

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM (c. 1945-1965)

The United States came out of the period of the Great Depression after becoming involved in WWII. The end of WWII marked the beginning of a time of economic prosperity and widespread patriotism. There was a sense of pride that capitalism had successfully “passed the test” and the United States military redefined the global power structure. Patriotic sentiments encouraged the idea that, in every area, Americans are second to none, i.e., “American Exceptionalism.”

Many artists were sponsored by the government during the depression as part of the WPA. Some of these artists (from the “Easel Section” in New York) were working experimentally and were paid based on the “quality” of the work.

After the war ended, these Avant Garde artists were chosen to represent the United States. Their work demonstrated that the United States was on the cutting edge of the art scene, leading the way forward and not dependent on European traditions.

Action Painting



Jackson Pollock *Alchemy* 1947

Action Painting is a type of Abstract Expressionism in which you can almost observe the actions of the artist on the canvas. This work shows the fluidity of the paint as it is flung and dripped onto the canvas. Other Action Painters, such as Willem de Kooning, smear the paint and slash it across the canvas with rapid brushwork.

Jackson Pollock was an artist who represented the typical American boy next door – a perfect poster child for the patriotic, post-war mindset. Sort of a John Wayne cowboy, Pollock came from Wyoming, wore tee shirts and blue jeans, drank beer and created his artwork in a barn.

Pollock was the perfect poster boy for Abstract Expressionism because he did not fall into the stereotype most people had of an *artist*: a beret wearing, wine sipping, cafe loitering snob! He was a man of few words who often answered questions with a simple “yep” or “nope.” People found him relatable even if they didn't necessarily understand his art.

Color Field



Mark Rothko *Untitled* 1949

Color Field painting is another type of Abstract Expressionism. This style gets its name from the large areas of flat or subtly blended colors. The emphasis is on experiencing the qualities of paint, such as color and fluidity, rather than the representation of space, photo-realistic details, or the telling of a story.

Historical Note:

Before they were famous, the works of famous abstract expressionists such as Pollock and Rothko were auctioned off by the pound shortly after the government funded Easel section project closed.

The paintings sold for next to nothing. A plumber even bought several pallets of these paintings just to use as cheap insulation for pipes! The post-war political climate and propaganda made these artists famous and their artwork priceless.

POP ART (1955-1960s)

In the 1950s and 60s, the culture was shaped by mass-media, advertising and consumerism. Pop Art reflects these aspects of society by using recognizable images from popular culture as subjects for works of art (product logos, comic strips, celebrities, etc. . .).

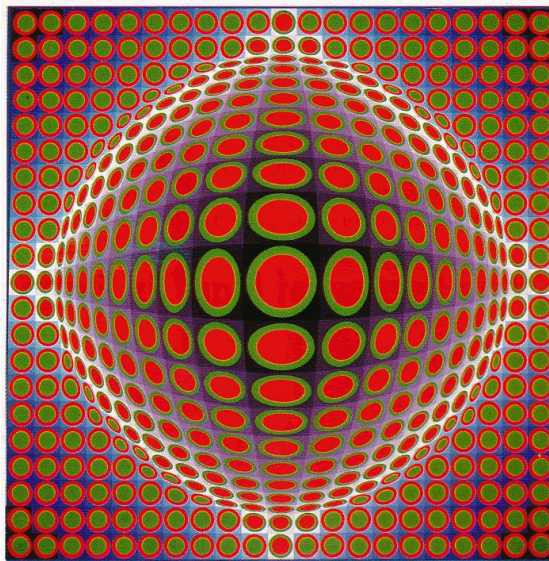


Andy Warhol *Marilyn Monroe Diptych* 1962

Even if you have never seen a movie starring Marilyn Monroe, you probably recognize her face. She is so much a part of popular culture; she seems to be everywhere from poster stores to purses to tee shirts. In keeping with the “more is better” mentality, Warhol has stamped out multiple images of her just as all consumer products are mass produced on a factory assembly line.

OPART (1960-1970s)

- Op Art is a style of art that produces optical effects. Typically, the images are non-representational. The shapes, lines and patterns are designed to create an optical illusion.



Victor Vasarely *Vega Per* 1969

This work uses of light, color, shape and line to create the illusion of a bulging spherical mass.

As you look at this image keep in mind the historical context: large numbers of young people are using mind altering substances and can be mesmerized for hours by lava lamps! However, the artists have to be very accurate and precise as they work. They do not have computers or digital graphics in this time.

MINIMALISM (1960-70s)

Minimalist artists tried to simplify art by reducing their use of colors, lines, shapes, textures and light/dark values. They thought that art had become too complicated.

These artists wanted to create artworks that could be immediately understood by the general public without any background knowledge. The Minimalists rebelled against art for the elite.



Tony Smith *Die* 1962

This is a typical example of a Minimalist sculpture. It is what it is. It is a visual piece and is nothing more to it. You don't need to know any literary references, subscribe to art journals, read critics' reviews, know the personal biography of the artist, or be able to interpret symbolism.

What you see is what you get. Or, as Frank Stella put it, "What you see is what you see."

PERFORMANCE ART (1965-70s)

During the 1960s and 70s many artists decided to bypass the art critics, dealers, collectors and museums by creating art for a live audience. Performance Art facilitates a direct art experience and relationship between the performer and those watching the performance. As a temporal work that cannot be bought or owed, it denies the idea of art as something exclusively for the wealthy.



Bruce Naumann *Self Portrait as a Fountain* 1966-70

This is a photograph of Bruce Naumann during his performance entitled, *Self Portrait as a Fountain*. Keep in mind, it is the 60s and 70s. People are doing a lot of drugs. That makes me appreciate that he is spewing water out of his mouth rather than choosing to be a fountain in another way!