
Teacher Resource

Abstract Expressionism

Welcome to the Royal Academy.

Created for teachers, this resource is packed with activities that will help your students get the most out of our Abstract Expressionism exhibition.

This RA teacher resource includes:

Introduction

A brief overview of Abstract Expressionism and its key characteristics as well as an introduction to the vocabulary of art.

Pre-visit

Activities to complete in class before your students come to a workshop, self-directed visit or guided tour of the Abstract Expressionism exhibition.

In the galleries

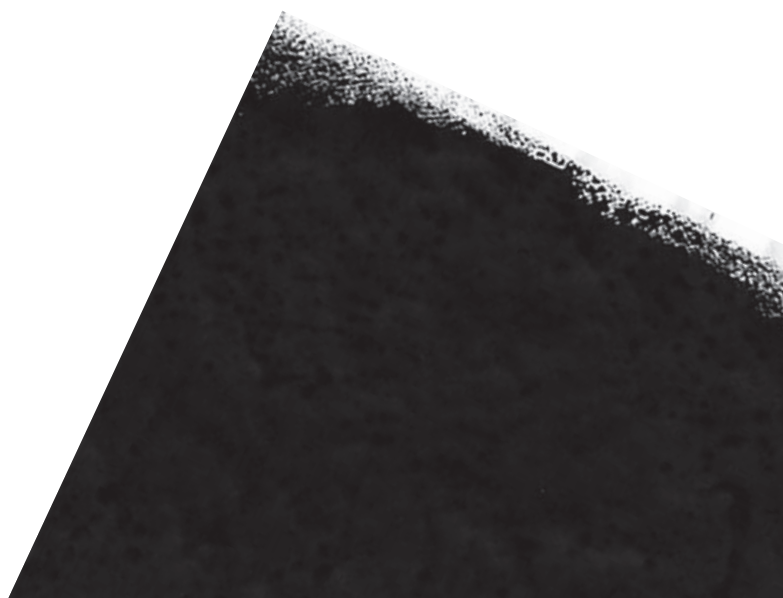
Activities for your class while at the exhibition on a self-directed visit.

Back in the classroom

Practical and discussion activities inspired by your visit.

Key artworks and information about the artists

Illustrations of a selection of artworks from the exhibition, which can be used as the basis for classroom discussion.



Abstract Expressionism

Introduction

Abstract Expressionism was a watershed moment in the evolution of 20th-century art. In the years surrounding the Second World War, artists like Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) rejected traditional painting methods, styles and compositions. In the era of free jazz and the Beat Generation, these artists moved away from figurative art and toward abstraction, unleashing a new confidence in painting.

Often monumental in scale, some of the works by Abstract Expressionists are intense, spontaneous and deeply expressive. Other works are more contemplative, presenting large fields of colour that border on the sublime and often bring out intense emotional responses in the viewer. These radical creations redefined the nature of painting, and were intended not simply to be admired from a distance but as two-way encounters between artist and viewer.



Key Characteristics of Abstract Expressionism

Diverse

All of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism had very different styles; no two artists' work is interchangeable.

Abstract

Abstract artworks do not have defined figures or objects, instead they are made up of shapes, lines and colours.

Movement

The expressive sculptural forms and marks on the canvases force the viewer's eyes to move, giving the viewer a sense of how the artist must have moved as they worked.

Expression

The artists used line, colour, shape, movement and scale to express big ideas, like life and death.

Scale

Monumental in scale, the canvases of Abstract Expressionism immerse the viewers standing before them.

All-over composition

There is no single focal point in an Abstract Expressionist painting. Painted areas go right to the edges of the canvas and often seem to extend beyond.

Technique

Whether they poured, dripped, splashed, jabbed, welded or assembled, these artists broke away from the traditional painting techniques of the past. The act of painting was important and was often very visible in the finished work.

**To see a selection of works in the exhibition please go to the RA Website
www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/abstract-expressionism**

Please refer to The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* for an overview of where Abstract Expressionism fits into the wider timeline of art history.

www.metmuseum.org/toah



Pre-visit

These activities will encourage students to:

- gain experience and confidence in discussing and analysing works of art.
- identify key features of paintings and sculpture from this movement.
- increase their understanding of the vocabulary of art.
- explore and experiment with art materials and techniques.

What is Abstract Expressionism? Discussion activity

Choose 3-5 key works from the exhibition and present them to your class. You can choose from the illustrated works at the end of this booklet.

Ask students to:

1

Look at and describe the artwork they see.

2

Fill out the *What is Abstract Expressionism* worksheet included in this resource.

Once students have completed their worksheets have a classroom discussion about the:

- a. the effect of the use of colour.
- b. the effect of the use of texture.
- c. The effect of the use of line.

Time

50 minutes

Time

30 minutes

Modern Art and Rejections: Discussion activity

The artist Ad Reinhardt said, 'modern art is about rejections'. Abstract Expressionism led to a shift in the production of art and the imagery in art.

1

What exactly did the Abstract Expressionists reject? Discuss.

2

Discuss whether it matters what they rejected.

Radical Art: Discussion activity

1

Pick an artwork by one of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.

2

Pick one artwork by a ground-breaking artist that was active earlier in the 20th century. (For example: a German Expressionist, Cubist or Surrealist painter, or one of the Fauves.)

3

Compare and contrast the two artworks, using the worksheet *What is Abstract Expressionism?*

Discuss:

- What is new or radical about both of these artworks?
- How are they similar? How are they different?
- Choose an artist you admire, then pick an artwork they have created recently. What is new or radical about it? What does it reject?

Time

50 minutes

Experimenting with Paint: Painting activity

Look at David Smith's sculpture and consider the use of line and shape and the sense of movement.

Translate the lines, shapes and the sense of movement into a painting using non-traditional techniques inspired by the artworks of Jackson Pollock.

Practical

1

Take a pot of PVA and mix it with a few drops of black ink or watered-down black paint.

2

Use the brush handle, rather than the bristles, with paint.

3

Use varied gestures and movements of different speeds to drip and draw with the paint, flicking the brush handle to create different varieties of lines.

4

Neither end of the brush can touch the paper!

Critique and Discuss

Discuss the process of creating the paintings:

- What was it like using these materials?
- What were the challenges in controlling paint?
- What were the disadvantages or advantages of working slowly or quickly?
- How would using colour have affected the appearance of the finished painting?
- Share the painting with your classmates and to talk about the emotions it evokes in them. Is this what you intended?
- What insights does this experience give you into the processes used by some of the Abstract Expressionists?



Materials

- PVA
- black ink or an oil-based paint
- black exterior one coat gloss for wood
- A4 paper
- brushes

Time

5-7 minutes per painting

Scaling Up: Painting Activity

In this activity, students will select a detail from a smaller work they have already created and scale it up, inspired by the work of Franz Kline.

Many of the artworks by the Abstract Expressionists appear spontaneous, as though they were created quickly. Look at the black and white paintings by the artist Franz Kline. In fact, Kline often began by making smaller drawings to devise a composition, before moving onto a larger-scale painting.

Practical

1

Select a painting or drawing you have already created.

2

Using a small viewer made with A5 paper or a phone camera, select a detail.

3

Draw this small detail on a half sheet of A4.

4

Scale-up the detail onto a sheet of A2, carefully copying the composition from your sheet of A4.

5

Use a large brush loaded with black paint to create the main compositional elements, then work with white paint to complete your painting. Work energetically and quickly.

6

Give your painting a title.

Critique and discuss

Compare the small detail with the larger scale work.

- What are the challenges when moving from a small scale to a large one?
- Describe the visual and emotional impact of the larger-scale work.
- Why did you select the title?
- Discuss ideas for titles of your paintings with your classmates.

Materials

- palettes
- black paint
- white paint
- large brushes
- 2 sheets of A2 paper per student
- 1 sheet of A4 paper per student
- water pots
- phone cameras / viewer made of A5 paper

Time

20 minutes



At the RA

These activities will encourage students to:

- look carefully at artworks, describing, recording and analysing artworks they see during self-directed visits to the exhibition.
- share their interpretation of different artworks.

Before coming to the RA, look at a plan of the exhibition (provided later in this resource) and select which rooms you would like students to focus on during your visit.

Students can work in pairs or small groups of 3 to 4.

We encourage students to sketch and draw in the galleries using pencils.

Record and Describe: Sketching activity

For each artwork you discuss with your group, use a small sketchbook to:

- 1**
Sketch the composition.
- 2**
Note down your initial response underneath, what was your first thought when you saw the artwork? Why did you think this?
- 3**
Note down your analysis of the tone, colour, line, use of materials and composition.
- 4**
Note the memories or feelings it evokes.
- 5**
Make notes of questions about the works or things you want to know more about.

Materials

- A small sketchbook
- A pencil

Time

10 minutes per artwork

Let's Talk about Sculpture: Discussion activity

The exhibition includes the work of two sculptors, Louise Nevelson and David Smith. As you go through the galleries, spot their artworks.

For each sculpture you encounter, think about:

- What materials did the sculptor use?
- What techniques did they use to put the materials together?
- What story does the artist tell in this work?
- How does their use of material tell this story?
- How are the artworks by Nevelson and Smith similar?
- How are they different?
- Look at the paintings which are in the same room as the sculpture. Why do you think the curators chose to exhibit the sculpture with these paintings? Would you classify Smith and Nevelson as Abstract Expressionists? Why or why not?
- Which contemporary artists do you think might have been influenced by Nevelson and Smith?



Time

10 minutes
per sculpture

Back in the classroom

These activities will encourage students to:

- engage in critical analysis and discussion of the artworks they saw at the Abstract Expressionism exhibition.
- to research the artists whose work they saw.
- create their own artworks in response.

Is Art Autobiography? Research activity

The critic Clement Greenberg once stated that it was a misconception that the work of the Abstract Expressionists is termed 'action painting' and that the artworks were 'pure bursts of spontaneity'. He said that their work was an 'artist's autobiography on record'.

Do you agree or disagree?

Why?

Provide examples to support your ideas

Using notes from the visit to the RA, research one of the artists whose you saw in the exhibition to use as evidence and address this statement by Greenberg either in writing or in a short oral presentation.

From Representation to Abstraction: Practical activity

Choose an artist whose work you saw in the exhibition that you find interesting.

Think about their use of colour, materials, application and scale. Choose one of your own artworks that is representational (not abstract) and reinterpret the piece inspired by your chosen Abstract Expressionist.

Drawing in Space: Sculpture Activity

David Smith once described sculpture as 'drawing in space'. Inspired by the Abstract Expressionism exhibition, create a 3D sculpture using a song from one of your playlists as inspiration.

Practical

1

Create a 3D sculpture which can either stand freely or hang from the ceiling using some string.

2

Use the materials in an inventive way.

3

Then, either:

- a.** Create a drawing or painting of the 3D sculpture you created.
- b.** Create a drawing of the shadows it projects onto the floor or another surface.

Critique and discuss

- What was more inspirational to you as you created the sculpture, the materials or the song? Why?
- What was the experience of using those materials? What were the advantages and challenges of creating your sculpture?
- Did you feel able to express yourself freely? Why or why not?
- Do you agree with Smith's statement about 'drawing in space'? Why or why not?

Materials

- different thicknesses of wire
- cardboard
- string
- sponges
- plasticine
- scissors
- masking tape
- string

Time

At the teacher's discretion

Need more information?

The RA Exhibition in Focus guide, an informative source of information about different artworks and themes in the exhibition is given out free at teacher events and school visits or workshops

Why not check out the RA exhibition catalogue for this exhibition?

Learn more about Abstract Expressionism from MoMA:

http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/abstract-expressionism

Watch these videos by MoMa about the painting techniques of:

Rothko

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSiu8qzHV6c>

Kline

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xQTlp0hscs>

Reinhardt

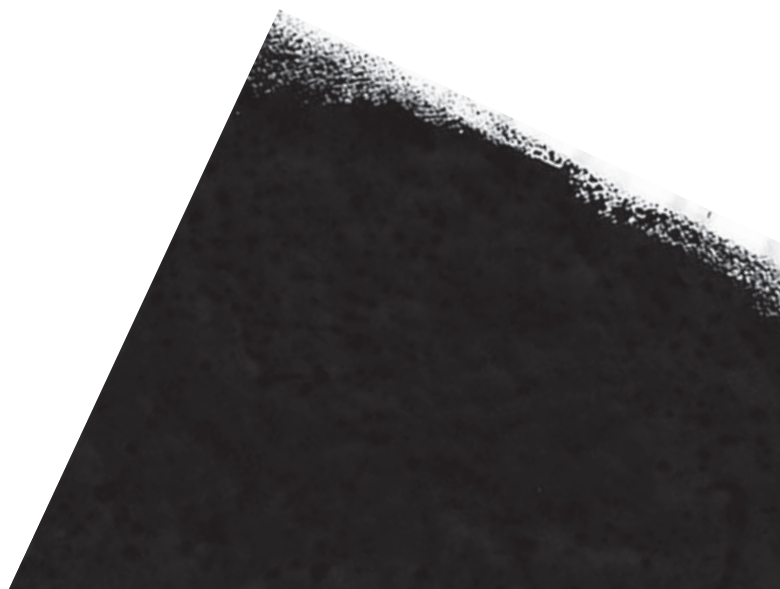
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSiu8qzHV6c>

Pollock

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EncR_T0faKM

Newman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GacKM9yxiw4>

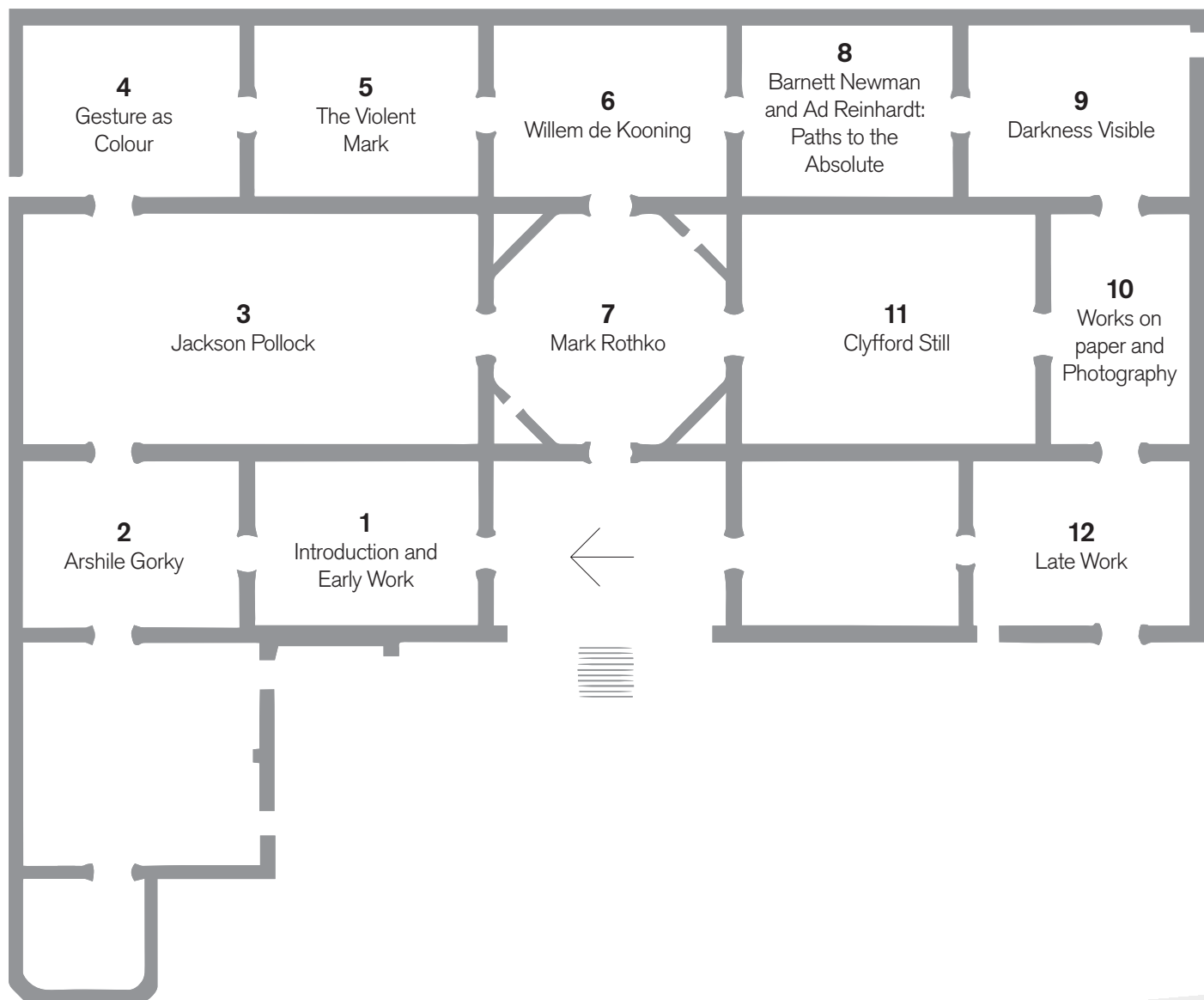


Worksheet

What is Abstract Expressionism?

Artwork	Title	Title
	Artist	Artist
	Medium	Medium
	Size	Size
Colour Tone Describe the use of colour <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Primary/ complementary– Warm/ cool– Light/ dark		
Line Marks Describe the use of line and marks <ul style="list-style-type: none">– thick/thin– long/short– expressive		
Materials Surfaces Describe the use of materials and the texture of the surface <ul style="list-style-type: none">– How was it made?– Is it clear what tools the artist used?		
Composition Balance Describe the composition <ul style="list-style-type: none">– How are all the elements arranged?– Is there movement?– Are elements repeated?– Is there a focal point?		
Shape Scale Describe the shape of the artwork. What is the scale of the artwork?		
The Effect What is the effect of each of these aspects of the artwork?		

Plan of the Galleries





The artists

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

A Russian emigré, Rothko did not see himself as part of any movement. He was influenced by Matisse and his work is known as 'colour field' painting, with big abstracted areas of expressive colour and form.

**Mark Rothko**

Yellow Band, 1956

Oil on canvas, 218.44 x 201.93 cm

Sheldon Museum of Art, Sheldon Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial, N-130.1961.

© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko ARS, NY and DACS, London.

Photo: © Sheldon Museum of Art

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)

Still moved into abstraction earlier than many of the other artists. Jackson Pollock recognised Still's importance when he said 'Clyfford Still makes the rest of us look academic.' His powerful, expressive approach resulted in monumental paintings that have been little seen outside the US.

**Clyfford Still**

PH-950, 1950

Oil on canvas, 233.7 x 177.8 cm

Clyfford Still Museum, Denver. © City and County of Denver / DACS 2016
Photo courtesy the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO

David Smith (1906–1965)

Inspired by the strength and brutality of steel, Smith was the first sculptor to work with welded metal. Beginning his career as a painter, he often attached found objects to his canvasses. He moved into working with steel and saw his chosen material as representing progress and industrialisation, resulting in work that was both figurative and abstracted.

**David Smith**

Volton XVIII, 1963

Steel, 278.1 x 170.2 x 38.1 cm

The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection.
© Estate of David Smith/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2016

Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011)

Born and raised in New York, Frankenthaler received great acclaim early on in her career and was included in important exhibitions when she was in her twenties. A painter and printmaker, her work combines gestural drawing and brilliant use of colour and she pioneered the staining technique of pouring thinned paint onto raw, unprimed canvas laid on the floor.

**Helen Frankenthaler**

Europa, 1957

177.8 x 138.4 cm

Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © 2015 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London. Photo: Robert McKeever

Conrad Marca-Relli (1913–2000)

Born in Boston, Marca-Relli is best known for his large-scale works in collage that explore the boundary between figuration and abstraction. He was part of the New York art world in the 1950s and participated in major exhibitions along with some of the best known Abstract Expressionists.



Conrad Marca-Relli

East Wall (LL-10-59), 1959

Canvas collage dyptic, 197.5 x 305 cm

Private Collection, courtesy Archivio Marca-Relli, Parma. © Archivio Marca-Relli, Parma. Photography : Roberto Ricci

Joan Mitchell (1925–1992)

After graduating from art school in 1948, Mitchell travelled to France where she began to explore abstraction. After returning to New York, she established a strong reputation among the Abstract Expressionists. She settled in France permanently in 1968 and throughout her long career demonstrated a mastery of colour and remained firmly committed to gestural abstraction.

**Joan Mitchell**

Mandres, 1961-1962

Oil on canvas, 221 x 200 cm

Private collection, courtesy of McClain Gallery. © Estate of Joan Mitchell

Janet Sobel (1894–1968)

Sobel emigrated to the U.S. from the Ukraine at the age of 14 and did not begin painting until she was 43. Self-taught, she experimented with materials and techniques including drip painting moving from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism. She exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's 'Art of this Century' and gained a presence in the male-dominated New York art world.

**Janet Sobel**

Illusion of Solidity, c. 1945

Oil on canvas, 109.2 x 68.6 cm.

Private Collection Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art, NY.
© The estate of Janet Sobel

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Born in Rotterdam, De Kooning moved to America when he was 22 years old. He first worked for commercial painters and signmakers. De Kooning's work is very gestural, with big energetic, boldly painted shapes. His early work is more figurative and his later work is very abstracted.

**Willem de Kooning**

Untitled, 1961

Oil on canvas, 203.53 x 177.8 cm

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University; Gift of Joachim Jean and Julian J. Aberbach, New York.
© 2016 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS,
London



© **Royal Academy of Arts**

Written by the RA Learning Department
in collaboration with Charlotte Steel.

With special thanks to:
Dardane Hadri at Argyle Primary School
Orly Smetana at St James' Catholic High School