

# Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting

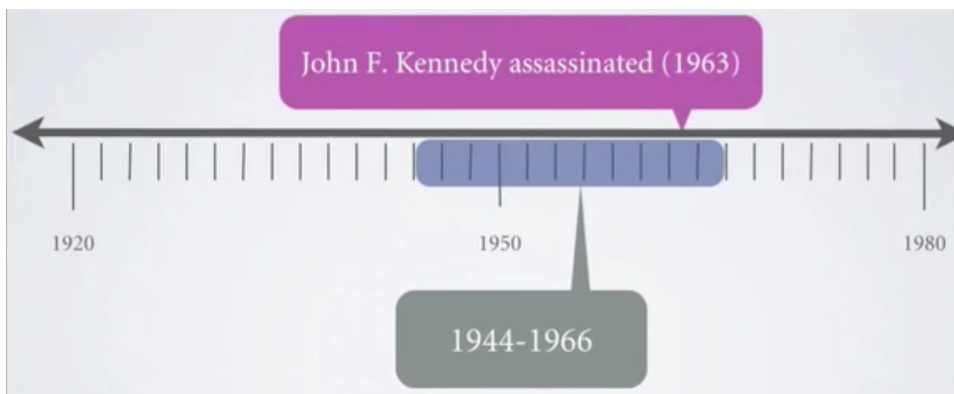
by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is about Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the context that influenced the development of abstract expressionism, and identify examples of abstract expressionist artwork. The rise of the United States as a world superpower after World War II and the migration of artists and intellectuals to the United States were influential in the development of Abstract Expressionism. This lesson will cover:

You'll be looking at works of art today from between 1944 and 1966.



## 1. The Liver is the Cock's Comb

**Abstract expressionism** is considered the first American art movement following the end of World War II. In a nutshell, abstract expressionism is a visual experience that is anti-figurative, rebellious, and emotional.

The work of the artist Arshile Gorky marks a bridge of sorts between surrealism and abstract expressionism. He was influenced by the works of Picasso and Juan Gris, as well as the idea of automatism where works of art are created spontaneously. It was an idea shared by Dada and surrealist artists, that more meaningful forms could be created by bridging the unconscious with the conscious mind. This was believed to be achievable through psychic automatism.



The Liver is the Cock's Comb by Arshile Gorky

1944

Oil on canvas

The reality is that, whereas these ideas may have been brought forth through automatism, the translation on the canvas was hardly spontaneous. Works of art like Gorky's are carefully composed collection of forms.



#### BIG IDEA

The rise of the United States as a world superpower after World War II and the migration of artists and intellectuals to the United States were influential on the development of abstract expressionism.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Abstract Expressionism**

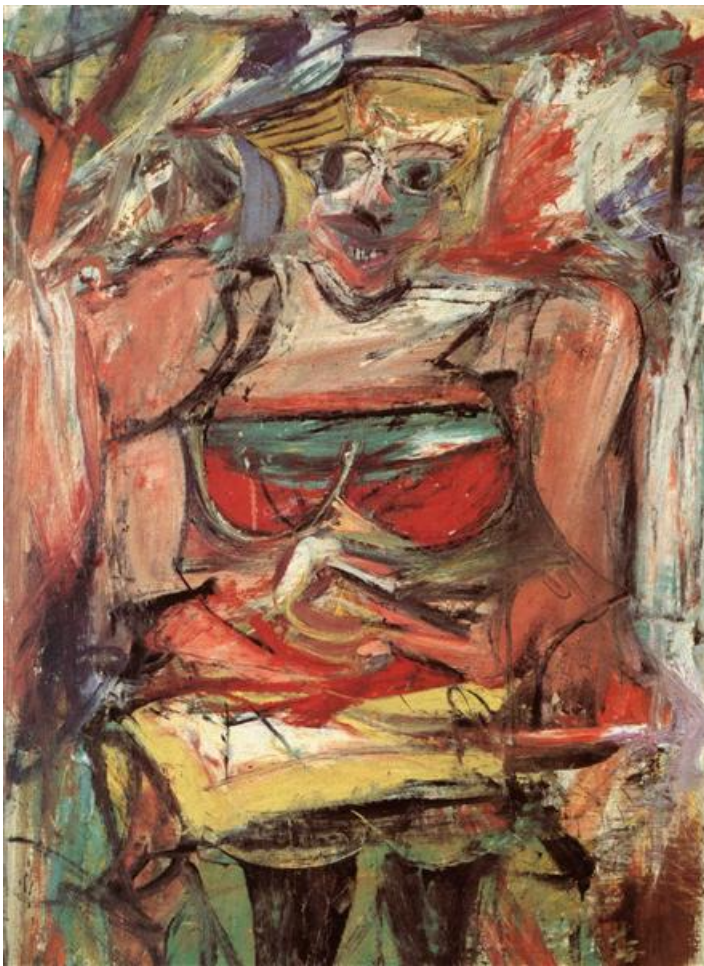
An American art movement characterized by the application of paint through techniques that revealed the artist's process and feelings, including throwing paint on a canvas or dripping paint randomly.

---

## 2. Woman V

The artist Willem de Kooning was a friend of Gorky's. Like Gorky's work, what may at first appear to be a jumbled or amateurish representation of something was actually well thought out and intentional. De Kooning was one of the most important Avant-Garde artists working in New York, perhaps the most important of the 1950s.

Take a look at this example:



Woman V by Willem de Kooning

1952-1953

Charcoal and oil on canvas

This painting called *Woman V* was a carefully and skillfully painted depiction of what has been described as humanity's simultaneous esteem for and fear of feminine power.

Unlike Willem de Kooning's long and productive life, Gorky's was tragically short. It spiraled downward into a series of emotional and physically damaging events before he took his own life at the age of 44. His passing cleared the way for his rival, Jackson Pollock, to become even more renowned in the artistic community and beyond.

---

### 3. Autumn Rhythm

Pollock is known primarily for his development of and contributions to the style of painting known as **action painting**. Pollock had several influences for this type of paint:

- Mexican muralism: Pollock apprenticed with the Mexican artist David Siqueiros and learned about synthetic paints from him.
- Native American sand painting: Pollock saw a demonstration that stayed with him.
- Surrealist influence of the aforementioned psychic automatism: culminated in the signature **gesture painting** and drip painting technique of Jackson Pollock.



**Autumn Rhythm by Jackson Pollock**

**1950**

**Enamel on canvas**

His forms developed rather spontaneously. He mentioned once that he became lost in painting, but often reworked a piece after the fact when he became better acquainted with it. Like other abstract and expressionist works, the forms aren't as important as the feelings they inspire.

The art critic Clement Greenberg was an important figure in the art and literature communities at the time. A huge fan of the action painter Jackson Pollock, Greenberg was also an enthusiastic supporter of abstract expressionism. His 1939 essay describing the distinction between high art, which is the Avant-Garde, and Kitsch, or popular culture, was particularly influential in how he regarded abstract expressionism. He stated that Avant-Garde demands more from its viewers in terms of education and resources, whereas Kitsch art is art for the masses.

He viewed true modernism as the act of using the methods of the discipline to critique it, an idea that was influential. An example of this would be how modern art challenges the ideas of what art truly is.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Action Painting**

A style of abstract painting characterized by physical applications of paint, for example large smears, spilling, or splashes of paint onto a canvas.

##### **Gesture Painting**

A style of abstract expression painting that uses techniques to express temporal qualities.

---

## 4. Color Field Painting

Artists like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman challenged and resisted his influence in their development of a new form a painting called **color field painting**. It was the first time that art completely avoided any type of form whatsoever.

An example of color field painting:



**No. 61 (Rust and Blue) by Mark Rothko**

**1953**

**Oil on canvas**

Newman and Rothko were influenced by the writings of the philosopher Nietzsche and his idea of the tragically divided self. Using this as inspiration, color field painting portrays fields of color coexisting within the same space, but distinct from each other. Although very different from action painting, it is a form of abstract expressionism in a modern style that strives to express transcendence and the infinite through art.



**Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue? by Barnett Newman**

**1966**

**Oil on canvas**



**TERM TO KNOW**



## Color Field Painting

A style of abstract painting characterized by large sections of color on the canvas in geometric shapes and patterns.

# 5. Tachisme

Antoni Tàpies, from Spain, was associated with the movement known as **tachisme**, which is a French approach to abstract expressionism. It uses gestures and handwriting, and sometimes graffiti-like types of imagery in it. This was really influential in Europe and Latin America.



Les Quatres Cròniques

Antoni Tàpies

1990



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Tachisme

A style of abstract painting characterized by random brushwork, application of paint directly from the tube and doodling.



### SUMMARY

Now that you have gone through the lesson, are able to identify and define the key terms? Can you describe the context that influenced the development of abstract expressionism, and identify examples of abstract expressionist artwork? The rise of the United States as a world superpower after World War II and the migration of artists and intellectuals to the United States were influential on the development of abstract expressionism.

You saw several examples of work by some of the most important artists during this time including **The Liver is the Cock's Comb**, **Woman V**, and **Autumn Rhythm**. You also saw a couple of examples of **color field painting** including *No. 61 (Rust and Blue)* and *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?*



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Abstract Expressionism**

An American art movement characterized by the application of paint through techniques that revealed the artist's process and feelings, including throwing paint on a canvas or dripping paint randomly.

### **Action Painting**

A style of abstract painting characterized by physical applications of paint, for example large smears, spilling, or splashes of paint onto a canvas.

### **Color Field Painting**

A style of abstract painting characterized by large sections of color on the canvas in geometric shapes and patterns.

### **Gesture Painting**

A style of abstract expression painting that uses techniques to express temporal qualities.

### **Tachisme**

A style of abstract painting characterized by random brushwork, application of paint directly from the tube and doodling.