

New York in the 1940s

World War II brought artists to New York.

Surrealists dominated Paris art scene but by 1942 all the key figures had gone to New York.

Surrealists provided the intellectual ingredient but the values of interwar culture in America provided the other. **The Depression, the FAP, the war and America's pervasive Protestant ethic** had instilled in young artists a commitment to social relevance--or usefulness.

Trauma of the depression forced a reappraisal among American artists of their cultural identity. First through themes of Social Protest but then came the WPA and the Federal Art Project--Work program developed to put artists to work--gave an opportunity for Social Realism to flourish--and as we will see later, enabled the development of experiments with abstraction.

New York School

The New York school is often considered the first truly 'American Movement'. Birthed out of the atrocities of the Second World War, including the atom bomb and the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, this movement was also influenced by European avant-garde ideas as they bumped up against the more pragmatic social and political ones in America of the 1940's. This was a complex time in U.S. history as the Cold War fueled fears of Communism, unprecedented economic growth heralded in an age of massive consumable goods. In a time of strict social divisions between races and genders, many women artists found challenges within the art world, over and above those of the men based on social codes of conduct related to their gender. However, they found ways to engage with the new ideas growing out of their time and each developed personal interests and directions within the movement known as Abstract Expressionism or the New York School.

The seeds of the movement were sewn in the 1930's as MOMA began retrospectives of European Modernism from Post-Impressionism to Cubism; DADA and Surrealism and modernist works were shown also at NYU and at the Guggenheim in the 1930's. In 1939 Moma exhibited **Picasso's Guernica**, which was enormous-



ly influential...(it stayed there until around 79 on continuous display) Guernica--was particularly important because it combined a powerful political statement with European formal sophistication (Cubism).

An organization called American Abstract Artists organized in 1936 and exposed non-objective expression with Mondrian as a model. His utopian ideas that manifest in rationalizing the meaning contained in the horizontal and vertical line and use of primary colors influenced many New York School Artists, in particular many of the women.

Mexican Social Realists were in New York: Diego Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco

Rivera-- 1920's Mexican social revolution inspired nationalistic mural painting--

Mexico went on to create a new kind of propagandistic and inspirations public art, reflecting the nations artistry and socialist spirit of the revolution. These artists were in New



York Artists were influenced by their politics, their use of industrial materials and the size of the murals. Of all the Mexican muralists Rivera had the most impact on the younger generation because of the frescoes he painted. This one, *Man at the Crossroads*, was commissioned for the lobby of Rockefeller plaza but was destroyed because of its socialist leanings.

The depression gave rise to the **WPA** designed to get people back to work. In 1935, a division called the Federal Art Project made it possible for artists to earn a living as artists. They gravitated to NY where they met in dingy bars and downtown lofts and found an environment of support and comradeship as artists had in Paris decades before. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Mark Rothko all worked on the project...

The **American Regionalists**, in particular **Thomas Hart Benton**, who was a mentor to Jackson Pollock focused, worked with styles, preferring nostalgic themes of the American mid-west and heroic ones of the growth and prosperity of American city life.

The regionalists and the Mexican muralists all sought idealistic transformations of society by appeals to the masses using an easily understood style...They opposed European Modernism, seemed to them elitist.

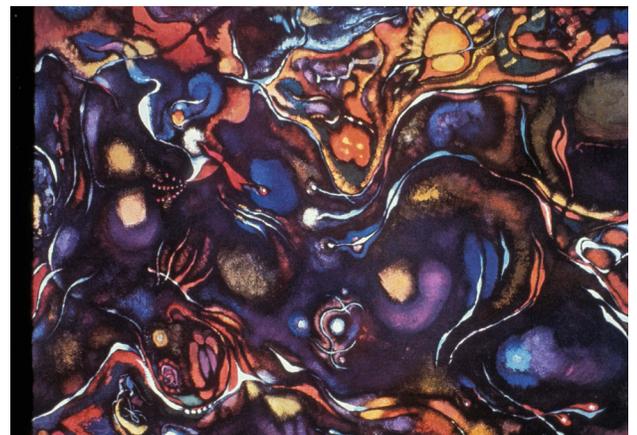
On August 9, 1945 the United States dropped an **atom bomb** on Nagasaki, Japan bringing WWII to a close. The war had lasted six years and afterwards, people in the West became aware of the horrors of the Holocaust on Germany's Jewish population including others deemed by the Nazis as degenerate. Hitler's persecution of anyone declared 'degenerate' sent many artists as well as other intellectuals fleeing Europe during the war. Many of these Europeans found a new home in New York.

Surrealists and Dada artists, held the limelight in New York... the artists provided a model of what an artist was...to them art and life were inseparable and they lived this heightened existence 24 hours a day. At the same time, the Surrealist who were interested in Sigmund Freud and his ideas concerning the subconscious, believed that through dreams and automatic process of drawing and free association, the subconscious could be made conscious. While Dada, in particular **Marcel Duchamp**, introduced the notion that art was not necessarily something to look at but rather something to think about...something to stimulate the mind rather than the eye. Dada was an attitude rather than a style that grew out of horror of war/. Nothing could surpass the horror of trench warfare, in which tens of thousands died to gain a few yards of scorched ground and the survivors then waited for the counterattack that would drive them back...In the front lines, the words victory and defeat had lost their meaning...



The belief that a society that could produce something as horrible as the war was an evil one whose philosophy and culture should be totally destroyed because it was socially and morally bankrupt.

Dadaists also believed that the artist was the product, and traditionally, the prop, of bourgeois society, itself anachronistic and doomed. The war finally demonstrated its rottenness, but instead of being able to join in the construction of something new, the artist was still trapped in that society's death throes. He was an anachronism whose work was totally irrelevant. --Dada was an expression of frustration and anger.



The New York artists were affected by social relevance; existentialism; surrealist's interests in the unconscious; Mexicans; and European Modernism especially cubism;

At this time there was great interest in myth as a source of the universals of the human psyche and looking to Greek literature and “primitive” cultures for more authentic connection with the underlying forces of nature. The theories of Carl Jung postulated archetypes in the individual unconscious belonging to the collective unconscious...thus connecting all humans. Jung, a student of Freud, developed ideas related to human development and subconscious processes that were different than Freud and the American artists tended to be drawn to his ideas more so than to those of Freud.

Myths of rebirth and renewal had particular attraction.

Critics:

The two main critics who supported the ideas of the New York school were Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

They became extremely influential as a result of the proliferation of magazines being published as a forum for visual arts and ideas and because of the growth of the gallery system.

Greenberg, who was a huge supporter of Jackson Pollock, wrote prolifically about his own ideas and championed the artists who represented them. Though he covered many topics in his writings and often contradicted himself, it was his theory that art should be ‘pure’ and that artists should be working with the materiality of their media, that came to justify the work of Pollock as purely aesthetic and at the same time, set a direction toward more and more abstract and flat canvases. (since painting is ultimately a 2-D endeavor). No narrative, no subject even except for the paint on the surface itself.

1952 Harold Rosenberg coined another term to describe work of deKooning, Pollock and Kline in particular. ---This became another way of thinking about the work of the New York School, now also known as ‘Action Painting’. For these artists the canvas was an extension of the mind itself, Rosenberg saw the artist’s task as a heroic exploration of the most profound issues of personal identity and experience in relation to the human condition. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.



Without a doubt, **Jackson Pollock** is the most well know of the artists of this time...he studied with Benton and was a Classic American success story: He came from the West to New York to become “the greatest living American Painter” Life Magazine article. The mythic retelling of his severe drinking and personal problems, which created despair and exhaustion for Pollock, are part of our collective cultural memory. He died in a single car accident in 1956.

Pollock admired Diego Rivera and Kandinsky, and Surrealists including Mas-son. He was not apolitical as some might suggest, with left wing politics and many drawings that reveal his concern about the human condition...war But his strongest influence early on was Picasso. Pollock spent 10 years developing a semi-figurative symbolic vocabulary--interested in Jungian psychology, automatism, primitive myths (especially those that dealt with sexuality).

But **Native American Art** also heavily influenced Pollock. He had grown up in the West but also the Natural History Museum installed a new wing dedi-cated to arts of the ‘Americas’.

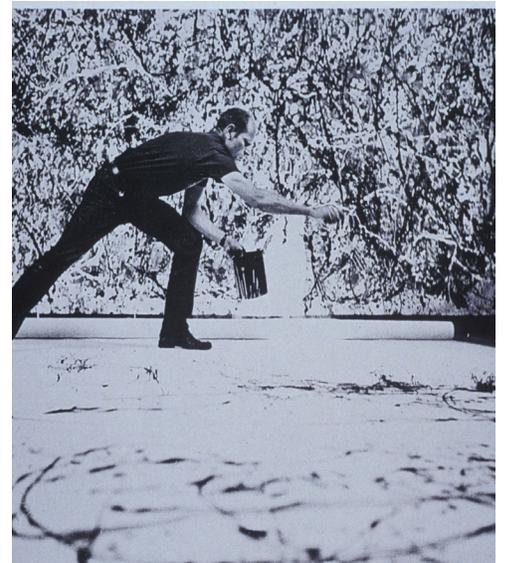
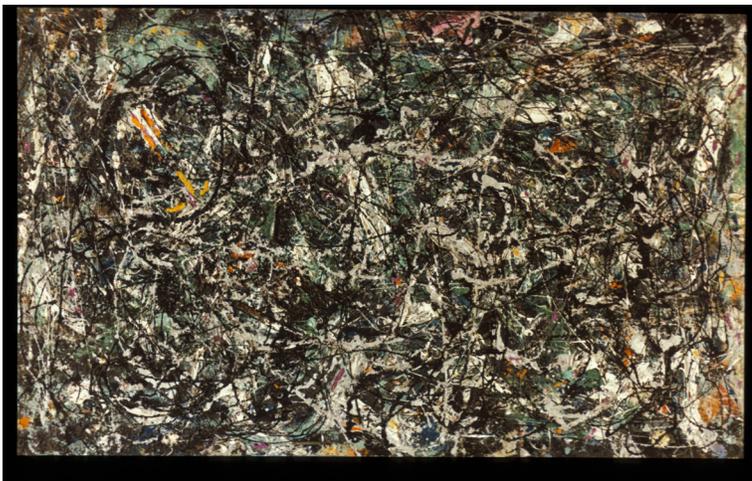
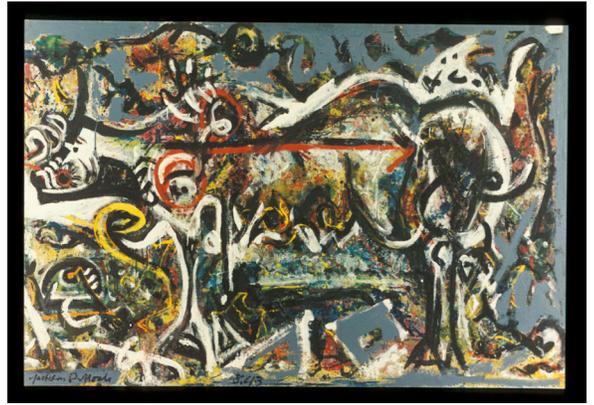
She Wolf-1943-gestural, mythic stories of the founding of Rome...

Pasiphae (the wife of the Minos and mother of the Minotaur of Aegean and Greek myths)...

Preoccupied with totem motifs-- violent composition and crudely vigorous brushwork embody his private anxieties including themes of classical history and myth.

Full Fathom Five- In 1947 recognizable imagery disappeared--his canvases became surfaces, which simply recorded his passage—title refers to a song from the *Tempest* by William Shakespeare.

With unconventional techniques and materials he developed his drips technique, which is indebted to the industrial paints and scale of the Mexican Muralists and the automatic drawing techniques of the Surrealists not to mention, Native American Sand Painting.



Number 1 (Lavender Mist)--1950--"My painting does not come from the easel--I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting but prefer to take the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or floor. I need the resistance of the hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting; since this way I can walk around it, work from 4 sides. Literally be in it."

In 1950 Hans Namuth made a film of Pollock at work... (see web link)-- while Pollock was receiving some notoriety, he was still not financially successful and was having some insecurities concerning his work.

Use of his paintings for a Vogue magazine layout and fashion ad indicates how integrated into American culture this particular style became.

By 1953 Pollock felt he had exhausted the potential of the "drip" painting--his personal life was in turmoil and confusion and he had withdrawn into alcoholism--The art world was watching him with excitement and he was reverting to older styles.

The he was in a car crash and died.

ROTHKO—born in Lithuania his childhood was marked by the worst period of mob violence against Jews in Russia. Trained in the Jewish school in Portland, Oregon where his mother and sister and he had moved to be with his father who died seven months after they arrived.

He won a full scholarship to Yale, focusing on philosophy and mathematics. Dropped out of school and went to New York. Political activism and social concerns, participated in the Artists Union in the 30's, drawn to leftist politics... fascism, the depression, and the war made social and political agenda more urgent. For Rothko, (and others, Newman, Gottlieb, etc.) painting seemed irrelevant and immoral...they sought subjects that addressed the timeless ethical and ontological questions of the human condition. They had a more philosophical approach.

Believing that Expressionist distortion of the human figure (deKooning) was sadistic, instead he adopted Surrealist automatism to evoke the Spirit of Myth--which was generic to all times--UNIVERSAL--involved in pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree merged into one tragic idea.

Always against post-cubist abstraction--was spiritual about his work which he said was intended to evoke the ' tragic mystery of our perishable condition. The silence of God, the unbearable silence of God.'



Number 22, 1949— By 1947, he wanted to create greater universality with the myth, he abandoned subject matter altogether -- it has been suggested that the horizontal band across the center of this painting is literally derived from earlier depictions of horizontal dead figures lying across the laps of maternal figures (as in Michelangelo's *Pieta*)..Rothko had done an earlier work called *Entombment*, which supports this idea through its form.

Orange and Yellow—1956--1950, he had developed his own archetypal form consisting of large rectangular fields of color-- used thin washes of pigment that soaked into the unprimed canvas.-

Adopted the rectangle format and a rectangular cloud of color which he stacked symmetrically one on top of another. Meant to evoke elemental emotions.

His simplicity in the work, express a complex, subtle, and turbulent mind. He was plagued by depression but also a sense of urgency in exploring profound human content in painting.

There was no point of attention, as he believed all art was about mortality --as time went on his canvases became darker and darker— he was actually receiving some security and reputation when in the

spring of 1967 he sunk into a deep depression. A year later he had an aneurism of the aorta. He recovered but his emotional life steadily deteriorated and finally in 1970 he committed suicide.

Not a picture of an experience...it is an experience. Meant to be an interaction with the viewer.

The artists of the New York schools interest in primitivism and the unconscious intersected with wider contemporary preoccupations ...Hollywood films, newspaper and magazine articles, radio programs, and books. After the war, masculine themes were depicted in popular films and on TV. Themes about war, westerns, police shows, etc. and masculinity was defined as strong, confident, and usually rough (as John Wayne and Eule Bryner.

In particular, Modern Man literature was a primary arena in which the problem-solving potential of concepts of the primitive and the unconscious---two principle categories of "others" opposed to reason and common sense—was being worked out.