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PAINTING

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM, MORE THAN INSPIRED MADNESS

by

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Throughout the centuries creative people have been driven by deep, personal needs in their search for meaningful values. Revolutions, civil wars, oppressive governments, famines, plagues and all sorts of upheaval that surrounds man has at times shaken his confidence in his fellowman and in himself. Outbreaks of recklessness, revolts against existing mores, and the need for self expression emerge from the chaos around him, and man begins to re-evaluate himself and his world, and commences again his quest for truth.

The artist is among the first to break through the limits and barriers man has imposed upon himself and to explore the depths of his own imagination and inventive powers. He begins to devise and improvise from his very inner being, a new and vibrant expression, charged with emotion. The artist begins to embrace an entirely new world of possibilities.

Who is capable of such deep and extraordinary expression? Many persons throughout history and some in our time, but it is innovators, the geniuses, who are our bonds with the past and our step ladders to the future: Biotto, Pavlova, Beethoven, Stanislavski, Kandinsky. One cannot study ballet without recognizing the artistry and beauty of Pavlova, music without Beethoven, the theatre and its history with Stanislavski, nor painting without the knowledge of Giotto or Kandinsky. Each artist sought the truth for himself, and all passed it down to us to see absorb, criticize.

The manifestations and complexities of modern twentieth century life gave rise to an expressive new art form, Abstract Expressionism. The artists' search for new ways to express themselves led the Abstract Expressionists away from the existing styles and representational or realistic forms were gradually abandoned. An emphasis on form and free-flowing colors emerged. Experience of any kind contains intangible qualities, and the artists began to feel that these qualities could be defined more clearly and honestly through abstract forms. This free and energetic endeavor gave birth to a very personal and original art form, Abstract Expressionism.<sup>1</sup> Though there is a great diversity of artists, in his book, Modern Painting--Contemporary Trends, Nello Ponente states that there remains, however, "a general similarity of outlook, a common attitude toward painting, a common desire to push beyond its traditional limits into unexplored territory."

The term Abstract Expressionism is too broad to give an accurate picture of contemporary art.<sup>2</sup> It includes everything from completely non-objective art to subject intangled works such as Willem de Kooning's Women.<sup>3</sup> Classification, therefore, is difficult because of this diversity of artists.

What does the term mean? Abstract refers to a composition in which a natural subject or object is abstracted or distorted and is not the only foundation for the art work. Expressionism refers to unrecognizable shapes, the non-objective, which spring from the artist and which he expresses freely and spontaneously.<sup>4</sup> It implies a "boisterous violence of expression."<sup>5</sup> However, there can be a "prevailing calm of spirit and composition"<sup>6</sup> as well. Many works are categorized under Abstract Expressionism. Some embody the extreme opposites mentioned. Others fill

the middle ground between the two. These conflicting aspects will be better understood later when specific artists are introduced and their work delineated.

Most Abstract Expressionists began their careers as representational artists with a background of study and training, but gradually they severed their ties, progressing from one level of abstraction to another.<sup>7</sup> They began to make their own personal discoveries, exploring the world, themselves, and the relationship between them.<sup>8</sup>

Can one experience a work of art without experiencing the artist himself? Can one judge a work and not judge the individual who created it? According to author Frank Seiberling the experience is not just "an experience of our own but a shared experience with the artist."<sup>9</sup> There is a barrier between us, the art work and the artist, yet we can make judgments through intelligent examinations of the art, the artist, and our own values though such judgments may be tentative due to our proximity in time to the work of the twentieth century.

Earlier reference was made to the diversity of the artists who have been lumped, rather hurriedly and promiscuously into one classification, specifically, Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps a closer look at some of the contrasts and similarities of the artists' works will give insight into the nature of the creators of those works. Does the artist express his times, his milieu? Does he, above all, express himself? Only subjectively are we able to reach the presence and nature of the artist.

The presence of strong feeling is more apparent in Abstract Expressionism because the subject is either absent or greatly distorted. This strong feeling can be loud and brash, or it can be quiet and

intense. The artist himself determines the degree and type of feeling he wishes to express.

Wassily Kandinsky, who is considered by many art historians as the "Grandfather of Abstract Expressionism"<sup>10</sup> felt an inner compulsion for pure lyrical emotion.<sup>11</sup> Attuned with the spiritual, he wove poetry and fantasy into richly balanced compositions. Sober, delicate tones enrich his imaginative variety of forms. "No artist in this century has left us as rich and varied a work testifying, once and for all, to the infinite resources of abstract art."<sup>12</sup>

Kandinsky's works imply active tempos. His theory was that color and form can exist alone as expressive means; the imitation of visual reality was unnecessary.<sup>13</sup> His attitude toward subject matter and visual reality was an out-growth of his interest in music and oriental mysticism. He believed that the individual controlled his inner satisfaction. Man could, through meditation, overcome physical discomfort and worldly conflicts. Kandinsky projected himself beyond worldly concerns through a visual escape from recognizable forms.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that the form of the circle never quite left his canvas. Perhaps optimism or faith in one form or another is embodied in this symbol of infinity, of wholeness.

Though the "birth" of Abstract Expressionism is often attributed to Kandinsky, the artist Jackson Pollock was one of the first to be recognized. His paintings are as direct as a painting can be. Embodied in his works is pure action, vibrant emotion.<sup>15</sup> Pollock regarded paint itself as potential energetic force which he must release. Under his hand the canvas came alive, rich and full of energy that was part of the artist himself.<sup>16</sup> Dispelling traditional techniques, he darted and

weaved across his unstretched canvas. The painting and the painter became one.

Pollock was not a contemplative person but rather a restless, perhaps tormented man. The violence which created the huge works of art reflects the human conditions of the artist himself.<sup>17</sup> This violence, however, is mostly external; his aggressive works were slowly and seriously composed. There is an intimate union between the man and his work,<sup>18</sup> an active presence vitalized with energy. Speaking of himself and his work Pollock wrote:

My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to take the unstretched canvas to the hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel near, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting.<sup>19</sup>

He was entranced by the inherent vitality of his materials and explored them extensively.

Pollock's world is not tidy and secure, but he still creates a unity of his own. He accepts the accidental and stabilizes it. Frank Seiberling asks, ". . . does the 'organized chance' of Pollock represent something positive and hopeful, or is it nihilistic, making unity only out of despair?"<sup>20</sup> Optimistically we tend toward the "positive and hopeful."

The works of Pollock are more subtle than those of Franz Kline. Kline's sheer clarity and freedom from the extraneous is powerful and unified. It created an over-simplification. His paintings are bold, direct, impulsive. There is brash power and force in Kline's huge shapes, a bold and simple statement by an assertive yet gentle man.<sup>21</sup> His love of energy, of pure dynamic force, is expressed in pure and

simple terms. The bashing black arms of paint welcome the viewer with a slap on the back, a hearty handshake, and a sincerity and honesty as warm as the friendship.

Kline, like Pollock, released a rich, full energy across his canvas, committed entirely to the act of painting. Little wonder that the term action painters, a sort of sub-classification of Abstract Expressionism, is used to describe some of these artists.<sup>22</sup>

By comparison, the work of Mark Tobey suggests a more subtle, complex personality. Here appears to be a nearly complete rejection of the practical world, a nearly complete introspection. The "brooding effect of Tobey's paintings is created partly by the insistent use of small, irregular, retilinear shapes."<sup>23</sup> A single theme is explored patiently and tirelessly. The little shapes are never quite the same. Variation and unity is achieved through a seemingly powerful persistence. The underlying tone of introspection is emphasized by the extensive use of warm tones, each appearing in a variety of values.<sup>24</sup>

Tobey was a solitary man and artist working geographically distant from the mainstreams of Abstract Expressionism in New York. It is in retrospect that his work has been classified with that of the other Abstract Expressionists. Tobey formally entered the world of action painters relatively late when the high tide of the movement began to ebb. This late exposure allows the inner relationship which connects Tobey to the masters of Abstract Expressionism as well as his considerable differences from them to be at once visible.

Tobey's is a highly personalized style. Influenced by Chinese calligraphy, as was Kline but here the similarity ends, he explored the space-creating rhythms of those signs. Here action is not regarded as

the only concrete reality but rather as a means to express a spiritual reality, sincere and truthful.<sup>25</sup>

If Kline represents the outwardness of life, the loud, the forceful, the bold, then Tobey represents the inwardness, the quiet, the enduring, the humble. "The restraint of Tobey. . . touches us more because true eloquence comes from the heart, and the heart is a seed slow to mature."<sup>26</sup> But there is a place for the bold and the humble, the loud and the quiet, in art as well as in life.

The powerful, experimental Willem de Kooning broke up form and shattered and transformed reality. Space is not an illusion but rather a tangible part of the composition, filled with intense and dynamic movement of clashing colored forms or images.

De Kooning began to work out a non-figurative style. Once he had mastered it, he applied its principles to a figurative image. The result was his Women series. Huge and dynamic, full of contrasting movement, these works combine the violence of color and texture with the distorted image.<sup>27</sup> Even if it was not the intent of the artist, the series becomes an open violent protest, a protest against conformity in general. Frank Seiberling suggests that de Kooning's Women are "symbolic images of experience and feelings of the artist which were too strong and deep to represent realistically."<sup>28</sup> Each one in the series is more violent than the one preceding and they all appear to be savage attacks, perhaps destroying a memory harbored by the artist himself. From this evidence we can surmise that de Kooning was not a man of routine, safe and suppressed, not a conformist.<sup>29</sup>

The "dean of American abstract painters," Hans Hoffman, is a major representative of American abstract expressionism,<sup>30</sup> but his abstraction

didn't develop as did that of Pollock or de Kooning. Hoffman seems less concerned with the inherent vitality of materials or the violence of color and textures. His handling of space is a "push and pull," as Hoffman himself called it, of color. Emotion is based entirely on color vibrations and the clash of colored forms. His handling of abstract and arbitrary color goes back to Van Gogh. The violent clashes and outbursts of color are achieved with sensitive control.<sup>31</sup>

Densely expressionistic, the canvases of Hans Hoffman are full of vigor and delight. Hoffman himself gives us some insight, "art must counter-balance the banal weight of everyday life, it must give us the constant aesthetic joy we need."<sup>32</sup> This is true for the art viewer as well as for the artist himself.

A wide range of art falls into the category called Abstract Expressionism. Expressed in these works is an equally wide range of moods and temperament, anxieties, and complexities. Such is the nature of man. The nature of art is no more and no less than the nature of man.<sup>33</sup>

With the advent of Abstract Expressionism the limits, the barriers that man had imposed upon himself, and therefore his art forms, began to crumble. The artist began to break free, to explore the depths of his own imagination and inventive powers and to devise and improvise from his inner being a new and vibrant expression, charged with emotion, no longer limited to nature or man and his activities. Released from the previous constructivist constraint and further removed from conventional subject matter, the artists embraced an entirely new world of possibilities. As the barriers began to fall they could never successfully be put up again. Man had freed himself and refused to go back into bondage.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Seiberling, "Baffling U. S. Art: What is it About," Life, November 9, 1959, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Nello Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1960), p. 79.

<sup>3</sup>Sheldon Cheney, The Story of Modern Art (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 635.

<sup>4</sup>John Sedgewick, Jr., Art Appreciation Made Simple (New York: Made Simple Books, Inc., 1959), p. 150.

<sup>5</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Bernard S. Myers, Understanding the Arts (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1963), p. 479.

<sup>8</sup>Ben Heller, "The Roots of Abstract Expressionism," Art in America, April, 1961, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup>Frank Seiberling, Looking into Art (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1959), p. 212.

<sup>10</sup>Robert M. Coates, "The Art Galleries," The New Yorker, November 4, 1961, p. 145.

<sup>11</sup>H. W. Janson, History of Art (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. and New York: Harry W. Abrams, Inc., 1964), p. 525.

<sup>12</sup>Michel Seuphor, Dictionary of Abstract Painting (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1957), p. 192.

<sup>13</sup>John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1959), p. 448.

<sup>14</sup>James A. Schinneller, Art-Search and Self Discovery (Scranton, Pennsylvania: International Textbook Company, 1964), p. 152.

<sup>15</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting Contemporary Trends, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup>Janson, History of Art, p. 531.

<sup>17</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends, p. 136.

- <sup>18</sup>Seuphor, Dictionary of Abstract Painting, p. 244.
- <sup>19</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends, p. 136.
- <sup>20</sup>F. Seiberling, Looking into Art, pp. 259, 273.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 259.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 234.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends, p. 138.
- <sup>26</sup>Seuphor, Dictionary of Abstract Painting, p. 274.
- <sup>27</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends, p. 153.
- <sup>28</sup>F. Seiberling, Looking into Art, p. 257.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 258.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 235.
- <sup>31</sup>Ponente, Modern Painting-Contemporary Trends, p. 147.
- <sup>32</sup>Seuphor, Dictionary of Abstract Painting, p. 190.
- <sup>33</sup>F. Seiberling, Looking into Art, p. 234.

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