



# ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Arts

## JACKSON POLLOCK AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

KEY WORDS:

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Twentieth century witnessed a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases of Western art. Just as Literature achieved its effects by violating the norms of Standard English syntax and sentence structure, painting relied on novelty and a fractured form informed undeniably by the modern fragmented society which played its part in the new venture of modernism wherein expressing oneself became the most difficult mission. Innovation became the core value of modern art as Harold Rosenberg remarks "the only thing that counts for Modern Art is that a work shall be NEW" (49). The artists strived enormously to rise above the contemporaries which resulted in what can be termed as "breakthrough" that each one had to undertake in the venture of modernizing the art of painting.

Lucy Lippard says that "Today movements are just that; they have no time to stagnate before they are replaced... Younger critics and artists have matured in a period accustomed to rapid change" (Qtd in Galenson 1). During the Renaissance, joint venture became popular wherein the eminent masters did not work alone but on the other hand, their studios comprised of students and assistants. In fact most of them assumed the role of an ideator instead of an executant as in the case of Raphael who was never seen at court without some fifty painters. His notions were executed by his disciples and assistants paving the way for one of the revolutions in Renaissance art. Non-Western art played a key role in the development of modern art. In the search of new aesthetic possibilities, Western artists found limitless inspiration in the traditions of other cultures across the world. Sub-Saharan Africa, the pre-colonial Americas, and Oceania were particularly influential. The modern period of art history witnessed the demolition of traditional restrictions, in terms of both form and content. Modernism shaped itself and encompassed many different styles and forms such as Impressionism, Post Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Social Realism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.

Impressionism relied on the human eye which was a marvelous instrument that opened to the fascinating experiences of light and movement and post impressionism emerged as an offshoot of it. Cubism focused on a multi-perspectival means of presenting objects. The aim of Surrealism was to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality. The artists painted illogical scenes with photographic precision creating strange creatures from everyday objects and developed techniques that allowed the unconscious to express itself. But Abstract Expressionism, the American post world - war movement in the 1940s rose above all other schools to achieve an international influence, creating a halo around the city of New York which in turn became the new center of western art. The term was first used by the art critic Robert Coates to imply American art. The Abstract Expressionists who were to become gestural painters shared the surrealists' fascination with automatic drawing which for them was a way to reveal the unconscious. The features of the style have derived from a combination of the affecting passion and abstinence of the German Expressionists with the anti-figurative aesthetic of the European abstract schools such as Futurism, the Bauhaus and Synthetic Cubism. It has many stylistic similarities to the Russian artists of the early twentieth century. The major figures were Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Emma Kunz, who were followed later on by Rothko, Barnett Newman and

Agnes Martin. In America, the movement was not only associated with painting and painters like Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, Hans Hofmann, William de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and many others but also with collagists and sculptors. Abstract Expressionism produced some of the most memorable artwork of the 20th Century. As an art movement it has left a legacy of some truly creative and original paintings. It used art as an expression of emotion, focusing on color and form.

The Abstract Expressionists had a distinct style and a novel language of painting. The movement was influenced by Surrealism and Existentialism which desired to use the subconscious to create automatic art. In automatic art or automatism, the subconscious directed the hand of the artists without reference to their conscious mind. Existentialism favoured the creation of an artwork rather than the finished artwork itself. The Abstract Expressionists were inspired by retrospectives of the work of Miro and Kandinsky. In fact the Surautomatism technique smoothened the way for the technique of autographic, exploring the possibilities of unique hand-painted gesture as a vehicle of expression. The great leap of modern art's early decades of the last century was the proposition that abstraction could be the highest form of artistic expression. A hundred years later, canvases marked only by paint splashes, slashes, drips, and flows are now counted among the canonical works of Western art. The terms gestural abstraction and action painting have been used to describe the sort of abstractions that directly reflect the action of an artist's gestures in applying paint. "Abstract Expressionists value expression over perfection, vitality over finish, fluctuation over repose, the unknown over the known, the veiled over the clear, the individual over the outer" (Seitz Qtd in Baal-Teshuva 10). In Abstract Expressionism the artist creates art work using pure color and form and, being nonrepresentational, no objects are actually illustrated.

Abstract Expressionism is often split into two categories: firstly, Action Painting, so called by the American critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952, in which the artist considered the canvas as nothing but an arena to act, typified by the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky; secondly, Color Field Painting practiced by Mark Rothko and Kenneth Noland and others, which consisted of exploring non geometric blocks of color on canvas. Abstract Expressionism was exemplified by large canvases which used the 'all over' painting technique. As the name implies the canvas was painted all over, the decisive distinction here being that each fraction of the canvas was as vital as the next. There was no traditional focal point in the centre or anywhere else for that matter. One of the reasons it gained favor was thought to be political. In USA there was major censorship of the arts generally during the McCarthy era of the 1950's. But since Abstract Expressionism never confined to any particular subject in painting it was quite unscathed by the controversies. Jackson Pollock, the most pioneering artist of the style himself once said "Modern art to me is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we're living in" (Wright 20).

Paul Jackson Pollock (January 28, 1912 –August 11, 1956) was an influential American Painter and a major figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement. Regarded mostly as a reclusive artist, he had a volatile personality and struggled

with alcoholism. In 1945, he married the artist Lee Krasner, who became an important influence on his career and on his legacy. Most of the time, it was her influence that helped him to bring back his spirits from frequent depressions that he had suffered from. Born in Cody, Wyoming as the youngest of the five children of Stella May McClure and LeRoy, a farmer and later a land surveyor for the government, he was quite influenced by his parents at a very young age. During his early life, he experienced Native American culture while on surveying trips with his father. Stella and LeRoy Pollock were Presbyterian, the former, Irish and the latter, Scotch-Irish. He enrolled at Los Angeles' Arts High School in California from which he was expelled, after having been expelled from another high school in 1928. In 1930, following his brother Charles Pollock, he moved to New York City where they both studied under Thomas Hart Benton at the Arts Students League of New York. From 1938 to 1942, he worked for the WPA Federal Art Project. In order to fight alcoholism, from 1938 through 1941 Pollock underwent Jungian psychotherapy with Dr. Joseph Henderson and later with Dr. Violet Staub de Laszlo in 1941-1942. This was one of the significant influences in Pollock's paintings. In October 1945, Pollock and Lee moved to what is now known as the Pollock-Krasner House Studio, at 830 Springs Fireplace Road, in Springs on Long Island. N. Y. Peggy Guggenheim lent them the down payment for the wood-frame house with a nearby barn that Pollock converted into a studio. There he perfected the technique of working with which he became permanently identified. This studio represented the psyche of Pollock and is unquestionably the golden reservoir which contributed to glorify modern art. At an experimental workshop operated in New York City by the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1936, he was introduced to the use of liquid paint which later on became one of his trademarks wherein he poured paint onto the vast canvas.

In the movie titled *Pollock* by Ed Harris, the director has depicted with utmost precision, an incident in which, once while Pollock was painting in his Spring studio, when by chance the paint from his brush dripped onto the floor which grabbed his attention. The very same experiment he accomplished on his canvas which resulted in the exquisite drip paintings of Pollock. He turned to synthetic resin-based paints called alkyd enamels, one of the novel media of his time thereby deviating from the conventional mode of painting. The use of these household paints instead of the artist's paints was described by Pollock himself as "a natural growth out of a need" (Qtd in Boddy-Evans). He used hardened brushes, blasting syringes and sticks in order to paint. He achieved a more immediate means of creating art through the techniques of pouring and dripping which the modern art owes to him. The viscous flow of paint was not restricted to mere movements of the hand and the wrist but on the contrary was accompanied by movements of his body, over which he had control, accompanied by the force of gravity. He sometimes mixed broken glass with his paint and once even knocked down a wall to make a room large enough for a 20-foot canvas. Vigorously he moved around the canvas, painted from all the four sides by pouring, flinging, dripping and splattering almost in gusto and brought to a close only when he found in it what he actually wanted to see.

His most popular paintings were made during the drip period between 1947 and 1950 when he reached at the acme of glory of his career but abruptly abandoned the drip style. Each stage of his career reflected, just like his paintings, a continuous and ceaseless effort at innovation and novelty. At one time he was an Abstract Expressionist, at another time an artist of pouring, and at another a dripper. Each stage in fact portrays the artistic developments and the enhancing quality in Pollock. He never continued with a clichéd pattern and this won him different titles in the course of his career. The distinctness is quite evident in his paintings like, *Mural*, 1943, *Moby Dick*, 1943, *Pasiphae*, 1943, *The She Wolf*, 1943, *Full*

*Fathom Five*, 1943, *Eyes in the Heat*, 1946, *Guardians of the Secret*, 1947, *Reelection of the Big Dipper*, 1947, *One: Number 31*, 1950, *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950, *Blue Poles* 1952, *Convergence*, 1952, *Ocean Greyness*, 1953, and so on. In 1955 he painted *Scent and Search* which were his last two paintings. After struggling with alcoholism for his entire life, on August 11, 1956, at 10:15 pm, he died in a car crash along with Edith Metzger who also got killed. Pollock's mistress Ruth Kligman survived. After his demise, his estate was managed by his wife Lee Krasner ensuring his reputation even after his demise despite the changing art-world trends. They are buried in Green River Cemetery in Springs. In December 1956, he was given a memorial retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.

Abstract paintings by Jackson Pollock demonstrate how Abstract Expressionism moved towards the production of paintings without conscious control. When the emphasis on form is reduced or absent in abstract art and expression dominates, then the appreciation of such abstract art becomes instinctive and emotional. Pollock was of the view that modern art was a part of an evolutionary process. "It's a part of a long tradition dating back with Cezanne, up through the cubists, the post-cubists, to the painting being done today" (Wright). Pollock's impulsive drip technique allowed him to depict his inner forces or in a way the unconscious. For him it was an activity through which he could explore his unconscious, a tool of self-discovery and reflection. Pollock clearly worked through instincts from his psyche, as seen by the domination of the automatist process throughout most of his career.

Abstract Expressionism's predilection for the unconscious was a legacy of its immediate predecessors such as the Impressionists, Surrealists and Expressionists who had attempted to discover the deep interiors of the mind through the unhindered employment of paint on canvas. The Abstract Expressionists took this to its logical extreme by rescuing painting from the last remnants of form and figure and converting the canvas into a space to perform the frenzied dance of the unconscious. Any attempt to read the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists therefore takes for granted an understanding and definition of the unconscious using the technologies made available by psychoanalysis. Freud, Jung and Lacan tried to theorize the unconscious, and evolved definitions which helped in the analysis of the paintings of the period, especially those of Abstract Expressionists.

## REFERENCES

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