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# Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism

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SURREALISM AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

(TITLE)

BY

MICHAEL R. ROBINS

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## INTRODUCTION

Abstract Expressionism (Action Painting or the New York School, or whatever you may call the art of a group of Americans working in and around New York during the forties and fifties) is unquestionably the most important phase in the direction of Abstract Art since its realization at the end of the nineteenth century. Abstract Expressionism is the conclusion to many problems sought by abstractionists and the Avante-garde throughout the first half of this century. That would be 'coming to terms' with the acceptance of the idea of abstraction: i.e., to accept it with no holds barred, and to continue with that as the starting point.

The European had sought to come to terms with abstraction through intellectualization and theory, to rationalize the irrational. Cezanne tried, so did Picasso and Braque with Analytical Cubism. The Surrealists Masson and Miro came close to the realization, as did the early Kandinsky, but it was the Americans who took the irrational and used it as it was. They simply 'painted' and with that gesture liberated themselves from the European abstract tradition. Many say this as the displacement of a European heritage, that they had dealt them a fatal blow. Art, up until then, had always come from Europe and with it came taste and aesthetics 'European style.' The Americans in their realization and liberation of abstract art had annihilated European taste bringing aesthetics back to the 'instinctive threshold.' With it came the realization that Europe had cultivated pre-conceptions and idioms which had the 'appearance' of abstract art because of their strong cultural traditions. The Americans, somewhat oblivious to tradition, were in a position to push abstract art through that apparent 'blockade.'

In considering New York artists one must bear in mind their diversity and their independence from one group from another. Only their situation and their aim was in common. Their aim was simply to contribute to the mainstream of contemporary art and not to produce mere representations of something developed in Europe.

This intention underlined the motivation of many American artists as early as 1910; though the Abstract Expressionist movement in general appears to owe no great debt to the Ash Can School or the Social Realists and Regionalists.<sup>1</sup> Abstract Expressionism is the final realization of ideas started by Kandinsky, Picasso, Masson and Breton and many other European leading abstractionists.

Some of these European artists were introduced to America in the Armory Show of 1914. The show did very little to achieve its aim of promoting the American Avante-garde but it turned out to be a tremendous success for the European artists. It took another thirty years before American artists dared to turn their backs on Paris again.

For the American artists not particularly concerned with abstraction the solution lay in an art form that typified America and Americans. This gave rise to Regionalism and Social Realism. Born out of the great depression Social Realism became packed with political comments which in many instances gave rise to Marxist ideals. Fortunately they relied upon that climate for their impetus and thus became extinct with the passing of time. The setting up of the Federal Art Project by the U. S. Treasury Department, undoubtedly prompted by the 'climate' at that time, was an extremely important and effective organization. This later became the Works Progress Ad-



ministration (W. P. A.) and part of its aim was to give artists a living wage in return for art works and particularly murals.

The W. P. A. enabled many artists to meet one another, in some instances to actually work together, and to discuss and air their views. There were those in favour of Social protest and those who were more concerned with abstraction.<sup>2</sup> The younger artists at the time, deKooning, Gorky and Pollock, reflecting back on those days looked towards and debating an art free of social protest and reform.<sup>3</sup> For them the W. P. A. was not so much an opportunity to protest, via public murals (as with Thomas Hart Benton) but more an opportunity and chance to devote themselves, in the role as full-time painters to abstract art. It was the work of Jackson Pollock and William deKooning in the mid forties that arrested the attention of European collectors and connoisseurs in America, winning the patronage of Peggy Guggenheim and Katherine Drier and the appraisal of Andre Breton and the Surrealists. It was their success that expressed in forceful terms that which American artists had been trying to achieve for the past forty or so years.

Jackson Pollock, with his astounding discovery of what was then an entirely new technique in painting, the 'drip' or 'action' gestural type, "broke the ice for us," as deKooning generously stated, and after Pollock came a whole flotilla of 'ice breakers.' It is not so much what Pollock did as the way he went about it, and it is the implications and possibilities that burst from his style that make Pollock perhaps America's greatest painter.



## CHAPTER II

### Europeans in America, the refugees

The political climate during the thirties in Germany and Hitler's closing of the Bauhaus forced artists, including Joseph Albers and Hans Hoffman, to leave Europe and come to the United States. With the threat and eventual coming of World War II many more followed, gathering in and around New York. Almost an entire Surrealist movement had moved over, including their leader, the poet and intellectual, Andre Breton.

The Surrealists wasted no time in distributing manifestos and introducing young influential American artists to their ideas. Peggy Guggenheim, wife of the surrealist Max Ernst, exhibited surrealist work in her 'Art of This Century' Gallery. As did Julien Levy, who was to play an important part later in the discovery of Arshile Gorky.

Hans Hoffman, one of the earlier arrivals in New York (1932), had already set up an art school there. He exercised great influence with the Association of American Abstract Artists, whose primary aim was to get exhibition space for their members. Hans Hoffman played a very important background role in the Abstract Expressionists movement. The ideas he brought from the Bauhaus of simplicity and purity of structure and form were of great help to the younger developing artists searching for ideas. None of the first Abstract Expressionists were ever pupils of his art school though they would have come in contact with him a great deal in the lofts and bars of the New York scene. Having some association with Hans Hoffman could almost be viewed as a credential in regard to the personal biography of the New York Abstract Expressionists.

The Dutchman Piet Mondrian was also a very influential artist to arrive in New York, though he came ten years later than Hoffman in the early forties. Also an associate of the Association of American Abstract Artists, Mondrian, as a mature artist, affiliated himself with Geometric Abstraction, attracting great interest among the association's members. Mondrian's reduction of natural forms to 'constant elements:' i.e., the reduction of colour to primaries and the reduction of spatial boundaries to vertical and horizontal lines, and his pure structural qualities provided many artists with more than a casual influence. Mondrian's "plus and minus" series had a strong and positive effect on deKooning.

Though deKooning, (who had emigrated from Holland in 1928), works essentially from the figure he is frequently impressed with the way in which Mondrian's "canvases keep changing in front of us."<sup>1</sup> He was amazed at the continual generation of new thoughts and ideas that came from Mondrian's canvases each time he returned to them. This is a quality that one finds in deKooning's work, in particular his Woman series. (Figure 8)

Mondrian arrived in New York at a time when Surrealism was the predominant trend and his strong, rational, geometric structures, shared little in common with the more energetic impulsive activity of Abstract Expressionism. Mondrian's potential, I think, was fully realized with the advent of post-painterly and hard edge abstraction, though his ideas of 'clearing away the impurities' and getting to the 'core' of art may have been a very inspiring factor.

Perhaps one of the most important figures in the Avante-garde art world, a man who had emigrated from Europe before the Armory show and had contributed to the show one of its most successful works, the Nude De-

scending the Staircase, was Marcel Duchamp. Formerly a Dadaist and later a chess player, Duchamp held close contact and friendship with leading members of the art world. It was Duchamp, together with the photographer Alfred Steiglitz, who set up exhibitions of leading European artists like Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, Lautrec, Brancusi and Mattise at the 291 studio gallery in New York during the late twenties. Later Duchamp helped to form the Societe Anonyme with Katherine Drier, for the purpose of buying and exhibiting examples of European and American art. The Societe Anonyme also arranged lectures and symposiums by Brancusi, Braque, Kandinsky, Klee, Leger, Mondrian and Miro. Duchamp arranged one man shows for Jean Arp and Jean Corleau at the 'Guggenheim Jeune' in 1937. These exhibitions inspired young artists such as Jackson Pollock, William deKooning and Arshile Gorky when they were working on Federal art projects.

## CHAPTER III

### The Surrealists

Of all the European refugee artists in America, those that stimulated the young American abstractionists the most were the Surrealists. Hoffman, Mondrian and Duchamp contributed but it was the surrealist who opened the road for Pollock and Gorky that was to lead to Abstract Expressionism.

Born from the ashes of Dadaism, Surrealism enjoyed two decades as the most organized level of European perception. Their ideas and aims were made available in published manifestos written by Andre Breton. They were patronized and supported by Julien Levy and Peggy Guggenheim who exhibited their work throughout the late thirties and early forties.

In the first manifesto written in 1924 Breton gave the following definition of the word 'surrealism:'

"Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes the express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual function of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any controlled exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."

Breton, before World War I, was a medical student studying psychiatry. It was while a student that he came in contact with the work of Freud whom he came to admire and respect "beyond all others." It is undoubtedly Freud's study and translation of dreams that inspired Breton to inspire the surrealists. The surrealists also found support in Hegel in re-examining the concepts of reality and attempting to break down the antithesis between matter and mind. But Freud supplied the necessary basic investigations into the unconscious that supported the surrealists' belief that the "minds scope"

could outreach its "determined logical powers."<sup>1</sup> Breton saw as the ultimate achievement of dream study the coalition of dream and reality, mind and matter, into one sort of reality which he called surreality.<sup>2</sup>

Surrealist painting can be divided into two categories, the first -- Dream Pictures, in which one would include the work of Dali, Ernst and Magritte. The second group, which is really the most important for the Abstract Expressionists would include the 'organic' work of Matta, Masson, Miro and Arp. Their work might be called 'automatic pictures.' Their paintings were not executed 'after the act' as was with, say, Magritte, who would have had dream-like or 'hallucogenic' thoughts and then proceed to paint them. The automatic paintings were executed during the duration of a thought or state of mind, and were therefore less structured and more spontaneous. Their work is often defined as organic surrealism. The organic appearance or likeness to natural forms in their work came as a direct result of their spontaneity of execution. The forms were dictated only by haphazard and accidental boundaries (see figure 4), much like nature itself. One would not expect to find geometry for that would be the result of logical reasoning, and would undermine their initial intentions.

It is this type of thinking that inspired Gorky and Pollock so much (I will refer to this point again in a later chapter), though neither of them employed the 'ritual' of Surrealism: i.e., the method of surrealism to submerge one's self into the realms of the subconscious treating the whole act as if it were 'art-play.' The surrealists saw their work as "direct uncensored graphics," seeking evidence for their "dream-wish that something more resourceful than logic might be found to endure life with fuller significance."<sup>3</sup> Breton, in order to become a surrealist writer or painter wrote:



"Have someone bring you materials -- get settled in your favourite comfortable place, put yourself in a passive receptive frame of mind. Forget about your genius, your talents and everybody else's. Work quickly, without a pre-conceived subject, fast enough not to remember and not to be tempted to look over what you've done."<sup>4</sup>

In this 'ritual' one has to place oneself as a 'medium' and become detached from the concrete world. Many components of Abstract Expressionism, in particular the work of Jackson Pollock, seem to employ a similar method and technique, but in response move to the world around him.

It might seem that in many instances the surrealists anticipated Abstract Expressionism though they were involved in 'being' surrealists. It is the point of this thesis to examine that similarity that exists between surrealism and abstract expressionism.

There exists, too, a similarity between the results of automatism -- the biomorphic organic shapes, particularly those of Matta, and certain examples of primitive art. Assuming that there is something universal about surrealist ideology, one can envision the employment of such a method that would place one in a situation similar to that of a primitive man who has just discovered art.

Primitive art, in particular African and Pre-Columbian, has played an important role in the formation of Modern art; it is evident in the early work of Rothko and Gottlieb, while deKooning was quick to notice and refer to recently discovered cave paintings in the south of France.<sup>5</sup>

The Surrealist movement encompassed a wide variety of artists and styles. Their views were flexible enough to permit the showing of work of non-surrealist artists in their exhibitions. A typical practice or custom

of the surrealists was to adopt and give patronage to artists whose work and techniques were similar to their own. They also respected the fact that many artists disliked group activities and preferred to be considered independent. In this way they included in some of their shows the work of Gorky and Pollock. Other pre-Abstract Expressionists like Robert Motherwell and William Baziotes were more actively involved in Surrealism. The two of them frequently held 'automatic poetry' sessions, some of which were attended by Pollock, though he generally admitted a dislike for those sort of activities.<sup>6</sup>

Pre-World War I Munich Expressionism was important for surrealism and also Abstract Expressionism, and almost one of direct influence. This was partly through Paul Klee (though Klee refused to have any formal connection with the surrealist in spite of their admiration for him<sup>7</sup>) and partly through analogy of form and method. Here the work of Kandinsky and his Improvisation method seem to anticipate the surrealists' more deliberate automatic method.

Surrealism then was a devised process, a system, enabling artists to employ their total being. For them the critical point of creativity lay in the subconscious, a virtually untapped warehouse of billions of experiences and events that make up the complexity of the mind. A world that reason alone cannot release. Few artists would deny that their work comes from the inner-self, or that their best work seemed effortlessly inspired. In a hypothetical sense psychic automatism presents itself as a means simply to release unlimited amounts of what might be considered 'pure art.' The surrealists like the Dadaists before them were indicating that anyone could be an artist.



## CHAPTER IV

### Jackson Pollock -- The First

Pollock's role in the Abstract Expressionist movement was a relatively simple one. It was his inventiveness and breakthrough into fresh artistic territory that the realization and possibilities of Abstract Expressionism existed. It is unfortunate that his work, for the most part, remains something of an artist novelty, suffering as a result.

Born in Cody, Wyoming in 1912, Pollock was one of the few native Americans in the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. Pollock's incentive to become a painter probably came from his older brother, Charles. Charles, himself a painter, was a well read and knowledgeable person. For a while Jackson's art training seems to indicate that he was following in the footsteps of Charles.

Pollock's art training started in Los Angeles at the Manual Arts High School in 1928. Charles at this time had already spent two years at the Art Students League under Thomas Hart Benton. Pollock later enrolled there in 1929. But it was while at Los Angeles that Pollock came under the influence of Frederick John de St. Vain Schwankovsky, whose teaching was essentially that of Theosophy and Krishnumurti.<sup>1</sup> It is an interesting coincidence that Mark Tobey was in Pollock's class at that time. Tobey was later to emerge as Pollock's oriental counterpart.

Los Angeles was certainly more important for Tobey than Pollock. Pollock's career really began at New York at the Art Students League with Benton. Benton was a great classicist, a firm believer in the analytical methods of the Renaissance and Baroque art. This echoes through Benton's work which

has been updated with latter day subject matter -- Regionalism and social conscience. Benton's direct influence upon Pollock was most certainly a negative one as Pollock later stated, "Benton was something which I could react against." Benton and Pollock held a close friendship keeping in touch with one another until Pollock's death in 1953. Benton's main contribution to the direction that Pollock was later to take was in introducing him to the Mexican Orozco.

In 1930 Benton and Orozco worked on a W. P. A. mural at the New School for Social Research. If one examines the components of Pollock's mature works in order to find out that which makes it new and different the most noticeable feature is the size. Pollock did action posing for the New School mural and was interested and excited by the idea of large mural painting. Some say that Pollock's notion of scale came from his childhood in the vast expanses of the west. Though Pollock himself saw his work as "the transition between easel painting and the mural,"<sup>2</sup> implying that he painted portable murals.

Later, through Orozco, Pollock met another Mexican, Siqueiros, in the spring of 1936. Siqueiros was the confirmed communist of the Social Realist era. Though always something of a radical, Pollock never really got involved in Marxism. However, Siqueiros had set up an experimental workshop to explore new techniques applicable to mural painting and banners and one of the many experimentations at the workshop was the use of synthetic paints and lacquers. In his later 'drip' paintings Pollock used 'commercial' paints similar to these.

So it was with Benton and Orozco that Pollock was exposed and involved with large scale painting, and with Siqueiros and the workshop where he en-

countered the type of paint that enabled his free fluid drip technique to develop.

Pollock's work at this time showed little of these two experiences. His work between 1941 and 1945 in particular showed a strong influence from Picasso's late cubism. Two paintings executed in 1943, She-Wolf and Pasiphae, point towards a personal myth. She-Wolf is the embellishment of an experience -- an event personal enough to motivate a work of art. These paintings, and in particular She-Wolf, is said to have been developed from things found in Picasso's Guernica.<sup>3</sup> Guernica was for Picasso a myth, not in the classical sense, but the personal, traumatic, sense. The wealth of personal experience and motivation makes Guernica Picasso's masterpiece. It is in this light, that of a myth, that one must look at Gorky, deKooning, Rothko and Gottlieb. It seems that personal myth<sup>4</sup> is a part of Abstract Expressionism.

Though Pollock is famed for his drip paintings it is in his myth where the depth of his work lies. Of all Pollock's works, those two and one of his last, the Portrait and a Dream, point to the personal poetic feeling of Pollock, which might be lost in the novelty of his drip paintings if one did not bear these works in mind.

In 1942 Pollock met his future wife, Lee Krasner, who introduced him to Hans Hoffman. Hoffman once suggested to Pollock that he might benefit from enrolling in one of his classes and "work more from nature," to which Pollock replied, "I am nature."<sup>5</sup> I think here Pollock indirectly admits to an influence from surrealism. To say "I am nature" is the same as saying I am the centre of all things. That is essentially what autonomy is about, realizing that the artist is the source of his work.

If one compares Andre Breton's instruction for automatism it is strikingly similar in view to a very complete statement made by Pollock.

"I continue to get further away from the painter's tools, such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluid paint or heavy impasto with sand, broken glass or other foreign material added. When I am in the painting I am not aware of what I'm doing -- it's only after a sort of get-acquainted period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying images, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It's only when I lose contact with a painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony and easy give-and-take and the painting comes out well."<sup>6</sup>

It is in his later, mature, work that Pollock discovers his full potential. It seems that he has employed the automatic method, and in a sense re-discovered them. His own 'rules' are flexible and are open to decisions, moods, and emotions. If Pollock sees an image, say a face, developing he sets about and destroys it, because he says, "the painting has a life of its own." As stated earlier, it was the unconventional surrealist who discovered Abstract Expressionism.

Pollock fits into a category of Abstract Expressionism coined by Harold Rosenberg as 'Action Painting.' The title can be misleading as it implies what Benton once called, "paint slinging binges." Action Painting is anything but wild and erratic, in fact, as Pollock suggests, the process is anything but 'active.' "If there is pure harmony and easy give-and-take the painting comes out well." This gives the impression that Pollock's paintings

were executed in a rather 'cool' manner. If action painting should imply 'instant art' Pollock most certainly does not fit into that category.

In the calligraphic sense the fine webs of luminescent lines in Pollock's mature paintings are suggestive of automatic writing, not in the literal, but in the visual sense, as in doodling. This is the personal language of his art.

As Pollock's bold, original, style emerged he found himself, as did others, standing dangerously on the brink of failure, as he had more or less completely rejected conformity. Pollock dared to commit himself totally, pursuing his own art and showing us that art can be produced directly by the artist himself, and need not rely on the distortion of nature. I think Rosenberg meant by Action Painting -- the act of painting itself -- the gesture being the act. Much like a musician creating music spontaneously by improvisation. As Rosenberg says, "The canvas is now an arena in which to act."<sup>7</sup>

Kandinsky, who first used the term 'Abstract Expressionism' in 1910, draws attention to the immediate relationship between Abstract Expressionism and Improvisation in music. He called his more spontaneous works Improvisations. Broadly speaking, Kandinsky's theory of art was to express his spiritual awareness of the material through the material medium of paint.<sup>8</sup>

There are definite similarities in the work of Pollock and Kandinsky, though not necessarily any direct influence, they both point toward the same thing. Kandinsky's canvases, like Improvisation No. 30 (Figure One), were done almost in a trance, "rather subconsciously" and in a "state of strong inner-tension."<sup>9</sup>



"The observer," says Kandinsky, "must learn to look at the picture as a graphic representation of a mood and not as the representation of objects."<sup>10</sup> Kandinsky seems to anticipate both the surrealists and the Abstract Expressionists.

Therefore Pollock, re-discovering Surrealism and Kandinsky, brought about the final realization and potential of Abstract Expressionism.

"The type was not the younger painter but the reborn one," says Rosenberg. "The big moment came when it was decided to paint -- just paint."<sup>11</sup>

## CHAPTER V

### Arshile Gorky -- A Debt to Europe

Gorky is a different kind of artist to most Abstract Expressionists, he belongs in a category of his own. His is not an Action Painter like Pollock or Kline, nor is he similar to the colour field painters like Rothko and Still. Gorky's work perhaps best shows the transition from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism, though without 'positively' being either.

Up until the early forties Gorky had patiently studied the work and imitated the styles of artists whom he admired. For twenty years he studied Uccello and the old masters, Cezanne, Picasso and synthetic Cubism, Kandinsky and finally the 'abstract' space of Miro till he broke through into his own well educated and highly personal style. Gorky encompassed each one of those styles in turn, regardless of what other people thought and said, impregnating himself and savouring almost the entire history of Abstract art, step by step.

Gorky's connection to Abstract Expressionism is not as direct as Pollock, deKooning, Kline and Rothko. If one assumes that all these artists worked independently and developed, through their own realizations of Abstract Expressionism their own personal styles, then, Gorky would fit into the group if that is the combining 'factor.' Gorky went through the same phase as did other Abstract Expressionists by having his personal breakthrough in the mid forties.

Like Pollock, Gorky's close relationship to Surrealism provided another link between that and Abstract Expressionism. Gorky has often been described as the last surrealist or the first Abstract Expressionist.<sup>1</sup> It is in this transition that Gorky exists, taking on a flavour of the two.



Forgetting painterly qualities for a moment, the most conducive factor of Abstract Expressionism was the personal content or myth. For Pollock it was something silent which could only surface in the automatic process of painting. For deKooning it was a personal challenge, the struggling opposite forces. For Rothko it was poetic and mystic. For Gorky it was memories and nostalgia, particularly from his childhood in Armenia, and emotions laced with fantasy and romantic tragedy.

Perhaps Gorky's strong influence from Miro and organic surrealism (proved by the fact that it was his last in a long line of influences) led him into his own personal realization. This phase of Gorky's work, around 1942, perhaps shows the main difference between Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism.

"Where the Surrealists discovered their unconscious desired, Gorky instead implanted the emblems of his desire in his subconscious."<sup>2</sup>

Gorky's life had been a long series of tragedies. Torn from his native Armenia by war and having to flee to the United States. The starvation of his mother, and the poverty and hardship of that time. These were the 'emblems' of Gorky's personal myth. Gorky had a strong deep passion for his homeland. Though Gorky enjoyed the celebration of his work by Andre Breton and the Surrealists he never accepted the idea of surrealism in the surrealist way. "Their art," he wrote in a letter to his sister and confidante Vartoosh, "are quite strange and somewhat flippant, almost playful."<sup>3</sup>

Gorky, I think, rode along with the surrealists as they were the first to appreciate and not reject his work. Gorky was against the 'ritual' of surrealism, considering that their art was "reduced to an unconscious game in which anyone can play irrespective of credentials and quality."<sup>4</sup>

It was shortly after Gorky came under the influence of the abstract space of Miro and the automatic method of surrealism that he came to terms with himself and was free to release his own imagination and myth. "Taking the bull by the horns," rather than dissecting and analyzing the work of other artists whom he admired, he broke through into what Julien Levy considers "his emotional liberation."<sup>5</sup> It was his association with surrealism that made him realize that his secret emotional confusion was the very source of his soul.

Gorky's career as an original mature artist started more or less with the Garden in Sochi series (Figure 5). These works were about his lost childhood, enlivened with Armenian folklore. In 1941 Gorky wrote a legend for his Garden in Sochi, part of which went:

"... the Garden was identified as the Garden of wish-fulfillment and I had often seen my mother and other village women opening their bosoms and taking their soft dependable breasts in their hands to rub them on the rock. Above all this stood an enormous tree all bleached under the sun, the rain, the cold and deprived of leaves. This was the Holy Tree."<sup>6</sup>

It was in this period that Gorky found himself and his myth. The nostalgia of his past, the folklore and legends, superstitions and fertility. From this point on Gorky's life and his art were one.

Gorky continued his association with the Surrealists exhibiting with them at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1945. Andre Breton devoted the concluding section of this show "Surrealism and Painting" to Gorky -- allowing him to remain "himself." Something which Pollock liked to do also as he exhibited with the Surrealists around this time.

Later Gorky exhibited along with Pollock and deKooning in a group exhibition titled "New American Painting." They left Surrealism behind them and Abstract Expressionism moved to the front. It was in the light of this show that Rosenberg came to regard Gorky as "a typical hero of Abstract Expressionism,"<sup>7</sup> seeing him as a pioneer of the new American painting.

Therefore in many instances Gorky typified the 'nerve centre' of Abstract Expressionism. He had adhered to a strong influence from Picasso and Cubism -- glued to a preference for Abstract European art rather than America's own Social Realism. He had taken his most crucial influence from surrealism, of the automatic and biomorphic type, though retained his own identity throughout, and did not become involved in the 'play' or ritual.

## CHAPTER VI

### Mark Tobey -- Oriental Influence

Tobey, though not from New York, reflects in his work the same personal realization as that of Pollock and Gorky -- though Tobey's breakthrough might decidedly be called an 'enlightenment.' Tobey was from the west coast and though he is considered by many to be an Abstract Expressionist, his work differs somewhat from the New York artists. The most noticeable being size.

Tobey had studied brushwork and calligraphy in Seattle under the Chinese artist Teng Kwei. It was in his brushwork that Tobey learned the "difference between volume and the living line."<sup>1</sup> That sentence could apply equally well to Pollock and a lesser extent Kline. Though Tobey's impetus came from the Orient and Zen Buddhism.

"All is in motion now," wrote Tobey. "A design of flames encircles the quiet Buddha. One step backward into the past and the tree in front of my studio in Seattle is all rhythm, lifting, springing upward!"<sup>2</sup>

The 'springing rhythm' of the tree that had once appeared ordinary to him became the starting point for his so-called style of White writing.

Tobey's myth was oriented around Eastern philosophy but he sometimes used, in particular with a painting called The Dormition of the Virgin (Figure 10), a western Christian theme. In fact, Tobey had for a long time been interested in icon-painting and the Byzantine painting in general.<sup>3</sup>

"In The Dormition of the Virgin (her deathless sleep), I have used some form in improvisation similar to musicians, using a motive by earlier or contemporary musicians. I had more or less of a feeling of earlier paintings upon and into which I built a modern complex structure. The outline of the

floating Virgin in coral colour rises above a similar form below which is but a shadowy idea of her earthly existence."<sup>4</sup>

Tobey's use of improvisation likens him to the type of thinking conducive to Abstract Expressionism. And he deals extensively with the spiritual, as did Kandinsky. The meticulous planning of Tobey's paintings differs him from Pollock, whose work his most resembles. Yet again, Tobey is a typical diversity of Abstract Expressionism.

Zen Buddhism captured a lot of interest in the Western world during the twenties and thirties though there were many who considered Zen best left to the East. The surrealist Andre Masson could be considered as one by the following statement that he made:

"... One must not believe that we can find any profound help in pictorial quietism via Asiatic 'recipes' for saintliness."<sup>5</sup>

Masson says that the Chinese painter values only passive possession "to be the humble echoe -- the reflection," whereas the Western painter must have the 'spirit of conquest' and would feel lost if he is not, even in the least bit "aggressive" -- "Humility is out of keeping with his ken."<sup>6</sup>

Here lies the fundamental difference between Tobey and Pollock. The type of artist Masson was hinting at, referring to aggression and conquest would be typified by Pollock and deKooning as well. Their paintings have the essential quality of a 'Love Hate' relationship, and represent fine examples of Western culture.



## CONCLUSION

One may conclude that Abstract Expressionism is the continuation of certain lines laid down by Kandinsky, Picasso to some extent and above all the automatic method of Surrealism.

The 'core' of the art world had emigrated from Europe to the United States giving the young artists there the opportunity of first hand experiences. With this opportunity the New York artists were able to see and compare themselves to the European art and decide how much a part of it they wanted to be. From my research it seems that Surrealism was the greatest influence on the innovators of Abstract Expressionism, though they wished to retain their own identity by not becoming members of the Surrealism movement. They found their identity in the realization of their personal myth -- the point where art and life become one -- and from that point on, their art became known as Abstract Expressionism -- The Expression in pure abstract terms, i.e. where the paint and colour become the subject, of something that was personal to them as individual artists. Theirs was the discovery of pure abstract art.

So, by refusing to get involved in the dogma of current trends, the ritual of Surrealism, they were able to breakthrough into an art that goes beyond anything that had been done before. It was the uncommitted Surrealists, Pollock and Gorky, who first arrived at Abstract Expressionism. Surrealism had, with the method of automatism, opened the road for these artists who were more involved with Surrealism. Motherwell and Baziotas, for instance, did not enter into Abstract Expressionism until Pollock had shown them the way.



fig 1. IMPROVISATION # 30.  
Wassily Kandinsky, 1913. (oil on canvas).

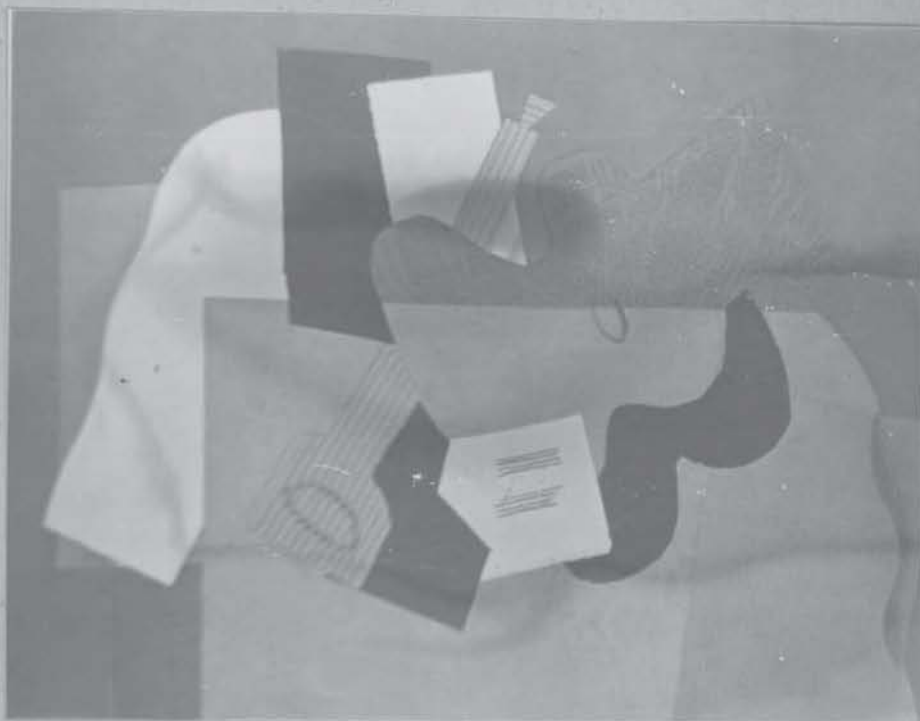


fig 2. GUITARE ET CLARINETTE.  
Georges Braque, 1918. (collage-charcoal  
& gouache on cardboard).





fig 3. GUERNICA.  
Pablo Picasso, 1937. (oil on canvas).

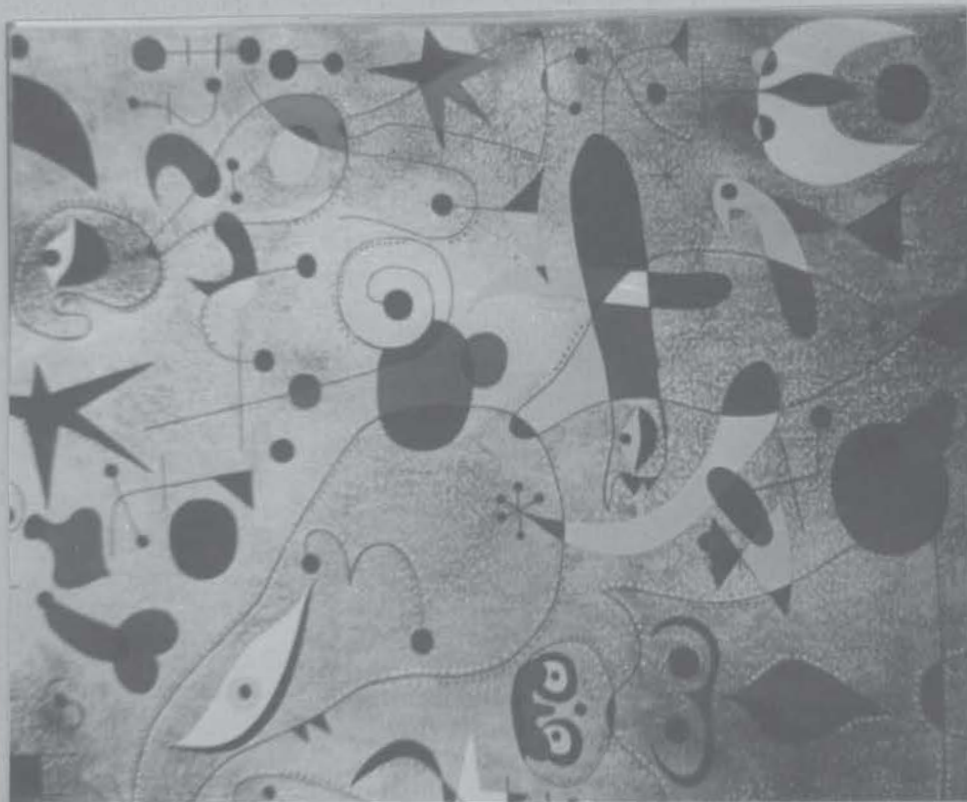


fig 4. THE ESCAPE LADDER.  
MIRO, 1940. (gouache & oil wash on  
paper).



fig 5. GARDEN IN SOCHI.  
Arshile Gorky, 1940. (oil on canvas).



fig 6. SHE WOLF.  
Jackson Pollock, 1943. (oil on canvas).



fig 7. THE LIVER IS THE COCKS COMB.  
Arshile Gorky, 1944. (oil on canvas).



fig 8. WOMAN 1.  
William De Kooning, 1950-52. (oil on canvas).





fig 10. DORMITION OF THE VIRGIN.  
Mark Tobey, 1945. (oil on canvas).



fig 9. PORTRAIT AND A DREAM.  
Jackson Pollock, 1953. (oil on canvas).

## NOTES

### Chapter I

1. Jacob Lawrence, Ben Shahn and Stuart Davis and many others were concerned specifically with social problems, whereas Abstract Expressionism is essentially "art for the sake of art."
2. William Seltz, Spirit Time and Abstract Expressionism (May Art 46: 80-7 F'53)

### Chapter II

1. Ibid.

### Chapter III

1. A. Balaham, The Road to the Absolute (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), page 92
2. Ibid., page 93
3. Ibid., page 92
4. D. Carrel and E. Lucie Smith, Moments in Modern Art (New York: Horizon Press, 1973)
5. The Museum of Modern Art, Jackson Pollock (New York: Arno Press, 1972), page 26
6. A. H. Barr, Jr., Cubism and Abstract Art (New York: Arno Press, 1966), page 66

### Chapter IV

1. Krishnamuri is a form of Zen philosophy. Theosophy is the study of ancient literature to gain greater knowledge and wisdom.
2. D. O'Conner, The Genius of Jackson Pollock (Art Forum, May '67)
3. The Museum of Modern Art, Jackson Pollock (New York: Arno Press, 1972), page 36
4. Ibid., page 36
5. Myth, in the context that I have used it would mean the personal subject of the work and that which would essentially motivate it.

6. D. Carrol and E. Lucie Smith, Moments in Modern Art, (New York: Horizon Press, 1973), page 121
7. Ibid., page 120
8. H. Rosenberg, The American Action Painters (Art N: 51-22-3 + D'52)
9. A. H. Barr, Jr., Cubism and Abstract Art (New York: Arno Press, 1966)
10. Ibid., page 124
11. H. Rosenberg, The American Action Painters (Art N:51-22-3+)

#### Chapter V

1. Special issue of Gorky (Arts May, March, 1976), page 77
2. Ibid., page 78
3. Ibid., page 32
4. Ibid., page 81
5. H. Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), page 17

#### Chapter VI

1. A Tobey Profile (Art Digest: 26:5+ O'15 '51)
2. Mark Tobey, Reminiscence and Reverie (May Art 44:228-32 O'51)
3. Mark Tobey, The Dormition of the Virgin (Art N: 44:22 Ja'1 '46)
4. Ibid.
5. Andre Masson, "Instant Notes" for a New Style. (Art N: 50:20 + O'51)
6. Ibid.

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R. Goodnough, Pollock Paints a Picture. (Art N 50:38-41+ My '51)

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Julien Levy, Abstractions. (Art N 47:46 Mr '48)

P. Tyler. Jackson Pollock, the Infinite Labyrinth (May Art 43:92-3 Mr '50)



J. Albers, American Abstract Artists. (May Art 40:161 JA '47)  
H. Rosenberg. A Decade of Distortion (Art N 61:44-5 D'62)  
C. Greenburg, Hoffman, Grand Old Rebel. (Art N 57:26-9+ '59)  
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