

Research point:

The Abstract Expressionists' use of gesture was caught up with notions of authenticity and even of purity of intent. The influential critic Clement Greenberg wrote in his article 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' in 1939 about the good artist painting 'cause' and the bad artist painting 'effect'. He also talks about what he describes as 'the inflections of the personal' becoming a legitimate subject. For example, the artist Jackson Pollock talked about wanting to paint from his emotions, not to illustrate them. What's your response to these comments?

"I don't paint Nature, I am Nature". In: Collings, M. (2000) ***This is modern art.*** London: Seven Dials, p. 44.



Hans Namuth - Pollock painting, 1950. [ibid. p.45].

"Be in the painting"; Express feelings rather than illustrate them"; Painting has a life of its own - I let it live"; "Whiplash energy & calm". [Jackson Pollock - Hans Namuth film].

Arguably the upheavals of the first half of the 20th century – world war x 2, economic collapse, societal and cultural shifts – impacted just as forcefully on visual art as on any other branch of human activity. The fast pace of change in these years saw a rash of new and experimental ideas and methods in the expressive arts. According to the definition employed by the Tate Gallery, as applied to art, *'avant-garde means art that is innovatory, introducing or exploring new forms or subject matter'* Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/avant-garde> [Accessed: 19 June 2018].

Pushing the boundaries in art was nothing new, with artists such as Gustave Courbet reflecting the social conditions of the mid-nineteenth century in his realist portrayal of everyday life and customs in France.



Gustav Courbet (1849) ***The stone breakers.*** [Oil on canvas]. Available at: <http://www.gustave-courbet.com/the-stonebreakers.jsp> [Accessed: 20 June 2018].

Pushing against the traditional, the classical and the romantic restrictions of the French Academy, he set the scene for later modern art movements such as Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism.

The notion of something being avant garde, innovative, radical is like saying that it is the quality and originality of vision that marks out the artist's work. In this sense, the artwork produced by modernist painters was adjudged by the critic Clement Greenberg as belonging in the Western tradition of high art, as seen over the preceding centuries.

Contrast this with his definition of kitsch – popular, commercial and mass market - “...with their chromotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc. etc.” From ‘Avant Garde and Kitsch (1939)’ - In: Clement Greenberg (1961) **Art and culture: critical essays**. Boston: Beacon Press, p.9. Available at: <http://sites.uci.edu/form/files/2015/01/Greenberg-Clement-Avant-Garde-and-Kitsch-copy.pdf> [Accessed: 18 June 2018].

Greenberg's assertion that the good artist paints ‘cause’ and the bad artist paints ‘effect’ arose from his comparison of an ‘avant garde’ artist like Picasso, with his ‘lines, colours and spaces that represent a woman’, and a work (mistakenly attributed) of the Russian 19th century realist painter Ilya Repin. The work in question was a battlefield scene, which according to Greenberg would likely appeal more to his suggested ‘ignorant Russian peasant’ when viewing both works. Why? Because the ‘Repin’ painting “predigests art for the spectator and spares him the effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic [bad] art”. [ibid. p.15].

In my mind there is a kind of intellectual snobbishness in this assertion about ‘genuine art’. What makes art ‘genuine’, but the making of art, good or bad?

Greenberg's reference to the ‘the inflections of the personal’ spans the centuries: “Only with the Renaissance do the inflections of the personal become legitimate, still to be kept, however, within the limits of the simply and universally recognizable. And only with Rembrandt do “lonely” artists begin to appear, lonely in their art.” [ibid. p.17].

If kitsch was seen by Greenberg as the opposite of high art (avant garde), by the time the Abstract Expressionists were putting paint to canvas it was obvious that popular culture (kitsch) was beginning to have an influencing effect on cultural trends, culminating in the pop art revolution of the 1960's.

Abstract Expressionism

“The dominant movement in American painting in the late 1940's and 1950's, characterised by a desire to convey powerful emotions through the sensuous qualities of paint, often on canvases of huge size.” In: Chilvers, I. (2009) **The Oxford dictionary of art and artists (Oxford paperback reference)**. 4th edn. New York: Oxford University Press, p.4.

Abstract art, non-objective art, non-representational art, expressionist art, has an expressed precedent in the work of the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, who extolled the '*supremacy of pure feeling or sensation in the pictorial arts*'. He believed in the '*experience of objectlessness*'. In: Shapiro, M. (1978) **Modern art, 19th and 20th centuries: selected papers**. New York: George Braziller, Inc., p.202.

Another influencer was the Armenian-American, Arshile Gorky, whose gestural mark making and paint run-offs can be seen in his 1944 painting **How my mother's embroidered apron unfolds in my life**:



In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) **Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism**. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 296 – “...the canvas as a field of prodigious excitement...” [ibid. p.296].

Gorky “...had learned from Picasso (dissociation of form and contour), Miró (biomorphic figures), Kandinsky (saturated colour), Matisse (transparency of the paint layer, which allows for an active role of the underlayers), Matta (sci-fi landscape, amoebic decor), and even Duchamp... Until his suicide in 1948, he produced at top speed works that could only be called Surrealist ... but which Pollock, Newman, and other Abstract Expressionist painters immediately regarded as the seed of their own movement.” [ibid. p.296].

Similarly, the work of Ukrainian-American artist Janet Sobel who, according to one reviewer, could be seen as the '*grandmother of drip painting*'. Haber's Art Reviews. Available at: <http://www.haberarts.com/sobel.htm> [Accessed: 20 June 2018], exerted an influence:



Janet Sobel (c.1946) **Untitled**. [Oil and enamel on composition board]. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/artists/5503?=&page=1&direction> [Accessed: 20 June 2018]. Free-flowing paint, mixing and merging and filling the canvas.

In an earlier 1957 work, ***The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art: The vital role that painting and sculpture play in modern culture***, Shapiro similarly expressed the need for artists to extoll spontaneity and intense feeling in their work:

“The consciousness of the personal and spontaneous in the painting and sculpture stimulates the artist to invent devices of handling, processing, surfacing, which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation—all signs of the artist’s active presence. The work of art is an ordered world of its own kind in which we are aware, at every point, of its becoming.” Available at: <http://www.artnews.com/2007/11/01/top-ten-artnews-stories-a-modernist-manifesto/> [Accessed: 18 June 2018].

It is this sense of ‘*authenticity and even of purity of intent*’ that we see expressed in the work of Jackson Pollock and other contemporary Abstract Expressionists such as the following:



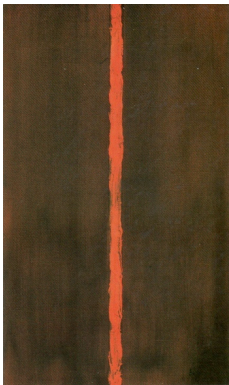
Willem de Kooning (1948-9) ***Untitled***. [Enamel and oil on paper on composition board]. (white on black canvas “... a recognisable trademark style – almost like the artist’s own logo – filling the whole canvas”. In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) ***Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism***. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 351.



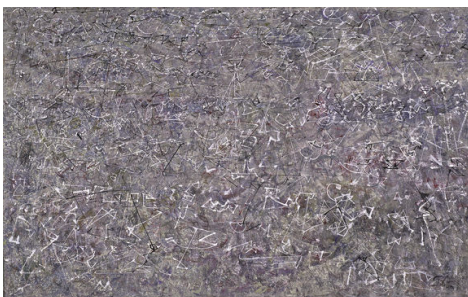
Robert Motherwell (1949) ***At five in the afternoon***. [Casein on board]. “...scumbling contours and paint runoffs”. In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) ***Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism***. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 352.



Mark Rothko (1949) **Number 3/No.13 (Magenta, Black, Green on orange)**. [oil on canvas]. In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) **Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism**. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 353. Less gestural and more to do with colour field painting “... *less interest in exploring abstract notions of colour and form than in generating emotion in the viewer.*” In: Collings, M. (2000) **This is modern art**. London: Seven Dials, p.166.



Barnett Newman (1948) **Onement I**. [Oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas]. In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) **Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism**. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 362. Newman’s trademark narrow ‘zip’ spark of life – ‘zip’ as opposed to ‘band’ of colour “...*as it connoted activity rather than a motionless state of being*”. [ibid. p.362].



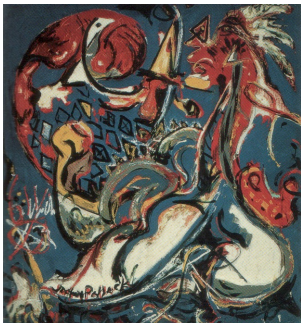
Mark Tobey (1949) **Universal field**. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. [Tempera and pastel on cardboard]. Available at: <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/859> [Accessed: 18 June 2018]. ‘White writing’ painting style “...*His style of ‘gesturalism’ evolved in complementary contrast to the emotive action paintings of Pollock and others*” In: Januszczak, W. (1997) **Techniques of the great masters of art**. New York: Chartwell Books Inc., p.441.



Franz Kline (1950) ***Clock face***. [Oil paint on canvas] In: Januszczak, W. (1997) ***Techniques of the great masters of art***. New York: Chartwell Books Inc., pp.446-447. Dramatic, gesturalist black on white paint handling "...conveyed a sense of the alienation and violence characteristic of the contemporary American city". [ibid. p.447].

Jackson Pollock

Jackson's earlier abstract work show figurative influences, with imagery derived "... from his acquaintance with Jungian analysis". In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) ***Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism***. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 350.



Jackson Pollock (c.1943) ***Moon woman cuts the circle***. [Oil on canvas]. [ibid. p.357].

According to Matthew Collings, Pollock painted fairly unremarkable abstract pieces in 1930's and early 1940's [Collings, 2000, p.45]. These were influenced by the works of Picasso, Surrealism and Mexican murals. Pollock was to return to these earlier influences by 1951 when he began to make black-and-white paintings such as ***Number 14, 1951***:



Jackson Pollock (1951) ***Number 14, 1951***. [Enamel on canvas]. In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) ***Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism***. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 356. This return to including

the earlier figurative style within his abstract paintings picks up on several influences, including "...a mixture of Mexican mural painting (Diego Rivera) and the American Regionalist style of his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton." [ibid. p.356]. **Number 14, 1951** in particular has something of the drama, if not the overt political statement, of Picasso's **Guernica**.

It is recognised that Pollock's flourishing as a modern avant garde artist was at its height between 1947 and 1950 [Collings, 2000, p.45]. It is then that we experience his drip paintings, or what the art critic Harold Rosenberg named 'Action Painting' in his 1952 essay **The American Action Painters**. The canvas was "...an arena in which to act". Available at: <http://www.artnews.com/2007/11/01/top-ten-artnews-stories-not-a-picture-but-an-event/> [Accessed: 20 June 2018].

An experimental early drip piece of 1947, **Full fathom five**, a densely worked piece covering the full canvas with many colours of paint and bits and pieces of found objects:



Jackson Pollock (1947) **Full fathom five**. [Oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, coins, cigarettes, etc.] In: Januszczak, W. (1997) **Techniques of the great masters of art**. New York: Chartwell Books Inc., p.461.

Using colour and form in a non-representational manner, 'Abstract Expressionism', and Pollock's 'Action Painting' put an emphasis on the expression, the intensity of the sensation and the authenticity of the feeling in the act of painting itself, as opposed to the end product as a 'work of art'.

Foregoing the use of the traditional easel, Pollock used different medium such as synthetic resin-based paints, laying the canvas on the floor, painting large by using hardened brushes, sticks, basting syringes for applying paint – spontaneous splattering, smearing and dripping.

By 1950, in **One (Number 31)**, you begin to notice that in places the unprimed canvas is showing through, becoming an integral element of the overall painting, similar to the way in which the use of negative space can work to enhance a more traditional composition.



Jackson Pollock (1950) **One (Number 31)**. In: Collings, M. (2000) **This is modern art**. London: Seven Dials, p.46.

Another painting from 1950, **Autumn rhythm**, shows off the vibrant and dynamic effects of this almost jazz-like dancing around the canvas:



Jackson Pollock (1950) **Autumn rhythm**. [Oil and enamel on canvas]. In: Januszczak, W. (1997) **Techniques of the great masters of art**. New York: Chartwell Books Inc., p.465.

Gestural it most certainly is, a characteristic common to Abstract Expressionist artists: “... a longing for what could be called the autographic gesture, the inimitable, signature-like dribble of paint that would translate private feelings and emotions directly onto the material field of the canvas – without the mediation of any figurative content.” In: Foster, H., Krauss, R.E. and Bois, Y.-A. (2004) **Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism**. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 348.

Autumn rhythm is perhaps the most indicative of Pollock’s style, with its use of various methods of paint application – paint thrown and splattered, paint thinned and dripped from sticks in lines and allowed to run freely, paint thickened and allowed to gather in pools that skinned over when dry.

What is also obvious is that the unprimed canvas itself is once again an important part of the painting. It may be that, particularly towards the edges, Pollock deliberately left uncovered surfaces, or alternatively it could have just been the result of quick movement around the canvas, or has been suggested “... sites of slacker activity...”. (Januszczak, 1997, p.461].

Let Clement Greenberg have the last word. He lauded Abstract Expressionism as “... the quintessential ‘American-type painting’...” of its age. [Foster, Krauss and Bois, 2004, p.348].

Stuart Brownlee – 512319 | 20 June 2018