

## Abstract Expressionism

"What about the reality of the everyday world and the reality of painting? They are not the same realities. What is this creative thing that you have struggled to get and where did it come from? What reference or value does it have, outside of the painting itself?" Ad Reinhardt, in a group discussion at Studio 35, in 1950.

My essay starts with the origin and the birth of this great expression in the twentieth century. This movement not only touched painting, it had an effect on various aspects of art - poetry, architecture, theatre, film, photography.

Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian are considered to be the pioneer artists to have achieved a truly abstract visual language in painting. Although they worked independently, these artists were united by a belief that abstract painting was capable of evoking a spiritual experience. A central figure of German Expressionism, Kandinsky, in 1911, began to paint densely layered composition of free -floating lines and areas of colour, with the intention to reveal his desire to install visual form with the properties of music. By 1915, Malevich had invented a new, abstract visual set of paintings consisting of one or more colored geometric shapes on a white field. He visualized a state of feeling, and a sense of bliss and wonder. Mondrian took a different approach with tighter geometric orientation and stricter compositional order. He was also inspired by landscape but he interpreted it as a series of interlocking vertical and horizontal lines.

It would be hard to advance any definition of abstract expressionism without taking into account the vast and varied cultural and historical happenings that led to its birth. This artistic movement evolved over a long time. As we look closely at any of the members of the generation identified with abstract expressionism, their biographies reveal the whole experience of this artistic adventure. It was an odd reaction of the new America from the old Europe. For more than half a century, the general European public had been bombarded of a variety of art exercises. But new wave of artists in Europe and United States saw in change in its future. Abstract was a natural evolution. It would finally liberate artists from the claims of tradition and lift art to the next level of heights. When the economic and ideological interests began to fade away, a fresh form of thinking evolved. It was not just people's mental habits that changed the way of life, it was also the ways of life that changed people's mental habits.

The developments in science and technology over the twentieth century have been accompanied by an unprecedented new forms and means of communications. Born at the beginning of the twentieth century, the artists whom we link together under the name Abstract Expressionists were also the product of the same tension that produced the forms, formations and deformations of their history. It was then, the tension became an art. Willem de Kooning was born in 1904, Arshile Gorky again in 1904, Adolf Gottlieb in 1903, Hans Hoffman in 1880, Barnett Newman in 1905, Mark Rothko in 1903, Clifford Still in 1904, Jackson Pollock in 1912, Ad Reinhardt in 1913 and Robert Motherwell in 1915. These artists' initial biographies were programmed around the people who were still living according to the principles set down in the nineteenth century. What artists like Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell and others were able to realize in the late forties and early fifties went far beyond the possibilities that were opened up by recent influences. The artists ranged from thirty to forty -two years old then and were coming into the mature periods of their lives and were expressing the maturity of the art. The economic and cultural circumstances in the United States conditioned and defined their art - the crash of 1929, the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, the American

stance of neutrality towards World War II until December 1940.

The term "Abstract Expressionism" is misleading. On its first appearance, it seemed like any genuine innovative style, breaking away with the past in a radical manner. By a clearer understanding it revealed that Abstract Expressionism flourished due to some reliable understanding of the painters' formal and technical concerns and their relationship to previous art. Unlike European tradition, American art had no classical roots. In the mainstream America art has not been monumental and decorative, but basically popular and realistic. After giving primary debt of the Abstract Expressionism to the European art, the artists managed to preserve some unique and compelling qualities of American expression. These included boldness of imagery, directness of technique, stress on the material physicality of medium and surface, and sincerity of statement.

Abstraction embodied the intellectual achievement and adventurous outlook of the twentieth century, along with other technological breakthroughs. Evolving after photography had proven its ability to capture appearances, abstract expressionism in every walk of art conveyed that could not be captured through a set of lens. It gave complete freedom from conventional concerns and restraints, which led to unobstructed expressiveness and individual exhalation. Even though the work may seem spontaneous, abstract artists employed highly calculated methods.

The relationship between abstract art and modern architecture was particularly strong. Many painters paid homage to architectural principles in their compositions. Kazimir Malevich, in architectonics, experimented with three-dimensional exploration of ideas. A number of artistic groups and movements evolved which taught the integration of art, architecture and design. German architect, Walter Gropius, developed a series of interlocking geometric forms around a central matrix, which embodied the transformation of abstract planar composition into a functioning three-dimensional form. Gropius Bauhaus buildings celebrated the industrial materials and construction techniques and banished ornament and hand-crafted elements in favour of sleek form.

A number of abstract artists found photography as the most progressive means of expression. Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian artist produced photograms-photographs created without a camera by arranging objects directly on light sensitive paper, which is then exposed to light in bursts or for sustained periods. He created the impression of three-dimensional form by changing the density of lights and darks across the major surface.

As the convention of figurative painting was radically transformed by abstraction, so was the fundamental forms of music. In 1920s Arnold Schoenberg developed the twelve-tone system- a method of composition with twelve tones related only to one another in a way that all the melodic and harmonic elements of a composition are derived from a basic arrangement as ordered by the composer. A composition can be made by inverting, reversing the rows or doing both at once. All tones must be used before any is repeated. This method provided composers with a surprising degree of freedom within its orderly framework.

In early abstraction, the relationship between poets and visual artists was so close that many of them worked in both forms of communication. Among better known was Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, as he created a poetic form called parole. Marionette poems were of dissonant compositions with nonsense words in various typefaces and sizes roaming freely on the page, producing a chaotic pattern of forms. He distorted, stretched and fragmented words, so that they lost all connection to their original meaning. He hoped that the pure force of the words given visual expression would result in a more primitive and original form of communication.

The theatre had offered painters, writers and musicians a unique forum for concentrating on a single piece of art. But none is more famous which fully embodied abstraction is the Russian Opera, Victory over the Sun, first performed in St. Petersburg in 1913. The plot symbolized the human

conquest of natural forces and the conquering of the old by the new, revolved around a group of dictators, who capture the Sun and enclose it in a square container. Dissonant music sound effects accompanied the actors' movements and speech. The sets and costumes consisted of black and white cloth sheets painted with geometric forms. The libretto was written in a transitional language which relied on puns and free association of sounds and images. It was thought to communicate the inner state of the speaker more directly.

Film, just like photography depends not only on mechanical devices, but also is able to stimulate motion. An earliest adventure into abstract film-making was made by Hans Richter who created animated works which consisted of geometric forms arranged according to the laws of chance. He derived from a series of experiments called scroll pictures with variations on formal themes drawn in pencil on long rolls of paper. His interest in painting and drawing led to his investigation of film making.

Abstract expressionism was the combination of idealism and spirituality- two great schools of thought. I would sum up this essay by quoting from Willem de Kooning describing what abstract art means to him in 1951. He saw it as an art of spiritual harmony in which all the main characters flew away from the painful realities of life. He said, " Their own sentiment of form instead was one of comfort. The beauty of comfort. The great curve of a bridge was beautiful because people could go across the river in comfort. To compose in curves like that, and angles, and make works of art with them could only make people happy, they maintained, for the only association was one of comfort. That millions of people have died in war since then, because of that idea of comfort, is something else."