

# Back to black

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Boring. Lifeless. Atypical.

Colorless. Kooky. BLACK. The color is dark. It blocks light, inspiration, and imagination. It is often considered impure, dirty, and evil.

A color worn by those mourning the loss of a loved one. A color describing one of the most devastating pandemics in history. A color considered unequal. A tone so relevant that it can be seen everywhere by everyone, yet somehow it still fits the description of all the above words and phrases. Black is black because it's selfish.

It absorbs every color in the spectrum and conceals them from the viewers eyes, leaving nothing but darkness. It is the only shade of color, other than white, that is capable of containing every color while retaining its own identity. White, however, shares the colors and stories it has within. By simply passing white light through a prism, the entire color spectrum becomes visible (Murmson). This phenomenon is most notably seen in rainbows, nature's work of art created by God himself. Despite this beautiful spectacle, the color white is still considered pure.

It is free of all visible imperfections. Black, however, follows the same concept, but it does not receive the same praise. A sample of black can be free of any imperfections; any obscurities, but it is still considered impure. It is still viewed as irrelevant and still interpreted as lifeless. This concept is most visible in a painting by Ad Reinhardt.

In his abstract painting No. 10, Reinhardt brings purity and perfection to the color black and its various shades in his search to develop the " absolute

zero of art” by eliminating brush strokes, developing his image using perfect shapes, and by placing visible images within a seemingly plain black painting. Reinhardt not only brings morality to the color black, but he also bring insight and simplicity to the world of art. Adolph (Ad) Reinhardt was a simple man. In fact, this simplicity can be seen in nearly all of his later works. Reinhardt, however, was not always as simple as many of his later, mature works reveal.

Adolph Reinhardt’s artistic career began early on. From a young age, his interest in the visual arts was apparent. In high school, Reinhardt began designing and drawing cartoons for his school’s newspaper. These cartoons were obviously much more complex than Reinhardt’s later, abstract work (Savvine). After graduating high school, Reinhardt attended Columbia University, turning down multiple art scholarships from other schools. At this time, he was more interested in written works and the historical context of art rather than developing works himself.

While attending Columbia, Reinhardt majored in literature and art history, which together provided him with a strong understanding of humanities and modern art. He studied under Meyer Schapiro who was a notable art historian of the time. Schapiro was known for his Marxists and extreme views which he often pushed on Reinhardt in an attempt to influence his views on not only art, but society as well. He also encouraged Reinhardt to become involved in campus politics. This involvement is often credited to shaping his leftist views, which are most likely what would influence Reinhardt in his later years (Savvine). Upon graduating from Columbia in 1935, he began studying as an artist.

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It is at this time where he would fall under the impact of artists who were influenced by Cubism and Constructivism. These influences contributed to Reinhardt's interest in abstract artwork which he also began to develop during this period. Much of his work of this time was influenced by geometric abstraction. However, he was also still developing cartoons and working as an illustrator creating much more complex works (Savvine). As his interest in abstract art began to escalate, his interpretation and development of such works began to deviate from his peers. Much of Reinhardt's mature works are defined by his quest to develop a pure form of abstract art which contained no outside influences or the slightest suggestion of emotion.

This "absolute abstraction" was, what Reinhardt felt, the only true form of abstract art. He believed many works of abstract art at the time included too many "emotional innuendos, and a cult of the ego" (Savvine). Reinhardt wanted to create art for the purpose of creating art. It was this purpose, along with his desire to bring piety to abstractionism, that influenced him to begin developing his paintings characterized by their use of only one color and varying sizes of geometric squares and rectangles. It is in this category where No. 10 can be placed.

Reinhardt began this style of painting with colors such as red and blue, and it was not until 1954 to his death in 1967 that Ad would develop his Black Paintings (Savvine). He believed this series of paintings represented that pure, absolute abstraction he had been searching for. This idea most likely became a desire of Reinhardt's in conjunction with the leftists views instilled in him by his mentors. These views developed the way in which he interpreted and developed this series of paintings. The Black Paintings, <https://assignbuster.com/back-to-black/>

however, would not have been possible without the use of multiple techniques.

Specifically, two techniques in which oil is siphoned from the applied paint, and multiple layers are formed in order to remove brush strokes. Reinhardt worked countless hours practicing these techniques in order to reach his goal of developing his idea of moral art. By mastering these techniques, Reinhardt was able to not only remove the brush strokes from his paintings but also siphon the life from the canvas (Cotter). It was in this manner he believed he could remove all inspiration or suggestive tones from his work. That was the only way he could create the pure form of art he desired. In an oil painting, the oil brings a glossy life to the otherwise matte dye.

By removing the oil from the paint, Reinhardt left a matte finish on the canvas, creating the look present in the Black Paintings. With the oil removed from the paint, the moral form of the color was left. This pure, matte appearance of color left little room for inspiration and analysis of the work because only a honest, lifeless color was present. However, the color present was still black. Black, as described by Reinhardt is, “.

.. interesting not as a color but as a non-color and as the absence of color.” It was this view that led him to create, what he believed, the “ absolute zero of art” (Savvine). The term absolute zero is rather interesting. It is often a term used to describe a temperature equal to zero degrees Kelvin.

At absolute zero, it is impossible for life, or even matter, to exist. In fact, absolute zero is physically impossible to not only measure, but to reach (Muir). If this definition is applied to what Reinhardt considered to be the “

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absolute zero of art,” it too would be an impossible feat. Reinhardt believed his series of black paintings were truly the absolute zero of art, where no life, inspiration, or imagination could exist. Reinhardt, however, failed to recognize that reaching absolute zero was unfeasible.

He made one mistake. A mistake that prevented him from achieving his vision of the Black Paintings. Reinhardt wanted his paintings to stand alone. Their purpose was to be art within themselves. He designed them to be free of any outside influence. However, Reinhardt used minimally varying shades of black within his painting.

The differing tints he used are so close to matching each other that it is difficult to differentiate between the assorted squares of different shades. These varying tints of black require light for the viewer to become aware of their presence. The viewer must look at the painting long enough for their eyes to adjust and interpret the various shades. Reinhardt stated, “ Looking isn’t as simple as it looks. Art teaches people how to see.” His purpose was to make people spend time with art.

Rather than looking at art from an outside perspective, the viewer must look at the art as art. The piece itself tells the observer how to perceive it. This idea, this need to give the viewer something to look at, and this necessity to spend time with the art is what led Reinhardt to his mistake. As the observer spends time with No. 10, a greek cross becomes visible hovering in the center of the piece, hidden inside the hues of black.

It brings a sort of eerie unknown feeling to the painting, but more than that, it brings inspiration and imagination. It leaves the viewer questioning the

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intent of the cross' visibility. After all, the painting was supposed to be free from any outside influence. While the cross may prevent the painting from being the absolute zero of art, it encourages the purity of the work. The cross, being a religious symbol and representing Christ, brings further piety to the piece. The cross brings the influence of God's existence into the piece.

God is often perceived to be seen in pure white clothing surrounded by saintly angels of the same origin. Reinhardt, however, paints the cross as black, but with his techniques and use of perfect shapes to create a perfect cross, he brings a sort of righteousness to the otherwise ghostly figure. The use of perfect squares, which make up the cross, continue to emphasize the purity of the piece. By using perfect shapes, Reinhardt reinforces his views of abstract art. Many abstract works of the time featured random, deformed shapes scattered throughout the painting. Reinhardt, however, believed these shapes left room for imagination.

This is what led him to fill his canvas with perfect squares, nearly exact copies of each other except for varying hues of color. The measurements and perfection required to fill the entire canvas with these perfect shapes while maintaining the ability to keep the shapes distinct and their intersections pure, further emphasizes Reinhardt's desire to perfect art. It is often difficult to measure success, especially in the world of art. Many artists set out to accomplish a goal with their works, but they are often met with criticism and an displeased audience. Ad Reinhardt was no exception.

His Black Paintings were met with both criticism and applause. Many people found it hard to understand their purpose and their meaning. This is partly

due to Reinhardt being ahead of his time in the world of abstract art, and the fact that this series of paintings was not meant to have a purpose to the viewer but rather to the artist himself. Reinhardt believed these paintings were capable of creating social change despite their lack of inspiration, life, and imagination. While he did not accomplish his goal of making the absolute zero of art, he did bring a new identity to black. Reinhardt brought purity, perfection, and life to something deemed otherwise by society.

He believed in his vision, and devoted the last years of his life to achieve his purpose. Although he may not have succeeded at attaining the goal he set for his artwork, he inspired artists who would come after him. Reinhardt took a risk, and used his ideas to create something new. Perhaps society could learn something from Ad. If value is placed on the simple joys in life as much as the complex acts, then maybe his work will in fact inflict social change. Observing life as a simple arrangement of geometric shapes, allows nothing to come of the experience.

However, by considering the dedication, techniques, and images these simple geometric shapes form, life may not be as black and abstract as it seems. Works Cited Cotter, Holland. " Tall, Dark, and Fragile." The New York Times, [www.nytimes.com/2008/08/01/arts/design/01blac.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/01/arts/design/01blac.html). Accessed 27 Oct. 2017. Muir, Hazel. " What happens at absolute zero?.

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