-war boom and rise of advertising
 - Growth of suburbs (Levittown) and the rise of the middle class led to homogeneous lifestyles
 - Conformity and the "American Dream" emphasized traditional family values and material success
- Political climate
 - Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union fueled ideological conflicts and arms race
 - McCarthyism and the fear of communism led to political paranoia and suppression of dissent
 - Rise of American global power and influence through military and economic dominance (Marshall Plan)
- Cultural climate
 - Shift towards individualism and self-expression challenged conformist attitudes
 - Rejection of traditional values and societal norms (Beat Generation) reflected in literature and music
 - Increased interest in psychology and the subconscious influenced by Freudian theories
 - Impact on the arts
 - Artists sought new forms of expression to reflect the changing times and break from past traditions
 - Emphasis on spontaneity, improvisation, and personal expression (action painting) as a means of authentic creativity

- Rejection of representational art in favor of abstraction (color field painting) to convey pure emotion and inner states

European avant-garde influence

- Surrealism
- Emphasis on the subconscious and automatic writing (free association) inspired Abstract Expressionists
- Influence on Abstract Expressionists' interest in spontaneity and improvisation as a means of tapping into the unconscious
- Use of abstract forms and symbols (biomorphic shapes) to convey psychological states and dream imagery
- Other European avant-garde movements
- Cubism's deconstruction of form and space (collage) paved the way for non-representational art
- Expressionism's emphasis on emotional intensity and personal expression (distorted forms) inspired subjective approaches
- Dadaism's rejection of traditional art forms and embrace of chance and irrationality (readymades) challenged artistic conventions

Abstract Expressionism and the Global Stage

Cold War impact on art

- Cold War politics
- Abstract Expressionism seen as a symbol of American freedom and individuality in contrast to Soviet collectivism
- Promoted as a contrast to Soviet Realism and communist ideology, which favored figurative and propagandistic art
- Used as a cultural weapon to assert American influence and values (CIA funded exhibitions) in the battle for hearts and minds
- American global power
- Post-war economic boom and rise of the United States as a superpower expanded the art market and patronage
- Increased international exposure for American art and culture through exhibitions and publications (The New American Painting)
- Abstract Expressionism became a symbol of American cultural dominance and "soft power" in the global arena

Government support for artists

- Federal Art Project (FAP)
- Part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression to provide employment for artists

- Employed artists to create public works of art (murals, sculptures) for government buildings and public spaces
- Provided financial support and exposure for many artists who later became Abstract Expressionists (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning)
- Other government-sponsored programs
- The GI Bill provided education benefits to veterans, allowing many to attend art schools (Black Mountain College)
- The State Department's "Art in Embassies" program showcased American art abroad as a form of cultural diplomacy
- The National Endowment for the Arts, established in 1965, provided grants and support for American artists and arts organizations

1.3 The Emergence of New York as an Art Center

After World War II, the art world's center shifted from Paris to New York. European artists fleeing war found refuge in the US, where a dynamic art scene and economic stability fostered innovation.

Key institutions like MoMA and the Art Students League championed Abstract Expressionism. Critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg promoted the movement, while artist-run spaces like The Club nurtured community and creativity.

The Shift of the Art World's Center from Paris to New York

Shift of art world center

- Paris was the epicenter of the art world before World War II
- Birthplace of influential art movements (Cubism, Surrealism, Fauvism)
- Drew artists from around the globe seeking inspiration and recognition
- New York rose to prominence as the new art hub after World War II
- Numerous European artists sought refuge in the United States to escape the ravages of war
- New York's dynamic and experimental art scene provided fertile ground for artistic innovation
- Key factors propelling New York's ascent as an art center
- The United States' economic and political stability in the post-war era
- Expansion of the American art market fueled by a growing collector base
- Amplified support for the arts from cultural institutions and wealthy patrons

Institutions and Individuals Shaping Abstract Expressionism in New York

Institutions fostering Abstract Expressionism

- Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)
- Established in 1929 to champion modern and contemporary art
- Instrumental in elevating the profile of Abstract Expressionism through groundbreaking exhibitions

- Showcased the work of leading Abstract Expressionist artists to a wide audience
- Art Students League
- Prestigious art school in the heart of New York City
- Served as a training ground and creative hub for many Abstract Expressionist artists
- Encouraged artistic experimentation and fostered collaborations among students and teachers

Art critics' role in promotion

- Clement Greenberg
- Hailed Abstract Expressionism as a distinctly American art movement
- Stressed the significance of formal elements (color, line, shape) in evaluating art
- Championed the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Hans Hofmann
- Harold Rosenberg
- Introduced the concept of "Action Painting" to describe Abstract Expressionist techniques
- Emphasized the artist's emotional engagement and the creative process itself
- Supported the work of Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky

Impact of artist-run spaces

- The Club
- Established in 1949 by a collective of Abstract Expressionist artists
- Functioned as a platform for exhibitions, lectures, and discussions
- Nurtured a strong sense of camaraderie and shared purpose within the artist community
- Cedar Tavern
- Iconic gathering spot for Abstract Expressionist artists during the 1950s
- Facilitated the exchange of ideas and lively debates about art among its patrons
- Became emblematic of the bohemian spirit that characterized the Abstract Expressionist movement

1.4 Major Themes and Techniques in Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism tackled big ideas like the sublime, the unconscious, and existentialism. Artists used huge canvases, wild brushstrokes, and spontaneous techniques to explore these themes, creating powerful and emotional works.

Painters like Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko each had unique approaches. They pushed boundaries with drip painting, figurative abstraction, and color fields, revolutionizing art and challenging viewers to engage on a deeper level.

Key Themes in Abstract Expressionism

Themes in Abstract Expressionism

- The sublime
 - Evokes awe-inspiring, overwhelming, and transcendent experiences beyond human comprehension
 - Conveys a sense of vastness, power, and the infinite through monumental scale and intense colors (Rothko's color field paintings)
 - Invites contemplation and introspection, encouraging viewers to engage with their own emotions and perceptions
- The unconscious
 - Delves into the depths of the human psyche and inner emotions, revealing hidden desires and fears
 - Employs automatic drawing and painting techniques to tap into the subconscious and bypass rational thought (Pollock's drip paintings)
 - Reflects the influence of Surrealism and psychoanalytic theories on the Abstract Expressionist movement
- Existentialism
 - Grapples with individual freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in a chaotic and uncertain world
 - Expresses the human condition and the struggle to find purpose and authenticity in the face of absurdity (de Kooning's "Women" series)
 - Emphasizes the subjective experience and the role of the individual in creating their own reality and values

Techniques and Approaches in Abstract Expressionism

Techniques of Abstract Expressionist painting

- Large-scale canvases
 - Engulf the viewer and create an immersive, all-encompassing experience that demands attention
 - Allow for expansive, bold, and dynamic compositions that capture the energy and intensity of the artist's vision (Pollock's "Mural", Rothko's "Seagram Murals")
 - Challenge traditional notions of easel painting and invite the viewer to engage with the work on a physical and emotional level
- Gestural brushwork
 - Involves energetic, spontaneous, and expressive application of paint, often using unconventional tools (sticks, trowels, palette knives)
 - Conveys the artist's physical movements and emotional state through visible brushstrokes and the tactile quality of the paint (de Kooning's vigorous brushstrokes, Franz Kline's bold, calligraphic marks)
 - Emphasizes the process of creation and the direct interaction between the artist and the canvas

Improvisation in Abstract Expressionism

- Improvisation
 - Embraces the unplanned, intuitive aspects of the creative process, allowing for serendipitous discoveries and unexpected outcomes
 - Relies on the artist's instincts, impulses, and subconscious to guide the composition and development of the painting (Pollock's drip paintings)
 - Fosters a sense of spontaneity, authenticity, and immediacy in the finished work, capturing the energy and emotion of the moment
- Spontaneity
 - Involves working in the moment without preconceived ideas, sketches, or plans, responding directly to the canvas and the artist's inner state
 - Requires trust in the creative process and a willingness to take risks, embracing accidents and imperfections as part of the work (action painting by Pollock and others)
 - Results in dynamic, energetic compositions that reflect the artist's unique gestures, movements, and decisions made in the heat of creation

Comparison of Abstract Expressionist artists

- Jackson Pollock
 - Pioneer of drip and action painting techniques, creating intricate webs and layers of paint by pouring, dripping, and splattering
 - Developed all-over compositions with no discernible focal point, emphasizing the unity and interconnectedness of the elements ("Number 1, 1948")
 - Focused on the physical act of painting and the artist's movements, using the canvas as an arena for performance and self-expression
- Willem de Kooning
 - Blended figurative elements with abstract forms, creating a dynamic interplay between representation and abstraction
 - Employed vigorous brushwork and a sense of energy and movement, capturing the vitality and complexity of the human form ("Woman I")
 - Explored the human figure, particularly in his "Women" series, as a vehicle for expressing psychological and existential themes
- Mark Rothko
 - Master of color field painting, using large expanses of luminous, pulsating color to evoke deep emotions and spiritual experiences
 - Created compositions with rectangular blocks of color, often with soft, blurred edges that seem to dissolve into one another ("No. 61 (Rust and Blue)")
 - Emphasized the meditative and transcendent aspects of color and space, inviting viewers to immerse themselves in the work and reflect on their own inner states

Unit 2 – Surrealism & Automatism:

Abstract Roots

2.1 Surrealism's Impact on Abstract Expressionism

Surrealism's focus on the subconscious and rejection of artistic norms deeply influenced Abstract Expressionism. It encouraged artists to tap into their inner worlds, embracing spontaneity and irrationality in their creative process.

This shift paved the way for new techniques like automatic drawing and action painting. Abstract Expressionists adapted these ideas, creating emotionally charged works that pushed the boundaries of art even further.

Surrealism's Influence on Abstract Expressionism

Key principles of Surrealism

- Emphasis on the subconscious and the irrational
- Believed subconscious mind was a source of artistic inspiration and creativity (automatic drawing, free association)
- Sought to tap into the subconscious through various techniques to unlock hidden creativity and break free from rational constraints
- Rejection of traditional artistic conventions and rational thought
- Challenged established norms of art-making and embraced unconventional, often shocking imagery (melting clocks, impossible landscapes)
- Favored spontaneity and irrationality over conscious, rational thought in the artistic process
- Exploration of dreams, fantasies, and the absurd
- Fascinated by the world of dreams and the bizarre, incorporating dream-like imagery and symbols (Salvador Dalí's paintings)
- Believed exploring the absurd and irrational could lead to a deeper understanding of the human psyche (René Magritte's surreal juxtapositions)

Adaptation of Surrealist techniques

- Automatic drawing and gestural mark-making
- Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning employed techniques similar to automatic drawing, allowing their subconscious to guide their artistic process
- Emphasized spontaneous, gestural mark-making to create large-scale paintings with a sense of immediacy and raw energy (Pollock's drip paintings)
- Embracing chance and spontaneity
- Incorporated elements of chance and spontaneity into their work, much like the Surrealists

- Used unconventional tools and techniques to create unpredictable and dynamic compositions (splattering paint, using sticks or knives)
- Exploring the depths of the psyche
- Interested in exploring the inner workings of the human mind and emotions, like the Surrealists
- Sought to create art that was a direct expression of their subconscious, resulting in highly personal and emotionally charged works (Mark Rothko's color fields)

Impact of Surrealism on Abstract Expressionism

- Liberation from traditional artistic conventions
- Surrealism's rejection of traditional artistic conventions paved the way for Abstract Expressionists to push boundaries of what was considered acceptable in art
- Surrealist emphasis on spontaneity, irrationality, and the subconscious provided a conceptual framework for exploring new forms of artistic expression
- Emphasis on the artist's inner world
- Surrealism's focus on the subconscious and exploration of dreams and fantasies influenced Abstract Expressionists to prioritize the artist's inner world as a source of inspiration
- Shift towards introspection and personal expression became a defining characteristic of Abstract Expressionism (Barnett Newman's "zips")
- Impact on the development of new artistic techniques
- Surrealist techniques like automatic drawing and incorporation of chance were adapted and expanded upon by Abstract Expressionists
- Contributed to the development of new artistic approaches that became synonymous with Abstract Expressionism (action painting, color field painting)

2.2 Automatism and the Subconscious in Artistic Creation

Automatism in art lets the subconscious take the wheel, creating spontaneous and unfiltered works. It's all about tapping into the hidden corners of the mind, bypassing self-censorship and societal norms to unleash raw creativity.

Abstract Expressionists ran with this idea, using automatism to break free from traditional art rules. They embraced chance, improvisation, and direct expression, resulting in powerful, emotionally charged works that spoke straight from the artist's inner self.

Automatism and the Subconscious in Artistic Creation

Automatism in artistic creation

- Creative process involving suppression of conscious control allowing subconscious mind to guide artistic expression
- Emphasizes spontaneity, intuition, free flow of ideas without premeditation or rational intervention (stream-of-consciousness writing, action painting)
- Taps into subconscious mind believed to be source of authentic, unfiltered creativity

- Bypasses constraints of conscious thought and societal norms (self-censorship, artistic conventions)
- Allows artists to explore inner psyche bringing forth hidden desires, fears, emotions in their work
- Leads to creation of highly personal, symbolic, emotionally charged artworks (dream-like imagery, abstract forms)

Techniques for achieving automatism

- Automatic drawing and painting creating art without conscious planning or control
- Continuous, flowing lines or spontaneous brush strokes without lifting drawing tool from surface (Surrealist André Masson, Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock)
- Working rapidly without pausing to analyze or refine marks
- Free association expressing ideas and images as they emerge without censorship or logical connections
- Stream-of-consciousness writing or speaking (Surrealist automatic writing)
- Responding instinctively to visual stimuli (Rorschach inkblot test)
- Collaborative automatism involving multiple artists contributing to single work without knowing full context
- Surrealist game "Exquisite Corpse" embracing chance, unpredictability, collective subconscious
- Each artist adds to composition in sequence without seeing previous contributions (folded paper, covered sections)

Impact on Abstract Expressionism

- Significant role in development of Abstract Expressionism as artists sought to create works that were direct expressions of inner selves
- Emphasis on spontaneity and intuition allowed breaking free from traditional artistic conventions exploring new forms of expression (non-representational art, large-scale canvases)
- Encouraged embracing accident, chance, improvisation in creative process
- Led to development of techniques like action painting emphasizing physical act of painting itself (Jackson Pollock's drip paintings)
- Contributed to creation of highly gestural, expressive works channeling emotions and energy directly onto canvas
- Dynamic, powerful compositions (Willem de Kooning's abstract figurative paintings, Franz Kline's bold black-and-white abstractions)

Automatism in Surrealism vs Abstract Expressionism

- Both movements employed automatism to access subconscious creating art free from conscious control
- Differed in underlying philosophies and application of automatism
- Surrealists used automatism to explore irrational, dreamlike, marvelous

- Combined automatism with elements of representational imagery creating strange, unsettling juxtapositions (Salvador Dalí's melting clocks, René Magritte's paradoxical scenes)
- Guided by specific themes or prompts (responding to particular phrase or object)
- Abstract Expressionists used automatism for pure abstraction and self-expression
- Eliminated recognizable imagery or symbolic content focusing on formal elements of art (color, line, texture)
- More open-ended, individualistic approach with each artist developing unique style of spontaneous creation (Mark Rothko's color field paintings, Robert Motherwell's gestural abstractions)

2.3 European Modernism and Its Influence

European Modernism shook up the art world with movements like Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism. These styles broke from tradition, experimenting with form, color, and emotion. Artists like Picasso and Matisse pushed boundaries, paving the way for new artistic expressions.

Abstract Expressionism took these ideas and ran with them. American artists embraced the spirit of innovation, emphasizing spontaneity and the act of painting itself. They created a unique style that reflected post-war America while acknowledging European influences.

Key Movements and Artists of European Modernism

Key movements of European Modernism

- Cubism fragmented and reassembled objects from multiple perspectives to create abstract compositions (Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque)
- Fauvism used bold, expressive colors and loose brushwork to convey emotions and subjective experiences (Henri Matisse, André Derain)
- Expressionism distorted and exaggerated forms to express inner feelings and psychological states (Edvard Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner)
- Surrealism explored the subconscious mind through dreamlike imagery and automatic drawing techniques (Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró)
- Bauhaus promoted the integration of art, craft, and design, emphasizing abstraction and functionality (Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee)

Impact of European Modernism on Abstract Expressionism

Innovations of European Modernists

- Rejected traditional representational art in favor of abstraction and non-objective art
- Experimented with form, color, and composition
- Cubist fragmentation and multiple perspectives challenged conventional notions of space and perspective
- Fauvist bold, expressive use of color prioritized emotional impact over realistic representation
- Surrealist exploration of the subconscious and automatic drawing techniques tapped into the artist's intuitive creative process

- Emphasized the artist's subjective experience and emotional expression
- Expressionist conveying inner feelings through distortion and exaggeration of forms and colors
- Adopted an interdisciplinary approach to art-making
- Bauhaus integration of art, craft, and design blurred boundaries between fine art and applied arts

European Modernism's international impact

- Established a avant-garde art scene in Europe that challenged traditional art institutions and conventions
- Increased cultural exchange between Europe and the United States
- European artists fleeing to the U.S. during World War II brought Modernist ideas and practices
- American artists studying and traveling in Europe absorbed Modernist influences
- Developed a global modernist discourse with shared ideas and influences across national boundaries
- Contributed to the emergence of New York as a new center of the art world in the post-war era

Abstract Expressionism vs European Modernism

- Embraced the spirit of experimentation and innovation pioneered by European Modernists
- Pushed the boundaries of abstraction even further, emphasizing the flatness of the picture plane
- Emphasized the act of painting itself
- "Action painting" techniques (dripping, splattering, gestural brushwork) highlighted the artist's physical engagement with the canvas
- Large-scale canvases and all-over composition immersed the viewer in the artwork
- Diverged from European Modernism's intellectual and theoretical approach
- Prioritized spontaneity, intuition, and improvisation in the creative process
- Rejected preconceived ideas and planning in favor of the "immediacy" of the artistic gesture
- Developed a distinctly American style reflecting the post-war context and the "American experience"
- Asserted cultural independence from European influences while acknowledging their impact

Unit 3 – New York School: Artists and Studios

3.1 Formation and Key Members of the New York School

The New York School emerged as a groundbreaking movement in American art during the post-World War II era. Artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko revolutionized painting with their bold, abstract styles and innovative techniques.

These artists shared a commitment to spontaneity, rejection of traditional conventions, and exploration of the subconscious. Their work was influenced by European modernism, Surrealism, and the cultural climate of post-war America, establishing New York as the new center of the art world.

Formation and Key Members of the New York School

Key artists of New York School

- Jackson Pollock
 - Pioneered drip painting technique creating all-over compositions with intricate layers and rhythmic patterns (Number 1, 1948)
 - Revolutionized the concept of painting as an arena for action and physical engagement with the canvas (Autumn Rhythm (Number 30))
 - Iconic works like Blue Poles exemplify his innovative approach to abstraction and the spontaneous creation process
- Willem de Kooning
 - Blended figuration and abstraction in his Women series portraying distorted, fragmented female figures with gestural brushwork (Woman I)
 - Abstract landscapes like Excavation showcase his dynamic compositions and expressive use of color and form
 - Interchange demonstrates his ability to seamlessly merge figurative elements with abstract passages creating a complex visual dialogue
- Mark Rothko
 - Created large color field paintings with luminous rectangular forms that evoke a sense of spirituality and contemplation (No. 61 (Rust and Blue))
 - Explored the emotional impact of color using subtle gradations and contrasting hues to create immersive experiences (Orange and Yellow)
 - Works like Four Darks in Red exemplify his mastery of color and his belief in the transcendental power of abstract art
- Franz Kline
 - Developed a signature style of bold black-and-white abstractions inspired by Chinese calligraphy and architectural structures (Chief)

- Works like Mahoning showcase his gestural brushstrokes and the dynamic interplay between positive and negative space
- Untitled (1957) demonstrates his ability to create powerful compositions using a minimal palette and spontaneous mark-making
- Robert Motherwell
- Known for his Elegy to the Spanish Republic series which combines abstract forms with political and historical references
- Incorporated collage and a limited color palette in compositions like Beside the Sea exploring the interplay between flat shapes and textured surfaces
- At Five in the Afternoon exemplifies his use of black as a dominant color and his ability to evoke a sense of solemnity and depth

Emergence factors of New York School

- Influx of European artists fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe
- Brought new ideas and influences to the New York art scene introducing avant-garde concepts and techniques (Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky)
- Artists like Max Ernst settled in the U.S. contributing to the cross-pollination of Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist ideas
- Post-war disillusionment and search for new forms of expression
- Artists sought to break free from traditional artistic conventions in response to the horrors of World War II
- Explored the subconscious and the spontaneous creation process as a means of expressing their inner emotions and psychological states
- Economic and political dominance of the United States
- New York City emerged as the new center of the art world replacing Paris in the post-war era
- Increased patronage and support for American artists through galleries, museums, and collectors fostering the growth of the New York School
- Influence of Surrealism and Jungian psychology
- Artists drew inspiration from automatic drawing and the exploration of the subconscious as a source of creativity and self-expression
- Emphasis on the individual psyche and personal expression aligned with the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious

Artistic influences on New York School

- Jackson Pollock
- Studied under Thomas Hart Benton learning the principles of rhythmic composition and the use of dynamic lines and forms
- Influenced by Native American sand painting and Mexican muralism incorporating elements of ritual and symbolic imagery

- Willem de Kooning
 - Trained in the academic tradition at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts developing a strong foundation in figurative drawing and painting
 - Drew inspiration from Cubism, Surrealism, and the work of Arshile Gorky in his exploration of fragmented forms and expressive brushwork
- Mark Rothko
 - Studied under Max Weber at the Art Students League in New York absorbing the principles of modernist abstraction and color theory
 - Influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy and the work of Henri Matisse in his pursuit of a transcendental art that evokes deep emotional responses
- Franz Kline
 - Trained in academic realism at Boston University honing his skills in drawing and composition
 - Influenced by Japanese calligraphy and the work of Willem de Kooning in his development of a gestural, black-and-white abstract style
- Robert Motherwell
 - Studied philosophy and art history at Stanford and Harvard Universities gaining a deep understanding of the intellectual and historical context of art
 - Influenced by the Surrealist concept of automatism and the work of Henri Matisse in his use of collage and his emphasis on the expressive potential of color and form

Shared principles of New York School

- Emphasis on spontaneity and the subconscious
- Believed in the importance of automatic, intuitive creation as a means of tapping into the artist's inner world and emotions
- Sought to express their deepest psychological states and experiences through the act of painting itself (Jackson Pollock's drip technique)
- Rejection of traditional artistic conventions
- Abandoned figurative representation in favor of pure abstraction as a way of breaking free from the constraints of the past
- Challenged the boundaries between art and life by embracing the physicality of the painting process and the use of unconventional materials (Willem de Kooning's inclusion of everyday objects)
- Belief in the autonomy of the artwork
- Viewed the painting as an independent entity, free from external references or narrative content
- Emphasized the flatness of the picture plane and the materiality of the paint itself as the primary subject of the work (Mark Rothko's color field paintings)
- Interest in the sublime and the transcendental
- Sought to evoke a sense of awe, mystery, and spiritual depth through their large-scale, immersive works

- Explored the metaphysical aspects of art and its ability to connect the viewer with a higher realm of experience (Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings)
- Commitment to individualism and personal expression
- Valued the unique vision, style, and creative process of each artist as a fundamental aspect of their work
- Rejected conformity and embraced the diversity of approaches and techniques within the New York School (Franz Kline's gestural abstractions vs. Robert Motherwell's collages)

3.2 The Role of Art Schools and Galleries

Abstract Expressionism flourished in American art schools, where artists honed their skills and explored new forms of expression. The Art Students League and Black Mountain College were key institutions, attracting future leaders of the movement like Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg.

Mentors like Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers shaped the movement's direction. Galleries such as Art of This Century and Betty Parsons Gallery provided crucial platforms for emerging artists. Critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg championed Abstract Expressionism, helping establish it as a major force in art.

Art Schools and the Development of Abstract Expressionism

Art schools and Abstract Expressionism

- Art Students League, New York City
 - Provided traditional art education and studio space for artists to hone their skills and techniques
 - Attracted artists seeking to break from conventional styles and explore new forms of artistic expression
 - Notable students included Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning who went on to become leading figures in Abstract Expressionism
- Black Mountain College, North Carolina
 - Experimental, interdisciplinary approach to art education encouraged students to push boundaries and challenge traditional art forms
 - Emphasized collaboration and exploration of new ideas through cross-disciplinary workshops and projects
 - Influential teachers such as Josef Albers, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham exposed students to avant-garde concepts and techniques
 - Notable students included Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Kenneth Noland who incorporated experimental practices into their work

Mentors of New York School

- Hans Hofmann
 - Taught at the Art Students League and his own school, influencing a generation of Abstract Expressionist artists

- Emphasized the importance of color, form, and spatial relationships in creating dynamic compositions
- Influenced the work of Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and others through his teachings on the "push and pull" of color and form
- Josef Albers
- Taught at Black Mountain College, bringing his Bauhaus-inspired teachings to the United States
- Focused on the interaction of colors and the use of simple geometric forms to create optical illusions and visual tension
- Inspired the hard-edge abstraction of artists like Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly who explored the perceptual effects of color and shape

Galleries and Critical Support for Abstract Expressionism

Galleries promoting Abstract Expressionism

- Art of This Century, New York City
- Opened by Peggy Guggenheim in 1942, providing a vital platform for avant-garde art in the United States
- Showcased European Surrealists alongside emerging American artists, fostering cross-cultural exchange and influence
- Provided early exposure for Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell, helping to launch their careers
- Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City
- Opened in 1946 with a focus on promoting American avant-garde artists working in abstract and experimental styles
- Represented key figures of the New York School, including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still
- Played a crucial role in establishing Abstract Expressionism as a major force in the art world

Art critics and New York School

- Clement Greenberg
- Championed Abstract Expressionism as a uniquely American art movement that represented a break from European traditions
- Emphasized the importance of flatness, color, and the rejection of illusionism in creating purely abstract compositions
- Supported artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Helen Frankenthaler through his influential essays and criticism
- Harold Rosenberg
- Coined the term "Action Painting" to describe the gestural, improvisational approach of the Abstract Expressionists

- Focused on the existential and psychological aspects of the creative process, seeing the canvas as an arena for the artist's actions
- Supported artists like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Philip Guston, interpreting their work through an existentialist lens

3.3 Studio Practices and Collaborative Environments

Abstract Expressionists revolutionized art-making with innovative techniques. Pollock's drip paintings, de Kooning's layered canvases, and Rothko's color fields exemplify their diverse approaches. These artists pushed boundaries, experimenting with materials and scale to create immersive experiences.

The New York art scene fostered a spirit of collaboration and experimentation. Artists gathered at local haunts to exchange ideas, critique work, and push each other creatively. This supportive yet competitive atmosphere fueled the movement's growth and impact on modern art.

Studio Practices and Working Methods

Studio practices of New York School

- Jackson Pollock
 - Developed drip painting technique, placing canvas on floor and using various tools to apply paint (sticks, trowels, basting syringes)
 - Worked spontaneously and gesturally, moving around the canvas while painting
 - Incorporated unconventional materials into paintings (sand, broken glass, cigarette butts)
- Willem de Kooning
 - Worked on multiple canvases simultaneously, often taking months or years to complete a single painting
 - Employed process of adding, scraping away, and reworking layers of paint to create complex, textured surfaces
 - Drew inspiration from both figurative and abstract elements, blurring the lines between the two
- Mark Rothko
 - Created large-scale, color field paintings featuring rectangular blocks of color
 - Applied thin, translucent layers of paint to achieve sense of depth and luminosity
 - Focused on evoking emotional responses through use of color and scale

Composition approaches in Abstract Expressionism

- Jackson Pollock: All-over composition lacking central focal point or hierarchy
- Willem de Kooning: Compositions featured fragmented, overlapping forms and gestural brushstrokes
- Mark Rothko: Simplified compositions consisting of rectangular color fields
- Scale
 - Many Abstract Expressionists worked on large-scale canvases to create immersive, powerful experiences for viewers (Pollock's drip paintings often exceeded 8 feet in width or height)

- Rothko's color field paintings typically human-scaled, measuring around 6-8 feet tall
- Materials
- Unconventional materials often incorporated (house paint, enamel, industrial pigments)
- Pollock used variety of tools to apply paint (sticks, trowels, basting syringes)
- Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline favored black and white paint, emphasizing gestural quality of brushstrokes

Experimentation, Improvisation, and Collaboration

Experimentation in New York School

- Abstract Expressionists prioritized spontaneity and intuition in art-making process
- Pollock's drip painting technique relied heavily on improvisation and physical act of painting
- De Kooning's work involved cycle of creation and destruction, with final painting emerging through process of experimentation
- Many artists embraced accidents and chance occurrences as part of creative process, allowing materials to guide direction of work

Collaboration in Abstract Expressionist development

- New York art scene in 1940s and 1950s characterized by strong sense of community and artistic exchange
- Artists gathered at places like The Cedar Tavern and The Club to discuss ideas, critique each other's work, and socialize
- Collaborative projects helped establish Abstract Expressionism as major movement (9th Street Art Exhibition in 1951)
- Critics played significant role in promoting and interpreting work of Abstract Expressionists (Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg)
- Supportive and competitive atmosphere of New York art scene fostered innovation and pushed artists to develop unique styles and approaches

3.4 The Cedar Tavern and Artists' Social Circles

The Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village was the beating heart of Abstract Expressionism. Artists like Pollock and de Kooning flocked there to debate art, politics, and philosophy, forging a community that shaped the movement's spirit and ideas.

These gatherings sparked friendships, rivalries, and artistic breakthroughs. The tavern's informal vibe encouraged free-flowing discussions, while critics like Greenberg helped define Abstract Expressionism's theoretical foundations, cementing its place in art history.

The Cedar Tavern and Its Significance

Significance of Cedar Tavern

- Served as a crucial meeting point for Abstract Expressionist artists and intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s located at 24 University Place in Greenwich Village, New York City
- Close proximity to artists' studios and galleries made it a convenient gathering location
- Frequently visited by notable artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko to socialize, discuss art, and exchange ideas
- Provided a space for artists to engage in heated debates about art, politics, and philosophy fostering a sense of community and shared purpose
- Informal atmosphere encouraged spontaneous and uninhibited discussions contributing to the development of the New York School's avant-garde spirit

Role of social interactions

- Facilitated cross-pollination of ideas among artists, critics, and intellectuals leading to the development of new artistic concepts and approaches
- Artists shared thoughts on techniques, materials, and the role of art in society influencing each other's work
- Helped define the theoretical underpinnings of Abstract Expressionism
- Discussions often revolved around ideas of existentialism, Jungian psychology, and the unconscious which were incorporated into artists' work
- Presence of influential art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg helped shape the critical discourse surrounding Abstract Expressionism
- Critics' interactions with artists informed their interpretations and evaluations of the movement

Relationships and Rivalries

Relationships among Abstract Expressionists

- Served as a backdrop for the formation of close friendships and professional relationships
- Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning maintained a complex friendship that included mutual respect and occasional rivalry despite their artistic differences
- Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning shared a close bond often painting together and influencing each other's work
- Rivalries and tensions emerged fueled by differences in artistic approaches, critical reception, and personal temperaments
- Well-known rivalry between Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, two of the most prominent figures in the movement, was often discussed at the tavern
- Contributed to the dynamic and competitive nature of the New York art scene pushing artists to innovate and refine their techniques

Impact of New York's social dynamics

- Social interactions and debates helped shape public perception and critical reception of Abstract Expressionist works
- Critics who frequented the tavern such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg developed influential theories about the movement based on their interactions with the artists
- Personal relationships and rivalries sometimes influenced the way works were interpreted and compared
- Perceived rivalry between Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning led to comparisons of their techniques and the relative merits of their approaches
- Reputation as a gathering place for the avant-garde contributed to the mystique and allure surrounding Abstract Expressionism enhancing its status as a groundbreaking and influential movement

Unit 4 – Pollock: Action Painting & Drip Technique

4.1 Pollock's Artistic Development and Early Works

Jackson Pollock's early artistic journey was shaped by diverse influences. From his studies at the Art Students League to his exposure to Mexican muralists and European modernists, Pollock's early works blended regionalism, abstraction, and symbolism.

As Pollock transitioned to Abstract Expressionism, he developed his iconic "drip" technique. This shift marked a move towards pure abstraction, emphasizing the physical act of painting and eliminating recognizable imagery in favor of non-representational expression.

Pollock's Early Artistic Journey

Early influences on Pollock

- Studied at the Art Students League in New York City
- Influenced by his teacher Thomas Hart Benton's regionalist style and use of dynamic curves in compositions
- Exposed to the large-scale, socially conscious murals of Mexican muralists like José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros
- Inspired by the abstraction and symbolism in the works of European modernists Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró
- Worked for the Federal Art Project during the Great Depression creating representational murals and paintings depicting American life and social issues

Pollock's representational and surrealist works

- Representational works showcase Pollock's early artistic development
- "Going West" (1934-35) depicts a group traveling westward, inspired by Benton's regionalist style
- "The Flame" (1934-38) features a semi-abstract figure engulfed in flames, experimenting with abstraction
- Surrealist-inspired works demonstrate Pollock's interest in symbolism and the subconscious
- "Birth" (1941) exhibits a complex composition with biomorphic forms and symbolic elements
- "The Moon Woman" (1942) depicts a mythical female figure, influenced by Jungian psychology

Key elements in Pollock's early paintings

- Incorporates mythical and symbolic imagery influenced by Jungian psychology and Native American art
- Examples include "The She-Wolf" (1943) and "Pasiphae" (1943)
- Experiments with various techniques and materials to create textured surfaces

- Uses unconventional materials like sand and plaster in "The Magic Mirror" (1941) and "Stenographic Figure" (1942)
- Explores the subconscious and automatic drawing inspired by the Surrealist concept of "psychic automatism"
- Evident in works such as "Untitled (Animals and Figures)" (1942) and "Untitled (Abstract Composition)" (1943)

Transition to Abstract Expressionism

Transition to abstract style

- Gradual shift from representational and surrealist-inspired works to pure abstraction
- "Mural" (1943) commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim showcases a more abstract and expressive style on a large scale
- Develops the iconic "drip" technique by experimenting with pouring and dripping paint onto canvas laid on the floor
- Examples include "Full Fathom Five" (1947) and "Number 1A, 1948"
- Increases emphasis on the physical act of painting and the artist's gestures
- Focuses on the process in works like "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" (1950) and "One: Number 31, 1950"
- Eliminates recognizable imagery and symbolism to fully embrace non-representational abstraction
- Evident in paintings such as "Number 8, 1949" and "Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950"

4.2 The Evolution of Action Painting

Action Painting revolutionized abstract art by emphasizing the physical act of creation. Artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning used spontaneous, gestural brushwork on large canvases, prioritizing process over product and tapping into their subconscious.

This approach drew inspiration from Surrealist automatism, adapting it to focus on bodily movements and intuitive responses. Action Painters employed unconventional tools and techniques, like dripping and pouring paint, to create dynamic, energetic compositions that challenged traditional notions of skill and expression.

Key Concepts in Action Painting

Characteristics of Action Painting

- Style of abstract art emphasizing the physical act of painting
- Prioritizes the process and energy of creation over the final product
- Features spontaneous, gestural brushwork and dripping or flinging paint onto the canvas (Jackson Pollock)
- Utilizes large-scale canvases to facilitate expansive, energetic movements
- Focuses on the artist's intuitive, subconscious expression

- Rejects traditional painting techniques and representational subject matter
- Explores the inherent properties of paint such as viscosity and fluidity (pouring, dripping)

Spontaneity in Action Painting

- Spontaneity plays a central role in Action Painting
- Artists work quickly and intuitively responding to their immediate impulses
- Minimal planning or preconceived ideas before starting a painting
- Improvisation enables direct, unmediated expression of the artist's inner state
- Paintings develop organically through the creative process
- Artists incorporate chance and accident as essential elements of creation (unintentional drips, splatters)
- The spontaneous, improvisational approach yields highly dynamic, energetic compositions
- Visible brushstrokes, drips, and splatters convey a sense of movement and vitality (Willem de Kooning)

Influences and Techniques in Action Painting

Surrealist influence on Action Painting

- Surrealist automatism involves suppressing conscious control to allow the subconscious mind to guide the creative process
- Aims to access the artist's inner psyche and reveal authentic, uncensored expression
- Action Painters adapted automatism to their physical, gestural approach to painting
- Emphasis on the artist's bodily movements and intuitive responses rather than purely psychological automatism (Franz Kline)
- The Surrealist idea of accessing the subconscious inspired Action Painters to prioritize spontaneity and improvisation
- Rejection of rational, premeditated composition in favor of instinctive, unfiltered expression (Robert Motherwell)

Unconventional techniques in Action Painting

- Action Painters often employed unconventional tools to apply paint
- Sticks, trowels, knives, and even the artist's own hands or body parts (Hans Hofmann)
- Allowed for more varied, expressive mark-making and textures
- Dripping, flinging, and pouring paint directly onto the canvas
- Emphasized the physical properties of the paint and the role of gravity in composition (Jackson Pollock)
- Resulted in complex, layered surfaces with a sense of depth and movement

- Working on unstretched canvases laid flat on the floor
- Enabled artists to move around the painting and approach it from various angles
- Facilitated large-scale, immersive compositions that envelop the viewer (Helen Frankenthaler)
- The use of unconventional tools and techniques contributed to the raw, unrefined aesthetic of Action Painting
- Challenged traditional notions of skill and craftsmanship in favor of authentic, direct expression

4.3 Analysis of Pollock's Drip Technique and Major Works

Jackson Pollock's drip technique revolutionized painting. He placed canvases on the floor, moving around them to drip, pour, and splatter paint using various tools. This innovative approach created complex, layered surfaces with intricate patterns and textures.

Pollock's work embodied the spirit of Abstract Expressionism. His all-over compositions, monumental scale, and pure abstraction tapped into the unconscious mind, reflecting post-war anxiety and individualism. His success helped establish American painting as a major force in modern art.

Pollock's Drip Technique

Pollock's drip technique innovation

- Action painting approach characterized by spontaneous, energetic, and physical engagement with the canvas
- Placed large canvases on the floor to move around all sides and engage with the painting from multiple angles
- Dripped, poured, and splattered paint using various tools (sticks, hardened brushes, basting syringes)
- Incorporated paints of different viscosities to achieve diverse effects and textures
- Built up complex, layered surfaces through the application of multiple paint layers
- Experimented with unconventional media by adding non-traditional materials (sand, broken glass, other objects)

Composition in Pollock's drip paintings

- Employed all-over composition, eliminating a central focal point and distributing visual interest evenly across the canvas
- Created intricate webs of interlacing lines and shapes that formed dynamic, rhythmic patterns
- Often restricted color palette to black, white, and primary colors to emphasize gesture and movement
- Worked on monumental scale, with some canvases over 17 feet wide, creating immersive and engulfing viewing experiences

Interpretation and Significance

Symbolism in Pollock's abstractions

- Believed in tapping into the unconscious mind to express inner thoughts and emotions

- Sought to capture the dynamic energy and movement of the painting process itself
- Rejected traditional representation and recognizable subject matter in favor of pure abstraction
- Reflected the post-war zeitgeist, embodying the anxiety, uncertainty, individualism, and freedom of the era

Significance of Pollock vs Abstract Expressionism

- Played a pioneering role as one of the leading figures of the Abstract Expressionism movement
- Helped define the style and philosophy of Abstract Expressionism
- Inspired a generation of painters to explore abstraction and paved the way for future experimental techniques
- Achieved critical and commercial success, receiving widespread recognition and commanding high prices
- Contributed to shifting the center of the art world from Paris to New York, establishing American painting as a major force in modern art

4.4 Pollock's Impact on Abstract Expressionism and Modern Art

Jackson Pollock revolutionized abstract art with his "drip" technique, pushing boundaries and sparking debates. His work shifted focus from representation to pure abstraction, emphasizing the physical act of painting and the artist's creative process.

Pollock's influence extends beyond art, redefining the artist's role in society and becoming a cultural icon. His legacy continues to inspire contemporary artists, shaping the ongoing exploration of abstraction, materiality, and creative expression across disciplines.

Pollock's Influence and Legacy

Pollock's Abstract Expressionism influence

- Pioneered the "drip" technique, a defining characteristic of Abstract Expressionism
- Allowed for spontaneous, gestural painting without direct contact with the canvas (sticks, hardened brushes, turkey basters)
- Emphasized the physical act of painting and the artist's creative process showcasing the expressive potential of the medium
- Contributed to the shift from representational art to pure abstraction
- Focused on the expressive potential of color, line, and form rather than depicting recognizable subjects (landscapes, portraits)
- Encouraged other artists to explore non-objective, emotionally charged art leading to the development of new abstract styles (Action Painting, Color Field)
- Helped establish New York City as the center of the post-war art world
- Attracted international attention to American art and the Abstract Expressionist movement putting the US at the forefront of avant-garde art

- Inspired a generation of artists to break free from traditional artistic conventions and pursue new forms of creative expression

Critical reception of Pollock's work

- Initially met with mixed reactions from critics and the public
- Some praised his innovative approach and the raw energy of his paintings recognizing their groundbreaking nature
- Others dismissed his work as chaotic, meaningless, or lacking in skill questioning the validity of abstract art
- Controversial "drip" paintings challenged traditional notions of art and aesthetics
- Raised questions about the definition and purpose of art blurring the lines between painting and performance
- Sparked debates about the role of the artist and the validity of abstract art as a legitimate form of creative expression
- Gained increasing recognition and support from influential art critics, such as Clement Greenberg
- Greenberg championed Pollock as a leading figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement elevating his status in the art world
- Helped legitimize Pollock's work and the broader acceptance of abstract art paving the way for future generations of artists

Legacy of Pollock's techniques

- Expanded the possibilities of painting beyond traditional methods and materials
- Encouraged experimentation with unconventional tools, such as sticks, hardened brushes, and turkey basters leading to new creative approaches
- Demonstrated the potential for large-scale, immersive abstract paintings that engulf the viewer in fields of color and gesture
- Influenced the development of other abstract art movements and styles
- Inspired the gestural, spontaneous approach of Action Painting emphasizing the physical act of painting (Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline)
- Paved the way for the Color Field painters, who focused on large areas of unmodulated color exploring the emotive power of hue (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman)
- Continues to inspire contemporary artists working in various media
- Artists have adapted and built upon Pollock's techniques, such as pouring, splattering, and layering creating new forms of abstract expression
- His legacy is evident in the ongoing exploration of abstraction, materiality, and the creative process across artistic disciplines (painting, sculpture, installation)

Pollock's impact on art and culture

- Helped to redefine the role and image of the artist in society

- Embodied the idea of the artist as a rebellious, avant-garde figure challenging established norms and conventions
- Contributed to the mythologizing of the artist's persona and creative process as a form of heroic self-expression
- Became an iconic figure in American art and culture
- His life and work have been the subject of numerous books, documentaries, and films cementing his status as a cultural icon (Jackson Pollock (1987), Pollock (2000))
- His paintings have become some of the most recognizable and valuable works of modern art fetching record prices at auction (No. 5, 1948 sold for \$140 million in 2006)
- Influenced the broader cultural landscape beyond the art world
- His style and techniques have been appropriated in fashion, design, and popular media becoming a symbol of creativity and innovation (clothing patterns, album covers, advertising)
- Has become a symbol of artistic innovation, individualism, and the spirit of post-war America embodying the cultural zeitgeist of the era

Unit 5 – Willem de Kooning: Evolving Themes

5.1 De Kooning's Artistic Journey and Stylistic Evolution

Willem de Kooning's artistic journey spanned decades and continents. From his early training in the Netherlands to his rise as a leading figure in Abstract Expressionism, de Kooning's work evolved dramatically. His move to the US and involvement with the New York School shaped his unique style.

De Kooning's art is characterized by bold brushwork, vibrant colors, and dynamic compositions. He constantly experimented, embracing accidents and reworking paintings. His willingness to blur the lines between figuration and abstraction set him apart, creating a distinctive and influential body of work.

Willem de Kooning's Artistic Journey

Key influences on de Kooning's development

- Early life and training in the Netherlands
- Born in Rotterdam in 1904 grew up in a working-class family
- Attended the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques developed strong draftsmanship skills
- Influenced by Dutch masters (Rembrandt, Vermeer) and modernist movements (Cubism, De Stijl) shaped his early artistic vision
- Move to the United States in 1926
- Settled in New York City immersed himself in the vibrant art scene
- Exposed to American culture and art movements (Precisionism, Social Realism) broadened his artistic horizons
- Works Progress Administration (WPA) artist during the Great Depression
- Created murals and other public works gained experience working on large-scale projects
- Met and collaborated with other artists, including Arshile Gorky forged important artistic relationships
- Involvement in the New York School and Abstract Expressionism
- Developed friendships and artistic relationships with Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and others exchanged ideas and techniques
- Participated in groundbreaking exhibitions at the Sidney Janis Gallery and the 9th Street Art Exhibition established his reputation as a leading figure in the movement

Evolution of de Kooning's style

- Early figurative works (1930s-1940s)
- Influenced by Cubism and Surrealism experimented with fragmentation and distortion
- Depicted human figures, particularly women, in a fragmented and distorted manner explored themes of identity and perception

- Examples: "Seated Woman" (1940) features angular, intersecting planes, "Pink Angels" (1945) showcases biomorphic forms and dream-like imagery
- Transition to abstraction (late 1940s-1950s)
- Began to dissolve figurative elements into abstract forms blurred the lines between representation and abstraction
- Explored the expressive potential of color, line, and form pushed the boundaries of traditional painting
- Examples: "Excavation" (1950) features a complex web of overlapping shapes and colors, "Attic" (1949) demonstrates a move towards more fluid, gestural brushwork
- Abstract Expressionist period (1950s)
- Fully embraced gestural abstraction and spontaneous mark-making embodied the core principles of Action Painting
- Created large-scale, energetic compositions that emphasized the physical act of painting
- Examples: "Composition" (1955) showcases dynamic, sweeping brushstrokes, "Interchanged" (1955) features a dense, layered surface of colors and forms
- Women series (1950s-1960s)
- Returned to the theme of the female figure reinterpreted it through an abstract lens
- Combined abstract and figurative elements in a new way created a sense of ambiguity and tension
- Examples: "Woman I" (1950-52) is a monumental, confrontational figure, "Woman and Bicycle" (1952-53) merges the human form with abstract, geometric shapes
- Late abstractions (1970s-1980s)
- Continued to explore abstraction in a more lyrical and fluid manner embraced a sense of spontaneity and improvisation
- Used brighter colors and more calligraphic brushstrokes created a sense of lightness and movement
- Examples: "Untitled III" (1977) features sweeping, gestural lines and vibrant colors, "Untitled XXV" (1977) demonstrates a more minimalist approach with simplified forms and a restricted color palette

De Kooning's Distinctive Style and Creative Process

Characteristics of de Kooning's technique

- Brushwork
- Vigorous and gestural, conveying a sense of energy and movement captures the artist's physical and emotional engagement with the canvas
- Varies from thick, impasto strokes to thin, translucent washes creates a rich, tactile surface
- Often creates a sense of depth and texture through layering builds up a complex, multi-dimensional composition
- Color palette
- Ranges from muted earth tones (ochre, umber) to vibrant, saturated hues (crimson, cobalt blue)

- Frequently uses combinations of pink, yellow, blue, and green creates a sense of harmony and contrast
- Employs color to create mood, atmosphere, and spatial relationships uses color to guide the viewer's eye through the composition
- Compositional techniques
- Balances chaos and control, spontaneity and deliberation creates a sense of dynamic tension
- Uses fragmentation, collage-like arrangements, and overlapping forms breaks down traditional notions of pictorial space
- Creates dynamic tension through asymmetry and the interplay of positive and negative space activates the entire canvas

Role of experimentation in de Kooning's process

- Willingness to embrace accidents and chance occurrences
- Allows unexpected drips, splatters, and smears to inform the final composition incorporates the inherent qualities of the materials into the work
- Incorporates the inherent qualities of the paint and canvas into the work celebrates the unpredictable nature of the medium
- Constant revision and reworking of paintings
- Scrapes, sands, and overpaints to create complex, multi-layered surfaces reveals the history of the painting's creation
- Views each work as an ongoing exploration rather than a finished product embraces the idea of painting as a journey of discovery
- Pushing boundaries and challenging conventions
- Defies easy categorization and moves between figuration and abstraction refuses to be confined by a single style or approach
- Explores new techniques, materials, and styles throughout his career constantly pushes himself to evolve and grow as an artist
- Embracing the act of painting as a form of self-discovery
- Views the creative process as a means of personal expression and exploration uses painting as a tool for self-reflection and understanding
- Allows the painting to evolve organically, responding to the work as it develops engages in a dialogue with the canvas, letting the painting guide his decisions

5.2 The "Women" Series: Controversy and Significance

Willem de Kooning's "Women" series shook up the art world with its bold, distorted female figures. These paintings blended abstraction and representation, using aggressive brushstrokes and vibrant colors to create intense, ambiguous depictions of femininity.

The series sparked controversy, with some praising its raw energy while others condemned it as misogynistic. It challenged pure abstraction in Abstract Expressionism, influenced later art movements,

and sparked important debates about gender representation in art.

Willem de Kooning's "Women" Series

Visual traits of de Kooning's "Women"

- Distorted, fragmented, abstract female figures with exaggerated features (large eyes, gaping mouths, disproportionate body parts)
- Aggressive brushstrokes and gestural marks convey energy and intensity
- Ambiguous, conflicting representations of femininity depict figures as both alluring and threatening, beautiful and grotesque
- Tension between figuration and abstraction blurs boundaries between the two styles
- Vibrant colors (pinks, reds, yellows, blues) and bold, thick black outlines define contours of figures

Controversy of "Women" paintings

- Divided opinions among art critics and public, with some praising raw energy and psychological depth while others condemned as misogynistic and objectifying
- Feminist critiques argued distorted, fragmented depictions reinforced negative stereotypes of women and perpetuated male dominance and objectification of female body
- Debates about role of figuration in Abstract Expressionism, as "Women" series challenged dominant trend of pure abstraction and raised questions about boundaries between abstraction and representation

Symbolism in distorted female figures

- Exploration of complexities and contradictions of female psyche, with figures embodying range of emotions (desire, vulnerability, aggression, power)
- Reflect artist's own ambivalent feelings towards women and the feminine
- Symbolic representation of "eternal feminine" archetype, evoking idea of feminine as both alluring and threatening, nurturing and destructive
- Psychological projection of artist's inner world, serving as vehicle for de Kooning to explore his own subconscious fears, desires, and conflicts

"Women" series in Abstract Expressionism

- Challenged dominant aesthetic of pure abstraction by reintroducing figuration and representation
- Demonstrated possibility of combining abstraction with recognizable subject matter
- Influenced development of Neo-Expressionism and figurative painting in 1970s and 1980s, inspiring new generation of artists with raw, gestural style and psychological intensity
- Sparked important debates in feminist art criticism, highlighting issues of gender representation and power dynamics in art
- Encouraged feminist artists and critics to challenge traditional depictions of women and reclaim agency over female body

- Remains significant, influential body of work in history of modern art, widely exhibited, studied, and discussed as touchstone for ongoing debates about relationship between art, gender, and representation

5.3 Abstract Landscapes and Late Career Developments

Willem de Kooning's late career saw a dramatic shift from intense figurative works to serene abstract landscapes. This change, influenced by his move to rural East Hampton, marked a new phase in his artistic journey.

De Kooning's abstract landscapes featured vibrant colors, bold brushstrokes, and complex compositions. These works showcased his evolving interests, focusing on the pure experience of painting and challenging traditional notions of landscape art.

Willem de Kooning's Late Career Shift to Abstract Landscapes

Shift to abstract landscapes

- In the late 1950s and early 1960s, de Kooning gradually transitioned from his earlier figurative works to more abstract landscapes
- Some paintings still featured recognizable elements of the figure, but the landscapes became increasingly abstracted over time
- Focus shifted to color, gesture, and the interplay of forms rather than representational content
- De Kooning's move to rural East Hampton, Long Island in 1963 significantly influenced his shift towards abstract landscapes
- Natural surroundings of his new environment (rolling hills, expansive skies, coastal vistas) inspired him to explore the landscape as a subject
- Often worked outdoors, directly observing and responding to the light, colors, and forms of the landscape
- Abstract landscapes marked a departure from the intense psychological and figurative content of his earlier works (Women series)
- Landscapes were more serene, contemplative, and focused on the pure experience of painting itself
- Shift reflected de Kooning's evolving artistic interests and desire to engage with the act of painting on a more fundamental level

Elements of abstract compositions

- De Kooning's abstract landscapes characterized by dynamic interplay of color, line, and form
- Vibrant, expressive colors used in unexpected combinations create a sense of energy and movement (bright yellows, deep blues, earthy reds)
- Bold, gestural brushstrokes convey the artist's physical engagement with the canvas and the painting process
- Complex, layered compositions feature multiple planes and forms intersecting and overlapping, creating a sense of depth and space

- Abstract landscapes incorporate a sense of space and depth, despite their non-representational nature
- Achieved through overlapping forms, variations in color and tone, and interplay of positive and negative space
- Paintings suggest a sense of landscape without directly depicting recognizable elements, inviting viewer interpretation based on personal experiences and associations
- Compositions are often open and expansive, with a sense of freedom and improvisation
- De Kooning allowed the painting process to guide the development of the work, embracing chance and spontaneity
- Paintings often lack a clear focal point, encouraging the viewer's eye to move across the surface and explore various elements and relationships within the composition

Early vs late de Kooning

- Earlier works (Women series) characterized by strong figurative presence and psychological intensity
- Featured distorted, fragmented figures conveying a sense of inner turmoil and existential angst
- Aggressive, jagged brushwork reflected the emotional and psychological content of the paintings
- Later abstract landscapes more serene, contemplative, and focused on the pure experience of painting
- Greater sense of harmony and balance, with a more subtle interplay of color and form
- Fluid, lyrical brushwork conveyed a sense of freedom and improvisation
- Earlier works explored complexities of the human condition (relationships between sexes, individual's struggle for identity and meaning)
- Later abstract landscapes, while still emotionally charged, more concerned with the act of painting itself and artist's direct engagement with the medium
- Landscapes can be seen as a meditation on the beauty and mystery of the natural world, as well as an exploration of the possibilities of abstract painting

Impact of late career developments

- Shift to abstract landscapes had significant impact on de Kooning's legacy and influence
- Demonstrated his versatility as an artist and ability to continue innovating and evolving throughout his career
- Expanded possibilities of abstract painting and challenged traditional notions of what constitutes a landscape
- Abstract landscapes widely celebrated, securing de Kooning's place as one of the most important and influential artists of the 20th century
- Exhibited in major museums and galleries worldwide, continuing to inspire and engage new generations of viewers
- Significant impact on the art market, with many abstract landscapes achieving record prices at auction

- Late career developments influenced subsequent generations of artists working in various styles and mediums
- Inspired artists to explore possibilities of color, gesture, and form in their own work
- Encouraged artists to embrace the act of painting itself and trust in the intuitive, improvisational aspects of the creative process
- De Kooning's legacy helped shape the course of abstract painting in the latter half of the 20th century and beyond, cementing his status as a key figure in the history of modern art

Unit 6 – Rothko: Color Fields and the Sublime

6.1 Rothko's Artistic Philosophy and Color Theory

Rothko's artistic philosophy centered on color's emotional power. He believed color could directly communicate feelings and ideas, creating immersive experiences for viewers. His large, color-saturated canvases aimed to tap into universal human experiences and evoke a sense of the sublime.

Rothko's approach to color theory was multifaceted. He used contrasts, luminosity, and saturation to create visual tension and depth. By manipulating color relationships, he aimed to evoke specific emotional responses and psychological states in viewers, emphasizing the transformative power of art.

Rothko's Artistic Philosophy

Emotional power of color

- Color as a primary means of expression
- Believed color could directly communicate emotions and ideas to the viewer without need for representational elements
- Aimed to create an immersive, meditative experience for the viewer by enveloping them in large, color-saturated canvases
- Color as a spiritual and transcendental force
- Viewed color as a way to tap into universal human experiences that transcend individual differences (collective unconscious)
- Believed color could evoke a sense of the sublime, the infinite, or the ineffable aspects of human existence
- Color as a means of personal expression
- Used color to convey his own emotional states and inner world, expressing his thoughts and feelings through chromatic relationships
- Considered color a direct extension of his psyche, a way to externalize and communicate his innermost experiences

Philosophy's influence on artistic practice

- Belief in the transformative power of art
- Viewed art as a means of personal and societal transformation, capable of inspiring introspection, self-discovery, and spiritual growth
- Aimed to create works that could profoundly impact the viewer, provoking a reevaluation of one's place in the world and relationship to others
- Rejection of materialism and superficiality

- Sought to create art that transcended the mundane, the superficial, and the transient aspects of modern life
- Believed art should address deeper, more enduring aspects of the human experience, such as existential questions, emotional truths, and spiritual yearnings
- Interest in mythology and archetypal symbolism
- Drew inspiration from ancient myths, symbols, and religious iconography from various cultures (Greek mythology, Judeo-Christian traditions)
- Incorporated archetypal themes and universal symbols into his color compositions, seeking to evoke a sense of timelessness and shared human experience

Abstraction vs representational art

- Rejection of figurative and narrative elements
- Believed representational art was limiting and distracting, tying the viewer to specific objects, scenes, or stories
- Sought to eliminate all references to the external world, allowing the viewer to focus solely on the emotional and spiritual impact of color
- Emphasis on the autonomy of color
- Considered color to be a self-sufficient means of expression, capable of conveying meaning and evoking responses without the need for representational elements
- Believed that color, when freed from the constraints of representation, could directly access the viewer's emotions and subconscious
- Creation of immersive color fields
- Developed signature style of large, rectangular color fields that dominated the viewer's field of vision
- Aimed to envelop the viewer in a meditative, color-saturated environment, encouraging a state of contemplation and introspection

Rothko's Color Theory

Rothko's color theory approach

- Use of color contrasts
- Juxtaposed complementary colors (red and green, blue and orange) to create visual tension, vibrancy, and a sense of movement within the composition
- Employed subtle variations in hue and value to create depth, atmosphere, and a sense of space within the color fields
- Emphasis on luminosity
- Used thin, translucent layers of paint to create a sense of inner light, as if the colors were emanating from within the canvas
- Aimed to create colors that appeared to glow, pulsate, or vibrate, evoking a sense of energy and vitality

- Manipulation of saturation
- Varied the intensity and purity of colors to evoke different emotional responses and psychological states
- Used highly saturated colors to create a sense of intensity, passion, or joy, while employing desaturated colors to evoke a sense of contemplation, melancholy, or spirituality
- Attention to color relationships
- Carefully considered the interactions between adjacent colors, exploring how they influence and modify each other
- Used color harmonies (analogous colors) and discords (clashing colors) to create a sense of balance, tension, or dynamism within the composition

6.2 The Development of Color Field Painting

Color Field painting emerged in the 1940s and 50s as a branch of Abstract Expressionism. It focused on large canvases filled with expansive areas of flat, solid color to create a sense of immersion and evoke emotional responses from viewers.

Key figures like Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler pioneered techniques that emphasized color's psychological effects. Color Field painting differed from Action Painting by prioritizing meditative experiences over energetic gestures, influencing later movements in abstract art.

Key Characteristics and Definition of Color Field Painting

Characteristics of Color Field painting

- Large canvases filled with expansive areas of flat, solid color create a sense of immersion and transcendence
- Minimal or no visible brushstrokes result in a smooth, uniform surface that emphasizes the overall consistency and unity of the composition
- Lack of any discernible subject matter or imagery keeps the focus on the emotional and psychological effects of color itself
- Aims to evoke a meditative or contemplative response from the viewer through the use of color and scale (Rothko's rectangular blocks of color)

Origins, Influences, and Comparison to Other Abstract Movements

Origins of Color Field painting

- Emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, evolving from Abstract Expressionism which emphasized spontaneous, gestural brushwork and the artist's subjective expression
- Color Field painters sought to move away from the intense, personal approach of Abstract Expressionism
- Influential precursors include Barnett Newman, known for his "zip" paintings featuring vertical lines dividing large, flat areas of color, and Clyfford Still, who created paintings with jagged, abstract forms and expansive fields of color

- Other influential artists in the development of Color Field painting include Mark Rothko, known for his luminous, rectangular blocks of color, and Adolph Gottlieb, who created abstract compositions with simplified, flat shapes

Color Field vs other abstract movements

- Action Painting, another branch of Abstract Expressionism, emphasized the physical act of painting, visible brushstrokes, and a more energetic, gestural, and spontaneous approach focused on the process of creation rather than the final product (Jackson Pollock)
- Hard-Edge painting, which emerged in the late 1950s, shared similarities with Color Field painting, such as the use of flat, unmodulated areas of color and emphasis on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas
- Hard-Edge painting differed from Color Field painting in its more geometric, precise, and clearly defined shapes and edges, lacking the atmospheric or ethereal qualities often found in Color Field works (Ellsworth Kelly)

Rothko's influence on Color Field

- Mark Rothko is considered one of the most prominent and influential Color Field painters
- Rothko's signature style featured large, rectangular blocks of color with soft, blurred edges meant to evoke deep emotional responses and a sense of spirituality
- His works helped establish Color Field painting as a major movement in abstract art
- Other notable Color Field painters who contributed to the development and popularization of the style include:
 - Helen Frankenthaler, known for her "soak-stain" technique and use of thinned paint
 - Morris Louis, who created poured, veil-like compositions with thinned acrylic paint
 - Kenneth Noland, recognized for his target and chevron paintings featuring concentric circles and angular shapes
- These artists further explored the expressive potential of color and helped solidify Color Field painting as a distinct and influential movement in the history of abstract art

6.3 Rothko's Major Works and Their Interpretation

Mark Rothko's major works revolutionized abstract art with their large-scale, color-focused compositions. His paintings, like "No. 61 (Rust and Blue)" and the Seagram Murals, use simplified forms and carefully chosen hues to evoke deep emotions and contemplation.

Rothko's art invites viewers to immerse themselves in color and form, encouraging introspection and spiritual connection. His legacy as a key Abstract Expressionist continues to influence artists and captivate audiences, showcasing the power of non-representational art to communicate profound human experiences.

Rothko's Major Works

Famous paintings of Rothko

- "No. 61 (Rust and Blue)" (1953)

- Large-scale abstract painting featuring rectangular blocks of color with soft, blurred edges that create a sense of depth and luminosity
- Dominant colors rust-brown and dark blue evoke a somber, contemplative mood
- "Orange and Yellow" (1956)
- Vibrant composition with two rectangular forms that seem to float on the canvas, showcasing Rothko's exploration of color relationships
- Dominant colors orange and yellow create a warm, energetic atmosphere
- Seagram Murals (1958-1959)
- Series of paintings commissioned for the Four Seasons Restaurant in New York, intended to create an immersive, emotional experience for diners
- Dark, somber color palette featuring maroon, brown, and black, reflecting Rothko's belief in the transformative power of art
- Rothko ultimately withdrew the paintings, believing they were unsuitable for a dining setting and that the restaurant's clientele would not appreciate their spiritual and emotional depth

Composition and color in Rothko's works

- Composition
- Simplified, abstract forms often featuring two or three rectangular blocks of color arranged vertically on the canvas, inviting contemplation and introspection
- Soft, blurred edges between color fields create a sense of depth and luminosity, as if the colors are emanating from within the canvas
- Color palette
- Explored a wide range of colors throughout his career, from bright, vibrant hues to more muted, earthy tones
- Later works often featured darker, more somber hues (maroon, brown, black), reflecting Rothko's growing interest in the emotional and spiritual aspects of color
- Color combinations carefully chosen to evoke specific moods and emotions, ranging from joy and exuberance to melancholy and introspection
- Emotional impact
- Paintings invite contemplation and introspection, encouraging viewers to engage with their own emotions and experiences
- Large scale and immersive quality create a sense of being enveloped by the work, fostering a deep, personal connection between the viewer and the painting
- Color combinations and compositions can evoke feelings of spirituality, transcendence, or melancholy, depending on the specific work and the viewer's individual response

Meaning and significance of Rothko's art

- Scale

- Large-scale works create an immersive, all-encompassing experience for the viewer, encouraging a physical and emotional response rather than a purely intellectual one
- Size of the paintings allows viewers to "enter" the work, becoming fully engaged with the colors, forms, and their own emotional reactions
- Viewer's experience
- Paintings invite a meditative, introspective approach, encouraging viewers to spend time with the works and allow their emotional response to evolve and deepen
- Viewers are encouraged to explore their own feelings and experiences, using the paintings as a catalyst for self-reflection and personal growth
- Rothko believed in the transformative power of art to evoke profound emotions and to provide a means of communication between the artist and the viewer
- Cultural context
- Emerged in the post-World War II era, a time of existential questioning and spiritual seeking, as people grappled with the aftermath of the war and the uncertainties of the modern world
- Paintings can be seen as a response to the anxieties and uncertainties of the time, offering a means of transcendence and connection in a fragmented, uncertain world
- Rothko's work is often associated with themes of spirituality, transcendence, and the human condition, reflecting his deep interest in philosophy and the nature of existence

Critical reception and legacy of Rothko

- Critical reception during Rothko's lifetime
- Initially met with mixed reviews, as some critics found his work too abstract or emotionally challenging, struggling to understand his departure from traditional representation
- Gradually gained recognition as a leading figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement, alongside artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning
- Influenced by philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, whose ideas on existentialism and the human condition informed his artistic vision
- Legacy in the decades following his death
- Recognized as one of the most significant artists of the 20th century, whose contributions to the development of abstract art and color field painting are widely acknowledged
- Works continue to be highly sought-after and command high prices at auction, with major paintings selling for tens of millions of dollars
- Influenced subsequent generations of artists, particularly in the fields of Color Field painting and Minimalism, who built upon his explorations of color, form, and emotion
- Paintings remain powerful examples of the emotional and spiritual potential of abstract art, inviting viewers to engage with their own experiences and to find meaning and connection in the face of an uncertain world

6.4 The Concept of the Sublime in Rothko's Art

The sublime in art evokes awe, grandeur, and terror through vast or powerful imagery. Philosophers like Burke and Kant explored its emotional and cognitive effects, contrasting it with beauty and emphasizing human reason's role in comprehending overwhelming experiences.

Rothko's approach to the sublime differed from Romantic and other Abstract Expressionist artists. His large-scale, color-field paintings create immersive experiences, using intense hues and soft edges to evoke emotional responses and spiritual contemplation in viewers.

The Concept of the Sublime

Concept of the sublime

- Aesthetic concept refers to overwhelming sense of awe, grandeur, or terror in the face of something vast or powerful (nature's immensity, the divine)
- Often associated with feelings of insignificance or helplessness
- Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime (1757)
- Focused on emotional and physiological effects
- Emphasized role of terror, obscurity, and power in evoking the sublime
- Contrasted with the beautiful, associated with smallness, smoothness, and delicacy
- Immanuel Kant's concept of the sublime (1790)
- Distinguished between mathematical sublime (immensity of nature) and dynamical sublime (power of nature)
- Argued sublime arises from inability of imagination to comprehend totality of vast or powerful object
- Emphasized role of reason in asserting superiority of human mind over sublime object

Rothko's evocation of sublimity

- Large-scale paintings create immersive experience that overwhelms viewer's visual field
- Expansive size of canvases evokes sense of the vast and infinite (Seagram Murals, Rothko Chapel)
- Use of color contributes to sublime effect
- Intense, saturated colors create emotional impact and sense of depth (Red on Maroon, Orange and Yellow)
- Juxtaposition of contrasting colors creates tension or harmony
- Soft, blurred edges and gradual transitions between color fields
- Creates sense of ambiguity and mystery, evoking obscurity associated with the sublime
- Lack of clear representational content allows viewer to project own emotions and experiences
- Engagement with viewer's subjectivity heightens sense of the sublime as personal, transformative experience

Sublime in Rothko's viewer experience

- Believed art should serve spiritual and emotional purpose, transcending mere decoration or representation
- Sought to create paintings that engulf viewer and evoke sense of the sublime
- Interest in sublime influenced by readings of philosophy and spirituality (Friedrich Nietzsche, concept of "tragic and timeless")
- Paintings designed to be viewed up close, creating intimacy and immersion
- Believed proximity allows viewer to enter meditative, transformative state
- Simplification of form and elimination of representational content intended to remove distractions
- Allows viewer to focus on pure emotional and spiritual impact, facilitating sublime experience

Rothko's sublime vs other artists

- Romantic artists (Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner) depicted sublime through dramatic, naturalistic landscapes
- Rothko's abstract approach focused on emotional and spiritual impact of color and form
- Abstract Expressionists (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning) explored sublime through gestural, spontaneous mark-making
- Rothko's sublime more contemplative and meditative, emphasizing color fields and soft transitions
- Rothko's sublime closely tied to viewer's experience and emotional response
- Sets him apart from highly personal, autobiographical approach of some Abstract Expressionists
- Rothko's sustained engagement with sublime throughout career
- Suggests deeper commitment compared to some Abstract Expressionists who moved away from concept in later works

Unit 7 – Key Figures: Kline, Motherwell, Newman, Still

7.1 Franz Kline: Gestural Abstraction and Black-and-White Compositions

Franz Kline's gestural abstraction revolutionized painting with bold, energetic brushstrokes and a stark black-and-white palette. His work focused on the expressive potential of brushwork itself, creating dynamic compositions that conveyed raw emotion and movement.

Kline's background in illustration and calligraphy influenced his keen sense of composition and mark-making. His intuitive approach emphasized spontaneity, with paintings often completed in intense sessions, reflecting the improvisational nature of jazz music.

Franz Kline's Gestural Abstraction

Gestural brushwork in Kline's paintings

- Bold, energetic brushstrokes convey a sense of movement and dynamism reflecting the artist's physical actions and emotional state (anger, passion)
- Varying brush sizes and techniques create visual contrast and depth with thick, heavy strokes alongside thinner, more delicate lines (impasto, dry brush)
- Non-representational forms focus on the expressive potential of the brushwork itself in the absence of recognizable subject matter (landscapes, portraits)
- Compositional balance achieved through the interplay between positive and negative space with brushstrokes often extending beyond the canvas edges, suggesting continuity (all-over composition)

Impact of limited color palette

- High contrast created by the stark juxtaposition of black and white heightens the visual impact and drama of the paintings (chiaroscuro)
- Absence of color strips away distractions allowing the viewer to focus on the raw energy of the brushwork (monochromatic)
- Black and white palette evokes a sense of urgency and immediacy conveying a range of emotions, from aggression to contemplation (anger, serenity)
- Interplay between black and white creates a sense of depth and volume suggesting the presence of light and shadow, adding a dimensional quality to the flat surface (tenebrism)

Influences and Creative Process

Influence of illustration and calligraphy

- Graphic design experience as a commercial illustrator and designer developed Kline's keen sense of composition and visual balance (layouts, typography)

- Calligraphic elements incorporated gestural marks reminiscent of calligraphy reflecting an interest in the expressive potential of line and mark-making (Chinese calligraphy, Japanese Zen brushwork)
- Enlarged scale allowed for more expansive, physically engaging brushwork in the transition from small-scale illustrations to large-scale abstract paintings (murals)
- Simplification of forms reflects a process of abstraction and distillation reducing complex shapes to essential lines and marks (minimalism)

Role of spontaneity in creation

- Intuitive approach emphasizes the immediacy of the creative act with paintings often completed in a single, intense session (action painting)
- Gestural mark-making conveys a sense of spontaneity and improvisation with brushstrokes reflecting the artist's physical movements and energy (dripping, flicking)
- Embrace of accidents and chance adds an element of unpredictability and vitality to the compositions through the incorporation of drips, splatters, and unintentional marks (automatism)
- Jazz influence seen in Kline's interest in the improvisational nature of jazz music with paintings often compared to the spontaneous, free-flowing quality of jazz improvisation (bebop, free jazz)

7.2 Robert Motherwell: Collage and the "Elegy" Series

Robert Motherwell's collage techniques revolutionized abstract expressionism. He blended torn paper and newsprint into his paintings, adding depth and texture. This approach bridged his abstract style with political engagement, incorporating real-world elements to address social issues.

The "Elegy to the Spanish Republic" series showcases Motherwell's symbolic power. Over 150 paintings feature black vertical forms on white backgrounds, evoking mourning and loss. These works transcend specific events, addressing universal themes of human struggle and oppression.

Robert Motherwell's Collage Techniques and Themes

Collage in abstract expressionism

- Motherwell frequently incorporated collage elements into his paintings
- Used torn paper, newsprint, and other materials (magazines, book pages) to add visual interest and complexity
- Collage elements added texture and depth to his abstract compositions, creating a sense of layering and history
- Collage techniques influenced by Cubism and Dada art movements
- Appreciated the way collage could disrupt the picture plane and challenge traditional notions of representation
- Allowed for the incorporation of real-world elements into abstract works, blurring the line between art and life
- Collage served as a bridge between Motherwell's interest in abstraction and his desire to engage with political and social issues

- Incorporated newspaper clippings and other printed materials related to current events (Spanish Civil War, Vietnam War)
- Used collage to create a dialogue between art and the world around him, reflecting his belief in the social responsibility of the artist

Symbolism of "Elegy" series

- "Elegy to the Spanish Republic" is a series of over 150 paintings created by Motherwell between 1948 and 1991
- Series was a response to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the defeat of the Republican government by fascist forces led by Francisco Franco
- Paintings feature recurring motifs of black vertical forms against a white background, evoking a sense of mourning and loss
- Black vertical forms are often interpreted as symbolic of death, mourning, and the human struggle against oppression
- Forms resemble funeral processions or the bars of a prison cell, suggesting confinement and suffering
- Stark contrast between black and white heightens the emotional impact of the works, creating a sense of drama and intensity
- Series serves as a powerful statement on the human cost of war and political oppression
- Reflects Motherwell's ongoing engagement with social and political issues, particularly his opposition to fascism and totalitarianism
- Demonstrates the ability of abstract art to convey complex emotions and ideas, transcending specific historical events to address universal themes

Influences and Artistic Techniques

Surrealism's influence on Motherwell

- Motherwell was deeply influenced by Surrealism, particularly the concept of automatism
- Automatism involves creating art without conscious control, allowing the subconscious mind to guide the creative process
- Motherwell embraced the idea of spontaneous, intuitive mark-making as a way to access deeper levels of meaning and emotion
- Incorporated elements of chance and improvisation into his work
- Would often begin paintings without a preconceived plan, allowing the composition to evolve organically through the act of painting
- Used techniques like dripping, splattering, and blotting to create unexpected effects and textures
- Surrealist influence can be seen in Motherwell's use of abstract forms and symbols
- Forms often suggest dreamlike or psychological states, evoking the irrational and mysterious aspects of the subconscious mind

- Symbols, such as the "Elegy" motif, take on a powerful emotional resonance, functioning as visual metaphors for complex ideas and experiences

Elements of Motherwell's abstractions

- Motherwell's use of color was often stark and dramatic
- Frequently used black and white to create high-contrast compositions with a sense of emotional intensity
- Also incorporated bold, primary colors (red, blue, yellow) to create a sense of energy and dynamism
- Shapes in Motherwell's paintings are often simple and geometric
- Rectangles, ovals, and lines are common motifs, used to create a sense of structure and order
- Shapes are arranged in dynamic, asymmetrical compositions that create a sense of movement and tension, suggesting the inner turmoil of the artist
- Composition was a key element of Motherwell's artistic practice
- Used principles of balance, rhythm, and proportion to create visually striking arrangements that draw the viewer into the work
- Often divided the canvas into distinct zones or sections, creating a sense of spatial depth and complexity
- Compositions are carefully constructed to guide the viewer's eye and create a powerful emotional impact, inviting contemplation and reflection

7.3 Barnett Newman: "Zip" Paintings and Color Field Abstraction

Barnett Newman's "Zip" paintings revolutionized abstract expressionism with their bold simplicity. Thin vertical lines divide expansive color fields, creating focal points and altering spatial perception. These works embody Newman's quest to evoke the sublime through art.

Newman's monumental canvases engulf viewers, encouraging intimate engagement with color and form. His color field approach contrasts with gestural abstraction, offering a more contemplative experience. Both styles reject traditional representation, prioritizing emotional and spiritual expression.

Barnett Newman's "Zip" Paintings

Zip concept in Newman's paintings

- Thin, vertical lines dividing Newman's color field paintings
- Created by leaving thin strips of canvas unpainted or painting contrasting colors
- Serve as visual and conceptual anchors in expansive color fields
- Provide focal points for viewer's eye to rest upon
- Create sense of depth and dimensionality in otherwise flat planes of color
- Zips alter viewer's perception of space within painting
- Suggest division or compartmentalization of canvas
- Can create tension or harmony between color fields (red and blue, black and white)

- Vertical orientation of zips emphasizes height of canvas
- Encourages viewer's eye to move up and down painting
- Enhances sense of scale and monumentality in Newman's works (*Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, *Cathedra*)

Spiritual foundations of abstract expressionism

- Newman's paintings influenced by interest in Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah
- Believed in spiritual potential of abstract art to convey profound emotions and ideas
- Saw color field paintings as means of creating transcendent experience for viewer
- Works informed by philosophical beliefs
- Influenced by concept of "sublime" as described by philosophers (Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant)
- Sought to create paintings evoking awe, vastness, and the infinite
- Simplicity and reductionism in paintings intended to strip away distractions
- Allow viewer to contemplate essential nature of existence and their place within universe
- Believed abstract expressionist works could serve as conduit for spiritual and emotional experiences
- Encourage introspection and self-reflection in viewer (*Onement I*, *The Stations of the Cross*)

Scale and Abstraction in Newman's Works

Scale in large-format works

- Newman's paintings known for monumental scale
- Often measuring over 6 feet in height and width
- Intended to engulf viewer's field of vision and create immersive experience
- Large scale emphasizes physical presence of painting
- Encourages viewer to engage with work on bodily level
- Creates sense of intimacy and direct interaction between viewer and painting
- Proportions of color fields and zips carefully considered
- Balanced to create harmony and equilibrium
- Can also create tension or asymmetry, challenging viewer's expectations (*Broken Obelisk*, *Anna's Light*)
- Expansive scale allows for subtle variations in color and texture to become more apparent
- Encourages close inspection and contemplation of surface qualities

Color field vs gestural abstraction

- Newman's color field abstraction differs from gestural abstraction of contemporaries (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning)
- Color field abstraction emphasizes large, flat planes of color with minimal evidence of artist's hand

- Gestural abstraction characterized by energetic, expressive brushstrokes and visible trace of artist's movement
- Newman's paintings more contemplative and meditative in nature
- Encourage slower, more sustained engagement from viewer
- Gestural abstraction often conveys spontaneity, dynamism, and action
- Both color field and gestural abstraction reject traditional notions of representation and narrative in art
- Prioritize expressive potential of color, form, and materiality of medium
- Newman's color field paintings and gestural abstractions of contemporaries influential in development of abstract expressionism
- Contributed to movement's emphasis on large-scale, non-representational works privileging artist's subjective experience and viewer's emotional response

7.4 Clyfford Still: Large-Scale Abstract Landscapes

Clyfford Still's massive abstract landscapes capture the raw power of nature. His huge canvases, filled with jagged shapes and earthy colors, overwhelm viewers with a sense of awe. Still's work evokes the vast, untamed beauty of the American West.

Growing up on farms in North Dakota and Washington deeply influenced Still's art. His rural roots and connection to the land shine through in his paintings, which express the essence of the American landscape through abstract forms and bold colors.

Clyfford Still's Large-Scale Abstract Landscapes

Scale and abstraction for the sublime

- Still's paintings feature immense scale, often measuring over 10 feet in height or width engulf the viewer, creating an overwhelming sensory experience that evokes a sense of awe and insignificance
- Abstract forms dominate Still's compositions with jagged, vertical shapes resembling craggy cliffs or rock formations (Half Dome) and horizontal bands evoking vast, open plains or horizons (Great Plains)
- The combination of scale and abstract forms elicits a sense of the sublime, an awe-inspiring, almost intimidating sense of grandeur and power in nature (Niagara Falls) that captures the raw, untamed beauty of the American landscape, evoking feelings of reverence in the viewer

Color and texture for depth

- Still's palette consists primarily of earthy tones, such as deep reds, ochres, and black contribute to the sense of rawness and primal energy in his works (soil, clay)
- Contrasting colors, such as bright yellows or oranges, create focal points and suggest depth through the juxtaposition of dark and light hues that creates a dynamic interplay drawing the viewer's eye through the composition
- Still employs a variety of textures, from smooth, flat areas to thick, impasto brushstrokes add a tactile quality to the paintings, enhancing the sense of depth and dimensionality
- Rough, heavily-applied paint suggests the rugged surfaces of rock formations (Grand Canyon) or the rich, organic quality of soil (fertile farmland)

Still's Artistic Influences and Legacy

Rural influence on abstract expressionism

- Still grew up on a farm in North Dakota and later lived in Washington state and California with experiences in these rural, western environments deeply influencing his artistic vision
- The vast, open spaces and rugged terrain of the American West are reflected in the scale and abstract forms of Still's paintings
- Vertical shapes and jagged edges evoke the towering mountains and canyons of the western landscape (Rocky Mountains)
- Horizontal bands and expansive fields of color suggest the endless horizons and sprawling plains of the West (Great Basin)
- Still's connection to the land and his rural roots imbue his abstract expressionist works with a sense of authenticity and primal energy, expressing the essence of the American landscape and the artist's deep, spiritual connection to it through a form of visual poetry

Rejection of art market vs legacy

- Still was known for his fiercely independent and uncompromising stance toward the art world, refusing to sell his paintings through commercial galleries, believing that the art market corrupted the integrity of an artist's work
- Still's rejection of the art market led to his relative obscurity during his lifetime while contemporaries (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning) gained widespread recognition, Still remained on the periphery of the Abstract Expressionist movement
- However, Still's uncompromising commitment to his artistic vision has solidified his legacy as a key figure in the development of Abstract Expressionism
- His innovative use of scale, color, and texture paved the way for future generations of abstract artists (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman)
- The Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, Colorado, which houses 95% of his total output, has helped cement his reputation as a master of 20th-century American art

Unit 8 – Sculpture: Smith and Nevelson's Assemblages

8.1 Abstract Expressionist Sculpture: Techniques and Materials

Abstract Expressionist sculpture pushed boundaries with innovative techniques and materials. Artists welded, assembled, carved, and cast to create expressive forms. They used metal, wood, and found objects to challenge traditional notions of sculpture.

The creative process was as important as the final product. Sculptors embraced spontaneity, worked directly with materials, and explored form and space. This approach set Abstract Expressionism apart from other movements like Surrealism, Constructivism, and Minimalism.

Key Techniques and Materials in Abstract Expressionist Sculpture

Techniques in Abstract Expressionist sculpture

- Welding joined metal pieces together enabling spontaneous, gestural forms (David Smith)
- Assemblage combined found objects and materials creating unconventional, expressive compositions (Louise Nevelson's monochromatic wooden assemblages)
- Direct carving sculpted directly into materials like wood or stone emphasizing the inherent qualities of the material (Isamu Noguchi's organic, biomorphic forms)
- Casting poured molten metal or other materials into molds allowing for experimentation with abstract forms (Ibram Lassaw's cast bronze sculptures)

Materials for artistic expression

- Metal provided structural strength for large-scale works, allowed for dynamic, gestural forms, and reflected the industrial and technological advancements of the time (steel, bronze)
- Wood offered a warm, organic quality, allowed for direct carving and assemblage techniques, and conveyed a sense of immediacy and connection to nature (pine, oak, mahogany)
- Found objects incorporated everyday materials into art, challenged traditional notions of sculpture, and reflected the artists' interest in the urban environment and consumer culture (scrap metal, furniture parts, discarded wood)

Process and Product in Abstract Expressionist Sculpture

Process vs product in sculpture

- Emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation 1. Artists embraced chance and accident in the creative process 2. Sculptures often evolved through the act of making 3. Process was seen as an integral part of the final work
- Direct interaction with materials
- Artists worked directly with their chosen media (carving, welding, assembling)

- Physicality of the sculpting process was evident in the finished pieces through visible tool marks, rough surfaces, and gestural forms
- Sculptures retained a sense of the artist's hand and gesture expressing their unique artistic vision
- Exploration of form and space
- Artists investigated the interplay between positive and negative space blurring boundaries and creating dynamic compositions
- Sculptures often blurred the line between two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms challenging traditional notions of sculpture
- Final works invited viewers to engage with the sculpture from multiple perspectives encouraging active participation and interpretation

Abstract Expressionism vs other movements

- Surrealism
- Similarities: Use of found objects and unconventional materials (readymades, assemblages)
- Differences: Surrealists often used objects for their symbolic meanings exploring the subconscious, while Abstract Expressionists focused on formal qualities and the expressive potential of materials
- Constructivism
- Similarities: Emphasis on industrial materials and geometric forms (steel, glass, concrete)
- Differences: Constructivists focused on structured, mathematical compositions reflecting social and political ideals, while Abstract Expressionists embraced spontaneity and gesture expressing individual emotions and experiences
- Minimalism
- Similarities: Exploration of form and space, use of industrial materials (steel, concrete, plexiglass)
- Differences: Minimalists sought to eliminate any trace of the artist's hand creating impersonal, geometric forms, while Abstract Expressionists celebrated the physicality of the creative process and the unique mark of the artist

8.2 David Smith: Welded Steel Sculptures and Artistic Innovation

David Smith revolutionized sculpture with welded steel. He transformed industrial materials into abstract art, blending geometric and organic forms. His work challenged traditional sculpting methods and expanded the possibilities of three-dimensional expression.

Smith's impact on Abstract Expressionism was profound. He inspired artists to explore unconventional materials and techniques, paving the way for large-scale, abstract sculptures that emphasized the inherent properties of industrial materials.

David Smith's Welded Steel Sculptures

Smith's welded steel approach

- Pioneered the use of welded steel as a medium for sculpture in the United States

- Utilized industrial materials (scrap metal, found objects) and techniques (welding) to create abstract forms
- Incorporated discarded machine parts and tools into his compositions, transforming them into artistic elements
- Developed a distinctive visual language through the manipulation of steel
- Explored the inherent properties of the material such as strength, malleability, and ability to create linear and planar forms
- Embraced the raw, unfinished appearance of welded steel, celebrating its industrial qualities (visible seams, imperfections)
- Created sculptures that combined geometric and organic forms
- Juxtaposed angular, geometric shapes (cubes, rectangles) with fluid, curvilinear elements (curves, spirals)
- Achieved a sense of balance and dynamism through the interplay of contrasting forms (positive and negative space)

Industrial materials in Smith's art

- Utilized welding, a technique commonly used in industrial fabrication, to construct his sculptures
- Allowed for the direct manipulation of steel, enabling him to create complex, three-dimensional forms (interlocking shapes, overlapping planes)
- Provided a means to work on a larger scale than traditional sculpting methods (carving, modeling)
- Incorporated found objects and scrap metal from industrial sources
- Used discarded machine parts (gears, springs), tools (hammers, wrenches), and other industrial debris as raw materials
- Transformed these objects into artistic elements, imbuing them with new meaning and context
- Embraced the aesthetic qualities of industrial materials
- Celebrated the raw, unfinished appearance of welded steel, leaving visible seams and imperfections
- Highlighted the inherent properties of the material such as strength, durability, and ability to create structural forms (frameworks, scaffolding)

Smith's impact on Abstract Expressionism

- Expanded the possibilities of sculpture by introducing welded steel as a viable medium
- Challenged traditional notions of sculpture as carved or modeled forms (marble, clay)
- Demonstrated the potential for industrial materials and techniques to be used for artistic expression
- Influenced the development of Abstract Expressionist sculpture
- Inspired other artists (Mark di Suvero, Richard Stankiewicz) to explore the use of unconventional materials and methods
- Contributed to the shift towards large-scale, abstract sculptural forms that emphasized the inherent properties of materials (weight, texture)

- Paved the way for the integration of sculpture and architecture
- Created works that blurred the boundaries between sculpture and the built environment (public installations, site-specific works)
- Encouraged the exploration of sculpture as a means to define and transform space (outdoor sculptures, urban interventions)

Interpretation and Symbolism in Smith's Sculptures

Symbolism in Smith's compositions

- Explored themes of nature, industry, and the human condition through abstract forms
- Used organic shapes and curves to evoke natural elements and processes (growth, decay)
- Incorporated geometric forms and industrial materials to symbolize the impact of technology and modernization (mechanization, urbanization)
- Imbued his sculptures with a sense of energy and movement
- Created dynamic compositions that suggested growth, transformation, and the passage of time (ascending forms, spiraling shapes)
- Used the interplay of positive and negative space to create a sense of tension and balance (voids, openings)
- Expressed personal experiences and emotions through his sculptural language
- Drew inspiration from his life experiences including his work in factories and his service in World War II (themes of labor, conflict)
- Conveyed a range of emotions from the exuberance of creativity to the trauma of war and loss through the manipulation of form and material (jagged edges, twisted shapes)

8.3 Louise Nevelson: Assemblage and Monochromatic Sculptures

Louise Nevelson revolutionized sculpture with her unique assemblage technique. She transformed discarded wooden objects into striking compositions, arranging them in box-like structures and painting them in a single color to create unified, abstract forms.

Nevelson's work explored themes of memory, identity, and urban life. By incorporating found objects from city streets, she imbued her sculptures with a sense of history and personal experience, inviting viewers to contemplate the relationship between individuals and their environment.

Louise Nevelson's Sculptural Techniques

Concept of assemblage in Nevelson's sculptures

- Artistic technique creating three-dimensional works by combining and arranging found objects and materials
- Incorporated discarded wooden objects (furniture parts, architectural elements, debris)
- Carefully selected and arranged objects to create visually striking compositions
- Constructed assemblages within box-like structures or frames

- Contained spaces organized and unified diverse elements within the sculpture
- Transformed everyday objects into abstract, sculptural forms
- Removed objects from original contexts and combined them in new ways
- Imbued objects with new meanings and aesthetic qualities

Impact of monochromatic color schemes

- Painted assemblage sculptures in a single, uniform color, creating monochromatic works
- Dominant color choices: black ("Sky Cathedral" series), white, gold
- Single color unified disparate elements, creating a cohesive visual experience
- Emphasized overall form and structure rather than individual components
- Color influenced emotional and psychological impact
- Black evoked mystery, depth, solemnity
- White suggested purity, simplicity, ethereal lightness
- Gold conveyed opulence, value, timelessness
- Interplay of light and shadow on monochromatic surfaces added depth and dynamism
- Uniform color accentuated contrasts between raised and recessed areas, creating visually engaging experience

Thematic and Conceptual Elements in Nevelson's Work

Role of found objects in expression

- Reflected interest in urban environment and discarded remnants of human life
- Incorporated materials imbued sculptures with sense of history, memory, passage of time
- Found objects served as symbols of personal experiences and collective experiences of urban dwellers
- Prominently featured architectural elements (moldings, dowels, furniture parts)
- Referenced built environment and structures shaping human life
- Highlighted interest in relationship between sculpture and space, engaging with surrounding environment
- Found objects underwent transformation and recontextualization
- Incorporated into artistic compositions, giving them new life and meaning
- Juxtaposition of diverse found objects created visual and conceptual tension, inviting contemplation of relationships between elements

Themes in Nevelson's assemblage works

- Explored theme of memory and its relationship to personal and collective identity

- Use of found objects and discarded materials evoked nostalgia and passage of time
- Assemblages served as repositories of memories for artist and viewers
- Theme of identity closely tied to use of found objects and process of assemblage
- Selecting and arranging specific objects reflected personal history, experiences, sense of self
- Assembling disparate elements into cohesive whole mirrored process of constructing and negotiating identity
- Deeply rooted in experience of urban life, particularly New York City
- Found objects and architectural elements sourced from streets and buildings of the city
- Dense, layered compositions echoed complexity and dynamism of urban environment
- Explored relationship between individual and city, highlighting ways urban spaces shape human experience and identity

Unit 9 – Abstract Expressionism:

Post-WWII Impact

9.1 The Cold War and American Cultural Diplomacy

The Cold War shaped Abstract Expressionism's rise as a symbol of American freedom and creativity. The U.S. government and cultural institutions actively promoted this art movement to counter Soviet influence and showcase American cultural superiority.

Abstract Expressionism became a tool in cultural diplomacy, demonstrating the virtues of capitalism and democracy. Government-sponsored exhibitions introduced the movement to global audiences, establishing it as a significant international art phenomenon.

The Cold War and Abstract Expressionism

Cold War's impact on Abstract Expressionism

- Cold War tensions between the United States and Soviet Union significantly influenced development and promotion of Abstract Expressionism (1947-1991)
- U.S. promoted cultural superiority and political ideology through arts to counter Soviet influence
- Abstract Expressionism symbolized American values of freedom, individuality, and creativity (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning)
- U.S. government and cultural institutions actively supported and promoted Abstract Expressionism
- Funding provided to artists and exhibitions through State Department and Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)
- Support helped establish Abstract Expressionism as dominant post-World War II art movement (1950s-1960s)

Abstract Expressionism in cultural diplomacy

- Abstract Expressionism showcased American cultural achievements and promoted democratic values abroad
- Freedom of expression in Abstract Expressionism countered Soviet socialist realism
- Promoting Abstract Expressionism demonstrated superiority of U.S. political and economic system (capitalism, democracy)
- U.S. State Department organized international exhibitions featuring Abstract Expressionist works
- Exhibitions improved global perception of U.S. and its cultural output (Europe, Asia, Latin America)
- Countered Soviet propaganda and influenced public opinion in key regions

Government exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism

- Government-sponsored exhibitions introduced Abstract Expressionism to international audiences

- U.S. State Department organized and funded major exhibitions: "Advancing American Art" (1946), "Modern Art in the United States" (1955)
- Exhibitions traveled to various countries, showcasing works of prominent Abstract Expressionists (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko)
- Exhibitions established Abstract Expressionism as significant international art movement
- Attracted widespread attention from critics, artists, and general public
- Contributed to global recognition and appreciation of American art and culture (Venice Biennale, São Paulo Biennial)

The CIA and Abstract Expressionism

CIA's role in Abstract Expressionism

- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) covertly promoted Abstract Expressionism during Cold War
- CIA recognized potential of Abstract Expressionism as cultural weapon against Soviet Union
- Provided financial support to exhibitions, publications, and events promoting Abstract Expressionism through front organizations (Congress for Cultural Freedom)
- CIA's involvement part of larger strategy to win "hearts and minds" in Europe and other regions
- Supporting Abstract Expressionism demonstrated vitality and creativity of American culture
- Countered Soviet propaganda and influenced intellectuals and opinion-makers abroad (Paris, Berlin, Rome)
- CIA's involvement in promoting Abstract Expressionism not revealed until years later
- Disclosure of CIA's cultural activities led to debates about relationship between art and politics
- Critics argued CIA involvement compromised autonomy and integrity of art world, while others viewed it as necessary tool in ideological battle of Cold War (1950s-1960s)

9.2 Existentialism and Its Influence on Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism and Existentialism shared a deep connection in post-war America. Artists embraced existentialist ideas of individual freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning, using these concepts to fuel their groundbreaking artistic techniques and themes.

The movement's emphasis on spontaneity, personal expression, and rejection of traditional art forms mirrored existentialist philosophy. Artists like Pollock, Rothko, and de Kooning created works that explored the human condition, anxiety, and the struggle for identity in a chaotic world.

Existentialism and Abstract Expressionism

Existentialism and key concepts

- Philosophical movement emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and responsibility
- Stresses uniqueness and isolation of individual experience in hostile or indifferent universe
- Believes individuals solely responsible for giving meaning to their lives and living authentically

- Key concepts include:
- Existence precedes essence: Individuals create essence and meaning of their own lives through choices and actions
- Absurdity: Inherent meaninglessness of life and human struggle to find meaning in chaotic, irrational universe (Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus")
- Authenticity: Living in accordance with one's own values and beliefs, rather than conforming to societal norms or expectations (Sartre's "Being and Nothingness")
- Angst: Profound feeling of dread, anxiety, or despair in face of life's uncertainties and realization of one's own freedom and responsibility (Kierkegaard's "The Concept of Anxiety")

Existentialism in Abstract Expressionism

- Abstract Expressionist artists influenced by existentialist ideas, shaping artistic themes and techniques:
- Emphasis on individual: Focused on artist's subjective experience and personal expression (Pollock's drip paintings)
- Spontaneity and improvisation: Employed spontaneous, gestural brushwork to convey authentic emotions and experiences (de Kooning's "Women" series)
- Rejection of traditional artistic conventions: Abandoned representational art in favor of abstract forms and compositions (Rothko's color field paintings)

Existentialist themes in art

- Human condition: Depicted struggles, anxieties, and emotions of modern life (Newman's "Vir Heroicus Sublimis")
- Search for meaning: Reflected existentialist quest for purpose and significance in chaotic world (Gorky's "The Liver is the Cock's Comb")
- Power of individual: Celebrated creative potential and unique perspective of individual artist (Kline's "Chief")

Existentialism across Abstract Expressionists

- Embraced existentialist notions of individualism, freedom, and authenticity in their work:
- Action painting: Used dynamic, gestural techniques to express individual emotions and experiences (Pollock, de Kooning)
- Color field painting: Created large, color-saturated canvases evoking deep, personal responses (Rothko, Newman)
- Automatic drawing: Employed automatic drawing techniques to tap into subconscious and create authentic, spontaneous works (Baziotes, Gorky)
- Emphasized:
- Primacy of individual artist's creative process and personal expression
- Freedom to break from traditional artistic conventions and explore new forms of expression

- Importance of creating authentic, emotionally charged works reflecting artist's innermost thoughts and feelings
- Individual approaches and influences varied:
 - Jackson Pollock: Drip paintings embodied existentialist notions of spontaneity, authenticity, and primacy of creative act itself
 - Mark Rothko: Color field paintings explored existentialist themes of emptiness, despair, and search for meaning through emotional power of color and scale
 - Willem de Kooning: Figurative abstractions grappled with existentialist ideas of human condition, anxiety, and struggle for identity in modern world
 - Barnett Newman: "Zip" paintings and sculptural works investigated existentialist concepts of sublime, void, and individual's place in universe
- Despite differences, all Abstract Expressionist artists:
 - Drew inspiration from existentialist philosophy to create deeply personal, emotionally charged works
 - Rejected traditional artistic conventions in favor of new, experimental forms of expression
 - Sought to capture authentic, subjective experience of individual artist in chaotic, uncertain world

9.3 Gender Roles and Women Artists in Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism was dominated by men, but women artists made significant contributions despite facing gender bias and limited opportunities. They struggled to be taken seriously and often had to balance artistic ambitions with societal expectations.

Women like Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, and Joan Mitchell developed unique styles and techniques. Their work challenged gender stereotypes and expanded the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism, though recognition often came later in life or posthumously.

Gender Roles and Women Artists in Abstract Expressionism

Gender dynamics in Abstract Expressionism

- Male dominance in the art world
- Majority of well-known Abstract Expressionist artists were men (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning)
- Women artists often overshadowed and undervalued despite their significant contributions
- Gender stereotypes and expectations
 - Women expected to prioritize domestic roles (homemaking, child-rearing) over artistic careers
 - Perception of women as muses or supportive partners rather than independent artists (Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning)
- Unequal access to resources and opportunities
- Limited representation in galleries, exhibitions, and art criticism compared to male counterparts
- Difficulty in securing financial support and patronage due to gender bias

Challenges for women artists

- Lack of critical attention and serious consideration
- Women's work often dismissed as derivative or inferior to male counterparts (Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell)
- Gendered language in art criticism, emphasizing masculinity and virility associated with Abstract Expressionism
- Exclusion from important social networks and artistic circles
- Male-only gatherings and clubs, such as The Club and the Cedar Tavern, where crucial connections and discussions took place
- Limited access to influential art dealers, collectors, and curators who could advance their careers
- Balancing artistic ambitions with societal expectations
- Pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and prioritize family responsibilities over artistic pursuits
- Difficulty in asserting themselves as serious, committed artists in the face of societal skepticism

Contributions of women Abstract Expressionists

- Lee Krasner
 - Developed a unique style combining gestural brushwork and collage techniques ("Untitled", 1949)
 - Influenced by her husband, Jackson Pollock, but maintained her own distinct artistic identity
 - Major works include "Gaea" (1966), showcasing her bold use of color and dynamic compositions
- Elaine de Kooning
 - Known for her dynamic portraits and figurative abstractions that challenged traditional gender roles
 - Contributed to the development of action painting and gestural abstraction alongside male peers
 - Notable works include "Fairfield Porter #1" (1954) and "Bacchus #3" (1978), demonstrating her expressive brushwork
- Other significant women Abstract Expressionists
 - Helen Frankenthaler, known for her innovative color field paintings and soak-stain technique ("Mountains and Sea", 1952)
 - Joan Mitchell, recognized for her large-scale, emotionally charged canvases that explored personal experiences ("Ladybug", 1957)

Impact of gender on artistic legacy

- Delayed recognition and undervaluation
- Women artists' contributions often overlooked or minimized during their lifetimes due to gender bias
- Posthumous reevaluation and increased appreciation in recent decades through exhibitions and scholarly works

- Challenges in establishing independent artistic identities
- Women artists often defined in relation to male partners or mentors (Krasner to Pollock, Elaine de Kooning to Willem de Kooning)
- Struggle to break free from gendered labels and comparisons that diminished their individual achievements
- Ongoing efforts to reassess and celebrate women's contributions
- Exhibitions and scholarly works focusing on women Abstract Expressionists aim to rectify historical imbalances
- Reevaluation of the movement's history to include diverse voices and experiences beyond the male-centric narrative

Unit 10 – Abstract Expressionism: Paris to New York Shift

10.1 The Role of Art Critics: Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Others

Abstract Expressionism sparked heated debates among critics. Clement Greenberg championed the movement's formal qualities, while Harold Rosenberg focused on the act of painting itself. Their differing views shaped how people understood and valued this groundbreaking art form.

These critics played a crucial role in legitimizing Abstract Expressionism. Their writings provided a framework for appreciating the works, influencing public perception and stimulating intellectual discourse. Their impact continues to shape our understanding of modern art today.

Key critics of Abstract Expressionism

- Clement Greenberg
 - Influential American art critic played a pivotal role in championing Abstract Expressionism as a significant development in modern art
 - Emphasized the importance of formal qualities in art, such as flatness and the rejection of illusionism, arguing that these elements were essential to the purity and autonomy of the medium (painting, sculpture)
 - Promoted artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Hans Hofmann, helping to establish their reputations and secure their place in the art historical canon
- Harold Rosenberg
 - American writer, educator, and art critic who offered a distinct perspective on Abstract Expressionism, focusing on the existential and psychological aspects of the creative process
 - Coined the term "Action Painting" to describe the work of Abstract Expressionists, emphasizing the physical act of painting and the artist's direct engagement with the canvas
 - Interpreted the works of artists like Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Philip Guston as records of the artist's inner struggles and emotional states, rather than purely formal exercises

Perspectives in Abstract Expressionist criticism

- Clement Greenberg's perspective
 - Stressed the importance of the medium's inherent properties, arguing that the best Abstract Expressionist works exploited the unique characteristics of paint and canvas
 - Argued that Abstract Expressionism represented a shift towards pure abstraction and the exploration of the painted surface, free from the constraints of representation or narrative
 - Believed that the flatness and two-dimensionality of the canvas were essential to the integrity of the medium, and that the best Abstract Expressionist works embraced these qualities (color field painting, hard-edge abstraction)
- Harold Rosenberg's perspective

- Emphasized the act of painting as a form of self-expression and existential struggle, viewing the canvas as an arena in which the artist's actions and gestures took precedence over the final product
- Viewed the works of Abstract Expressionists as records of the artist's creative process and psychological state, rather than as finished, autonomous objects
- Interpreted the gestural brushstrokes, drips, and splatters in Abstract Expressionist paintings as evidence of the artist's physical and emotional engagement with the medium (action painting, gestural abstraction)

Impact of criticism on Abstract Expressionism

- Legitimization of the movement
- Critics like Greenberg and Rosenberg helped establish Abstract Expressionism as a serious and significant development in modern art, validating its importance and relevance
- Their writings provided a theoretical framework for understanding and appreciating the works of Abstract Expressionist artists, making the movement more accessible to a wider audience
- The critical support of influential figures like Greenberg and Rosenberg contributed to the institutional recognition of Abstract Expressionism, leading to major exhibitions and acquisitions by museums and galleries
- Shaping public perception
- Art criticism influenced the way the general public and art institutions viewed and valued Abstract Expressionist works, shaping tastes and preferences
- Positive critical reception contributed to the commercial success and canonization of certain Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning
- The ideas and interpretations put forth by critics helped to create a narrative around Abstract Expressionism, establishing its place in the broader context of modern art history
- Stimulating intellectual discourse
- The differing perspectives of critics sparked debates and discussions about the nature and meaning of Abstract Expressionist art, encouraging a deeper engagement with the movement
- These debates helped to deepen the understanding and appreciation of the movement's complexities and nuances, revealing the diverse range of artistic approaches and philosophies within Abstract Expressionism
- The critical discourse surrounding Abstract Expressionism contributed to the development of new ideas and theories in art criticism and aesthetics, influencing subsequent generations of artists and critics

Greenberg vs Rosenberg on Abstract Expressionism

- Similarities
- Both critics recognized the significance of Abstract Expressionism as a groundbreaking development in modern art, acknowledging its departure from traditional artistic conventions
- Both emphasized the importance of the artist's individual expression and the rejection of representational or narrative content in favor of pure abstraction

- Greenberg and Rosenberg both played crucial roles in promoting and interpreting Abstract Expressionism, helping to establish its place in the canon of modern art
- Differences
- Focus on form vs. process
- Greenberg prioritized the formal qualities of the artwork, such as color, composition, and the flatness of the picture plane, arguing that these elements were essential to the purity and autonomy of the medium
- Rosenberg focused on the act of painting itself, viewing the canvas as a record of the artist's physical and psychological engagement with the medium, emphasizing the importance of the creative process over the final product
- Interpretation of meaning
- Greenberg tended to avoid symbolic or metaphorical interpretations, instead emphasizing the pure visual experience of the artwork and its formal properties
- Rosenberg was more interested in the existential and psychological implications of the artist's creative process, seeing the artwork as a manifestation of the artist's inner struggles, emotions, and personal experiences
- Influence on the art world
- Greenberg's formalist approach had a significant impact on the development of post-war American art, influencing movements like Color Field painting and Hard-edge abstraction
- Rosenberg's emphasis on the creative process and the artist's individual expression resonated with the emerging counterculture of the 1950s and 60s, influencing the development of Neo-Dada and Pop Art

10.2 Debates and Controversies Surrounding Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism sparked heated debates in the art world. Critics dismissed it as chaotic splatters, while supporters hailed it as groundbreaking. The movement's emphasis on spontaneity and the unconscious divided opinions, with some seeing it as meaningless and others as deeply authentic.

Gender and racial biases affected the reception of Abstract Expressionist art. Women artists like Lee Krasner were often overshadowed by male counterparts, while African American artists like Norman Lewis were largely excluded from the mainstream narrative, reflecting broader societal inequalities.

Debates and Controversies

Debates on Abstract Expressionism

- Debate over the validity and significance of Abstract Expressionism as a legitimate art movement
- Critics argued that Abstract Expressionism lacked skill, technique, and meaning, dismissing it as mere splatters and drips on canvas (Jackson Pollock's drip paintings)
- Supporters viewed Abstract Expressionism as a groundbreaking and innovative approach to art, emphasizing the emotional intensity and spontaneity of the creative process (Willem de Kooning's gestural brushstrokes)
- Controversy surrounding the role of the unconscious and spontaneity in the creative process

- Some critics believed that the emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation led to chaotic and meaningless works, lacking intentionality and structure
- Artists and supporters argued that tapping into the unconscious allowed for greater emotional expression and authenticity, revealing the artist's innermost thoughts and feelings (Mark Rothko's color field paintings)
- Disagreements about the political implications of Abstract Expressionism
- Some viewed Abstract Expressionism as a symbol of American freedom and individualism during the Cold War era, representing the triumph of democracy over totalitarianism
- Others criticized the movement for its perceived lack of social and political engagement, arguing that it was too inward-looking and detached from real-world issues (Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings)

Challenges to Abstract Expressionist validity

- Critics argued that Abstract Expressionism was too subjective and lacked clear meaning or purpose
- They believed that the absence of recognizable subject matter made the art inaccessible and elitist, catering only to a small group of intellectuals and art connoisseurs
- Some critics dismissed Abstract Expressionism as mere decoration or wallpaper, lacking the depth and substance of traditional representational art (Clyfford Still's large-scale abstract paintings)
- Artists who challenged Abstract Expressionism, such as Pop artists and Minimalists, argued that the movement had become too self-indulgent and inward-looking
- They sought to create art that was more objective, ironic, and engaged with popular culture and everyday life, rejecting the emotional intensity and subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism (Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans, Donald Judd's geometric sculptures)
- Some critics and artists believed that Abstract Expressionism had become too commercialized and institutionalized
- They argued that the movement had lost its original spirit of rebellion and innovation, becoming a mainstream and marketable style rather than a genuine avant-garde movement (the rise of the New York School and the influence of art dealers like Leo Castelli)

Biases and Challenges

Gender and racial bias in reception

- Women Abstract Expressionists, such as Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning, often struggled to gain recognition and were overshadowed by their male counterparts
- Critics and art historians tended to focus on the work of male artists, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, relegating women artists to the role of wives or muses
- Women artists' contributions were frequently dismissed or attributed to the influence of their male partners, denying them agency and autonomy in their artistic practice (Lee Krasner's paintings often being compared to those of her husband, Jackson Pollock)
- Racial biases also played a role in the reception of Abstract Expressionist artists
- African American artists, such as Norman Lewis and Beauford Delaney, were often excluded from the mainstream narrative of Abstract Expressionism, despite their significant contributions to the movement

- Their work was frequently overlooked or marginalized by critics and art institutions, reflecting the broader racial inequalities and discrimination in American society (Norman Lewis's abstract paintings being largely ignored by the art establishment during his lifetime)

Abstract Expressionism vs traditional art

- Abstract Expressionism rejected traditional notions of composition, perspective, and representation
- Artists emphasized the flatness of the picture plane and the physicality of the painting process, abandoning illusionistic depth and realistic depiction of objects (Mark Rothko's color field paintings, Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings)
- They explored new techniques, such as dripping, pouring, and splattering paint onto the canvas, challenging the conventional methods of painting with brushes and easels (Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, Helen Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique)
- The movement challenged the idea of the artist as a skilled craftsman
- Abstract Expressionists emphasized the importance of the artist's individual expression and unique vision, prioritizing the creative process over the final product
- They viewed the creative process as a form of self-discovery and personal exploration, embracing accidents, imperfections, and spontaneous gestures as integral parts of the artwork (Willem de Kooning's gestural brushstrokes, Franz Kline's bold black-and-white abstractions)
- Abstract Expressionism blurred the boundaries between different artistic mediums
- Artists incorporated elements of sculpture, performance, and dance into their paintings, expanding the possibilities of what could be considered art (Jackson Pollock's action paintings, Robert Motherwell's collages)
- They explored the possibilities of scale, creating monumental works that engulfed the viewer and challenged traditional notions of the intimate, easel-sized painting (Clyfford Still's large-scale abstract paintings, Barnett Newman's expansive color fields)

10.3 The Decline of Paris and the Rise of New York as Art Capital

World War II reshaped the art world. Paris lost its artistic dominance due to political instability and economic hardship. Many European artists fled to the US, bringing their talents and ideas with them.

New York emerged as the new art capital. The post-war economic boom fueled patronage, while Abstract Expressionism established a distinctly American artistic voice. This shift had lasting impacts on the global art scene.

The Decline of Paris as the Art Capital

Decline of Paris's artistic dominance

- Political instability and economic hardship in Europe following World War II
- Widespread destruction of infrastructure and resources (museums, galleries, studios)
- Significantly reduced patronage and financial support for the arts
- Rise of fascism and totalitarianism in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s
- Severe suppression of artistic freedom and avant-garde movements (Surrealism, Dadaism)

- Forced exile and emigration of many prominent artists (Marc Chagall, Max Ernst)
- Gradual shift in cultural focus towards the United States
- Growing economic and political power of the US post-World War II
- Increased global interest in American art, culture, and values (Abstract Expressionism)

New York's rise as art capital

- Significant influx of European artists and intellectuals fleeing persecution
- Major contributions to the development of new artistic styles and ideas in New York
- Establishment of influential art schools and institutions (Black Mountain College, The Art Students League)
- Post-war economic boom in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s
- Dramatically increased wealth and patronage for the arts
- Rapid growth of the art market and gallery system in New York (Leo Castelli Gallery, Sidney Janis Gallery)
- Emergence of Abstract Expressionism as a distinctly American art movement
- Strong emphasis on individual expression, spontaneity, and gesture (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning)
- Deliberate rejection of traditional European artistic conventions and techniques
- Active promotion of New York as a dynamic center of innovation and experimentation in the arts

The Rise of New York as the New Art Capital

Conditions for artistic focus shift

- Cultural factors contributing to the rise of New York
- Growing fascination with American popular culture, consumerism, and mass media
- Profound influence of advertising, design, and visual communication on art production (Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein)
- Emergence of a bold, confident American identity in the arts (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg)
- Economic factors supporting New York's art scene
- Significant expansion of the art market and collector base in the US (Peggy Guggenheim, Robert Scull)
- Increased funding for the arts through private foundations and public institutions (Ford Foundation, Museum of Modern Art)
- Development of a robust gallery and museum system in New York (Whitney Museum of American Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum)
- Political factors reinforcing New York's artistic prominence
- Heightened Cold War tensions and the active promotion of American cultural superiority

- Strategic government support for the arts as a tool of cultural diplomacy (International Program of the Museum of Modern Art)
- Establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 to provide federal funding for artistic projects

Impact on global art scene

- Firm establishment of New York as a global art hub
- Attraction of diverse international artists and major exhibitions to the city
- Significant influence on the development of art scenes in other cities worldwide (London, Berlin, Tokyo)
- Emergence of new art movements and styles in the wake of Abstract Expressionism
- Rise of Pop Art and its critical engagement with consumer culture and mass media (Claes Oldenburg, Tom Wesselmann)
- Development of Minimalism and its emphasis on simplicity, industrial materials, and geometric forms (Donald Judd, Dan Flavin)
- Growth of Conceptual Art and its prioritization of ideas, language, and process over traditional artistic skills (Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner)
- Lasting influence on the art market and institutional structures
- Continued dominance of American collectors, galleries, and auction houses in the global art market
- Ongoing importance of New York as a center for art education, production, and exhibition
- Persistent debates about the centralization and decentralization of the contemporary art world (globalization, regionalism)

Unit 11 – Abstract Expressionism's Legacy: Pop & Minimalism

11.1 The Transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art

Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art represent two distinct movements in 20th-century art. Abstract Expressionism focused on emotions and spontaneous techniques, while Pop Art drew inspiration from popular culture and consumer products.

The shift from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art reflected changes in post-World War II society. Pop artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein used everyday objects and media imagery to challenge traditional notions of art, often employing irony and satire in their work.

The Shift from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art

Abstract Expressionism vs Pop Art

- Abstract Expressionism
 - Subject matter explored emotions, inner turmoil, and the subconscious mind (Jackson Pollock's drip paintings)
 - Technique involved spontaneous, gestural brushstrokes and dripping paint onto the canvas (Willem de Kooning's "Woman" series)
 - Philosophy emphasized art as a means of personal expression and self-discovery, focusing on the creative process rather than the final product (Mark Rothko's color field paintings)
- Pop Art
 - Subject matter drew from popular culture, mass media, and consumer products, often featuring recognizable brands and celebrities (Andy Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans")
 - Technique utilized precise, mechanical reproduction methods such as screen printing and stenciling to create multiple copies of an image (Roy Lichtenstein's comic book-inspired paintings)
 - Philosophy viewed art as a reflection of society and a critique of consumerism, blurring the lines between "high" and "low" culture (Tom Wesselmann's "Great American Nude" series)

Influence of consumer culture

- Post-World War II economic boom led to increased consumerism
- Abundance of mass-produced goods and advertising flooded the market (Coca-Cola, Chevrolet)
- Rise of suburbia and the "American Dream" lifestyle (white picket fences, television sets)
- Mass media's growing influence on society
- Television, magazines, and billboards shaped cultural norms and desires (Life Magazine, Times Square advertisements)
- Celebrities became icons and role models, their images widely disseminated (Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley)

- Pop artists drew inspiration from everyday objects and media imagery
- Elevating the mundane to the status of fine art, challenging traditional notions of what constitutes "art" (Robert Rauschenberg's "Combines")
- Incorporating elements of popular culture to create a new visual language (Jasper Johns' "Flag" paintings)

Notable Pop Artists and Their Works

Notable Pop artists

- Andy Warhol
 - "Campbell's Soup Cans" (1962) showcased repetition and mass production, highlighting the uniformity of consumer goods
 - "Marilyn Diptych" (1962) explored celebrity culture and iconography, using a silkscreen process to reproduce Marilyn Monroe's image in vivid colors
- Roy Lichtenstein
 - "Whaam!" (1963) appropriated the visual style of comic books, enlarging a single panel to monumental proportions
 - "Drowning Girl" (1963) provided an ironic commentary on melodramatic romance comics, using Ben-Day dots and bold outlines
- Tom Wesselmann
 - "Still Life #30" (1963) featured bold, flat colors and everyday objects like cigarettes and soda cans, emphasizing the graphic qualities of consumer products
 - "Great American Nude" series (1961-1973) explored the objectification and commodification of the female body, reducing it to a collection of idealized parts

Irony and satire in Pop Art

- Irony: presenting familiar objects in a detached, emotionless manner
- Warhol's "Electric Chair" (1964) commented on the desensitization to violence in media by repeating an image of an execution device
- Claes Oldenburg's oversized sculptures of everyday objects (e.g., "Clothespin," 1976) subverted expectations by altering scale and materials
- Satire: critiquing society's values and consumerist tendencies
- Richard Hamilton's collage "Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?" (1956) juxtaposed images of consumer goods and idealized bodies to question postwar aspirations
- Eduardo Paolozzi's "I Was a Rich Man's Plaything" (1947) incorporated elements of advertising and popular culture to satirize the commodification of desire
- Appropriation: borrowing imagery from popular culture and recontextualizing it
- Robert Rauschenberg's "Retroactive I" (1964) combined screen-printed images from newspapers and magazines to create a fragmented narrative

- James Rosenquist's "F-111" (1964-1965) used a collage aesthetic to critique the military-industrial complex, juxtaposing images of consumer goods with a fighter jet

11.2 Minimalism as a Response to Abstract Expressionism

Minimalism emerged as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism, embracing simplicity and industrial materials. Artists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre created works that emphasized geometric forms, repetition, and the inherent qualities of materials.

This movement challenged traditional notions of art-making, rejecting personal expression in favor of the viewer's experience. Minimalism's impact extended beyond visual arts, influencing architecture, design, and fashion with its focus on simplicity and functionality.

Defining Minimalism and Its Core Principles

Core principles of Minimalism

- Simplicity: Minimalist works characterized by lack of ornamentation
- Feature simple geometric shapes (squares, rectangles, lines)
- Eliminate unnecessary elements or distractions
- Repetition: Key compositional strategy employed by Minimalist artists
- Repeated forms, patterns, or motifs create sense of order and unity
- Highlights inherent qualities of materials used
- Industrial materials: Frequently incorporated into Minimalist works
- Common materials include steel, aluminum, plexiglass, concrete
- Reflects movement's rejection of traditional art-making techniques
- Emphasizes the object itself

Comparing Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism

Minimalism vs Abstract Expressionism

- Visual characteristics:
 - Abstract Expressionism: Gestural, spontaneous, emotionally charged brushwork
 - Emphasis on individual artist's expression and act of painting
 - Large-scale canvases with layered, complex compositions
 - Minimalism: Simple, geometric forms and monochromatic color schemes
 - Emphasis on object itself and its inherent qualities
 - Industrial materials and precise, machine-like execution
- Conceptual underpinnings:
 - Abstract Expressionism: Art should express artist's inner emotions and subconscious

- Influenced by Surrealism and automatic drawing
- Artist as conduit for universal truths and collective unconscious
- Minimalism: Rejects idea of art as vehicle for personal expression
- Emphasizes viewer's experience and interaction with object
- Eliminates external references or associations, focuses on pure form and presence

Key Minimalist Artists and Their Works

Key Minimalist artists

- Donald Judd:
 - Precise, geometric sculptures and installations
 - Used industrial materials (steel, aluminum, plexiglass)
 - Iconic works: "Untitled (Stack)" series (1965-1968), identical metal boxes in vertical columns
- Carl Andre:
 - Pioneered modular, grid-based compositions in sculptures and installations
 - Used industrial materials (bricks, metal plates, wood blocks)
 - Notable work: "Equivalent VIII" (1966), rectangular arrangement of 120 firebricks
- Dan Flavin:
 - Sculptures and installations using fluorescent light tubes
 - Explored interplay of light, space, and color
 - Iconic works: "Monument for V. Tatlin" series (1964-1990), arrangements of colored fluorescent tubes

Impact and Legacy of Minimalism

Impact of Minimalism on art

- Challenged traditional notions of art-making:
- Rejected art as vehicle for personal expression or narrative content
- Emphasized object itself and inherent qualities, not external references or associations
- Incorporated industrial materials and production methods, blurred line between art and everyday objects
- Influenced subsequent art movements (Conceptual Art, Post-Minimalism)
- Paved way for ideas-based approach to art-making
- Encouraged questioning nature and purpose of art
- Minimalist aesthetics and principles widely adopted beyond visual arts (architecture, design, fashion)
- Emphasis on simplicity, functionality, industrial materials in contemporary designs

- Expanded boundaries of what is considered art
- Encouraged critical and conceptual approach to art-making
- Established art can be made from any material, take any form, if effectively conveys intended meaning or experience

11.3 Abstract Expressionism's Influence on Later Art Movements

Abstract Expressionism left a lasting mark on the art world, inspiring new movements and styles. Its principles of spontaneity, emotion, and gestural painting influenced Neo-Expressionism, Lyrical Abstraction, and Color Field Painting, each adapting these ideas in unique ways.

The movement's impact extended globally, shifting the art world's focus to New York and inspiring artists worldwide. It paved the way for Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art, challenging traditional notions of art and the artist's role.

Legacy of Abstract Expressionism

Adaptations of Abstract Expressionist principles

- Neo-Expressionism
 - Emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a reaction to the dominance of minimalism and conceptual art
 - Characterized by a return to figurative and expressive painting, drawing inspiration from the emotional intensity and gestural techniques of Abstract Expressionism
 - Incorporated elements of graffiti, pop culture, and historical references (Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Julian Schnabel)
- Lyrical Abstraction
 - Developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a more intimate and personal approach to abstract painting
 - Emphasized spontaneity, intuition, and the expressive potential of color and gesture, building upon the legacy of Abstract Expressionism
 - Incorporated elements of nature, landscape, and the human figure (Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell, Sam Francis)
- Color Field Painting
 - Emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a response to the gestural intensity of Abstract Expressionism
 - Focused on large areas of flat, solid color, exploring the emotional and spiritual effects of pure color
 - Emphasized the monumental scale and immersive quality of the painting, drawing from the innovations of Abstract Expressionism (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still)

Impact on modern art

- Established the United States as a major center for avant-garde art in the post-World War II era, challenging the dominance of European modernism
- Shifted the focus of the art world from Paris to New York, marking a significant cultural and historical shift

- Paved the way for the acceptance of abstraction as a valid and significant form of artistic expression, expanding the boundaries of what constitutes art
- Influenced the development of subsequent art movements and styles
 1. Pop Art: Reacted against the seriousness and introspection of Abstract Expressionism by embracing popular culture and mass media imagery (Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein)
 2. Minimalism: Rejected the emotional and subjective aspects of Abstract Expressionism in favor of a more reductive and objective approach to art-making (Donald Judd, Dan Flavin)
 3. Conceptual Art: Prioritized the idea or concept behind the artwork over its visual or material properties, challenging the emphasis on the artist's hand and gesture in Abstract Expressionism (Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth)
- Challenged traditional notions of what constitutes art and the role of the artist, emphasizing the creative process and the individual expression of the artist over the finished product

Global influence of Abstract Expressionism

- Europe
 - Influenced artists associated with Art Informel in France, who explored abstraction and spontaneous gesture (Jean Fautrier, Pierre Soulages)
 - Inspired the development of Tachisme, a European variant of Abstract Expressionism that emphasized the physical act of painting (Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu)
 - Impacted the work of German artists such as Emil Schumacher and K.O. Götz, who incorporated elements of Abstract Expressionism into their own abstract styles
- Asia
 - Influenced the Gutai group in Japan, which emphasized spontaneity, performance, and unconventional materials in their art-making (Kazuo Shiraga, Atsuko Tanaka)
 - Inspired the development of modern and contemporary art in China, particularly after the end of the Cultural Revolution (Zao Wou-Ki, Chu Teh-Chun)
 - Impacted the work of Korean artists such as Kim Whan-Ki and Ha Chong-Hyun, who adapted Abstract Expressionist techniques to their own cultural contexts
- Latin America
 - Inspired artists to explore abstraction and gestural painting as a means of expressing political and social concerns (Roberto Matta, Rufino Tamayo)
 - Contributed to the development of Neo-Concretism in Brazil, which emphasized the participatory and experiential aspects of art (Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark)
 - Influenced the Informalismo movement in Argentina, which sought to break free from traditional artistic conventions through spontaneous and intuitive creation (Alberto Greco, Kenneth Kemble)

Unit 12 – Contemporary Views on Abstract Expressionism

12.1 Reassessing Abstract Expressionism in Art History

Abstract Expressionism sparked heated debates in the art world. Initially praised for its originality, it later faced criticism for its male-dominated narrative and alleged ties to Cold War politics.

Today, we're reexamining Abstract Expressionism through new lenses. Feminist and postcolonial perspectives are shedding light on overlooked artists and influences, reshaping our understanding of this pivotal movement.

Historical Context and Critical Reception

Critical reception of Abstract Expressionism

- Initial reception in the 1940s and 1950s
- Praised for originality, spontaneity, break from traditional art forms
- Seen as uniquely American art movement reflecting post-war optimism, individualism
- Supported by influential art critics (Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg)
- Challenges to Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s and 1970s
- Emergence of Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art questioned relevance
- Feminist art historians critiqued male-dominated narrative
- Postmodernist theories challenged notions of originality, singular artistic genius
- Reappraisal and legacy from the 1980s to the present
- Renewed interest in technical, formal aspects of Abstract Expressionist works
- Recognition of movement's global influence, impact on contemporary art practices
- Increased attention to contributions of women, artists of color within the movement

Revisionist Perspectives and Contemporary Interpretations

Revisionist perspectives on Abstract Expressionism

- Feminist art history
- Challenged male-dominated narrative of Abstract Expressionism
- Highlighted contributions, experiences of women artists (Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Joan Mitchell)
- Examined gender politics, power dynamics within Abstract Expressionist circle
- Postcolonial and global art history

- Explored influence of non-Western art, culture on Abstract Expressionist artists
- Investigated movement's reception, impact in countries outside the United States
- Challenged notion of Abstract Expressionism as purely American art movement
- Social and political context
- Examined relationship between Abstract Expressionism and Cold War era, including CIA's promotion of movement as symbol of American freedom
- Analyzed impact of McCarthyism, Red Scare on Abstract Expressionist artists and their work
- Considered role of Abstract Expressionism in shaping American cultural identity, soft power

Identity in Abstract Expressionism interpretations

- Gender and feminist perspectives
- Reevaluation of experiences, contributions of women Abstract Expressionist artists
- Examination of gender-based obstacles, discrimination faced by women artists within the movement
- Analysis of how gender influenced critical reception, historical narrative of Abstract Expressionism
- Race and ethnicity
- Increased recognition of contributions of African American Abstract Expressionist artists (Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff)
- Exploration of how race, ethnicity shaped experiences, artistic practices of Abstract Expressionist artists
- Examination of intersection of Abstract Expressionism with Civil Rights Movement, other social justice struggles
- Identity and personal experiences
- Consideration of role of individual artists' backgrounds, experiences, identities in shaping artistic practices, philosophies
- Analysis of how personal trauma, mental health, addiction influenced work of Abstract Expressionist artists
- Exploration of relationship between Abstract Expressionism and broader cultural, intellectual movements of mid-20th century (existentialism, psychoanalysis)

Influence of Abstract Expressionism in art

- Impact on later art movements
- Influenced development of Color Field painting, Minimalism, Neo-Expressionism
- Shaped discourse around autonomy of artwork, primacy of artistic process
- Contributed to expanding boundaries of what constitutes art, role of the artist
- Place within 20th-century art history
- Significant as pivotal moment in shift from modernism to postmodernism

- Related to earlier avant-garde movements (Surrealism, Dada)
- Impacted globalization of art, rise of international art markets and institutions
- Legacy and contemporary relevance
- Ongoing influence on contemporary art practices (gestural abstraction, use of unconventional materials)
- Shaped discourse around relationship between art, politics, identity
- Continued reinterpretation, reevaluation in light of changing social, cultural, historical contexts

12.2 Contemporary Artists Inspired by Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism's legacy lives on through contemporary artists who blend its techniques with modern themes. They use gestural brushstrokes, vibrant colors, and spontaneous mark-making to explore social issues, identity, and globalization.

These artists reinterpret Abstract Expressionism's emphasis on process and emotion for today's world. They incorporate figurative elements, digital media, and found materials, pushing the boundaries of what abstract art can convey and achieve.

Contemporary Artists Inspired by Abstract Expressionism

Contemporary artists inspired by Abstract Expressionism

- Cecily Brown
 - Uses gestural brushstrokes and vibrant colors reminiscent of Willem de Kooning's work (Woman series)
 - Incorporates figurative elements into abstract compositions, blurring the lines between representation and abstraction (Figures in a Landscape)
- Mark Bradford
 - Creates large-scale, layered collages that evoke the energy and spontaneity of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings (Number 1)
 - Uses found materials (billboard paper, posters) and incorporates social and political themes, addressing issues of race, class, and urban decay (Scorched Earth)
- Julie Mehretu
 - Employs a dynamic, layered approach similar to that of Franz Kline (Chief) and Robert Motherwell (Elegy to the Spanish Republic)
 - Combines architectural elements, abstract forms, and calligraphic marks in complex compositions, reflecting on globalization and migration (Mogamma)
- Charline von Heyl
 - Explores the interplay between abstraction and representation, echoing the concerns of Philip Guston (The Studio) and Willem de Kooning (Excavation)
 - Uses bold colors, gestural marks, and a sense of spontaneity in her paintings, challenging traditional notions of composition and form (Mana Hata)

Approaches of contemporary vs original artists

- Similarities

- Emphasis on the act of painting and the physical properties of the medium, valuing the creative process and the artist's subjective experience
- Use of gestural, expressive brushstrokes and spontaneous mark-making, conveying emotion and energy (Pollock's drip technique, de Kooning's vigorous brushwork)
- Exploration of the subconscious and emotional aspects of the creative process, tapping into the inner psyche and intuition (Rothko's color fields, Gorky's biomorphic forms)

- Differences

- Contemporary artists often incorporate figurative elements, recognizable imagery, or references to popular culture, while Abstract Expressionists primarily focused on pure abstraction (Brown's figures, Bradford's use of found materials)
- Greater focus on social, political, and cultural issues in contemporary works, addressing current concerns and contexts (Bradford's commentary on urban decay, Mehretu's reflections on globalization)
- Use of a wider range of materials and techniques, including digital media and installation art, expanding beyond the traditional paint on canvas approach (Mehretu's use of digital printing, Bradford's incorporation of collage)

Reinterpretation for current issues

- Mark Bradford's work

- Addresses issues of race, class, and urban decay through his use of found materials and layered collages, recontextualizing the "all-over" composition of Pollock to comment on the complexity of contemporary urban life (Scorched Earth, Tomorrow Is Another Day)
- Brings attention to the marginalized communities and the impact of gentrification, using abstraction as a means to engage with social and political realities

- Julie Mehretu's paintings

- Reflect on globalization, migration, and the interconnectedness of modern societies, using layered architectural elements to evoke the dynamism and complexity of urban environments (Mogamma, Stadia II)
- Explores the notion of identity and belonging in an increasingly globalized world, using abstraction to represent the flux and movement of people and ideas across borders

- Cecily Brown's figurative abstractions

- Explore themes of sexuality, desire, and the representation of the female body, challenging traditional gender roles and power dynamics through the subversion of classical painting tropes (High Society, The Pyjama Game)
- Uses the language of abstraction to confront issues of objectification and the male gaze, reclaiming the female form and asserting agency through gestural, expressive brushwork

Relevance of Abstract Expressionism today

- Lasting impact on the emphasis of the creative process and the artist's subjective experience
- Contemporary artists continue to value the role of spontaneity, improvisation, and intuition in their work, embracing the legacy of the "action painting" approach (Brown's gestural brushstrokes, Bradford's layered collages)
- The idea of art as a means of self-expression and personal exploration remains central to contemporary practice, with artists using their work to convey their unique perspectives and experiences
- Continued exploration of the expressive potential of abstraction
- Contemporary artists use abstraction as a means to convey complex ideas and emotions, building on the groundwork laid by the Abstract Expressionists (Mehretu's layered compositions, von Heyl's interplay between abstraction and representation)
- The use of non-representational forms allows for open-ended interpretations and viewer engagement, inviting the audience to bring their own experiences and meanings to the work
- Influence on the scale and ambition of contemporary art projects
- The monumental scale of Abstract Expressionist works (Pollock's Mural, Rothko's Seagram Murals) has inspired contemporary artists to create large-scale, immersive installations that engulf the viewer (Bradford's Pickett's Charge, Mehretu's Mural)
- The idea of the "heroic" artist, exemplified by the Abstract Expressionists, continues to shape the public perception of contemporary art and artists, with figures like Bradford and Mehretu being celebrated for their visionary approaches and bold statements

12.3 The Market for Abstract Expressionist Art: Collecting and Conservation

Abstract Expressionism's impact on the art world extends beyond canvas and paint. The movement's legacy is shaped by a complex interplay of artistic merit, market forces, and institutional support, influencing how we value and preserve these groundbreaking works.

Conservation challenges unique to Abstract Expressionist art highlight the delicate balance between preserving artistic intent and ensuring long-term stability. Meanwhile, the art market's influence on canon formation and public perception continues to shape our understanding of this pivotal movement.

The Art Market and Collecting

Factors in Abstract Expressionist valuation

- Artistic reputation and historical significance
- Critical reception gauges artwork's impact through reviews, essays, and scholarly analyses
- Scholarly attention signifies artwork's importance within art historical canon
- Inclusion in major exhibitions (retrospectives) and museum collections (MoMA) validates artistic merit
- Rarity and availability
- Limited supply of works by key artists (Pollock, Rothko) increases market demand

- Presence of iconic or seminal works (Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm") commands higher prices
- Provenance and ownership history
- Previous owners and collections (Rockefeller, Guggenheim) enhance artwork's prestige
- Exhibition and publication history documents artwork's public visibility and scholarly recognition
- Physical condition and conservation
- State of preservation and restoration affects artwork's aesthetic integrity and market value
- Potential for future deterioration or conservation needs introduces financial risk for collectors
- Market trends and economic factors
- Overall art market performance and investor confidence influence buying activity and price levels
- Comparative prices for similar works or artists (de Kooning, Kline) provide market benchmarks

Institutions shaping Abstract Expressionist reception

- Museums
 - Acquisitions and permanent collections establish canonical status of artists and artworks
 - Scholarly research and publications (exhibition catalogs, monographs) advance art historical understanding
 - Educational programs and public outreach foster broad appreciation and engagement
- Galleries
 - Representation of artists and estates (Pollock-Krasner Foundation) promotes ongoing visibility and scholarship
 - Marketing and promotion of works builds collector interest and demand
 - Facilitating sales to collectors and institutions sustains market activity and price levels
- Private collectors
 - Building significant collections (Tremaine, Heller) concentrates important works and supports market
 - Lending works for exhibitions expands public access and scholarly study
 - Donating or bequeathing collections to museums (Newman at MoMA) ensures long-term preservation and access

Conservation and Legacy

Conservation of Abstract Expressionist art

- Material and technical challenges
 - Use of unconventional materials (house paint, sand) and techniques (dripping, staining) complicates conservation
 - Inherent fragility and instability of some materials (newsprint, unprimed canvas) accelerates deterioration

- Environmental control and storage
- Proper temperature, humidity, and light levels prevent damage from heat, moisture, and UV radiation
- Archival materials (acid-free mounts) and storage methods (flat files) minimize physical stress and chemical interactions
- Documentation and research
- Thorough condition reports and treatment records guide ongoing conservation and future study
- Scientific analysis of materials and techniques informs understanding of artistic process and deterioration mechanisms
- Ethical considerations
- Balancing preservation with artist's intent respects original creative vision
- Minimally invasive treatments and reversibility allow for future refinement of conservation techniques
- Collaboration and knowledge sharing
- Interdisciplinary approaches involving conservators, scientists, and art historians ensure well-informed decision making
- Dissemination of research and best practices advances field-wide standards and expertise

Art market's impact on Abstract Expressionism

- Canon formation and art historical narratives
- Influence of market trends on scholarly attention and exhibitions shapes understanding of movement's scope and significance
- Reassessment of overlooked artists (Norman Lewis) and works expands and diversifies art historical canon
- Public access and engagement
- Role of museums in providing access to works ensures broad public appreciation and understanding
- Impact of market value on public perceptions and appreciation risks overshadowing artistic and historical merit
- Authenticity and attribution
- Market pressure for secure attributions incentivizes rigorous provenance research and connoisseurship
- Scholarly debates and revisions based on new research (Pollock catalogue raisonné) refine understanding of artists' oeuvres
- Contextual interpretation
- Balancing formal analysis with social, political, and biographical contexts enriches understanding of Abstract Expressionism's meanings
- Evolving understanding of Abstract Expressionism's significance and meaning reflects ongoing scholarly inquiry and public dialogue