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# Teacher Resource

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## 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.**

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**This RA teacher resource includes:**

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### **Introduction**

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

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### **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.

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### **In the galleries**

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

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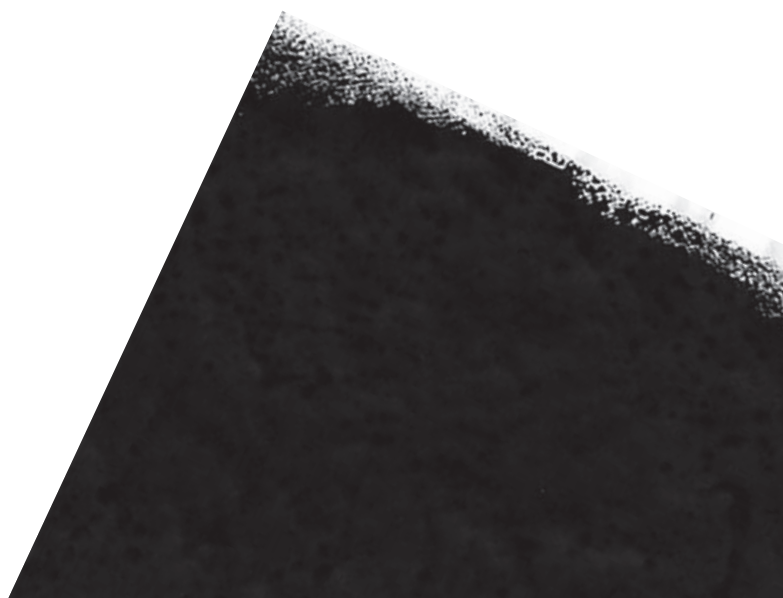
### **Back in the classroom**

Practical and discussion activities inspired by your visit.

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### **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

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## 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.



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## Key Characteristics of Abstract Expressionism

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### Diverse

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

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### Abstract

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

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### Movement

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

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### Expression

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

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### Scale

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

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### 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.

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### 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.

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

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**[www.metmuseum.org/toah](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah)**

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## The Vocabulary of Art

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### 1. How do we describe colours and tones?

Blue, yellow and red are primary colours. You cannot make a primary colour by mixing other colours together.

Green, orange and purple are examples of secondary colours. You can make a secondary colour by mixing two primary colours together.

All colours have warm and cool hues. Warm colours have more yellow and cool colours have more blue.

A colour can be light or dark. Different tones of a colour are made by mixing white, black, or grey to that colour.

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### 2. How do we describe line?

There are many different types of lines: thick, thin, curly, squiggly or straight.

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### 3. How do we describe shape?

Geometric shapes include circles, squares and triangles.

Organic shapes, which can be found in nature, are less regular.

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### 4. How do we describe texture?

Texture describes the surface of something.

The surface of a painting can look smooth or it might look bumpy if the artist applied paint thickly.

The surface of a sculpture can look rough and uneven with lots of small grooves.



# Pre-visit

These activities will encourage students to:

- gain experience and confidence in talking about works of art.
- learn art vocabulary.
- look closely at art.

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## Let's Talk about Art: Discussion activity

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### Discussing artworks using the vocabulary of art

Select one of the key artworks from the Abstract Expressionism exhibition (supplied at the end of this resource) and project it onto a screen. Use the questions below to guide your class discussion. Ask students to point to specific areas of the artwork as they discuss.

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#### 1. What do you see?

Describe the colours and tones of the colours.

Describe the lines.

Describe the shapes.

Describe the texture of the paint, or the surface of the metal.

Are there recognisable figures or is it completely abstract?

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#### 2. Analyse the relationships between the colours, lines and shapes.

**Repetition:** What colours, lines, shapes repeat in the artwork? How does the repetition bring the work together?

**Arrangement:** How are all the colours, lines, shapes arranged? Is there a central focus? How does your eye move around the painting?

**Contrasts:** Are there contrasting colours, lines, shapes within the work, light and dark, rough and smooth?

**Movement:** How does the artist use lines, colours and shapes to suggest movement?

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#### 3. What does the artwork mean to you?

How does the artwork make you feel? Why?

How would you dance or move if you were in this artwork? Why?

Do you like this work of art? Why or why not?



Time

15–20 minutes

# At the RA

These activities will encourage students to:

- look carefully at artworks, describing what they see during self-directed visits to the exhibition.
- share their interpretations of different artworks.
- have confidence in talking about 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 small groups of 3 to 4, each overseen by an adult.

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

## Pick, Mix and Talk

In each room, give the students a few minutes to walk around and look at all of the artworks. Then, nominate a student to select an artwork for the group to discuss.

### 1. Ask open questions about the chosen work, encouraging a range of interpretations:

What do you see?

What words would you use to describe the artwork?

How do you think it was made?

What does it remind you of?

How does it make you feel?

Why do you think your classmate chose this work?

### 2. At the end of your time in the galleries discuss:

What did you like best of the art that you saw? Why?

What did you not like? Why?

What do you think are the main features of Abstract Expressionism?

Would you recommend that your friends and family visit the exhibition? Why or why not?

Encourage students to explain their ideas, opinions and reactions to the different artworks that they encounter.

## Time

**20 minutes**  
for 2–3 rooms

**45 minutes**  
for 5–6 rooms

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## Art Expeditions

**1.** In each room you have chosen to stop in, ask the students to look at the types and sizes of the artworks and the materials used. Then select one artwork to explore in more depth.

**2.** Give each student a copy of the worksheet (supplied at the back of this resource) and a pencil and assign roles (two students can take on the same role).

**Describer:** Asks the group what words describe the artwork and notes them down on a piece of paper. Single words or short phrases are fine.

**Detective:** Asks the group to find clues in the artwork to help them understand how the artists worked and the materials they used.

**Questioner:** Asks the group what the artist was trying to achieve? What does the piece make you think about? What does it make you feel? Why?

**Sketcher:** Keeps a visual record by sketching chosen art works.

**3.** Before leaving the room, briefly discuss how each role helped the group think about the artwork.

**4.** Ask the students to swap roles in each room so every student has a go at every role during their visit.



### Time

**20 minutes**  
for 2–3 rooms

**45 minutes**  
for 5–6 rooms

# Back in the classroom

These activities will:

- draw on your students' experiences at the Abstract Expressionism exhibition.
- encourage practical exploration and critical discussion.

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## Painting: from words to collaborative compositions

Students will create collaborative paintings based on adjectives they used to describe Abstract Expressionist paintings they saw at the RA.

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### Practical

1. Review the art you saw at the Royal Academy with your students. As a class, create a list of adjectives that describe the art that you saw. Write each of the adjectives on a separate small piece of paper and put all the papers into a box.
2. Divide the students into groups of 4.
3. Each group can pull three words from the box.
4. Using those three words as inspiration, ask the group of students to create a collaborative abstract painting that expresses the three words.

Ask students to consider the following before they begin:

- What colours will they use?
- How will they apply the paint?
- What texture will the surface of the painting have?

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### Discussion

Display the paintings on a flat surface, along with the three words that inspired them.

Ask each group to talk about their work, the decisions they made and how they tried to express the three words in their painting.

## Materials

- paper
- paints
- brushes

## Time

This exercise could be completed in one lesson, but students may prefer to work on their paintings over several lessons.



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## Sculpture: Found objects

Students will create a sculpture inspired by the artworks by David Smith that they saw in the Abstract Expressionism exhibition.

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### Practical

1. Divide the students into pairs or small groups.
2. Put a selection of found materials on a flat surface so students can select the pieces they want to use to form a sculpture.
3. Ask students to create an abstract sculpture inspired by the art of David Smith. Talk about what Smith's sculptures looked like and their use of balance, shape, line and expression.

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### Discussion

Display the sculptures (hang them from the ceiling or against a wall, or place on a flat surface).

Ask each student to give their sculpture a title.

Ask them why they chose that title.

What kind of music would go well with their sculpture?

## Materials

**Any selection of found materials from around the classroom/home.**

**For example:**

- plastic cutlery
- buttons
- kitchen sponges
- old toys
- masking tape, string and wire

## Time

This exercise could be completed in one lesson, but students may prefer to work on their sculptures over several lessons.

# 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?

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## Learn more about Abstract Expressionism from MoMA:

[www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/themes/abstract-expressionism](http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/abstract-expressionism)

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## Watch these videos by MoMa about the painting techniques of:

### Rothko

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSiu8qzHV6c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSiu8qzHV6c)

### Kline

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xQTlp0hscs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xQTlp0hscs)

### Reinhardt

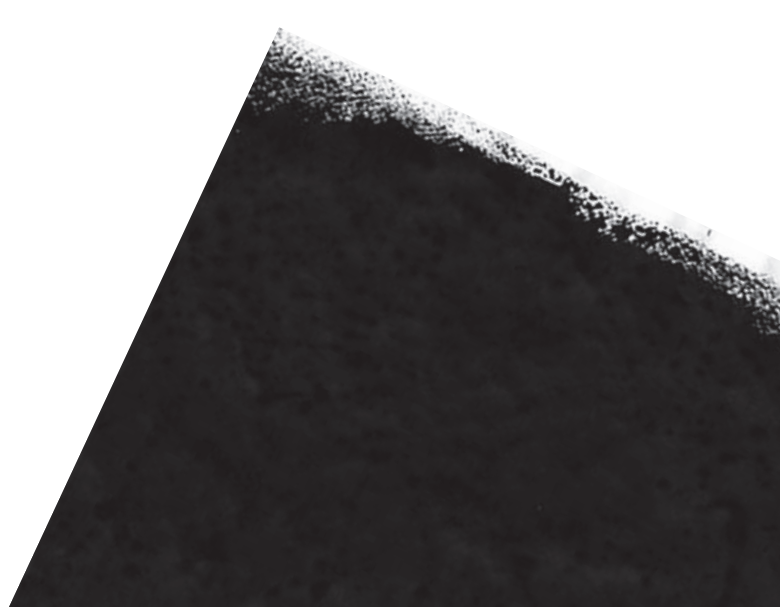
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSGGHmTXA3o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSGGHmTXA3o)

### Pollock

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EncR\\_T0faKM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EncR_T0faKM)

### Newman

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=GacKM9yxiw4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GacKM9yxiw4)



# Worksheet

## Art Expeditions

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Artist: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Notes

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#### Describer:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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#### Detective:

\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

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#### Questioner:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Worksheet

## Art Expeditions

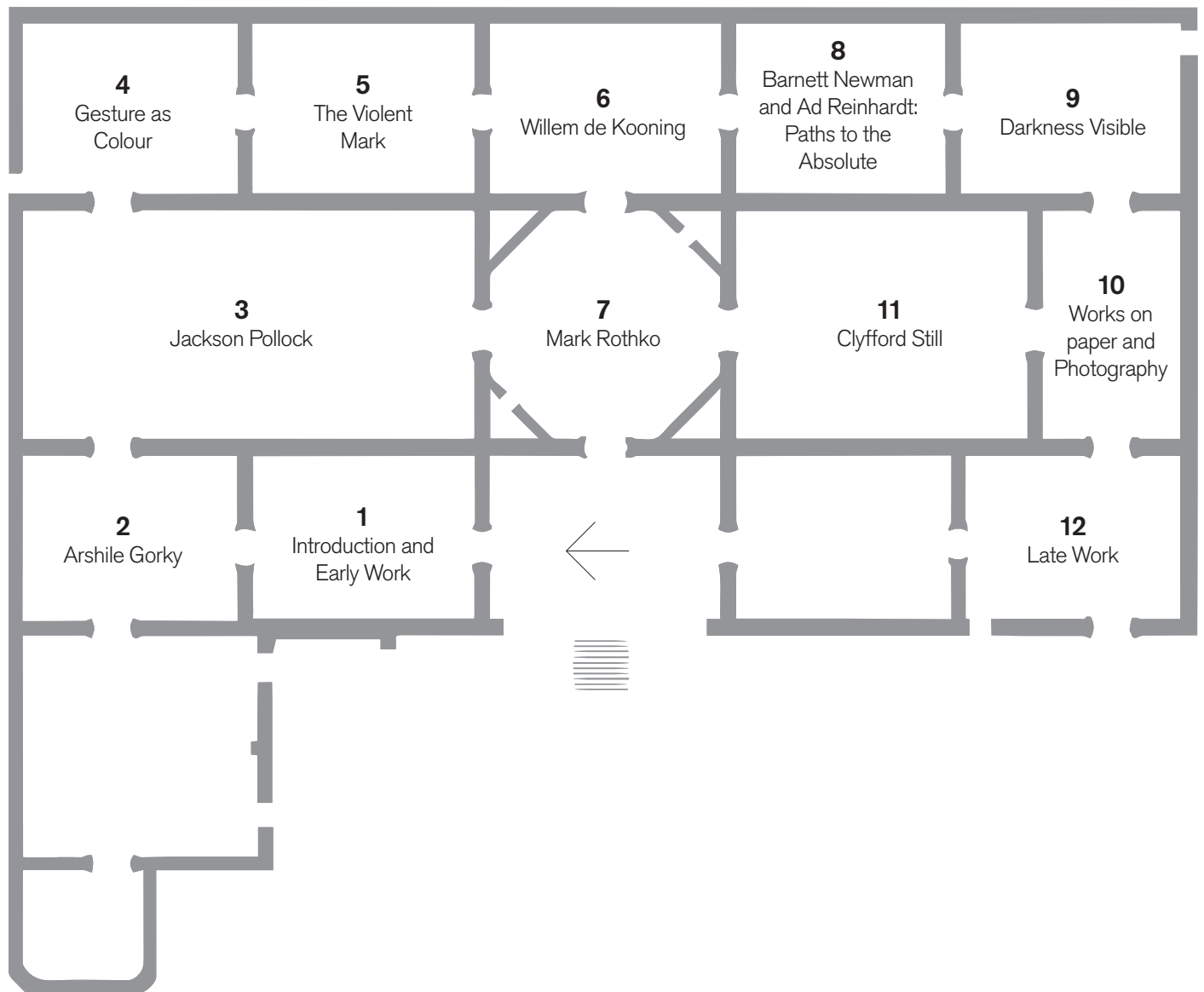
Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Artist: \_\_\_\_\_

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Sketcher \_\_\_\_\_

# Plan of the Galleries





**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.  
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London





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