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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: AN AMERICAN PHENOMENON

by

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: AN AMERICAN PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: AN AMERICAN PHENOMENON

One of the newest types of painting in the modern tradition is Abstract Expressionism. It began in New York around 1944. All the experiences of Americans with modern art had been poured into the melting pot of the city. Present were not only eminent native artists, but also Europeans with established reputations - refugees from Fascist Spain, Nazi Germany, and Occupied France. Their meetings with each other brought about interchanges on all levels of thought and practice. Out of this mixture came not an adaptation of a trend formalized abroad but a new style of painting created in America.¹

It is true that Kandinsky is given credit for having produced the first entirely abstract painting in the early years of this century, but the family tree of abstract expressionism can be traced back to Delacroix and beyond him to the traditions of which French romanticism was a

¹Leonard Freedman, Looking at Modern Painting (New York, 1961), p.72.

continuation. When one remembers Delacroix's warning that "all precautions have to be taken to make execution swift and decisive (in order not to lose) the extraordinary impression accompanying the conception," one finds him stating a principle that is pushed to its limits by painters today who appear to splash color at random, following spontaneous impulse. Yet their "precautions" must be present behind the apparent impulsiveness just as in the case of Delacroix where they were present to a rigidly imposed degree. And when abstract expressionism seems formless and sloppy, one may remember that Delacroix was accused of painting with "a drunken broom."²

In founding abstract expressionism painters broke with many traditional influences. Philosophically some of them were ranging far from the Greco-Semitic tradition of Western civilization. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, Mark Tobey had developed an interest in Oriental art and theology, particularly Zen Buddhism. His work shows the attempt to find unity and truth discoverable through intuition and contemplation. The work of other abstract expressionist painters has been interpreted as a statement of existentialism.

²H.H. Arnason, The History of Modern Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968), p.146.

Incessant innovation has been characteristic of twentieth century art, and earlier schools of modern painting had lost their momentum by the forties. There were still numerous variations on Cubism, Surrealism, and the decorative work of Matisse. But many of the younger artists did not want to go on trying changes on these styles.³ Abstract expressionism placed no limits on the independent form and color signs that could be invented. It offered discovery of the self, discovery of the world, freedom of rules, conventions, and traditions--what a field of action for the artist!⁴

Abstract expressionism, then, represents a new approach. Yet it is very much related to the past. It derives directly from the revolution of man's visual experience, which had already been accomplished by earlier twentieth century schools. As Robert Motherwell said:

Every intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head. It is his real subject, of which anything he paints is both an homage and a critique, and everything he says a gloss.

Technically the abstract expressionists owe their greatest debts to Cubism and to the German expressionist movement. Philosophically they have been influenced by Mondrian,

³Freedman, p.72.

⁴Herbert Read, Art Now (New York, 1968), p.111.

Kandinsky, and the Surrealists.⁵

At first the more important artists working in New York in the earlier forties were all grouped under the label "School of New York". Not all of them, however, were abstract expressionists. Some of them, for example, sought to exploit the style of Mondrian, but Mondrian's technique did not point towards abstract expressionism.

A tremendous amount has been written concerning the characteristics of abstract expressionism. Indeed, one of the phenomena connected with the style is the amount of verbalizing by artists, critics, and interested bystanders. The mere existence of works of this kind seems to have been a challenge to their creators and exhibitors to explain them in print. At this point, to avoid confusion and complicated terminology, a definition of abstract expressionism will be postponed until after analysis of the work of several artists who belong to the movement. This is all the more essential because there is more than one kind of painting which belongs to the style. Three types will be singled out, more in an effort to provide insight and comprehension than to be arbitrary about classification. Undoubtedly, some pictures fit into more than one of the categories set up. In any event, an approach

⁵Freedman, p.73.

is made to the paintings themselves so that analysis of them will answer such questions as: What should one look for in this kind of painting? What is their significance in the tradition of modern art? What standards can be used in judging these works?

1. Structural Painting. Hans Hofmann exemplifies this first category of abstract expressionists—those who emphasize structure. With him is grouped Grace Hartigan, Philip Guston, Sam Francis, Theodore Stamos, Willem de Kooning, Jack Tworkov, and others.

Hofmann was among the first of the abstract expressionists. He was also its most brilliant teacher. It was in this capacity that he was called to the U.S. in 1930, yet he did not receive the touch of fame until after his first exhibition in New York at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in 1944.

A glance at his painting, "X, 1955", may suggest that there is no apparent order in the bright, stabbing colors and the broad swaths of paint. Both Kandinsky and Hofmann paint non-objectively in the sense that all reference to the reality of the phenomenal world has been eliminated. Both are what are called colorists, since their pictures are built up with the substance of color and achieve their particular effects as a result of it. To this extent Kandinsky could be classed as an abstract expressionist.

Yet the paintings belong to two different worlds in spite of their similarities. The surfaces of Kandinsky's "Two Compositions" are relatively smooth or flat compared to "X, 1955". The latter is built up of pigment into almost three dimensional relief, whereas Kandinsky's pigment is drawn on the canvas along the picture plane. The difference involved here is a basic one for all types of abstract expressionism. The pigment must be thick enough to preserve the stroke of brush or palette knife or whatever instrument is used so that the trace of execution remains on the surface. The very act of painting, the actual process of creativity, is thus captured on the canvas.⁶

Another distinction must be made between these two types of abstraction. Kandinsky manipulates his color areas and lines in such a way that the observer must keep his eye in continual movement. For Kandinsky sees the canvases as arenas for moral struggle. His forms and colors are contending forces of light and dark, good and evil. "X, 1955", on the other hand, deals solely with the elements of art and does not demand moral interpretation of this type. The Hofmann is static as opposed to the kinetic effect of the Kandinsky; and this static, structural quality is characteristic of this first type of

⁶Freedman, pp.73-75.

abstract expressionism. But if one talks about structure in "X, 1955", one's first impression that there is only chaos here must be re-examined. At a second look, a wealth of details catches the attention. In fact, the painting has been so carefully built, so deliberately organized, that it may have a closer similarity to Cubism than to Kandinsky.

This may not be immediately apparent if one looks back to Braque's "Man with a Guitar". Compared to the Hofmann the Braque painting is strikingly limited in its use of color and motif, with monochromatic brown organized through predominately short, straight lines and sharp angles making planes which tilt, overlap and blend. The elements of design selected by the Cubist are not those of the abstract expressionist. The texture of his surface is entirely different. And Braque still holds on to references to visual phenomena, which have been banished from the Hofmann. Yet there are important similarities. Both types of painting focus attention on the substance of painting as a medium. The composition is constructed in each case out of the qualities of the craft itself. In both cases there is carefully organized structure.

In Hofmann's construction "X, 1955" projects forward giving the representation of space. All the pigments rest on the surface equally and move towards the eye rather than

away from it. Even where one color is placed over another, as the great red streaks cut above the blue, the blue immediately springs to the same level as the red. This retention of all parts of the surface in the same plane is typical of abstract expressionism. The areas in "X, 1955" do not recede nor tilt as in Cubism, nor do they flow back and forth as in Kandinsky's composition. They stay on the surface and emphasize it. To organize his surface, Hofmann has placed a huge X almost in the center of the canvas. The crossing of the two bars is a little high and to the left of the center making the composition asymmetric. In discussing his own work Hofmann constantly used such phrases as "the establishment of relationships", "development of tensions", "expansion-contraction", and "push-pull". All of these terms deal with color and the effect of different colors on each other as a result not only of the qualities of chroma, value and intensity, but also of direction and size of the areas in which they exist. They are certainly not new terms and can be equally well applied to the analysis of such a painting as the "Blue Vase" by Cézanne, which has many similarities of general structure to "X, 1955". The major force in the latter picture consists in the rising pull to the left along the bar of red. This is only partially counteracted by the more vertically placed blue streak. The large yellow area

to the right of the center aids in stabilizing the central masses as do the smaller yellow squarish areas to the left of center. In fact, every block of pigment is carefully and superbly placed to maintain the structural tension and the push-pull of the varying color areas. What looks unorganized is very meticulously planned.

If this does not seem to be the case, it is because one is unaccustomed to the roughness, vagueness, and unfinished quality of the shapes used. Being so used to the definite shapes of modern artists for the last fifty years, one is startled by the lack of clarity or the indefiniteness of shape. This very lack is a great help in making more obvious the process of organization; it is as though the artist had no time to go back and tidy up the edges and smooth out the planes with which he was dealing. The result has a much greater effect of spontaneity and conceives the creative process, leaving its record on the surface of the artist's canvas. By theory, when color is splashed, flipped, shoved, or swept over a surface the artist is closest to the observer because his emotional impulse is translated into physical actions that immediately, without intermediate stages, produce shape and color.⁷

⁷Alfred Neumeier, The Search for Meaning in Modern Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964), p.134.

Hofmann himself, like most other well-known abstract expressionists, has indulged in a great deal of self-explanation. Typical phrases are: "Pictorial life is a created reality. Without it, pictorial communication--the appeal to the senses and the mind--is non-existent." "Pictorial life is not imitated life; it is, on the contrary, a created reality based on the inherent life within every medium of expression." "Color is, of course, not a creative means in itself. We must force it to become a creative means. We do this in sensing the inner life by which related colors respond to each other through the created actuality of intervals." "Looking at a picture is a spontaneous act that reveals at once the quality or non-quality of the work. But what is quality? Quality is the essence resulting from convincingly established felt-relationships."⁸ This is another way of saying that painting without verbal or visual references to visible nature is valuable in itself; it is good if it fits together as a composition. Th meaning is highly personal and is definitely marked by the artist's own judgement and values. Most of all the abstract expressionists are romantic in the extreme personalism of their art. When Guston calls his painting "The Painter's City" he implies

⁸Ibid.

the most personal, emotional sources for his art. Such titles attached to the abstract expressionist paintings bring the school into the tradition of personal fulfillment and release, at whatever expense, which is the basis of romanticism.⁹

2. Action Painting. The second category of abstract expressionism makes much more out of the concept of the act of painting than does the first type--so much so that it has been called "action painting". The spontaneous movements made by the artist, his involuntary reflexes motivated by long training, the exploitation of the accidental and the dependence upon intuition, coupled with new techniques of applying paint, are all part of action painting as opposed to the structural ordering of form illustrated by Hofmann. Jackson Pollack was the American most successful in developing this approach to the creative act, as George Mathieu has been in France. For both of them "What was to go onto the canvas was not a picture but an event." "A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist..." "The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life."¹⁰

⁹Arnason, p.146-7.

¹⁰Freedman, p.75.

As Delacroix was accused of painting with "a drunken broom", some abstract expressionists have literally painted with brooms (while sober). With these artists the act of painting has become the overriding considerations. At first reaction, one may feel that nothing at all remains of art except the elusive and ephemeral moment of action. Yet the object made as a result of the artist's actions is still around and it is each person's task to comprehend and to approve or disapprove of this record.¹¹

To help, a reference is made to the aesthetic theory of Benedetto Croce:

...intuitive knowledge is expressive knowledge. Independent and autonomous in respect to intellectual function; indifferent to later empirical discriminations, to reality and unreality, to formations and aperceptions of space and time...
 ...intuition or representation is distinguished as form from what is felt and suffered, from the flux or wave of sensation, or from psychic matter; and the form, this taking possession is expression. To intuit is to express; and nothing else (nothing more but nothing less) than to express.

The works of Pollack and Mathieu are extreme illustrations of Croce's ideas; they record or express the passing moment of intuition.

The accidental occurrence as opposed to the conscious act was first recognized as a possible means of creativity

¹¹Arnason, pp.146-7.

by the Dadaists, who made of the fortunate, the automatic and the accidental a positive element for the modern tradition. Pollack and Mathieu raised this non-rational element of the creative act to the position of a major principle. In order to apply it fully, Pollack abandoned the more normal methods of manipulating paint, as can be seen readily in "The Cockatoo" and "Painting 49-9". Taking cans instead of brushes, he dripped paint over the canvas in long arabesques interwoven across the total surface accompanied with blotches which contrast to the essential linearity of his effect. Partially because of the requirements of the gestures used to fling this paint across a two dimensional surface, the artist resorted to even larger canvases, until dimensions of ten feet or more were not unusual. The size of the painterly projection is a significant characteristic of abstract expressionism.¹² These gigantic murals, which would take up most of an ordinary wall, offered means for a superb display of the movements of the painter, involving not only the hand and wrist but the arm and entire torso.

With means continually more inventive and radical, Pollack pushed a wide range of expressive utterances to remarkable personal lengths. It is, of course, his passion

¹²Ibid.

as an artist that kept his works from ever being decorative.

Nevertheless this painting does have qualities of passion and lyrical desperation, unmasked and uninhibited painfully beautiful celebrations of what will disappear already from this world-- or of what may be destroyed at any moment. The urgency of his joy at this period is as great and as pertinent to our time.¹³

The meaning of his paintings is not ambiguous. Each is a direct statement of the spiritual life of the artist. Each is its own subject and the occasion for its expression.

Pollack says of his painting:

I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc. because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.¹⁴

The varieties of possibilities which this technique opens up is revealed if a contrast is made between the paintings by Pollack and the work of Mathieu. Immediately observable are differences in types of color, the uses of area against line, and above all, the configurations of stroke.

¹³Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, American Painting Today (New York, 1956), p.22.

¹⁴Hugo Munsterberg, Twentieth Century Painting (New York, 1951), p.62.

The following is an account of Mathieu's type of action painting: Once George Mathieu was invited to participate in the Salon de Mai. He decided he would show an enormous picture or none. His gigantic canvas was accepted although it was not yet painted. Reading a treatise on heraldry one day, Mathieu's eye fell on the following passage: "Mathieu of Montmorency, having seized 12 imperial standards at the Battle of Bouvines, his descendents changed the four eagles on their arms to 17 eaglets..." This phrase excited him, and from this excitement emerged his painting and myth adventure of Bouvines. Sensing his subject, Mathieu began to read everything on Bouvines and on feudal strategy, and to gather all possible information on every personage involved, from Philip Augustus and the Emperor Otto to the least important participant who had suffered a wound in the fight. He rented the enormous Calmels studio on the Rue Marcadet, where the biggest sets for Paris films are painted. Since the Battle of Bouvines took place on a Sunday, early in the afternoon, it was on a Sunday, just after lunch, that he set to work. Present were the Flemish poet, Emmanuel Looten, representing the Count of Flanders, and Michel Tapie de Celeyran, representing the Count of Toulouse. Mathieu was dressed in black silk; he wore a white helmet and shoes and greaves with white

cross-bars. In the hodge-podge of paint tubes and the hundreds of brushes, Mathieu summoned onto his canvas in a few hours (exactly the time taken by the fighting) first the army of the king of France (to the left of the picture), and then the armies of the coalition; above are splashes of larger characters and many colors used for their own sake just as much as for the pure joy of the symbol. These represented the Bishop of Beauvais, the Bishop of Laon, the Count of Boulogne, and Otto IV, Holy Roman Emperor, whose flight was finally indicated by a trail of black almost ten feet long beginning at the center of the canvas and descending to the lower right-hand corner. Mathieu's motions cannot by any stretch of the imagination be integrated in the ordinary terminology of a "technique". No doubt this reveals a flair for attracting attention reminiscent of Salvador Dali. Yet it is the result that counts, and Mathieu's results are highly decorative and elegant.¹⁵

3. Symbolist Painting. Here is a third variation of the abstract expressionist style—a variation whose particular qualities are a result of an interest in symbolism. Because of the apparent vagueness of meaning

¹⁵Herbert Read, The Philosophy of Modern Art (London, 1963), pp.216-17.

derived from an abstract expressionist painting, it may seem that an emphasis on symbolism might be a contradiction of the purpose of the style. But just as the other characteristics have been taken from the modern tradition, so this one follows from Dada or Surrealist precedents.

Robert Motherwell in particular has done research in the area of signs and symbols and arrived at an effect different from those of Hofmann or Pollack. There is not much regard for great complexities of color relations nor is much achieved by the manner in which the surface of his painting is developed. Both these factors are present, but what counts are the implications of meaning. It is the possibility of a more definite meaning which attracts the observer to the few and simple areas, lines, and stripes, and finally to the interrelationships of those elements.

Confronted by a Motherwell painting, the observer will begin to search for associational values partially implied by the "image" he uses on the canvas. But they are highly ambiguous images. No positively recognizable reminiscences of experience occur in the painting, and yet one is haunted by the possibility or implication of meaning it offers. On the other hand, an experience of this type may be intensely frustrating; on the other, the process of creating meaning out of the pictorial elements

may be deeply satisfying.¹⁶

What has been said above about the symbolist category of abstract expressionism can be effectively demonstrated by looking at Motherwell's "The Voyage, 1949". With respect to the method by which the picture is organized, it is clear that it parallels the approach of structural abstract expressionist painters rather than that of action painters. A very definite, almost symmetrical balance is developed around the central circle and vertical black band. A green strip at the bottom right and the angle of the white line on the left, diagonally across the black rectangle, hold the other areas and colors in typical tension, assisted particularly by a tall, yellow rectangle to the right of center. The method is essentially structural in effect but the interrelation of the areas and the greater definition of shape elicit a response from the observer in terms of such questions as: What is happening? Why are these shapes in this context? This leads to the conclusion that there must be some meaning, which is as yet elusive, but which may be trapped if only more would be known about or seen in the painting. In this way the relationship of shapes in a composition implies significance other than the kind to be found through

¹⁶Ibid.

an analysis of structure or through the evidence of the creative process.

In contrast to this picture, which Motherwell painted in 1949, is his "Je t'aime, IV" dated 1955-57. The background is in the structural abstract expressionist style. Superimposed upon this the words "Je t'aime" serve to wrench the spectator psychologically between two different and irreconcilable spheres of existence: that of the created object, and that of his everyday life. Placing the writing on the picture plane is, of course, a revival of an old idea; for it has the same significance as the bits of newspaper, wallpaper, theater tickets, and so on, which appear in the later collages of Cubism, typified by Gris's "Breakfast" and Picasso's "Man with a Hat".¹⁷

We can now provide a general definition of abstract expressionism, which we shall state in terms of subject matter, form, and content. Abstract expressionism is a type of painting with the following characteristics:

a) It is "abstract" in the sense that it does not contain specific visual references. Thus it has no subject matter -- unless one changes the definition of subject matter and suggests that the subject matter of the painting is the painting itself.

¹⁷Ibid.

b) The tangible marks of the creative process remain on the painting's surface, which has strong tactile qualities.

c) The content consists of a non-specific but powerful expression of the painter's intuition of reality.

The definition cannot in itself give one a complete understanding of abstract expressionist painting; it does give primary characteristics, and serves to help one distinguish it from other types of painting. Thus, while many of the other schools of modern painting possess one or two, none of them possess all three.¹⁸

The impact of the style has been deep and almost universal. Although it has not been the only type of painting practiced in the past twenty-eight years, it has certainly been the dominant movement of this period. By 1950 it was firmly established with numerous participants, dealers, critics, and museum directors, as well as the artists themselves. International in scope and appeal, it has adherents in all parts of the democratic world. Even behind the Iron Curtain some abstract expressionist paintings have been secretly painted, smuggled across borders, and exhibited in Paris.

A vast apparatus in America has helped gain public

¹⁸Freedman, p.84.

attention for abstract expressionism. New York City has two major museums dedicated to fostering modern art: the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Apparently, too, some of the artists practicing the style have become dissatisfied, perhaps because of the disregard for traditional subject references or because vast production on a world scale made the movement take on a quality of sameness or monotony. De Kooning turned back to subject matter; Motherwell turned back to Cubism and Dadaism.

Another example of the current reaction to abstract expressionism might be the 1960 exhibition, "New Images of Man", presented by the Museum of Modern Art. The new images were conceived in terms of expressive deformation of the human figure and rigorously excluded the completely abstract type of painting. Another straw in the wind is the remarkable revival of the Dada movement, which led to an ephemeral existence from 1916 to 1923.

Whatever the future holds, it is certain that abstract expressionism has already had a significant role and that America had the major lead in its formation. Critic Michel Seuphor made the observation that "the contribution of the U.S. to abstract expressionism is today as important as that of France. For several years

Paris has been no longer the only capital of the avant-garde in art; it shares these high honors with New York." For a Frenchman, even one who has been in this country, to make a confession that the United States is on a par with Metropolitan France is a sure indication of the remarkable pre-eminence of New York in the world of modern art. This was achieved through the development of abstract expressionism.¹⁹

Abstract expressionism describes an art that makes no natural references except tangentially, and that records the objectified image of the artist's personal state of feeling. The painters have objectified their images, have made their personal visions and vocabularies available, but without the extroverted energy one associates with expressionism—a term that evokes El Greco, van Gogh, Soutine. The excitement and explosive energy, even violence, of Pollack, de Kooning, and Kline was only one of the startling developments of post-war American painting. It was surely the most dramatic, the most newsworthy, and thus it captured the public imagination.

In the late forties out of their awareness of the innovational developments in Europe, the Americans

¹⁹Ray Faulkner and Edwin Ziegfeld, Art Today (New York, 1961), pp. 120-22.

created abstract expressionism, the first new mode or stylistic possibility to be invented in the United States. In the years since it came to maturity it has become the most influential style everywhere, and New York has become the center of world art with younger European and Asian painters choosing it as the place to study instead of Paris. For some time now it has no longer been necessary to look to Europe for examples that would be only partially understood. The culture is now local, the context American and understandable.²⁰

²⁰Henry Goldzahler, American Painting in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1965), p.177.

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