

Abstract art development

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If you take a look at the paintings, you will see that they are abstract. In fact, they are painted in a style that is sometimes referred to as " Abstract Expressionism". Many people have trouble understanding and appreciating this type of art. The purpose of this essay is to explain how, over time, art has evolved to become more and more abstract, and why this is important. My intention is to explain the goals of abstract art, and to help you learn how to enjoy it. To begin, I'd like to introduce you to the idea that, broadly speaking, there are two types of paintings: representational and abstract.

We call a painting " representational" if it portrays specific, recognizable physical objects. In some cases, the representational paintings look true to life, almost like a photograph. For example, consider the following painting by Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-1669). This painting is called " The Anatomy Lecture of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp", and was painted in 1632. " The Anatomy Lecture of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" [1632] by Rembrandt van Rijn. Display a larger picture of this painting. When you look at this painting, it is easy to recognize what you are looking at.

There are eight men wearing funny-looking clothing (actually, the style of clothing worn in 17th century Holland), and on a table in front of the men lies a dead man, whose arm is being dissected. It is easy to identify all the objects in the painting, as well as the overall meaning of the painting. (You are looking at an anatomy demonstration.) Not all representational paintings are so realistic. For example, Paul Cezanne (French, 1839-1906) created some beautiful paintings of fruit. Take a look at this one, " Apples, Peaches, Pears, and Grapes", which Cezanne painted from 1879-1880 Apples, Peaches, Pears and Grapes" [1879-1880] by Paul Cezanne. Display a larger

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picture of this painting. Obviously, this painting is more abstract than the previous one. Still, what you are looking at is representational. The objects in the Cezanne painting may not be as realistic as the ones in the Rembrandt — there is no way you would mistake the Cezanne painting for a photograph — but it is easy to recognize that you are looking at various types of fruit in a bowl. When you look at a representational painting, you get an immediate feeling as to whether or not you like the painting.

For example, take another look at the previous two paintings and compare what you feel when you look at the anatomy lesson with what you feel when you look at the bowl of fruit. Abstract paintings are different. They have designs, shapes or colors that do not look like specific physical objects. As such, abstract paintings are a lot harder to understand than representational paintings. Indeed, when you look at an abstract painting, you often have no idea what it is you are actually seeing. Let's see if we can make sense out of this.

In general, there are two types of abstract paintings. The first type of abstract painting portrays objects that have been "abstracted" (taken) from nature. Although what you see may not look realistic, it is close enough that you can, at least, get an idea of what you are looking at. If you have ever seen any of the paintings of Claude Monet (French, 1840-1926), you will know what I mean. In 1899, Monet began to paint a series of paintings called "Water Lilies". These paintings depict the garden at his house in Giverny, Normandy (in France).

Although the objects in the paintings don't really look like lilies, or water, or clouds, they are close enough that you can get a feeling for what you are

seeing. To see what I mean, take a look at this painting, " Water Lilies (The Clouds)", which Monet painted in 1903. " Water Lilies (The Clouds)" [1903] by Claude Monet. Display a larger picture of this painting. A second type of abstract painting, sometimes referred to as " pure" abstract art, is even more obtuse. Such paintings do not reflect any form of conventional reality: all you see are shapes, colors, lines, patterns, and so on.

Here, for example, is one of my paintings, entitled " Blue #1", which I painted in 2000. " Blue #1" [2000] by Harley Hahn. Display a larger picture of this painting. As you can see, nothing in this painting is recognizable. There are no people, fruit or even water lilies. When you look at such art, it is natural to wonder why anyone would bother to create such paintings in the first place. What could the artist possibly have in mind? In some cases, the design itself might be pleasing to the eye, and we might look upon the painting as nothing more than a decoration.

Most of the time, however, this is not the case. Indeed, a great deal of abstract art is not particularly pleasing to the eye. Moreover, why would an artist spend so much time creating a mere decoration? There must be something more to it. The truth is, yes, there is a lot more to abstract art than what meets the eye, and to see why, we have to consider the basic purpose of art. To truly appreciate a work of art, you need to see it as more than a single, isolated creation: there must be context. This is because art is not timeless.

Every painting is created within a particularenvironment, and if you do not understand that environment, you will never be able to appreciate what the artist has to offer you. This is why, when you study the work of a particular

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artist, it makes sense to learn something about his life and the culture in which he lived. Although the qualities of a painting depend on the skill and desires of the artist, a great deal of what you see on the canvas reflects the environment in which the art was created. As an example, take a look at the following two paintings.

The painting on the right, the well-known Mona Lisa, was painted from 1503-1506 by Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452-1519). The painting on the left, a picture of Princess Diana, was painted in 1982 by Andy Warhol (American, 1928-1987). Both are portraits of a woman, and both were produced by highly skilled artists who used similar poses — but notice the striking differences in style. " Princess Diana" [1982] by Andy Warhol. Display a larger picture of this painting. " Mona Lisa" [1503-1506] by Leonardo da Vinci. Display a larger picture of this painting.

If you study the lives of da Vinci and Warhol, you will find that there were — as you might well imagine — significant personal differences between the two men. These differences, however, do not account for the vast dissimilarity in painting styles. When you compare these two paintings, what you are seeing, more than anything else, are cultural differences. When an artist creates, he is strongly influenced by the times in which he lives and, no matter how innovative he might be as a person, he cannot completely escape the boundaries of his culture.

As you study the history of art, you see that, at any particular place and time, there is always a dominant " school" of art that defines the prevailing artistic culture. Most artists of the time work within the norms of that culture. A few artists, however — the visionaries and the experimenters — break new

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ground and, as they do, they encounter tremendous resistance from people who don't understand the "new" style of art. However, it is from the work of these innovators that art evolves. So how does this pertain to abstract art? Until the end of the 19th century, virtually all painting was representational.

Artists painted pictures that were straightforward, and people looked at those paintings for one reason: to see the particular images that were depicted. At first, this idea sounds so obvious as to hardly be worth stating. Why else would you look at paintings, if not to see the images? However, as I will explain, there are other, more compelling reasons to look at a painting. Indeed, it is possible to experience a painting in such a way that you go beyond what you see, in order to find out what you might feel. In the early 1870s, a movement arose in France that began to introduce abstraction into serious art.

This movement, called Impressionism, produced works of art that, for the first time, did not consist wholly of realistic images. The original goal of the Impressionists was conceptually simple: they wanted to depict nature as it really existed. In particular, they labored to capture the ever-changing effects of light, as it changed throughout the day and from season to season. For example, the French painter Monet, whom I mentioned above, spent a lot of time creating series of paintings in which he painted the same subject at different times of the day.

His goal was to show how the color and form of the subject changed from one hour to the next. Take a look at this painting of haystacks, created by Monet in 1890-1891. His goal was not to paint a simple image of a stack of hay, but rather to show the color and form of the haystacks at a particular

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time of day at the end of the summer. From Monet's point of view (I imagine), the painting was more of an exercise than a work of art. "Wheatstacks (End of Summer)" [1890-1891] by Claude Monet. Display a larger picture of this painting. Around the same time, another school of art, Neo-Impressionism, arose from the influence of Impressionism.

The Neo-Impressionists used many small side-by-side dots to build up various shapes and colors. You can see this technique — which is known as "pointillism" — in the following painting, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte", created in 1884-1886 by Georges Seurat (French, 1859-1891). "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" [1884-1886] by Georges Seurat. Display a larger picture of this painting. Finally, in the 1880s and 1890s, a disparate group of artists sought to move beyond Impressionism and its obsession with the changing effects of light.

These artists, collectively known as the Post-Impressionists, created a wide range of striking and innovative paintings. Among the most important Post-Impressionists were Paul Cezanne (French, 1839-1906), whom I mentioned earlier, Paul Gauguin (French, 1848-1903) and Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853-1890). When you look at Impressionist paintings, you will notice that, although they are generally soothing to the eye and calming to the spirit, they are, as a whole, quite boring. This is not the case with the Post-Impressionists, as you can see by looking at the following two paintings. First, here is "Where Do We Come From?

What Are We? Where Are We Going?", painted in 1897 by Gauguin. "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" [1897] by Paul Gauguin. Display a larger picture of this painting. Next, take a look at "<https://assignbuster.com/abstract-art-development/>

Irises", painted in 1889 by van Gogh. " Irises" [1889] by Vincent van Gogh. Display a larger picture of this painting. The last three decades of the 19th century were a time of two important — and distinct — transitions. First, as I have mentioned, there was a gradual change from representational art to abstract art. You can see this in the work of the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists.

The second change was more subtle, but far more important. With the work of the Post- Impressionists, the purpose of art itself had begun to change. For most of history, the primary purpose of painting had been to portray images, rather than to evoke feelings and emotions. Starting with the Post-Impressionists, however, the emphasis began to shift. For the first time, unconscious feelings began to find their way into mainstream art. What allowed this to happen was that the Impressionists had loosened the bonds, giving permission for painters to stray from their representational roots and become more abstract.

To be sure, the Post-Impressionists were still quite literal in their work: when you look at the work of Cezanne or Gauguin or van Gogh, you do know what you are looking at. Indeed, at the beginning of this essay, I used one of Cezanne's paintings (" Apples, Peaches, Pears, and Grapes") as an example of representational work. Still, the gradual shift to abstraction and the capturing of deep-seated emotion was real and far-reaching. The reason that this is so important is that most of human life exists unconsciously, below the surface of perception and beyond the reach of voluntary, purposeful thinking.

Within this netherworld, lies the strong, untamed and irrational forces that give life to our being and definition to what it means to be human. Until the 20th century, artists had to be content with merely grazing the surface of consciousness. Try as they might, their ability to penetrate to the heart of what it means to be human was limited by their tools. When the brain processes a recognizable image, a mental barrier is erected that prevents significant entry into the processes of the unconscious.

Thus, representational art, by its very nature, imposes limits on how deeply an artist is able to insinuate him- or herself into the unconscious processes of the observer. However, with the coming of abstraction, artists had, for the first time, a powerful tool that would allow them to bypass literal perception and reach into this otherwise impenetrable world of unconscious emotion. This was possible because, the more abstract a work of art, the less preconceptions it evokes in the mind of the beholder. In the hands of a skillful practitioner, abstract art can be an extremely powerful tool.

However, as I will explain in a moment, such tools require more than the skill of the artist, they require the cooperation of the observer. Before I get to this point, however, I'd like to continue with a bit of history. By the beginning of the 20th century, the move towards abstraction had generated enormous possibility. Previously, painters — restricted by the conventions of representational art — had confined themselves to either imitating nature or telling stories. Now, for the first time, artists were able to enter a realm in which unbounded imagination was, not only possible, but desirable.


Between 1910 and 1920, a new movement towards abstract art, both in painting and sculpture, arose in Europe and in North America. The first

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important abstract artist was Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866-1944). During the years 1910 to 1914, Kandinsky created a series of paintings which he called "Improvisations and Compositions". Even today, almost a century later, Kandinsky's work is striking in its ability to bypass our consciousness and stir our inner feelings. Take a look, for example, at one of my favorites, "Improvisation 7", which Kandinsky painted in 1910. "Improvisation 7" [1910] by Wassily Kandinsky.

Display a larger picture of this painting. The work of Kandinsky was extremely influential, and helped to usher in an age in which a number of abstract movements were established, one after another: Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism, Neoplasticism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and so on. Rather than describe each of these movements in detail, I'd like to jump to what I consider to be the defining point of 20th century art: Abstract Expressionism. What we now call Abstract Expressionism emerged in New York in the early 1940s. It was not so much a well-defined school of art, as a way of thinking.

The Abstract Expressionists made the final break from the rigid conventions of the past, by redefining what it meant to be an artist. In essence, they rebelled against what the rest of the art world judged to be acceptable. Although the idea of abstraction had been around for some time, the Abstract Expressionists went a lot further. They began to emphasize, not only the finished product, but the actual process of painting. They experimented in how they interacted with the paint, the canvas, and their tools; and they paid attention to the physical qualities of the paint itself, its texture, color and shape.

I realize this sounds vague and pretentious, so I will explain to you what it all means. Before I do, though, let's take a look at an Abstract Expressionist painting, so you can at least get a feeling for what I am talking about. The following painting was created in 1950 by Jackson Pollock (American, 1912-1956), a pioneer of what came to be called "action painting". The painting was originally called "Number 1, 1950", but at the suggestion of an art critic named Clement Greenberg, the painting was renamed "Lavender Mist" (although, there is actually no lavender in it). *Lavender Mist* [1950] by Jackson Pollock.  The name "action painting" was coined to describe the techniques used by Pollock. He would fasten large canvases to the floor of his studio, and then drip, fling, and spill paint on them. He often used regular house paint, because he preferred the way it flowed. Now, I understand that the first time you look at a picture like "Lavender Mist" you may see nothing more than a confusing array of disorganized lines and spots. "What," I hear you say, "is this supposed to mean?"

How could anything so primitive and crude be considered to be great art? It looks like something a bored kid would do if he was left alone in an art studio with no supervision. Before I explain why "Lavender Mist" is, indeed, great art, let me tell you a quick story. A few years ago, I decided to visit Washington, D. C. by myself. It was the middle of winter, and the city had been hit by a huge snowstorm. I was all alone, so I decided to walk to the National Gallery of Art. The streets were virtually empty, and as I entered the museum, I could see that it too was empty.

I asked the information person if they had anything by Jackson Pollock. She said yes, and gave me directions to the room in which his paintings and drawings were hung. I had heard of Pollock and seen photographs of his work, but I had never seen any of the paintings in person. I still remember the feeling I had when I descended the stairs, turned the corner, and looked at the wall. I was alone in a large room and, there on the far wall, was "Lavender Mist". The effect it had on me was completely unexpected. It was the only time in my life when I can remember a painting, literally, taking my breath away.

I know this will sound a bit sappy, but seeing that painting changed me forever. Looking at a Jackson Pollock painting for the first time. How could this be the case? You just looked at a picture of the same painting, and I doubt you felt as if you had been changed forever. First, I should explain that the actual canvas is large, nearly 10 feet (3 meters) long. It is quite imposing when you see it in person, especially in a large empty room, where the painting seems to reach out, grab you and pull you towards it.

Second, what you see in the picture above is nothing like the real thing. Not only is the picture on your screen much smaller than the actual painting, but the colors you see on a computer monitor are muted and inexact. Moreover, on a computer screen, you do not get a sense of the texture of the paint and the canvas. All of this you understand, I am sure. Everyone knows that viewing a real painting is a lot different from looking at a picture of the painting on a computer monitor (or on a projection screen in an art history class, for that matter).

However, there is another reason why I was so moved by "Lavender Mist", and it has to do with the very purpose of art. To discuss this, we have to consider the question, Why do we create art? There are a number of straightforward reasons why human beings create art: to make a decoration, to tell a story, to capture or preserve an image, or to illustrate an idea. However, there is another, more subtle, but far more important reason why art is important to us. The need to reach inside ourselves and manipulate our unconscious feelings is universal.

We all do it to some degree, although most of the time we are blind to what we are doing. That is where art comes in. As I explained earlier, one of the purposes of art is to allow us indirect access to our inner psyche. Great art affords a way to get in touch with the unconscious part of our existence, even if we don't realize what we are doing. In this sense, the role of the artist is to create something that, when viewed by an observer, evokes unconscious feelings and emotions.

The reason abstract art has the potential to be so powerful is that it keeps the conscious distractions to a minimum. When you look at, say, the apples and pears of Cezanne, your mental energy mostly goes to processing the images: the fruit, the plate, the table, and the background. However, when you look at "Lavender Mist", you are not distracted by meaningful images, so virtually all of your brain power is devoted to feeling. You can open yourself, let in the energy and spirit of the painting, and allow it to dance with your psyche.

Of course, this only works if you cooperate with the artist. His job is to create a painting that is rendered so skillfully that, when you look at it, what you

see actually changes what you feel at an unconscious level. Your job is to clear your conscious mind of thoughts and preconceptions in order to allow yourself to be influenced by what you are seeing. This means that, if you are to truly appreciate a work of art, you must be willing to let yourself go, to put yourself in the hands of the artist, so to speak, and let him take you wherever he wants.

Much of the time, this partnership fails, sometimes because the artist is simply not skillful enough; often because the person looking at the painting does not know how to truly appreciate it. Now you can see why the advent of Abstract Expressionism was so important. For the first time in history, artists were creating abstract art so skillfully that it was able to penetrate quickly and powerfully into people's subconscious (at least some people, some of the time). Thus, it is possible to view the history of painting as a long evolutionary process, starting with the slow, labored development of tools and techniques.

Eventually, after centuries of representationalism, the Impressionists began to shake off the long-standing restrictions, which led to the development of various schools of abstract art, culminating, in the 1940s, with Abstract Expressionism, the beginning of a new age of creation and human achievement. I'd like to introduce to you a few of the Abstract Expressionists, painters whose work was important to the evolutionary process that redefined what it meant to be an artist. One thing that you will see is that work of these painters varies greatly.

This is because, as I have mentioned, Abstract Expressionism is not so much a school of painting as a way of approaching and experiencing the act of <https://assignbuster.com/abstract-art-development/>

creation. I have already shown you " Lavender Mist" (1950) by Jackson Pollock. Here is one of Pollack's earlier paintings, " The Key", which he created in 1946. " The Key" [1946] by Jackson Pollock. Display a larger picture of this painting. Next, I'd like to show you a painting by Arshile Gorky (Armenian-American, 1904-1948), whose work had significant influence at the time that Abstract Expressionism was emerging.

This painting, called " One Year the Milkweed", was created in 1944. " One Year the Milkweed" [1944] by Arshile Gorky. Display a larger picture of this painting. When you are just getting used to abstract art, you might wonder, just how good are these artists anyway? It doesn't look all that hard to fill a canvas with lines, and smears, and splotches. I can assure you that the best abstract painters are all highly skilled artists in their own right. For example, here is a charcoal sketch done by Gorky in 1938, called " The Artist's Mother". It is actually an idealization of his mother, inspired by an old photograph.) " The Artist's Mother" [1938] by Arshile Gorky. The next painting is by Franz Kline (American, 1910-1962). It is called " Painting Number 2", and was created in 1954. " Painting Number 2" [1954] by Franz Kline. Display a larger picture of this painting. Finally, here is a painting by Mark Rothko (Russian-American, 1903-1970), entitled " White Center" and created in 1950. This painting is an example of what is called " Color Field" painting: an abstract image with large areas of undiluted color. " White Center" [1950] by Mark Rothko.