

## 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 (Federal Art Project), 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 (Works Progress Administration) and the Federal Art Project (the 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 and those of color, found challenges within the art world, over and above those of the white men based on social codes of

conduct related to their gender and race. 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. **1939 exhibited Picasso's, Guernica**, which was enormously 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.



## 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 inspirational public art, reflecting the nation's artistry and socialist spirit of the revolution. These artists were in New York, and many of the younger



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 is a copy of Diego Rivera's "Man at the Crossroads" originally painted in Rockefeller Center but destroyed because Rockefeller felt it was too socialist in content.)*

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—as they gravitated to NY where they met in dingy bars and downtown lofts and found an environment of support and comradely 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, the Mexican muralists all sought idealistic transformations of society by appeals to the masses using an easily understood style. They opposed European Modernism, which seemed to them elitist. *(this painting by Thomas Hart Benton is in the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, TN.)*



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. 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.

Dataist believed that the artist was the product, and traditionally, the prop, of bourgeois society, itself anachronistic and doomed. The WW I 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; and WWII**

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. He believed that artists should be working with the materiality of their media, which 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. 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. As a result of this, many of the women in the movement were criticized because their work was not active enough.

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 **Masson**.

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 dedicated to arts of the **'Americas'**.

**See lecture slides of Natural History Museum and Pollock's work.**

He was preoccupied with totem motifs-- violent compositions and crudely vigorous brushwork embody his private anxieties including themes of classical history and myth.

**For Williem De Kooning** much of the work derives from WWII imagery. Photographs of bodies, buried in mass graves appeared. Also horrifying were images and accounts of victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some who vaporized into their surroundings, leaving 'shadows' of their silhouettes on pavement near ground zero.

**Excavation--1950**

He is most known for his paintings of women:

**Woman One, 1950-52**, is a dozen different paintings superimposed on one another. The figure comes into focus and out again, like a flash, a painting in perpetual state of redefinition. Always unfinished, in process, as opposed to the modernists preoccupation with Utopia DeKooning observed, "I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."

**We see a different direction in the New York School with the work of Mark Rothko**

**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.

They won a full scholarship to Yale, focused 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.**

BELIEVE 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 he 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.'

He adopted the rectangle format and a rectangular cloud of color which he stacked symmetrically one on top of another. His simplicity in the work, express a complex, subtle, and turbulent mind, 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.

**He believed his work was not a picture of an experience but rather 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.

The word 'modern' functioned to distinguish the new subjectivity from that of earlier humans, principally 'primitives', although, authors and artists often emphasized similarity and continuity between primitives and modern man. Modern designated a status implicitly denied to all African-Americans, and native-Americans by virtue of their racial identity, essentially 'primitive' human nature. The term man was equally loaded, as it served to distinguish humanity from animal, nature, and god, even as some of those boundaries were being erased. It also opposed the human individual to culture, society, and community, asserting the priority of individuality over collectivity. Man was used in a seemingly nondiscriminatory way but in fact, it did excluded certain classes of humans and the subtext was that women were not included at all.