

# Abstract Expressionism

# ***Main Characteristics***

- Art for art's sake – 'art calls attention to art' (Clement Greenberg *Modernist Painting*, 1965)
- Combination of Abstract Art and Expressionism amounting to automatic painting i.e. allowing the subconscious to express itself (a Surrealist idea)
- Embraces works of diverse styles eg. Action painting and Colour Field Painting

# ***The 2 types of Abstract Expressionism***

- Action painting – technique concerned with gesture and action creating texture as paint intertwines in delicate patterns like spiders webs
- Colour field – large unified shapes or areas of colour

# *Major Artists*

- Jackson Pollock (1912-56)
- Ad Reinhardt (1913-67)
- Robert Motherwell (b.1915)
- Mark Rothko (1903-70)
- Willem de Kooning (1904-97)
- Clyfford Still (1904-80)
- Barnett Newman (1905-70)

# *Jackson Pollock*

- 'disturbed and melancholy artist'  
(World History of Art – Honour & Fleming)
- Made the act of painting its own subject
- Early work is representational  
(*Naked Man with Knife*, c. 1938-40)



# ***A load of old Pollocks***

- Style changes after 1947 – drip paintings (*Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950*)
- ‘My painting does not come from the easel’ (he wrote in *Possibilities 1947*)





# *Willem de Kooning*

- Excavation (1950) is typical of De Kooning's style which is seen as more aggressive than Pollock
- He uses harsh, clashing mixtures of colours and patterns – fleshy pinks, lurid greens and yellows



# ***Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning***

- Krasner was married to Pollock but she was always onto a loser – Action Painting is a masculine pursuit and she was never going to be AS GOOD as Pollock
- Ditto for de Kooning – both were second class citizens in the art journals and in artistic circles



# ***Krasner Cat Image, 1957***

- After Pollock's death Krasner turned to 'large-scale, hybrid anthropomorphic forms' in an exorcism of her rage, guilt and loss (Women Art & Society – Whitney Chadwick)



# ***Mark Rothko***

- 'Soft, hovering, cloudy forms with frayed edges' (World History of Art – Honour & Fleming)
- Soaked paints into the canvas - luminosity
- 2 or 3 banks of colour which form the composition are scumbled over thinly painted areas

# *More on Rothko*

- Rothko's considered the spiritual dimensions of abstraction
- Can it be argued that you could tell he was going to commit suicide looking at 'Green on Blue' of 1956?
- Probably not, but this has been read into his later Black paintings...



# ***Barnet Newman***

- Newman too saw art as spiritual – a quest for the unknowable and the sublime (World History of Art)
- His work *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1) answers his desire to raise man & his feelings to the status of God



# *Conclusion*

- The centre of Western art moved to America during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the abstract Expressionists emerged as the avant garde until the late 50s
- A Modernist movement, the artists as creating art which was 'self referential' I.e. referred to nothing but art itself
- Championed as displaying/representing the freedom of the West/USA as opposed to the oppression of Cold War USSR, their exhibitions worldwide were funded in secret by the CIA