

# Pioneers of Abstraction

## *Background Notes*

Sarah Ciacci — 22 October 2025



(1) Gillian Ayres: *Phaëthon*, (1990, Tate)

**WAHG**

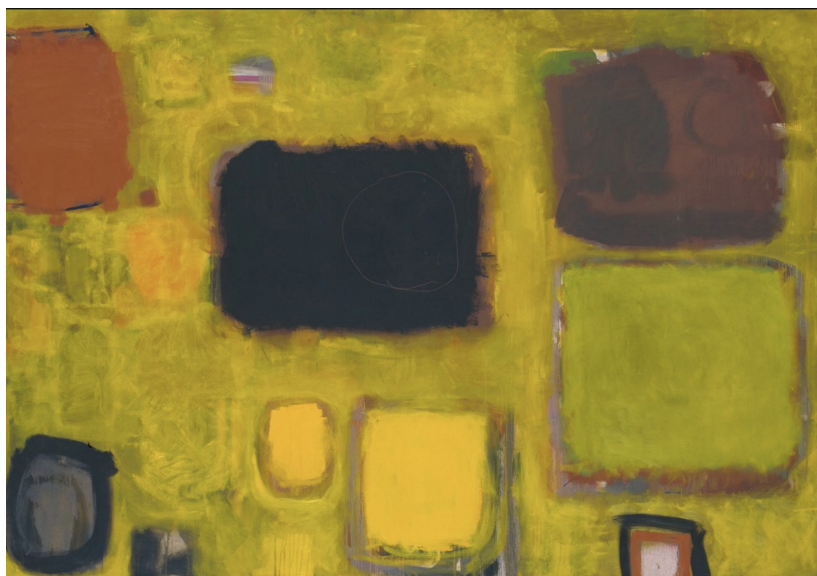
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This talk on the Pioneers of Abstraction will explore the artists who were instrumental in establishing Abstraction in Britain, commencing largely in the years following World War Two and whilst not a cohesive group, they were generally aware of each other's work and were influenced by each other.

**Gillian Ayres** (1930–2018) is best known for her vibrantly coloured abstract paintings and prints, of which she said there was no meaning behind them, instead they were all about the visual experience. She was born in 1930 in London and was sent to St Pauls' Girls School, spending weekends teaching art in bomb damaged parts of London with her friend Shirley Williams (who went on to a career in politics). She studied at Camberwell School of Art from 1946-1950 and spent her career teaching alongside her painting, in 1978 becoming Head of Painting at Winchester School of Art, the first woman to hold such a position. In her abstract paintings she explored bright colours, expressive line and shape and mark making. Someone once asked what her work was about, and she just listed random things like ice cream, cakes, seaweed, shells and hats, which gives a certain freedom of interpretation! Although she sometimes gave her works literary titles like *Phaëthon (1)*, a character from Greek mythology, they don't relate directly to the content of the work, but instead tangentially link to the painting's mood and feel. She was influenced by North American artists like Jackson Pollock, like him working on canvases lying on the floor. Henri Matisse was another inspiration for his bright colours and confident mark making. Later in her career she moved from using acrylics to oils which she layered several inches thick exploring the sculptural quality of the medium as well, which we also see in *Phaëthon*.

**Patrick Heron** (1920-1999) is known for his expansive colour-drenched paintings loosely inspired by his environment, such as the beach, the sky, or his garden. He was born in 1920 in Leeds and moved with his family to Cornwall and then Hertfordshire where his father established Cresta Silks. This brought Heron into contact with designers like Paul Nash and Cedric Morris perhaps influencing his interest in modernist art. He studied at the Slade School of Art until the outbreak of World War II, when he registered as a conscientious

objector and worked at the Leach Pottery, St Ives, in Cornwall under Bernard Leach, the father of English studio pottery. While there he met many leading artists of the St Ives School including Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, and he lived there from 1956 until his death. 1956 is also the year when his paintings changed from more figurative modernist works influenced by artists like Matisse, Bonnard and Cezanne to more abstract pieces. He experimented with different formats, from paintings made up of stripes to those with looser forms, all with his characteristic use of bold colour. In *Yellow Painting: October 1958 May/June 1959* (2) we see his focus on the play of bold colour, texture and shape that characterise his paintings - this one may have been inspired by the rocks and hedges in his garden in St Ives.



(2) Patrick Heron: *Yellow Painting: October 1958 May/June 1959*, (1959, Tate)

**Adrian Heath** (1920-1992) is important as a link between the St Ives School in Cornwall and the Constructivists in London. He was born in Burma in 1920 and attended Bryanston School in Dorset. In 1938, he studied art under the figurative artist Stanhope Forbes, founder of

the Newlyn School in Cornwall and the following year began studying at the Slade School of Art but his studies were broken by the outbreak of World War II. He joined the RAF and was shot down, so he spent almost the entire war as a prisoner of war at Stalag 383 in Bavaria, where he encouraged a fellow prisoner Terry Frost to paint. At the end of the war, he returned to the Slade and on completion of his studies visited St Ives Cornwall (In 1949 and 1951). Here he met Ben Nicholson, forming a link between the St Ives School and the London-based Constructivists Victor Pasmore and Anthony Hill, with whom he was also associated. He was at this time making abstract paintings featuring large, heavily brushed, block-like slabs of colour, as we can see in *Composition, Blue, Black and Brown* (3). He described the process of evolution of paintings like these as developing by growth, writing, *'The thing of interest is the actual life of the work: its growth from a particular white canvas or board ... It is the process, the method of development that is the life of the painting'*.



**(3) Adrian Heath:** *Composition, Blue, Black and Brown*  
(1952, Tate)



**(4) Terry Frost: *Walking down the Quays, St Ives***  
(1953, Peter Scott Gallery)

**Terry Frost** (1915-2003) is known for his bold use of colour and shape inspired by the Cornish environment. He was born in 1915 in Leamington Spa and aged 16 attended evening art classes but didn't take up painting straight away, instead working at many different practical jobs. During World War II he took up painting again, as a prisoner of war in Stalag 383 in Bavaria, encouraged by his fellow prisoner Adrian Heath. Commenting later he described these years as a '*tremendous spiritual experience, a more aware or heightened perception during starvation*'. After the war Frost studied at Camberwell School of Art (1947-50) under the Constructivist artist Victor Pasmore, who he described as his god, and his early work was in the gritty, realist tradition of the Euston Road School. In the 50s he lived at St Ives, working as an assistant to Barbara Hepworth, and so he became part of a close circle of emerging British Modernists working with abstraction, including Peter Lanyon and Patrick Heron. His work moved towards abstraction based on his observations of nature, often inspired by the movements of the sea and specifically

the rhythm of boats bobbing up and down in St Ives harbour. In *Walking down the Quays, St Ives (4)* he attempts to capture in abstract terms the effect of the rise and fall of boats in a harbour on a twilight evening, with his characteristic patterns of strongly outlined interlinked shapes. In the 60s, while teaching in California, he discovered acrylic paint and became increasingly interested in colour as a character in itself, which developed into a series of brightly coloured 'soft sculptures', which he thought of as brushstrokes in space.

**John Hoyland** (1934-2011) is significant for his exploration of scale, flatness and colour in his work. He was born in Sheffield in 1934 to a working-class family. Through the 50s he studied at Sheffield College of Art and the Royal Academy Schools, although his abstract works left the director, Charles Wheeler, less than impressed! In 1960 he took part in the group show *Situation* alongside Gillian Ayres, for which artists showed large-scale abstract pictures aimed at filling the viewer's field of vision. His paintings at this point used bands of colour which suggested a kind of buckling of the picture plane but by 1964 he was painting unequivocally flat works with the paint soaked into the canvas, as we can see in *14.6.64 (5)* with its simple, intensely coloured forms floating against a green field of colour. This is similar to what the American colour field painters were doing, and following the exhibition, he was awarded a bursary which allowed him to travel to New York where he met colour field painters Helena Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, as well as Clement Greenberg, the modernist critic who championed abstraction and flatness. In the 70s he started building up the surface of his paintings with thick layers of brilliantly coloured pigment. Hoyland didn't like being called an abstract painter, he said, *'It's just too abstract a word. It smacks always of geometry to me, of rational thought. There's no geometry, there's no rectangles in nature, no real straight lines. There's only the circle, the one really powerful form in nature I keep getting drawn back to'*.



(5) **John Hoyland:** *14.6.64* (1964, Manchester Art Gallery)

**Howard Hodgkin** (1932-2017) is an artist who resists easy explanation. Born in London in 1932 to a middle-class family, he spent time in New York, California and took many visits to India forming a large collection of Indian Art. After running away from both Eton and Bryanston School in Dorset he studied at Camberwell School of Art (1949-50) and then Bath Academy of Art, where he could explore abstraction, although it took him until his 40s, when he also came out as gay, to find his consistent style. In *Rain (6)*, which is nearly 2 m wide, we see the style most associated with Hodgkin - the fluency of the paint, his use of bold colours (he is celebrated as being an outstanding colourist) and the painted frame, perhaps influenced by the decorative borders of Indian art. Although his works appear completely abstract he said he based his works on specific events, usually an encounter between people, *'one moment of time involving particular people in relation to each other and in relation to me'*. However his work resists easy categorisation, and he famously did not like explaining his work, so he remains an enigmatic, and important, post-war artist.



**(6) Howard Hodgkin: *Rain* (1984-9, Tate)**

### **Ideas for further reading**

Mel Gooding, *Gillian Ayres* (Lund Humphries, 2001)

Michael McNay, *Patrick Heron* (Tate Publishing, 2002)

Jane Rye, *Adrian Heath* (Lund Humphries, 2012)

Chris Stephens, *Terry Frost* (Tate Publishing, 2015)

Mel Gooding, *John Hoyland* (Thames and Hudson, 2006)

Antony Lane, Richard Morphet, Julia Marciari Alexander, *Howard Hodgkin: 1992-2007* (Yale University Press, 2007)

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