

“American-Type” Painting

Advanced painting continues to create scandal when little new in literature or music does (sculpture is a different question). This would be enough of itself to indicate that painting is the most alive of the avant-garde arts at the present moment, for only a substantial and meaningful newness can upset right-thinking people. But why should painting monopolize this kind of newness? Among a variety of reasons, I single out one that I feel to be most to the point: namely, the relative slowness, despite all appearances to the contrary, of painting's evolution as a modernist art.

Though it may have started toward modernism earlier than the other arts, painting has turned out to have a greater number of *expendable* conventions imbedded in it, or at least a greater number of conventions that are difficult to isolate in order to expend. It seems to be a law of modernism—thus one that applies to almost all art that remains truly alive in our time—that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized. This process of self-purification appears to have come to a halt in literature simply because the latter has fewer conventions to eliminate before arriving at those essential to it. In music, the same process, if not halted, seems to have slowed down because it is already so far advanced, most of the expendable conventions of music having proved relatively easy to isolate. I am simplifying drastically, of course. And it is understood, I hope, that conventions are overhauled, not for revolutionary effect, but in order to maintain the irreplaceability and renew the vitality of art in the face of a society bent in principle on rationalizing everything. It is understood, too, that the devolu-

tion of tradition cannot take place except in the presence of tradition.

Painting continues, then, to work out its modernism with unchecked momentum because it still has a relatively long way to go before being reduced to its viable essence. Perhaps it is another symptom of this same state of affairs that Paris should be losing its monopoly on the fate of painting. By no one, in recent years, have that art's expendable conventions been attacked more directly or more sustainedly than by a group of artists who came to notice in New York during and shortly after the war. Labeled variously as “abstract expressionism,” “action painting” and even “abstract impressionism,” their works constitute the first manifestation of American art to draw a standing protest at home as well as serious attention from Europe, where, though deplored more often than praised, they have already influenced an important part of the avant-garde.¹

These American painters did not set out to be advanced. They set out to paint good pictures that they could sign with their own names, and they have “advanced” in search of qualities analogous with those they admired in the art of the past. They form no movement or school in any accepted sense. They come from different stylistic directions, and if these converge it is thanks largely to a common vitality and a common ambition

¹ I believe Robert Coates of *The New Yorker* invented “abstract expressionism,” at least in order to apply it to American painting; it happens to be very inaccurate as a covering term. “Action painting” was concocted by Harold Rosenberg in *Art News*. “Abstract impressionism” denotes very inaccurately certain after-comers, none of whom are dealt with in this piece. In London, I heard Patrick Heron refer in conversation to “American-type painting,” which at least has the advantage of being without misleading connotations. It is only because “abstract expressionism” is the most current term that I use it here more often than any other. Charles Estienne calls the French equivalent “*tachisme*”; Michel Tapié has dubbed it “*art informel*” and “*art autre*.” Estienne's label is far too narrow, while both of Tapié's are radically misleading in the same way that “action painting” is. Since the Renaissance began calling medieval art “Gothic,” tendencies in art usually have received their names from enemies. But now these names seem to be more the product of misunderstanding and impotence than of outright hostility, which only makes the situation worse.

and inventiveness in relation to a given time, place and tradition. Their work evinces uniform stylistic traits only when compared on the broadest terms with that of artists who work, or worked, in other times, places or relations. The pictures of some of these Americans startle because they seem to rely on ungoverned spontaneity and haphazard effects; or because, at the other extreme, they present surfaces which appear to be largely devoid of pictorial incident. All this is very much seeming. There is good and bad in this art, and when one is able to tell the difference between them he begins to realize that the art in question is subject to a discipline as strict as any that art obeyed in the past. What puzzles one initially—as it puzzled one initially in every new phase of modernism in the past—is the fact that “abstract expressionism” makes explicit certain constant factors of pictorial art that the past left implicit, and leaves implicit on the other hand, certain other such factors that the past made explicit. The nature of some of these factors will emerge below, but meanwhile let it suffice to repeat that “abstract expressionism” makes no more of a break with the past than anything before it in modernist art has.

Major art is impossible, or almost so, without a thorough assimilation of the major art of the preceding period or periods. In the 1930s and the early 1940s New York artists were able to assimilate and digest Klee, Miró and the earlier Kandinsky to an extent unmatched elsewhere either then or previously (we know that none of these three masters became a serious influence in Paris until after the war). At the same time Matisse's influence and example were kept alive in New York by Hans Hofmann and Milton Avery in a period when young painters elsewhere were discounting him. In those same years Picasso, Mondrian and even Léger were very much in the foreground in New York—Picasso to such an extent as to threaten to block the way and even the view. Of the utmost importance to those who were to overcome Picasso after learning from him was the accessibility of a large number of early Kandinskys in

what is now the Solomon Guggenheim Museum. All in all, this marked the first time that a generation of American artists could start out fully abreast—and perhaps even a little bit ahead—of their contemporaries elsewhere.

But I doubt whether they would have been able to acquire the artistic culture they did without the opportunity for unconstrained work that most of them got in the late 1930s and early 1940s from the Federal Art Project. Or whether they could have launched themselves so well when they began showing without the small but sophisticated audience provided by the students and graduates of Hans Hofmann's art school in New York. This country's distance from the war was another favorable circumstance, and along with it the presence here during the war years of artists like Mondrian, Masson, Léger, Chagall, Ernst and Lipchitz, together with a number of European critics, dealers and collectors. The proximity of these people, if not their attention, gave these new American painters the sense, wholly new in this country, of being in the center of art in their time.

What real justification there is for the term “abstract expressionism” lies in the fact that some of these painters began looking toward German, Russian or Jewish expressionism when they became restive with Cubism and with Frenchness in general. But it remains that every one of them started from French art and got his instinct for style from it; and it was from the French, too, that they all got their most vivid notion of what major, ambitious art had to *feel* like.

The first problem these young Americans seemed to share was that of loosening up the relatively delimited illusion of shallow depth that the three master Cubists—Picasso, Braque, Léger—had adhered to since the closing out of Synthetic Cubism. If they were to be able to say what they had to say, they had also to loosen up that canon of rectilinear and curvilinear regularity in drawing and design which Cubism had imposed on almost all previous abstract art. These problems were not tackled by program; very little in “abstract expres-

sionism" is, or ever was, programmatic; individual artists may have made "statements" but there were no manifestoes; nor have there been "spokesmen." What happened, rather, was that a certain cluster of challenges was encountered, separately yet almost simultaneously, by six or seven painters who had their first one-man shows at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York between 1943 and 1946. The Picassos of the thirties and, in lesser but perhaps more crucial measure, the Kandinskys of 1910-1918 were then suggesting new possibilities of expression for abstract and near-abstract art that went beyond the enormously inventive, but unfulfilled ideas of Klee's last decade. It was the unrealized Picasso rather than the unrealized Klee who became the important incentive for Americans like Gorky, de Kooning and Pollock, all three of whom set out to catch, and to some extent did catch (or at least Pollock did) some of the uncaught hares that Picasso had started.

Often, the artist who tries to break away from an overpowering precedent will look at first to an alternative one. The late Arshile Gorky submitted to Miró in the latter thirties as if only in order to escape from Picasso, but while exchanging one seeming bondage for another, he made a number of pictures in which we are now able to discern much more independence than we could before. Kandinsky, whose earlier paintings Gorky scrutinized for hours on end in the first years of the forties, had even more of a liberating effect; and so too, did Gorky's more frequent adoption of the landscape instead of the figure or still life as a starting point. And a short while later, André Breton's personal encouragement began to give him the self-confidence he had lacked until then. But again, and for the last time, he reached for an influence—that of Matta, with whom he had also come into personal contact during the war years. Matta was, and perhaps still is, a very inventive draftsman and, occasionally, a daring no less than flashy painter. His ideas became more substantial, however, in

Gorky's more paint-wise hands, which endowed those ideas with new and very "American" qualities of color and surface, transforming and adding so much that their derivation became conspicuously beside the point. Finding his own way out of Picassoid space, Gorky learned to float flat shapes on a melting, indeterminate ground in a difficult stability that was both like and unlike Miró's. Yet, for all his late-won independence, Gorky remained a votary of French taste and an orthodox easel-painter, a virtuoso of line and a tinter rather than a colorist. He became one of the greatest painters that this country and this time produced, but he finished rather than started something, and the younger painters who try to follow him have condemned themselves to a new kind of academicism.

Willem de Kooning, who was a mature artist long before his first show at Charles Egan's in 1948, is closest to Gorky among the other initiators of "abstract expressionism"; he has a similar culture and a like orientation to French taste. He may be even more gifted as a draftsman, and he is certainly more inventive. At the same time he enjoys both the advantages and the liabilities of an aspiration larger, perhaps, than that of any other living artist. De Kooning's apparent aim is a synthesis of tradition and modernism that would grant him more flexibility within the confines of the Late Cubist canon of design. The dream of a grand style hovers over all this—the dream of an obviously grand and an obviously heroic style.

De Kooning's figurative paintings are haunted as much as his abstract ones are by the disembodied contours of Michelangelo's, Ingres's and even Rubens' nudes. Yet the dragged off-whites, the grays and the blacks in one phase, and the vermilions, yellows and mint greens in another, which insert these contours in shallow depth continue to remind one of Picasso by their application and inflection. There is the same more or less surreptitious shading of every plane, and a similar insistence on sculptural firmness. No more than Picasso can de Kooning tear himself away from the figure and that modeling of it for which his sense of contour and chiaroscuro so

well equip him. And there is perhaps even more Luciferian pride behind de Kooning's ambition than there is behind Picasso's: were he to realize all his aims, all other ambitious painting would have to stop for a generation since he would have set both its forward and its backward limits.

De Kooning has won quicker and wider acceptance in this country than any of the other original "abstract expressionists"; his need to include the past as well as to forestall the future seems to reassure a lot of people who still find Pollock incomprehensible. And he does remain a Late Cubist in a self-evident way that none of the others, except Gorky and perhaps Motherwell, approaches. The method of his savagery continued to be almost old-fashionedly, and anxiously, Cubist underneath the flung and tortured color, when he left abstraction for a while to attack the female figure with a fury more explicit than has animated any of Picasso's violations of physiognomical logic. Equally Late Cubist has been his insistence on *finish*, which has been even more of an obstacle in his case than in Gorky's. Perhaps neither de Kooning nor Gorky has ever reached, in finished and edited oils, the heights they have in fugitive, informal sketches, in drawings and in rapidly done oils on paper.

In some ways Hans Hofmann is the most remarkable phenomenon of "abstract expressionism," as well as the exponent of it with the clearest title so far to the appellation of "master." Active and known as a teacher here and in pre-Hitler Germany, Hofmann did not begin showing consistently until 1944, when in his early sixties, which was only a short time after his art had turned outspokenly abstract. He has since then developed as part of a tendency whose next oldest member is at least twenty years younger than himself. It was natural that Hofmann should have been the most mature one in the beginning, but it is really his prematureness rather than his maturity that has obscured the fact that he was the first to open up certain areas of expression that other artists have gone on to exploit with more spectacular success. Hofmann strains to pass

beyond the easel convention, and Cubism along with it, even as he strains to cling to them. For many reasons having to do with tradition, convention and habit, we automatically expect pictorial structure to be presented through contrasts of light and dark; but Hofmann, who assimilated the Fauve Matisse before he did Cubism, will juxtapose shrill colors of the same pitch and warmth in a way that, if it does not actually obscure their value contrast, at least renders it jarring and dissonant. This effect will often be reinforced by his drawing: a sudden razor-sharp line will intervene where least expected—or too often where least needed; or thick gobs of paint, without support of a firm edge, will seem to defy every norm of the art of painting. But Hofmann is never so lucid as when he consigns a picture to thicknesses of paint, nor, I am willing to hazard, has any artist of this century outdone him in the handling of such thicknesses. Where he fails most often is, on the contrary, in forcing the issues of clarity and "synthesis," and in offering draftsman's tokens of these that are too familiar.

Like Klee, Hofmann works in a variety of manners, no one of which he has tried to consolidate so far. He is, if anything, all too ready to accept bad pictures in order to get into position for good ones; which makes it look as though he were conspiring with himself to postpone the just recognition of his art—of his noble easel-painting art, which offers to those who know how to look all the abundance of incident and event that belongs traditionally to the easel picture.

I couple Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell, for all their dissimilarity, only because they both stay closer to Late Cubism, without quite belonging to it, than do any of the artists still to be discussed. It is too generally assumed that the "abstract expressionists" start from little more than inspired impulse, but Motherwell stands out among them, despite many appearances to the contrary, precisely because of his reliance on impulse and direct feeling—and also because of his lack of real facility. But though he adheres to the simplified, schematic kind of design established by Matisse and Picasso, he is funda-

mentally less of a Cubist than either de Kooning or Gorky. Nor does he depend as much on taste as is commonly assumed. Motherwell is, in fact, among the least understood, if not the least appreciated, of all the "abstract expressionists."

There is a promising chaos in him, but not of the kind popularly associated with the New York group. Some of his early collages, in a sort of explosive Cubism like that of de Kooning's more recent paintings, have with time acquired an original and profound unity in which seeming confusion resolves itself into an almost elementary orderliness. And between 1946 and 1950, Motherwell did a number of large pictures that will remain among the masterpieces of "abstract expressionism." Several of these, with broad vertical bands of flat black or ochre played off against white or repeats of black and ochre, show how triumphantly the decorative can become utterly dramatic in the ambitious easel painting of our time. Yet Motherwell has also turned out some of the feeblest works done by any of the leading "abstract expressionists," and an accumulation of these in the early 1950s has deceived the art public as to the real scale of his achievement.

Gottlieb has in a sense been an even more uneven artist. His case is almost the opposite of Motherwell's: capable perhaps of a greater range of controlled effects than any other of the group, he has, I feel, lacked the nerve or the presumptuousness to make this plain to a public that got in the habit of accusing him of being influenced by artists whose work he was hardly acquainted with, or whom he himself had influenced in the first place. Over the years, in a characteristically sober way, Gottlieb has made himself one of the surest craftsmen in contemporary painting: one who can, for instance, place a flat and irregular silhouette, that most difficult of all shapes to adjust in isolation to the rectangle, with a force and rightness no other living painter seems capable of. Some of his best work has come since he abandoned his "pictographs" for paintings called "imaginary landscapes" or "seascapes" that have usually proved too difficult for Cubist-trained eyes. The one serious ob-

jection I have to make to Gottlieb's art in general—and it is related perhaps to the lack of nerve, or rather nerviness, I have just mentioned—is that he works too tightly, too patly, in relation to the frame, whence comes the "set," over-inclosed, static look that diminishes the original power of many of his pictures. But power as such, Gottlieb has in abundance. Right now he seems the least tired of all the original "abstract expressionists," and one who will give us a lot more than he has given us so far. In the future Gottlieb's status will, I feel sure, be less contested than that of some other artists in the group under discussion.

Pollock was very much of a Late Cubist as well as a hard and fast easel-painter when he entered into his maturity. The first pictures he showed—in murky, igneous colors with fragments of imagery—startled people less by their means than by the violence of temperament they revealed. Pollock had compiled hints from Picasso, Miró, Siqueiros, Orozco and Hofmann to create an allusive and altogether original vocabulary of Baroque shapes with which he twisted Cubist space to make it speak with his own vehemence. Until 1946 he stayed within an unmistakably Cubist framework, but the early greatness of his art bears witness to the success with which he was able to expand it. Paintings like the *She Wolf* (1943) and *Totem I* (1945) take Picassoid ideas and make them speak with an eloquence and emphasis that Picasso himself never dreamed of in their connection. Pollock cannot build with color, but he has a superlative instinct for resounding oppositions of light and dark, and at the same time he is alone in his power to assert a paint-strewn or paint-laden surface as a single synoptic image.

It may be a chronological fact that Mark Tobey was the first to make, and succeed with, easel pictures whose design was "all-over"—that is, filled from edge to edge with evenly spaced motifs that repeated themselves uniformly like the elements in a wallpaper pattern, and therefore seemed capable of repeating the picture beyond its frame into infinity. Tobey

first showed his "white writings" in New York in 1944, but Pollock had not seen them when he did his own first "all-over" pictures in the late summer of 1946, in dabs and ribbons of thick paint that were to change at the end of the year into liquid spatters and trickles. Back in 1944, however, he had noticed one or two curious paintings shown at Peggy Guggenheim's by a "primitive" painter, Janet Sobel (who was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn). Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively: they showed schematic little drawings of faces almost lost in a dense tracery of thin black lines lying over and under a mottled field of predominantly warm and translucent color. The effect—and it was the first really "all-over" one that I had ever seen, since Tobey's show came months later—was strangely pleasing. Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him. But he had really anticipated his own "all-overness" in a mural he did for Peggy Guggenheim at the beginning of 1944, which is now at the University of Illinois. Moreover when, at the end of 1946, he began working consistently with skeins and blotches of enamel paint, the very first results he got had a boldness and breadth unparalleled by anything seen in Sobel or Tobey.

By means of his interlaced trickles and spatters, Pollock created an oscillation between an emphatic surface—further specified by highlights of aluminum paint—and an illusion of indeterminate but somehow definitely shallow depth that reminds me of what Picasso and Braque arrived at thirty-odd years before, with the facet-planes of their Analytical Cubism. I do not think it exaggerated to say that Pollock's 1946-1950 manner really took up Analytical Cubism from the point at which Picasso and Braque had left it when, in their collages of 1912 and 1913, they drew back from the utter abstractness for which Analytical Cubism seemed headed. There is a curious logic in the fact that it was only at this same point in his own stylistic evolution that Pollock himself became con-

sistently and utterly abstract. When he, in his turn, drew back, it was in 1951, when he found himself halfway between easel painting and an uncertain kind of portable mural. And it was in the next year that, for the first time since arriving at artistic maturity, he became profoundly unsure of himself.

The years 1947 and 1948 constituted a turning point for "abstract expressionism." In 1947 there was a great stride forward in general quality. Hofmann entered a new phase, and a different kind of phase, when he stopped painting on wood or fiberboard and began using canvas. In 1948 painters like Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin "joined up," to be followed two years later by Franz Kline. Rothko abandoned his "Surrealist" manner; de Kooning had his first show; and Gorky died. But it was only in 1950 that "abstract expressionism" jelled as a general manifestation. And only then did two of its henceforth conspicuous features, the huge canvas and the black and white oil, become ratified.

Gorky was already trying his hand at the big picture in the early 1940s, being the first in this direction as in others. The increasing shallowness of his illusion of depth was compelling the ambitious painter to try to find room on the literal surface of his canvas for an equivalent of the pictorial transactions he used to work out in the imagined three-dimensional space behind it. At the same time he began to feel a need to "escape" from the frame—from the enclosing rectangle of the canvas—which Cézanne and the Cubists had established as the all-controlling coordinate of design and drawing (making explicit a rule that the Old Masters had faithfully observed but never spelled out). With time, the obvious reference of every line and even stroke to the framing verticals and horizontals of the picture had turned into a constricting habit, but it was only in the middle and late 1940s, and in New York, that the way out was discovered to lie in a surface so large that its enclosing edges would lay outside or only on periphery of the artist's field of vision as he worked. In this way he was able to

arrive at the frame as a *result*, instead of subjecting himself to it as something given in advance. But this was not all that the large format did, as we shall see below.

It was in 1945, or maybe even earlier, that Gorky painted black and white oils that were more than a *tour de force*. De Kooning followed suit about a year or two later. Pollock, after having produced isolated black and white pictures since 1947, did a whole show of them in 1951. But it was left to Franz Kline, a latecomer, to restrict himself to black and white consistently, in large canvases that were like monumental line drawings. Kline's apparent allusions to Chinese or Japanese calligraphy encouraged the cant, already started by Tobey's case, about a general Oriental influence on "abstract expressionism." This country's possession of a Pacific coast offered a handy received idea with which to explain the otherwise puzzling fact that Americans were at last producing a kind of art important enough to be influencing the French, not to mention the Italians, the British and the Germans.

Actually, not one of the original "abstract expressionists"—least of all Kline—has felt more than a cursory interest in Oriental art. The sources of their art lie entirely in the West; what resemblances to Oriental modes may be found in it are an effect of convergence at the most, and of accident at the least. And the new emphasis on black and white has to do with something that is perhaps more crucial to Western painting than to any other kind. Value contrast, the opposition of the lightness and darkness of colors, has been Western pictorial art's chief means, far more important than perspective, to that convincing illusion of three-dimensionality which distinguishes it most from other traditions of pictorial art. The eye takes its first bearings from quantitative differences of illumination, and in their absence feels most at loss. Black and white offers the extreme statement of these differences. What is at stake in the new American emphasis on black and white is the preservation of something—a main pictorial resource—that is suspected of being near exhaustion; and the effort at preservation is un-

dertaken, in this as in other cases, by isolating and exaggerating that which one wants to preserve.

And yet the most radical of all the phenomena of "abstract expressionism"—and the most revolutionary move in painting since Mondrian—consists precisely in an effort to repudiate value contrast as the basis of pictorial design. Here again, Cubism has revealed itself as a conservative and even reactionary tendency. The Cubists may have discredited sculptural shading by inadvertently parodying it, but they succeeded in restoring value contrast to its old pre-eminence as the means to design and form as such, undoing all that the Impressionists and the Late Impressionists, and Gauguin and the Fauves, had done to reduce its role. Until his very last pictures Mondrian relied on light and dark contrast as implicitly as any academic artist of his time, and the necessity of such contrast went unquestioned in even the most doctrinaire abstract art. Malevich's *White on White* remained a mere symptom of experimental exuberance, and implied nothing further—as we can see from what Malevich did later. Until a short while ago Monet, who had gone furthest in the suppression of value contrast, was pointed to as a warning in even the most adventurous circles, and Vuillard's and Bonnard's *fin de siècle* muffling of light and dark kept them for a long while from receiving their due from the avant-garde.

It was maybe a dozen years ago that some of Monet's later paintings began to seem "possible" to people like myself, which was at about the same time that Clyfford Still emerged as one of the original and important painters of our time—and perhaps as more original, if not more important, than any other in his generation. His paintings were the first *serious* abstract pictures I ever saw that were almost altogether devoid of decipherable references to Cubism; next to them, Kandinsky's early filiations with Analytical Cubism became more apparent than ever. And as it turned out, Still, along with Barnett Newman, was an admirer of Monet.

The paintings I remember from Still's first show, in 1946, were in a vein of abstract symbolism, with "archaic" as well as Surrealist connotations of a kind much in the air at that moment, and of which Gottlieb's "pictographs" and Rothko's "dream landscapes" gave another version. I was put off then by Still's slack, wilful silhouettes, which seemed to defy every consideration of plane or frame; the result looked to me then—and perhaps would still look so—like a kind of art in which everything was allowed. Still's subsequent shows, at Betty Parsons', were in what I saw as a radically different manner, but they still struck me as being utterly uncontrolled. The few large and vertically arranged area-shapes which made up the typical Still of that time—and really continue to make up the typical Still of today—were too arbitrary in contour, and too hot and dry in color as well as in paint quality, for my taste. I was reminded, uncomfortably, of amateur Victorian decoration. Not until 1953, when for the first time I saw a Still of 1948 alone on a wall, did I begin to get an intimation of his real quality. And after I had seen several more of his pictures in isolation that intimation became large and definite. (And I was impressed, aside from everything else, and as never before, by how upsetting and estranging originality in art could be; how the greater its challenge to taste, the more stubbornly and angrily taste would resist it.)

Turner, really, was the one who made the first significant break with the conventions of light and dark. In his last period he bunched value intervals together at the light end of the color scale, to show how the sky's light or any brilliant illumination tended to obliterate half tones and quarter tones of shading and shadow. The picturesque effects Turner arrived at made his public forgive him relatively soon for the way he had dissolved sculptural form. Besides, clouds, steam, mist, water and atmosphere were not expected to have definite shapes, and so what we now take for a daring abstractness on Turner's part was then accepted in the end as another feat of naturalism. The same applies to Monet's close-valued late painting. Iri-

descent colors please banal taste in any event, and will as often as not be accepted as a satisfactory substitute for verisimilitude. But even when Monet darkened or muddied his color, the public of his time still did not seem to object. It may be that the popular appetite for sheer or close-valued color revealed by this popular acceptance of Turner's and Monet's late phases signified the emergence of a new kind of pictorial taste in Europe, in reaction perhaps against Victorian color. Certainly, what was involved was an uncultivated taste that ran counter to high tradition, and what may have been expressed was an underground change in Western sensibility. This may also help explain why the later painting of Monet, after having for such a long time made the avant-garde shudder, should now begin to stand forth as a peak of revolutionary art.

How much conscious attention Still has paid to this aspect of Monet's painting I do not know, but Still's uncompromising art has its own kind of affinity with popular or bad taste. It is the first body of painting I know of that asks to be called Whitmanesque in the worst as well as the best sense, indulging as it does in loose and sweeping gestures, and defying certain conventions (like light and dark) in the same *gauche* way that Whitman defied meter. And just as Whitman's verse assimilated to itself quantities of stale journalistic and oratorical prose, Still's painting assimilates to itself some of the stalest and most prosaic painting of our time: in this case, the kind of open-air painting in autumnal colors (and they prevail regardless of season) that may have begun with Old Crome and the Barbizon School, but which has spread among half-trained painters only since Impressionism became popular. Though of an astounding homogeneity, this kind of painting is not "primitive"; its practitioners usually draw with a semblance of academic correctness. Every one of them is intent, moreover, and intent in a uniform way, on an Impressionistic vividness of light effect that lies beyond their uniformly inadequate command of the capacities of oil color, which is due in turn to their inability ever to learn how to take into account the limitations

of oil color. These painters try to match the brightness of sunlight with incrustations of dry paint, and seek to wrest directly, from the specific hue and density and grain of a pigment, effects of open-air lighting that, as the Impressionists themselves have shown, can be obtained or approximated, only through *relations*. The process of painting becomes, for these half-trained artists, a race between hot shadows and hot lights in which both lose; the result is inevitably a livid, sour picture with a brittle, unpleasant surface. Examples of this kind of landscape abound in the outdoor shows around Washington Square and in Greenwich Village restaurants, and I understand that they abound in Europe too. (I can see how easy it is to fall into "sweet and sour" color when lights and darks are not put in beforehand, and especially when the paint is reworked and re-covered constantly in the effort to increase its brightness, but I cannot for the life of me understand why the results should be so uniform and why the legion of those who devote most of their time to this sort of art can never learn anything more than they do.)

Still is the only artist I know of who has managed to put this demotic-Impressionist kind of painting, with its dark heat and dry skin (dry under no matter how much varnishing or glazing) into serious and sophisticated art. And he has even taken over some of the drawing that goes with this species of "buckeye," to judge from the frayed-leaf and spread-hide contours that wander across his canvases like souvenirs of the great American outdoors. These things can spoil a picture or render it weird in an unrefreshing way, but when such a picture does succeed it represents the rehabilitation of one more depressed area of art.

But what is most important about Still, aside from his quality, is that he shows abstract painting a way beyond Late Cubism that can be taken, as Pollock's cannot, by other artists. Still is the only "abstract expressionist" to have founded a school, by which I mean that at least two of the many painters he has stimulated and influenced have not lost their independ-

ence thereby. Barnett Newman is one of these, and Newman might have realized himself in much the same way had he never seen a Still. Though Newman runs bands of color which are generally dimly contrasted, in either hue or value, across or down "blank" areas of paint, he is not interested in straight lines or even flat surfaces; his art has nothing whatsoever to do with Mondrian's, Malevich's, or anything else in geometrical abstraction. His thin, straight, but not always sharp-edged lines, and his incandescent color zones are means to a vision as broad as any other expressed in the painting of our day. Still may have led in opening the picture down its middle, and in the interlocking of area-shapes, but Newman, I think, has influenced Still in turn in the matter of a forthright verticality as well as in that of an activated, pregnant "emptiness." And at the same time Newman's color functions more exclusively as *hue*, with less help from differences of value, saturation or warmth.

Newman's huge and darkly burning pictures constitute perhaps the most direct attack yet on the easel convention. Mark Rothko's rejection of that convention is less aggressive. That his art appears, moreover, to be indebted as much to Newman as to Still (Rothko has, in effect, turned the former's vertical line sideways) detracts absolutely nothing from its independence, uniqueness or perfection. Nor does the fact that the originality of Rothko's color, like the originality of Newman's and Still's, manifests itself first of all in a persistent bias toward warmth; or even that, like Newman (though it is Rothko who probably did the influencing here), he seems to soak his paint into the canvas to get a dyer's effect and avoid the connotations of a discrete layer of paint on *top* of the surface. (Actually, the two or three banks of somber but glowing color that compose the typical Rothko painting achieve the effect they do because they are scumbled over other colors.) Where Rothko separates himself most perhaps from Newman and Still is in his willingness to accept something from French art *after* Impressionism; his way of insinuating certain contrasts

of warm and cool, I feel, does betray a lesson he learned from Matisse. But this, again, explains very little. The simple and firm sensuousness, and the splendor, of Rothko's pictures belong entirely to himself.

A new kind of flatness, one that breathes and pulsates, is the product of the darkened, value-muffling warmth of color in the paintings of Newman, Rothko and Still. Broken by relatively few incidents of drawing or design, their surfaces exhale color with an enveloping effect that is enhanced by size itself. One reacts to an environment as much as to a picture hung on a wall. But still, in the end one does react to the picture as a picture, and in the end these pictures, like all others, stand or fall by their unity as taken in at a single glance. The issue is raised as to just where the pictorial stops and the decorative begins, and the issue is surmounted. Artiness may be the great liability of these three painters but it is not the artiness of the decorative.

What is most new, and ironical, is the refusal of Newman's and Rothko's linearity to derive from or relate in any way to Cubism. Mondrian *had* to accept his straight lines, and Still has had to accept the torn and wandering ones left by his palette knife. Rothko and Newman have refused, however, to take the way out of Cubist geometry that Still shows them. They have preferred to *choose* their way out rather than be compelled to it; and in choosing, they have chosen to escape geometry through geometry itself. Their straight lines, Newman's especially, do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself, as he himself makes clear in three special paintings he has done—paintings three to four feet long but only two to three inches wide, that are covered with but two or three vertical bands of color. What is destroyed is the Cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; with Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and *makes* the picture, instead of merely being *echoed*. The limiting edges of Newman's

larger canvases, we now discover, act just like the lines inside them: to divide but not to separate or enclose or bound; to delimit, but not limit. The paintings do not merge with surrounding space; they preserve—when they succeed—their integrity and separate unity. But neither do they sit there in space like isolated, insulated objects; in short, they are hardly easel pictures—and because they are hardly that, they have escaped the “object” (and luxury-object) associations that attach themselves increasingly to the easel picture. Newman's paintings have to be called, finally, “fields.”

So, too, do Still's, but they make a different point, and one easier to grasp. The Old Masters had kept the frame in mind because it was necessary, whether they wished it or not, to integrate the surface and remind the eye that the picture was flat; and this had to be done in some part by insisting on the shape of the surface. What had been a mere necessity for the Old Masters became an urgency for Cézanne when his pictures began flattening themselves of their own accord. He had to resort to drawing and design that was more geometrical, or regular, than that of the Old Masters because he had to deal with a surface made hypersensitive by the draining of the sculptural illusion behind it. Edges could be prevented from breaking through this tautened surface only by being kept regular and near-geometrical, so that they would echo the shape of the frame more insistently; to the same end it was also useful to orient edges, whether regular or not, on clearly vertical or horizontal axes corresponding to those of the frame's top, bottom and sides. This was the system that the Cubists inherited, but which Late Cubism converted into an inhibiting habit. Still's great insight was to recognize that the edges of a shape could be made less conspicuous, therefore less cutting, by narrowing the value contrast that its color made with the colors adjacent to it. This permitted the artist to draw and design with greater freedom in the absence of a sufficient illusion of depth; with the muffling of light-and-dark contrasts, the surface was spared the sudden jars or shocks that might result from “complicated-

ness" of contour. The early Kandinsky may have had a glimpse of this solution, but if he did it was hardly more than a glimpse. Pollock had had more than that: in several of his huge "sprinkled" canvases of 1950—*One* and *Lavender Mist*—as well as in *Number One* (1948), he had literally pulverized value contrasts in a vaporous dust of interfused lights and darks in which every suggestion of a sculptural effect was obliterated. (But in 1951 Pollock had turned to the other extreme, as if in violent repentance, and had done a series of paintings, in linear blacks alone, that took back almost everything he had said in the three previous years.)

It was left to Still not only to define the solution but also to make it viable. This—along with Still's personality—may explain the number of his followers at present. It may also explain why William Scott, the British painter, said that Still's art was the only completely and originally American kind he had ever seen. This is not necessarily a compliment—Pollock, who is less "American," despite all the journalism to the contrary, has a larger vision, and Hofmann, who was born and brought up abroad, is capable of more real variety—but Scott meant it very much as a compliment.

When they started out, the "abstract expressionists" had had the traditional diffidence of American artists. They were very much aware of the provincial fate lurking all around them. This country had not yet made a single contribution to the mainstream of painting or sculpture. What united the "abstract expressionists" more than anything else was their resolve to break out of this situation. By now, most of them (along with the sculptor, David Smith) have done so, whether in success or failure. Whatever else may remain doubtful, the "centrality," the resonance, of the work of these artists is assured.

When I say, in addition, that such a galaxy of strong and original talents has not been seen in painting since the days of Cubism, I shall be accused of chauvinist exaggeration, not

to speak of the lack of a sense of proportion. But I make no more allowance for American art than I do for any other kind. At the Biennale in Venice in 1954, I saw how de Kooning's exhibition put to shame not only the neighboring one of Ben Shahn, but that of every other painter his age or under in the other pavilions. The general impression is still that an art of high distinction has as much chance of coming out of this country as a great wine. Literature—yes, we know that we have done some great things in that line; the English and French have told us so. Now they can begin to tell us the same about our painting.

1955
1958