

How New York stole the Idea of Modern Art: Jackson Pollock and the New York School

Texts and background notes

Barry Venning - 17 Jun 2015



Nina Leen: *The Irascibles* (a group portrait of the New York School), Life Magazine, Nov. 23rd 1950



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Jackson Pollock and the New York School

The year 1940 marked a watershed in the history of modern art. Up to that point, modern art was principally associated with Paris, but that ended when the city was occupied by the Nazis. The Nazis were implacably hostile to experimental art in all its forms, which led many European avant-garde painters and sculptors to seek refuge elsewhere. For many of them, their chosen destination was the USA, and for the rest of the twentieth century, it was New York that became the capital of modern art. The younger generation of New York artists were, for the most part, deeply impressed by the achievements of their European elders such as Picasso, Mondrian, Ernst and Léger, but they were equally determined to produce an art of their own – an art that was ambitious, serious, distinctively modern and like nothing that Europe had yet produced.

These artists are collectively known either as the New York School or, perhaps more commonly, as the Abstract Expressionists. They included Jackson Pollock (1912-56), Mark Rothko (1903-70), Barnett Newman (1905-70), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), Arshile Gorky (1904-48) and Clyfford Still (1904-80). Their art was controversial, uncompromisingly abstract, large scale and often subject to ridicule, but they also had powerful and influential champions such as the critic Clement Greenberg (1909-94) and the gallerist and collector, Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979). Guggenheim provided them with exhibition opportunities, whilst Greenberg, in a series of pugnacious and brilliantly argued essays, claimed that their work completely out-stripped the efforts of post-war European artists.

They rose to prominence during the late 1940s and, by the time Jackson Pollock died in 1956, they were, with the possible exception of Dali and Picasso, the most discussed artists in the western world. They became so influential that Pollock once lamented the fact that 'every kid thought it was easy to do a Pollock'. They have not completely lost the element of notoriety, but their reputations have grown over the last five decades to the point where exhibitions of Pollock and Rothko at the Tate have attracted a huge number of visitors.



Jackson Pollock: *Mural*. 1943. 247 x 605cm.
University of Iowa Museum of Art

Texts

Clement Greenberg, 'The Decline of Cubism' 1948

If artists as great as Picasso, Braque and Léger have declined so grievously, it can only be because the general social premises that used to guarantee their functioning have disappeared in Europe. And when one sees, on the other hand, how much the level of American art has risen in the last five years, with the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith....then the conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to United States, along with the centre of gravity of industrial production and political power.

Jackson Pollock, application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, 1947

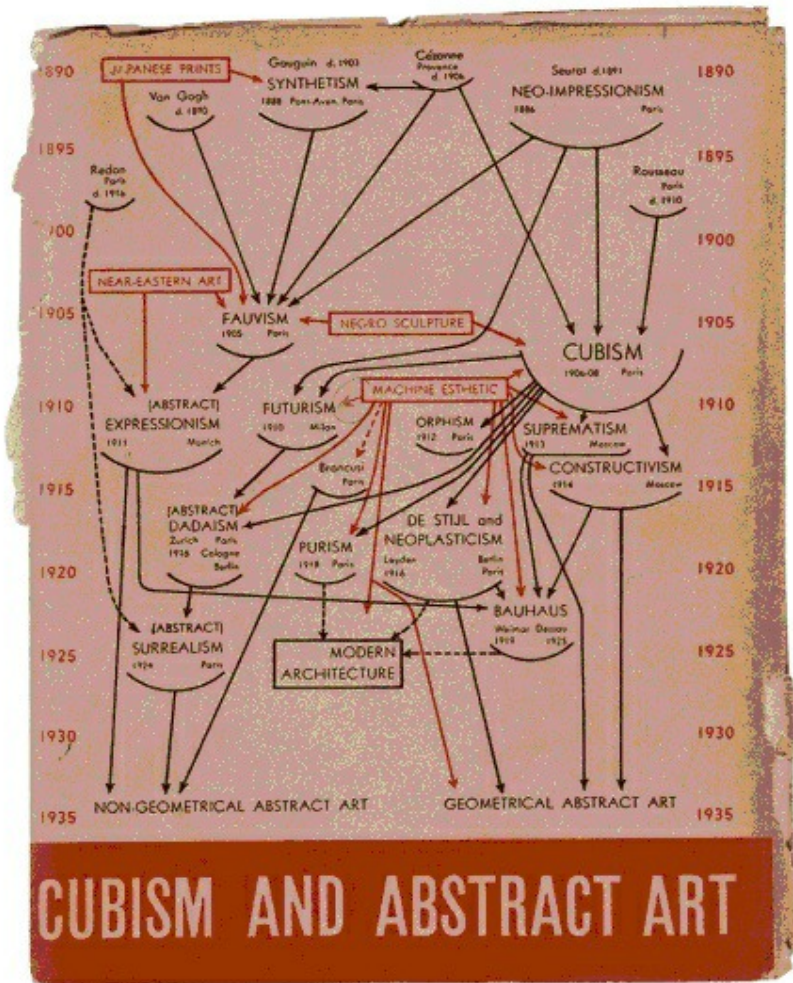
I intend to paint large, movable pictures which will function between the easel and the mural. I have set a precedent in this genre in a large painting for Miss Peggy Guggenheim which was installed in her house and later shown in the 'Large Scale Painting' show at the Museum of Modern Art. It is at present at Yale University.

I believe the easel picture to be a dying form, and the tendency of modern feeling is towards the wall painting or the mural. I believe the time is not yet ripe for a full transition from easel to mural. The pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely.

Jackson Pollock in conversation with William Wright 1950 (unbroadcast radio interview)

WW Mr Pollock, there's been a good deal of controversy and a great many comments have been made regarding your method of painting. Is there something you'd like to tell us about that?

JP My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio in the old forms of the Renaissance or any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique.



Alfred H. Barr: Flow Chart explaining the Development of Modern Art from the exhibition catalogue 'Cubism and Abstract Art', 1936, Museum of Modern Art.

Recommended reading

Anfam, D. *Abstract Expressionism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1990.

Bricker Balken, D. *Abstract Expressionism*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005.

Clearwater, B. *The Rothko Book*. London: Tate Publishing, 2006.

Guilbaut, S. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Lanchner, C. *Jackson Pollock*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

Forthcoming Exhibition

Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots

Tate Liverpool

30 June – 18 October 2015

The exhibition will present a rare chance to see a significant showing of the work that Pollock produced between 1951-53, including some of his so-called 'Black Pourings'. This is a widely debated body of work and the Liverpool show will be the first chance to see a representative sample of it in a public institution since 1980.



Mark Tansey: *The Triumph of the New York School*,
oil on canvas, 1984

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