Abstract vs. Figurative Art

Questions over the meaning, origin, and necessity of abstract art have formed some of the central riddles of modern art. The answers to them can seem even more remote now that contemporary painting encompasses veins of both abstraction and figuration. This wasn't always the case: during the years when Abstract Expressionism flourished, figuration was shunned by the most advanced artists, and for reasons which date back to the late 1930s. Below we examine all the terms in this debate: abstraction; figuration (abstraction's opposite for much of the twentieth century); and the concept of 'representation,' which critics have come to use more often since the 1970s, which acknowledges that abstract and figurative art are not as different as they might seem.

Almost all art is abstract art, if we take abstraction to be a process of drawing inspiration from the shape, color and texture of objects. Artists have "abstracted" from the world around them since prehistoric times. But it was not until the early twentieth century that abstraction began to be explored as an end in itself.

Abstract art tends to rely on the associations of form to suggest meaning, rather than employing recognizable motifs to point to particular themes and content. It ranges from the easily comprehensible, quasi-figurative, landscape-based imagery of Kandinsky, to the obscure, mystical monochromes of Malevich.

Imitation, or realistic representation, has been one of the goals of visual art since the earliest times - the ancients called it mimesis. During some periods artists have striven to create the effect of an illusion, with images that seem to extend the real, 3D space of the viewer. At other times they have striven for realism - an impression of social reality. In the twentieth century, the opposite of abstraction is best thought of in the widest sense, as "figuration," though some Abstract Expressionists considered any residual presence of the figure (such as is seen in Miró, or early Rothko), no matter how abstracted, to constitute figuration.

The idea of abstract art was present to some degree throughout the art of the late nineteenth century, from Post-Impressionism to Symbolism. But pure abstraction was finally achieved around 1913 - those most often said to have created the first abstract paintings are Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and Robert Delaunay. Some consider Cubism to be an abstract style, yet Picasso was opposed to pure abstraction, and actually changed course when he felt his work was verging on pure abstraction.

Experiments in abstract art throughout the century have always aimed at disrupting the traditional understandings of easel painting, and this disruption has tended towards two logical conclusions, the grid and the monochrome. The grid - typically seen in Cubism, and in Piet Mondrian - is hostile to narrative, and also confuses the conventional oppositions between line and color, figure and ground, motif and frame. The monochrome runs counter to the traditional understanding of painting as either a window or a mirror: an opening through which we see another world, or a surface on which some version of ourselves...
Hans Hofmann's presence in Paris at the time of these early developments was important in bringing ideas about abstraction to the United States, though others such as Arshile Gorky and John Graham would also play a role.

### ABSTRACT ART DURING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Although the Abstract Expressionists spoke more of content than of form, abstraction was central to their means. Rothko, Newman, and Still all consciously strove to remove from their pictures any motifs which might carry associations. Instead they employed purely abstract form and expressive color to communicate directly with the viewer in the most immediate way.

Critics, however, were more alert to the importance of abstraction. For Harold Rosenberg, the painters’ abstraction was a product of their Existential encounter with the canvas - the abstract mark was a cry in the wilderness. And for Clement Greenberg, abstraction was central to the goal of all modernist artists, to rid art of all that was extraneous to it.

The example of Jackson Pollock has come to be a particularly controversial test case of the significance of abstraction and figuration in Abstract Expressionism - particularly since figures began to remerge in his late work, when the artist seemed to become frustrated with trying to develop his abstraction. For some such as Clement Greenberg, abstraction was central to Pollock’s success.

### ABSTRACT ART AFTER ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Many have come to question the possibility of abstraction as Clement Greenberg and others saw it. Some argue that Pollock was trying to represent his unconscious, and that memory images and motifs from his psychoanalysis slipped through. Others go further, maintaining that, although Pollock may have attempted to repress all forms of reference in his work, he could never escape them entirely, as abstraction is a language like any other, and carries metaphors like any other. Most critics now agree that Pollock’s abstraction was a language of sorts, and, therefore, that it is more connected to conventional imagery than had been hitherto imagined. Today they argue that abstract and figurative paintings both do the work of representation, and in that sense are closely related.

The lack of figuration in Abstract Expressionism is typical of the post-war period, when distaste for leftist politics eroded the position of social realism, and world war shook the humanism at the heart of the Expressionist style. Few realists - other than Andrew Wyeth - gained prominence in this period.

However, although many Abstract Expressionist paintings are indeed abstract, some artists reintroduced the figure. De Kooning is famous for the series of Women, that he began in the early 1950s. For him, the use of the figure was central to his engagement with the history of Western art. His example would be hugely influential, but as color field abstraction gained more support in the 1950s, de Kooning's recourse to figuration began to be held against him.

Although the decline of Abstract Expressionism did not result in an immediate return to figuration, some artists began to explore this direction in the 1960s.

Philip Guston is particularly famous for having returned to the figure in the late 1960s, when he began to feel that his abstraction made it difficult to respond to the social and political upheavals of the period. And others might be noted, including Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein, who were termed "New Perceptual Realists," and "Super-realists" such as Chuck Close and Richard Estes (though their work was often more preoccupied by the photograph than by the figure).