

Abstract Expressionism:

Other Dimensions

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris

October 5–December 5, 1990



Ralph Rosenborg, *Nature II*, 1942

Abstract Expressionism, now generally regarded as the most important American stylistic contribution to twentieth-century art, is usually considered to require immense surfaces to accommodate the sweeping gestures of “action painting,” as in the work of Jackson Pollock, or “color fields,” as in the work of Mark Rothko. However, these techniques and styles did not necessarily require large scale to achieve their formal or expressive goals.

Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions is the first investigation of the role of small-scale painterly abstraction in American art from 1940 to 1965. This exhibition seeks to broaden the definition of Abstract Expressionism by showing fully realized small-scale paintings by well-known Abstract Expressionists, as well as work by lesser-known artists who have been overlooked because they worked exclusively in small formats.

The term Abstract Expressionism was first used in 1929 to refer to the non-representational paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, who believed that an abstract approach to painting could express spiritual essences of objects and ideas. In America, the Abstract Expressionist style that emerged in the 1940s was a startling break from the realistic, regionalist styles of the previous decade, which

drew from the American experience. This somewhat isolationist art was challenged by the Abstract Expressionists, who were influenced by European modernist painters, some of whom took refuge in New York City during World War II, including the Surrealists Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, and André Masson. Therefore, the Americans had first-hand contact with Surrealist techniques such as Masson’s “automatic writing,” a way to create works by allowing ideas to flow directly from the mind to the hand, resulting in spontaneous and freely gestural lines, dabs, and other semi-controlled markings.

Although the Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s had diverse styles, each used painting to express feelings, values, and ideas in a non-realistic manner. Radical techniques, such as Pollock’s pouring, dripping, and spattering, or Rothko’s scrubbing and staining, resulted in non-specific patterns and colors that reflected the artists’ interest in universal meanings. Other painters, among them Mark Tobey, were concerned as well with expressing meditative and spiritual harmony within themselves and the world.

The Abstract Expressionists who painted on enormous surfaces garnered the most critical acclaim, in part because their work visually overwhelmed smaller paintings in the same style. Certain American critics also promoted these large paintings because they felt that art on this scale suggested such “American” qualities as expansiveness and freedom from tradition.



Harold Shapinsky, *Rainbow on Alabama Avenue*, 1948

However, as this exhibition illustrates, Abstract Expressionists painted small-scale works that look similar to their monumental creations. And several major artists—among them Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Hans Hofmann—worked on small surfaces consistently throughout their careers. Though small in size, the works lose none of their impact or presence—the small-scale paintings are visually effective and powerful and are conceptually, if not physically, “expansive.”

Jackson Pollock, considered one of the central figures of Abstract Expressionism, made many small paintings. More than one-half of his mature output was only 36 inches wide; less than one-quarter measured 72 inches or more in even one dimension. In large and small works, Pollock’s pouring, dripping, pooling, and other gestural means of paint application created highly activated surfaces. The look of all-over “field” painting was achieved through rhythmic networks that implied extensions beyond the edges, a key to the feeling of expansiveness critics prized in Pollock’s art.

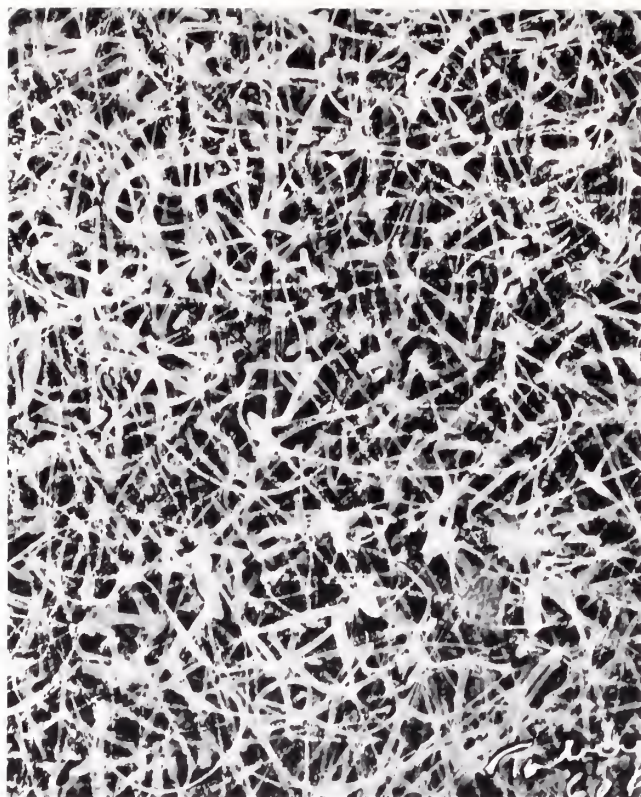
Another major Abstract Expressionist painter, Robert Motherwell, was influenced by Surrealist automatism. His work has a lyrical quality, and he encourages a poetic reading of his imagery: “It’s possible to paint a monumental picture that’s only 10 inches wide, *if one has a sense of scale. . . .*” He has painted his *Elegy* motif throughout his

career in seemingly endless variations; the motif adapts well to paintings of any size, as seen in a 5 by 7-inch version, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic #61* (1960), whose counterparts can reach over 20 feet in width.

Like Motherwell, Franz Kline continually created small finished works. Yet many of his large works contain expressive gestures that he initially painted in smaller compositions. In all sizes, Kline’s bold brushwork dashes dynamically across the surface.

Harold Shapinsky’s work, always small in size, consists of aggressively composed, non-objective paintings in vivid colors. Calm and reticent in his personality, Shapinsky nevertheless often depicted turbulent activity with tightly controlled gestures, giving the pictures an enormous sense of contained pressure. He has only recently won international acclaim.

Mark Tobey has an international reputation but is not usually included among the major Abstract Expressionist painters, possibly because of his preference for small formats, his residence on the West Coast, and his reverence for universal and inner harmony, as reflected in his adherence to the



Mark Tobey, *Little Miracle*, 1960

Baha'i World Faith. Tobey frequently blended Oriental and Occidental aesthetics, as in his adaptation of the Oriental technique of *sumi* (thrown ink) to a highly spontaneous form of Action Painting, or his transformation of gestural calligraphic markings into "white writing" to make paintings of modest dimensions that paralleled Abstract Expressionism's all-over compositions and fields. "The dimension that counts for the creative person," Tobey wrote, "is the Space he creates within himself. This inner space is closer to the infinite than the other, and it is the privilege of a balanced mind . . . to be as aware of inner space as . . . of outer space."

A meditative approach to painting, a reserved personality, as well as a preference for small formats are some reasons for the critical neglect of the work of Tobey, Shapinsky, Rollin Crampton, Sal Sirugo, Charles Seliger, and Ralph Rosenborg. Senior in this group, though not as well known as Tobey, is Rollin Crampton, whose nature-based but highly abstract works were among the first American paintings to rely on essentially monochromatic imagery. So distilled is Crampton's art from its sources that sometimes titles provide the only clues to the paintings' ultimate derivation from nature. Crampton was attracted to Zen Buddhism's search for a fundamental unity of being, for "getting down to a basic sort of simplicity." He believed a successful painting would reflect a philosophy of universal "oneness."

Eastern aesthetics also influence Sal Sirugo. He concentrates his mental and visual powers into extremely small pictures, creating mysterious works that seem to have no focus whatsoever. Charles Seliger's gestural paintings also use the forms and forces of nature as source material, seeking their essences through overall patterns of interwoven shapes, lines, details, and color. Seliger's paintings begin with very spontaneous techniques that are ultimately controlled and refined. Both Seliger and Sirugo create unified fields through complex textures and many tiny details. The effect is subtle, reflective, and inviting—not confrontational, as is often the case in large paintings by Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, or Barnett Newman.

Ralph Rosenborg began painting gestural abstractions by 1940, a number of years before many well-known Abstract Expressionists. Like Seliger's, his gestural abstractions are incisive perceptions of nature, balancing active and contemplative modes; expressiveness is tempered with a meditative approach to the subject. For Rosenborg, each painting stirs up memories and recalls a common human experience. He notes, "If you go deep down the painting will give the viewer a lift. A picture has no value but for what it does for a person inside themselves." To reach that deep experience



Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic #61*, 1960. Oil on panel, 5 × 7 inches.
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lee V. Eastman.

of nature, the painted natural elements must be “composites of the world we know, everything that has been stored up since childhood.”

The work of Tobey, Crampton, Rosenborg, Seliger, and Sirugo parallels the established Abstract Expressionist canon: these artists represent a group of individualists working within generalized stylistic and philosophical parameters of mid-century painterly abstraction. Although each works with a recognizably personal set of images and formats, there are five characteristics that give them coherence as a group: the decision to work in small scale, because their aesthetic goals are most powerfully achieved in reduced formats; a combination of spontaneity and control in technical matters; a highly sensitized interest in and respect for nature, as both a source of visual and spiritual satisfaction. (These artists use the physical appearance of natural forms and forces as motifs, rejecting the notion that only completely non-objective art can produce viable, advanced abstract painting.) The fourth shared characteristic is a strong belief in the meditative or revelatory nature of their art, accompanied by seriously held spiritual convictions, often based on Eastern philosophy, sometimes on individual amalgams of spiritual theories. Lastly, the artists have essentially modest and quiet personalities and have disdained self-promotion.

To fit such artists into American art history, we must be objective and open to the messages of their different voices. Together with their better-

known counterparts they constitute but one part of the larger complexity and continuity of American abstract painting. Tobey's statement that “the dimension that counts for the creative person is the Space he creates within himself” could be a cherished motto for many of the artists, who have found that a whole universe of emotion and intellect can be concentrated, with the proper sensibility, into an area less than half that encompassed by the sweep of an arm.

Jeffrey Wechsler
Assistant Director, Curatorial Affairs
Jenni L. Schlossman
Curatorial Assistant
The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.
Asterisked works are in the New York exhibition only.

William Baziotes (1912–1963)

Primeval Wall, 1959

Oil on canvas, 23¾ × 29¾

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of the Container Corporation of America

Rollin Crampton (1886–1970)

Stonehenge, 1951

Oil on paper, mounted on board, 22 × 28

The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick; Gift of Edward and Lois Grayson

Ahab's Seas, c. 1954-55

Oil on board, 37 × 28

Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University Art Collection; Purchased with funds from the Audrey S. and Thomas B. Hess Foundation, Inc.

Willem de Kooning (b. 1904)

Zot, 1949

Oil on paper, 18 × 20¼

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; from the collection of Thomas B. Hess; Purchase, Rogers, Louis V. Bell, and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest and gift of the heirs of Thomas B. Hess

Woman with Smile, 1967

Oil on canvas, 23½ × 18½

Collection of Richard E. Lang and Jane Lang Davis

Sam Francis (b. 1923)

Untitled, 1956

Oil on paper, 30½ × 22⅞

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of an anonymous donor 74.120

Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)

Figures in Pictoscape II, 1949

Oil on masonite, 14 × 18

© 1979 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc.

Nadir, 1952

Oil on masonite, 11 × 13⅜

© 1979 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc.

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)

Untitled, c. 1942

Collage and oil on gessoed panel, 13⅞ × 13⅞

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Gift, Michelle and Herbert Rosenfeld

The Window, 1952

Oil on plywood, 11½ × 9

Private collection

Gerome Kamrowski (b. 1914)

Figure in Blue, 1940

Oil and enamel on panel, 19 × 15½

Washburn Gallery, New York

Transformation, 1943

Enamel on jute, mounted on panel, 23 × 32

Washburn Gallery, New York

Franz Kline (1910–1962)

Untitled, 1961

Oil on paper, 18¼ × 18

Collection of Richard E. Lang and Jane Lang Davis

Lee Krasner (1908–1984)

Untitled, 1946

Oil on linen, 27¾ × 30¼

Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1948

Oil on canvas, 30 × 25

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;

Gift of Mrs. Donald T. Braider

Knud Merrild (1894–1954)

Perpetual Possibility, 1942

Enamel on canvas over composition board, 20 × 16⅞

The Museum of Modern Art, New York;

Gift of Mrs. Knud Merrild

Robert Motherwell (b. 1915)

N.R.F. Collage, Number 2, 1960

Oil and collage on paper, 28⅞ × 21½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the

Whitney Museum of American Art 61.34

Barnett Newman (1905–1970)

Untitled, 1946

Oil on canvas, 17 × 27⅞

The Schorr Family Collection

Vincent Pepi (b. 1926)

Piazza del Popolo, 1950

Oil on canvas, 27⅞ × 17½

The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum,

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,

New Brunswick; Gift of the artist

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Free Form, 1946

Oil on canvas, 19¼ × 14

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Sidney

and Harriet Janis Collection

**Number 20*, 1948

Enamel on paper, mounted on cardboard, 20½ × 26

Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art,

Utica, New York

Richard Pousette-Dart (b. 1916)

The Tree, c. 1948
Oil on canvas, 34 × 27
Private collection

Untitled (Eye of the Sky), 1961
Oil on panel, 13½ × 18⅝
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham,
Massachusetts; Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur E. Kahn,
New York

Clayton S. Price (1874–1950)

Untitled, 1949-50
Oil on paper, 14½ × 12
Private collection

Ralph Rosenborg (b. 1913)

Night Landscape, 1940
Gouache on board, 9¾ × 13
The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum,
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,
New Brunswick; Gift of Edward and Lois Grayson

Nature II, 1942
Watercolor on paper, 6½ × 13¾
Private collection

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Untitled, 1950
Oil on canvas, 44¾ × 33½
Collection of Richard E. Lang and Jane Lang Davis

Untitled, 1964
Acrylic on paper, 25⅞ × 20
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of the Woodward
Foundation

Ethel Schwabacher (1903–1984)

Plurabelle, 1956
Mixed media on board, 9⅞ × 8
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Christopher C. Schwabacher

Sonia Sekula (1918–1963)

The Burning Forrest [sic], 1949
Oil and pencil on paper, 10¼ × 8¼
The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum,
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,
New Brunswick; Gift of Betty Parsons Foundation

Charles Seliger (b. 1926)

Sea Fossils, 1952
Oil on canvas, 9½ × 13½
Private collection

Forest Echoes, 1961
Oil on canvas, 12⅞ × 16⅞
Private collection

Harold Shapinsky (b. 1925)

Rainbow on Alabama Avenue, 1948
Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 18½ × 19¾
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert H. Kinney

Untitled, c. 1948
Oil and enamel on paper, mounted on cardboard,
20½ × 25¾
Collection of Mark Scheiber

Sal Sirugo (b. 1920)

C-70, 1948
Luminall and casein on masonite, 20 × 14
Collection of Sal and Irene Sirugo

C-107, c. 1954
Luminall, casein, and wax crayons on masonite,
12 × 16
The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum,
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,
New Brunswick; Gift of Edward and Lois Grayson

Janet Sobel (1894–1968)

Untitled, c. 1946
Oil and enamel on board, 18 × 14
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;
Gift of William Rubin

Theodoros Stamos (b. 1922)

The Field, 1952
Oil on canvas, 16 × 19⅞
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Mark Tobey (1890–1976)

Above the Earth V, 1956
Tempera on paper, 18 × 11¾
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Lippold

Space Rose, 1957
Tempera on paper, mounted on board, 4 × 4
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Seliger

Little Miracle, 1960
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 5⅞ × 4¼
The Dayton Art Institute; Museum purchase with
funds provided by the Junior League of Dayton, Ohio, Inc.

Bradley Walker Tomlin (1899–1953)

**Number 12–1949*, 1949
Oil on canvas, 32 × 31
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of B.H. Friedman in honor of John I.H. Baur 86.53



Charles Seliger, *Forest Echoes*, 1961

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris**

120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017
(212) 878-2453
Free admission

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Cover: Hans Hofmann, *The Window*, 1952