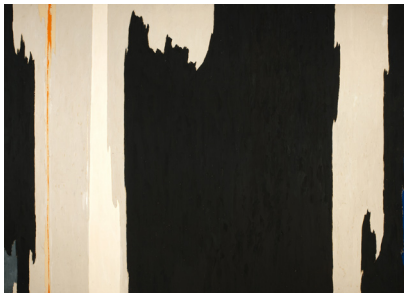


ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM 101

WHAT IS ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM?

Abstract Expressionism refers to an American art movement that emerged after World War II during the 1950s. The artists who are generally considered Abstract Expressionists experimented with new approaches to painting in a number of unique ways. They “broke free” from traditional painting methods (like keeping the canvas on an easel, or painting with traditional tools like brushes). Although Abstract Expressionist artists’ paintings look very different, their work tends to share several key characteristics.

WHAT MAKES A PAINTING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST?



Clifford Still, PH-1123, 1954.

IMAGERY

Abstract Expressionist artwork does not generally contain realistic looking images of objects or figures. Instead, in Abstract Expressionist artwork, shapes, colors, and lines combine to create the “image.” Many Abstract Expressionists wanted people to be able to react to the artwork without the interference of associations with recognizable imagery.



Barnett Newman, *Cathedra*, 1958.

SCALE

Many Abstract Expressionist artists wanted to immerse the viewer in a total experience of their art. Making art that was very large in scale helped Abstract Expressionist artists draw the viewer’s focus into the artwork to achieve this goal. Creating art that could be *experienced*, not just seen, was important.



Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950.

ALL-OVER COMPOSITION

Abstract Expressionist artists commonly covered the entire surface of their paintings. They “broke the boundaries” of the canvas by stretching the paint all the way to, and sometimes over, the edge of the canvas. In a typical Abstract Expressionist composition, there is not one focal point. Instead, a person’s sight might be directed “all over” the canvas by the colors of paint, brushstrokes, and the artist’s technique.



Jackson Pollock, 1950.

MOVEMENT

Abstract Expressionist artwork generally shows some motion or movement made by the artist in the act of making. Even artists who did not create their artwork by using big movements or gestures did, in many cases, achieve a sense of implied movement in the finished artwork by the marks made on the canvas. A sense of movement is also created by the all-over compositions that keep viewers' eyes moving around the artwork.



Franz Kline, *Mahoning*, 1956.

TECHNIQUE

Abstract Expressionists used several different techniques to make their art. Some artists poured and dripped paint, moving around the canvas in the act of painting. Other artists applied broad, heavy, brush strokes with thick brushes, like artist Franz Kline (at left). Clyfford Still applied his paint with a trowel, in jagged swaths, sometimes layering it on very thickly, and in other places very thinly. Each artist's particular technique, their particular manner and order of applying paint to the canvas determined what their artwork would look like.



Clyfford Still, 1950-A-No. 1 (PH-272), 1950.

EXPRESSION

Many of the Abstract Expressionist artists were interested in philosophies that examined the artist's inner life and the experience of being human. Whether illustrated with broad body movements or controlled applications of paint, Abstract Expressionist artists "expressed" with their technique, tools, and materials the ideas and emotions that could not be described with everyday images. These artists did not want their expression to be confined by recognizable imagery.

While Abstract Expressionist artists wanted viewers to be free to experience and understand their artwork on their own terms, their artwork often touched on big ideas they thought were important—like life and death, spirituality, power, struggle, and a range of human emotions.