

How Abstract Expressionism Changed the View of Art
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In the late 1940s and 1950s in the United States, there was a type of art called [abstract expressionism](#). It took ideas from European art styles like expressionism, surrealism, and cubism, but it also had its own special things. Abstract expressionism uses shapes, colors, and movements that don't look like real things to show how the artist feels inside. It's different from regular art because it doesn't try to show real life or tell a clear message. Instead, it lets you make your own ideas about the art based on your own feelings and imagination.

Historical Context of Abstract Expressionism

To truly understand abstract expressionism, we need to know about its history and the important artists who made it what it is. People often call abstract expressionism the New York School because it was a big deal in New York City. That's where the heart of this movement was, with lots of creative artists.

Abstract expressionism started right after World War II, a time when the world was going through big changes. As people tried to make sense of the aftermath of the war, American artists wanted to break away from the old ways of doing art. They wanted to create something that was completely different from what people were used to. It was also a way to show that American art was just as important as European art. Abstract expressionism was a sign of how much things were changing and how America was becoming a center for new and innovative art.

The Essence of Abstract Expressionism



Hypothetical

gallery view of people admiring an abstract expressionist painting.

Abstract expressionism goes beyond just how things look; it's about the feelings and thoughts behind the art. The artists who started this movement believed that art should show **what's going on inside the artist's head**. It should be a way to express their inner world rather than just showing what's on the outside. They wanted to tap into their subconscious minds to bring out their creative ideas. At the same time, they wanted to make people feel something when they looked at their art, something **personal and unique to each person**.

Automatism

In order to achieve this, artists from the abstract expressionist movement used some unique methods that went against the usual art rules. One of these methods was known as **"automatism."** This meant they moved their hands freely on the canvas without any prior planning. It was like allowing their hands to do whatever they pleased. This allowed them to capture spontaneous ideas and movements, making their art feel lively and unpredictable. For instance, the renowned artist Jackson Pollock created his famous **"drip paintings"** by flinging paint from his brushes onto large canvases placed on the ground. Willem de Kooning employed a similar approach but also included scraping and smearing paint with knives and rags to produce various textures and colors.

Want to experience Drip Art? Do it here: [Drip Art Game](#)

Gestural Abstraction

Another technique in abstract expressionism is **"gestural abstraction."** This is all about showing emotions and moods through the artist's brushwork. They used bold, strong strokes to make the canvas feel full of energy and movement. Think about artists like Franz Kline, who used black and

white paint to create dramatic shapes and contrasts. On the other hand, Joan Mitchell used bright colors and sweeping strokes to make her art look like music and poetry.

Color Field Painting

The third technique in abstract expressionism is “**color field painting.**” This style used big blocks of solid color to give the artwork a sense of depth and atmosphere. The artists played with tiny differences in color to create a strong sense of balance and harmony. For instance, Mark Rothko used rectangles of different colors to add tension and balance to his art. Barnett Newman used vertical lines, which he called “**zips,**” to divide the colors and give rhythm and direction to his creations.

All these techniques had one thing in common: they wanted to make people feel something, not just understand the art. Abstract expressionism aimed to give each person a unique, personal experience when they looked at the art. The artists didn’t want to explain their work; they wanted to connect deeply with anyone who saw their art.

Key Artists of Abstract Expressionism

Some really famous artists played a huge role in making abstract expressionism what it is. They made art that had a big impact and still inspires artists today.

- **Jackson Pollock:** He is often called one of the first abstract expressionists. He’s famous for his “**drip paintings.**” Instead of using brushes like everyone else, he let the paint flow freely from his brushes onto big canvases on the ground. The result was a colorful and wild dance of shapes and colors that people couldn’t stop looking at.
- **Willem de Kooning:** This artist also did things differently in abstract expressionism. He used a mix of quick, unplanned movements and careful actions. He even used knives and rags to move the paint on his canvas. This made his art full of complex layers of texture and color, and it made people think about the emotions and shapes in his work.
- **Mark Rothko:** He was a master of color field painting. He used big blocks of solid color to create art that felt deep and thoughtful. His paintings had subtle changes in color and shape that made people feel deep emotions and get lost in his art.
- **Barnett Newman:** He had a unique style of abstract expressionism. He used vertical lines, which he called “**zips,**” to divide his canvases. These lines added a sense of rhythm and direction to his art, making people think about the colors and space in his work.

Techniques in Abstract Expressionist Art

To really understand abstract expressionism, we need to know about the techniques the artists used. These techniques showed off their own styles and helped shape abstract expressionism as a kind of art.

Action Painting and Color Field Painting

Abstract expressionism can be split into two styles: action painting and color field painting. Each of these styles helps us see this kind of art in a different way.

Action Painting: It is all about energy and movement. Artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning used bold, dynamic brushwork. They put paint on the canvas with strong, quick movements, creating patterns of drips, splashes, and strokes. The act of painting was like a performance, and the canvas caught the artist's emotions and movements.

Color Field Painting: This is different. It's all about using big areas of solid color or blended colors to create a feeling of depth, space, and mood. Artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Helen Frankenthaler were really good at this style. They made art that was like being surrounded by colors, and it made people think and feel a lot. Small changes in color and shape guided people's eyes and made them think about the art.

The Lasting Impact of Abstract Expressionism

Abstract expressionism was a big deal in the art world. It used new methods and made people feel deep emotions. It changed how people saw art and inspired other art styles like pop art and minimalism.

Read also: [How do artists depict emotion in art?](#)

When we talk about abstract expressionism, it's all about feelings. Art lets us look inside ourselves and think about our own emotions. It's a journey that encourages us to discover our feelings, question how art works, and see the canvas as a way to understand ourselves.

In the end, abstract expressionism isn't just a small part of art history. It shows how powerful human creativity and emotion can be. It invites us on a journey to explore abstract art, connect with the deep emotions artists put into their work, and experience art in its purest, most emotional form. It's a journey that still captures the hearts of art lovers all over the world.