

Topic Page: [Abstract expressionism](#)

Definition: **abstract expressionism** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

(1951) : an artistic movement of the mid-20th century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing esp. an artist's liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and usu. nonrepresentational means

abstract expressionist *n or adj, often cap A&E*

Summary Article: **abstract expressionism**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

movement of abstract painting that emerged in New York City during the mid-1940s and attained singular prominence in American art in the following decade; also called action painting and the New York school. It was the first important school in American painting to declare its independence from European styles and to influence the development of art abroad. Arshile Gorky first gave impetus to the movement. His paintings, derived at first from the art of Picasso, Miró, and surrealism, became more personally expressive.

Jackson Pollock's turbulent yet elegant abstract paintings, which were created by spattering paint on huge canvases placed on the floor, brought abstract expressionism before a hostile public. Willem de Kooning's first one-man show in 1948 established him as a highly influential artist. His intensely complicated abstract paintings of the 1940s were followed by images of *Woman*, grotesque versions of buxom womanhood, which were virtually unparalleled in the sustained savagery of their execution. Painters such as Philip Guston and Franz Kline turned to the abstract late in the 1940s and soon developed strikingly original styles—the former, lyrical and evocative, the latter, forceful and boldly dramatic. Other important artists involved with the movement included Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko; among other major abstract expressionists were such painters as Clyfford Still, Theodoros Stamos, Adolph Gottlieb, Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Esteban Vicente.

Abstract expressionism presented a broad range of stylistic diversity within its largely, though not exclusively, nonrepresentational framework. For example, the expressive violence and activity in paintings by de Kooning or Pollock marked the opposite end of the pole from the simple, quiescent images of Mark Rothko. Basic to most abstract expressionist painting were the attention paid to surface qualities, i.e., qualities of brushstroke and texture; the use of huge canvases; the adoption of an approach to space in which all parts of the canvas played an equally vital role in the total work; the harnessing of accidents that occurred during the process of painting; the glorification of the act of painting itself as a means of visual communication; and the attempt to transfer pure emotion directly onto the canvas. The movement had an inestimable influence on the many varieties of work that followed it, especially in the way its proponents used color and materials. Its essential energy transmitted an enduring excitement to the American art scene.

See Seuphor, M. , *Abstract Painting* (1962, repr. 1964);

Sandler, I. , *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970);

Tuchman, M. , ed., *The New York School* (rev. ed. 1970);

Ashton, D. , *The Unknown Shore* (1962) and *The New York School* (1973);
Guilbaut, S. , *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983);
Seitz, W. C. , *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (1983);
Fracina, F. , ed., *Pollock and After* (1985);
Anfam, D. , *Abstract Expressionism* (1990);
Polcari, S. , *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (1991);
Gibson, A. E. , *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997);
Craven, D. , *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique* (1999).

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