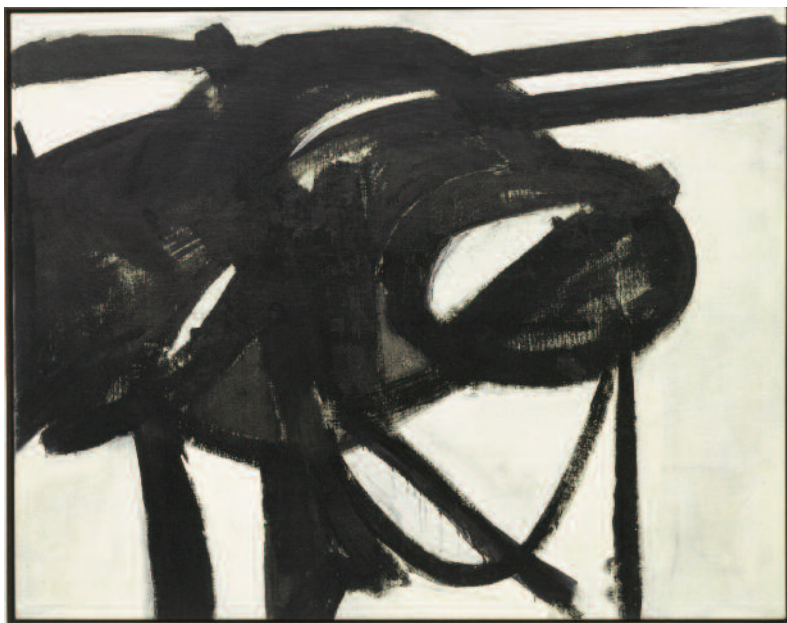




Above: Arshile Gorky (American, born Armenia. 1904-1948), *Agony*, 1947, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 1/2" (101.6 x 128.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. A. Conger Goodyear Fund

Right: Franz Kline (American, 1910-1962), *Chief*, 1950, oil on canvas, 58 3/8" x 6' 1 1/2" (148.3 x 186.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David M. Solinger





Mark Rothko (American, born Latvia. 1903-1970), from the left: No. 5/No. 22, 1950; No. 3/No. 13, 1949; No. 37/No. 19 (Slate Blue and Brown on Plum), 1958, No. 16 (Red, Brown, and Black), 1958. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Big Picture: Abstract Expressionist New York Museum of Modern Art, New York and Art Gallery of Ontario

by Emese Krunák-Hajagos

If “realism is an old hat” as Tom Wolfe said, then Abstract Expressionism is a vintage dress. It is still beautiful and still fits.

Abstract Expressionism was the first specifically American movement to achieve worldwide recognition. In the late 1930s and through World War II many leading painters fled the terrors of Nazism in Europe and sought refuge in the United States. Among them were Hans Hoffman, who became a pioneer and teacher of abstraction and Arshile Gorky, the “godfather” of the movement. While the war was raging in Europe, New York City was a safe haven. Exiled artists and dealers filled the city. Peggy Guggenheim opened her gallery *The*

Art of This Century and with Leo Castelli becoming an art dealer, all local artists benefitted. At the end of the war Europe was in ruins, and New York replaced Paris as the centre of the art world. The victorious United States came out of the war with its economy stronger than ever. Hero worship was on the ascendant and Americans were set to bolster their national identity in a post-war world. A new generation of American artists emerged, ready to dominate the world stage. They came to be known as the New York School, or the Abstract Expressionists, a term that art critic Robert Coates used to describe the work of Hans Hofmann in 1946. By 1948, as Barnett Newman

remarked, the artists were in the process of making the world, to a certain extent, in their own image.

“We agree only to disagree” could be the unwritten motto of this loose grouping of artists according to the art historian Irving Sandler. As the Abstract Expressionists never formed a unified group, their diversity was always visible. In the 1940s, the two leading critics of Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg had different theories about the meaning, function and style of modern art that created an ongoing debate. Greenberg defined painting by its flatness, so it had to be purified of all illusionistic and sculptural effects such as deepness and plasticity. Subject matter also had to be eliminated. He urged the artists to develop “a bland, large, balanced, Apollonian art” aiming for “an intense detachment” from everything present—

a rather minimalist approach. Greenberg advocated for Jackson Pollock and the Color Field painters like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolf Gottlieb, Clyfford Still and Hans Hofmann. The artists, on the other hand, had little sympathy for his formalist perspective. As Rothko wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1943: "It is widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints so long as it is well painted... There is not such a thing as good painting about nothing." Harold Rosenberg was more interested in the political and social movements of the period and their influence on the artists. He spoke of the transformation of painting into an existential drama: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." Action painting is a term created to describe the works of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning

and Franz Kline. Then came the big moment when it was painting for just the sake of PAINT and the gesture on the canvas was liberation from political, aesthetic and moral values. This philosophy met the requirement of the McCarthy era, a time of artistic censorship in the US, when abstract art was considered apolitical and therefore safe.

Abstract Expressionism and MoMA came into being about the same time, and all of the 200 Ann Temkin-curated works in this show come from the museum's collection. Upon entering the spacious venue we take notice that the pictures are not just 'big' in presence and reputation, but are generally large in size as well. The first room is occupied by the "mythmakers:" Jackson Pollock's *The She-Wolf* (1943) with its free-form abstraction and Rothko's *Slow Swirl at Edge of Sea* (1945), a surrealist composition with two humanlike forms embraced in a swirling, floating, dancing happiness, depicted by soft grays and browns.

Next is a monographic gallery, devoted to seven similar works of Barnett Newman starting with *Onement, I* (1952), his breakthrough painting. The surface of a monochromatic background is vertically divided in half by an orange band, a "zip," as the artist later called it. Newman explained his zip motive in his essay *The First Man Was an Artist*, as the stick the aboriginal man used to draw a line in the mud. Newman suggested that his zip should be taken as a metaphor for this primal and tragic gesture of art. His large Color Field paintings are all built on the zip motive (*Notes Series*, 1968). He lectured about nothingness – the central idea of existentialism – in *The Club* at 8th Street in Greenwich Village, a favourite meeting place for Abstract Expressionists. Nothingness is what comes to mind looking into his paintings. I couldn't wait to get 'unzipped.'

Willem de Kooning is represented



Jackson Pollock (American, 1912-1956). Left: One: Number 31, 1950, 1950, oil and enamel paint on canvas, 8' 10" x 17' 5 5/8" (269.5 x 530.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. Fund (by exchange). Right: Number 1A, 1948, 1948, oil and enamel paint on canvas, 68" x 8' 8" (172.7 x 264.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

by only four paintings hanging in separate galleries. Switching between abstraction and figuration, he seems never to have really known where he fit in. His iconic figurative work *Woman I* (1950), is still controversial. Does it picture the scary, overwhelming aspect of female power over men or does it mirror male aggression toward women? The large figure of the woman with enormous breasts, big eyes and howling mouth is depicted by angry brush strokes while her clothes and the background are created by abstract patches of paint.

A large gallery is dedicated to Jackson Pollock's 'drip' paintings. In 1947, Pollock described his painting process in detail: "I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need a resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the sides and literally be in the painting." Pollock used objects such as sticks, spatulas, knives, or vessels with which the paint could be dripped, poured and hurled on the canvas. He emphasized the automatism of his approach as a "pure harmony, an easy give and take" but also mentioned that after a "get acquainted period" with the painting he makes changes, and has no fear of destroying part of the composition since the painting has its own life and comes out well at the end. *Full Fathom Five* (1947) is a good example of this method. The weave of the top colour-layers veils a figure painted with lead paint. The objects worked into the picture such as buttons, keys, nails, cigarettes etc. are placed with reference to this hidden figure. The title was suggested by the writer Ralph Mannheim from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as its lines give a parallel image of a figure submerged beneath the smears of paint: "Full fathom five thy father lies/...Those are pearls that were his eyes/ ...But doth suffer a sea change/into something rich and strange." Rich and strange indeed



Willem de Kooning (American, born the Netherlands. 1904-1997), *Woman I*, 1950-52, oil on canvas, 6' 3 7/8" x 58" (192.7 x 147.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

describes Pollock's endless painterly labyrinths. Pollock painted with his whole body, moving rapidly in a dance-like trance around the canvas, dripping or throwing paint sometimes straight from the can, then quickly touching it up, animated by an intense physical energy. His radical painting method delivered a jolt the New York art scene and in August, 1949 Life Magazine named him the greatest living painter in the United States. By the time Hans Namuth photographed and filmed him at work in July 1950, our image was complete, of Pollock as the mythic,

sexually-charged "Jack the Dripper." Yet, shouldering the burden as hero of mass media may have proved to be too much. Along with the notoriety came detractors. Someone labelled his drip-paintings "apocalyptic wallpaper." While far from Pollock's intentions, his "all over" method, as exemplified in the 1954 *White Light*, became very influential for ornamental and decorative styles. If his work was influential, so was the image of Pollock the man, as art critic Robert Hughes noted – a world famous painter, the Vincent van Gogh from Wyoming, who

died drunk at forty-four, with two girls in a big, expensive car. More recently, the myth was perpetuated and elevated to symbolism in the 2000 movie *Pollock*, beautifully portrayed by actor and director Ed Harris.

Mark Rothko is represented in a single gallery by eight paintings made over a fourteen year period. In 1950 he started to paint his "multiforms," his signature paintings. Rothko usually divided the canvas into three horizontal planes of bright, vibrant colours. He applied a thin layer of binder mixed with pigment onto the bare canvas, and then painted thinned oils onto this layer, then another layer, creating a dense mixture of overlapping colours and shapes which bleed into each other. His brushstrokes were light and very fast. A dramatic effect is created by the contrast of colours, radiating with inner energy (*No. 5/No. 22* 1950). As Rothko wrote, his paintings are "only expressing basic human emotions –

tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them." There is really something religious in Rothko's attempt to abandon everything to feelings and create an unworldly atmosphere in his paintings (*No. 14 Horizontals, White over Darks* 1961). Rothko became famous, successful and rich, and ironically that deepened his depression. The luxurious New York Four Seasons Restaurant's commission (1958), well depicted in the Broadway show *Red*, was a great painterly challenge and his personal undoing at the same time. He never delivered the 40 pieces he painted for them. In the 1960s his horizon darkened dramatically. He finished the 14 large, dark, blood-coloured canvases for the Rothko Chapel but committed suicide before they were installed in 1971.

The Big Picture is GREAT! An open book of modern art history, it includes

excellent pieces from Philip Guston, Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Lee Krasner among others. The show has some nice surprises, such as Grace Hartigan's beautiful *Shinnecock Canal* (1951), Aaron Siskind (*Martha's Vineyard* 1954) and Robert Frank's photographs (*Men of Air* 1948). David Smith's two-dimensional painted steel sculpture, titled *Australia*, are refreshingly funny. Visitors alternately see kangaroos and fishes, but I see a bug.

That brings to mind the world of artist Adolf Gottlieb and his commentary: "What do these images mean?" That is simply the wrong question. Visual images do not have to conform to either verbal thinking or optical facts. A better question would be: 'Do these images convey any emotional truth?'" They certainly do, as is proven by Abstract Expressionism's enormous influence on later styles and artists.



Left: Philip Guston (American, born Canada. 1913-1980), *The Clock*, 1956-57, oil on canvas, 6' 4" x 64 1/8" (193.1 x 163 cm). *The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson.* Right: Hans Hofmann, (American, born Germany. 1880-1966), *Memoria in Aeternum*, 1962, oil on canvas, 7' x 6' 1/8" (213.3 x 183.2 cm). *The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist*