

The Abstract Expressionist canon 1950-2000

Once you're in, you're in.

Master thesis MA Cultural History

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Preface

Although the art historical canon has been criticized and is a serious no go in the postmodern age, there is one sphere in which it still flourishes; the art history programs of universities. Sophomores are supposedly “hungry for the survey”, art historical canons provide a feeling of safety when dealing with the art world. The traditional canon, consisting of a list of masterpieces, is learned by heart and contributes to the art historian’s connoisseurship.

Scholars seem to be taken back by the persistence of the canon. They find it surprising that canons are still written, published and read. However, in my opinion, the attractiveness of the canon is understandable. As the art historian started off as a connoisseur, the contemporary art historical student is plagued by this older image. As an art history student, people expect you to know who made what and when, otherwise you seem to have wasted your time during college. A horrifying moment, recognizable to most art history students, is when you visit a museum or gallery with your parents or friends who have other backgrounds. “You should know the date,” or: “why is this art?” The canon is more than a framework which one can reject. It is the necessary body of knowledge to prove to the outside world that you have learned something. Like in any other discipline, you are doomed with the necessity of factuality. It is safe to say that the canon will continue to remain a necessary evil, at least for art historians communicating with the outside world.

“If you can’t beat them join them. You’ve got to do it 'cos it makes you feel good.” *Queen*.

Introduction

“Abstract Expressionism is arguably the most important art movement in postwar America.”¹ This statement seems so natural, but that has not always been the case. When did Abstract Expressionism become the canonical American art style it is today? Abstract Expressionism has been intensively researched since its emergence in the late 1940s. It has been a highly contested art style with many friends and foes. It has especially become *the* American art style, and its artists became *the* modern example of romantic artists; Abstract Expressionists were the urban cowboys of New York City (though certainly not all of them). The art and its artists became mythical beings who once wandered the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan. Jackson Pollock has become the most iconic figure of this unorganized and self-denied ‘movement’, partly due to the many photographs (published in Life magazine) taken of him while he was working on art. Pollock’s name has become a brand. It is safe to say that Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism are embedded in the American cultural landscape. Hundreds of books have been written on this American art and its artists, discussing its formal, political and cultural aspects. This extensive literature has contributed to the canonical status of Abstract Expressionism. Despite the fact that art historians have played a huge role in the mystification and popularization of Abstract Expressionism, there has been a relatively small amount of literature on its historiography.

Art historical handbooks and exhibitions are two major indicators of the canonization of an art style or individual artist. In the last fifteen years, art museums have mounted major exhibitions of the work of key figures in the ‘movement’. Exhibits of members of the Abstract Expressionist ‘movement’ are coming close to matching shows of French Impressionists in popularity, according to art historian Patricia Mainardi in 2002.² Auction prices for these artists reach astronomical numbers.³ Reputations continue to be made by scholars and curators who are able to say something new about the ‘heroic years’ of Abstract Expressionism.⁴ These indicators show that Abstract Expressionism is safely embedded in the canon of art history.

¹ Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), back page.

² Landau quotes Patricia Mainardi in her introduction, *Ibid.* 80.

³ Pollock’s “Number 19,” a 1948 drip painting, sold for \$58.4 million in 2013. Willem de Kooning’s 1953 “Woman (Blue Eyes)” fetched \$19.2 million. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-05-15/basquiat-s-dustheads-sells-for-record-49-million>

⁴ Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism : Context and Critique*, 79. The heroic years refer to the first generation Abstract Expressionists; Second generation Abstract Expressionism are not awarded the same reputation as first generation.

This year the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam will publish a theme issue on re-writing or re-affirming the canon through the history of re-staging exhibitions. In recent years it has become popular to re-stage exhibitions. “It is now widely accepted that the art history of the second half of the twentieth century is no longer a history of artworks, but a history of exhibitions.”⁵ I want to do the same in my thesis, but instead of looking at the history of exhibitions, I will research art history survey books.

Art history survey texts are one of the most significant indicators of the canonization of an art style. Once you’re in one, you rarely get kicked out. **When was Abstract Expressionism included in an art historical survey books and how has the process of canonizing Abstract Expressionism developed in the second half of the 20th century?** Tracing the inclusion of Abstract Expressionism in survey books forms a case study in a broader discussion about the process of canonization of art styles. What are the criteria of selection to be included in an art historical overview? It also demonstrates the ‘acceptance’ period of abstract art in the dominant art historical discourse. As for example Gombrich in 1950 described representational art as a signal human achievement, and disparaged abstract art as a display of the artist’s personality rather than his skill.⁶

⁵ <http://www.stedelijk.nl/collectie/publicaties/stedelijk-studies-spring-2015--call-for-papers>

⁶ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London, Phaidon 1950) 380.

Relevance and participation in the academic discussion

Literature on Abstract Expressionism

In general, there exist two kinds of research on Abstract Expressionism. Firstly, publications that focus on individual artists: the monographic strand of research.⁷ This kind of research has been done since the 1950s up until the present day. Secondly, publications that focus on analyzing the movement itself, especially the political and social context of Abstract Expressionism, including its reception in Europe.⁸ This kind of research has predominantly been carried out from the 1970s until the 1990s. The first book-length study on Abstract Expressionism as an ‘entity’ was published in 1970 by Irving Sandler, and was appropriately titled *The Triumph of American Painting*.⁹ In the seventies and early eighties Kozloff (1973), Cockroft (1974), and Guilbaut (1983) revealed the covert use of art by the U.S. government and focused on Abstract Expressionism as an aesthetic weapon of the cold war.¹⁰ In the late 1980s a ‘new and improved’ scholarship emerged which reevaluated primary sources, such as Leja (1990), Anfam (1990), Polcari (1991), Gibson (1997), Craven (1999), Jones and Saunders (1999). In 1988, scholars reflected on the existing scholarship regarding Abstract Expressionism in a special issue of *Art journal*.¹¹ This special issue anticipated a decade of new scholarship on the movement.

These ‘new and improved’ scholars discarded parts of the work of former scholars as unscientific, such as Guilbaut or Rosenberg. In the 1990s scholars aimed at revealing the ‘true essence’ of Abstract Expressionism, disenchanting the art style and reducing it to a measurable scientific study object according to others that in the end made “the historical construction that is Abstract Expressionism”.¹² The art style itself has become a historical construction in which scholars writing about the art have almost contributed as much to its mythical status as the artists themselves. That is why scholars should be interpreted as active participants in the history of this art style. After sixty years of intense debate and scholarship, it is time to endeavor on a historiographical journey through the abstract expressionist studies.

⁷ Francis, Frascina, *Pollock and after : The Critical Debate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

⁸ Sigrid. Ruby, *“Have we an American art?”: Präsentation und Rezeption amerikanischer Malerei in Westdeutschland und Westeuropa der Nachkriegszeit* (Weimar: VDG, 1999).

⁹ Daniel A. Siedell, “The Quest for the Historical Abstract Expressionism”, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 1 (2010) 108.

¹⁰ Nancy. Jachec, “Transatlantic Cultural Politics in the Late 1950s The Leaders and Specialists Grant Program.”, *Art History*, (2003) 533.

¹¹ Ann Gibson, “Editor’s Statement I: New Myths for Old: Redefining Abstract Expressionism.”, *Art Journal* 47, no. 3 (september 1988) 171.

¹² Siedell, “The Quest for the Historical Abstract Expressionism”, 107–21. For a complete overview of the historiography on Abstract Expressionism from the 1940s till the 2000s see: Landau (2005).

How and when did this art style acquire its prominent status in the history of art? Whatever one might think of abstract art; whether one comments: “my four year old child could do the same”, or “this isn’t art”, it has instigated discussions about what art exactly is, and especially art criticism.¹³ Today there is no discussion as to whether Rembrandt is an artist, whoever disputes that will encounter a lot of resistance and perhaps this person will even be called a fool or uneducated. However we forget that this has also been a process, a process of canonization. Rembrandt has not always been as celebrated as he is today. He was successful until his death, but was overshadowed by Gerard de Lairese (1641-1711) and he was reassessed in the mid-nineteenth century, for example his statue was erected in Amsterdam in 1852 and today his exhibitions attract thousands of visitors for example the exhibition Late Rembrandt in het Rijksmuseum this year. Admittedly there was less of a public discussion about the artistic merits of Rembrandt than about the artistic merits of Pollock, but there was a moment of entering the safe garden of the grand narrative, namely canonical art history. My point is that someone, and that someone is mostly (although that is currently changing due to social media and the decrease of expert knowledge) an art critic and/or historian, decides that French Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism are titled Art. Mostly this is a decision firstly made by art dealers, curators, critics and eventually art historians who decide to include them in survey texts, in other words: the canon of art. Art historical survey texts are themselves the product and source of the art canon.

Relevance

“It is necessary to transform the study of ‘Abstract Expressionism’ from an exclusively historical practice to a historiographical one.”¹⁴ In 2005 the first comprehensive collection of key writings about Abstract Expressionism was published by Ellen Landau’s *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*. In her introduction she discusses the major arguments and crucial points of view that have surrounded the movement decade by decade. It is a historiographical study of literature specifically discussing Abstract Expressionism. In this book she narrates the development of Abstract Expressionist studies as a scholarly practice as it has developed from the 1940s and 1950s until now. In her book she does not discuss the inclusion of Abstract Expressionism in survey texts.

¹³ However there is now scientific proof that viewers favor art that has been made by artists instead of by children. Leslie Snapper etc., “Your kid could not have done that: Even untutored observers can discern intentionality and structure in abstract expressionist art”, *Cognition* 137 (April 2015) 154–65.

¹⁴ Siedell, ‘The Quest for the Historical Abstract Expressionism’, 119.

More recently Peter R. Kalb has discussed the influence of the photos taken by Hans Namuth for *Life* magazine in the history writing and criticism of Abstract Expressionism, especially the role it played in the 'still insecure world in the early 1950s'.¹⁵ He discusses the role of these pictures in influencing for example art critic Harold Rosenberg in his discussion of Abstract Expressionism, and how it has contributed to Pollock's rise to fame.

Although Abstract Expressionism has been extensively researched, it is now time to research the researchers. In summary, my contribution will be to research the canonization of Abstract Expressionism by analyzing an important indicator of canonization: art historical survey texts. I hope to be able to describe the process of canonization of Abstract Expressionism. Furthermore, I will describe the changes occurring over time in the reception of the movement in survey textbooks, contributing to the general discussion about the creation of art historical canons.

¹⁵ Peter R Kalb, "Picturing Pollock: Photography's Challenge to the Historiography of Abstract Expressionism", *Journal of Art Historiography* no. 7, (2012) 4.

Contextualizing the canon

Theoretical framework: In this chapter I will discuss the canon as a fundamental thinking system within the discipline of art history. As such the canon is deeply embedded within the discipline of art history, which is traditionally described as consisting of effects and counter-effects expressed in formal objects. Firstly, I will discuss the development of art history into a scientific domain and why the canon has such a dominant place within the discipline. Furthermore, I will situate art history within the broader art field which includes the art practice. Art history can be described as a *metadiscourse* framing individual artworks, being fully capable of naming its objects and consequently its art practice in general. Secondly, I will discuss how the canon has developed as a framework since its inception in the nineteenth century. This implies contextualizing the canon, which is distinctly different from presenting the advantages and disadvantages of using the canon. It rather entails the mechanics of canonicity, in other words, the discursive structures underlying the creation, formation and maintenance of a specific canon. Thirdly, I will introduce the concept of *multiple canons*, which describes the canon as dynamic and fragmented, in contrast to the more traditional viewpoint of the canon as a static and uniform entity. This concept makes it possible for parallel canons to exist and interact through time and space. This concept has arisen due to the persistence of the canon within the discipline.

In this research the canon will be seen through the concept of multiplicity. The canon is fragmented and far from complete. As has become apparent from the recent academic discussion, it is most fruitful to study singular canons, a singular canon being the history of one art style or period in its specific historical, political and spatial context. I will focus on one of the most well-known canonized art styles: Abstract Expressionism. The canonization of one art 'style' will function as a case study in the research of the construction and maintenance of canons. I have chosen to measure the canon of the history of Abstract Expressionism through analyzing survey textbooks, which are one of the most prominent indicators of canonicity. What role and position is attributed to Abstract Expressionism within art history?

The professionalization of art history

Art history became an academic endeavor in the late eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, first in German universities, due to forces such as nationalism and the ascendance of the bourgeoisie. As art history defines and interprets visual culture, art

historians helped to shape a nation's sense of self.¹⁶ In this way, art history actually entered into the service of nationalism. Art historians, like scholars in any other discipline (and humans in general), engage in the act of making value judgements and qualitative distinctions.¹⁷ All art historical writing is a “continuous reshaping of the past, an ongoing attempt to keep it relevant and infuse it with meaning and purpose.”¹⁸ The majority of art historical writing is either synchronic or diachronic, portraying either how all art at a given time expresses a basic idea, in other words captures the *Zeitgeist*, or, portraying art's progression in time, in other words its ongoing improvement.¹⁹

Art historians study objects that have been made in the past or present. Up until the twentieth century, these objects relied on past trades, as works of art were based on prior traditions. Art history therefore, by researching objects, always also studies the developments leading up to the most recent stage, which culminated in the object of study. As tradition implies a generational transmission of values, trades and customs, it implies the continuity, adjustment and appropriation of formal characteristics. The primary task for art historians has been to evaluate objects based on their aesthetic merits, and as the discipline increasingly became an academic endeavor, art historians were expected to be able to place works of art within the broader historical continuum. “Traditional art history focusses on formal concerns, because of a historically rooted validation of a particular identity that is unproblematic. The historical construction of formalism is based on nonfigurative art as being identity-free and universalized space.”²⁰ In other words, if art is stripped down to its formal aspects, the identity of the artists and sociopolitical interests are irrelevant. Materiality is the basis of the study of art objects. Traditional art history canonizes art due to its formal characteristics. All social interpretations that have become commonplace in the practice of art criticism, have been systematically neglected by orthodox art history up to the 1970s.

This all relied on subjective knowledge,; through years of experience viewing artworks, it became possible to authenticate works of art. For the art historian to surpass the status as connoisseur and become a professional, it was necessary to institutionalize the discipline (through, for example, the erection of museums and art journals) and to reach a consensus

¹⁶ Elizabeth Mansfield, 'Introduction, in: Idem ed., *Making Art History : A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

¹⁷ Anna Brzyski, *Partisan Canons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 9.

¹⁸ James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002) xii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰ Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, “Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity”, *Art Journal* 65, no. 1 (2006) 31.

about the object of study: the canon. This way, knowledge would not rely on the individual connoisseur but could be traced back to a consensus. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the growing middle class sought positions where special knowledge rather than physical effort was required. Art history was one of the disciplines that was seen as appropriate by the middle class to promote and proof its social mobility and ascension. As there are “few proofs of high social rank that supersede the possession of artworks,”²¹ the bourgeoisie, through the profession of art history, could deploy these markers of social distinction.²²

The discipline of art history is comparable to its “unacknowledged sister discipline, anthropology,”²³ which also entails a direct contact between the observer and the observed. Since the 1980s, the complex dynamics of this interaction have been criticized within anthropology.²⁴ Like anthropologists, art historians observe the ‘Other’, in this case, the artists. The discipline has begun to acknowledge the *superaltern* position of the artists, reflecting our idealized self-image and the active participation of the artists in the art historical discourse. Observers and the observed both have equal access to the sphere of production of the art historical discourse. But if we think of the art world as consisting of two interrelating discourses, artists actively contribute to the canon by emphasizing particular aesthetic values above others.²⁵ The art historical discourse and art discourse (art practice) coproduce the canon. Artists are no passive bystanders at the mercy of art historians.

Art history as metadiscourse: the relationship between art history and art practice

In the process of professionalization, at the time art history was entering the realm of scholarship, the evaluation of artworks no longer relied solely on the aesthetic judgement of the individual art historian or even the consensus of art historians agreeing on their aesthetic judgements. A second criteria was formulated which was independent of individual judgement. An artwork had to represent a significant innovation. There had to be historical evidence of the work’s impact on past and present works, and until today art must take a ‘logical’ place in art history’s historical narrative. “The value of art is still predicated on its

²¹ Ibid.,5.

²² Ibid.,6.

²³ Brzyski, ‘Making art in the age of art history’, in Idem, *Partisan Canons*, 248.

²⁴ Brzyski, ‘Making art in the age of art history’, in: Idem, *Partisan Canons*, 247.

²⁵ Ibid., Brzyski, ‘Making art in the age of art history,’ see this whole article for a discussion on the active role of artists in the making of a set of criteria for the canon.

potential to enter art history.”²⁶ This historical narrative is the canon. Canonicity is earned when an artwork proves its historical significance and is aesthetically complementary to and preferably surpassing a previous style.

In the art world, which does not coexist with the real world but adheres to its own value system, art history and art practice seem to be separated by professional distance. The first is not an empirical given but a complex discursive system across verbal and visual fields, the verbal field consisting of art history, art theory and art criticism, the visual field being art practice, artists and the artworks they produce. Art historical discourse occupies a *metadiscursive* position vis-à-vis the art practice.²⁷ A *metadiscourse*, initially used in linguistics, can be described as the contextualization of a single medium, whether a text or an artwork. It is a discourse (art history) about a discourse (art practice). This *metadiscourse* has a framing function as it infuses the viewer with a broader discursive and cultural context. Art history is the discursive and cultural context in which art practice is viewed and produced. It is also the system in which meanings are produced. It implies that formally based art history is fully capable of naming its defined object, as it is the study of the materialization of reality, namely objects.

Throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and even the twenty-first century the direct interaction between the verbal and visual fields has been denied, so as to guarantee objectivity of the research done by art historians. However, they coproduce the system that evaluates art. That same system keeps canonicity in place as a fundamental structure in art history and art practice. In this research, I will take the same position as Brzyski in stating that the interests and power of both discourses are interrelated and coproducing the value system of art.

What is a canon?

A canon is an empty structure, its content is constructed by the art world. It traditionally consists of key time posts that help create a rough framework for people to navigate across the vast sea called the history of art. It helps to maintain a sense of context and history.

Metaphorically speaking it is a navigational tool, comparable to the modern TomTom, which, if used without interference, can steer you into directions which you can choose to blindly follow or keep your eyes on the road and deviate from the route if one encounters interesting new destinations. The content of the canon is decided on by those with established power

²⁶ Ibid., 265.

²⁷ Ibid., 249.

structures, i.e. the art historians, teaching and discussing what will be canonized and what will not. The content consists of works of art that have had a profound impact on subsequent artists or have made any kind of innovation, whether in terms of new subject matter, technical innovation or redefining what is art. The canons are constantly enhanced but rarely rewritten. However, art history maintains a chicken-or-egg relationship with the canon. Was the discipline formed in response to an already existing hierarchy of cultural expressions or does art history itself conjure these hierarchies? In my opinion, the canon is not an autonomous entity but a constructed think system. It is an empty structure that can be used by those who either want to maintain the status quo or who occupy oppositional positions and want to change or attack the canon.²⁸ Within the canon, certain features are highlighted while others are downplayed, preserving one's political and social identities. The canon is the essence or 'marrow' of tradition,²⁹ the essence of art history. Canon formation is fundamentally linked with the existing sociopolitical order.³⁰ However changing, the survey texts that will be discussed in this research have been written by scholars who are located in the so-called Eurocentric mainstream.³¹

Sociopolitical factors and models of the canon

The canon itself has become a self-regulatory entity over the individual authority of the art connoisseur or eventually the art historian. The canon was rooted in the disciplinary developments of art history in the West during the twentieth century, and it remains an essential tool for art history today. The function of the canon is to define what counts as art, legitimizing the object of study of the art historian. However, the creation of a canon is not obligatory in every system. Canons result from deliberate activities of preservation.³² The canon is about securing certain items in response to ideological demands, which implies that other external interests influence the content and structure of surveys. For example, economic interests: survey courses are cost effective for universities, publishers make large profits from reference books as they are sold to most universities teaching art history. Political interests (such as nationalism) have influenced the structure of survey texts. Think of how art styles are

²⁸ Anna Brzyski, "Introduction: Canons and Art History", 4. Most revisionist scholars tend to view canon formation as an exclusionary process that prohibits minorities from gaining access to power.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Murray en Murray, "Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity", *Art Journal* 62.1 (2006) 39.

³¹ Ibid., 35.

³² Rakefet Sheffy, "The Concept of Canonicity in Polysystem Theory", *Poetics Today* 11, nr. 3 (1 oktober 1990): 520.

portrayed to be typical of certain countries, such as Rococo France, or Abstract Expressionism as exemplary of American society after the Second World War.³³

In general, there are two models of canonization: firstly the genealogical model and secondly the center-and-periphery model. Genealogical models rely on the generic characteristics of art that are transferred from one generation of artists to the next, and they consider art to be a cumulative product of everything that came before. Center-and-periphery models rely on the concept of substitutable dominants, one style temporarily dominating all others, while in the periphery new developments are created.³⁴ Another way of describing the canon is to think in terms of the classical and romantic canons. The classical canon relies on universal aesthetic principles, the romantic canon favors local specificity, in other words, art works representing a spatial and temporal identity.³⁵ The latter created the foundations for an oppressive canon, because it tended to homogenize the art production, all art that did not fit into the preconceived ideal or standard was simply never included. This way the canon was protected. The classical canon has been severely critiqued.³⁶

Up until the 1970s, art historians have tried to identify one principle that could explain every aspect of art, which can be called synchronic art history. During the 1970s a debate was instigated by Marxism, post-structuralism, and feminism about the disciplines' exclusion of women artists and underlying power relations.³⁷ Artists however responded already two decades earlier, from the 1950s onwards, with actions of the Gutai group in Japan, and art movements like the Situationists, mixed media minimalists, Neo-Dada and Fluxus.³⁸ In the late 1980s, post-colonialists critiqued the exclusion of non-Western art in the discipline, which resulted in World Art History.³⁹ The practice of art history became more socially involved, focusing on the complex relationship between art and its environment. Art historians started to reject any unifying notion of agency as well as the alleged autonomy of

³³ Mansfield, 'Border Patrols', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions* (New York; London: Routledge, 2007). I agree with the second option, stating that the canon is constructed rather than a mere representation of an independently existing reality.

³⁴ Mark Miller Graham, 'The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey', *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (1 October 1995) 31.

³⁵ Marlite Halbertsma, 'The call of the canon. Why art history cannot do without', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History*, 18.

³⁶ Elizabeth Mansfield, 'Art history as identity', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ Terry Smith, 'Coda and contemporaneity', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History*, 317-318.

³⁹ Mansfield, 'Art history as identity', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History*, 12.

their discipline.⁴⁰ Feminist and postcolonial scholars criticized the content of the canon, which controls the body of works qualified as art, and therefore considered study material. They also acknowledged their own subjectivity as art historians.

In contrast, some scholars argue that there is no way to practice a canon-free art history.⁴¹ It has remained the cornerstone of art history practice, its thinking system. This has provided art historians with a tremendous amount of power, as they decide what is art, what is included and what is excluded. The art work itself is unable to acquire a canonical status without the consensus of several art historians.⁴² Though individuals do not generate canons, canons represent forms of consensus accumulatively acquired over time.⁴³ The canonization or non-canonization has serious consequences for the art and the artists involved. The canon decides what is worth studying by scholars. Without being 'canonized', artists can be soon forgotten, their work being deprived of market value and status.

Criticizing the canon: The development of a thinking system

Criticism of the discipline of art history is closely linked to the critique of the art historical canon.⁴⁴ The problem is not that a selection has been made, but that the particular selection is held to be of universal significance.⁴⁵ As a result of feminist studies and postcolonial studies, the power relations embedded within the canon have been laid bare. The canon's function was revalued, it was no longer a "yardstick for determining enduring timeless masterpieces, but an agent of power, the power to decide whose culture and whose views will set agendas for the rest of us."⁴⁶ From the 1970s onwards, scholars became increasingly involved in researching what the canon means, how it was formed and why it had been so selective.⁴⁷ The first criticisms led to the inclusion of previously non-canonized works. This resulted in the expansion of the number of canonized works. The canon seemed to be endlessly expandable. More art works were included into the survey texts, especially from non-Western and women artists.

⁴⁰ Elkins, *Stories of Art* (2002), 120.

⁴¹ Mansfield, 'Making Art History', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History*, 55.

⁴² However I am not implying that artworks do not contain intrinsic meaning or value. It is not art history that infuses art works with meaning.

⁴³ Brzyski, *Partisan Canons*, 28.

⁴⁴ However, some say this has not been done sufficiently, especially in comparison to the critique on the canon in literary studies, such as Mansfield, 'Art history as identity', in: Idem ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, 16.

⁴⁵ Terry Smith, 'Coda and contemporaneity', in: Idem ed., 315.

⁴⁶ Graham, 'The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey', 30.

⁴⁷ Griselda Pollock, 'Whither Art History?', *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (2014) 17.

Criticism has evolved from criticizing the content of the canon in general to researching the dynamics of the canonical system.⁴⁸ Due to its inevitable persistence within the discipline, it seems as though scholars were right when they stated that art history cannot do without the canon. The question arises whether art history can be practiced without canonical formations. If not, how can the canon be used with greater reflexivity, and which questions should be asked beyond the critiques of inclusion and exclusion? According to Brzyski, this question has hardly been considered by art historians.⁴⁹ The persistence of the canon is paradoxical, the canon is fiercely critiqued but still lingers on through its embeddedness in the way art historians and students think. It helps us value art but simultaneously devalues art which is not canonized. Contextualization becomes the validation for art. So why is the canon so persistent?

Why is the canon so persistent?

The persistence of the canon is possibly explained by psychoanalytical theory. For example, Griselda Pollock discusses the fundamental principles within art history such as its exclusivist and androcentric character. She states that we are obsessed with the stories of artists, much less with the individual works of art.⁵⁰ Substituting these artists with heroes, she elucidates our obsessions with artists as the idolatry of the artist. She follows Freud's logic to explicate why the integration of diversity into Art History never quite happened. Following this psychoanalytical logic, the artist becomes the ideal mirror for the art lover, and a figure kept at a distance and elevated to genius. The artist himself is idealized and mirrored, the artist becomes the superalter. There is no difference for connoisseurs and public alike. This explains why the integration of previously ignored artists, such as women and non-Western artists, is a difficult and slow process, and why the chronological narrative is so attractive.

Does the survey adhere to some kind of unconscious longing for a story about subsequent heroes? Do we feel safe in the arms of these heroic figures of past and present? Or is it our need for narrative and closure? In a roundtable discussion in *Art Journal* in 2005 several (exclusively American) art history professors discussed the use of survey courses for undergraduate students at universities. "Many students love to take survey courses, and many people love to teach them."⁵¹ How can we explain this supposed love for surveys?

⁴⁸ Brzyski, *Partisan Canons*, 3.

⁴⁹ While it is not true that there have been no attempts to change the canon. *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁰ Pollock, 'Whither Art History?', 18.

⁵¹ Peggy Phelan e.a., "Art History Survey: A Round-Table Discussion", *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (2005) 33.

I have analyzed this roundtable discussion and have come up with four main themes often mentioned by these art history professors.

Definition	Purpose	Appeal	Image
Rough framework	'inspire students to pursue a culture consuming life', visit museums etc.	'big ideas'	Stigma
Key time posts	"The survey should be the beginning of a journey."	large historical sweep, large audience, large range of artworks	Lacking any aesthetic theory
Introduction	Create confidence		
What counts as art	Sense of ownership		
Lower division course	Developing (analytical skill) critical way of thinking		
Traditional	Past and present		
Formally based	Making the art world accessible		
Western orientated	Empowering		
Janson or Gardner	Value of art		
Reproductions (mere exposure)	Framework for sorting the information		

In general there are several recurrent themes: confidence, framework, validation, bigger picture or grand narrative. For this research the most interesting theme is definition. Scholars refer to the survey course as representing the key time posts and exemplary of what counts as art. Especially this last comment 'what counts as art' supports the view that surveys are the

gatekeepers of heaven or in this case the canon. The common objective of art history professors teaching the survey is to make its content interesting for a twenty-first century audience. It is used to create familiar landmarks so that students feel confident when dealing with art. Students should feel confident enough to visit a museum and would be more likely to appreciate contemporary art. Although all professors acknowledge the untenable position of the 'traditional' chronologically organized survey, they acknowledge that all critical contemporary thinkers from Foucault to Said draw upon vast knowledge and understanding of the canon.⁵² Without being familiar with the canon, it is impossible to fully understand the works of such scholars. This would imply that it would take several generations of art historians to eradicate the canon as structure of all scholarly activity.

Reflexive canonicity: Multiple canons

Due to its persistence and seemingly inevitability within art history, in more recent literature the canon has been dealt with in a different, more reflexive way. However, artists themselves have abandoned the canon as thinking system while meeting the conditions of canonicity.⁵³ By not referring to the canon as either an unproblematic given or exclusively in negative terms, scholars are currently involved in looking into the diverse factors affecting the maintenance and production of canons, such as market forces, nationalism, gender, race, and academic power positions. Dependent on times, geographic location and agenda, there are multiple parallel canons.⁵⁴ To understand the multiplicity of the canon, it is important to make a distinction between content and structure. If we see canons from the functional perspective, as conceptual structures, any kind of style can be canonical simultaneously with other styles.

Abstract Expressionism is often described as triumphing in the 1950s, implying that all other art styles at the time didn't really matter, whereas it is the canon that gives us the impression of a neatly closed-off time period. Following the examples in *Partisan Canons* (2007), especially following Robert Jensen in his evaluation of the Impressionist canon, I will research Abstract Expressionism as a canonical framework which is formed by external factors such as those mentioned above. In my discussion of Abstract Expressionism, I will

⁵² Ibid., 37.

⁵³ In contemporary art practice discourse, the call on canons is annihilated. Contemporary art does meet many conditions of canonicity: art museum recognition, avid collecting, high sale prices, inclusion in textbooks and peer acknowledgment. But a degree of confidence in the widespread valiance of judgment and in the continuity of valuing is gone, according to Terry Smith. See *Partisan Canons* (2007), 324.

⁵⁴ Brzyski, *Partisan Canons*, 4.

stress the multiplicity of canons and the subjectivity of their carriers in regard to introductory survey texts written by art historians.

Survey texts have steadily evolved but rarely has the expansion of surveys altered what art historians considered art.⁵⁵ There is a general stability about who are regarded as the most important artists. The more prominent an artist is within the canon, the less differentiations can be found in his or her reception. Does this also hold true for Abstract Expressionism? Before addressing this question, I will first discuss the history of survey texts and their role within the process of canonization.

What is the role of survey texts within the process of canonization?

Next to institutions such as museums and galleries, survey texts are important indicators of the canonization of artworks, artists and art styles. Survey texts are the carrier of the canon, though they are looked down upon by many art historians. It is hard to speak about the canon without discussing survey texts. Anthologies of art history maintain the canonized collection. The same can be said of retrospective exhibitions of artists or styles, whereas institutions such as contemporary galleries or periodicals tend to reflect and create 'trends'. Their choices directly reflect preferences in the field of actual production.⁵⁶ Survey texts are much more static. The art works presented in these survey texts are 'imprisoned' within the canon, they no longer participate in the active art 'production', they become entities. Only very brave contemporary artists will attempt to challenge or appropriate canonized artworks. The latter become sanctified. Nonetheless attempts have been made throughout art history by brilliant artists, such as *Olympia*, 1863 by Manet or *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili, 1996. In both works prior canonical art is challenged, respectively Titiaan's *Venus*, 1538 and a random depiction of Mary.

The earliest survey texts were written in Germany in the early nineteenth century and were part of a national identity construction, 'making of the nation'. Survey texts are therefore exemplary for the way the discipline of art history has been structured since its institutionalization.⁵⁷ As a consequence, art history as a discipline was structured along geopolitical lines, each nation producing its own art and culture. Reference books showed the variations of national styles over time. The discipline presented its object of study (the art and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁶ Sheffy, 'The Concept of Canonicity in Polysystem Theory', 517.

⁵⁷ Institutionalized Art History began as a university discipline in the German-language universities of Central Europe and was exported to the rest of the world with the exemption of Great Britain, which only belatedly joined in during the twentieth century. Pollock, "Whither Art History?", 13.

the artists) as part of a strong narrative, awarding each style, as well as art history in general, its own beginning, middle and end. Survey texts are mostly structured as novels, with a beginning (prehistoric or Greek), middle (Renaissance) and end (modernism/postmodernism).

Today survey texts serve a different purpose, namely to introduce undergraduate students to the highlights of art's triumphant story.⁵⁸ Ironically, the discipline itself downplays survey texts to obligatory literature for undergraduate students: "The discipline of art history dismisses introductory textbooks and treats canons as if they were alien creatures feeding off the body of art, we can hardly expect survey textbooks to be better than most of them currently are."⁵⁹ This derogatory attitude towards introductory texts could have serious consequences considering their profound impact on future art historians. The surveys, and those teaching it, truly define what is and what is not art. The courses have consequences for art history education and the future of the arts.⁶⁰ Survey textbooks often are the first encounter students have with art history, and therefore 'preprogram' students in the way they practice art history. In *Partisan Canons* it is stressed that survey texts are predominantly used in American universities, it is stated that in Europe students are introduced to the art historical canon earlier on in the educational system. From my own experience I can argue otherwise, having read Gombrich in my first year of college, though it is striking that most authors writing about the problematic nature of the use of surveys in art history education are American. The problem seems to be addressed more often among American scholars. For example, for many undergraduate students, Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* is still the first introduction to Art History with a capital A, portraying 'the story of art' as a chain of masterpieces by geniuses. Through this introduction students learn to think of art history in this narrative context. The *metadiscourse* can be described as a the thinking system in which past, present and future art is framed. Although Gombrich has been critiqued for pretending to be able to tell 'the story of art', he still accounts for the first encounters with art history for many future art historians. The popular surveys written by Janson, Arnason or Gardner are still widely used in the introductory courses at universities. According to Elkins, they promote a certain kind of education, namely a general cultural literacy, which was originally a German idea in the nineteenth century known as *Bildung*, and today is called aesthetic education.

⁵⁸ Elkins, *Stories of Art*, 85.

⁵⁹ Robert Jensen, 'Measuring Canons', in: Idem ed., *Partisan Canons*, 50.

⁶⁰ Phelan e.a., "Art History Survey: A Round-Table Discussion", 34.

Categories of survey texts

Narrowly defined, survey texts are simplified, compressed, conventionalized stories, written by serious historians and providing a clear chronology.⁶¹ They do not reflect questions or disagreements between scholars about disjunctions in history but answer the ‘traditional’ questions of styles and artistic movements. Furthermore, they are an introduction to the ‘Art of the West’, centered on the great narratives of high cultures, and can be processed in the timespan of one academic year.⁶² They are characterized by canonicity, chronology, subjectivity and “art history’s unnatural attachment to closure”, referring to the extraordinary need to define neat time periods with subsequent styles.⁶³

In the 1990s scholars have proposed to do away with the existing survey texts, such as Janson, Hartt and Gombrich because they were too subjective and authoritarian.⁶⁴ James Elkins, an advocate of traditional art history and its methods, has proposed taking non-Western canonical frameworks as examples for a restructuring of our own Western canon, thereby proposing a decisive break with Western institutions.⁶⁵ Although others such as Barry Flood state that transcending the canon is a fantasy, they acknowledge that the canon can never be completely abandoned.⁶⁶ But apparently this has not led to much change, since Janson’s handbook is still being sold just like Gombrich’s or Arnason’s, although recent survey books try to get around the biases and put ‘everything’ in, leading to very extensive tables of contents. David Summers’s *Real Spaces*, published in 2003, seems to be an exception in the realm of survey textbooks. He presents an art historical overview without a chronological structure. Summers wants to create a *lingua franca* for an expanded history of art. It is an attempt to formulate a contextual method of description of works of art plus a more intercultural art history.⁶⁷ It is a broad conceptual history, perhaps at the moment the broadest survey possible. Summers leans toward art history focusing on form but taking into regard the culturally specific contexts and non-linearity of art production.⁶⁸ Summers has succeeded in opposing the three main objectives of older survey texts:

⁶¹ Ibid., 57.

⁶² Graham, “The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey”, 30.

⁶³ Murray and Soraya Murray, “Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity”, 39.

⁶⁴ Graham, “The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey”, 39.

⁶⁵ Elkins, *Stories of Art*, 127.

⁶⁶ Finbarr Barry Flood, ‘From the Prophet to postmodernism? New world orders and the end of Islamic art’, in: Idem. ed., *Making Art History : A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, 46.

⁶⁷ David Summers, “Real spaces”, *World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (2003) 19.

⁶⁸ James Elkins, “Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism (Book)”, *Art Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (2004) 373–81.

1. Strict periodization, especially in regard to modernism: “I will not offer a history of the works of art we call modern, nor will I try to say when modernism might have begun or ended.”⁶⁹

2. Any form of chronology (it is therefore pure formalist).

3. Any claim to progress. Progress is local, partial and focused.

Real Spaces is an attempt to work around the survey text as being chronological or teleological. Its problem is that it is too difficult and philosophical for any first introduction and therefore will not easily replace the earlier surveys. Peggy Phelan, among others, has also positively reviewed Foster’s *Art since 1900*, though organized around art styles and periods, stating that it will no doubt be adopted as a new text for the art history survey. This shows that the ‘story of art’ can be told in a different way, apart from the chronological genealogical model.

In general these broad surveys of world art history situate as much as possible material in a chronological narrative, with the ultimate goal of inclusiveness. They reorder existing material in the light of a new idea, perhaps discovering new objects for consideration. Surveys become necessary when paradigms change, as a whole picture is at stake rather than individual details. At other times, surveys become unnecessary and field work is the order of the day.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Summers, “Real spaces”, 549.

⁷⁰ Elkins, “Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism (Book)”, 80.

Methodology: How to measure a canon through a survey text?

Although I would like to be able to pinpoint to the exact moment Abstract Expressionism was included in a survey text, it is also only in rare instances that a canon can be traced to a concrete point of origin such as an exhibition, text or event.⁷¹ Consequently, I do not expect to be able to exactly identify the origin of the canon of Abstract Expressionism. The most convenient way to determine what is canonical at a certain moment in time is by conducting a textbook survey.⁷² Here I will be able to give an indication of when Abstract Expressionism became incorporated in the canon.

As previously stated, canons are empty structures, filled in by art historians over time. Survey texts are the product of the consensus of several art historians, and portray the most important works as ‘agreed upon’. It becomes irrelevant whether or not we critique the canon in general, more importantly we must contextualize the structure of a canon and its external influences. As shown by several scholars, the canon is not static, though fairly stable in its content, but it evolves over time, especially expanding its scope and preferring one artist over the other within a certain art style depending on the time period.⁷³ Gradually it has become apparent that canons are persistent within the art historical discipline and that the discipline has not (yet) invented any other framework.

If an artist is mentioned in a survey text, it is safe to say that he or she is generally accepted as canonical, and that this status will hardly ever change in the Western framework of art history. My case study, the canon of Abstract Expressionism, will demonstrate how a specific art canon has emerged and developed over a fifty-year time period in American and West-European survey texts, while acknowledging that there are also non-Western survey texts, and that Western European survey texts should also include for instance Spanish, French and German ones. The surveys that I have analyzed are the result of searches in Dutch libraries. For further research it would be interesting to see if Abstract Expressionism (or any other canonized artist or art movement) is mentioned in, for example, Indian or Argentinian survey textbooks, and if not, which alternative canons are presented as the canons of the 1950s. This would underpin the theory of multiple canons. However, in this thesis I will take into consideration the time (which decade), geographic location (nationality of the historian and

⁷¹ Brzyski, *Partisan Canons*, 8.

⁷² Robert Jensen, ‘Measuring the Canon’, in: Idem ed. *Partisan Canons*, 32.

⁷³ See Jensen’s article for an example of how the Impressionist canon has evolved over time.

country of publication) and, where possible, the political and social agendas of the art historians writing the survey texts.

What will be measured?

I have analyzed 29 surveys published between 1950 and 2000, focusing on the chapters on Abstract Expressionism. Special attention will be given to the most widely read survey texts (which are marked in red in the bibliography). Gardner's *Art through the ages*, first published in 1926, was one of the first attempts at a one-volume history of world art and has been revised and republished up to the present. Gombrich's *Story of Art*, first published in 1950, is the closest a textbook has ever come to providing a clear single narrative, according to Elkins. It is still a must-read for many undergraduate art history students. Arnason's *History of Modern Art*, which was first published in 1968, has been reedited and republished several times, and a more recent survey text, Stokstad's *Art History*, first published in 1995, represents the current attempts to integrate Western and non-Western material. It will be interesting to look at the differences in the subsequent editions of these 'histories of art' in the reception of Abstract Expressionism.

To answer the first part of my research question how an art historical canon is created, I will look at the survey books published in the 1950s. The following sub-questions concerning the content and structure will guide me in analyzing these textbooks:

1. When was the first time Abstract Expressionism was mentioned in a survey text? It will be interesting to see how long it took for Abstract Expressionism to be included in a survey text after its appearance in the art world.
2. Which artists were associated with Abstract Expressionism? And was it portrayed as an art style?
3. Which artworks were discussed? And which were reproduced?
4. Which adjectives are used to describe the artworks and artists? These adjectives will be called keywords, which I will summarize at the end of each chapter. These keywords can tell us something about the implicit reception of Abstract Expressionism and the 'hidden' opinion of the author of the survey.
5. In what way is Abstract Expressionism positioned within the continuum of art history?

Nationality: What are the differences between surveys written respectively by West-European (notably English, Dutch and German) and by American art historians about Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s?

To answer the second part of my research question about the maintenance of the canon, I will look at survey texts from the 1960s onwards to research how Abstract Expressionism is mentioned in these works. At the end of each chapter I will summarize the results of the analysis. The following sub-questions will guide me in analyzing these textbooks:

1. Which artists are associated with Abstract Expressionism? Has the list of artists associated with Abstract Expressionism changed over time?
 2. Which artworks are discussed and which are reproduced?
 3. What keywords are used to describe Abstract Expressionism?
- **Nationality:** Are there differences between surveys written respectively by West-European (notably English, Dutch and German) and American art historians about Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s and onwards?

As I have reviewed all the collected data, I have come up with the following categories which each survey includes: *Continuum, Reception, Contextualization, Dominance 1950s, First American Achievement, Pollock*. Continuum: how is Abstract Expressionism discussed in art history? Reception concerns subjective statements. Contextualization: statements made on historical circumstances influencing Abstract Expressionism. Dominance 1950s: statements explaining the sudden rise and fall of the art style. First American achievement: statements made about Abstract Expressionism being the first innovative art style to arise in the United States. Because Pollock is the only painter consistently (from the very beginning) associated with Abstract Expressionism since the 1950s, he is the only one I can research over the total period of fifty years. It is interesting to see how his representation and position within Abstract Expressionism has changed over time. This method is comparable to the grounded theory method, however, I have not used this method to develop a new theory but to systematically order my data set. These categories have made it easier to compare the surveys on these diverse subjects.

In addition to these questions there are two hypotheses that I want to test when analyzing the survey texts from the 1960s onwards.

First hypothesis: The farther removed one gets from the “core of the canon” (the artists most often associated with Abstract Expressionism or who are seen as the most influential), the more uncertain the specific contributions of an artist or a work of art become; or, conversely, the more uncertain an artist’s specific contributions are, the less canonical the artist.⁷⁴ In the

⁷⁴ Robert Jensen, ‘Measuring the canon’, in: Idem ed. *Partisan Canons*, 47.

case study of the Impressionist canon, important, but not widely influential artists such as Berthe Morisot, although frequently illustrated in the textbooks, are represented by a great variety of works, while for example Caillebotte's work *Paris Street: Rainy Day* is never excluded from a survey text. Caillebotte is always represented by this single work. I am curious if this is also true for certain artworks in the Abstract Expressionist canon.

Second hypothesis: Due to Marxist, feminist and post-colonial critique on the content of survey textbooks, there must be a difference (expansion in content) between survey texts roughly before and after 1970.⁷⁵

Goal: Ultimately my goal is to be able to explain which external factors have influenced the canon (geospecific, temporal, political) of Abstract Expressionism. As a result of my analysis of the survey texts I will be able to answer how this canon has developed, which artists and artworks have been associated with Abstract Expressionism and which place this art style has been awarded within the larger narrative of art history.

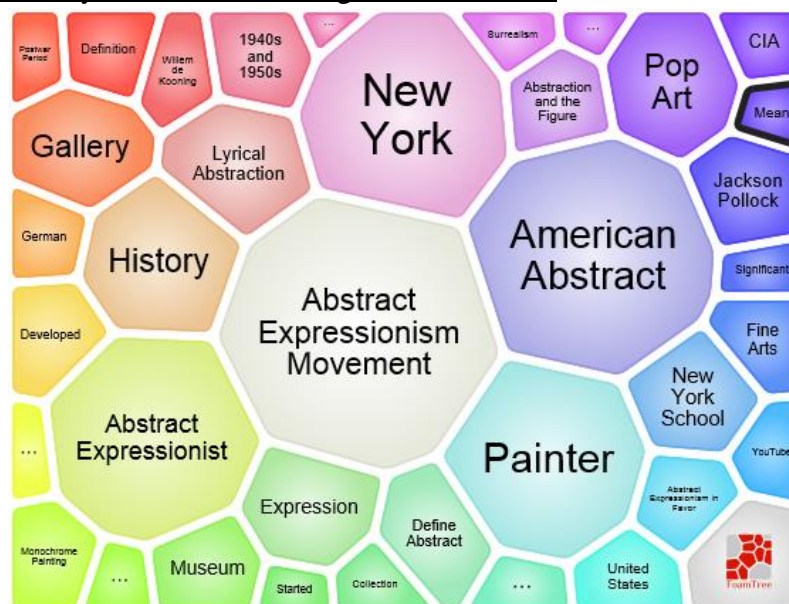
Currently the artists associated with the first generation of abstract expressionists are Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), Franz Kline (1910–1962), Lee Krasner (1908–1984), Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), William Bazotes (1912–1963), Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992), and Clyfford Still (1904–1980), among others.⁷⁶ However these artists never saw themselves as part of (any) tight group.

⁷⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?", *The feminism and visual culture reader*, (1971) 229–33.

⁷⁶ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm <31-07-2015>

Case study: Abstract Expressionism as canon

I have used the search engine carrot search which clusters information found on the internet, to give on a global overview of who is mostly mentioned with regards to Abstract Expressionism on the internet. This provides us with a framework on the factors most associated with Abstract Expressionism.



search terms: Abstract Expressionism



search terms: action painting

These two foam trees give a global overview of subjects relating to Abstract Expressionism and action painting. In short, Abstract Expressionism is related to ‘a movement’ and to American abstract painting. New York is also often discussed in association with Abstract Expressionism. Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock are two separate strands. Notably in the right hand corner there is a small group with CIA. In short, Action Painting is associated with Jackson Pollock, New York School, Color field Painting and ‘painting definition’.

Analyzing the 29 surveys

Cautiously including Abstract Expressionism 1950-1960

It is likely that the survey textbooks prior to 1950 did not yet include Abstract Expressionism. Approximately between 1943 and 1955 the ‘first generation’ Abstract Expressionists came into existence in New York. Robert Coates used the term ‘Abstract Expressionism’ for the first time in 1946 in an article published in the *New Yorker* to describe the work of artist Hans Hofmann. In 1947 Pollock developed his characteristic style of painting, in which he made his first ‘drip paintings’, henceforth associated with ‘Action Painting’, a term which was popularized by Harold Rosenberg in 1952. After *Life Magazine* ran the famous article ‘Is he the greatest painter alive?’ in 1949, accompanied by pictures of Jackson Pollock working in his studio, and a showing at the Betty Parsons gallery in 1950, Pollock’s work and therefore ‘action painting’ became particularly wide known.

Pollock’s fame had already risen to substantial heights in the mid-1950s, though prior to 1950 he was not widely known outside the New York art world. Therefore, survey texts written between 1950 and 1955 presumably are the first possible survey texts, at least including Pollock and therefore other painters, as Pollock was the most well-known at the time.

I have tried to contextualize the individual backgrounds and interests of all art historians writing survey texts. I have succeeded in some cases better than in others. For example, Gombrich, Canaday and Read were very outspoken about their stylistic preferences and opinions, while others are either simply less well known or have been less outspoken about their judgments. The style of writing in the 1950s was much more subjective than it is today. Therefore, apart from the discernible prejudices in interviews, I will be able to abstract the author’s opinion on Abstract Expressionism, and more generally their take on contemporary art, through close reading of their prefaces. In this chapter I will discuss three American survey texts, written by Henri Taylor, Bernard Myers and John Canaday and respectively published in 1954, 1957 and 1959 and four European survey texts including two Dutch texts, written by Ernst Gombrich, Herbert Read, Van der Grinten and Van Thienen and respectively published in 1950, 1957, 1958 and 1959.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ I was unable to find any surveys written in 1955 or 1956.

Three out of the seven surveys do not mention Abstract Expressionism. Two of these three surveys were written by European scholars, namely Gombrich in 1950 and Van der Grinten in 1958, the only American survey not mentioning Abstract Expressionism is Taylor (1954). In total, 67% of the surveys acknowledged Abstract Expressionism as new art style. 18 different artists are associated with Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s.

Artists	Number of times mentioned
Jackson Pollock	4
Willem de Kooning	4
Philip Guston	2
William Baziotis	2
Hans Hofmann	1
Arshile Gorky	1
Jack Tworkov	1
Adolph Gottlieb	1
Barnett Newman	1
Franz Kline	1
Grace Hartigan	1
Theodoros Stamos	1
Paul Burlin	1
Mark Rothko	1
Bradley Tomlin	1
Clyfford Still	1
Robert Motherwell	1

What could be the possible reasons for these three authors not to include Abstract Expressionism? Firstly Gombrich and Taylor were notorious for their disdain of contemporary nonfigurative avant-garde art. These old-fashioned men seemed to be especially struck by the very personal approach of artists. Artists no longer felt obliged to produce art which expressed universal aspirations, the artist having been “a servant of religion and humanity” for centuries according to Taylor.⁷⁸ Taylor disagrees with the very personal approach of his contemporaries, stating that they are misusing their talents for their own

⁷⁸ Francis Henry Taylor, *Fifty Centuries of Art. Published for the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Harper & Brothers, New York, NY, 1954) 176.

personal gain. Rather they should use their talents for a greater good, like ‘the artist’ has been doing throughout the ages, in other words, the artist’s traditional role. Part of the disapproval is due to the deviation from these principles. Furthermore Taylor is said to have referred to the MoMa as: “that whorehouse on Fifty-third Street.”⁷⁹ Since Taylor was Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1940-1955 it is very unlikely that he had never heard of Abstract Expressionism, him being the director of a major art museum in New York City. “The future course of the American artist who, like the layman, is now at the crossroads in politics and economics, may not be clear for another generation.”⁸⁰ Taylor does not seem convinced that the contemporary trends he has observed will have a lasting impact on future generations of artists. Apparently, Taylor seems apprehensive of making any final judgements on the value of contemporary art (including Abstract Expressionism). Taylor disapproves of contemporary art because it has not yet proved its lasting impact. It will take more time to find out what is truly art with a capital A. However on the very last page of the survey, without any further reference or discussion, four artworks are reproduced, which were all on view in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York:

William Baziotés	Dragon, 1950.
Georgia O’Keeffe	Cow’s Skull, 1931.
Charles Demuth	I saw the figure 5 in gold, 1928.
Max Weber	Beautification, 1947.

He reproduced a work by Baziotés from 1950, but does not explicitly discuss this artwork. Today Baziotés is mostly associated with the abstract expressionists. A possible explanation could be that the *Metropolitan Museum*, on which he predominantly based his survey, did not own any works of Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky or any other painter (except Baziotés) later on associated with the style of painting, at the time of publishing in 1954.⁸¹ Gombrich was not a huge admirer of contemporary art, to put it lightly, in the earlier versions of *The Story of Art* Gombrich’s descriptions tend to be less concealing of his real opinion. However what he

⁷⁹ <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/taylorf.htm>

⁸⁰ Taylor, *Fifty Centuries of Art*, 183.

⁸¹ After a brief check in their online database: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search?ft=abstract+expressionism>, the earliest work acquired from an abstract expressionist is Gorky’s, *Water of the Flowery Mill* (1944) in 1956 <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/488915?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=abstract%2Bexpressionism&pos=7&imgno=0&tabname=object-information> and in 1957 they acquired: Pollock’s *Autumn rhythm (number 30)* from 1950. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/488978?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=abstract+expressionism&pos=1>

exactly thought about modern art remains to be an open question. Elkins takes as example the differences in description of Giacometti's marble Head (1927) between the Fourth edition in 1951 and the sixteenth edition in 1995. The Fourth edition is much more outspokenly critical of the marble Head: "He is a sculptor who is fascinated by certain special problems of his calling and he assumes – rightly or wrongly- that we too share his interest." In contrast to the sixteenth edition: "Though all that is visible on the slab are two dells, one vertical and one horizontal, it still gazes at us much as do those works of tribal art discussed in the first chapter."⁸² The reason why Gombrich changed his opinion on the artistic and aesthetic merits of Giacometti is not clarified by Elkins. Instead he discusses the philosophic problems raised by Gombrich's structuring, in and exclusion of art history.

In the first edition of *The Story of Art* there is only a small paragraph on American art, in which Gombrich discusses (among others) Feininger, as an exemplary representative. It is most likely that he *chose* not to mention Abstract Expressionism than that this resulted from ignorance. Gombrich concludes his survey with the discussion of surrealism, with works by Salvador Dali and Grant Wood: "The best known of the modern movements in art- Surrealism." He describes surrealism as "self-contradictory, and unrealistic as one cannot become 'primitive' at will."⁸³ In his last chapter, which he titled 'Experimental Art: The Twentieth Century', abstract art is mentioned as follows: "paintings which discard all subject matters are often referred to as 'abstract' pictures". [...] The idea that art is first and foremost a means of self-expression was bound to lead to a number of experiments."⁸⁴ The name of this chapter is exemplary of Gombrich's general opinion on contemporary abstract art.

Contemporary art is presented as experimental, implying that the artworks included in this chapter are experiments that have not yet proven their value. In addition, Gombrich refers to 'pictures', which has a realistic connotation, pictures referring to the visual images of reality. According to Elkins Gombrich's *The Story of Art* is the closest the century came to producing a book with clarity of purpose and a single, continuous narrative. It tells the story with no distractions.⁸⁵ It is the prime example of the standard story of art: the discovery, triumph and abandonment of naturalistic skill. It is presented as a story with a strong narrative and an ambiguous ending. The plot is almost theatrical and consisting out of five acts. The fifth act is

⁸² Elkins, *Stories of Art*, 61–62.

⁸³ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (London, 1950) 441.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 428.

⁸⁵ Elkins, *Stories of Art*, 59.

partly tragic, artists chose to abandon an acquired skill. This is comparable to Taylor's disappointment in the misuse of talents by artists.

A possible explanation for the third survey not including Abstract Expressionism, is more likely because the author Van der Grinten, was not well acquainted with Abstract Expressionism. As the art style was not yet as well known in Europe as it was in the United States. In the last chapters of the survey Van der Grinten does discuss surrealism, constructivism and neo-plasticism, but in general no artists post 1930s. There is also no mention of any American painters, in consequence there is no mention of Abstract Expressionism as art style. In the paragraph on artists of some importance outside the Netherlands, Van der Grinten focusses on German and French artists such as Cubists and Expressionists, for example Cézanne and Picasso. Perhaps if Van der Grinten had included any American painters he would have included Abstract Expressionism.

In contrast, the (personal) disapproval of Abstract Expressionism did not prevent Canaday from discussing Abstract Expressionism. He was a conservative art critic and professor, anti-modernist, and anti-intellectual.⁸⁶ Highly unlikely but true, is the fact that Canaday was the chief art critic for *The New York Times* from 1959 to 1973. He referred to most of the Abstract Expressionists as unimaginative imitators who "have either reached the end of a blind alley or painted themselves into a corner."⁸⁷ "Perhaps Abstract Expressionism cannot mean anything because the vast welter of New York is in itself meaningless, an unhappy possibility. If so, then the quarrel is not with the artist's limitation but with our time and our city, of which Abstract Expressionism offers a complete and authentic expression. New York is always called an exciting city, and so it is. But the things that make it exciting also make it monotonous if they are not tied to something deeper than surface movement and color. That is what I look for in Abstract Expressionist painting and do not find, and that is why I find it monotonous."⁸⁸ Canaday uses the word monotonous to describe abstract expressionist's formal aspects, therefore only focusing on movement and color in the paintings. Canaday closely associated the art style with the city of New York, it not being the artists' 'fault' for creating such monotonous art, as the city evokes this superficial style. However Canaday did discuss Abstract Expressionism in his survey, even in a fairly positive manner, which I will discuss later.

⁸⁶ "The Art Story: Art Critic - John Canaday", <http://www.theartstory.org/critic-canaday-john.htm>. <9 July 2015>

⁸⁷ Ibid., 'The Art Story'.

⁸⁸ Ibid., "The Art Story: Art Critic - John Canaday."

The other authors who did include Abstract Expressionism tend to be apprehensive about making any final judgments on contemporary art. Abstract Expressionism is included on conditional terms, for example Van Thienen stresses that a certain authenticity cannot be denied as long as art is born out of protest, and if all conformist conceptions are abandoned in art and in life. Willem de Kooning is described as simply applying a formula, because in his personal life he was not a nonconformist. Abstract Expressionism is described as a very personal art style and its authenticity is tied to whether or not the artist adhered to a non-conformist attitude in his personal life as well. Likewise Canaday stresses that the art of de Kooning would be senseless, if one did not accept the totality of Kandinsky's premise that "De Kooning's work is inchoate, fragmentary, and senseless unless we accept the totality of Kandinsky's premise that a painter, through talent, training and experience reaches a point where he may express himself without recognizable forms in form and color."⁸⁹ Most authors legitimize Abstract Expressionism by referring to Abstract Expressionism as part of a much longer tradition, even though they mention that the reader "may find it hard to believe" that Abstract Expressionism had artistic precedents. "Painters today take their principles to extremes who appear to splash color at random, following spontaneous impulse." Canaday compares his contemporaries' opinion on abstract expressionists with what prior critics had said about Delacroix, who was accused of painting with "a drunken broom." [...] "Some abstract expressionists have literally painted with brooms. This may be going a little far, but it still goes in the direction set by early romanticism and continued through van Gogh."⁹⁰ Delacroix and Van Gogh are used here to legitimize the inclusion of Abstract Expressionism and rebut the criticism of his fellow critics.

Abstract Expressionism is fitted into art history as part of a longstanding modernist tradition, being the product of a varying mixture of styles that is especially innovative due to its methods which Pollock and others created in 1946-1947 directly after the Second World War in New York City. Abstract Expressionism is used as a broad term, encompassing a wide variety of art styles. However, the labels 'action painting' and the 'New York School' are used to refer directly to the works associated with Abstract Expressionism today. The 'new' style is discussed as an extreme movement combining previous (European) art styles and isms, such as: dada, surrealism, romanticism, expressionism and impressionism. According to

⁸⁹ Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962) 448.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 449.

Read apart from Western influences, oriental calligraphy is mentioned as an influence (broad brushstrokes). In general authors refer to the improvisatory tradition stemming from Kandinsky, though according to Myers, Paul Burlin projects a “highly personal and far more violent form and color arrangement” than Kandinsky ever had.⁹¹ There Burlin can be seen as a more evident precedent in the tradition of improvisatory art. Myers goes on to state that: “During the post-World War II period in the United States, besides the continuation of many geometric, Expressionist, and Surrealist styles, a series of new formulations have come forward.”⁹² Abstract Expressionism is described as being one of the two movements (the other being the mystic painters of the Northwest) as a “varying mixture of Abstract Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and in its most extreme form Dadaist practices involving the spontaneous and intuitive spattering of paint.”⁹³ Influences from “Klee, Kandinsky, Masson, Matta, Miró, Arp, and similar sources may frequently be noted in this imaginative and intensely subjective art.

Many authors especially emphasize that Abstract Expressionism is an art style originating in America which for the first time has influenced artists abroad. Though the art style is not exclusively found in America. For example Myers states that: “Parallel developments have taken place in many countries in Europe and even in Latin America.”⁹⁴ Canaday states that: “At the moment of this writing, the most vigorously flourishing school of contemporary art in the United States, and to a lesser degree in France, is Abstract Expressionism.”⁹⁵ Read mythologizes Pollock: “since his death he has become a symbolic figure, representative of a whole movement that has given American painting an international status it never enjoyed before.” However, Read emphasizes that it is not a strictly American movement, because all modern movements are international and transnational.⁹⁶ Furthermore, most painters have stayed in Europe or were born there, no distinction should be made between American and European-born artists. These statements are indicative of the gradual dismantlement of the categorization of artists and art styles based on nationalities and geographic areas.

However Myers does state that the United States has acquired shared cultural leadership with Europe, (comparable to Read). “Both the New York and Northwest groupings are symptomatic of postwar sharing of modern cultural leadership by the United States and

⁹¹ Myers, *Art and Civilization* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1957) 653.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 655.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 655.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 655.

⁹⁵ Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 447.

⁹⁶ Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (London, 1959) 274.

Europe. This development is even more clearly marked in the field of sculpture.”⁹⁷ The Dutch surveys focus on the influence of Abstract Expressionism abroad. This implies that impacting the European art scene was an indicator of a new meaningful art style.

Canaday mentions five (exclusively European) artistic traditions contributing to Abstract Expressionism. Firstly, Abstract Expressionism is a result of the influence of expressionism in America in general. Secondly, the art of the impressionists has inspired contemporary artists to proceed in the expressive style of painting. Thirdly, Kandinsky’s theory of improvisation, stating that color and form can exist alone as expressive means, is presented as the theory on which Abstract Expressionism is based. Fourthly, early romanticism appears to be a significant influence,⁹⁸ and lastly, Abstract Expressionism seemingly owes its origin to *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider).⁹⁹ Canaday positions abstract expressionists within a longstanding tradition, starting with Delacroix and Van Gogh, continuing through Kandinsky. Canaday mentions this tradition to legitimize the seemingly extreme methods and materials used by abstract expressionists. Jackson Pollock being the artist with whom in retrospect we associate the whole concept of ‘action painting’ was inspired directly by Masson.”¹⁰⁰ Canaday directly compares the art of Jackson Pollock to the *Waterlilies* by Monet, exceptionally the same comparison will be made in the 1980s. In contrast with his description of de Kooning’s work Canaday is very positive about Pollock: “Monet is the bridge between naturalism of early impressionist painting and contemporary school of extreme abstraction [referring to: Abstract Expressionism]. The similarity between Monet and Pollock is: “the use of a pattern of different colors, densely intermingled or freely splattered, [...] without even secondary reference to nature. Monet’s late art was one of abstract surfaces where relationships of form and color exist for themselves in spite of the vestigial remains of a subject.”¹⁰¹ [...] “It is on this basis that Monet now seems to have anticipated a school of contemporary extremists.”¹⁰² He goes on to state that “Abstract impressionism” would be an appropriate term to describe Pollock’s “sparkling interweaving of dots, splashes, and ropelike lines of color.”¹⁰³ Canaday focusses on the formal aspects in the discussion of Pollock’s art.

⁹⁷ Myers, *Art and Civilization*, 656.

⁹⁸ According to Canaday, the titles of the artworks refer to a tradition of personal fulfillment and release at whatever expense, which is embedded in romanticism and reflect extreme individualism.

⁹⁹ Canaday, 448-449. Canaday refuses to use any authentic names and therefore translates everything into English: *Die Brücke* has turned into The Bridge.

¹⁰⁰ Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, 258.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 189.

In addition to Masson, Read also refers to other Surrealists, from artists like Ernst, Matta and Picasso as influential to Pollock. Exceptionally Read refers to ‘action painting’, which developed out of the work of Fautriers: “Fautriers’s style leads gradually towards ‘action painting’, a phrase invented by the American critic, Harold Rosenberg. The overall technique of the artists of Abstract Expressionism is compared to surrealism’s *écriture automatique*, according to Van Thienen.

Abstract Expressionism is consistently referred to as a ‘movement’ or school of which Jackson Pollock is the main figure, except in the survey written by Van Thienen. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning are both mentioned four times, Philip Guston and William Baziotes are both mentioned twice. Read discusses the biggest amount of artists but he is also writing a history of exclusively modern art. Jackson Pollock is referred to as the ‘inventor’ of this new extreme movement inspired by surrealism. Pollock’s work is most frequently reproduced, however not one artwork is reproduced twice. His work is directly compared to the late work of Monet. Pollock is said to have been directly influenced by Masson. Pollock is described as ‘the leader’ and a “symbolic figure of his time”. Especially Pollock’s method is legendary, in which he has deviated from the use of ‘traditional’ materials and way of painting. The ‘act’ of painting itself has become more important than the painting itself. Furthermore, the large size of the canvases is mentioned as exemplary and the use of brooms is referred to twice.

The movement is not explicitly contextualized in the historical circumstances. The historical context of post-World War II (except as a specific historical period, meaning since 1945), is only used to describe a new art style with ‘extreme’ formal aspects. The reasons for Abstract Expressionism making its appearance on the art scene after the war are not substantiated. However all authors emphasize that Abstract Expressionism would never have existed without the influence of all the art emigres fleeing Europe. For example Read states that “the arrival as refugees in American in 1941 of certain French artists seems to have been a significant event.” [...] “Matta Echaurren, bringing with him a dynamic form of Surrealism, which in its linear intensity anticipates some of the characteristics of action painting.

Some surveys present Abstract Expressionism as ‘flourishing at the time of writing’, such as Canaday and Myers. Others, however, present it as culminating in 1955 and demising after the mid-1950s. The reasons for the demise of Abstract Expressionism as dominant art style in the mid-1950s are not often explained in any concrete way. Almost unnoticeably several

authors equal the work of Jackson Pollock with Abstract Expressionism as a whole. Canaday, Read and Wentinck present Pollock as singlehandedly creating the first original meaningful American art due to his nonconformist style of painting.

There are no clear differences between American and European survey texts, however, half of the European surveys do not mention Abstract Expressionism. Both American and European authors acknowledge Abstract Expressionism's European influences.

Overall, the authors of the 1950s surveys seem overwhelmed by the movement, using adjectives like: violent, inchoate, extreme, and 'going a little far'. They are not sure yet whether or not Abstract Expressionism will turn out to be an influential art movement. It could also turn out to be a trend instead of an art style, unworthy of being incorporated into the canon. Apparently, one decade was not enough time for a final judgement on the matter. Several authors feel the need to legitimize abstract expressionists' violent nature. In contrast, Pollock is included in the list of 'great leaders of the modern movement' by Read and by the Dutch survey as the first noteworthy American painter.

In conclusion, Abstract Expressionism was already mentioned in 1950s survey text books, however, it focused predominantly on Jackson Pollock and on relating it to prior traditions. The first survey books mentioning Abstract Expressionism are the Dutch survey text by van Wentinck in 1957 and Myers in the same year.

Frequently used adjectives are: imaginative, nonfigurative method, personal, extreme, splashes, splattering, expressive, violent, nonconformist.

Acknowledgement as innovative art style 1960-1970

In this chapter I will predominantly discuss American survey texts published in the 1960s, starting with Janson's survey published in 1962, Robb and Garrison in 1963, Hamilton in 1967, and Fleming in 1968. Gombrich's 11th edition of his *Story of Art* published in 1967 and Arnason's *History of Art* published in 1969 are the only two European survey texts I could find for this period in Dutch libraries.

All six surveys discuss Abstract Expressionism, Gombrich's 1967 edition does include a work by Pollock. As during the 1950s, Jackson Pollock is the most often mentioned, as all surveys include his work. Interestingly not one artwork of Pollock is reproduced twice. Rothko is mentioned in three surveys (Arnason, Hamilton and Robb) as opposed to only once in the 1950s. His painting *Orange and Yellow* is reproduced in two surveys. Hans Hofmann is included in two survey texts, opposed to once in the 1950s. Philip Guston, one of the three most mentioned artists in the 1950s, is now only mentioned by Arnason, who includes the biggest amount of artists in general. Grace Hartigan, Theodoros Stamos and Paul Burlin are no longer mentioned as abstract expressionists. In addition, Matta, Tobey, Reinhardt and Marca-Relli are added in the chapter on Abstract Expressionism.

Artists	Number of times mentioned
Jackson Pollock	6
Mark Rothko	3
Willem de Kooning	2
Clyfford Still	2
Robert Motherwell	2
Franz Kline	2
Hans Hofmann	2
Adolph Gottlieb	2
Arshile Gorky	1
Jack Tworkov	1
Barnett Newman	1
Philip Guston	1
Roberto Matta	1
Ad Reinhardt	1
Conrad Marca-Relli	1

The group of artists associated with the art style is more elaborately demarcated. For example, Arnason sets apart color field and action painters. There is a big difference between Janson's survey in 1962, in which only Jackson Pollock is mentioned, and Arnason's survey in 1969, in which he includes 19 artists. This could mean that Abstract Expressionism was more widely known and had been studied at the end of the 1960s, or it can be explained by the fact that Janson was writing a history of art and Arnason's survey is a history of exclusively modern art.

According to Arnason the official recognition of the art style took place in 1951 with the exhibition in the MOMA. Arnason is the first to mention several critics, such as Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Robert Coates, and Alfred Barr. Matta, together with Robert Motherwell, helped bridge the gap between European surrealism and the American movement which would later be called Abstract Expressionism. "Aside from their intrinsic quality, Pollock's drip paintings contributed other elements that changed the course of modern painting. Although he had no direct stylistic followers, he affected the course of experimental painting after him."¹⁰⁴ Arnason states that Pollock had fundamentally impacted the art production.

As stated before Gombrich does include Abstract Expressionism in his 1967 edition. In his Postscript from 1965, Gombrich elaborates on writing contemporary history: "Can one really write or teach the history of art 'up to the present day' as one can write or teach the history of aviation? Many critics hope that one can, but I am less sure. But only a prophet could tell whether these artists will really 'make history', and on the whole critics have proved poor prophets."¹⁰⁵ Gombrich is very skeptical about the possibilities of historians being able to make any judgments on contemporary art. One would expect that this skepticism is reflected in Gombrich's discussion of Abstract Expressionism, however this is not really the case: "In France this concentration on the mark or blot left by the brush was called tachisme. At the time when I was writing the last chapter, the American artist Jackson Pollock had begun experimenting with novel ways of applying paint. [...] Becoming impatient of conventional methods, he put his canvas on the floor and dripped, poured, or threw his paint to form

¹⁰⁴ Arnason, *A History of Modern Art*, (London, Prentice Hall 1969) 500.

¹⁰⁵ Ernst Gombrich, *Story of Art* (London, Phaidon, 1967) 455. NB: In the later 1972 edition, "Not all these painters" is substituted with: "Not all his followers." The shift from the word *painters* to *followers* implies that the artists had grouped together. Gombrich thereby implies the assembly of a group with Pollock as group leader.

surprising configurations. He probably remembered stories of Chinese painters who had used such unorthodox methods and also the practice of American Indians who make pictures in the sand for magic purposes. The resulting tangle of lines satisfies two opposing standards of twentieth century art: the childish scrawls at the time of life before children even start to form images and, at the opposite end, the sophisticated interest in the problems of pure painting. Pollock has thus been hailed as one of the initiators of a new style known as ‘action painting’ or Abstract Expressionism. Not all these painters use Pollock’s extreme methods but all of them believe in the need to surrender to spontaneous impulse. Like Chinese calligraphy these paintings must be done rapidly. They should not be premediated but rather resemble a spontaneous outburst.”¹⁰⁶ Gombrich emphasizes the spontaneous nature of ‘action painting’ and its unorthodox methods. Gombrich is not exclusively negative, although he does describe Pollock’s work as experimental ‘childish scrawls’ and ‘the use of unorthodox methods resulting from impatience, but on the other hand Gombrich acknowledges Abstract Expressionism satisfying the sophisticated interest in the problems of pure painting. Notable is that Gombrich does not give his own opinion on the art style (which he normally does), he only refers to others who have ‘hailed Pollock as an initiator’.

In contrast to Gombrich’s focus on Pollock, Hamilton stresses the fact that also other painters were working in an abstract expressionist style, which itself was very diverse. “But Pollock was not alone in formulating a narrow if intense aesthetic. The New York School is the most neutral term, action painting is not inclusive enough as painters such as Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb have a deviating artistic procedure.”¹⁰⁷ Hereby referring to the stylistic differentiations within Abstract Expressionism.

Just like during the 1950s, the emphasis is on Abstract Expressionism being the first major American achievement. Hamilton states that: “the first kind of painting that was acknowledged abroad as original.” [...] The New York artists were finally able to “break the spell of the School of Paris.” Arnason likewise states that Abstract Expressionism was the first major original direction in the history of American painting.¹⁰⁸

Thus Europe’s approval (and dominance) is seen as indicative of the art becoming a valued style. According to the surveys abstract expressionists had distinguished themselves from

¹⁰⁶ Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 455.

¹⁰⁷ Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1880 to 1940*. Part of the Pelican History of Art series (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin Books, 1967) 350.

¹⁰⁸ Arnason, *A History of Modern Art*, 488.

their European precedents, the latter remained very important for the development of Abstract Expressionism: As Hamilton states that: “The development of Abstract Expressionism in New York was closely linked to the presence there during the War of several prominent European artists among whom the Surrealists, under Breton’s direction, were the most conspicuous. Through the exhibition of surrealist artworks American artists were helped to find their way from the American scene, to abstract design. [...] The definitions were European but the mood was not peculiar to Europe. American painters were the pioneers of a new sensibility, but that new sensibility was not an exclusively American privilege.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise Fleming describes Abstract Expressionism as: “a tense, explosive movement that had its inception in New York after World War II, combines the characteristics of cubist abstraction and non-objectivism with expressionist intensity and surrealist automatic painting.” The exact precedents of Abstract Expressionism are not yet discovered as according to Arnason there is still a fierce debate on what the influences of Abstract Expressionism are; “the history of Abstract Expressionism has yet to be written”. However, Arnason acknowledges the whole expressive wing to the impressionists as influential. Especially the influence of Picasso, Cézanne, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Arp, Miro, Duchamp, Klee and Schwitters are mentioned as being the important ‘prewar’ masters (pioneers) of painting. Especially through ‘the living lifeline with European art’ the teacher-artist Hans Hofmann, American artists became acquainted with European art: “The “old master” of the style [being Abstract Expressionism] was German Hans Hofmann who had absorbed the fauve and cubist techniques in Paris at the turn of the century.”¹¹⁰ The influence of art emigres to New York is more emphasized than it is in the 1950s, though already mentioned by for example Read (1958).

Comparably to the 1950s, authors especially compare Kandinsky’s art with the work of abstract expressionists, such as Robb and Garrison: “seeming novelty, Pollock’s method is not without precedent. Kandinsky’s *Improvisation no.30* was likewise the result of creating free, non-associative forms. [...] Kandinsky’s non-representational Expressionism, and the Surrealist’s exploitation of chance effects, are indeed the main sources. [...] Another parallel is evident in their comments about their feelings while painting.” Later on in their chapter on Abstract Expressionism Robb and Garrison state: “Obscure and baffling as the layman may find it, the Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s is an inevitable consequence of a trend which

¹⁰⁹ George Heard Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1880 to 1940*, 351.

¹¹⁰ In the chronological overview of the 20th century Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock are mentioned as being influential.

began in the late Renaissance. Subjective and emotional values like those found in Romanticist art can also be found in Abstract Expressionism.”¹¹¹ Abstract Expressionism is hereby set in a long lasting artistic tradition, even though it ‘may be hard to believe’ because of its “seeming novelty”, it inevitable developed over time. In other words art developed teleological. Other influences mentioned are cubism, expressionism and surrealism but also Chinese art, Far Eastern mysticism, Zen Buddhism, the latter especially stressed by Gombrich.

It is the first time that Abstract Expressionism itself is said (Robb and Garrison) to have (indirectly) influenced (art in general) Dubuffet and Op Art: “Whether or not Dubuffet *The Busy Life* (1953) is actually influenced by the “action painting” of American Abstract Expressionism, it clearly parallels it in significant respects.” Likewise Hamilton focusses on the influence of Abstract Expressionism on European artists: “The rapidity with which Abstract Expressionism became known and practiced in Europe can be partially explained by several factors.” For example Janson states that: “the term Abstract Expressionism, often applied to the style of painting that has been dominant on both sides of the Atlantic since the end of the second world war.” In addition Hamilton states that: “Immediately after the War, and in New York this time, there emerged a kind of abstract painting known in America and England as Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting, and in France as *art informel* or *tachisme*.” Hamilton acknowledges similar developments in England and France while stating that Abstract Expressionism specifically originated in New York.

On several occasions the description of Pollock’s work is accompanied by a discussion of his personality. He is the only painter whose personality is alluded to in a survey text. For example Janson gives an exceptional description of Pollock as thé American cowboy, including Pollock’s personality “Pollock regards paint itself as a storehouse of pent-up forces for him to release. He is himself the ultimate source of energy for these forces, and he “rides” them as a cowboy might ride a wild horse, in a frenzy of psychophysical action. He does not always stay in the saddle. The result is a surface so alive, so sensuously rich, that all earlier painting looks pallid in comparison.” Janson does not only describe his method but he equals Pollock’s own energy with the energy in the painting, therefore making Pollock and his art one and the same thing. ‘Action painting’ is a way for Pollock to release his energy, in other words comparing the act of painting with a kind of therapy session. Janson presents Pollock as a key figure and distinctive representative of the mid-twentieth century ‘Zeitgeist’. Janson

¹¹¹ Robb and Garrison, *Art in the Western World* (New York, Harper Brothers 1963) 636.

acknowledges the existence of more than one practitioner of Abstract Expressionism but does not state their names. Similarly Arnason states that Pollock is one of the most influential artists in the history of art.

Nevertheless Janson still feels compelled to defend Pollock's method: "To those who complain that Pollock is not sufficiently in control of his medium, we reply that this loss is more than offset by a gain- the new continuity and expansiveness of the creative process that gives his work its distinctive mid-twentieth-century stamp." Apparently there was a widespread opinion that Pollock's method was unprofessional, which Janson wanted to rebut.

More than in the 1950s, the specific social and political conditions of the time are indicated as influential to the development of Abstract Expressionism. Arnason states that: "The war created a ferment that brought on the victory of abstract and expressionistic art." [...] These factors being: rapid exchange, mobility, expressive abstraction as only viable form of communication at the end of the war. The realities of the artist's personal existence could only be expressed by the response of form and material to the necessities of his psychic situation." In addition, individual backgrounds of the artists are more often mentioned as influential to the artworks, for example in Arnason's survey. Arnason includes the historical context and individual background of the artists, for example Mark Tobey's religious background, while stating in his preface that these conditions are of secondary importance.

Robb focusses on the Abstract Expressionism reflecting the *Zeitgeist* of the 1950s: "Styles vary with each artist; and if there seems to be no sense of tradition, the very nontraditionalism of painting in the 1950s reflects the spirit of the time. [...] The works of Pollock and Rothko are thus pictorial statements about of the overriding preoccupations of the mid-twentieth century- the quest of the absolute."¹¹² [...] "Line and color are the elemental facts of painting as an art. Pollock and Rothko have pushed their search for the fundamental reality of these facts – along with other painters- as close to the ultimate as any artists in the history of painting."¹¹³

The authors have different opinions concerning how dominant Abstract Expressionism had been in the 1950s. Some present Abstract Expressionism as being the dominant style encompassing all other styles: "During the decade 1945-1955 it became **so far** the dominant

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 637.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 638.

pictorial activity that the continued existence of other kinds of painting at times seemed questionable.” Or as the most distinctive of several styles: “the dominant trend, emphasis on some form of abstraction. Even within the limits of nonfigurative style, aspects of the idiom are numerous, the most distinctive being associated with the painters Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko.”¹¹⁴

In spite of the fact that the art movement was once so dominant, authors portray it as ‘suddenly’ overthrown by several attacks, first by hard-edge painting and then by pop art, at the end of the 1950s. This exemplifies the existing tendency to think of the development of art as a continuous struggle between groups and movements in the center-periphery. Arnason states that “For whatever reason- a change in fashion, critical pressure, or a general realization that the automatic intuitive gesture is too easily imitated- brush painting, with its accent on texture and gesture, was already in a decline by the end of the 1950s”, implying that action painting is easily copied and unoriginal.

In my opinion Abstract Expressionism is not yet fully canonized because authors still feel obliged to legitimize Abstract Expressionism. For example Janson defends Pollock from his critics: “to those who complain about Pollock” and Robb tries to explain Abstract Expressionism to people unfamiliar to abstract and perhaps contemporary art in general: “Obscure as he layman may find it”. Gombrich is notorious for his subjective descriptions but does not give his opinion on Abstract Expressionism, he has included Pollock because ‘others’ have hailed him as an innovative artist. Gombrich himself does not praise Pollock. Gombrich and Arnason are the only two European surveys included in the analysis of the 1960s. As in his first edition of 1950, Gombrich continues to be very skeptical (comparable to Robb and Garrison, perhaps because Robb is a medievalist) about contemporary art. Arnason’s survey is the most extensive, also mentioning influential art critics such as Greenberg and Rosenberg.

Frequently used keywords: huge picture, (surface so) alive, sensuously rich, quest of the absolute, subjective, emotional, powerful, spilled and spattered, (in)tense, explosive.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 635.

Gradual acceptance 1970-1980

As previously stated, this research is confined to the surveys available in Dutch libraries.¹¹⁵ While several other surveys were written in the 1970s I will discuss three revised editions of previous discussed survey texts: Gardner (1970), Gombrich (1972), Janson (1979) and two additional survey texts by Jaffé (1970) Hamilton (1970) and Pischel (1976). All in all, I will discuss three American surveys and three European surveys.

All surveys discuss Abstract Expressionism and include Jackson Pollock. Sam Francis and Gorky are described as abstract expressionists. The most exceptional painter associated with Abstract Expressionism is Emilio Vedova, it is the first time he is ever mentioned.

Artists	Number of times mentioned
Jackson Pollock	5
Willem de Kooning	3
Mark Rothko	3
Franz Kline	3
Arshile Gorky	2
Robert Motherwell	2
Bradley Tomlin	2
Sam Francis	2
Clyfford Still	1
Emilio Vedova	1
Adolph Gottlieb	1
Hans Hofmann	1
William Baziotis	1

Paul Burlin, Philip Guston, and Barnett Newman are no longer described as abstract expressionists. De Kooning's work is reproduced three times with a painting from his *Woman* series. Gorky's *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* is reproduced twice. No other paintings are reproduced more than once. Abstract Expressionism is further divided into separate categories: action or gesture painters and color field painters. Hamilton goes on to state that "it was never a school in either the literal or figurative sense, rather a group of painters with

¹¹⁵ Other surveys do exist, for example: Robert Payne, *The World of Art* (Garden City 1972) not available in the Netherlands.

common interests”.¹¹⁶ This is a difference with surveys in the 1950s and 1960s, which rather present it as a defined group with Pollock as leading figure. Pollock is presented as second best after Gorky: “[Pollock is his] principal heir” [...] “had Gorky lived into the 1950s, he would surely have been the leading figure among the abstract expressionists.”¹¹⁷ Also Pollock’s drip technique was not in itself essential to Action Painting. Willem de Kooning is described as being another prominent member of the group and a close friend of Gorky. Hamilton states that “Although much progressive American painting of the 1950s has been described as Abstract Expressionist, not all of it was totally abstract, Expressionist, or even created within the dialectic of action painting as practiced in New York.” So the art produced in New York is separated from the wider Abstract Expressionist style and it is described as a style with many possible variations.

Surveys stress that the method of the action painters did not occur for the very first time and it was also not exclusively an American art style (Jaffé and Pischel directly compares ‘action painters’ with the Cobra group). Though surveys emphasize that Abstract Expressionism was the first significant American achievement. Action painting is described as a ‘movement’ bringing about the international coming of age for American art. Action Painting is presented as something essentially American, in contrast to Janson’s edition of 1963. “It has had an impact on European art, which had nothing to show of comparable force and conviction.”¹¹⁸ However it is still unexpected according to some, it is described as a ‘miracle’ that America could produce artists which would be as influential as the abstract expressionists. Pischel “It is above all that Abstract Expressionism has emerged as the basic inspiration behind postwar art, and it is this country which is destined to exert a powerful influence over European art – an event which would be nothing short of an artistic phenomenon.”¹¹⁹

Painters such as Max Ernst and Wols had already made drip paintings or at least had used exceptional materials and unconventional methods of applying paint (for example the use of broom and stick). Artists who had worked in a similar style were Breton, André Masson and Max Ernst. The latter, who once at least, in 1942, let paint drip from a can swinging from a cord.”¹²⁰ Although Wols remained a secluded painter, according to Pischel, implying that he most likely did not directly influence abstract expressionists. Gombrich refers to Chinese

¹¹⁶ Hamilton, *19th and 20th Century Art : Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1970) 366.

¹¹⁷ Janson, *History of Art; a Survey of the Major Visual Arts*, (New York: Abrams 1979) 663. Gorky died in 1948.

¹¹⁸ Janson, *History of Art; a Survey of the Major Visual Arts*, 663.

¹¹⁹ Pischel, *A World History of Art : Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Decorative Arts*. (New York: Newsweek Books, 1978) 704.

¹²⁰ Hamilton, *19th and 20th Century Art : Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1970) 366.

calligraphy and Indian Sand Painters, Surrealists and Kandinsky; Pischel (Italian) mentions Emilio Vedova (Italian) as a European artist working in a similar style. Jaffé sets the action painters in the romantic tradition of Delacroix and Van Gogh, who also tried to experience life to the fullest.¹²¹ Comparable to surveys in the 1960s, the importance of art emigres in New York is emphasized, for example Hamilton: “These [developments] had their source in the work of two painters: Arshile Gorky and Hans Hofmann, who both settled in New York. The inspiration for the unmediated work method is traced back to “the Surrealists’ emphasis upon automatic procedures for the revelation of “true psychic reality” and beyond that to Dada’s investigation of accident and chance.” The contribution of Abstract Expressionism itself to the history of art was in the monumental scale of the paintings and their instinctively expressive style. “It rejects the traditional role of the artist and of the observer. The act of painting is very important.”¹²²

Jaffé goes further than describing Abstract Expressionism as instinctively expressive. He even uses bestial adjectives to describe Pollock’s work, hereby contributing to Pollock’s self-destructive image. Pollock is described as some kind of wild animal painter in a state of trance when painting. Pollock paints without any constraints or premediated action. According to Hamilton, Pollock had already become notorious during his life time, and Pollock would undoubtedly be remembered.

With regards to the social and political circumstances influences the coming into existence of Abstract Expressionism, Gardner’s art through the ages contextualizes the most, referring to the shock of the cold war, universal fear, and the nonconforming individual as the historical conditions in the genesis of Abstract Expressionism. Gardner accounts for the harsher, more defiant and rebellious forms of Abstract Expressionism due to “The shock of the war and its “cold” aftermath, the persisting threat of atomic annihilation, the widening recognition of human suffering in a large part of the world, and a haunting fear among many that life has no meaning or value have sharpened the protest of highly sensitive artists against a mechanized culture that often appears to have no place in it for the nonconforming individual.”¹²³ Abstract Expressionism is rooted in the contemporary scientific development, as it reflected views of modern biology, creation of nature. Gombrich elicits Abstract Expressionism as a resistance to photographic reproduction.

¹²¹ Jaffé, *20.000 jaar schilderkunst : kleurboek der mensheid*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Boek, 1973) 291.

¹²² Hamilton, *19th and 20th Century Art*, 705.

¹²³ Gardner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970) 727.

Hamilton, Gardner and Gombrich all refer to the gradual acceptance of Abstract Expressionism. They state that “it may seem strange at first”, or “first shock of apprehension is passed”, “one will certainly come to like some better than others and gradually appreciate the problems.” These statements exemplify a broader debate in survey texts. Action painting is either portrayed as the unconscious application of paint onto the canvas or as a very intuitively guided art style, but not totally dependent on chance. The question remains if abstract expressionists are conscious of their brushstrokes? Is their work premediated? Is their work justifiable even if they apply paint instinctively without any reference to the natural world? Authors seem to have had a hard time accepting that Abstract Expressionism is Art, although it is not premediated. If the artwork is the result of chance, what is the role of the artist, is he even important? Art is allowed to seem effortless but the interference of the artist must be evident. For example Hamilton states that “The term Abstract Expressionism is self-explanatory. Such paintings are not only abstract, but are unmistakable instinctively expressive, rather than rationality premediated.” Though his [Pollock’s] work is not the result of chance but of complex rhythmic gestures [...] “¹²⁴ The emphasis is on the controlled element in Pollock’s work. Likewise Tansey stresses that although Pollock’s work may seem accidental, this is misleading as nothing directed by the psyche is accidental. Though his work is not the result of chance but of complex rhythmic gestures. “The act of the expression is directed by mysterious psychic forces: the accidental look is misleading. Nothing directed by the psyche was accidental.”

Gombrich goes on to compare contemporary art historians and critics of Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin with his own contemporaries. As their work was also not appreciated directly by their contemporaries but eventually idolized. “The definition in art is that we all but forget to ask what the work is supposed to be, for sheer admiration of the way it is done. I have suggested that this had happened to painting to an increasing extent. Developments after the Second World War have borne me out.” Gombrich states that nonobjective painting has increasingly become dominant in the art world. In the last pages of this 12th edition, Gombrich discusses factors that have changed the position of art and artists in society, two out of nine factors are applicable to Abstract Expressionism: the new experience of progress and change (philosophy of change) and the excitement aroused by fashion and trends. There is a new tolerance for abstract experiments which can result into positive things. Freedom is important but in Gombrich’s opinion it had also resulted in an obsession to be ‘nonconformist’.

¹²⁴ Hamilton, *19th and 20th Century Art*, 366.

Gombrich implies in this chapter that he is not sure what will be the future of art and if the movements mentioned in this ‘postscript’ chapter will turn out to be trends or will become ‘Art’. Actually he is apologizing in advance because he is unsure if the movements he is mentioning now, will still be seen as Art in 50 years. [...] “Paradoxically, both museums and books on art history may increase this danger, for by grouping totem poles, Greek Statues, cathedral windows, Rembrandts and Jackson Pollocks together we too easily give the impression that all this is Art with a capital A though dating from different periods.”¹²⁵ Gombrich implies that not all art is equally valuable, though through the grouping together it might appear so.

Both Gombrich and Janson state that Abstract Expressionism was not the only art style practiced in the 1950s. As stated by Janson: “Artists that came to maturity in the 1950s turned away from action painting.” However, Gombrich emphasizes that Abstract Expressionism is not the only art style in the 1950s: “I trust no reader will think, however, that these few examples exhaust the possibilities and the range of variations like to be encountered in any collection of recent art. It would be misleading to present the contemporary scene as if it were entirely dominated by experiments with paint, texture or shapes alone.” According to Hamilton, nonobjective abstract art received the most attention in the 1940s through 1950s. “Between 1945 and 1960 it is not too much to say that during those fifteen years representational art was almost ignored, at least by critics and collectors if not by the general public.” [...] However there were artists working in a representational style: “During that time even the continued existence of Realism was questioned, although Andrew Wyeth earned a popular success.”¹²⁶ Similar Tansey states that “It is indicative of the diversity of modern trends that, at the height of its vogue, Abstract Expressionism was by no means universally adopted. [...] In the later fifties, the tendency to total “inwardness” had hardly been established by the mode of Abstract Expressionism before it received a jarring reversal from the rise of a movement that had striking resemblances, to Dada and popular art.”¹²⁷ Against the subjectivity and painterly looseness of Abstract Expressionism has risen a movement called post-Painterly Abstraction, Op, hard edge painting.”¹²⁸

In my opinion Abstract Expressionism is more generally accepted than in the 1960s but not yet fully canonized. There are no authors explicitly defending Pollock’s art though three

¹²⁵ Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 491.

¹²⁶ Hamilton, *19th and 20th century art*, 363.

¹²⁷ Gardner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*, 729.

¹²⁸ Gardner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*, 730.

authors, Hamilton, Gardner and Gombrich, all refer to the gradual acceptance of Abstract Expressionism. They state that “it may seem strange at first”, or “first shock of apprehension is passed” and “one will certainly come to like some better than others and gradually appreciate the problems.” The appreciation of art in the historical canon is unconditional, therefore the description ‘may seem strange at first’ does not amount to the level of unconditional appraisal necessary for canonized art (in which there is no doubt and no discussion about the reception and impact of the art).

Difference between American and European surveys

Exceptionally (though not surprising) Gombrich is very skeptical about contemporary art. Gardner describes Abstract Expressionism as being ‘in vogue or in fashion’. Notably Pischel does mention more European artists working in an abstract expressionist style, such as Vedova (who has the same nationality as the author, namely Italian).

Keywords spontaneous, unconscious, expressive (as opposed to) rationality, energy, impatient, intense, violent, Dionysus-like, magic, demonic, weird, childlike, slashing, huge size, wild, passion, shredded forms, swirling, raw, uncontrolled, out of order and undisciplined.

Becoming a (misinterpreted) trademark 1980-1990

In this chapter I will discuss five surveys, all of them written by European authors, Lynton (1980), Lambert (1981), Honour and Fleming (1982), Van der Grinten (1986) and Baumgart (1987). Therefore I will not be able to compare American with European writers, although I will be able to compare these surveys with American surveys in the overall conclusion at the end of this research. I will discuss one second edition of a previously discussed survey that is the one by Van der Grinten.

All five surveys discuss Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock is mentioned in all five surveys. Willem De Kooning in four surveys and Rothko, Newman and Motherwell are mentioned in three surveys. Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, Mark Tobey, Reinhardt are included in two surveys. Remarkably not one artwork is reproduced twice.

Jackson Pollock	5
Willem de Kooning	4
Robert Motherwell	3
Barnett Newman	3
Mark Rothko	3
Clyfford Still	2
Mark Tobey	2
Ad Reinhardt	2
Arshile Gorky	2
Franz Kline	2
David Smith	1
Sam Francis	1
Karel Appel	1
Yves Klein	1
Emilio Vedova	1

Notably in comparison with the 1970s is that several painters are no longer mentioned by any author as associated with Abstract Expressionism, such as William Baziotés, Tworckov, Tomlin. Newly included are: Corneille, Yves Klein, Karel Appel, David Smith. It is however

unlikely that Karel Appel and Corneille will be mentioned by other authors in surveys in the 1990s.

Exceptionally Yves Klein is associated with Abstract Expressionism. Two authors associate him with Abstract Expressionism. One author implies that he might be an abstract expressionist, the other refers to one of his specific techniques, closely associated with Abstract Expressionism, which he developed in the 1960s. Gorky is either described as the last surrealist or the first abstract expressionist, whether he is one of both may be endlessly debated according to Honour and Fleming.¹²⁹ Both Gorky and Hofmann are referred to as catalysts and teachers with first-hand knowledge and experience of Cubism, Fauvism and Expressionism. They were the bridge between Europe and America. Differently than is understood today is that “retrospectively [in 1980 Lynton] , de Kooning appears the key and essential figure in the ‘action’ area of Abstract Expressionism, not Pollock. De Kooning kept his flexibility through the inclusion of figure.”¹³⁰ In contrast today (anno 2015) Pollock is appointed as the key figure in action painting. Both Honour and Lynton describe action painting as becoming so narrowly defined that it is similar to a trademark. Abstract Expressionism became a ‘formula’. For example Lynton states that “I feel that Pollock was trammled by his drip painting and the fame it brought him while Kline was not too confined by his quasi –ideographic images.”¹³¹ Because de Kooning and Kline did not fully abandon figurative painting they remained innovative, as opposed to Pollock who was confined to his own abstract formula.

Lynton and Lambert state that it was always a loosely associated group barely forming a movement. Until now the stylistic differences were stressed but not the fact the artists were never a real group, this is a difference between surveys published between 1950-1980 and 1980-1990.

Other differences regarding how the art style is placed within the continuum of art history, is firstly that in the 1970s Gombrich was the only author who mentioned Indian sand paintings with regards to Pollock and in the 1980s two surveys mention Indian Sand Paintings as influential to Pollock. Secondly that authors without exception (in the 1970s not all authors refer to) include Surrealism as influential prior art movement. Thirdly that authors (especially Lynton) stress the consequences of Cubism and the thematic primordialism of the Surrealists,

¹²⁹ Honour and Fleming, *The Visual Arts : A History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982) 606.

¹³⁰ Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980) 240.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

but also Mexican mural painting and the partial failure of the Federal Art Project as influential to the development of Abstract Expressionism. Honour and Fleming stress that certain currents in American art were pointing towards abstraction ever since the first decade of the century: “The artists who explored this vein were usually loners-America has always been rich in gifted mavericks. [...] These loners were for instance Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe and one or two other isolated American artists.” This is the first time that native American art developments are mentioned as influential to the art style. Furthermore the use of Jungian analysis by painters is mentioned for the first time.

In addition to the acknowledgement of native American art developments, Abstract Expressionism is described as relying on European art styles, but as specifically American (with the exception of Lynton who refers to Abstract Expressionism as un-European and un-American), only coming into existence due to the specific conditions in New York in the 1940s/1950s. According to Honour and Fleming precisely because Americans were unaware of European artistic traditions (purist abstract trend and surrealists trend), they combined two movements which ‘traditionally’ were seen as incompatible. Most authors stress that it was a uniquely American phenomenon, resulting from American ‘ignorance’. However Van Der Grinten and Baumgart align action painting directly with *art informel*. Baumgart does not portray Abstract Expressionism as innovative but rather as adhering to the already existing innovation *Art Informel*. This way he does not stress the distinctively American character of Abstract Expressionism.

Notably in 1981 Lambert is still very skeptical about Abstract Expressionism, she describes it as fashion, a style which is in vogue and became popular because it is worth a lot of money. She argues that it is too soon to make any substantial statements about the art movement. Lambert: “A painting that expresses man’s isolation may be less of a painting than one which reverberates with responses to the external world. Great claims have been made by art historians for the position of the Abstract Expressionists: (including the three mentioned above in the table) all working in New York.¹³² This is something about which it is too soon to decide.¹³³ It may be simply that we ought not to compare them with the painters of the past, because there can be no objectivity. Also it is hard to forget that the paintings of artists like Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning are now worth huge sums of money and are displayed in all the major museums.

¹³² Lambert, *Cambridge Introduction to the History of Art, The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1981) 71.

Especially Pollock's work is still described as shocking, though it has also been idolized and misinterpreted by young artists "As a result of Pollock's drip paintings, many a young artist associated vanguard art and individual expression with wild methods of applying paint, by throwing it, riding a bicycle through it, bursting paint-filled bags by shooting at them, arranging for bepainted but otherwise naked women to imprint their bodies on a cloth."¹³⁴

This created the image of Abstract Expressionism as wild and uncontrolled; however, this was a false image, according to Lynton. For example Honour and Fleming stress that Pollock was 'not a naturally gifted painter, he made the act of painting his trademark', this is the first time Pollock's incompetence is referred to as a reason for his unorthodox methods. But they also do state that Pollock's movements and application of paint was not completely uncontrolled, however 'it is uncertain whether he intended the sublime effect of pure creative force'.

That Pollock's work left art historians confused and baffled is further exemplified by Lambert who describes Rothko's work as 'difficult to look at'. Van der Grinten comments on the overvaluation of modern art, rejecting the notion that museums even have a modern art department. Lynton compares the super-heroic status of Duchamp as the 'Mephistopheles of the old modernism and the messiah of a new', to the extremist attitudes of Abstract Expressionism which resulted in corroboration or contradictions.¹³⁵ Honour and Fleming describe him as a archetypical American loner who in a kind of dervish dance completed his work." This reminds us of the *superaltern* state of heroic artists, discussed by Griselda Pollock. This is emphasized even further by Lynton in his discussion of contemporary art critics "Attention is taken from the work of art and focused on personalities and strategies. The public is encouraged in its lust for new stars, the art market steers artists to make more of the same as this 'formulae' had become part of their trademark."¹³⁶ In other words once the public had associated Abstract Expressionism with drip paintings, that was the only thing they wanted to see.

"The violence that people claimed to see in the paintings [of Pollock], and the attack on artistic values they interpreted it as" Commentators around the world found this art shocking- which seems just as odd as their subsequent idolization of it." [...] "It gained the support of a few critics and then of rapidly swelling American supporting chorus." Critics' objections to the de Kooning's incorporation of figures suggests what a delicate matter the opposition of

¹³³ Ibid., 72.

¹³⁴ Referring to Yves Klein in 1960.

¹³⁵ Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art*, 229.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 241.

abstraction and figuration still was.¹³⁷ So according to Lynton, Action painting was popularized by a small group of critics, and subsequently the general public copied the attitude towards the art style. In Lynton's concluding chapter 'The Artist in Modern Society' he emphasizes the misinterpretation of Abstract Expressionism again. "The abstract expressionist who worked as action painter is presented as the explorer of some private and distant realm, averted from his fellow men, but if we imagine him at work we see that he was also a man of ritual, putting into a socially admired form an activity that society would consider insane or at least pointlessly anachronistic. But Pollock worked like a tribal rainmaker, not like a raging prophet [...] there is no work of art that is not of some profit to society."¹³⁸ A false image of Pollock has been created. Harold Rosenberg coined the term Action Painting, which was misinterpreted as implying wild and even desperate activity.

Despite Abstract Expressionism's misinterpretation, it did become a well-known art style. The reasons for this relatively quick dispersion, is explained by various universal social needs. Firstly Lynton describes Abstract Expressionism as fulfilling the need for meaningful art in a troubled world (nuclear warfare) and secondly Lambert accounts for Abstract Expressionism's success due to the fascination for sensational stories about eccentric painters which are worth huge sums of money. Furthermore the art movement was associated with the current political circumstances: "A world reeling from mass racist murder, global war, and the threat of global destruction could attach what meanings it wanted to the works of Still, Newman, and especially Rothko."¹³⁹ For the first time the covert use of Abstract Expressionism is referred to by Lynton "By the late fifties the new American art was seen by Washington as a major prestige-building export and was busily promoted around the world. America dominates the story art from the 1940s on. Since America's image and power loom large in other respects too, this need not surprise us. Many parts of the world have themselves under American influence, from hamburgers and jeans to political tycoonery. Europe has been especially open to such influence. [...] The Second World War marked the end of European world leadership."¹⁴⁰ In other words, Abstract Expressionism is but one example of Americanization and America has replaced Europe as cultural center.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

Keywords extremist, violence, aggressive, dervish dance, heroic, disturbed, passionate, expressive, confrontation, melancholy, speed, force, energy.

The storyline Abstract Expressionism 1990-2000

In this chapter I will discuss six American surveys, Hunter published in 1992, Silver and Hart published in 1993 (2x), Janson and Stokstad published in 1995 (2x) and Honour and Fleming published in 1999. Two are subsequent editions of previously discussed surveys by Honour and Fleming and by Janson. Distinctive features of these surveys are their expanding scope, and further historical contextualization. All surveys mention Pollock and Gorky. Except Silver all surveys also include Willem De Kooning as an abstract expressionist. Apart from these three painters Newman and Rothko are mentioned four times.

Compared to the 1980s Abstract Expressionism has been more narrowly defined, several painters have been excluded from the canon such as Sam Francis, Mark Tobey (he is mentioned by Hunter for example but not as abstract expressionist “he anticipated Pollock’s all over abstract art but was unrelated to the New York scene), Karel Appel, Vedova, Corneille, and Yves Klein.¹⁴¹ New York school is a more neutral label according to many historians. Pollock’s chief rival for leadership of the New York School was Willem de Kooning.¹⁴²

Artists	Number of times mentioned
Jackson Pollock	5
Arshile Gorky	5
Willem de Kooning	4
Barnett Newman	4
Mark Rothko	4
Adolph Gottlieb	2
Franz Kline	2
Arshile Gorky	1
Ad Reinhardt	1
Robert Motherwell	1

¹⁴¹ However it was more exceptional that they were even included in the first place as Appel and Corneille are usually associated with the Cobra group.

¹⁴² Stokstad, *Art History* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1995) 1114.

Artworks reproduced more than twice.

Pollock	<i>Autumn Rhythm</i>	4
Newman	<i>Vir Heroicus Sublimis</i>	2

Similar to previous Kandinsky (specifically his *Improvisation 30 Cannons* in 1913), Cubism, Surrealism, Jungian psychology are included to be the main influences on Abstract Expressionism. Hunter implies that artists in New York would try to “emulate the café-studio life of Paris.”

In addition Mexican muralism, Janet Sobel, this is the first and only time this female artist has been referred to in a survey (Stokstad) and (the real roots) Rubens are also mentioned as precedents (Rubens is specifically a precedent of de Kooning). Stokstad is the only author to ever mention Janet Sobel. She is also the only author to parallel Abstract Expressionism directly with *Art Informel* hereby implying that the two movements developed out of comparable circumstances. First mentioned in the 1980s, the influence of native influences such as Indian Sand Paintings and Mexican Muralism are more frequently included. Hartt compares the transition from Abstract Expressionism to post painterly abstraction to the substitution of impressionism with post-impressionism in the 19th century, while acknowledging the different historical contexts. Moreover the comparison between impressionism and Abstract Expressionism can also be found in the comparison between the waterscape lilies by Monet to the work of Pollock by Hartt. (Canaday 1950 and Lynton 1980) The work of the abstract expressionists is without exception referred to as for example according to Stokstad as ‘carefully orchestrated’, as their work has been misinterpreted as being unconscious and wild (this reminds us of the 1980s surveys who also stressed the misinterpreted action painting). The most given explanation for the ‘downfall’ the more gestural and painterly wing of Abstract Expressionism at the end of the 1950s is that Abstract Expressionism became a formulae, a technique that could be taught and replicated. Action painting became a trick. However subsequent movements, for example [Rauschenberg: scale and drip] Neo-Dada, Pop Art, Op art etc. were deeply admiring of the first great American

style.”¹⁴³ Abstract Expressionism did influence subsequent movements refuting its easily imitable style.

In 1992 Lee Krasner is mentioned for the first time in Hunter’s survey, while today she is mostly included in the lists of abstract expressionist painters. Janson and Hunter refer to her as a full member of the abstract expressionists. Hartt explicitly stresses in his preface his feminist endeavor and his ambition to include more women artists, perhaps this is the reason why he also mentions Lee Krasner. Exceptionally Silver refers to Pollock’s later work and to the influence of his wife. “His wife, Lee Krasner, was a distinguished artist in her own right. In his last works Pollock returned to representation and a new austerity, approaching the worked produced by his wife Lee Krasner.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast Janson focusses on Pollock’s influence on Krasner: “Lee Krasner who was married to Pollock, never abandoned the brush, although she was unmistakably influenced by Pollock. She struggled to establish her artistic identity, emerging from his shadow only after undergoing several changes in direction and destroying much of her early work. After Pollock’s death, she succeeded in doing what he had been attempting to do for the last three years of his life: to reintroduce the figure into Abstract Expressionism while retaining its automatic handwriting. The potential had always been there is Pollock’s work: in *Autumn Rhythm* we can easily imagine wildly dancing people.”¹⁴⁵ Other authors do mention Lee Krasner but not her influence on Pollock. For example Stokstad simply acknowledges her existence “When he painted *Male and Female*, Pollock was beginning a relationship with the artist Lee Krasner.” Stokstad is the only author also mentioning Elaine de Kooning.

Frederick Hartt portrays the development of Abstract Expressionism as a story with a tragic plot, the opening act: the sudden invention of drip painting, the rise to fame and climax being the untimely death of Gorky and Pollock, and then the falling action: the sudden ‘attacks’ from subsequent art movement. The history of Abstract Expressionism could just as well be the storyline of a Hollywood movie with Jackson Pollock as protagonist. Both Stokstad and Silver call Pollock a hard-driven and self-destructive alcoholic, stating that both his life and painting techniques have taken on the aura of a heroic, masculine myth in their own right. Silver states that “Another archetype, the truly American primitivist, began to crystallize

¹⁴³ Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture*. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1976) 1029.

¹⁴⁴ Larry Silver, *Art in History* (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 1993) 435.

¹⁴⁵ Janson, *History of Art; a Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*. (New York: Abrams, 1962, 1979 and 1995) 796.

around him. He became a lonely, heroic individual once more, inventing a new vision in the tradition of the European avant-garde.” It is the first time that Pollock is referred to as an alcoholic as well as a reference to his nickname “Pollock’s drip paintings provoked outrage and notoriety when they were first displayed. One critic dubbed the artist “Jack the Dripper.” Of course, others praised his obvious energy and improvisation on such a grand scale. Implicitly Silver states that the critic dubbing him ‘Jack the Dripper’ did not fully grasp the novelty of Pollock’s work which was ‘obvious’. In addition Silver also states that “No painter more fully captured the public imagination as the heroic representative of the New York School than Jackson Pollock.” Pollock became a romanticized version of an American alcoholic driving solely by his own intrinsic needs, seemingly the public loved his heroic self-destructiveness. In comparison to prior surveys Pollock has taken Gorky’s place as catalytic abstract expressionist. Instead of referring to Gorky as the most important figure (like Janson did in the 1962 edition of his survey), “Pollock proved to be the most important of the Abstract Expressionists”.

Not only Pollock’s personal life but also personal details of other artist lives are included by Stokstad. She includes very personal information on artists, such as: “Gorky’s mother died of starvation”, Rothko was often depressed and deeply pessimistic and born in poor Jewish ghetto, and Pollock was reluctant to talk about his problems.”

Surveys refer to nuclear bombings, for example Silver refers to the “recent nuclear bombings of Hiroshima, in a world with widespread calamity and destruction” and the cold war as the political conditions under which Abstract Expressionism came into existence. As stated by Hunter “And so when progressive American artists became, paradoxically, the beneficiaries of the stricken 1930s and 40s (Federal Art Program had helped several abstract expressionists establish themselves as professional painters), they seized on their opportunities and, as had Malevich, Tatlin, and Popova before them, realized a breakthrough to total abstraction.” This is the first time Abstract Expressionism is compared to the Russian Suprematist and Constructivist movements in the 1910s. Hunter also states the most staggering portrayal of Abstract Expressionism as first achievement made by American artists: “It was a full 170 years after Americans had won their political revolution that they waged and won an aesthetic revolution that finally permitted American art to throw off its inhibiting shackles-provincialism, overdependence on European sources, an indifferent or even hostile public.” Hereby implicitly referring to slavery by using words like “shackles” and the American independence war, by stating the “political revolution”.

Stokstad also uses the word ‘provincialism’ to describe American art prior to the existence of Abstract Expressionism. Silver states that: “Like most emerging young American painters, he acknowledged France as the dominant art center of the past century and of recent art movements. He essentially grafted himself onto that heritage through association with art émigrés.” All authors stress that Europe had always been the cultural authority (especially France), by building on and rejecting these European traditions something new could come into existence. For example Hunter states that “In time, that art would leave little doubt about its power and importance, its legitimacy as successor to the best in European modernism, or the genuine Americanness of its vigor, boldness, and simple integrity. The artworks of Pollock, de Kooning’s are not to be understood as gestural display. They are too profound, and deeply meditated structures.”¹⁴⁶ “Overnight De Kooning attained the status of Existentialist hero. [...] “Few would argue that the painting and sculpture that emerged between mid-1940s and the 1960s was the foremost artistic phenomenon of its time.” Hunter leaves no room for discussion, Abstract Expressionism was the most innovative art style of its time and genuinely representative of the American spirit. Comparably Hunter states that: “No one before the best Abstract Expressionist painters had ever painted abstract pictures of such emotional intensity on such a scale.”¹⁴⁷

Through the medium of mass magazines such as *Life* as well as through art periodicals, the work of the pioneers was rapidly transmitted, and in Europe and to some extent in Japan parallel manifestations of the new style appeared with far greater speed than had reflections of Impressionism in the late-nineteenth-century.¹⁴⁸ Hartt emphasizes that Abstract Expressionism influenced art produced outside the United States. Furthermore Hartt states that “Considering the intensity and speed of twentieth century life as compared to the relaxed pace of the 19th century it is surprising Abstract Expressionism that Abstract Expressionism remained dominant for as long as it did.”

Before the 1990s only Lynton (in 1980) mentioned the promotion of Abstract Expressionism abroad by the U.S. government. In the 1990s Stokstad does mention the New American Painting exhibition ‘which circulated to nine European capitals’ and Hartt mentions the article on Pollock in *Life* magazine as factors contributing to Abstract Expressionism’ fame abroad, but not the involvement of the U.S. government. Honour and Fleming implicitly refer to the

¹⁴⁶ Sam Hunter, *Modern Art : Painting, Sculpture Architecture*. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992) 277.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1018.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1018.

covert use of Abstract Expressionism “Just when Abstract Expressionism was celebrating its triumphs and was being conscripted to advertise all over the world the power and beneficence of American liberalism, the exponents of Non-Objective art in New York were confronted with representational images.”

Keywords vulgar, elegant, mesmerizing, drip, pouring, energy, spontaneous, myth, violence, uncontrolled, extremism.

Conclusion

Contextualizing the survey is not as unproblematic as is implied in *Partisan Canons*, especially not with regards to survey texts. In my attempt to contextualize the abstract expressionist canon it has become clear that the discussion is very much dependent on personal opinions and preferences of the historians writing the surveys. Instead of analyzing the external factors, which was my initial plan but proved to be unworkable, I have analyzed the keywords in order to describe the discourse surrounding Abstract Expressionism. It is very difficult to prove the causality between an author's opinion and for example his profession (art museum director or art history professor).

These keywords serve two purposes; firstly they reveal the hidden opinions of the historians and secondly they reveal the changing attitudes towards abstract expressionist's methods and techniques. As historians are active participants in the art canon, the words they use to describe Abstract Expressionism contribute to the characterization of the art style. Some of these keywords used to describe Abstract Expressionism are deep-rooted in the discourse, these words are used in surveys throughout the analyzed time period (1950-2000). The most often used keyword is extreme. It is either used to describe an individual art work or to describe Abstract Expressionism as extreme variation of previous art styles, mainly surrealism. The keyword extreme is not necessarily used in a negative way, though it implies a strong position taken on by the artist which can evoke an extreme reaction of the viewer or critic. Extreme implies an art which is uncompromising, intense and remote (from the standard).

Other frequently used keywords are energetic and violent, which exemplify the two extremes of the broad spectrum of respectively positive to negative adjectives. In general keywords tend to shift to the positive side of the spectrum, for example adjectives like 'uncontrolled' and 'haphazard' are replaced by 'instinctively' and 'spontaneous'.

The use of keywords has also contributed to the construction of the dichotomy in Abstract Expressionism, namely the color-field painters, Newman and Rothko and the action painters Pollock and de Kooning. The artworks of the first group are always described with words like: sublime, universal and soft. The art by Pollock and de Kooning is always described with words like: violent, aggressive, energy. Their communality seems to be the mythical element in their work, as the keyword mythical is used for both groups. In my opinion through the use

of these diachronic words the aesthetic and conceptual gap between action painting and color-field painting is widened.

Surveys become much more focused on personalities and on historical contextualization in the 1980s. This is exemplified through the use of words such as 'heroic' to describe Pollock art work is used for the time in the 1980s, however this is the same time Pollock's alcohol problems are also mentioned. In addition Abstract Expressionism is presented as fulfilling certain social needs and satisfying the obsession with the sensational stories surrounding the personal lives of artists. Hitherto the conclusions on the discourse surrounding Abstract Expressionism, hereafter I will discuss the process and stages of canonization.

After analyzing these 29 surveys I will propose the following theory about stages of canonization. In my opinion there are three stages of canonization in the case study Abstract Expressionism. The first stage is being mentioned in a survey text. In the case of Abstract Expressionism this occurred in c.1957. The second stage is when an art style is included but authors feel obliged to legitimize their choice to include this art style. I have found that authors until approximately 1980 have been 'defending' Abstract Expressionism in their surveys. The third stage is when an art style is included in a survey and receives an undivided positive assessment, in other words, criticism on the art style is unquestionable, this only occurs in the 1990s. Paradoxically, the third stage (the moment when Abstract Expressionism is no longer questioned as valuable art style) is accompanied by the relatively negative portrayal of Jackson Pollock's personal life. It is as if the criticism which dominantly focused on the uncontrolled drips, splatters and brushstrokes on the canvas, shifted to the person Pollock, who was the archetypical American loner uncontrollably driven in his urges to be creative and destructive. Evidently his work became more and more intertwined with his personality. Instead of the end product (the art work itself), Pollock's lifestyle was criticized although also mythicized and idolized.

Until the 1980s, on several occasions Abstract Expressionism is mentioned in surveys but the authors still feel the need to legitimize this inclusion. The reception of Abstract Expressionism shifts from skepticism, both on the account of it being an American cultural achievement which was considered unbelievable and on the account of its unconventional methods. Actually only in the 1990s, authors stop referring to Abstract Expressionism as nothing more than a vogue, fashion or having to be viewed under specific conditions. This reveals another underlying debate, namely the problem of discussing contemporary art in survey texts. Authors risk their reputation by including an art style which is not yet

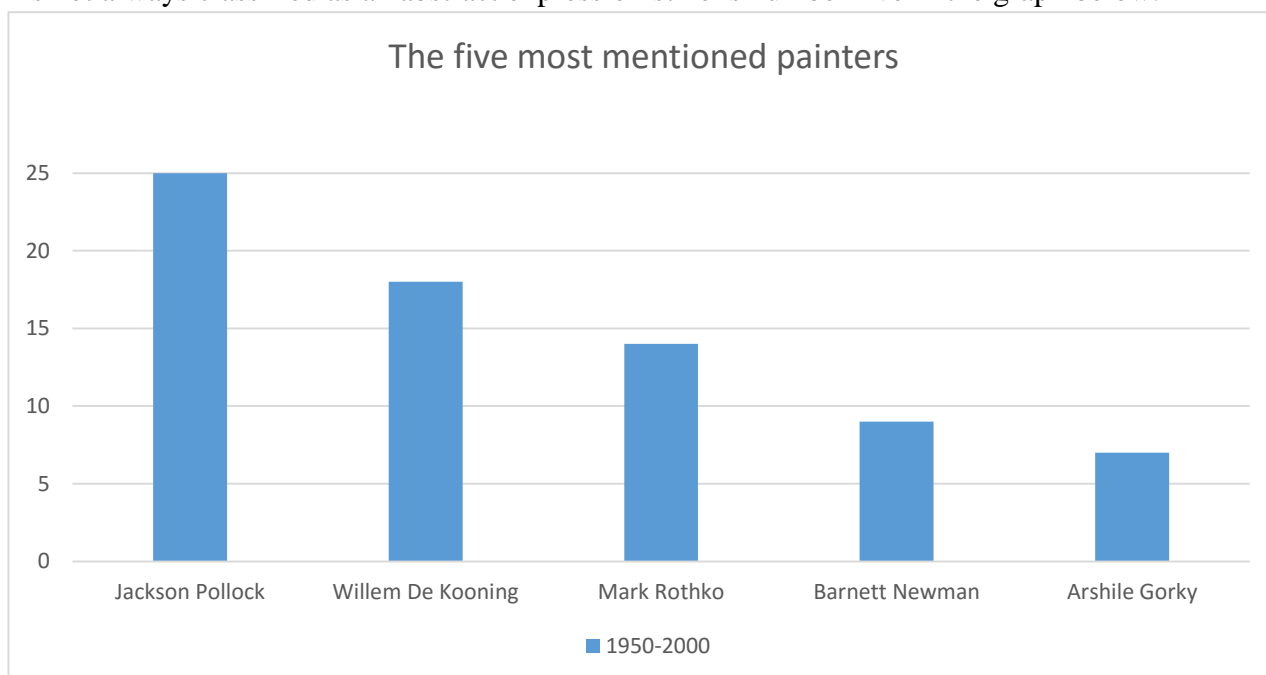
‘sanctified’, in other words indisputably classified as Art, though it has been picked up by critics, museums and journals to such an extent that it cannot be surpassed.

The criteria for including an art style are firstly, the world-wide dispersion of an art style (Arnason 1960s) and secondly, the consensus of several historians (Janson 1970s). In my opinion the most important criteria is innovation. The art style has to contribute ‘something’ new to the grand narrative for it to be mentioned, this has not changed in the 1990s, although the canon has fiercely been critiqued. The definition and criteria for including an artwork is that there has to be some consensus, but if the author feels obliged to legitimize his or her choice, this is seemingly not yet the case.

In my opinion the acceptance or positive reception of Abstract Expressionism is connected to the debate on whether or not action painters had some level of control over the ‘act of painting’. Once the act of painting is portrayed as partially controlled (this happens more consistently in the 1980s), authors on Abstract Expressionism feel more at ease referring to it as ‘Art’. The labeling of the art style as ‘action painting’ contributed to its misinterpretation as being haphazard and automatic, according to surveys in the 1990s. Many historians now prefer the label ‘New York School’ because it is a more neutral label. In the process of canonization, Abstract Expressionism was gradually divided into smaller compartments: mainly gesture or action painters, color field painters, second generation abstract expressionists etc.

Not surprisingly, Jackson Pollock is mostly described as the key figure within Abstract Expressionism, as most surveys state that he ‘invented’ the drip painting. However surveys in the 1970s and 1980s do not accredit this invention to Pollock, stating that Max Ernst and Wols had already made resembling drip paintings which Pollock had possibly seen. Though Pollock was the first to paint on such a monumental scale. The paintings by Pollock are interchangeable. It doesn’t seem to matter if you reproduce *Onement*, *Number One*, or *Pasiphae*. *Autumn Rhythm* is reproduced in the 1950s, thereafter it would take until the 1980s before it resurfaced in the surveys.

In the graph below we see the five most mentioned painters. Other than Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning is consistently mentioned as connected to Abstract Expressionism. De Kooning is always represented by his *Woman* series. Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman are categorized as color-field painters, which is one of the two groups within Abstract Expressionism. Furthermore Arshile Gorky often shifts between being associated with surrealism or with Abstract Expressionism (a categorization which will endlessly be debated), though he is always discussed in the chapter on ‘action painting’. But because he is not always classified as an abstract expressionist he is number five in the graph below.



Gorky’s work *The Betrothal* is one of the most consistently included artworks; it is reproduced in all decades.

Because these painters are most consistently mentioned, which means that they have been mentioned since the 1950s without interruption, we can say that these five painters are the core of the canon.

Core of the canon

Image 1: Gorky: is he the last surrealist or the first abstract expressionist, this will remain endlessly debated? He is described as the catalyst and synthesizer of cubism and surrealism. If he had lived long enough he would have had the leading role which was now taken over by Pollock.

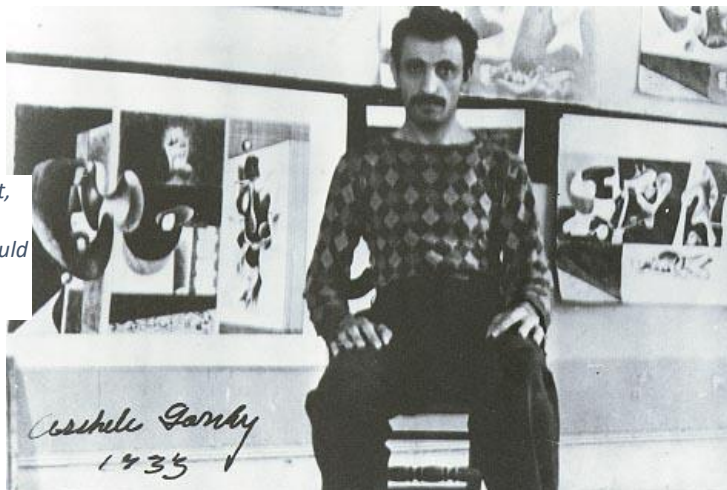


Image 3: Jackson Pollock probably the most famous or notorious (leader), second best to Gorky, till his untimely death. Hans Namuth, photograph for Life Magazine 1950. Is he the greatest painter alive?

Image 2: (Elaine and) Willem de Kooning. closest to Pollock, a heroic figure.

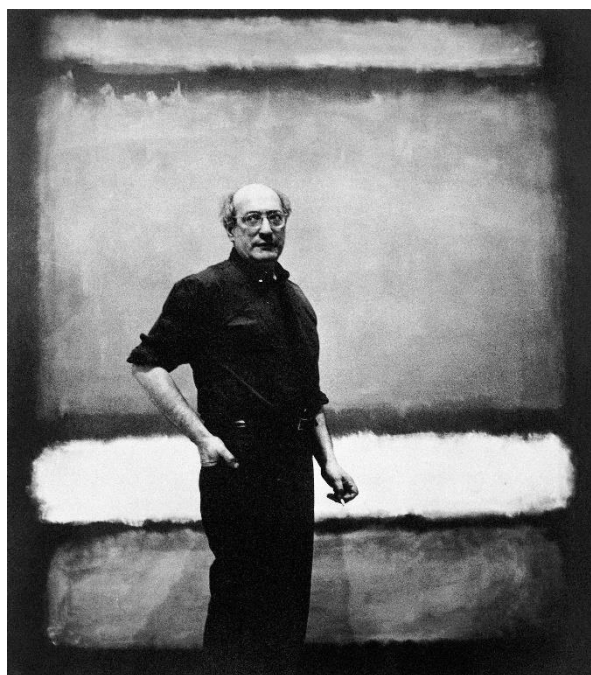
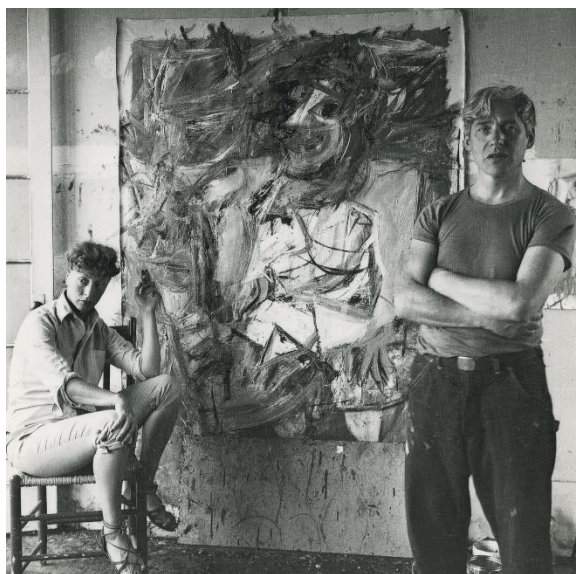


Image 4: Rothko is also part of the abstract expressionists, but he has "subdued the aggressiveness of other action painters." (Janson 1969)



Image 5: Barnett Newman in his studio, 1952. Photograph by Hans Namuth Newman's paintings suggest the direction that many other images of the later New York School would take.

The total canon is displayed in the graph below. The number of artists associated with Abstract Expressionism has become more narrowly defined. There is a huge difference between 1950-1960 and 1990-2000. In the 1950s 18 different artists are associated. In the 1990s eight different artists are associated. The canon has been reduced by half. Franz Kline got kicked out of the canon relatively late in the 1990s, while Paul Burlin and Philip Guston were no longer associated in the 1970s. Emilio Vedova was associated with Abstract Expressionism in the 1970 through the 1980s.

Artists associated with Abstract Expressionism

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	1950-1960	1960-1970	1970-1980	1980-1990	1990-2000	
■ Jackson Pollock	4	6	5	5	5	
■ Willem De Kooning	4	2	3	4	5	
■ Mark Rothko	1	3	3	3	4	
■ Barnett Newman	1	1	0	3	4	
■ Robert Motherwell	1	2	2	0	1	
■ Arshile Gorky	1	1	2	2	1	
■ William Baziotas	2	1	1	0	0	
■ Hans Hofmann	1	2	1	0	0	
■ Adolph Gottlieb	1	2	1	0	2	
■ Mark Tobey	0	1	0	2	0	
■ Ad Reinhardt	0	1	0	2	1	
■ Tomlin	1	0	2	0	0	
■ Clyfford Still	1	2	1	2	0	
■ Brooks	0	1	0	0	0	
■ David Smith	0	0	0	1	0	
■ Sam Francis	0	0	2	1	0	
■ Grace Hartigan	1	0	0	0	1	
■ Franz Kline	1	2	3	2	0	
■ Tworkov	1	1	0	0	0	
■ Philip Guston	1	1	0	0	0	
■ Paul Burlin	1	0	0	0	0	
■ Emilio Vedova	0	0	1	1	0	
■ Lee Krasner	0	0	0	0	2	
■ Stamos	1	0	0	0	0	
■ matta	1	0	0	0	0	
■ marca-relli	1	0	0	0	0	
■ appel	0	0	0	1	0	
■ klein	0	0	0	1	0	

Notably Grace Hartigan was mentioned in the 1950s, disappeared from the radar and resurfaced in the 1990s.

Comparably to the results of Robert Jenkins in *Partisan Canons* in his research on impressionism, the most canonical artists are always represented by the same paintings. One of my hypotheses turns out to be true. The most canonical artist is consistently represented by the same works of art. Routinely Pollock is represented by drip paintings which he made between 1948 and 1952, and Willem de Kooning is consistently represented by works from his *Woman* series. The less canonical artists, such as Clyfford Still or Franz Kline, are at the mercy of the historian, as it depends on their method of distribution, whether or not they are included in the chapter on Abstract Expressionism, furthermore these less canonical artists are represented by continuously different artworks.

Abstract expressionists themselves have always denied being a group or movement. Paradoxically, surveys as well stress that Abstract Expressionism is not a movement but rather a group of loosely interrelated individuals. However they do describe Abstract Expressionism with connotations mostly used to define groups, such as: “leaders” and “his role was taken”, implying that Abstract Expressionism was no different from other art movements in the past, for instance Die Brücke or Der Blaue Reiter. Because the art historical canon is built on the genealogical premise of artists building on prior accomplishments and grouping together in movements, it is not surprising that authors have difficulty discussing artists who did not form a traditional group.

There is a general consensus on the fact that American expressionism is the first American cultural achievement acknowledged abroad as significant. However several European surveys stress parallel developments in Europe (France) such as *Art Informel* and the Cobra group linking the movements together. Without the influence of art emigres such as Hans Hofmann and Arshile Gorky surveys emphasize Abstract Expressionism would not have surfaced in the art field. It is not until (apart from Gombrich) the 1980s that also native American influences are mentioned such as Indian Sand paintings, Mexican Muralism and the fact that several abstract expressionists had been employed during the Federal Art Program. Other external factors that had an impact on the popularization of Abstract Expressionism, such as the covert use by the U.S. government and the help of critics and museums, which are factors extensively discussed in abstract expressionist studies since the seventies, are barely (and

often implicitly) mentioned in surveys. Just a short while ago, in the 1990s, surveys by Honour and Fleming, Stokstad and Lynton (as early as 1980) mention the covert political use of Abstract Expressionism in the promotion of America.

One of my hypotheses' was that there should be an increase of women artists in surveys since 1970. Surveys in the 1970s and 1980s show no difference. The first author to explicitly state that women artists had been underrepresented in the art historical canon is Hartt and only in 1993. Other 1990s surveys include Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning and there is one mention of Grace Hartigan (though as second generation abstract expressionist). Moreover Stokstad presents Janet Sobel as influential to the development of Pollock's drip paintings. There are two possible explanations for the inclusion of these women. Firstly the inclusion of these women artists could be the result of the feminism debate instigated in the seventies. Secondly it could be explained through the more personal approach surveys tend to have in the 1990s. Surveys in the 1990s start referring to Lee Krasner as an artist in her own right instead of merely being Pollock's wife.

In total I have analyzed 15 American surveys and 14 European surveys. It appears that it became popular in Europe to write survey texts in the 1980s, as I was unable to find American survey texts published at that time. In contrast the 1990s five American surveys were published. Thus I cannot confirm the claim that surveys are a distinctively American phenomenon, which was stressed in *Partisan Canons*. There is a slight difference between American and European surveys on two subjects. Firstly European surveys tend to emphasize the European tradition Abstract Expressionism sprouted from (though this subsides in the 1990s) and secondly European surveys tend to include more European artists (for example Emilio Vedova) in the abstract expressionist canon. Although in total these differences are too marginal to add up to any major conclusions.

Taking Abstract Expressionism as a case study I conclude that canons are static, and labels become more and more narrowly defined. Styles are fragmented, as they are divided into smaller and smaller compartments, such as color-field, gesture painting etc. Eventually five painters are associated with Abstract Expressionism in comparison to eighteen in the 1950s. Actually canons are merely about distribution, the author chooses where he categorizes a painter, deciding singlehandedly in the case of Arshile Gorky, if he will be remembered as a surrealist or expressionist. The mere inclusion of an art style in a survey is not a definitive indicator of canonization, the sanctification in the case of Abstract Expressionism took another 35 years (from the first time it was mentioned in 1957 to it being unquestionably Art in the 1990s).

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List of Images

Fig. 1. Arshile Gorky. Photograph by Dr. Alexander Sandow.

<http://www.abbeville.com/interiors.asp?ISBN=1558592490&CaptionNumber=02> visited on August, 27, 2015.

Fig.2. (Elaine and) Willem de Kooning in their studio. Photograph by Hans Namuth , 1952.

<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Willem-de-Kooning/images-videos/Willem-de-Kooning-and-his-wife-Elaine-photograph-by-Hans/9897> visited on August, 27, 2015.

Fig. 3. Jackson Pollock. Photograph by Hans Namuth.

<http://rethinkable.deviantart.com/journal/Jackson-Pollock-Drip-Painting-Legend-507645465>
<visited on August, 27, 2015.

Fig. 4 Mark Rothko. Undated photo. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-galenson/mark-rothko-in-the-hague_b_5941346.html visited on August 27, 2015.

Fig. 5. Barnett Newman in his studio, 1952. Photograph by Hans Namuth.

<<http://henrimag.com/blog1/?p=6402>> visited on August 27, 2015