

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

**ABSTRACT
EXPRESSIONISM**

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

A Critical Record

David Shapiro
and
Cecile Shapiro



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521364935

© David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro 1990

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1990
Reprinted 1992, 1995, 1999

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-36493-5 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-36493-0 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-36733-2 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-36733-6 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2005

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

For Deborah, Anna, Abby, and Lizzie

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	x
Preface	xi
 Introduction: A Brief History, <i>David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro</i>	1
 <u>PART I • ORIGINS</u>	31
Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School, 1939–1943; Interview with Robert Motherwell, <i>Sidney Simon</i>	33
“Everyone Knew What Everyone Else Meant,” <i>Robert Goldwater</i>	46
The Club, <i>Irving Sandler</i>	48
 <u>PART II • THE CRITICAL RECEPTION</u>	59
Towards a Newer Laocoon, <i>Clement Greenberg</i>	61
The American Action Painters, <i>Harold Rosenberg</i>	75
Statement and Letter to the Directors of the Museum of Modern Art, <i>A Group of Artists</i>	86
A Critique of Abstract Expressionism, <i>Leon Golub</i>	89
The New American Painting, <i>Alfred H. Barr, Jr.</i>	95
As the Critics Saw It	101
Narcissus in Chaos: Contemporary American Art, <i>Cleve Gray</i>	109
Happy New Year: Thoughts on Critics and Certain Painters as the Season Opens, <i>John Canaday</i>	119
Letter to the Editor Regarding Canaday’s Criticism, <i>Dealers, Critics,</i> <i>Artists</i>	122
Reflections on the New York School, <i>Robert Goldwater</i>	126
The Critical Reception of Abstract-Expressionism, <i>Max Kozloff</i>	139
Re-evaluating Abstract Expressionism, <i>Gregory Battcock</i>	152
Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism, <i>Lawrence Alloway</i>	157
American Painting Since the Last War, <i>Peter Fuller</i>	169
Abstract Expressionism: The Social Contract, <i>Donald B. Kuspit</i>	182
Abstract Expressionism’s Evasion of Language, <i>Ann Gibson</i>	195
 <u>PART III • THE ARTISTS AND THEIR CRITICS</u>	213
 WILLEM DE KOONING	
Selected Chronology	215
What Abstract Art Means to Me, <i>Willem de Kooning</i>	219

Cambridge University Press
 0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
 David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

De Kooning's Women; Interview with Willem de Kooning, <i>David Sylvester</i>	225
Review of an Exhibition of Willem de Kooning, <i>Clement Greenberg</i>	229
Willem de Kooning, <i>Dore Ashton</i>	231
Willem de Kooning, <i>Lawrence Alloway</i>	238
Interview with Willem de Kooning, <i>Harold Rosenberg</i>	241
De Kooning of East Hampton, <i>Hilton Kramer</i>	254

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB

Selected Chronology	257
My Painting, <i>Adolph Gottlieb</i>	261
Adolph Gottlieb: An Interview, <i>David Sylvester</i>	264
Adolph Gottlieb, <i>Barnett Newman</i>	270
Adolph Gottlieb at the Nierendorf Gallery (<i>Anonymous</i>)	271
Adolph Gottlieb, <i>Fairfield Porter</i>	272
Adolph Gottlieb, <i>Clement Greenberg</i>	273
Adolph Gottlieb and Abstract Painting, <i>Lawrence Alloway</i>	276

FRANZ KLINE

Selected Chronology	288
Franz Kline Retrospective Exhibition: Introduction, <i>Frank O'Hara</i>	291
Art Chronicle: Feeling Is All (Kline), <i>Clement Greenberg</i>	299
Franz Kline, <i>Dore Ashton</i>	300
Franz Kline: Painter of his Own Life, <i>Elaine de Kooning</i>	304
Kline's Estate, <i>Lawrence Alloway</i>	316
Kline's "Effulgent Abstractions," <i>John Russell</i>	319

BARNETT NEWMAN

Selected Chronology	322
The Sublime Is Now, <i>Barnett B. Newman</i>	325
Barnett Newman at the Parsons Gallery, [<i>T. B. H.</i>] <i>Thomas B. Hess</i>	329
Art Chronicle: Feeling Is All (Newman), <i>Clement Greenberg</i>	330
The Philosophic Line of B. Newman, <i>E. C. Goossen</i>	332
Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist, <i>Lawrence Alloway</i>	336
Newman: Meaning in Abstract Art, II, <i>Harold Rosenberg</i>	344

JACKSON POLLOCK

Selected Chronology	351
My Painting, <i>Jackson Pollock</i>	356
An Interview with Jackson Pollock, <i>William Wright</i>	358
Art Chronicle: Jackson Pollock, <i>Clement Greenberg</i>	363
Jackson Pollock at Art of This Century (<i>Anonymous</i>)	364
Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth, <i>Parker Tyler</i>	365
The Month in Review: Jackson Pollock, <i>Hilton Kramer</i>	368

viii CONTENTS

Cambridge University Press
 0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
 David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

De Kooning on Pollock: An Interview, <i>James T. Valliere</i>	372
The Mythic Act, <i>Harold Rosenberg</i>	375
To Interpret or Not to Interpret Jackson Pollock, <i>Donald B. Kuspit</i>	382
MARK ROTHKO	
Selected Chronology	392
The Romantics Were Prompted, <i>Mark Rothko</i>	397
Mark Rothko at Art of This Century (<i>Anonymous</i>)	401
Art: Mark Rothko, <i>Dore Ashton</i>	402
The New New York Scene, <i>Anita Brookner</i>	406
Mark Rothko's New Retrospective, <i>Max Kozloff</i>	408
Rothko, <i>Harold Rosenberg</i>	413
Mark Rothko, <i>Robert Carleton Hobbs</i>	418
Selected Bibliography	423
Index	434

Cambridge University Press
 0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
 David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Jackson Pollock, <i>Going West</i> , 1934–5	4
Thomas Hart Benton, <i>The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley</i> , 1934	5
Willem de Kooning, <i>Queen of Hearts</i> , 1943–6	6
Philip Evergood, <i>Through the Mill</i> , 1940	11
Edward Hopper, <i>Early Sunday Morning</i> , 1930	12
Arthur G. Dove, <i>Ferry Boat Wreck</i> , 1931	13
Stuart Davis, <i>New York Waterfront</i> , 1938	110
Willem de Kooning, <i>Door to the River</i> , 1960	220
Adolph Gottlieb, <i>Beasts</i> , 1945	262
Adolph Gottlieb, <i>Two Discs</i> , 1963	263
Franz Kline, <i>Palmerton, PA</i> , 1941	292
Franz Kline, <i>Mahoning</i> , 1956	293
Barnett Newman, <i>Covenant</i> , 1949	326
Barnett Newman, <i>Vir Heroicus Sublimus</i> , 1950–1	327
Jackson Pollock, <i>The She-Wolf</i> , 1943	356
Jackson Pollock, <i>Number 1, 1948</i> , 1948	357
Mark Rothko, <i>Subway (Subterranean Fantasy)</i> , ca. 1936	398
Mark Rothko, <i>Vessels of Magic</i> , 1946	399
Mark Rothko, <i>Red, Brown, and Black</i> , 1958	400

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PREFACE

AN ART MOVEMENT may be said to have ended when it no longer attracts talented new adherents. This is true even when some of the original practitioners are still making works of the highest quality. Accordingly, Abstract Expressionism has come and gone. Once an art movement has departed in this way it becomes possible to examine it from a vantage not available earlier – a phenomenon of which some of the more recently published essays included in this volume are apt examples.

This collection is dedicated to an examination of the American manner of making art that became known as Abstract Expressionism. The major critical works are all in. The responses to Abstract Expressionism when it was fresh and evolving have been written. Comments since then come under the heading of art history.

Most of the pieces in this book were originally written for art magazines, intellectual journals, and museum or gallery catalogues. Few college and university libraries, even those with excellent periodical collections, have complete files of all of them, and even fewer collect exhibition catalogues. Serious arguments that help piece together a movement that began to trace its first patterns during World War II, moreover, appeared in obscure publications that are difficult to come by: *Tiger's Eye*; the one issue of *Possibilities* that Robert Motherwell edited with his friends; *It Is*, the publication of "The Club"; the Belgian periodical *Quadrum*; the Paris-based *Cimaise*; and so on. It is to bring some of these together and make them generally available that they are reprinted here.

The history we know about, that we study at school, is based on the records that happen to remain. We know little about the vast history that has not been recorded. In a parallel way the art history we study has been deduced from the works of art that remain, plus such written material as has been preserved. Our perception of the art work itself, as one of the critics included within these pages remarks, is affected by what has been said about it – both society's established view and the views of differing critics whose evaluations filter through.

The articles selected for anthologizing in this book include most of the important statements made about Abstract Expressionism. Its most influential critics are represented, though not always in proportion to

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

their impact. We have included essays that by tone and evaluation make clear their approval of Abstract Expressionism's contributions as well as others that deplore the mode. But readers ought not surmise that equivalent proportions pro and con were published during the period. Far from it. Abstract Expressionism appears to have made such a clean sweep during its heyday that it has not been easy to discover reasoned arguments attacking its assumptions. Published adverse criticism did not even amount to as much as ten percent. Had we limited ourselves, however, to a selection based on proportional representation, not only would we have had to omit the few published iconoclasts of the 1950s and 1960s – Leon Golub, Cleve Gray, John Canaday, the artists involved with the publication *Reality* – but we would also have been required to reduce the entire list of authors to those, such as Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Hilton Kramer, who were most prolific and influential. Moreover, much of the criticism of Abstract Expressionism's most assiduous commentators has been collected elsewhere and thus is readily available to readers who wish to pursue their views.

Our choice has been, rather, to include comments by each of the foremost Abstract Expressionist artists as well as to suggest the full range of critical evaluation, opinion, discussion, and opposition so that readers looking at the paintings themselves will find them brightly lit from as many angles as are needed to see them clearly. Long ago the late art critic Harold Rosenberg scolded American intellectuals for failing to study and write about the new American art. It is unlikely that even he hoped for the trickle of comment to become such a torrent. This collection attempts (to carry the metaphor a bit further) to pick out the sturdiest barques with the most clear-sighted pilots on that river of material so that they can continue to be available as companions and guides to the works themselves.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the librarians of the Sherman Art Library at Dartmouth College, particularly Barbara Read and Claudia Yatsevich, for their cheerful help and resourcefulness in finding materials needed for this and other projects in which we have been engaged. To Elsie Reynolds, now retired, and Janet Wagner, reference librarians at the Axinn Library of Hofstra University, we offer our thanks once again for their generous assistance at earlier stages in the development of this book.

We thank Elizabeth Maguire, our first editor at Cambridge University Press, whose steadfast confidence in our proposal brought this book to life, and Beatrice Rehl, who has followed through.

xii PREFACE

Cambridge University Press
0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

We are indebted to all the authors, journals, publishers, museums, and foundations that have made this collection possible by granting permission to publish material and to reproduce artists' works.

David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro

Cambridge University Press
 0521367336 - Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record
 David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*I celebrate myself and sing myself,
 And what I shall assume you shall assume.*

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

WALT WHITMAN, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*

Now about American painters. Today yesterday or any day. How do they do it.

They do it like this.

When they paint it does not make any difference what gets upon the canvas, they are they and they feel that they are going to be they. Oh yes. They. They are they. That is what they look like and that is what they feel.

GERTRUDE STEIN, *Four in America*, 1934

No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an "explanation" of the paintings, but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance. We feel that our pictures demonstrate our aesthetic beliefs, some of which we, therefore, list:

1. *To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.*
2. *This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.*
3. *It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.*
4. *We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.*
5. *It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.*

Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult any one who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantel; pictures of the American scene; social pictures; purity in art; prize-winning potboilers; the National Academy, the Whitney Academy, the Corn Belt Academy; buckeyes; trite tripe, etc.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB and MARK ROTHKO, "Statement," 1943.

Responding to *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell's criticism of their paintings in the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors exhibition. Published in *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943.