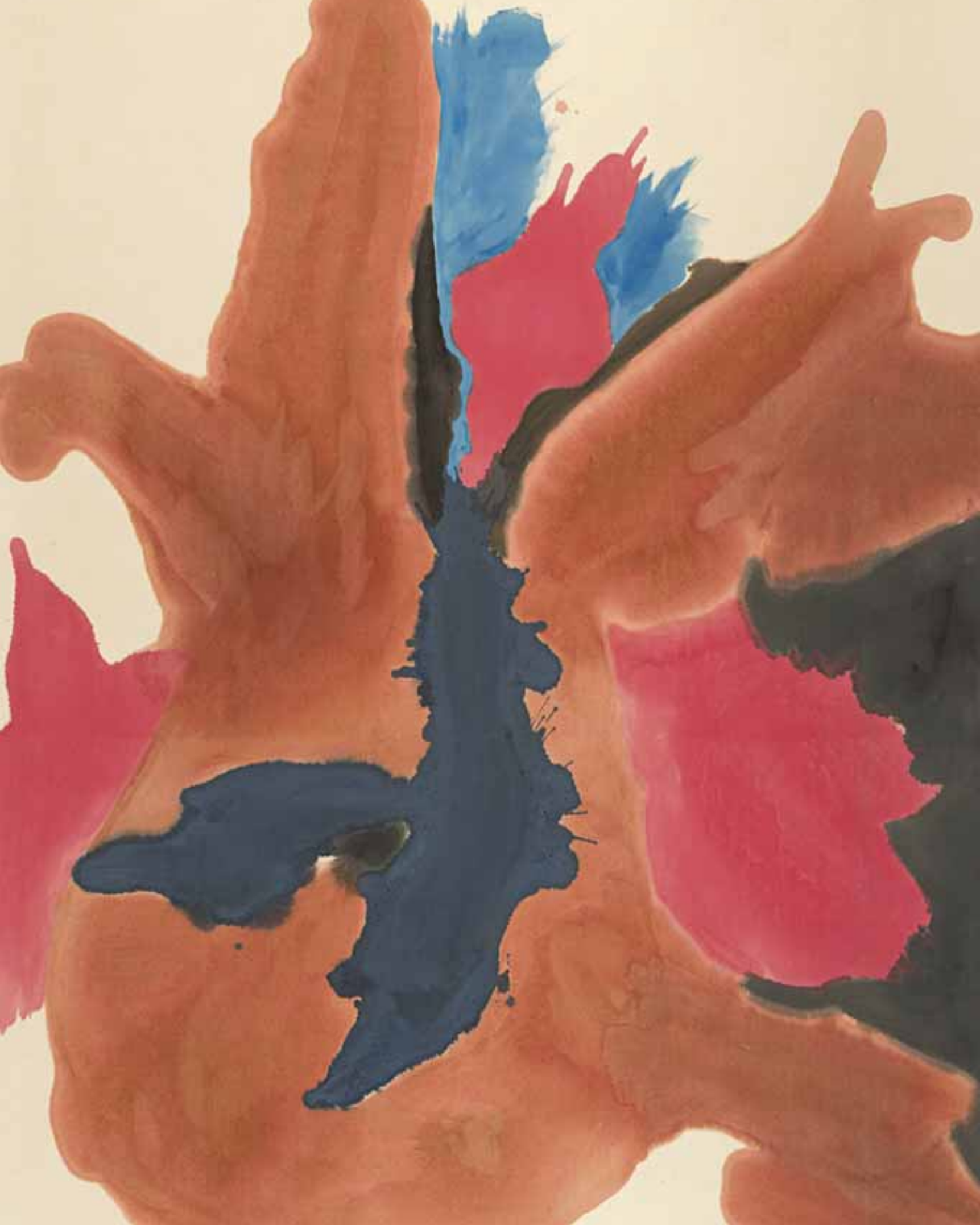
MUSEUM BARBERINI
POTSDAM

ALBERTINA modern



The Shape of Freedom

International Abstraction after 1945

Exhibition and catalog:
Daniel Zamani

Edited by
Ortrud Westheider
Michael Philipp
Daniel Zamani

With contributions by
Jeremy Lewison
Gražina Subelytė
Daniel Zamani

PRESTEL Munich · London · New York

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In Potsdam the exhibition is held
under the patronage of
Her Excellency Amy Gutmann,
Ambassador of the United States of America in Germany.

U.S. Embassy Berlin

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as well as numerous private collectors, who wish to remain anonymous

I write your name
. . .
And by the power of a word
My life returns to me
I am born again to know you
And to name you

Liberty

Paul Éluard

Foreword

The concept of freedom was central to the rejuvenation of modern art after 1945. Leaflets with Paul Éluard's poem "Liberté" (1942) were dropped by British aircraft over France two years before the Allied liberation of Paris. Freedom was also the dominant theme of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *The Flies,* which premiered in Paris in 1943 while the city was still under German occupation. Individual freedom as the responsibility to act was at the heart of the Existentialist philosophy embraced in Europe and America.

After the end of World War II, artists on both sides of the Atlantic sought a formal language that would emphasize the free creative act. As an expression of freedom, they filled their large paintings with pulsating energy. In a rejection of hierarchy, every point in the composition was conceived as an equally important pathway into the picture. For these artists, abstraction was not a style. Painters strove for immediate, individual expression; yet at the same time, their work was also meant to elicit self-realization on the part of viewers who were confronted with an "event" that had happened on the canvas: fields of color radiating out beyond the borders of the painting gave rise to an open-ended visual process.

The exhibition *The Shape of Freedom: International Abstraction after 1945* explores the two most important currents of postwar abstraction worldwide: Abstract Expressionism in the United States and Art Informel in Western Europe. Although these two movements have been shown in dialogue many times since the late 1940s, no exhibition has so far focused on their parallel development with respect to Action Painting and Color Field Painting, tracing their evolution in a long historical arc from the mid-1940s to the end of the Cold War.

Previous exhibitions have analyzed the propagation of abstraction as a universal language in the culture wars between West and East. The exhibition in Potsdam and Vienna, curated by Daniel Zamani, investigates the artistic intentions and international dialogue from which postwar abstraction emerged. *The Shape of Freedom* turns its gaze on the internationalization of the American art world with its vibrant center in New York. Many American artists were immigrants who had come to the United States as children with their families. The founding of new museums focused on contemporary developments—the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in 1939, and Peggy Guggenheim's gallery Art of This Century in 1942—introduced this new generation of artists to European avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Surrealism. The acquisition of one of Claude Monet's large-scale *Water Lilies* by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 made the Impressionist's semi-abstract works accessible as well. Art critics compared gestural postwar abstraction to Impressionist strategies for the dissolution of boundaries and spoke of an "Abstract Impressionism."

In Paris, the return of evacuated art treasures to the Louvre, the founding of journals, publishing houses, and galleries, and the rise of jazz soon after the end of the war were external signs of a new beginning. But they also formed the backdrop for a reckoning with trauma. The generation now struggling for freedom was one that, unlike their parents after World War I, was confronted with unprecedented crimes against humanity. In her 1963 book *Force of Circumstance,* Simone de Beauvoir wrote: “The war was over: we were left holding it like a big cumbersome corpse, and there was nowhere in the world to bury it.” In response to this experience, European postwar artists, like their counterparts in the United States, developed an event structure for painting that was radically opposed to the co-optation of the image.

The concept for this exhibition was developed by Daniel Zamani, Curator at the Museum Barberini since 2018. He found his point of departure in works from the Hasso Plattner Collection that, like the paintings of Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis, were inspired by French Impressionism, an artistic movement also richly represented in the founder’s collection, which is on permanent display at the Museum Barberini in Potsdam. Zamani presents the transatlantic dialogue through iconic works of postwar abstraction by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, Barnett Newman, Georges Mathieu, and Ernst Wilhelm Nay, while also giving a voice to lesser-known painters such as Norman Bluhm, Jean Degottex, Perle Fine, Simon Hantaï, Manolo Millares, Judit Reigl, Janet Sobel, Theodoros Stamos, and Hedda Sterne. In Vienna, Angela Stief, Director of the Albertina modern, augments the presentation, entitled *Ways of Freedom: Pollock, Rothko, Mitchell,* with numerous works from the Austrian postwar avant-garde. As in Potsdam, one of the show’s focal points in Vienna is the contribution that women made to the evolution of international abstraction after 1945.

Together with Angela Stief and Daniel Zamani, we would like to thank the many museums and private collections in Europe and the United States whose generous support has made this exhibition possible. We are especially grateful to the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art, Genève, and to the Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf for the generous loan of extensive bodies of works. Our special thanks are also due to the ASOM Collection as well as to Christian and Florence Levett for their pivotal support of the exhibition with numerous major loans. Along with Michael Philipp, Chief Curator at the Museum Barberini and coeditor of the catalog, we would also like to thank our authors for their essays, which arose out of a symposium held at the Museum Barberini on October 13, 2021. In Potsdam, the exhibition stands under the patronage of Her Excellency Amy Gutmann, Ambassador of the United States of America in Germany.

For the exhibition in Potsdam and Vienna, our hope is that many visitors will experience the shape of freedom so powerfully embodied in these paintings.

Ortrud Westheider
Director
Museum Barberini

Klaus Albrecht Schröder
Director General
The Albertina Museum

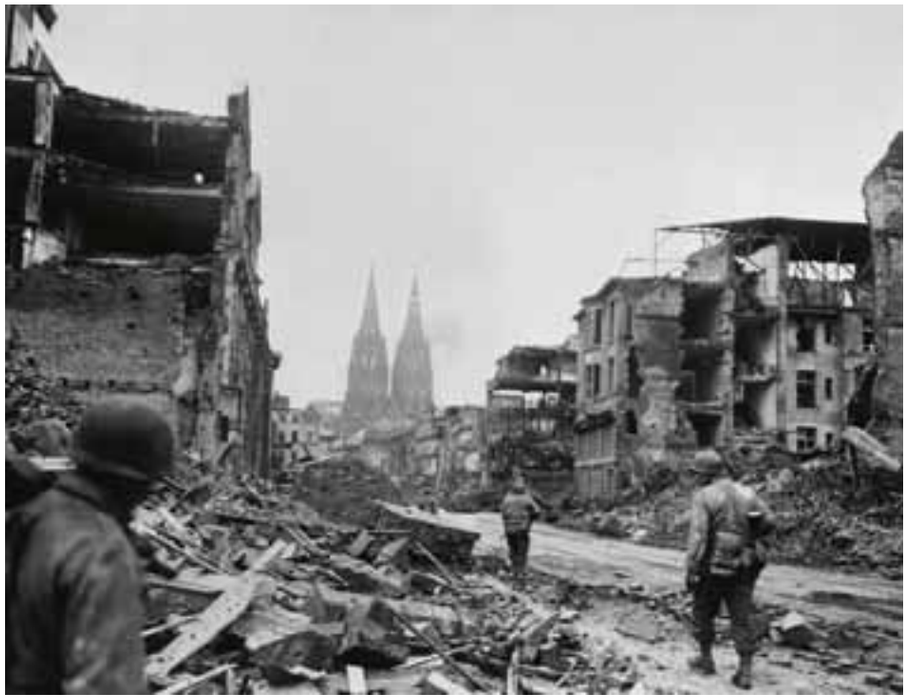
Acknowledgments

For their generous support in organizing the exhibition and this catalog our thanks are due to Jason Andrew, David Anfam, Jana Baumann, James Brett, Cheryl Chan, Magdalene Claesges, Edith Devaney, Bertrand Dumas, Charles Duncan, Vera Ehe, Tamaris Ellins, Martin Engler, Matthew Gale, Jean Claude Gandur, Julia Geiger, Keith Gill, Vivien Greene, Joëlle Griesmaier, Daniel Hantaï, Anna Helwing, Inge Herold, Kay Heymer, Anne-Kathrin Hinz, Sanford Hirsch, Elizabeth Horst, Judith Irrgang, Ekaterina Klim, James Koch, Sofia Komarova, Felix Krämer, Annette Krüger, Ulf Küster, Adeline Lafontaine, Carolin Langer, Christian and Florence Levett, Jeremy Lewison, Grace Liptak, Nancy Litwin, Patricia Magnani, Denise Marroquin, Marianne Mathieu, Tom McCormick, David Mees, Sigrid Melchior, Laura Morris, Eva Müller-Remmert, Eleanor Nairne, Molly Nelson, Jane Panetta, Leisa Paoli, Valentina Plotnikova, Chris Pousette-Dart, Kerstin Reichert, Sylvain Rochat, Jason Savas, Aurel Scheibler, Marie Schorlemmer, Sarah Schuster, Samandar Setareh, Walter Smerling, Elizabeth Smith, Maureen St. Onge, Franziska Straubinger, Gražina Subelytė, Karole Vail, Paula van der Linden, Adam Weinberg, Chloé Wermelinger, Richard Wilding, Nadine Zuni, and Christoph Zuschlag.

The Shape of Freedom?

Jeremy Lewison

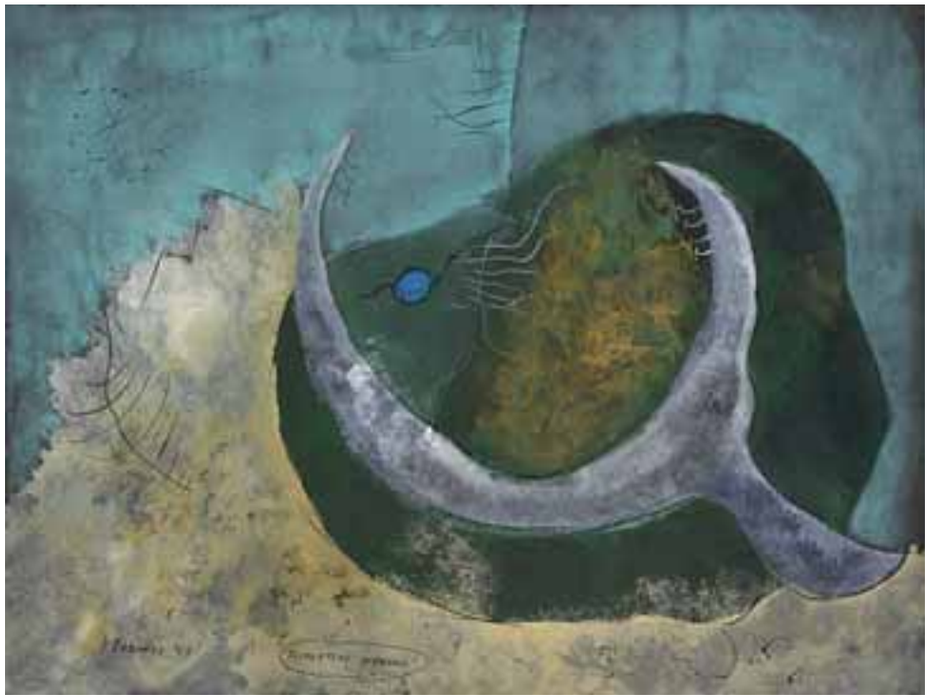
International Abstraction after 1945



1__The bombed-out city center of Cologne with view of the cathedral, March 8, 1945

In the aftermath of World War II, English poet Stephen Spender traveled to Germany on a special assignment as an officer for the Allied Control Commission in the British occupation zone. His mission was "to inquire into the lives and ideas of German intellectuals, with a particular view to discovering any surviving talent in German literature," to which later he added an investigation into the state of libraries. Visiting the "corpse-town" of Cologne, with a certain amount of irony and maybe some admiration Spender described the ruined city as "a climax of deliberate effort, an achievement of our civilization, the most striking result of co-operation between nations in the twentieth century." The technical achievements of civilization, Spender implied, had led to its destruction. Later, as he walked through the streets of Bonn, it seemed to him that "the ruin of Germany" had the potential to "become the ruins of the whole of Europe . . . it was the sense as I walked through the streets of Bonn with a wind blowing putrescent dust of ruins as stinging as pepper into my nostrils, that the whole of our civilization was protected by such eggshell walls which could be blown down in a day."[1]

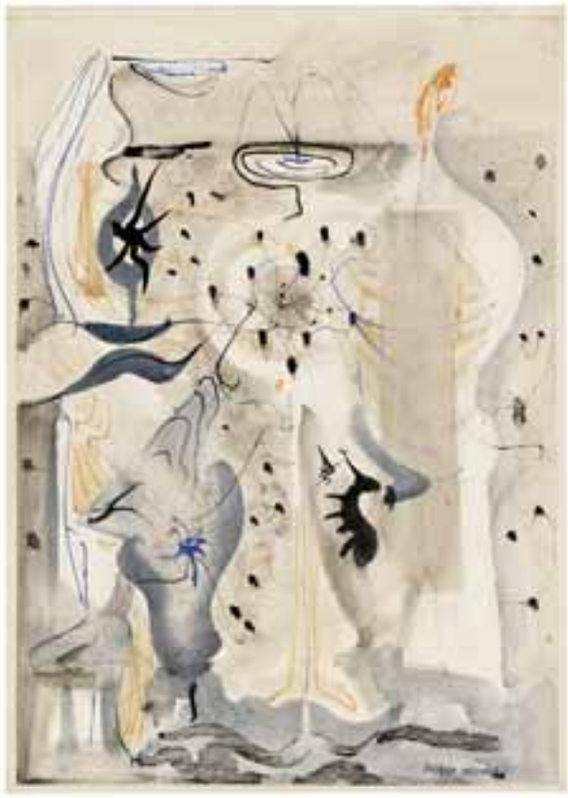
Complaints of civilization in crisis were already commonplace in the 1930s after the industrial-scale killing of World War I, the coming to power of fascist governments in Germany, Italy, and Spain, and the increasingly negative impact of technology on human life. It was not unusual for books to question the very nature of man in the machine age at a time when the Nazi regime was attempting to remake him.[2] The capitulation of France in 1940 seemed to spell the end of the old European order and the ascendency of this new, "purified" model of humanity. When the United States came out of isolation in 1941, it was not simply to save Europe from totalitarianism but to protect and preserve civilization. In a wartime letter President Franklin D. Roosevelt described the war as a "crusade" to save "civilization from a cult of brutal tyranny, which would destroy it and all of dignity in human life."[3] Over the fifteen years that followed the cessation of hostilities, the battle became not simply for civilization's survival but between three competing concepts: that of old Europe, the Soviet model, and the culture that some felt was increasingly imposed through occupation and financial muscle by the United States. The Soviets, former allies, were now seen as the major threat. Winston Churchill, invoking for the first time the specter of the Iron Curtain in a speech on March 5, 1946, in Fulton, Missouri, remarked alarmingly that "the Communist parties or fifth columns constitute a growing challenge and peril to Christian civilisation."[4] This was the context for the promotion and reception of abstract art in the postwar era that this essay will explore. The visual arts became contested ground, not so much for artists who saw themselves as part of a generalized movement that broke the boundaries of nationhood—as Jackson Pollock said, "the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country"—but for critics, political commentators, and government agencies.[5]



2__Theodoros Stamos
Ancestral Worship, 1947
The Whitney Museum
of American Art, New York

Opinion was divided as to what constituted civilization. Older Europeans often viewed America as a barbaric culture, violent, materialistic, and overbearing, while younger members of Western European society saw it as the future, exciting, the country of jazz and rock 'n' roll, Hollywood, and chewing gum, sophisticated in its technical advances, and appearing to provide material comfort at a time of European deprivation. British philosopher Bertrand Russell, returning from the US in 1945, wrote of the "intolerable boredom" arising from the uniformity that he found among Americans, who lacked "respect for knowledge."[6] Spender, on the other hand, writing four years later in a review of contemporary American literature, could see many of America's virtues. "American literature is a living body of protest against the vulgarity, commercialization, advertising, exploiting, which many people think of as the most characteristic American qualities. In fact contemporary literature suggests what the last American election suggested: that there is an America realer and more alive than the America which pollsters, advertisers, Hollywood and news editors know about." Comparing America to Europe he continued later in the article: "For America *is* vital, young, optimistic and in this way opposed to tired and disillusioned Europe. But there is another America, which is after all very old, very attached to Europe. A conflict is implicit in American civilization which is not really a young nation growing up in virgin country, but a collection of people with roots in very old countries living the life of a young country."[7] Spender here gives expression to the notion that American culture was derived from Europe, a theme that would be taken up especially by French cultural commentators in their rearguard fight against Americanization.

The idea that American civilization was barbaric was disproportionate, given recent memories of Nazi atrocities or the bombing of Dresden, but it was nevertheless a frequently expressed opinion. These reactions were to a great extent colored by old allegiances and responses to American aid in the form of the Marshall Plan (officially the European Recovery Program), instituted in 1948. It became apparent early on that America would have to make efforts to improve its image. The steps that American agencies undertook to promote the image of America through cultural activity in Europe as a way of cultivating positive opinion and to counter the impact of Soviet propaganda and resurgent communism in France and Italy is the principal subject of this essay, which looks at the growing influence of Abstract Expressionism alongside an already burgeoning European abstract movement. It will examine the concept of abstraction as an international language and a manifestation of freedom that inhered in Existentialist philosophy and discussion, and the manner in which European philosophical ideas underscored American art and writing in this period. If 1945 was the year of cessation of military hostilities, it marked the beginning both of culture wars and collaboration.

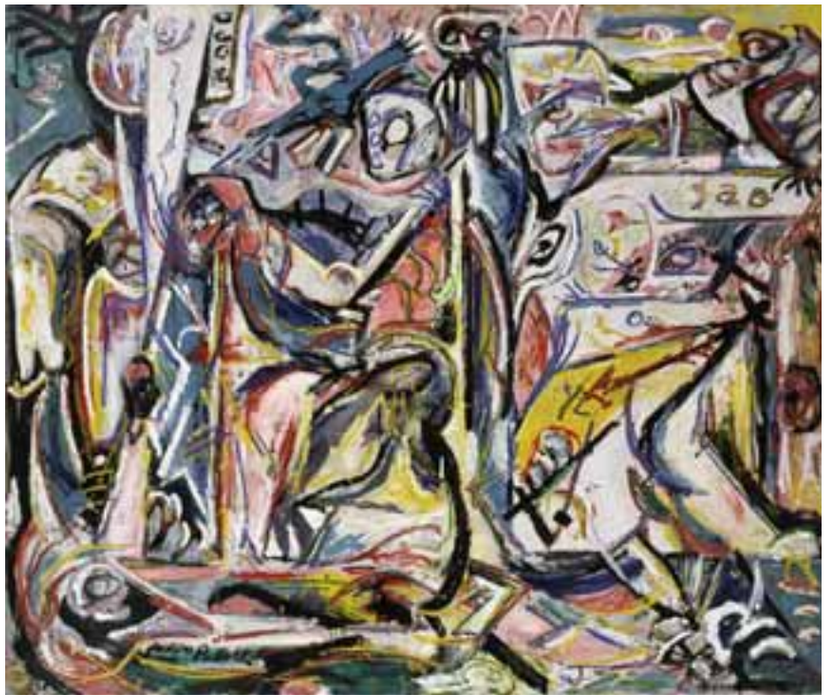


3__Mark Rothko
Baptismal Scene, 1945
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Art as a Weapon

The war had been responsible for the cessation of international artistic exchange. Deprived of information and with little interpersonal contact it was only after the war that artists began to sense a feeling of common purpose as they gradually became aware of what had been developing elsewhere. Information was hard to come by at first and exhibitions were scarce, particularly in Germany. Alan Bowness, a young Englishman later to become an art historian and director of the Tate Gallery, worked in Hamburg and Cologne for the Swedish Red Cross: "There was nothing in Germany. I was there from October 1947. Hamburg was ruinous. There was music, both Hamburg and Cologne had excellent radio orchestras . . . and then there was a theatre scene. The art scene hardly existed."[8] The French and British government agencies understood fairly swiftly that the provision of culture was a primary means to reeducate the nations deformed by fascism. Some artists traveled once again to Paris, but others had to rely on the exhibitions of such cultural agencies as the British Council, on the circulation of magazines, and, in Germany, on the *Amerika Häuser,* set up for the reeducation and democratization of the German people. The *Amerika Häuser* had good libraries with a wide range of American books and periodicals, including art magazines. For the first seven years after the war the Americans only provided Europe with exhibitions about the American way of life and the modern home, which tended to encourage the apprehension of the US as a materialistic society. The Smith-Mundt Act (1948) permitted the State Department to promote American interests and its way of life beyond its borders, and to counteract Soviet propaganda, but Republicans intervened in the Senate to prevent it from promoting the visual arts as some artists were considered leftist and therefore politically undesirable.[9]

The Venice Biennale was an exception but the US Pavilion was not state owned. It belonged to Grand Central Art Galleries, part of the Painters and Sculptors Gallery Association, an artists' cooperative.[10] In 1948 it was one of the first places in Europe where recent American art could be encountered. There visitors could see one early Surrealist-style work each by several artists who would later be known as Abstract Expressionists—Mark Rothko's *Baptismal Scene* (fig. 3) and *Ancestral Worship* (fig. 2) by Theodoros Stamos are examples. On the other side of the canal they could view the paintings of Jackson Pollock belonging to Peggy Guggenheim, who had taken over the unoccupied Greek Pavilion.[11] Rodolfo Pallucchini, the Secretary General of the Biennale, declaimed that the show expressed "the new spirit of freedom," for it displayed the kinds of art of which Italy had been deprived during the fascist years.[12] Guggenheim's collection fit in perfectly. The paintings in the US

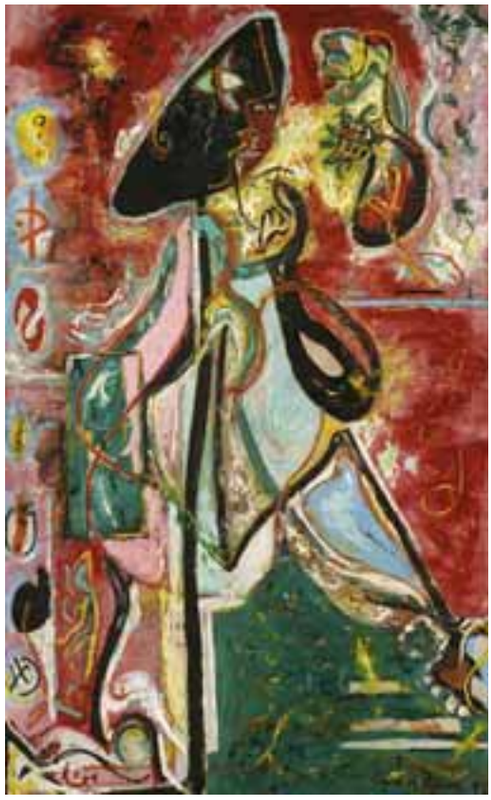


4__Jackson Pollock
Circumcision, 1946
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
(Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)

Pavilion did not particularly stand out, and if Guggenheim's private collection created interest it was not on account of the works by Pollock, which received little comment from the press, other than in Italy.[13] It seemed that Pollock's paintings, for example *Moon Woman* (fig. 5) or *Circumcision* (fig. 4), could be accommodated by anyone familiar with Surrealism and European Art Informel. Scottish painter Alan Davie, who visited the Biennale that year, remembered Pollock's paintings as "coming out of the European tradition and not something uniquely American."[14]

In 1948 few would have regarded American and European art as distinctively different, and American commentators themselves were keen to establish the credibility of American art by referring to its European foundations. Clement Greenberg, for example, who was to become one of Pollock's greatest apologists, wrote in the British literary magazine *Horizon* in 1947 that Pollock was a "morbid and extreme disciple of Picasso's Cubism and Miró's post-Cubism, tinctured also with Kandinsky and Surrealist inspiration."[15] European emigration to New York before or during the war meant that American painters were able to meet some of the major European artists in their own backyard. Indeed, the impact of European Surrealism should not be underestimated.[16] The idea that European painting was the progenitor of American abstract painting would be a major weapon in the armory of French critics when responding to the three substantial exhibitions of American art that circulated around Europe in the latter half of the 1950s.

One of the points of contention, however, was the credibility of the US as a cultural force. In 1950 Lewis Galantière, an American translator of French who had lived in Paris before the war, wrote a lengthy article in the American journal *Foreign Affairs* about the current state of America and its relationship with the world, and particularly Europe.[17] Notwithstanding the impact of American power and money in Europe, he lamented the fact that America had failed to win "over to our side that great majority of Europeans who are both anti-Communists and anti-capitalist." The way to do that, he explained, was through the dissemination of culture, writing that "when a nation attains to world leadership, it preserves that rank only so long as its culture—which is to say not merely its achievements in the humanities but also its manners, beliefs and civil institutions—commands respect and some degree of emulation."[18] With resurgent communist parties in both France and Italy, America was concerned to attract people to a political position more aligned with American liberalism. At the height of the Marshall Plan, itself a form of recivilization, Galantière noticed hostility toward the US for apparently flooding the market with goods and films, despite quotas for the latter.[19] The Europeans, he noted, "know what Soviet Russia is and they fear her domination intensely. But they do not know what America is and they are in doubt about our motives, our moral capac-

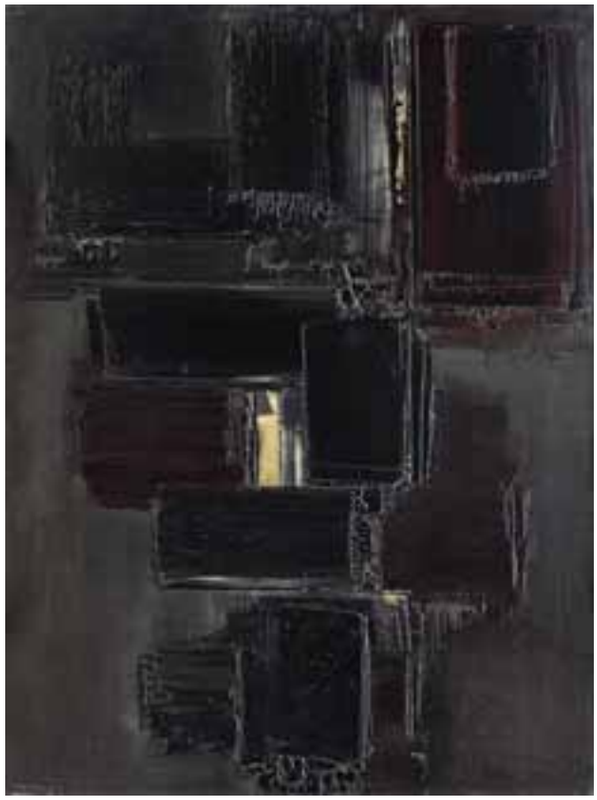


5__Jackson Pollock
The Moon Woman, 1942
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
(Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)

ities and our material stability." Above all, he added, "they are humiliated by the thought that they must seek help at our hands, and they console themselves in their humiliation by the comforting thought that their culture is superior to ours."[20] This European snobbery, particularly prevalent among French and British writers, was a *leitmotif* of discussion of American art, culture, and society in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Taking up where Galantière left off, Eloise Spaeth, an American art collector and writer, argued in 1951 that Congress must be "made to realize the need for an importance of the arts as propaganda" and held up the British Council as a model. She urged the government to use "art as a weapon" to combat the rising tide of communism, a weapon "that spoke the language the Italian people could understand better than any other people in the world perhaps—the language of painting." If America was derided for its materialism, she argued, the US should "demonstrate to the world that we, the youngest of world powers, have reached a maturity in the arts that entitles us to a place among the old world civilizations. It is about time we stopped selling our culture short."[21] The debates in the journals and internal advice from government appointees formed the background to Nelson Rockefeller establishing the International Program (IP) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which he conceived as a Marshall Plan for culture, at the moment the implementation of the Marshall Plan itself came to an end. Within a year the IP was overseen by the newly formed International Council (IC). At the same time the United States Information Agency (USIA) was founded to monitor and promote the cultural image of the US abroad.[22] If the cultural initiatives of the IC and the USIA were not organized in tandem, at least initially, their objectives were allied. Rockefeller was close to government and fully implicated in the way America faced out toward Europe.[23]

The IC soon set to work sending exhibitions to South America and Western Europe to promote the values of American democracy, ironically at a time of the domestic political repression of communists and a burgeoning civil rights protest against racial inequality and segregation. Much has been made of the CIA's undoubted connection with its activities and its promotion of democracy and liberalism in the propaganda war with the Soviet Union. But the involvement of government agencies, even if at arm's length, was commonplace in the cultural field. The British Council, funded directly by the Foreign Office, actively promoted British art in Europe, while the Institut Français did the same for France. General Charles de Gaulle himself acknowledged the importance of culture in the propaganda war when he commented in 1943 in a speech delivered in Algiers on the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Alliance Française, that the twin pillars on which France's standing would rest were French arms and French thought.[24] Culture then, as now, was an element of soft power.

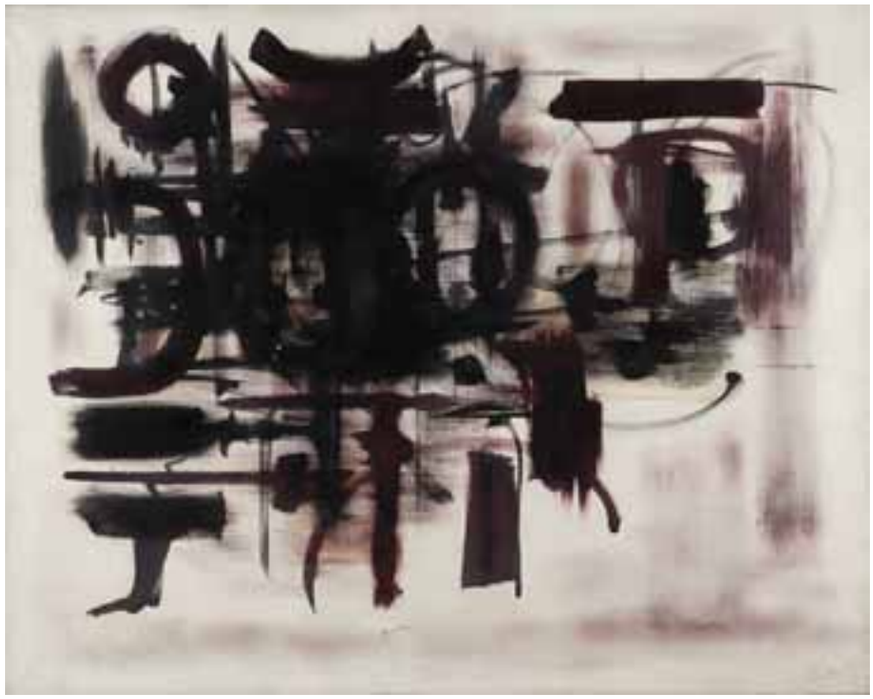


6__Pierre Soulages
Painting 81 × 60 cm, November 28, 1955, 1955
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève

In Germany American efforts to propagate its new-found status as the guardian of civilization and as a reeducator were expended not simply in organizing exhibitions but by controlling or subsidizing media outlets in its occupation zone, including ensuring that communist sympathizers were ejected from editorial boards.[25] They also subsidized such cultural magazines as *Die Amerikanische Rundschau* and its counterpart *Quelle* in France. The anti-communist *Preuves* (founded in 1951), a magazine read by most French intellectuals, and *Encounter* (founded in 1953 by Spender and Irving Kristol) were covertly partially funded by the CIA as were *Der Monat* (founded in 1948), *Tempo Presente* (established in 1956), Radio Free Europe (established in 1949), and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was launched in 1950 as a response to the Soviet Union's Peace Movement. All these efforts were intended to correct the influence of Soviet foreign policy and cultural imperialism, as well as to reeducate those who had fallen under the influence of fascism. With hindsight it is hard not to regard the initiatives of the Americans, the British, and the French as alternative imperialistic endeavors at a time when the decolonization movement threatened their empires. To paraphrase the words of American art historian Max Kozloff, if all the US-backed cultural and media manifestations were not a mouthpiece for any agency, they were certainly a showcase for American values.[26]

Art Informel in Europe

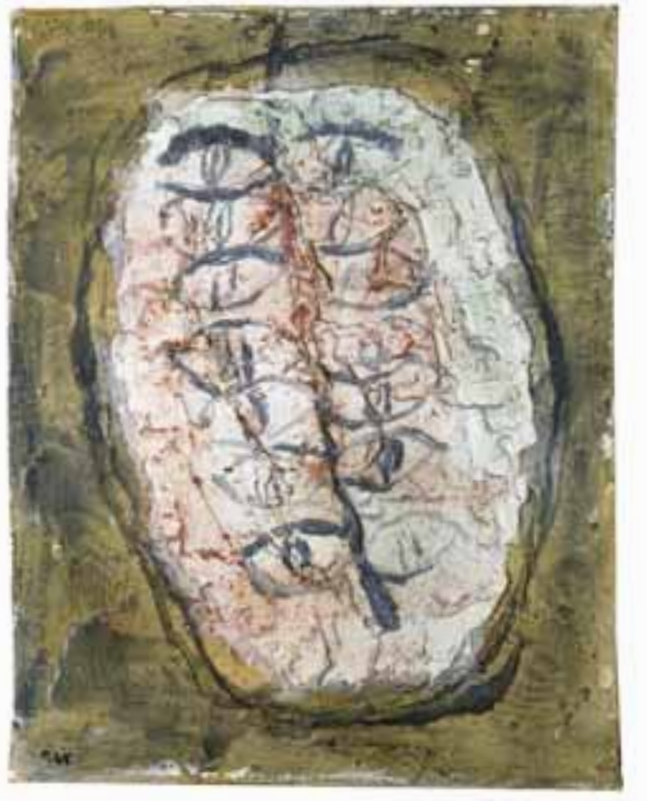
At the time the IC began to operate and send exhibitions to Europe, there was a thriving international community of painters associated with Art Informel.[27] As the decade progressed and the Cold War came into being, abstraction came to stand for freedom from tyranny, freedom of expression, and freedom of the individual, as distinct from the demands placed on artists in the Soviet-controlled sector that required adherence to a doctrine of Realism in the service of the state. For western German artists, it also represented freedom from the burdens of the past, notably an expunging of the Nazi past, its history, and ideology, an endeavor encapsulated in the phrase *Stunde Null* (zero hour). If the weight of tradition could be dismissed, then freedom was possible. This was a classic Existentialist position and one that would underpin later commentary on Abstract Expressionism. As the character Antoine Roquentin puts it in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *La Nausée* (1938): "The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was that which exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all. Neither in things nor even in my thoughts."[28] The present was in effect a point of origin. This was a sentiment commonly held. Michel Tapié, for example, wrote in the introduction to the exhibition catalog



7__Georges Mathieu
Untitled, 1951
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève

that accompanied his show *Véhémences confrontées* in 1951: "One must begin by considering as being worth less than nothing all of aesthetic history, and reject once and for all everything that is not essentially visual."[29] The idea of returning to a point of origin—or, as the American painter Barnett Newman called it, "the original impulse"—was an attempt "to arrive at [original man's] creative state."[30] To get back to that state the artist must erase from his memory the sophistication inherent in civilization in a search for authenticity. An act of unlearning was required. Some Europeans tended to think that Americans were not as burdened by the past as they themselves were. Marco Valsecchi, for example, wrote in *Il Giorno* in 1958: "It is possible for [Americans] to be more free in their creativity precisely because they are less tied down by traditions of deep-rooted cultures, as befalls instead our artists . . . and are able to reach more relaxed heights."[31]

In the 1960s a generation of German artists would see the refusal to engage with the recent past as a disingenuous evasion of responsibility, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s the trauma of the wartime and immediate postwar experience was perhaps too raw to process or willfully ignored. [John] Bernard Myers, an American communist sympathizer, noticed this when he wrote in the *College Art Journal:* "Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the postwar artistic situation in Germany is its complete lack of direct response to the conditions of the time. We may assume that the preponderant interest in various forms of abstraction, chiefly abstract surrealism and abstract expressionism, represents an escape from the unpleasant realities of a bombed out world."[32] In the next issue the critic Hugo Munsterberg presented an opposing view when he described the work of Fritz Winter, on display in the first Deutscher Künstlerbund exhibition in Berlin in August 1951, as portraying "the tragedy of our world in moving and dynamic terms. His heavy black lines and his somber reds and greys seem to reflect the experience of the burning cities and the barbed wire fences of the concentration camps . . . ."[33] The truth, however, was that the German government and society as a whole were inclined not simply to gloss over the recent past but to reintegrate former Nazis into the new democratic institutions. What emerged in the political arena, under the leadership of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, was a desire to move beyond national boundaries to participate in an international dialogue and to abandon Germanness. Abstract painting followed a similar path. It would abjure a national identity and be liberated from politics, a position promoted by German critic Will Grohmann.[34] To join in an international or supranational movement was to be aligned with the political current of the time that gave birth to such institutions as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe that transacted across regional boundaries.

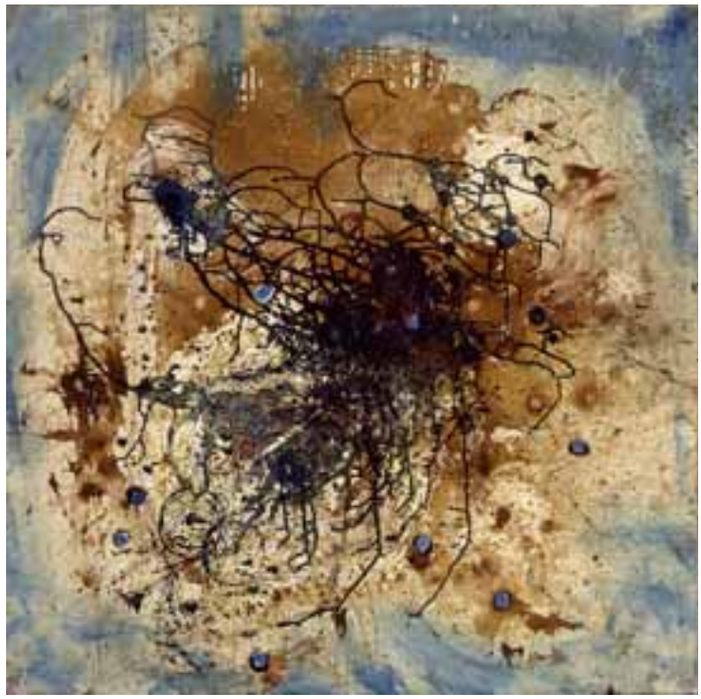


8__Jean Fautrier
Head of a Hostage, 1945
Centre Pompidou, Paris

French abstraction began to be shown in Germany in 1948, beginning with *Französische abstrakte Malerei,* organized by private collector Ottomar Domnick, that circulated to seven cities and included paintings by Hans Hartung and Pierre Soulages alongside geometric abstraction.[35] For German artists, travel in the second half of the 1940s was very difficult but by 1950 things began to open up. Fritz Winter, for example, met Soulages and Hartung in Paris in 1950, and German artists began to hold exhibitions there from around 1955.[36] In the early postwar years Paris was still the point of reference for both artists and critics.

Like Germany, Italy had been deprived of exhibitions of avant-garde art during the fascist period, when a Classical Realism became the favored idiom of a regime that sought to encourage associations with the glories of the Roman Empire. Rather than declaring the aftermath of war as a zero hour, Italians sought to catch up with the past not only by organizing exhibitions of the interwar years, such as the 1948 Biennale referred to above, which it would take Germany another seven years to do in the form of documenta I held in 1955, but by adopting styles of painting that subsumed lessons learned from prewar Paris-based artists. The fascist period was regarded as an interregnum in an otherwise uninterrupted sequence of centuries of Italian civilization rather than a period to be obliterated from history. Italian art would build not only on European developments of the recent past but on its own historic movements, particularly Futurism, in spite of its fascist associations. In Italy abstraction only came to symbolize freedom after the leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Palmiro Togliatti, publicly denounced it in an article of 1948. At that point Realism became aligned with communism and abstraction with freedom from restriction.[37]

Contact with American art reached Italy before Germany or France. The Biennales in 1948 and 1950 and the Pollock exhibition of the same year at the Museo Correr were important sightings. However, Art Informel had an earlier starting point in France than anywhere else in Europe. Three kinds of abstraction were developed: one based on grids, derived from Cubism but hotter in color; one sometimes called Lyrical Abstraction; and a third where the materiality of paint was emphasized. The more lyrical painters, among them Pierre Soulages (cf. fig. 6), Georges Mathieu (cf. fig. 7), and the German émigré Hans Hartung, were considered to operate in the realms of art without political or social commitment. Wols's gestural paintings based on nature were yoked to Existentialism by Jean-Paul Sartre (cf. fig. 9). However, there was no denial in France of the metaphorical content certain examples of abstraction might bear. Jean Fautrier's thickly encrusted *Otage* series was openly acknowledged to be a response to a Nazi atrocity at Oradour-sur-Glane (cf. fig. 8), while Jean Bazaine's and



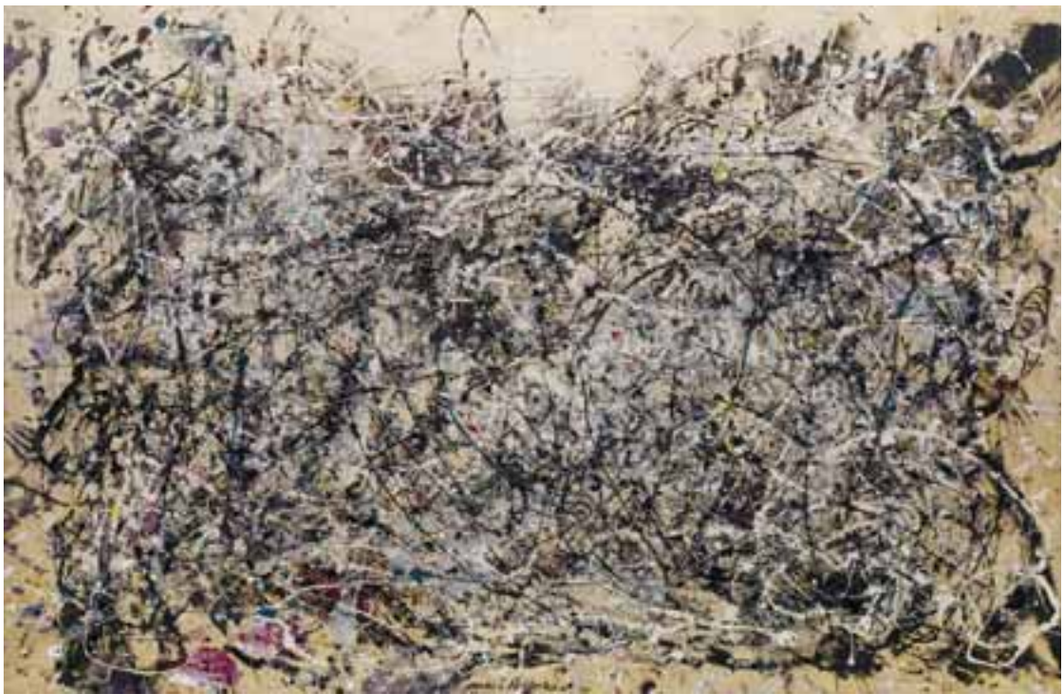
9__Wols
It's All Over, 1946–47
The Menil Collection, Houston

Alfred Manessier's grid paintings were associated with not only the stained-glass windows of Chartres but with the noble sacrifice for church and country of World War II. If some European artists appeared to be working through trauma, so were their American counterparts Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Philip Guston, but whereas the Europeans had lived through the events themselves, and sometimes witnessed them, Rothko, Newman, and Guston, who were either second-generation Jewish immigrants or had arrived in the US as young children, only experienced them vicariously. They felt the impact of genocide through cultural identification and as a deep loss, sometimes deferred for many years.[38]

The Crisis of Man

The dearth of exhibitions of American art in Europe was remarked upon by William Constable, a young curator from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, who was seconded to the Education and Cultural Relations Division of the Office of Military Government for Germany in the United States in 1951.[39] This was reiterated in the pages of *XXe Siècle* by Jerome Mellquist, who complained that "Even the Venice Biennale in 1950 did not elucidate the direction taken by painting of the last two generations in the US."[40] The lack of emphasis on the most contemporary persisted in the first few exhibitions promoted by the IC that followed the model announced by an exhibition held in Berlin in 1951, *Amerikanische Malerei.* There, Abstract Expressionist works were displayed as part of the general diversity of American art of the twentieth century. In fact, advice given by Americans stationed in Germany was that the German audience was not ready to receive abstract art.[41] While Abstract Expressionism has since come to be regarded as the dominant movement of the 1950s in America, at the time it was considered just one among many.

The IC's first European exhibition, *Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors,* opened in Paris in April 1953 and toured Europe until March 1954.[42] The exhibition showed a range of painting and sculpture from Edward Hopper to Pollock and Alexander Calder to David Smith. The subtext was a demonstration of freedom of expression and variety of approaches. As Andrew Ritchie wrote in the catalog, "diversity flourishes in the absence of an 'official art': The emphasis lies mostly on the artist as an individual," the inference being that official art belonged to the Soviet model.[43] By this time Pollock had had a solo exhibition of his black "pourings" at the Studio Facchetti in Paris (1952), with a catalog introduction by Michel Tapié, and the journal *Art d'aujourd'hui* had already devoted an entire issue to American abstraction in June 1951. A sighting of Abstract Expressionism in Paris was, therefore,



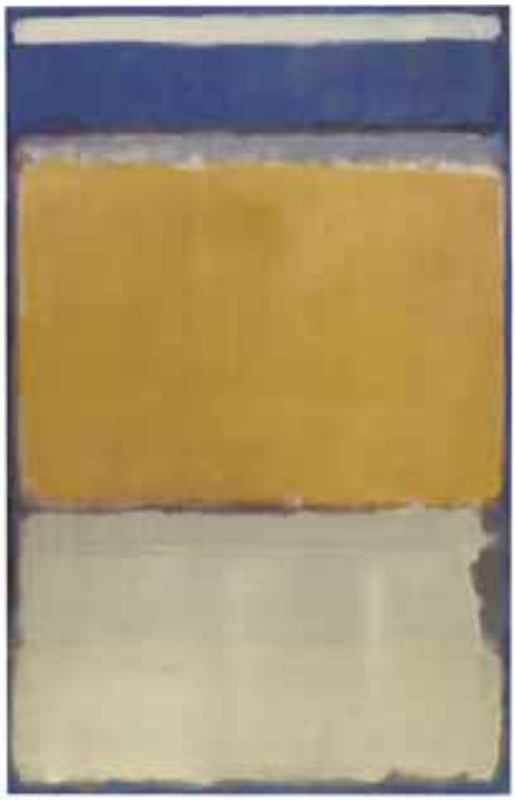
10__Jackson Pollock
Number 1A, 1948, 1948
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

not novel.[44] American art magazines were now in circulation in Europe bearing articles about the Abstract Expressionists, although the apprehension of their work was limited to black-and-white illustrations. The major event was the publication of Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" in *Art News* in December 1952, an article disseminated widely in Europe that largely determined the interpretation of Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s.[45] Its fundamental premise was based on his understanding of Existentialism.

In New York, in the immediate aftermath of war, the "crisis of man" discourse was promulgated by means of discussion of French Existentialism. *Partisan Review,* a quarterly magazine, carried numerous articles on Existentialism, stressing the heritage of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Sartre visited New York in 1945, and his book *Existentialism* was translated into English and published by the Philosophical Library in New York two years later. His theory of man emphasized individual action, instinct, personal responsibility, and freedom, and had an enormous impact on left-leaning intellectuals as well as the artists who became known as Abstract Expressionists. Statements these artists put out in the late 1940s and 1950s indicate a strong awareness of Existentialism and debates around the "crisis of man." Newman, Rothko, and Motherwell had all studied or read Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Other small-circulation cultural magazines, among them *Tiger's Eye* and *Possibilities,* published artists' statements alongside articles about the French movement. And, as an appetizer for the interest in Existentialism, in 1946, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay "Cézanne's Doubt" appeared in *Partisan Review,* in which he propounded the idea that the creative act preceded cognition and the formation of language, ideas adopted by Newman in "The First Man Was an Artist," published in *Tiger's Eye* the following year.

Existentialism was seen as a corrective to the industrialized, streamlined society that the US had become and a way to react against the depersonalization of Fordism and massification that had had its most heinous consequences in the concentration camps. It entered the political sphere at the moment support for communism was on the wane in the US and as American intellectuals sought to develop a more liberal, unaligned outlook. However, when Sartre declared his allegiance to the French Communist Party (PCF), his influence was supplanted by that of the more liberal, universalist Albert Camus, his "Art and Revolt," first published in *Partisan Review,* being included in the *New Partisan Reader, 1945–1953* at the expense of the numerous articles the magazine had published by Sartre in the 1940s.[46]

Rosenberg's 1952 article emphasized the work of art as an "act," something unconsidered and spontaneous, in which the canvas became the record of an "event." He elaborated on this further in "Revolution and the Idea of Beauty," published in *Encounter* the following year, arguing that the artist's



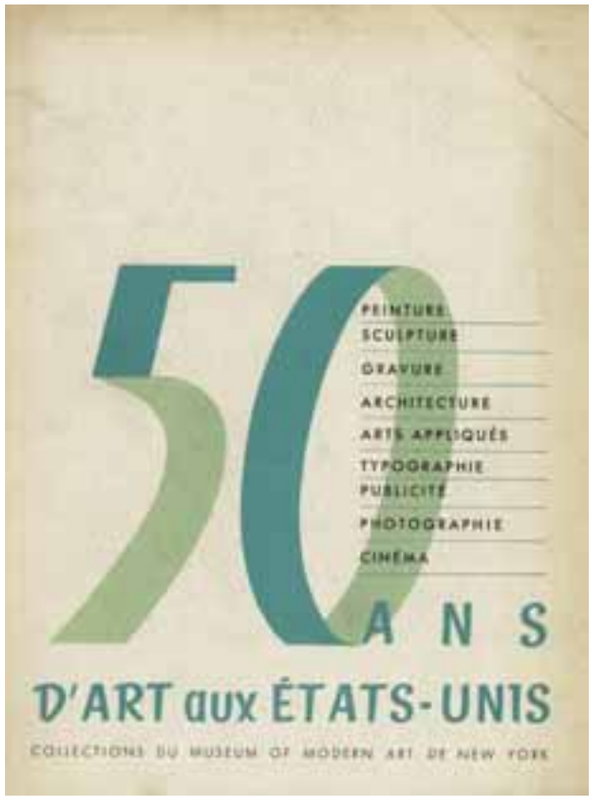
11__Mark Rothko
No. 10, 1950
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

revolutionary position is "inseparable from the direct apprehension of himself." [47] Artists should preserve their freedom and individuality by making works of art that were based on self-disclosure without political engagement. This was an idea derived from Camus. The intersubjective nature of Abstract Expressionism was consistent with Camus's views on universalism.[48] In a lecture in New York in 1947, Camus suggested that the dignity of man, who was universally culpable for the war, could only be restored by universalism through which "all men of good will may find themselves in touch with one another."[49] If individualism was to be the fundamental subject of their work, contact between individuals was paramount to avoid the pitfalls of nationalism, an idea that was encapsulated in the notion of abstraction as a supranational language. Ritchie's reference to the emphasis on the individual in his above-mentioned catalog introduction thus appears to be a direct reference to Rosenberg's article and an indication that both Rosenberg's ideas and Existentialism in general had drifted into institutional artistic discourse.

The Coming of America

The next large exhibition that the IC sent to Europe was *50 ans d'art aux États-Unis* in 1955 as part of the "Salute to France" festival arranged at the request of the French government under the auspices of the American Embassy. Drawn from MoMA's collection, it was initially planned to include only paintings but ended as a panoramic view of American fine and applied art with a large architecture section, as well as sections devoted to photography, modern prints, industrial design, typography, and film. As *Modern Art in the United States* only the paintings, sculpture, and print sections toured to Zurich, Barcelona, Frankfurt am Main, London, The Hague, Vienna, Linz, and Belgrade. The French press expressed their admiration for American architecture and, in some cases, the photography, industrial design, and print sections. In all these they could see what they felt were national characteristics. However, they were critical of the painting section, which was another eclectic mix of artists. It culminated with a room of Abstract Expressionist paintings, which, for the general public—and indeed for many artists, was the first in-depth, collective sighting of such large-scale works. Most of the French critics expressed irritation and nonchalance derived from a feeling that American painting was built on the shoulders of European art, and that many of the so-called American artists were of European extraction. It followed that for them there was no distinctively American style.

Unlike in London a year later, the French press did not engage in appreciative discussion. A theme that preoccupied the French and the British was that the paintings lacked control, were unre-

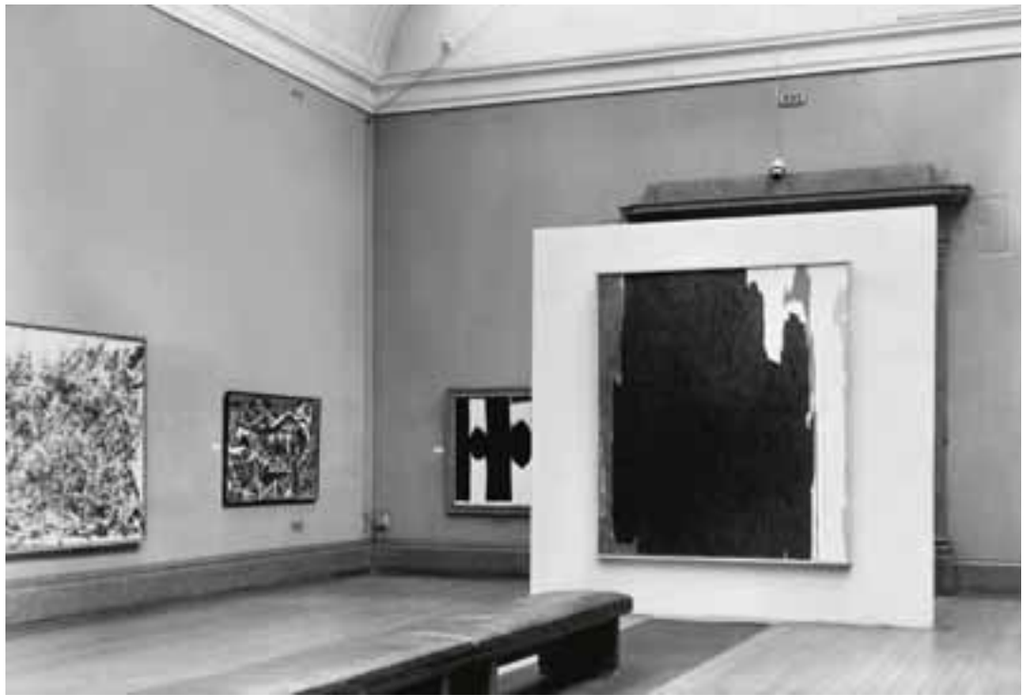


12__Cover of the exhibition catalog *50 ans d'art aux États-Unis* at the Musée national d'art moderne, Paris 1955

solved, and merely displayed "the vestiges of formidable battles," as one critic put it.[50] Violent, tortured, funereal, ugly, convulsive, explosive, trivial, excitable were adjectives applied to this art. Some writers noted the Existentialist aspects of the work and its essential sadness, but in Britain this was remarked upon less than in France.[51] In Germany, unlike in France, two reviewers saw the paintings as optimistic, presumably conditioned by the postwar gloom of that country and the *Weltschmerz* some thought underlay their own abstract art.[52] The French far-left and far-right newspapers were predictably anti-American. One of the sole positive French reviewers was Georges Menant, in *La Dernière Heure Lyonnaise,* a newspaper published in Grenoble neither politically aligned nor in the pockets of the French art dealers. He took his fellow critics to task for pointing out that American art reflected a European heritage, concluding that "it would be difficult to assert that it still reflects European inspiration. In actuality, American art . . . turns its back upon European abstraction."[53] This sentiment was shared by a number of British and German critics. Robert Melville, Patrick Heron, Lawrence Alloway, and David Thompson made important contributions to the discourse around Abstract Expressionism, seeing the scale of the paintings and their handling of space as being new to abstract painting.[54]

The IC's intention had been to present American art as building on the European tradition to cement links between the two cultures, promoting a sense of universalism and common endeavor. That the French, in the main, chose to interpret this as a sign of weakness, might indicate the success of the choice of works but perhaps not its effectiveness in presenting the US as the inheritor of the mantle of cultural equal, if not leader. Given that many of the reviewers in France were allied to the leading commercial galleries and those galleries were battling for the survival of Paris as the center of modern art, their rather dismissive response was perhaps predictable.[55]

Another important point of discussion regarded the nature of civilization itself. Pierre Descargues, for example, decried the "extensive section given over to saucepans, lemon-squeezers, can-openers and plastic plates—testimonies of American civilization that might have better found a public at the Salon of Household Arts rather than at the Musée d'art moderne."[56] Maurice Armand, a critic of the extreme right, echoed the commonly held view that European civilization was in peril, not simply from the events of the previous decade but from America itself: "The fragility of our dying civilization is reaffirmed in the face of the monstrous visage of America, protagonist of a barbarous revolution."[57] The view of a number of critics was that Abstract Expressionism was an unbridled, uninhibited primary expression of self with no regard for the conventions of painting, an unconscious, barbaric "action," but this represented a misapprehension of the process of painting, for the Abstract



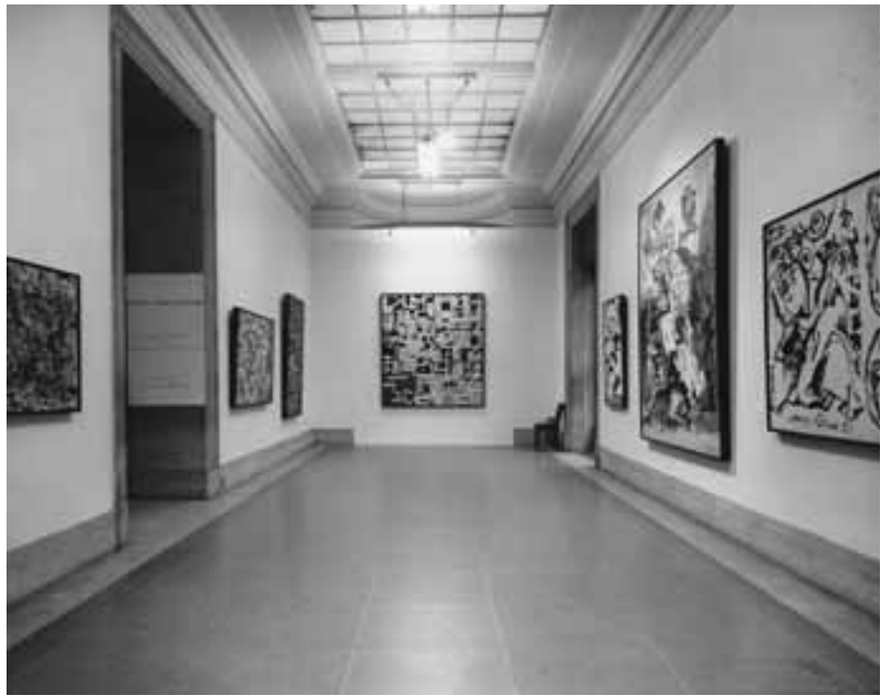
13__Installation view of the exhibition *Modern Art in the United States* at the Tate Gallery, London, 1956

Expressionist artists applied a "civilizing" process to their art. While some of them plotted their work in advance (Franz Kline, for example), others reviewed their paintings, adjusting, reworking, or destroying where necessary. As Pollock said: "I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image."[58] Thus the instinctive would be controlled by the rational. It may have been convenient, especially for some of the French and British press, to differentiate European art from American art and to regard the latter as "other," for perhaps there was something reassuring about nominating the invaders as barbaric, but ultimately the notion of barbarism was a myth.

Undoubtedly for some, American art had the potential to be revitalizing, as Bernard Champigneulle suggested: "To what extent is this country of recent traditions the inheritor of Western civilization? Might it bring new sap to the old country of Europe?"[59] In England Denys Sutton was undecided. "It is conceivable," he wrote, "that American art is on the verge of a rich flowering although the possession of power does not necessarily stimulate a valid artistic expression. Whether in the long run America will stand in relation to Europe as Rome did to Greece is, as our American cousins say, the sixty-four dollar question."[60] In other words, echoing the earlier words of Galantière, power in itself is insufficient for influence to take root. Cultural sophistication was equally important. Sutton suggests that the world was on the brink of one civilization supplanting another. For the artist and critic Patrick Heron, Paris and New York appeared to be on an equal footing: "We shall now watch New York as eagerly as Paris for new developments," he affirmed.[61] When the IC reviewed the success of the exhibition, it could see that the final room containing Abstract Expressionist paintings created simultaneously the greatest controversy and the greatest excitement. Leaving aside the far-left and the far-right reviews, it was apparent that those who were substantially uncommitted appreciated the dialogue with European painting as well as the advances American art had made.

A New Universal Language?

The exhibition finished its tour in the tumultuous year of 1956, when the American civil rights movement entered a more militant decade, the Suez crisis erupted, the Soviet invasion of Hungary took place, and when Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, denounced Joseph Stalin. Although the Hungarian invasion impacted upon the popularity of communism throughout Europe, up until then communist parties had been enjoying electoral growth, which the American government perceived as a threat to its influence. But now their popularity was decreasing, and the USIA

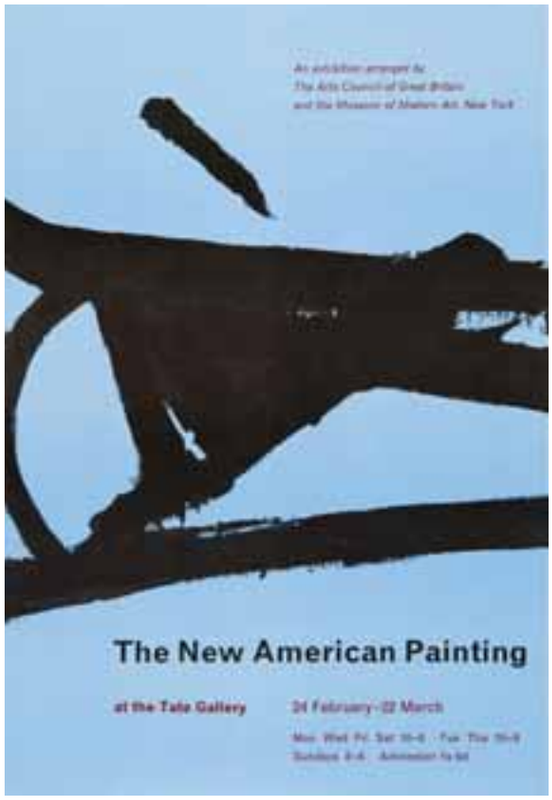


14__Installation view of the exhibition *The New American Painting* at the Tate Gallery, London, 1959

saw there was a need to bring the unaligned left into the fold of liberal politics. Together the IC and USIA mounted two exhibitions in Europe that ran simultaneously: *Jackson Pollock* and *The New American Painting.* An art that could be presented with familiar European Existential credentials, that seemed to link with the European avant-garde's interest in Art Informel while at the same time representing freedom of thought and expression, was meant to present a convincing counter to Soviet Realism.

It was also clear to the IC that many people in Europe had come to regard abstraction as a "language" that transcended national barriers, that could be universally understood.[62] It might also deal, covertly perhaps, with issues. Robert Motherwell, Alberto Burri, Antoni Tàpies, Manolo Millares, and Antonio Saura frequently evoked a sense of trauma in their works, endowing them with a political dimension. Grohmann had for some time been arguing for an internationalist outlook for German art in an effort to reintegrate it in European modernism. His colleague Werner Haftmann took a similarly internationalist view when, in his 1954 publication *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert* (Painting in the Twentieth Century), he talked about the worldwide adoption of modernist European strategies in art and architecture.[63] Four years later the compendium titled *Art since 1945,* which Grohmann edited and to which he was a contributor, confirmed the widespread adoption of this internationalist position. French critic Marcel Brion criticized the use of the name "School of Paris," noting that "the term is almost meaningless, for another reason: because the pictorial vocabulary of our epoch is more universal, more international than ever before. This is especially true of abstract art, which has been the general language of two generations of painters, all of them vigorously individualistic, yet all painting in a style that ranges from Milan to San Francisco, from London to Buenos Aires, and from Berlin to Tokyo."[64] Although Brion argued that there were local dialects within the language of abstraction, others saw this internationalism as a homogenization with little to distinguish one form of abstraction from another. By the end of the decade some commentators felt that gestural art had become so commonplace as to be academic.[65]

But there were others who saw the move away from representation as a last act of rebellion in the face of the increasing mechanization of life. As American art historian Meyer Schapiro wrote in 1957: "Paintings and sculptures. . . are the last hand-made, personal objects within our culture. . . . The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and a deep engagement of the self within his work." Freedom and abstraction were in harness. Schapiro, however, took issue with the idea that abstraction was a language that could be universally understood, arguing that: "what makes painting and sculpture so interesting in our times is their high degree of non-communication. You cannot extract a message from a painting by ordinary means; the usual rules of communication do not hold here, there is



15__Poster for the exhibition *The New American Painting* at the Tate Gallery, London, 1959

no clear code or fixed vocabulary. . . . Painting, by becoming abstract and giving up its representational function, has achieved a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented."[66] In many respects Schapiro was correct. Abstract painting has no grammar or syntax; it has no specific language that is translatable. Meaning is not obvious from a gesture or smear, a collection of marks, or a choice of color or format. Abstract painting is interpretable, but that interpretation relies always, to some degree, on subjectivity. A language implies communicability between people, a basic level of understanding that can be exchanged in a comprehensible way. At best individual artists have their own *écriture*—the French word seems to describe it best—but *écriture* is no more than form and style. Language inhabits *écriture* but it requires consistency and accepted meaning, which abstract painting simply does not have.

The Triumph of American Painting?

Many of the ideas outlined above fed into the way in which the IC presented their two large European touring exhibitions of 1957 and 1958. In the exhibition catalogs *Jackson Pollock* and *The New American Painting,* authors Sam Hunter and Alfred H. Barr Jr. made extensive reference to Existentialism, liberation, individuality, and freedom, ideas that would resonate with European intellectuals. The extent to which these philosophical points were absorbed is clear from the generally positive reviews of the exhibitions in Italy and England. In France, aside from the generous praise in the specialist art press, the national press acknowledged the Existentialist spirit of the work but continued to resent the growing status of American art. American painting continued to be seen as a descendent of European painting. If there were references to the similarity of Wols to Pollock and to the universal nature of abstraction, they were offered negatively. On the positive side, critics of all countries replaced the narrative around chaos with an equally powerful myth of control, neither of which were entirely accurate. This change was encouraged in large part by a viewing of Hans Namuth's film of Pollock in action, *Jackson Pollock 51.*

The essential diplomatic nature of the cultural offensive to unite the people of Europe and America was most keenly felt in Berlin, where, in the publicity leaflet for the Berlin Festival, Willy Brandt, the governing mayor of Berlin, wrote that the festival was intended "to give our fellow citizens in East Berlin and our fellow countrymen in the East Zone a practical example of the free development of art in the free world."[67] Offering an analysis of the ability of art to remove barriers, heal wounds, and revive spirituality, in his speech at the opening of *The New American Painting,* Senator Dr. Valentin Kielinger emphasized the power of intersubjectivity to overcome cultural and political barriers: "In a time of crisis-like