

Abstract Expressionism

Alexander Hayes

0922723

15th June, 1992

**Edith Cowan University
Bunbury, Western Australia**

ARE 1100 Painting 1
Assignment 1

Supervisor: Pat Bandurski

DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.16788787](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16788787)

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"... The key to Abstract Art especially that of Abstract Expressionism lies in the discovery of the self and the exploitation by a suitable technique, of that hidden store of virgin material which we must find a path and we all carry within us and to which this is perhaps the hardest aspect of the artist's work before it can be brought to light." (Seuphor, 1972, p. 3)

1.0 What is Abstract Expressionism?

Abstract Expressionism is geometric abstract art of an experimental nature. It lacks uniform style, which is characterised by the revolt of traditional prescribed technical procedure. Abstract Expressionism can also be described as a way of life that expresses or solves dilemmas in the complexity of contemporary civilisation.

Abstract Expressionism, described by Denis Thomas (1973) is imageless or antiformal in nature, improvisatory, very dynamic, energetic in all figure depiction, sensual in technique and tends to stimulate initially the sensory centre of vision in contrast to gratifying any established conventions of good taste.

2.0 When and where did Abstract Expressionism evolve ?

Abstract Expressionism became a recognised movement in the late 1940's and early 1950s. It initially flourished in America and went on to become the new importance for artistic direction.

The core of the Abstract Expressionist movement was a small band of innovators, working mainly in New York, who came to the public notice during the Second World War and who after the ending of the War dominated the American scene, creating what has been described as a new orthodox. Abstract Expressionism was known at the time as 'The New York School', due to the fact that it's main centre of activity and display was in New York City (Tuchmann, 1970).

Abstract Expressionism seems to have originated from a description of Kandinsky' paintings exhibited throughout Europe between 1910-1914. Influenced by Kandinsky's work in 1946 American artist's Gorky and Pollock, became the new vogue" with their interpretation of Abstract Expressionism. Abstract Expressionism was described also as Action Painting". With the evolution of this new style, art critic Clement Greenberg suggested that Western Art follow this new movement and depend on it for new artistic direction.

Abstract Expressionism, of the 1940's and 1950's was solely confined to the United States. Variations and interpretations developed in Europe, although not with such vigour as the American practitioners. Abstract Expressionism had and still has affinities with Tachisme, and made a strong impact in several countries during the late 1950's and 1960s.

3.0 Major influences on Abstract Expressionism

Environment

According to Trewin Copplestone (1962), Abstract Expressionism was an interpretation of current events, with influences from events in the past. He stated that personal interaction with the environment played a major role in influencing style. Therefore Abstract Expressionism was a whole series of influences coming together to form a style

War

The Second World War had a profound impact on Abstract Expressionism and art in general. With the disruption of life in Europe, the rise and fall of fascist governments and the constant changing of moral principles, came the emigration of a stream of talented artist's to America. Included in this immigration came artists such as Matta, Ernst, Tanguy and Breton who brought with them Surrealism. This link with Surrealism strongly influenced American born painter, Arshile Gorky (Tuchmann, 1970).

Artists

Amongst the artists who made the strongest impact internationally were Jackson Pollock, Hans Hoffmann, Willem de Kooning. Franz Kline, Mark Rothko , Robert Motherwell, Philip Guston, Arshile Gorky' and Mark Tobey. Styles were modelled on artists such as Cezanne, Picasso, Kandinsky and Miro. Kandinsky however had the forefront attention as the Abstract Expressionism innovator, and a major influence on its initial direction.

Wassily Kandinsky Wassily Kandinsky, born 1866 of German extraction was a theorist and innovator of many other styles besides Abstract Expressionism. According to Maurice Tuchmann,(1973, The New York School), Kandinsky incorporated space, future aspirations for the human race, happy feelings, pre-conscious imagination and inner nature within his paintings.

"... Kandinsky's eyes were opened to a nonrepresentational dimension ... when he entered his studio at dusk one day and found he did not recognise one of his own paintings. It was standing upside down and in the half light he saw it only as extraordinarily beautiful , glowing with inner radiance. It led him to believe, affirmed in numerous statements and articles in later years, that abstract forms have an inner life less than realistic forms. Abstraction and Realism were thus both opposite and equal to one another different aspects of a single truth."
(Thomas, 1976, p. 17)

The Abstract Expressionist extracted meaning from the very act of painting, considering it almost a ritual. Therefore everything that surrounded the artist and everything he/she interacted with, influenced them and their painting technique. The emphasis of formalism in Abstract Expressionism made it a forerunner for Modernism and contributed further to styles modelled in contemporary Realism (Tuchmann, 1970).

Abstract Expressionism and Realism juxtaposed, radiate an understanding of subject representation. This contrast is linked through non objective forms that strongly resemble geometric designs similar to that of traditional Arabic art, which has also been to have influenced Kandinsky's works.

4.0 What world events affected Abstract Expressionism ?

1935

- Elie Meadelman sells his extensive folk art collection.

- James Thrall Soby writes the first extensive examination of Surrealism.
- Germany repudiates the disarmament clauses of the Versailles treaty.
- Paul Signac and Max Libermann die.
- Greta Garbo stars in Anna Karenina.

1936

- Philip Guston settles in New York City.
- Margaret Mitchell writes Gone With The Wind.
- Surrealist exhibition at Galerie C. Ratton in Paris.
- Sigmund Freud publishes his autobiography.

1937

- Spanish Civil War erupts.
- Franco forces destroy the city of Guernica.
- The New Bauhaus opens in Chicago.
- Lyonel Feininger returns to the US.
- John Steinbeck writes 'Of Mice and Men'.
- Ernest Hemmingway writes 'To Have or Have Not'.
- John D. Rockefeller dies.
- Picasso paints depicting the horrors of war.
- Maurice Ravel dies.

1938

- Anti-semitic programs throughout Germany.
- Hitler meets Mussolini in Rome.
- "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art) exhibition organised by the Nazi Party to display the depravity of modern art.
- Ernst Ludwig Kirchner commits suicide.

1939

- Congress enacts legislation enabling Great Britain and France to purchase arms on "cash and carry" basis
- Yves Tanguy, Thomas Mann, Stravinsky, Dali, W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood all flee to the U.S. from Europe.
- John Steinbeck writes 'The Grapes of Wrath'.

- Great Britain and France declare war on Germany.
- The Second World War begins.
- Nuclear fission is discovered.
- Sigmund Freud and William Butler Yeats die.

1940

- Germany invades Norway, Luxembourg, Denmark and Belgium.
- Italy declares war on Britain and France.
- Mondrian, Leger & Man Ray emigrated from New York to Paris.
- The U.S. declines France's appeal for military aid.
- Hemingway writes 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'.
- Churchill becomes Prime Minister.
- Varian Fry formed the "Emergency Rescue Committee" which aided 1,500 artists in escaping from France - included were Breton Masson, Ernst Chagall, and Duchamp.

1941

- Japan bombs Pearl Harbour, Hawaii.
- The US. declares war on Japan, Germany and Italy.
- National Gallery of Art opens in Washington D.C.
- Orson Welles directs the movie 'Citizen Kane'.
- Germany invades Russia, takes Kiev.
- Air raids on London.
- Rommel crosses into North Africa.
- Salvador Dali has an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.
- Max Ernst and Peggy Guggenheim marry.
- "Young Painters in the French" group founded in Paris.

1942

- Royal Air Force raids Cologne and Hamburg.
- Heydrich the Gestapo leader is assassinated.
- Germany reaches Stalingrad.

1943

- Gottlieb, Rothko and B Newman defend modern painting by saying " We assert that the subject is crucial"
- Heavy Royal Air Force raids on Berlin and Ruhr.

- Rommel retreats, Germans surrender in North Africa.

1944

- Piet Mondrian dies in New York.
- Art of this century holds shows of William Bazotes, Robert Motherwell and Hans Hofmann.
- "D-Day landing in Normandy.
- "Battle of the Bulge begins in Ardennes.

1945

- The U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- Japan surrendered ending the Second World War.
- Jackson Pollock marries.
- Hitler dies in Berlin.

In essence, many events affected Abstract Expressionism. These events listed are only but a mere fraction of World events including the World War, that affected Abstract Expressionism.

5.0 Technique Of Abstract Expressionism

“... The technique of Abstract Expressionism is generally based on a free and automatic style known as 'action painting. The painter allows the brush to flow and coupled with colour this gives way to expression (on an abstract basis) which reveals feelings and emotions” (Brock, 1972.)

Selection of paint, tones and colours, choice of display size and most importantly, timing all play a major role in the finished product.

Mystical, magical, sensual, free floating, colours and shapes are all forms in which Abstract Expressionism is described and how the artist "feels" for the subject.

Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism go hand in hand, freeing or opening up styles of expression. Depictions of political, social, religious issues, were of no concern to these painters and so incorporating

issues open minded and unbiased. They could incorporate ideas bonding emotion and sensation by artistic depiction. Artists such as Jackson Pollock described his form of painting in the following manner:

".... When I am painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted ' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes , destroying distinct images because the painting has a life of its own. proof try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is a pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out at will." (America and Europe: A century of Modern Masters, p.22).

The art work "Hugging" painted in 1945 during the height of Arshille Gorky's mature style shows the correlation between nature and the unconscious. Gorky takes nature as a form and interprets it's moods and needs, evident in his work 'Space', Gorky depicts as unreal, with soft sensual forms, amid aggressive and phallic-like projections. Biomorphic forms evoke a sense of freedom. Gorky's main painting influences arose by affiliation with all art styles, especially Surrealism. Willem de Kooning, another Abstract Expressionist, wrote in 1951.

"... Art never seems to make me peaceful or pure, always seems to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity" (America And Europe; A Century of Modern Masters, 1979).

De Kooning's works also showed "... muscular gestures of uncertainty and violence occurring. Planes of colour clashed to form figures."

As described by Monelle Hayote, a fierce critic of Willem de Kooning's work describes his style as forms created by colour, clashing as fleshy women with no beauty who transform into apocalyptic beings. Hayote also noted death, visions, and impending doom in Willem de Kooning's painterly gesture.

In 1947, Jackson Pollock, a famous Abstract Expressionist, claimed that:

"... Inner necessity to paint expressed itself not as violent action, but as a personal lyricism dominated by insight into the workings of the subconscious". (As cited in America and Europe: A Century of Modern Masters, 1979.)

Pollock shows that by delving into the subconscious, an artist can make visible energy and control emotion. This subconscious technique often occurs unaware of the artist themselves. Around 1947, Pollock's style of painting changed from traditional implementation to one where knives , sticks and trowels were used.

Pollock also changed his application method which opened up a different form of painting altogether. This application was infamously known as the "drip" method where paints were thrown or splashed onto canvas. Foreign objects were also mixed into paint to create these different effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many facets of Abstract Expressionism which have changed over time due to economic, social or political reasons. The interpretation of this movement's significance in the historical annals also shifts as new ways of considering the significance of Abstract Expressionism come up against current trends and movements.

Abstract Expressionism is able to depict a non realistic view, shapes, hazy forms or basic line. The movement has of course progressed to be incorporated in current art movements and has undeniably influenced styles and imbued in its protagonists positive aspirations for the future of Mankind and need or desire for self expression.

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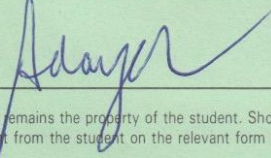
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Appendix

 EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA		ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET INTERNAL COURSES	
UNIT PAINTING 1 ARE 1130		NAME OF STUDENT (PRINT CLEARLY) HAYES ALEXANDER. <small>SURNAME FIRST NAME</small>	
STUDENT ID. NO. 0922723			
NAME OF LECTURER PAT ZANDURSKI		DUE DATE 20/5/92.	
Topic of Assignment ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM			
Group or tutorial (if applicable) 1P2		Course BACHELOR OF EDUCATION	
Campus where the unit is studied BUNBURY.			
I certify that the attached assignment is my own work and that any material drawn from other sources has been acknowledged Signature of student 		Date 15/5/92	
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PLAGIARISM ETC (University Rule 12.3)

All forms of cheating, plagiarism or collusion are regarded seriously and could result in penalties including loss of marks, exclusion from the unit or cancellation of enrolment.

Appendix 1.0: Lecturers marking sheet

LECTURER'S COMMENTS ON THE ASSESSMENT:

Alex —

This is an excellent essay —
I was impressed by the
way you have related
the movement to the
social conditions and historic
events of the time!
Your presentation last week
was confident & mature.

LECTURER'S SIGNATURE

P Bandurski

DATE

12/6/92

RESULT

$\frac{22}{25}$

Appendix 2.0: Lecturers marking sheet