INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY

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I

When the new art form now known as Abstract Expressionism began to impinge on the consciousness of the New York art world at the tail end of the forties, it astonished most observers, so unprecedented did it appear in form and content. With hindsight and investigation its roots have been unearthed, enabling us to recognize sources in Surrealism; in Freudian theories of the twenties; in the art and politics of the thirties; and in the *Zeitgeist* of the forties. But when by the early fifties the first trickles of Abstract Expressionism – also known at various times as the New York School, the New American Painting, Action Painting, American-Type Painting – had turned into a flood of works in visage and intent deliberately and programmatically divorced from anything in the entire history of art East or West, art cognoscenti were deeply divided as to its legitimacy and value.

The new painting dispensed with recognizable images from the known world. Its surfaces were often rough, unfinished, even sloppy, with uneven textures and dripping paint. Violent, brutal, improvised, slapdash, it demanded attention yet offered no clue to the nature of the response expected. It had force, energy, mystery, yet its explosions seemed inchoate outpourings of expression to which viewers were provided no key.

It was an art that aimed to negate the art of America's recent past as well as that of more distant times and places. School-of-Paris abstraction as it had been developing for a generation or more under the influence of Picasso and Braque was rejected as thoroughly as the most prominent schools of American painting immediately preceding it: Regionalism, Social Realism, American Scene, and American abstraction. The tradition of art as communicator or as source of pleasure appeared to have been abandoned by an intensely individual school of painting, in which each artist had a distinct, immediately differentiable calligraphy. Yet all seemed to share certain assumptions: the need to explore the subcon-

scious, the value of the exploitation of chance; the capacity of paint to serve as a vehicle for emotional expression; the certainty that the times mandated an entirely new way of painting employing an individually developed style in a vehemently personal art divorced from, and irreconcilable with, the past.

Anyone familiar with modern art will, to be sure, discern in Abstract Expressionist painting traces of Kandinsky, Miró, Picasso; some of the naiveté of Klee; the two-dimensionality of the Cubists; splashes of color reminiscent of Matisse; rudimentary echoes of so-called primitive art. The notion that pure form and color, independent of object or design, could evoke emotion had been enunciated by Kandinsky, a core tenet reaffirmed by elusive fragments of Kandinsky sometimes observable in their work.

Though the Abstract Expressionists rejected Surrealist forms because they were illusionist, they borrowed a central axiom, exploitation of the subconscious. In further differentiation from the Surrealists, they allowed the subconscious to spill over without the intermediary of narrative, forethought, known symbol, formal design, studied concept, or slick finish. Emotion was to flow from the artist directly onto the canvas, with the artist withholding conscious control and direction – the antithesis of art as artifice. Even by deciding to begin and then declare a work complete, the artist cannot help but apply basic volitional controls, of course, but the abdication of premeditation or planning resulted in totally new images.

Belief in the validity of inner experience, its authenticity considered more true and more real than objective fact and appearance, was nevertheless probably the essential shared notion among the Abstract Expressionists. The artist became, in a sense, only the conduit, the brush by means of which automatic writing transmitted emotion onto an external object, the painting surface. Its difficulty of access would thereby seem inevitable as well as intentional. By celebrating the individual inner cry "This is Me! Me! Me!" the Abstract Expressionist participated in the "exhilaration of an adventure over depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity," Harold Rosenberg wrote in the early fifties, revealing these artists as partaking of the last draughts of an extreme strain of Romanticism.[1]

Abstract Expressionism's avowed purpose is to express the self to the self. Just as certain songs by Luciano Berio use vocables indistinguishable as words, or as the composer Olivier Messiaen employed an invented mystical pseudo-language in his "Cinque Recants," these artists created a painting language comparable with speech in which sounds have

no assigned meaning. Or, perhaps, meaning in Abstract Expressionist painting might better be compared with the mysterious, secret languages reportedly developed by certain identical twins, who understand each other perfectly but close out from comprehension everyone else.

It is a paradox that Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb, all first-generation Abstract Expressionists, nevertheless insisted on the importance of subject matter, but insofar as possible they expressed their subjects impulsively and without acknowledgment of a potential audience. Thus, although some paintings by each of these artists transmit a range of emotions to some of those who look at them, responses are not necessarily related to the emotions suggested by the titles of the works or the written comments of the artists. Communication via visual metaphor comparing two unknowns is unlikely to be effective, yet it may be that this very quixotic attempt tells us why serious critics have called the art and the artists "heroic." ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" works because we have experienced summer days, although we do not know "thee." But suppose the speaker had compared "thee" to a "frumious Bandersnatch" when commenting to a person unfamiliar with Lewis Carroll?) In the typical Abstract Expressionist canvas the objective correlative (the actual event or object) to the emotion has been omitted. Feeling is free-floating, as ambiguous as a Rorschach blot, because it is not anchored in the experience of the spectator as well as the artist.

Yet if there are many who cannot "see" Abstract Expressionist paintings despite a willingness to experience them and a sophisticated art background, those who respond fully include the most impressive names among trained art viewers – artists, museum people, critics, and art teachers who spend most of their days with twentieth-century painting. Members of the art-loving, gallery-visiting public, collectors as well as people of modest means, have been enthusiastic about the paintings. Most men and women born since Abstract Expressionism became a factor in American art accept its legitimacy without question. Many of them, indeed, have been among its strongest supporters. Their most typical response, as one might expect, is sentient, sometimes paralleling the emotional release of the artist, sometimes conjuring unnamable but somehow satisfying emotions, and at other times, according to those who have experienced it, overwhelming "religious" feelings, most often in reaction to works by Rothko and Newman.

There is no doubt that this very American form, related in its improvisational characteristics to jazz (another quintessentially American contribution), was in its alienation, experimentalism, and hermeticism more

closely tied to the European *Zeitgeist* of the 1940s and 1950s than other American pictorial art of its time. One has only to recollect the alienation expressed by such writers as Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett, the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, the Theater of the Absurd, the *nouvelle vague* experimentation in the novel led by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute to realize that the estrangement felt by the Abstract Expressionists was closer to French sensibilities than to the prewar imperatives that other schools of American art continued to explore.

What impelled this particular group of artists to embark on a journey of exploration and discovery? Some of them – Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston – had achieved a measure of success with their earlier styles. Others had rarely or never exhibited. Yet they shared a deep need to effect a change in the artistic climate of their time. They came from disparate backgrounds and took a variety of routes to their convictions. Pollock, Rothko (who was born in Russia), Motherwell, Guston, and Still had all been raised in the West; only Gottlieb and Newman had grown up in New York, where they all converged. Willem de Kooning had emigrated to New York from Holland; Franz Kline,

JACKSON POLLOCK, *Going West*, 1934–5. Oil on fiberboard 15⅛″ × 20¾″. National Museum of American Art, 1973.149.1. Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Thomas Hart Benton.

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THOMAS HART BENTON, *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley*, 1934. Oil and Tempera on canvas mounted on panel 41½″ × 52½″. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. Museum purchase: Elizabeth M. Watkins Fund. (Photography by Jon Blumb)

from Pennsylvania – to speak only of differences in birthplace. Rothko, Guston, Gottlieb, and Newman were nominally Jewish. Pollock had initially been a follower of Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton; Guston had developed one of the finest Social Realist styles; de Kooning had struggled through dependence on Picasso – to suggest briefly their stylistic diversity. All of them, once living in New York, became familiar with the galleries and museums, the art magazines, and the currents running in the mainstream.

By the 1930s and early 1940s in New York City excellent examples of the art of every period in most cultures could be seen, and it can be argued that more modern art, much of it abstract, was being shown in public collections than virtually anywhere else in the world. From 1929 on the Museum of Modern Art mounted exhibitions emphasizing French modernism that set a high standard for others to follow. Soon thereafter the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, then known as the Museum of

WILLEM DE KOONING, *Queen of Hearts*, 1943–6. Oil and charcoal on fiberboard 46⅛″ × 27⅝″. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966.

Non-objective Art, showed in its funereal gray-walled, gray-carpeted space the works of Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, and their followers, including some young American nonobjectivists. The Museum of Non-objective Art even helped young artists with stipends. Under the patronage of Gugggenheim and the direction of Baroness Hilla Rebay, the assistance program was designed to encourage artists to work in non-objective styles. The allowance, most often $15 a month (easily worth more than ten times the sum's value today) was intended to cover art supplies. In exchange recipients were expected to show the Baroness examples of their work for criticism.

At New York University the Albert Gallatin Collection of Living Art

(now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), canvases by Cézanne, Picasso, Seurat, Braque, Léger, Matisse, and Mondrian could be studied. These luminous names were joined in the permanent collection by modernists such as Dufy, Tchelitchew, Modigliani, Utrillo, and de Chirico. Beginning in 1929 the collection added American modernists, among the initial group Marsden Hartley, Man Ray, Karl Knaths, and William Zorach, later joined by younger Americans such as John Xcéron, Charles Shaw, George L. K. Morris, Susy Frelinghusen, and Gertrude Greene.

Anyone could visit these institutions freely, since none charged admission except the Museum of Modern Art, for which art students and artists could – and most did – purchase an annual pass for a dollar.

Outside the museums an influx of European emigrés, many fleeing Hitler and world war, stimulated the growth of new approaches to painting. Hans Hofmann had come from Munich via Paris to live permanently in the United States in 1930, first teaching in California, then opening in New York City and in Provincetown, Massachusetts, art classes where a high proportion of future abstractionists studied for long or short periods. His direct influence as an abstract painter was far outdistanced by his reputation as a teacher, and his Friday evening lectures in New York were well attended by a motley assortment of artists.

Never a permanent New Yorker, Marc Chagall worked there for a long time; Salvador Dali, then a serious Surrealist, arrived in 1940; Dadaist and Surrealist Max Ernst lived and exhibited in New York during a portion of the period. After arriving in New York André Masson, who had earlier invented a version of automatic writing, had a tangible impact on some of the younger painters who were to become Abstract Expressionists. The Chilean painter Matta (Roberto Echaurren Matta), the youngest of the Surrealist group, became closest of all to American artists. He too was involved with automatic writing but even more with the morphology of "psychic responses to life." He embraced the idea that "everyone would invent their own morphology."[2]

Piet Mondrian's arrival in 1940 had been preceded both by his disciplined rectilinear paintings in primary colors and by his theoretical writings, which had appeared in the magazine he and Theo Van Doesburg founded in 1917, *De Stijl*. Although Mondrian's painting forswore any manifestation of emotion, and to that extent was antipathetic to Abstract Expressionism, its strict nonobjectivity could not help but make it an exemplar. Yves Tanguy, a Surrealist, went to New York from France in 1939. Another French painter, Amédée Ozenfant, whose

Foundations of Modern Art had been published in 1931, opened a school shortly after he arrived, where he taught his post-Cubist version of modernism, Purism. Artists debated *System and Dialectics of Art*, Russian-born John Graham's book on aesthetics. Ossip Zadkine, a Russian sculptor who had lived in France made a considerable impact, in part because he took students, as did Kurt Seligmann, an emigré in 1939.

More European artists representative of various strains of modernism resident in New York before or during World War II could be cited, but the point is that their presence allowed a miscellany of young artists to become involved firsthand with advanced practitioners of an array of modern European movements. Keenly tuned to the city's art milieu, those who were to become the first generation of Abstract Expressionists participated in museum and gallery life and met representative Europeans then in the process of turning New York into a cosmopolitan cultural center for the first time. With them, and with each other, they engaged in endless disputation about theory and experimentation in paint.

The future Abstract Expressionists were ambitious and hoped to achieve the special kind of greatness possible for artists. They came to believe that artists were distinct orders of being, and each felt that he had the "call," the mission to become a true artist. Indeed, some of them claimed more for art than had ever been claimed before. Closely following remarks by art historian Meyer Schapiro, who in 1937 had pointed out that apologists for abstraction liked to compare it to mathematics, particularly to non-Euclidian geometry, which they viewed as "independent of experience," Newman carried the notion further saying that the new painter is the true revolutionary:

> [He is] the philosopher and the pure scientist who is exploring the world of ideas, not the world of the senses. Just as we get a vision of the cosmos through the symbols of a mathematical equation, just as we get a vision of truth in terms of abstract metaphysical concepts, so the artist is today giving us a vision of the world of truth in terms of visual symbols.[3]

This eagerness to scale the highest peaks was not peculiar to Newman, although even more than most of the Abstract Expressionists he embraced philosophic speculation. The language of an anonymous press release for a 1943 exhibition in which both Gottlieb and Rothko participated, that of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors (an outgrowth of the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism), assumes that art is central to life and the United States is central to the world.

> Today America is faced with the responsibility either to salvage and develop, or to frustrate Western creative capacity. This responsibility may be largely ours for a large part of the century to come. This country has been greatly enriched, both by the recent influx of many great European artists, some of whom we are proud to have as members of our Federation, and by the growing vitality of our native talent.
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> In years to come the world will ask how this nation met its opportunity. Did it nourish or starve this concentration of talent?
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> Since no one can remain untouched by the impact of the present world upheaval, it is inevitable that values in every field of human endeavor will be affected. As a nation we are being forced to outgrow our narrow political isolationism. Now that America is recognized as the center where art and artists of the world meet, it is time to accept cultural values on a truly global plane.[4]

Here is one answer, then, to the question posed some paragraphs back about the impetus behind the struggle to find a new way of painting: The Abstract Expressionists wanted to erase the past and invent an original culture. They hoped to achieve greatness by means of a revolutionary upheaval parallel to their revolutionary political sympathies, which were by the late thirties and early forties most often leftist, anti-Stalin, and inclined toward Trotsky. They were to be not the midwives of regenerated art but the first cause. They aimed to create something utterly unexampled, entirely their own, and yet completely American. If the spectator could not understand their canvases, Gottlieb and Rothko insisted, it was the artists' function "to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way."

"During the 1940s," Gottlieb wrote soon after Jackson Pollock's death,

> a few painters were painting with a feeling of absolute desperation. The situation was so bad that I know I felt free to try anything, no matter how absurd it seemed; what was there to lose? Neither Cubism nor Surrealism could absorb someone like myself; we felt like derelicts. . . . Therefore one had to dig into one's self, excavate whatever one could, and if what came out did not seem to be art by accepted standards, so much the worse for those standards.[5]

But what to excavate, what to try in their desperation, was not easy to discover. It is one thing to be an autodidact; it is another to know what to

teach oneself. Although they insisted on a new *how*-to-say (style), they permitted themselves at first to plunder the past for their *what*-to-say (content, imagery). Pollock, Gottlieb, Rothko, Newman, and others turned for varying periods to mythology, particularly Greek myths and American Indian lore, in much the same way as Picasso for a time had turned to African art. "There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing," Gottlieb and Rothko maintained in a 1943 letter to *New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewell. "We assert that subject matter is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we express spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art." Once again they echoed but misinterpreted the art historian Meyer Schapiro, who had said something rather different in "The Nature of Abstract Art." There he had pointed out, not approvingly, that modern critics one-sidedly "relied on feeling to penetrate" primitive art, giving it "the special prestige of the timeless and instinctive."[6]

Primitive and archaic art, however, like all forms of art, are products of their time and place. Gottlieb and Rothko plucked the symbols of disparate cultures from their native fabric, with the result that their meanings and connotations were not available to the contemporary audience, whatever they may have meant to the artists. The borrowed symbols were rarely used literally in any case. They were taken out of context and abstracted or used as takeoff points for design. The artists allowed themselves the liberty because they saw their painting as "poetic expression of the essence of the myth" and as a "new interpretation of an archaic image." They believed that "the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol then."[7] Extending and broadening the notion, Harold Rosenberg, embroidering Schapiro's insight, wrote that "a three-thousand-year-old mask from the South Pacific qualifies as Modern and a piece of wood on a beach becomes Art."[8]

The goal: a universal symbolism in a timeless art. Symbols removed from their cultural context, however, become merely abstracted signs or elements of formal design if the fragments borrowed are not integrated as symbols evoking newly relevant myths. Yet this period in the art of the founding fathers of Abstract Expressionism, although it failed to achieve most of its stated aims, helped prepare for the art that was to follow by breaking with twentieth-century pictorial content and the observed world. By rejecting all current art styles as starting points, by dismissing the recent past as a source of visual examples, they left themselves no choice but to explore their psyches, their inner vision, and a morphology of their own invention.