# Unit 2: Abstract Expressionism

## Unit Student Learning Objectives

### Unit 2 (one week): Abstract Expressionism

At the end of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Identify artists and describe qualities associated with Abstract Expressionism, and Color Field painting (Course Goals: 1,2,4,5, GE: 1,4,6,7, Core skills: A, D, E)
2. Define key terms associated with these movements and artists (Course Goals: 1,2,4 GE: 1,4,6,7, core skills: A, D, E)
3. Question the theory and philosophy behind the movement, with emphasis on Greenberg and Sartre. (Course Goals: 2,3,4,5,6 GE: 1,4,6,7,9 core skills: A, B, C, E, F, G)

## Unit Student Assessments & Activities

### Introduction (ULO 3-4)

This week, we pick up with the end of World War II. Let's start by looking at two very different images of soldiers. One is by **George Grosz**, a bleak image of a crippled WW I veteran, reduced to a beggar. The other, by **Thomas Hart Benton**, shows heroic young Americans heading off to Europe to fight. By the time World War II is over, neither of these methods of expression seemed adequate to the younger generation of artists.



George Grosz, "The Hero", 1936



Thomas Hart Benton, "The Year of Peril, Embarkation"

Single events of this war were captured in so many detailed photographs that everyone understood the horror of what the world had gone through. But when it came to understanding the magnitude of the war--6 million civilians killed in the concentration camps, 180,000 killed by a single atomic blast--we humans are simply left contemplating our own inability to conceive of such large numbers.

One thing was for sure for the artist’s who became known as the Abstract Expressionists, a new artistic method was required to express this new understanding of the world and our place within it. Before the war, dozens of Europe's best artists fled to America, creating an artistic atmosphere around New York perfect for the education of our young artists. We look at two artists: Arshile Gorky and Hans Hofmann, and their influence on the Abstract Expressionists.

We then systematically dissect works by the most prominent of these figures, looking for two things. First, what was their artistic intent, and means of production? Some of these artists were only interested in what paint on a canvass meant in and of itself. Some were interested in exploring issues of social justice, and some were convinced that with color alone, they could create a truly spiritual and transcendent experience.

Whether formalist or metaphysical in intent, all of these artists had an interest in the abstract gesture (except, as we learn, Ad Reinhardt, the exception who proves the rule). Our second desire in this class is to begin to examine this gesture as a signature mark of the artists. Our class is as much a field guide as it is history. And we must look at these works not just as individual pieces, but as parts of the artists’ oeuvre, or body of work, and learn to spot other works with these same signature gestures, signature colors, signature compositions.

### Textbook : Read Chapter 6 Abstract Expressionism (ULO 1-3).

Please read Chapter 6 in *Twentieth Century American Art* by Erika Doss, pages 119-137. Then test your understanding by answering the Study Guide Review Questions below.

### Study Guide Review Questions (self assess): (ULO 1-3)

The answer to these questions can be found in chapter 6 of *Twentieth Century American Art* by Erika Doss.

* Two other names for Abstract Expressionism are: *[action painting, New York school]*
* What U.S and international events between 1940 and 1950 occurred that influenced the way artists at that time viewed the world? *[End of the New Deal, World War II, rise of US as a superpower]*
* What change did this bring to the art of that time? *[NY became the center of the art world, artists sought new forms of expression different from New Realism, artists turned towards individual expression]*
* Clement Greenberg was a(n): *[art critic]*
* Who said "The modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique."? *[Jackson Pollock]*
* By 1960 New York had how many galleries? *[300]*
* How did Europe feel about the new American Art? *[It was "a joke in bad taste"]*
* Explain the importance of Individualism at this time. *[Individualism and self-expression were seen as aspects of American freedoms, in contrast to communism's totalitarianism.]*
* Explain why Motherwell says Abstract-Expressionism “arose from a feeling of being ill at ease in the universe.” *[After the horrors of WWII and the anxiety of the cold war, artists looked for new means to express the human condition.]*
* Why does the author find Pollock’s interest in the ‘primitive’ to be problematic? *[Calling another society "primitive" makes that society seem simple or dumb compared to ours. Simply stealing the look of another cultures artwork without understanding the history and traditions behind it amounts to "cultural cannibalism."]*
* Why are the most famous Abstract-Expressionists white and male? *[Despite many of the progressive ideas held by the American Abstract Expressionists, racism and sexism were still common.]*

### **Readings**: Clement Greenberg (ULO 3, 4)

#### Introduction

*Clement Greenberg was one of the most influential critics of the 20th century, and a big part of the New York art scene from the 1940s to the 1960s, so it is crucial that we understand a little about him if we are going to understand Abstract Expressionism. His writings make a lot of references to artwork we aren't studying in this course, and often use a high level of vocabulary to precisely describe his positions, so I want to spare you the pain of reading pages and pages of his work, but still leave you with a good sense of his main ideas. What follows are excerpts from of his more famous essays called simply enough* ***"Modernist Painting"****. In it, he reformulates some of his ideas from his previous 30 years of writing. If you are interested, you can find the full texts and more information about Greenberg at* [*this website*](http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/)*.*

#### Main Points

Before we begin, I want to outline the most important points to look for in this article:

1. Modernism is unique in that it tends towards self-criticism. By this Greenberg means, using painting as an example, painters start using painting as a means of questioning. What makes a good painting? What makes painting different from other art forms? What things can painting do without and still be interesting to look at?
2. Greenberg felt that if each type of art (painting, sculpture, literature, music etc.) was going to be the best it could be, then it would have to concentrate on the qualities unique to itself. That meant painters would concentrate on color and the picture plane, sculpture would concentrate on three-dimensional form, and both would leave storytelling to literature.

* For painting what made it most unique was it's flatness. Modernist painters continue investigating what the Old Masters called the "integrity of the picture plane", and made it the first thing you see when you look at a painting.
* Modernism is not a break from the past, but a continuation of it.

#### "Modernist Painting"

... The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.

The self-criticism of Modernism grows out of, but is not the same thing as, the criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment criticized from the outside, the way criticism in its accepted sense does; Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized. It seems natural that this new kind of criticism should have appeared first in philosophy, which is critical by definition, but as the 18th century wore on, it entered many other fields...

At first glance the arts ... looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple ... The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.

Each art, it turned out, had to perform this demonstration on its own account. What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain.

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.

...

It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained, however, more fundamental than anything else to the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art. The enclosing shape of the picture was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm and a means shared not only with the theater, but also with sculpture. Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.

The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness underneath and above the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved was essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success of all pictorial art. The Modernists have neither avoided nor resolved this contradiction; rather, they have reversed its terms. One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism's success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.

Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognizable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit...

...

It is understood, I hope, that in plotting out the rationale of Modernist painting I have had to simplify and exaggerate. The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l'oeil, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. The Old Masters created an illusion i of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the Modernist painter can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye.

...

It should also be understood that self-criticism in Modernist art has never been carried on in any but a spontaneous and largely subliminal way. As I have already indicated, it has been altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice, and never a topic of theory. Much is heard about programs in connection with Modernist art, but there has actually been far less of the programmatic in Modernist than in Renaissance or Academic painting. With a few exceptions like Mondrian, the masters of Modernism have had no more fixed ideas about art than Corot did. Certain inclinations, certain affirmations and emphases, and certain refusals and abstinences as well, seem to become necessary simply because the way to stronger, more expressive art lies through them. The immediate aims of the Modernists were, and remain, personal before anything else, and the truth and success of their works remain personal before anything else. And it has taken the accumulation, over decades, of a good deal of personal painting to reveal the general self-critical tendency of Modernist painting. No artist was, or yet is, aware of it, nor could any artist ever work freely in awareness of it. To this extent -- and it is a great extent -- art gets carried on under Modernism in much the same way as before.

And I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant, and does not mean now, anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling, of tradition, but it also means its further evolution. Modernist art continues the past without gap or break, and wherever it may end up it will never cease being intelligible in terms of the past. The making of pictures has been controlled, since it first began, by all the norms I have mentioned. The Paleolithic painter or engraver could disregard the norm of the frame and treat the surface in a literally sculptural way only because he made images rather than pictures, and worked on a support -- a rock wall, a bone, a horn, or a stone -- whose limits and surface were arbitrarily given by nature. But the making of pictures means, among other things, the deliberate creating or choosing of a flat surface, and the deliberate circumscribing and limiting of it. This deliberateness is precisely what Modernist painting harps on: the fact, that is, that the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions.

### Presentation: Artist Slideshows (ULO 1-4)

* European Influence:
  + Hans Hofmann
  + Arshile Gorky
* Line and Gesture:
  + Jackson Pollock
  + Willem De Kooning
* Color Field:
  + Marc Rothko
    - Barnett Newman
    - Ad Reinhardt
* Second Generation:
  + Helen Frankenthaler
  + Morris Louis

### Interactive activities: artwork identification, and terminology (multiple chances, self assess)(ULO 1, 2)

* Identify artwork images from the slideshows
* Identify names of Abstract Expressionists
  + Helen Frankenthaler
  + Arshile Gorky
  + Hans Hofmann
  + Willem De Kooning
  + Lee Krasner
  + Morris Louis
  + Barnett Newman
  + Jackson Pollock
  + Ad Reinhardt
  + Marc Rothko
* Identify artists as Color Field Painters *[Rothko, Newman, Frankenthaler, Louis, Hoffman]*
* "Push-pull" who used this term and what does it mean? *[Hans Hoffman, the use of color and line to push space into or pull space out of the picture plane]*
* "Soak and Stain", who used this term and what does it mean? *[Helen Frankenthaler, applying paint directly to the raw canvas so that it literally penetrates and becomes one with the canvas.]*
* "Zip" who used this term, and what does it mean? *[Newman, it refers to the vertical stripes bisecting fields of color]*
* "Zero Point" who used this term, and what does it mean? *[Ad Reinhardt, the point where two colors are indistinguishable]*

#### Multiple Choice

1. Which of these Abstract Expressionists is also a good example of a color field painter?
2. Jackson Pollock
3. **Marc Rothko**
4. Willem De Kooning
5. Franz Kline

* Abstract Expressionism demonstrated Individualism by:

1. **placing emphasis on each artist’s unique style, their “signature mark”.**
2. admiring artists who were not social, but worked alone in isolation.
3. including subject matter that was anti-communist.
4. celebrating the heroic male artist.

* How does Pollock respond when asked “Do you think there can be a purely American Art?”:

1. “The important paintings of the last hundred years was done in France.”
2. “Yes, I don’t see why the problems of modern painting can’t be solved as well here as elsewhere.”
3. **“The idea seems absurd to me, just like the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd.”**
4. “The important paintings of the next hundred years will be American.”

* Discussing the influence of “primitive” art is problematic because:

1. it ignores the influence of contemporary society.
2. it ignores the influence other cultures have on ours.
3. it ignores the fact that America was built by slaves.
4. **it debases earlier societies and reduces them into one simple, static, and child-like culture.**

* According to Greenberg, what is unique about criticism during the age of modernism?

1. Modernists are more critical than artists of any other time period.
2. **Modernist are unique in that they turned their criticism inward.**
3. Modernists and critics really got along.
4. Modernism turned it's criticism towards literature.

* What did Greenberg mean when he said “What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art.”?

1. **Each of the arts should concentrate on the qualities unique to itself.**
2. Thin washes of paint break the irreducibility of artistic space.
3. Paintings based on narrative relied too much on copying music.
4. Confusion among the arts results from confusion of society’s morals.

* Which of the following can not be seen as influencing the formation of Abstract Expressionism:

1. The horrors of World War II
2. European artists teaching in the United States
3. The rise of the United States as a world power
4. **Minimalism**

### Discussion Board relating to slideshows and readings (ULO 1-4)

1. Please copy one line from Greenberg's article "Modernist Painting". Then write a paragraph in which you examine how it applies to the work of one of the artists you learned about in the slide presentations. The artists names again are: Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Willem De Kooning, Marc Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Clifford Still, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis
2. Here is another painting by Hans Hoffman. Describe how he used what he calls the "push and pull" of the composition to create space in the painting.

### Additional Artists to Study (ULO 1)

*You will not be tested on the following material, but if you are interested in studying further anything we discussed this week, these artists could also fit into this category*

* Franz Kline
* Lee Krasner
* Norman Louis
* Robert Motherwell
* Mark Tobey
* Clifford Still
* Esteban Vicente

### Optional links for further self-study (ULO 1-4)

*You will not be tested on the following material, but if you are interested in studying further anything we discussed this week, these links are a good place to start:*

* [MOMA's "Abstract Expressionist New York" show](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/abexny/), with tons of on-line interactive features
* [Review of the MoMA show](http://www.theartstory.org/review-abex.htm), and additional information on the Ab-Exers
* [Ad Reinhardt's 12 rules](http://www.artamble.com/art/miscpix/12rules.htm), posted on a webpage that breaks almost all of them!
* [Gestalt Principals explained](http://graphicdesign.spokanefalls.edu/tutorials/process/gestaltprinciples/gestaltprinc.htm), with graphic examples
* [Gestalt Principals explained](http://facweb.cs.depaul.edu/sgrais/gestalt_principles.htm), with fine art examples
* [Basic pricipals of color theory](http://www.tigercolor.com/color-lab/color-theory/color-theory-intro.htm) explained
* [Arshile Gorky Foundation](http://arshilegorkyfoundation.org)
* [Hans Hofmann Trust](http://www.hanshofmann.org)
* Pollock and Krasner [House and Study Center](http://sb.cc.stonybrook.edu/pkhouse/)
* Robert Motherwell, [the Dedalus Foundation](http://dedalusfoundation.org/index.php/site/motherwell/)
* Full text of [*Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias*](http://boppin.com/lorca/lament.html) by Frederico Garcia Lorca
* Mark Rothko at the [National Gallery of Art](http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/)
* [The Clyfford Still Museum](http://www.clyffordstillmuseum.org/) *under construction in Denver*
* Clyfford Still, [why you such a hater?](http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/2010/09/clyfford-stills-dysfunctional-relationship-with-moma/)