Abstract Expressionism was never an ideal label for the movement which grew up in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. It was somehow meant to encompass not only the work of painters who filled their canvases with fields of color and abstract forms, but also those who attacked their canvases with a vigorous gestural expressionism. But it has become the most accepted term for a group of artists who did hold much in common. All were committed to an expressive art of profound emotion and universal themes, and most were shaped by the legacy of Surrealism, a movement which they translated into a new style fitted to the post-war mood of anxiety and trauma. In their success, the New York painters robbed Paris of its mantle as leader of modern art, and set the stage for America's post-war dominance of the international art world.

Key Points

- Most of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism matured in the 1930s. They were influenced by the era's leftist politics, and came to value an art grounded in personal experience. Few would maintain their earlier radical political views, but many continued to adopt the posture of outspoken avant-gardists protesting from the margins.
• Having matured as artists at a time when America suffered economically and felt culturally isolated and provincial, the Abstract Expressionists were later welcomed as the first authentically American avant-garde. Their art was championed for being emphatically American in spirit - monumental in scale, romantic in mood, and expressive of a rugged individual freedom.

• The milieu of Abstract Expressionism united sculptors such as David Smith as well as photographers like Aaron Siskind, but above all the movement was one of painters.

• Political instability in Europe in the 1930s brought several leading Surrealists to New York, and many of the Abstract Expressionists were profoundly influenced by the style and by its interest in the unconscious. It encouraged their interest in myth and archetypal symbols and it shaped their understanding of painting itself as a struggle between self-expression and the chaos of the unconscious.
It is one of the many paradoxes of Abstract Expressionism that the roots of the movement lie in the figurative painting of the 1930s. Almost all the artists who would later become abstract painters in New York in the 1940s and 1950s were stamped by the experience of the Great Depression, and they came to maturity whilst painting in styles influenced by social realism and the Regionalist movement. By the late 1940s most had left those styles behind, but they learned much from their early work. It encouraged them in their commitment to an art based on personal experience. Time spent painting murals would later encourage them to create abstract paintings on a similarly monumental scale. And the experience of working for the government - sponsored Works Progress Administration also brought many disparate figures together, and this would make it easier for them to band together again in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the new style was being promoted.

Artists living in New York in the 1930s were the beneficiaries of an increasingly sophisticated network of museums and galleries which staged major exhibitions of modern art. The Museum of Modern Art mounted shows such as "Cubism and Abstract Art," "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism," and a major retrospective of Picasso. And 1939 saw the opening of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, (later to be called the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), which boasted an important collection of Kandinsky's works.

**New York in the 1930s and 1940s**

Many European modernists began to come to New York in the 1930s and 1940s to escape political upheaval and war. Some, such as the painter and teacher Hans Hofmann, would prove directly influential: Hofmann had spent the early years of the century in Paris; he had met the likes of Picasso, Matisse, and Braque, who had acquired titanic reputations in artists' circles in New York, and he was able to impart many of their ideas to his students. Hofmann arrived with a sophisticated understanding of Cubism, and also a love of Matisse's Fauvism, which was underappreciated by many in New York.

All this activity meant that New York's artists were extraordinarily knowledgeable about trends in modern European art. It left many with feelings of inferiority, yet these were slowly overcome in the 1940s.
Personal encounters with many displaced Europeans, such as André Breton, Max Ernst and André Masson, helped to rob some artists of the mythic status they had acquired. And, as Europe suffered under totalitarian regimes in the 1930s, and later became mired in war, many Americans felt emboldened to transcend European influence, to develop a rhetoric of painting that was appropriate to their own nation, and, not least, to take the helm of advanced culture at a time when some of its oldest citadels were under threat. It was no accident that critic Clement Greenberg, in one of his first important responses to the new movement, described it as "'American-Type' Painting".

The Formation of the Movement
By the late 1940s, many of the factors were in place to give birth to the new movement - however varied and disparate its artists' work. In, 1947 Jackson Pollock found his way to the drip technique. The following year, de Kooning had an influential show at the Charles Egan Gallery; Barnett Newman arrived at his breakthrough picture Onement I; and Mark Rothko began painting the "multi-form" paintings that would soon lead to the signature works of his mature period. And after 18 like-minded artists mounted a boycott of an exhibition of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum, and in January 1951 were cajoled into posing for a photo for Life magazine, they were baptized as "The Irascibles". Finally, the movement had a sense of common, group identity and purpose.

Themes, Concepts and Styles
Surrealism
The most significant influence on the themes and concepts of the Abstract Expressionists was Surrealism. The American painters were uneasy with the overt Freudian symbolism of the European movement, but they were inspired by its interests in the unconscious, as well as its strain of primitivism and preoccupation with mythology. Many were particularly interested in the ideas of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, who believed that elements of a collective unconscious had been handed down through the ages by means of archetypal symbols - primordial images which had become recurrent motifs. This gave many artists the impetus to move away from the biomorphic Surrealism of
Miró and Picasso, and towards an increasingly reductive style. Rothko and Newman are typical of this progress: Rothko experimented with abstract symbols in the early 1940s before moving towards entirely abstract fields of color; Newman similarly sought an approach which might strip away all extraneous motifs and communicate everything through one powerfully resonant symbol - in his case, the so-called 'zip' paintings.

Many artists attempted to channel into art by means of what André Breton called 'pure psychic automatism', which in practice often meant the involvement of chance in the creation of art. Pollock considered his drip technique to be at least in part a means of harnessing his unconscious; and the approach left effects to chance for all to see on the surface of the canvas. But like many others, Pollock also insisted on an element of control in his method - as he once said, "No chaos, damn it!" - and he believed that the "drips" were powerfully expressive, rather than being merely random accumulations of paint. Indeed, they were self-expressive. The ambivalence in Pollock's attitude was shared by many Abstract Expressionists', whose embrace of chaos was balanced by an impulse towards control. This paradox explains much of the energetic tumult one finds in the work of many of the so-called "action painters", including de Kooning, Kline and Motherwell. In part it led to the so-called "all-over" effect which one sees in Pollock's mature work, and in de Kooning's abstract paintings of the late 1940s, in which forms seem to be dispersed evenly across the canvas; when chaos threatened, everything in the image could shatter into pieces.

**Existentialism and Rosenberg**

Another impetus for the Abstract Expressionists to retool Surrealism was a feeling that certain aspects of the style were no longer suited to the post-war world. The reigning philosophy of the period, Existentialism, would never be an important influence on the Abstract Expressionists, but it contributed to the rhetoric of anxiety and alienation which pervaded discussion. It was also a key influence on one of the movement's key critics, Harold Rosenberg, who delved into it for this influential formulation which appeared in an 1952 article for *ART News* entitled "The American Action Painters": "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after
another as an arena in which to act - rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." It was this notion that birthed the idea of "action painting": it didn't quite accommodate the work of artists like Rothko and Newman, but it was an insightful realization of what painters like Pollock, Kline and de Kooning all had in common.

**Formalism and Greenberg**

The other critic who proved crucial in promoting the movement - and the one whose influence has far outlasted it - was **Clement Greenberg**. He was uncomfortable with any discussion of content and ideas in art, and argued instead that modern art had evolved along formal lines. Greenberg saw in Pollock the next important step in this process, and championed his work vigorously. Indeed, he championed all of the Abstract Expressionists as a triumphant American answer to the shortcomings of the European avant-garde. He also encouraged the idea of 'color field' painting. Some would later argue that color field painting represented a new manifestation of a long tradition of sublime landscape. But Greenberg viewed the work of Rothko, Still and Newman as part of a tendency in modern painting to apply color in extended areas, or 'fields'. He would later return to this notion in championing a second generation of painters, which included Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell and Morris Louis.

**Further Developments**

Like any group of artists whose work achieves widespread recognition, Abstract Expressionism was eventually imperilled by its success. An extensive network of dealers, museums and galleries reached out to support it; even the government covertly embraced it and promoted it vigorously overseas as a testament to free-expression in America, in contrast to the repressions of the Stalinist Eastern Bloc. Inevitably, by the mid 1950s, the style had attracted a multitude of young followers, and what began as an impulse to expression, threatened to become stale and academic.
By the mid 1950s the style had also run its course in other ways. The movement's greatest achievements were often built on a conflict between chaos and control which could only be played out in so many ways. Some artists, such as Newman and Rothko, had evolved a style so reductive that there was little room for development - and to change course would have shrunk the grandeur of their bold trademark solutions. Younger artists following the development of this generation were less and less persuaded by artists who were said to put forth one sublime expression after another, often in series; and they grew tired of their postures of heroism. Homosexual artists, such as Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Ellsworth Kelly, also felt little affinity with the macho styles and rhetoric of the New York School. Some, like Johns, would learn much from the Abstract Expressionists, and carry their interest in the autographic gesture in fresh directions, introducing qualities of irony, ambiguity and reticence which the older generation could never have countenanced. Others, like Warhol, were too enthralled by the pop culture of the streets to have much in common with the lofty ambitions of hard-drinking womanizers such as Pollock and de Kooning.

By the late 1950s, Abstract Expressionism had entirely lost its place at the center of critical debate and a new generation was on the cusp of success. Yet the legacy of the movement was to be considerable. Allan Kaprow sensed this as early as 1958 when he wrote an article for ART News entitled "What is the legacy of Jackson Pollock?" His answer pointed beyond painting, and Pollock's influence was certainly felt in areas where performance had a role: he was to be important to the Japanese Gutai movement as well as the Viennese Actionists. But the influence of the movement as a whole would continue to be felt by painters maturing in subsequent decades. It was important for the likes of Dorothea Rockburne, Pat Steir, Susan Rothenberg and Jack Whitten in the 1970s. Its rhetoric - if not its direct example - would be important for many Neo-Expressionists in the 1980s such as Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat. And in the 1990s it again provided an example to painters such as Cecily Brown. The themes and concepts which informed Abstract Expressionism may have lost the power to compel young artists, but the movement's achievements continue to supply them with standards against which to be measured.
Original content written by Justin Wolf

Key Artists:

**Jackson Pollock**
Jackson Pollock was the most well-known Abstract Expressionist and the key example of Action Painting. His work ranges from Jungian scenes of primitive rites to the purely abstract "drip paintings" of his later career.

**Willem De Kooning**
Willem de Kooning, a Dutch immigrant to New York, was one of the foremost Abstract Expressionist painters. His abstract compositions drew on Surrealist and figurative traditions, and typified the expressionistic 'gestural' style of the New York School.

**Mark Rothko**
Mark Rothko was an Abstract Expressionist painter whose early interest in mythic landscapes gave way to mature works featuring large, hovering blocks of color on colored grounds.

**Clyfford Still**
Clyfford Still was a leading first-generation Abstract Expressionist. His mature works are large-scale paintings with gaping chasms and stains of jagged color, often in dark earth tones.

**Franz Kline**
Franz Kline was an American abstract painter and one of the pioneers of Abstract Expressionism. His signature black-and-white abstractions were inspired by Japanese calligraphy, and inspired a later generation of artists who created Minimalism.

**Hans Hofmann**
German-born American painter, art teacher and theorist. Hofmann matured as an artist in 1904-14 in Paris, where he met many of the greatest artists of that time. After he emigrated to America in the early
1930s he enjoyed a prominent career as a teacher, powerfully influencing many Abstract Expressionists with his understanding of European modernism.

**Robert Motherwell**

Robert Motherwell was a first-generation Abstract Expressionist whose paintings use hulking shapes, large-scale strokes and calligraphy, and wide expanses of muted color. Eloquent and well-educated, he wrote extensively on theories of art.

**Barnett Newman**

Barnett Newman was an Abstract Expressionist painter in New York who painted large-scale fields of solid color, interrupted by vertical lines or "zips." His sometimes narrow or boxy canvases, part painting and part sculpture, were influential for Minimalism.

### Major Works:

**Artist:** Jackson Pollock  
**Title:** Number 1 (Lavender Mist) (1950)  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Collection:** National Gallery, Washington DC  
**Description:** One of thirty-two paintings in Pollock's 1950 solo exhibition at Betty Parson's New York gallery, *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)* was the only painting that sold. Despite critical praise and media attention, the artist did not garner sales of his famous drip paintings until later in his career. Pollock titled several paintings *Number 1*, and coded them with alternate titles. Thus, *Number 1* (1949) and *One, Number Thirty One*, are closely related but upon close viewing differ slightly. *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)* exemplifies gestural abstraction, in which paint was poured or applied with extreme physicality to reflect the artist's inner mind. The color is expressive, while space is created through alternative layers and drips of opaque paint, creating a textured canvas surface that is nearly dizzying.
**Artist:** Mark Rothko  
**Title:** Red, Brown and Black (1958)  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Collection:** MoMA  
**Description:** Mark Rothko’s paintings are titled by color variations, and all consist of soft, rectangular bands of color stretching horizontally across his canvases. *Red, Brown, Black* exemplifies a kind of chromatic abstraction known as color field painting. Color field painters were concerned with brushstroke and paint texture, but they came to view color as the most powerful communication tool. Rothko's interests in mysticism, religion, and myth hearken back to the Surrealists, and his blocks of color are meant to provide a contemplative, meditative space in which to visually investigate one's own moods and affiliations with the chosen palette. He sought to distill an essence, or true nature, out of codified hues.

**Artist:** Willem de Kooning  
**Title:** Door to the River (1960)  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Collection:** Whitney Museum, New York  
**Description:** Willem de Kooning was another gestural action painter, who worked often with broad brushstrokes and in light, pastel palettes. He sought authenticity of experience, not only in the making of his paintings but also in the representation of the experience on canvas. Some critics feel de Kooning is influenced most clearly by Cubism because his work frequently operates on grid-like compositions in which color creates dimension and texture. *Door to the River* is part of a series made in the 1950s to 1960s, in which de Kooning's brushstrokes appear to be completely spontaneous, to reflect the presence of both the artist and the viewer, when one sees the canvas with its lively physicality.
Artist: Barnett Newman
Title: Vir heroicus sublimis (1950-51)
Materials: Oil on canvas
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Description: Translated as "Man, heroic and sublime," Vir heroicus sublimis was, at 95"x213", Newman's largest painting at the time it was completed, although he would go on to create even more expansive works. He intended his audiences to view them from a close vantage point, allowing the colors to fully surround them - hence he was considered to be a color-field painter. Newman believed that the radically abbreviated motif of the zip could communicate qualities of humanity which found echoes in ancient art. For later generations, however, Newman's work was important for different reasons relating to its scale and simplicity. Mel Bochner, an artist associated with Conceptualism, remembered encountering it at MoMA in the late 1960s and realizing that its scale and color created a new kind of contact between art and the viewer. "A woman standing there [looking at it].. was covered with red," he recalled. "I realized it was the light shining on the painting reflecting back, filling the space between the viewer and the artwork that created the space, the place. And that that reflection of the self of the painting, the painting as the subject reflected on the viewer, was a wholly new category of experience."

Artist: Franz Kline
Title: Chief (1950)
Materials: Oil on canvas
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Description: Franz Kline's work typifies that of the "action painters" celebrated by Harold Rosenberg. But no matter how energetic and urgent his pictures seemed to be, they were always carefully considered in their execution. So much so that critics have speculated wildly on the sources behind images such as this. Chief was the name of a locomotive Kline remembered from his childhood, and it's possible to read the image as a sensory reminiscence of its power, sound and steaming engine. Some also believed that the artist's obsession with black was connected to his childhood spent in a coal-mining community dominated by heavy industry. And many have since noted that the
forms in his early abstractions seem to have evolved from drawings of Kline's wife Elizabeth.

**Artist:** Philip Guston  
**Title:** Zone (1953-54)  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Collection:** The Edward R. Broida Trust, Los Angeles  
**Description:** Zone, a painting that reflects the focused concentration of Philip Guston's mature work, suggests a warm calm, with its mist of red hatch-marks filling the painting's center. ("Look at any inspired painting," he once said, "it's like a gong sounding; it puts you in a state of reverberation.") Here, Guston hones his mark-making, and builds layers of paint out of quick, small strokes that are quite distinct from the wilder gestures of some of his colleagues. This approach led him to be characterized at one time as an "American Impressionist", which suggests just how varied was the work embraced by the official title of the movement, Abstract Expressionism.