

# Abstract expressionism

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Abstract expressionism is an American post-World War II art movement. It put New York City as the centre of the western art world for a while. The term was first used by Robert Coates, a German critic, but it had been in use in Germany since 1919 in a magazine known as *Der Sturm* on the topic of German Expressionism (Gallery 2008). The movement's name results from the mixture of the emotional strength and abstemiousness of the German Expressionists. The root of this artwork lies in the figurative painting which came into being in the 1930s.

The Great Depression significantly influenced all the artists who later became dominant abstract expressionists of the 1940s and the 1950s. This phenomenon led them to mature in their work since they now painted in styles influenced substantially by the Religionist Movement and social realism (Marter, 2007). By the late 1940s, most of these artists had abandoned their old styles in favor of more modern ones. However, they still implemented some aspects of their old styles in their new works. Therefore, they were now able to base their work on personal experiences. This new styles were more productive because the time they would have spent working on murals could now be spent creating abstract paintings on a massive scale.

These artists also had the experience of working together in the Works Progress Administration. This work experience brought many distinct artists together, thus making it easier for them to band together in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This saw the formation and promotion of the abstract expressionism style. Artists living in New York at the time benefited significantly from the presence of all the sophisticated museums and

galleries. These museums showcase outstanding art exhibitions and include the Museum of Modern Art as well as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, formerly known as the Solomon R.

Guggenheim Museum. They displayed such masterpieces as “ Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” and “ Cubism and Abstract Art”. In addition, they put on display works by Picasso and Kandinsky. A good number of European modernists, for example, Hans Hofmann, moved to New York in the 1930s and the 1940s to escape the war and political upheaval in Europe. He had spent his early years working in Paris.

When he was travelling, he encountered other reputable artists, such as Matisse, Braque and Picasso. Therefore, when he arrived in New York, he had refined appreciation of Cubism and undying love for Matisse’s Fauvism. All this led to the establishment of extraordinarily knowledgeable and talented artists in New York. Americans felt confident enough to use European influences in their work. They felt that this was appropriate for their country at a time when the oldest citadels in the world faced the war. Some described this new rhetoric painting as “ American-Type” painting.

By the late 1940s, the formation of the movement of abstract expressionism had started to take shape. This was in spite of the varied nature of its artists’ work. In 1947, Jackson Pollock was already working with his drip technique. In 1948, de Kooning received an exceptionally high-ranking show at the Charles Egan Gallery. Moreover, Barnett Newman came up with his much acclaimed Ornament I. Soon after this, a group of 18 artists mounted a boycott of a display of modern art at the Metropolitan Museum in 1951.

These artists became known as “ the Irascible” who together shared a common goal and identity. Themes, styles and concepts Surrealism This had the most significant influence on the works of Abstract Expressionist. Many artists like Pollock tried to put a sense of orderliness and control in their works. They achieved this by making their art works more expressive instead of randomly amassing paint on canvas. Many abstract expressionists embraced the same concept as Pollock did in his drip technique. They tried to balance the chaos in their work with control.

This is because if chaos dominated then the entire image could fall to pieces.

. Existentialism Another driving force for the Abstract Expressionists was the fact the artists felt that certain aspects of their current style were not at all suitable for the post-war era (Spilsbury, 2009) Externalism was, however, not a significant influence on the Abstract Expressionists, but it contributed immensely to the rhetoric, alienation and anxiety which suited the Abstract Expressionists. Formalism and Greenberg Clement Greenberg was a critic who played a key role in the development of Abstract Expressionists. He did not support the notion of content and ideas to create art. However, he supported all Abstract Expressionists and believed that it was a successful answer to American shortcomings concerning the European ultra-modern (avant-garde).

Clement Greenberg also supported the idea of color-field painting.

Eventually, Abstract Expressionism fell because of all the success it had achieved. The government, art galleries and even museums reached out to support it. Inevitably, the style attracted many young artists who turned

what had previously been a desire of expression to something academic and stale. By mid 1950s, the style had begun to fade out.

The paradox between chaos and control were the movement's greatest achievements. By the late 1950s, abstract expressionism had entirely lost its cusp of success and another art generation had taken its place. The ideas and concepts that informed Abstract Expressionism may have lost the influence to coerce young artists, but the movement's accomplishments continue to provide them with standards against which it can be measured.