

A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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57-01 ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

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Willem de
Kooning
Interchange,
1955

- This is Section 57 on Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field Painting. Abstract Expressionism emerged in **New York during the 1940s and 1950s**, marking America's first major contribution to international modern art. Artists such as **Jackson Pollock** and **Willem de Kooning** embraced spontaneous, gestural mark-making as a means of expressing raw emotion and the unconscious mind. From this movement grew **Colour Field Painting**, in which artists like **Mark Rothko** and **Helen Frankenthaler** replaced energetic gesture with vast, luminous expanses of colour, inviting quiet contemplation rather than visceral intensity.

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Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), *Mural*, 1943, Oil on canvas, 243.2 × 603.9 cm, University of Iowa Museum of Art



Willem de Kooning
Interchange,
1955



Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *No. 61 (Rust and Blue)*, 1953

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011),
Mountains and Sea, 1952

- Abstract Expressionism emerged in 1940s New York, shifting the art world's epicenter from Paris to Manhattan. It was born out of the trauma of WWII and influenced by Surrealist automatism, it emphasized the artist's psyche and the physical act of creation rather than relying on traditional "pictures" of things.
- **The Two Pillars**
- The movement branched into two distinct styles:
 - **Action Painting:** Led by **Jackson Pollock** and **Willem de Kooning**, this style focused on "gestural" marks. The goal was to capture the "event" of creation. Pollock's drip technique treated the canvas as an arena for action rather than a space for reproduction. The painting is a physical record of the artist's struggle, subconscious, and movement. Think of the artists as "extroverts".
 - **Colour Field Painting:** Artists like **Mark Rothko**, **Barnett Newman**, and **Clyfford Still** moved away from aggressive brushwork toward large expanses of contemplative colour. They wanted to remove the "noise" of the artist's personality (the messy brushstrokes) to let the viewer have a direct, spiritual experience. They were chasing the "Sublime"—a feeling of awe, vastness, and religious intensity. Think of the artists as "introverts".
- **Development and Transition**
- In the 1950s, **Helen Frankenthaler** bridged the gap between the two with her

"soak-stain" technique, pouring thinned paint onto raw canvas. This influenced a second generation of Colour Field painters, such as **Morris Louis**, who prioritized the formal properties of colour over emotional angst.

- **The Shift**

- By the 1960s, the movement's intensity began to wane. Its emphasis on "the individual genius" felt out of touch with a rising consumerist culture. It was eventually eclipsed by **Pop Art**, which embraced irony and mass media, and **Minimalism**, which stripped away the painterly emotion altogether.



Jackson Pollock (1912-1956),
Mural,
1943,
Oil on canvas,
243.2 × 603.9 cm,
University of Iowa Museum of Art

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), *Mural*, 1943, Oil on canvas, 243.2 × 603.9 cm, University of Iowa Museum of Art

- Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) was a **pioneering American painter** and a **leading figure** in the Abstract Expressionist movement. He is world-renowned for his revolutionary "**drip technique**," where he poured and splashed paint onto canvases laid on the floor, transforming art into a physical act of "**action painting**."
- Born in **Wyoming**, Pollock moved to New York in 1930 to study at the Art Students League. His volatile personal life and **struggles with alcoholism** were as **legendary** as his masterpieces. Pollock's unconventional career ended abruptly at age 44 in a fatal car accident.
- This enormous eight-by-twenty-foot painting marked **Pollock's breakthrough**. Commissioned by **Peggy Guggenheim** for her Manhattan townhouse entrance hall, the painting **proved too massive** for the space. Pollock worked frantically **through a single night** in 1943, laying the unstretched canvas **on the floor** and attacking it with sweeping gestures. The result was a **churning mass** of totemic figures rendered in black, white, yellow, and turquoise. **It's Abstract Expressionism's big bang.**
- Critic Clement Greenberg called it '**a tour de force**'. The Museum of Modern Art's Alfred Barr described Pollock's energy as '**volcanic**'. Art News noted the

'**barbaric intensity**' that would define his mature work. Guggenheim herself recognised she'd witnessed something unprecedented, though she initially balked at the scale.

- America had just entered the Second World War. **European Surrealists**, fleeing fascism, were reshaping New York's art scene. Pollock absorbed their **automatism** that is creating works directly from the subconscious.
- Pollock was thirty-one, drinking heavily, and in Jungian psychoanalysis when he painted *Mural*. He'd married **Lee Krasner** the previous year. She was the more sophisticated artist and his biggest advocate. She managed his career and nursed him through his alcoholic rages. At the time of his fatal car crash he was living with his mistress, the artist **Ruth Kligman** and Krasner had travelled to Europe to distance herself from their crumbling marriage. Kligman was the sole survivor of the crash.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Peggy Guggenheim - PEG-ee GOO-gen-hime

Jungian - YOONG-ee-an

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Jackson Pollock
(1912-1956),
Number 1A,
1948, Oil and
enamel on canvas,
172.7 × 264.2 cm,
Museum of
Modern Art, New
York

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Number 1A, 1948, Oil and enamel on canvas, 172.7 × 264.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- Pollock laid **unstretched canvas on his barn floor** in Springs, Long Island, and **dripped, poured, and flung industrial enamel** from sticks and hardened brushes. There's no focal point, no beginning or end—just an all-over web of black, white, grey, and aluminium paint. It's painting as performance, as dance. Pollock said he was **'in' the painting**, not observing it from outside.
- Life magazine asked, **'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?'** Critic Clement Greenberg championed Pollock as the fulfilment of modernist painting. But *Time* magazine **mocked the work** as **'a drool of enamel paint'**. The Museum of Modern Art acquired *Number 1A* in 1950, cementing Pollock's institutional status despite public bewilderment.
- By 1948, Pollock had **quit drinking** and was producing his best work. **He and Lee Krasner were living in rural isolation**. Peggy Guggenheim's gallery had closed; dealer Betty Parsons now represented him.
- Abstract Expressionism was coalescing as **America's first indigenous art movement**, challenging Paris's cultural dominance. As the Cold War intensified in the early 1950s the US Government even the art movement as **Cold War propaganda** citing it as an example of individual freedom against the Soviet state-imposed social realism.

NOTES

- Pollock's technique wasn't entirely new—Max Ernst and Janet Sobel had experimented with dripping—but his scale and commitment were unprecedented. He used cheap house paint because it dried faster than oils. The aluminium paint came from shipyards. **Each painting took weeks**, with layers building up in controlled chaos.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Betty Parsons - BET-ee PAR-sunz

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Lee Krasner (1908-1984),
The Seasons,
1957, Oil on canvas, 236.9 × 527.1 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Lee Krasner (1908-1984), *The Seasons*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 236.9 × 527.1 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

- Krasner painted this monumental work the year after **Pollock's death** in a car crash. It's her **liberation and her grief** made visible—explosive **gestural marks** in pink, orange, green, and umber surge across **seventeen feet** of canvas. She'd moved into Pollock's larger studio and **scaled up dramatically**. *The Seasons* marked her **breakthrough**: critics finally saw her as more than 'Pollock's widow'. She'd always been the **more sophisticated artist**, trained at Hans Hofmann's school and exhibiting before she met Pollock.
- Critic Bryan Robertson called it '**a major rediscovery**'. But **most reviews patronised her**. The New York Times mentioned Pollock three times whilst discussing her show. Krasner had suppressed her own work for years, ceding studio space and critical attention to her husband. She'd been **his fiercest advocate**, introducing him to Greenberg and managing his career whilst her own stalled.
- Krasner was forty-nine, finally claiming her artistic voice after **decades in Pollock's shadow**. She'd nursed him through alcoholic rages, supported them both financially through teaching, and **watched dealers and critics ignore her work**. Now, alone in Springs, Long Island, **she shredded her own earlier paintings** and collaged them into new works—destroying the past to build the future.

- *The Seasons* references **nature's cycles** and Jewish mourning rituals. Krasner worked from midnight to dawn, attacking the canvas with house-painters' brushes. The scale—learned from Pollock but now her own—announced her arrival. The Whitney acquired it immediately, recognising a masterpiece.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Lee Krasner - LEE KRAZ-ner

Hans Hofmann - hahnz HOFF-man

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Arshile Gorky (1904-1948),
***The Liver is the
 Cock's Comb***,
 1944,
 Oil on canvas,
 186 × 249 cm,
 Albright-Knox Art Gallery,
 Buffalo

Arshile Gorky (1904-1948), *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, 1944, Oil on canvas, 186 × 249 cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

- Gorky's masterpiece is a **riot of biomorphic forms**—fleshy pinks, sulphurous yellows, slashes of scarlet. The **title is a complex metaphorical pun**. The ancient Greeks believed the liver was the site of the soul and “liver” is a pun on one who lives. A coxcomb is traditionally a fool so is life itself a joke. The work cock also has sexual associations so the title suggests that life is driven by foolish sexual desires, lust.
- The shapes aren't abstract; they're memories of his childhood in Armenia, transmuted into sexual and botanical imagery. **Breasts, phalluses, petals, and organs meld** in a dreamscape that's both violent and tender.
- André Breton, Surrealism's pope, declared Gorky '**the first painter to whom the secret has been completely revealed**'. Critic Harold Rosenberg wrote that Gorky had '**opened American painting to psychic adventure**'. The Whitney Museum called it '**one of the most sensual paintings in American art**'.
- Gorky painted this during **his happiest period**. He'd just married Agnes Magruder ('Mougouch') and moved to rural Virginia. His new family life unlocked erotic and pastoral memories. But the **Armenian Genocide, which killed his mother** when Gorky was fifteen, haunts every canvas. He was synthesising Miró's playfulness with Picasso's brutality.

- Gorky mixed his own pigments and painted on unprimed canvas, creating a stained, absorbent surface. *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* took eighteen months. In 1948, a **studio fire** destroyed twenty-seven of his paintings. Weeks later, suffering from cancer and a broken neck from a car crash, **Gorky hanged himself**. He was forty-four.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Arshile Gorky - ar-SHEEL GOR-kee

Albright-Knox - ALL-bright NOKS

André Breton - ON-dray bruh-TON

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Willem de Kooning (1904-1997),
Excavation,
1950, Oil and enamel on canvas,
203.2 × 254.6 cm, Art Institute of
Chicago

Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), *Excavation*, 1950, Oil and enamel on canvas, 203.2 × 254.6 cm, Art Institute of Chicago

- De Kooning's canvas **seethes with fragmented anatomical parts**—breasts, teeth, eyes, limbs—all scrambled into a churning yellow and white maelstrom. The title evokes archaeology, as if the painter were **digging through layers** of flesh and memory. Unlike Pollock's all-over drips, de Kooning maintained elements of figuration. Bodies are implied, never stated. It's simultaneously brutal and elegant.
- Critic Thomas Hess called it '**one of the great paintings of the century**'. The Art Institute of Chicago snapped it up for **\$3,500** in 1952, beating MoMA to the punch. De Kooning represented America at the **Venice Biennale in 1950**, with **Excavation** as the centrepiece. Europeans were stunned by American painting's new confidence.
- De Kooning was forty-six, **struggling financially** despite critical acclaim. He'd **emigrated illegally** from Rotterdam in 1926 as a ship's stowaway. By 1950, he was splitting time between New York and Long Island, painting in a loft on Fourth Avenue. The Korean War had just begun. America was asserting global power; Abstract Expressionism became cultural propaganda.
- De Kooning worked on *Excavation* for **two months straight**, sometimes painting **through the night**. He scraped and reworked sections obsessively. The

final composition was inspired by a film still from an Italian neorealist movie—***Bitter Rice***—showing rice field workers. The yellow palette references Cubism and Dutch painting.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Willem de Kooning - VILL-em duh KOO-ning
neorealist - NEE-oh-REE-uh-list

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Willem de Kooning (1904-1997),
Interchange,
1955, oil on canvas, 200.7 ×
175.3 cm, private collection
Kenneth C. Griffin

Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), *Interchange*, 1955, oil on canvas, 200.7 × 175.3 cm, private collection Kenneth C. Griffin

- ***Interchange*** erupts with fleshy pinks colliding against acidic yellows and blues. **A seated female figure** dissolves into landscape—or is it landscape becoming body? De Kooning refused the distinction. **Breasts morph into hills**, thighs into highways. The painting's title references **New York's urban infrastructure**, but also the exchange between abstraction and figuration, between painterly gesture and recognisable form. It's simultaneously violent and sensual.
- **Critics were divided**. Some praised de Kooning's synthesis of the figure and abstraction. Others found the work disturbing, even **misogynistic**. His **"Woman" series**, begun in 1950, had **provoked outrage**. Clement Greenberg championed pure abstraction and saw de Kooning's **return to figuration as reactionary**. But Thomas Hess defended the paintings' 'savage poetry'.
- **De Kooning was fifty-one**, at the height of his powers. He'd just completed his controversial "Woman" paintings and was exploring new territory. **Abstract Expressionism was becoming institutionalised**. The art world pressured painters to **choose sides—pure abstraction or figuration**. De Kooning refused, painting bodies that bled into abstraction.
- De Kooning worked on *Interchange* **obsessively, scraping and repainting**. He applied paint with brushes, rags, and palette knives, building slippery, oily

surfaces. The composition suggests a billboard glimpsed from a moving car—fragmented, cinematic.

- It was sold at the time for **\$4,000** to architect Edgar Kaufmann Jr. and resold in 1989. For a then record price for a living artist of **\$20.7 million**. In 2015, *Interchange* sold privately for **\$300 million**, briefly the world's most expensive painting.

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Franz Kline (1910-1962),
Chief,
1950, Oil on canvas, 148.3 ×
186.7 cm, Museum of Modern
Art, New York

Franz Kline (1910-1962), *Chief*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 148.3 × 186.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- **Black industrial enamel** slashed across white canvas in bold, architectural strokes. Kline's forms suggest **bridges, girders, railway lines**—the infrastructure of America's industrial heartland. But *Chief* **isn't representational**. It's calligraphy scaled to mural proportions, gesture frozen mid-motion. The white isn't background; it's active space, pushing against the black with equal force.
- Critic Hilton Kramer called Kline '**the most powerful black-and-white painter since Goya**'. Thomas Hess compared his work to Japanese calligraphy, though Kline insisted he wasn't thinking of Zen. MoMA acquired *Chief* in 1952. By then, Kline was recognised as a **major figure**, though overshadowed by Pollock's celebrity.
- **Kline was forty** when he painted *Chief*. He'd worked as a commercial artist and painted realistic portraits before **discovering abstraction in 1949**. That year, he projected small brush drawings onto his studio wall with an opaque projector, seeing them magnified. The revelation was scale. By 1950, he was painting monumental black-and-white canvases.
- Kline used house painters' brushes and cheap enamel. He worked fast, completing most paintings in one or two sessions, though he'd sketch compositions first. *Chief's* title **references a locomotive** Kline remembered from

his Pennsylvania childhood. He died of **heart failure** in 1962, aged **fifty-one**, just as colour began entering his palette.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Franz Kline - FRANZ KLINE

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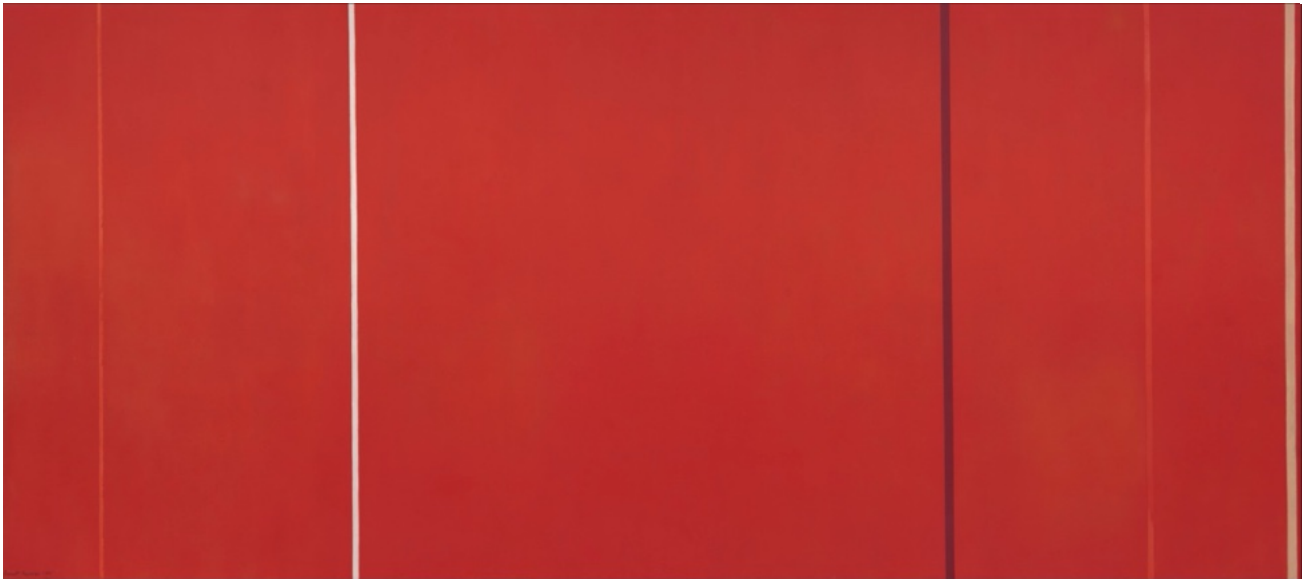
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Barnett Newman (1905-1970), **Vir Heroicus Sublimis**, 1950-51, Oil on canvas, 242.2 × 541.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Barnett Newman (1905-1970), *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51, Oil on canvas, 242.2 × 541.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- An eighteen-foot wall of cadmium red bisected by five vertical 'zips'—Newman's term for these linear interruptions. The Latin title means '**Man, Heroic and Sublime**'. Newman wanted viewers to stand close, eighteen inches away, so the field consumed peripheral vision. It's less a picture than an environment. **The zips don't divide the red; they activate it**, making you conscious of colour as physical presence.
- Many critics were **hostile**. The New York Times called it '**a hoax**'. But Thomas Hess defended Newman's 'metaphysical grandeur'. By the nineteen-seventies, minimalist artists like **Donald Judd cited Newman as pivotal**. MoMA installed the painting with Newman's specifications: viewers must approach it alone, intimately, not as spectacle.
- Newman had worked as a teacher and art writer before committing fully to painting at forty-three. **Vir Heroicus Sublimis** emerged after his breakthrough 'zip' painting, *Onement I*, in 1948. He was reading Kabbalah, Greek philosophy, and Native American art theory. Post-war, Newman sought to invent a new sublime without relying on European traditions.
- Newman **mixed his own paints** to achieve the red's intensity. He applied **masking tape** for the zips, then removed it to reveal raw canvas or contrasting

colours. The painting took eighteen months. Newman exhibited it in 1951 to general incomprehension. **He didn't sell a single painting until 1959**, supporting himself through teaching.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Barnett Newman - BAR-net NOO-man

Vir Heroicus Sublimis - veer heh-ROY-kus sub-LEEM-iss

Kabbalah - kuh-BAH-luh

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Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011),

Mountains and Sea, 1952, Oil and charcoal on canvas, 219.4 × 297.8 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, Oil and charcoal on canvas, 219.4 × 297.8 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

- Frankenthaler **poured thinned oil paint directly onto raw, unprimed canvas**, letting colour soak into the fibres like watercolour. ***Mountains and Sea*** suggests a coastal landscape—blues, greens, pinks bleed and merge—but it's not illustration. The canvas becomes stained skin, pigment and ground fused. It's **painting as dyeing**. Frankenthaler called it '**a landscape, but I wasn't thinking of it that way**'.
- Critic Clement Greenberg championed the work immediately. **Kenneth Noland** and **Morris Louis** visited Frankenthaler's studio in 1953, saw *Mountains and Sea*, and **adopted the soak-stain method**. It became **Colour Field painting's foundational technique**. Yet Frankenthaler's gender meant **she was often marginalised**. Male critics called her work '**decorative**'—a sexist dismissal.
- Frankenthaler was twenty-three, fresh out of Bennington College, **romantically involved with the much older Greenberg**. She'd just returned from a Nova Scotia holiday that inspired the painting's forms. Second-generation Abstract Expressionists were seeking alternatives to Pollock's gestural violence. **Frankenthaler offered lyricism**.
- She worked on her studio floor, walking around the canvas and **pouring paint from coffee cans**. The process was both **controlled and random**—she couldn't

entirely predict how paint would spread. ***Mountains and Sea* took one day.** Frankenthaler exhibited it in 1952 at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. She sold it for a few hundred dollars.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Helen Frankenthaler - HEL-en FRANK-en-thawl-er

Bennington - BEN-ing-tun

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Mark Rothko (1903-1970), No. 61 (Rust and Blue), 1953, Oil on canvas, 294.6 × 232.4 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

- Three hovering blue rectangles stacked vertically against an orange ground. The orange under layer is difficult to see in a reproduction but it explains the title and gives a subtle warmth to the painting. The edges of the areas blur where Rothko layered thin washes of pigment. The painting isn't 'about' anything; it's an emotional delivery system. Rothko described his work as '**tragedy, ecstasy, doom**'. He wanted viewers to weep. As with all Rothko's colour field paintings one must stand or sit for five or ten minutes in front of the painting, not a reproduction, in order to become involved in the subtle depth of the multiple layers of the work.
- Critics were divided. Some praised Rothko's 'transcendental' palette. **Others found the work monotonous.** Dore Ashton wrote that Rothko had 'located the sublime in pure colour'. By the nineteen-sixties, however, Abstract Expressionism's dominance was waning. **Pop Art's arrival made Rothko's earnestness seem antiquated.**
- Rothko was fifty, teaching at Brooklyn College and **struggling with depression.** His **marriage was unravelling.** He'd **emigrated from Latvia** as a child and retained a sense of exile. By 1953, he'd fully abandoned figuration. Colour Field painting was emerging as Abstract Expressionism's contemplative wing, distinct from Pollock's violence.

- Rothko worked on multiple canvases simultaneously, sometimes **abandoning paintings mid-process**. He **mixed oil paint with egg and glue** to achieve luminosity. No. 61 was exhibited at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1954. Rothko **refused to sell to collectors he deemed insufficiently serious**.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Rothko - ROTH-koh

Dore Ashton - DOR-ee ASH-ton

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Mark Rothko (1903-1970),

Black on Maroon (Seagram Mural),

1958, Oil on canvas, 266.7 × 457.2 cm, Tate Modern, London

Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Black on Maroon (Seagram Mural), 1958, Oil on canvas, 266.7 × 457.2 cm, Tate Modern, London

- Dark maroon fields look like windows on the dark canvas. Rothko **painted thirty murals** for the **Four Seasons restaurant** in New York's **Seagram Building** but withdrew before installation. He couldn't bear the thought of **Manhattan's wealthy dining beneath his tragedy paintings** . The Tate's suite shows Rothko's palette darkening—no more luminous blues, just dark maroon bleeding into black.
- John Fischer, visiting Rothko's studio, said the murals evoked '**the walls of an abattoir**'. Rothko agreed, saying he wanted '**to ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who eats in that room**'. He refunded the **\$35,000 commission**—enormous money—and kept the paintings. The **Tate acquired nine** in 1969.
- Rothko was fifty-five, **drinking heavily**, his second marriage strained. He'd accepted the Seagram commission for **financial security** but grew to despise the context. Rothko, a **Russian-Jewish immigrant** and **anarchist sympathiser**, **loathed American capitalism's triumphalism**. The commission's cancellation was self-sabotage.
- Rothko worked on the **Seagram murals for two years** in a Bowery studio. He built full-scale mock-ups of the restaurant's walls. The palette knife technique created dry, encrusted surfaces unlike his earlier, luminous washes.

- In 1970, on the day his murals were being unpacked at the Tate he slashed his arms with a razor and bled to death in his studio. He was sixty-six. The Tate honoured his wish for a contemplative space and installed his murals in a quiet, low-light dedicated room.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Seagram - SEE-gram

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Clyfford Still (1904-1980),
1957-D No. 1,
1957, Oil on canvas,
287.9 × 395.9 cm,
Albright-Knox Art
Gallery, Buffalo

Clyfford Still (1904-1980), 1957-D No. 1, 1957, Oil on canvas, 287.9 × 395.9 cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

- **A thirteen-foot wall of black with jagged flashes of yellow, and white tearing through.** Still applied paint with a palette knife, building encrusted surfaces. His forms suggest flames, chasms, geological strata—but he despised interpretation. Still wanted pure, unmediated encounter. The painting doesn't depict; it is. It's raw, uncompromising, almost hostile in its refusal to charm.
- Critics struggled. **Still's contempt for the art establishment was legendary.** He withdrew from galleries, refused museum surveys, and denounced commercialism. Hilton Kramer called him 'a visionary'. Others found his paintings '**ugly**' and '**primitive**'. Still didn't care. He believed Abstract Expressionism was being commodified and betrayed.
- Still was fifty-three, living in **self-imposed isolation** in Maryland. He'd grown up on the Canadian prairies and retained a frontier mysticism. **By 1957, he'd stopped exhibiting in New York entirely,** rejecting the art world's careerism. His peers saw him as principled; his detractors thought him paranoid and self-aggrandising.
- He never titled his works, only dated them. 1957-D No. 1 was one of several massive canvases completed that year. Still hoarded his paintings, releasing few for sale. After his death, thousands were discovered in his estate, many unseen by

the public.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Clyfford Still - KLIF-ord STILL

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Joan Mitchell (1925-1992),
Ladybug,
1957, Oil on canvas,
197.9 × 274 cm, Museum
of Modern Art, New York

Joan Mitchell (1925-1992), *Ladybug*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 197.9 × 274 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- **Explosions of orange, yellow, blue, and green cascade across the canvas.** Mitchell painted from **memory**—not direct observation—recalling **childhood summers in Michigan**. *Ladybug* doesn't illustrate; it evokes. The brushwork is aggressive yet lyrical, spontaneous yet composed. Mitchell called her paintings '**landscapes, not nature**'. They're emotional weather maps.
- Critics compared **Mitchell to de Kooning**, which **infuriated her**. '**I'm not a woman painter, I'm a painter**', she insisted. Irving Sandler praised her '**ferocious energy**'. But male critics often **patronised her**. The Museum of Modern Art acquired *Ladybug* in 1961, recognising her stature. Still, she **battled sexism** throughout her career, her achievements attributed to her famous male peers.
- Mitchell was thirty-two, living in a **cold flat in New York's** Lower East Side. She'd studied at the **Art Institute of Chicago** and moved to New York in 1950. She **drank heavily, fought with lovers**, and **painted obsessively**. Second-generation Abstract Expressionism was emerging. Mitchell rejected decorative Colour Field painting, maintaining gestural intensity.
- Mitchell worked on multiple canvases simultaneously, often scraping and repainting. She used oil paint straight from the tube, applied with vigorous brushstrokes. ***Ladybug's* title** came after completion—Mitchell titled paintings

based on colours or memories. In 1959, she **moved permanently to France**, escaping New York's machismo and establishing a studio outside Paris.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Joan Mitchell - JOAN MICH-ell

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Robert Motherwell (1915-1991),
Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 70,
 1961, Oil on canvas, 175.3 ×
 289.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, New York

Robert Motherwell (1915-1991), *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 70*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 175.3 × 289.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- **Black ovals and verticals march across a white field** like a funeral procession. Motherwell **painted over 150 Elegies** between 1948 and 1967, all **mourning the Spanish Republic's defeat in the Civil War**. The forms suggest **testicles and phalluses**—life crushed by fascism. It's Abstract Expressionism's most politically explicit series, though Motherwell insisted the forms were 'felt' rather than symbolic.
- Critics praised Motherwell's intellect. He was the **movement's theorist**, articulating Abstract Expressionism's **philosophy in essays**. Dore Ashton called the Elegies '**monuments to modern tragedy**'. But some peers found **Motherwell too cerebral**, lacking Pollock's raw instinct. The Met acquired Elegy No. 70 in 1965, recognising the series as major.
- Motherwell was forty-six, teaching at Hunter College and editing art journals. Unlike most Abstract Expressionists, he was **university-educated and financially comfortable**. The Spanish Civil War haunted him, though he'd **never been to Spain**. By 1961, Abstract Expressionism was institutionalised. **Pop Art was rising**. Motherwell's elegiac seriousness seemed increasingly out of step.
- Motherwell worked in **series obsessively**. The Elegies evolved from a small ink drawing made in 1948 to accompany a poem. He used cheap black house paint

and broad brushes, seeking spontaneity within formal structure. Elegy No. 70 took weeks, with multiple repainting sessions. Motherwell continued the series until 1967, then resumed it sporadically.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Motherwell - MUTH-er-well

Elegy - EL-uh-jee

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Kenneth Noland
(1924-2010),
Beginning,
1958, Acrylic on
canvas, 236.9 ×
236.9 cm, Hirshhorn
Museum, Washington
D.C.

Kenneth Noland (1924-2010), *Beginning*, 1958, Acrylic on canvas, 236.9 × 236.9 cm, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C.

- **Concentric circles—red, blue, black—radiate from the canvas's centre.**

Noland **stained the raw canvas with acrylic**, achieving flat, even colour without brushstrokes. The circles are **perfectly symmetrical**, rejecting gestural spontaneity. It's **painting as optical fact**, not emotional expression. Noland wanted to **eliminate 'the drama of the artist's hand'**, making colour the sole subject.

- Clement Greenberg championed Noland as **Colour Field painting's purest practitioner**. Michael Fried wrote that Noland had achieved '**radical abstraction**'. But critics like Harold Rosenberg dismissed Colour Field as '**decoration**', lacking Abstract Expressionism's existential depth. Noland's targets became emblematic of nineteen-sixties formalism's triumph over fifties angst.

- Noland was **thirty-four**, working in Washington D.C. alongside **Morris Louis**. They'd **visited Helen Frankenthaler's studio** in 1953, adopting her stain technique. By 1958, Noland was systematically exploring how colour relationships changed with different formats. The **target paintings** emerged from this investigation. Pop Art was ascending; Noland represented **painting's last stand against irony**.

- Noland used **compass and masking tape** to achieve geometric precision. He

mixed acrylic with water and **Magna paint**, creating translucent stains. Magna was soluble in turpentine and was the first commercially available acrylic paint. We now know the solvent fumes produced were a very serious health risk.

- Beginning was part of a series exploring symmetry's optical effects. Noland exhibited the targets at French & Company Gallery in 1959. They sold slowly—collectors preferred gestural painting. Noland abandoned the format in 1962.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Kenneth Noland - KEN-eth NO-land

Hirshhorn - HERSH-horn

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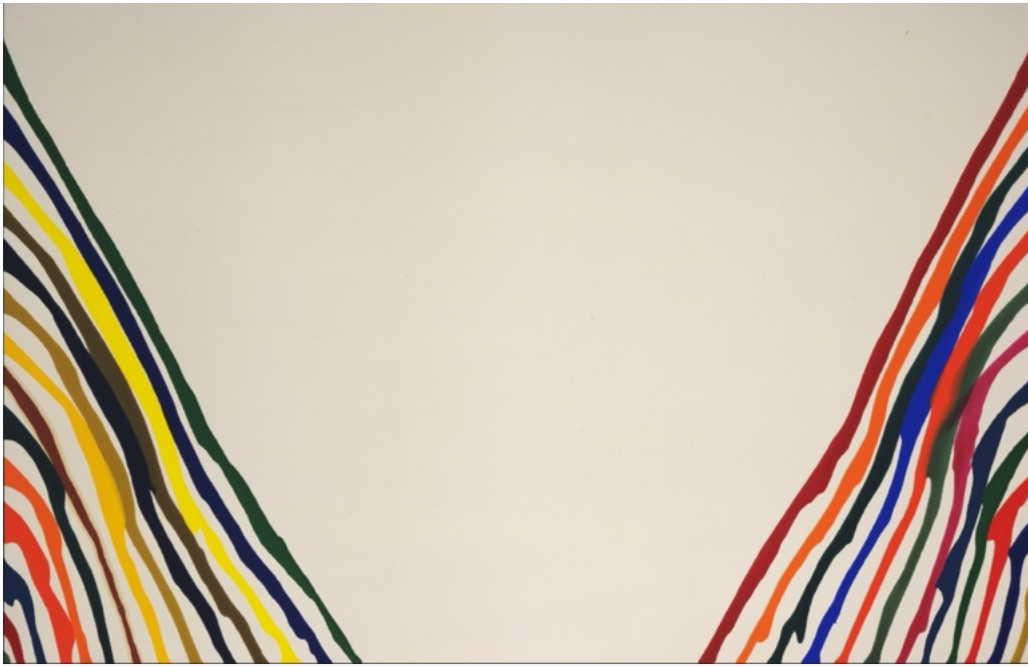
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Morris Louis (1912-1962),
Beta Lambda,
1961, Acrylic on canvas,
262.3 × 416.6 cm,
Museum of Modern Art,
New York

Morris Louis (1912-1962), *Beta Lambda*, 1961, Acrylic on canvas, 262.3 × 416.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- **Veils of translucent colour—rose, violet, orange—pour down the canvas like northern lights.** Louis tilted unstretched canvas and **poured diluted acrylic**, letting gravity guide the paint's flow. The result is **stained colour** without brushstrokes or texture. *Beta Lambda* is part of the 'Veil' series, where overlapping washes create luminous depth. It's painting dematerialised, colour as pure opticality.
- Critics called Louis a '**painter's painter**'. Clement Greenberg championed him as the **logical successor to Pollock and Rothko**. But Louis **worked in obscurity** in Washington D.C., far from New York's scene. His first major museum show was **posthumous**. Michael Fried wrote that Louis had 'achieved a new kind of spatiality'. Detractors found his work merely **decorative**.
- Louis was forty-nine, **dying of lung cancer** as he painted *Beta Lambda*. He'd worked as a commercial artist and muralist before discovering Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique in 1953. The Veil paintings came in an intense burst between 1958 and 1960. Louis destroyed hundreds of canvases he deemed unsuccessful, **obsessed with perfection**.
- Louis mixed acrylic paint with water and flow agents, achieving **watercolour-like transparency**. He worked alone, revealing finished paintings to no one, not

even his wife. *Beta Lambda*'s **Greek-letter title** is cryptic—Louis **numbered his series systematically** but never explained the logic.

- He died in 1962, aged forty-nine from lung cancer believed to have been caused by exposure to the solvents used in the Magna paint he used.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Morris Louis - MOR-ris LOO-iss

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57-01 ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

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Kenneth Noland, *Beginning*, 1958

- Abstract Expressionism became dated in the early 1960s and was replaced by **Pop Art** and artists such as **Andy Warhol** and **Roy Lichtenstein** who focused on mass media and consumer culture.
- At the same time **Minimalism** with **Donald Judd** and **Agnes Martin** stripped away **"forced" emotional expression**.
- It brought about one major change, the **centre of the international art world** moved from **Paris to New York City**.
- The focus on the act of creation influenced **Performance Art, Land Art and Conceptual Art**.
- Its masterpieces are still set **records** such as **de Kooning's *Interchange*** selling for **\$300 million** in 2015, the second most expensive painting ever sold.
- Thank you for your time and I hope to be seeing you again soon.



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