



Painting and Sculpture
Galleries, The Museum of
Modern Art, Spring 2010



Abstract Expressionism at The Museum of Modern Art

Abstract Expressionism ranks among the movements most closely associated with The Museum of Modern Art. The Museum was directly involved in Abstract Expressionism's own history, as it could not be with the earlier European avant-gardes: it was there on the spot, if not always immediately at the ready, to display and collect these home-grown works of art. The Museum's collection of paintings and sculptures that could be labeled Abstract Expressionist now includes about two hundred works. When drawings, prints, and photographs are factored in, the number easily quadruples. For the 2010–11 season, the Museum has mounted a rich and wide-ranging presentation of these works, filling some twenty-five thousand square feet of gallery space. Although this book contains just a fraction of that selection, it conveys the spirit of this event—to look carefully and collectively at the works made during that key moment in the history of modern art. A fresh understanding of this period is essential to the ongoing examination of artistic developments during the subsequent half century.

The Abstract Expressionists shared a passionate conviction that they must forge a new beginning for art. With Europe a postwar shambles, the very concept of modern civilization was thrown into question; this art developed exactly when Americans were absorbing the facts of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the bombings in Japan. These artists read their historical moment as a spur to action and an invitation to stage a rebirth of painting, this time on American shores. They invented styles that seemed—although only seemed—to take no account of what had come before, to look as if they had emerged *de novo*.

No one summary can encompass all the various ways that each artist achieved this. Sharing a very American dedication to self-reliant individuality, they all pursued resolutely separate routes to a personal idiom. Indeed, the now common assumption that an artist must have a signature style can be traced to this generation—Pollock's

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drip and Newman's zip had the catchiest names but were by no means the only such strategies. Certain generalizations are valid, however. Most of the artists adopted the principle of the all-over composition, rejecting the traditional concept of a central focus that gradually dispersed toward the corners and edges of the canvas. Instead, these works distribute the emphasis equally, bidding the viewer's eye to roam over the entire pictorial field. These artists also shared a dramatically new attitude toward scale. Even though abstraction had been well established for several decades, it had remained at the scale of the easel picture; large scale was reserved for narrative works in the mural tradition, like Picasso's *Guernica* (fig. 1) or José Clemente Orozco's frescoes at the New School for Social Research (1930–31). The adoption of large formats for abstract painting literally declared the artists' belief that what they were doing was big.

Today, Abstract Expressionist paintings appear to be eminent examples of museum art: grand in stature, replete with authoritative majesty. To recall the radical affront they presented at the time of their making, one needs to return to early installation photographs in which the paintings brush against the floors and ceilings of too-small galleries (fig. 2) and to the innumerable cartoons in the popular press lampooning their apparently nonsensical imagery (fig. 3). An eight-by-eighteen-foot canvas is now commonplace, and galleries and museums have long since adjusted their own scale to the demands of these works. Moreover, conditioned by decades of large-scale abstract composition far more reductive in its tactics, a vast public now accepts the beauty of an Abstract Expressionist field of color much as it does that of an Impressionist landscape.

At the same time, one can suppose that Abstract Expressionist works of art possess a new kind of strangeness for today's viewers. Abstract Expressionism developed simultaneously with the first decade of broadcast television. As art that



Fig. 1. **Pablo Picasso's Guernica**, 1937, at The Museum of Modern Art, 1957



Fig. 2. **Hans Namuth, Betty Parsons Gallery**, 1950. (Installation of Pollock's 1950 exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York)

Fig. 3. **Peter Arno**, cartoon originally published in the **New Yorker**, September 23, 1961



"His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction."

its makers felt to be profoundly linked to private spiritual and physical experience, it provided a polar opposite to the mass culture represented by the comedy and variety shows on TV. In the half century since, television has given way to the ubiquity of electronic screens in daily life. At work, at home, and in transit, we are attuned to their pulsing digital signals and have become comfortable with viewing anything at handheld size, from a family snapshot to a feature film. But for Abstract Expressionist art to operate fully, the experience must be firsthand—there is no virtual substitute for the encounter between the viewer's body and the canvas or object. These works ask for a type of concentration that is becoming increasingly unusual in a society that bombards our brains with simultaneous visual and auditory stimuli from countless directions. In a world that likes its culture fast, Abstract Expressionist works are uncompromisingly slow.

It is staggering to realize that with a few trips to the Museum's storage facility in Queens, one can assemble eighteen paintings by Jackson Pollock, ten by Mark Rothko, eight by Arshile Gorky, and so on. Just as the Museum's early generations of curators had labored to assemble career-long surveys of masters such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Joan Miró, so they deemed these American artists of sufficient historical importance to warrant telling each of their stories step by step. There is no better way to ensure lessons learned—and pleasures gained—than collecting in depth. Rothko's work in the Museum provides a fine case in point. One sees the roots of his development in *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, 1944 (plate 14), in which the schematic figures twirling across the horizon do a fertility dance that invokes the birth not only of Rothko's artistic maturity, but that of an entire generation. The format of this fantastical seascape (particularly the demarcated registers of sea and sky) uncannily anticipates what would become the artist's signature style.

That style is evident in a number of glorious paintings, such as *No. 10*, 1950 (plate 40), in which the many layers of thin washes of oil paint form misty fields of floating color, creating a weightless universe where laws of gravity do not apply. But an untitled acrylic painting of 1969–70 (plate 105), completed in the year of Rothko's death, ultimately transforms his idiom into one of opaque fields of black and gray. In this closing act, Rothko's sublime depths of color have given way to an impenetrable wall. These three paintings, and the many in between, constitute an artistic biography as dramatically compelling as any real-life biography could be.

Reviewing such careers in the fullness of time leads to certain significant changes. Familiarity with the best-known works makes way for curiosity about those

that may have been long overlooked. The collection also includes, for example, *No. 1 (Untitled)* (plate 39), a large painting Rothko made in 1948, the year before his first "classic" paintings. Its variously sized color forms seem to have been caught mid-motion as they shift around the canvas in search of a final position. What once would have been dismissed as "transitional" reads today as an exceptional painting, even if its strength resides in ambiguities rather than clarities.

Today's perspective also brings a curiosity about artists beyond the handful of best-known names. An acknowledgment that particular artists are giants need not relegate all others to invisibility; at the time, recognition of certain artists as leaders did not diminish the others' ambitions. Following a practice established early in its history, the Museum has made in-depth acquisitions of work by the artists that its curators judged to be of greatest importance, while also representing smaller numbers of works by other artists who played roles too significant to be forgotten. Two examples from the early years are William Baziotis and Theodoros Stamos, both central participants in the discourse about the new American painting. In 1947 the Museum acquired Stamos's *Sounds in the Rock* (plate 21) and Baziotis's *Dwarf* (plate 25), two recent paintings typifying the period's frequent evocation of primordial stages in natural and human history.

Unlike Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism was not a movement with card-carrying members. Rather, it was a broad phenomenon that swept countless artists into its orbit. In the 1950s, artists such as Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, James Brooks, and Grace Hartigan were among many who absorbed the innovations of the first pioneers and quickly developed independent voices within the idiom of what was dubbed, although to nobody's real satisfaction, "Abstract Expressionism." Although New York City was the epicenter of activity, geography was not a delimiting factor: in paintings such as *Big Red*, 1953 (plate 69), Francis developed an approach rooted in his admiration of artists such as Rothko and Still, although he was a Californian living and working in Paris. In some cases, we have included examples by artists who briefly used the language of Abstract Expressionism but later became known for much different work. For example, Romare Bearden's *Silent Valley of Sunrise*, 1959 (plate 84), is a meditative painting that sets a pool of blues and greens amid the hot orange-red that suggested its title. Eloquent in its own right, the canvas predates by just a few years the artist's great achievements in figurative collage.

The curatorial perspective in 2010 differs perhaps most notably from that of earlier years as it crosses the boundaries that separate various mediums. Although the movement was primarily associated with painting, several sculptors explored

the central concerns of Abstract Expressionism in three dimensions. The most significant was David Smith, who would become one of the great sculptors of the twentieth century. Works such as *Australia*, 1951 (plate 63), mark the beginning of his dedication to creating monumental sculpture that would be as radically ambitious as the paintings by his peers. Smith, who trained as a painter, also continued to work on canvas and paper throughout his life (plates 61, 62, 70).

The heroicizing rhetoric associated with this period engendered, not surprisingly, a focus on paintings and sculptures, the largest and most costly objects. But the artists themselves invested great energy on paper—ink drawings, watercolors, etchings, silkscreens, and so on. The collection includes works on paper that are masterpieces within their own mediums and that significantly nourished the artists' investigations on canvas or in metal. A group of Pollock's screenprints, c. 1943–44 (plates 5–7), reveals the stages of refining and revising integral to the artist's working process, undermining the false assumption that his approach was pure stream of consciousness. Adolph Gottlieb's pictographic language of the 1940s, a strong testimony to the primitivizing impulse at the base of Abstract Expressionism, was developed across several mediums. Flat grids of individual signlike elements provide the compositional structure for several etchings (plates 15–17) and a gouache in the collection as well as for landmark paintings such as *Voyager's Return*, 1946 (plate 18).

Photography may be the least expected element in the pages of this book and in the display it accompanies. For decades, photography has been presented as an independent tradition. But today, an image by Aaron Siskind or Harry Callahan looks more rather than less interesting when considered in the company of paintings by artists whose work they knew well. Despite its basis in observed nature—a wall of balanced rocks—Siskind's photograph *Martha's Vineyard*, 1954 (plate 99), resonates with the gestural vocabulary of an abstract painting by Franz Kline or Willem de Kooning.

Most of the works of art that came to be known as Abstract Expressionist were made within a mile or two of the Museum's new International Style building on West Fifty-third Street and were exhibited and sold within a few blocks of it. Whatever formal educations these artists had, the Museum was the school where they studied the modern European art that both fueled their aesthetic intelligence and prompted their desire to invent something altogether different. Thanks also to the newly founded Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the presence of many European artists in wartime exile in New York, and several art galleries established

by transplanted dealers, these artists could enjoy daily access to the art of the European avant-garde (fig. 4).

From the moment of its founding, the Museum honored as part of its mandate a commitment to art by Americans as well as by Europeans. Under the leadership of founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., its initial pursuit of works by Abstract Expressionist artists took place within the context of a wide-ranging program of acquisitions and exhibitions of work by artists living in the United States. Many individual acquisitions were made swiftly and astutely, but these early purchases cannot fairly be described as part of a concerted effort to acknowledge this movement as one of great import. Rather, these acquisitions were made among scores of others, spanning a broad array of representational and abstract styles. James Thrall Soby, then the director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, selected Pollock's *She-Wolf*, 1943 (plate 1), from the artist's first solo show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery that same year. But it was not until 1950 that the Museum acquired a second work by the artist, *Number 1A*, 1948 (plate 36). The 1940s also brought the purchase of individual paintings by Robert Motherwell, Gottlieb, Baziotes, Stamos, and de Kooning, and two by Gorky.

The 1950s witnessed the slow start of what might be considered a deliberate focus on the movement, as recognition of its significance became widespread. The Museum made its first acquisitions of works by artists such as Rothko, Kline, Hartigan, Clyfford Still, Philip Guston, and Barnett Newman. The curators purchased de Kooning's *Woman, I*, 1950–52 (plate 53), when it was first shown at the



Fig. 4. **George Platt Lynes, *Artists in Exile at Pierre Matisse Gallery***, New York, March 3–28, 1942. First row (left to right): Matta, Ossip Zadkine, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger. Second row (left to right): André Breton, Piet Mondrian, André Masson, Amédée Ozenfant, Jacques Lipchitz, Pavel Tchelitchew, Kurt Seligmann, Eugene Berman

Sidney Janis Gallery in 1953; Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller purchased *Woman, II*, 1952, from the same show and donated it to the Museum in 1955. Barr's purchases in the 1950s of Claude Monet's large water lily paintings (fig. 5) enlisted the past to illuminate what was happening in the present: modern museums had to accommodate works of a size that would previously have been unimaginable. It was not until the late 1960s, however, that curator William Rubin ushered into the collection the Museum's two eighteen-foot-wide masterpieces, Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950*, and Newman's great *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–51 (plates 38 and 60). Thanks in large part to Rubin's advocacy, important acquisitions continued through the following decades, in many cases as generous gifts by the artist or his or her heirs. Annalee Newman donated her late husband's breakthrough painting, *Onement, 1*, 1948 (plate 58), as recently as 1992.

The Museum's history of exhibiting Abstract Expressionism parallels that of its acquisitions. During the 1940s and 1950s, these works were intermingled with figurative paintings, geometric abstractions, and others in ecumenical survey exhibitions. Curator Dorothy C. Miller, despite her strong support of the Abstract Expressionists, did not limit her *Americans* exhibitions exclusively to their work. This approach seems to have stemmed at least in part from a wish to oblige the presumed conservative taste of the Museum's general public. A sharper focus on the group came from the Museum's International Program. This was a separate arm of the institution, established in 1952 to generate exhibitions of American art for presentation around the world. It also was charged with organizing the United States entries for international exhibitions such as the Venice and São Paulo biennials. Among its staff members was the poet Frank O'Hara, an unabashed champion of the Abstract Expressionist artists, who together with his colleagues organized solo and group exhibitions that centered specifically on their achievements.

The international visibility of this group reached its peak when, in 1958, Miller (assisted by O'Hara) organized for the International Program an exhibition called *The New American Painting*. The title reflected Barr's concern that the



Fig. 5. **Claude Monet's Water Lilies**, 1914–26, at The Museum of Modern Art, c. 1959

term "Abstract Expressionism" would not accurately describe all seventeen artists included, particularly one as seemingly *inexpressive* as Barnett Newman. The show toured to eight cities in Europe and met with reactions ranging from ridicule to exhilaration. The international tour of *The New American Painting* coincided with that of *Jackson Pollock: 1912–1956*, a retrospective exhibition organized by O'Hara; on a few occasions the two exhibitions were jointly presented in one city, offering a double dose of the American avant-garde. *The New American Painting* was shown at the Museum in the summer of 1959, by which point the singular importance of these artists was no longer in question (figs. 6 and 7).

It was in the 1960s—when Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and their peers were becoming household names—that MoMA bestowed the official recognition of retrospectives on senior statesmen such as Rothko, Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Motherwell, Pollock, and de Kooning. In 1969 Rubin organized *The New American Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation*, an exhibition of about 150 Abstract Expressionist paintings and sculptures belonging or promised to the collection. There has not been a synthetic presentation of this work at the Museum since then, and several generations of New York museumgoers (and indeed Museum staff members) have not yet had the opportunity to experience such a gathering.

The selection in this book, like that of the presentation it accompanies, is deliberately one with scraggly edges and fuzzy borderlines. Certain inclusions may strike some readers as capricious; there are no doubt omissions that will disappoint others. The goal is not to define a new canon for the movement, not to adjust the scorecard to promote or demote certain contenders. Instead, as we focus attention on a legendary era in the history of modern art, the ambition is twofold: to look anew at familiar masterpieces and to acknowledge that history is always more various and more complicated than the legends would suggest.



Fig. 6. Entrance to **The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958–1959**, The Museum of Modern Art, May 28–September 8, 1959



Fig. 7. Introductory panel to **The New American Painting**, illustrating the activities of the International Program