

March 2004

Dear Colleague

I'm delighted to enclose resources to support the exhibition **Surface Tensions, Abstract Expressionism and its Influence** which takes place from Monday 22 March to Sunday 20 June at Norwich Castle.

This superb exhibition brings to Norwich a rare selection of **key works by 20<sup>th</sup> century artists** including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Gillian Ayres, Peter Lanyon and James Hugonin.

The teacher's resources include:

- posters of two major works by **Jackson Pollock** and **Mark Rothko**, with supporting information and ideas for the classroom
- full print out of exhibition **text panel information** with in-depth background to Abstract Expressionism and its influence

Schools can also make use of **child-friendly resources** provided in the exhibition. These include 'Lucky Dip' cards and 'Travelling Labels' which encourage children to study the paintings more closely and to explore their own responses to the work.

In addition to the resource pack, there is an extensive schools' education programme of events and gallery sessions. For more information or to book call 01603 493636.

Finally, I've also enclosed a leaflet and poster for the exhibition and would be grateful if you could display the poster in the art department or some other suitable place in your school.

We hope to welcome you to Norwich Castle and Surface Tensions in the near future.

Yours faithfully  
Faye Kalloniatis  
Museum Education Officer

## Introduction

*Subject is crucial and only that subject matter is crucial which is tragic and timeless.*

Mark Rothko

Abstract Expressionism emerged in New York in the 1940s and became one of the most important art movements of the twentieth century. This exhibition highlights its achievements and explores its influence and enduring legacy.

The leading artists associated with the movement all developed their mature work during a critical five-year period following the end of the Second World War. Although their work was varied in style, the Abstract Expressionists shared a commitment to painting large-scale abstract paintings.

They wanted to create a new type of art and believed that abstract painting should have a subject in order to give it substance and meaning. To this end, the inner-world of the artist, expressed through abstract imagery, became the principal subject.

This exhibition identifies two approaches to Abstract Expressionist painting: the active, energetic surfaces of the paintings in this gallery are contrasted with the more static, contemplative paintings exhibited in the second gallery.

*Surface Tensions* is presented in Norwich through the Heritage Lottery Funded Tate Partnership Scheme. The exhibition is supported by East Anglia Art Foundation.

## **1: Action**

*Today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within.*

Jackson Pollock

The paintings in this gallery all have active, expressive surfaces. The paint has been brushed, dripped, and even thrown on to the canvas. The resulting marks act as a record of the actions or gestures of the artist. These paintings are often described as 'action' paintings.

One of the most important action painters was Jackson Pollock. In 1947 he started to work with the canvas laid on the ground, dripping and pouring paint to produce complex abstract webs. The resulting marks can be viewed as tracing the inner world of the artist.

Pollock's free abstraction was an important influence on other New York artists, including Philip Guston and James Brooks. The impact of Abstract Expressionism soon crossed the Atlantic and influenced British artists such as Gillian Ayres, Alan Davie and Richard Smith.

The legacy of action painting is also revealed in the work of contemporary artists such as Basil Beattie. Beattie has taken the values of expressive, abstract painting to create new, original imagery that extends the values and achievements of Abstract Expressionism.

## 2: Contemplation

*Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man or "life", we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.*

Barnett Newman

The paintings in this gallery are quieter and more contemplative than those displayed in the first gallery. There is less emphasis on the mark-making process. Instead the image has been simplified to large areas of colour. This type of Abstract Expressionism is often described as colour-field painting.

Colour-field painters such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko wanted their work to enclose or engulf the viewer in a total experience of colour. This would remove them from their everyday experience of the world, and encourage more profound, spiritual or transcendental reflection.

The spiritual values of Abstract Expressionism influenced subsequent generations of abstract painters including Agnes Martin. Her minimalist grids have a Zen-like simplicity, in part derived from her interest in eastern philosophy.

The power of abstract paintings to communicate spiritual values has extended into contemporary painting and the work of artists such as Shirazeh Houshiary and James Hugonin. Their work suggests the continued importance of spiritual communication in an increasingly secular society.





Jackson Pollock, *Yellow Islands*, 1952 Tate London 2004  
© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2004

# Surface Tensions

Abstract Expressionism and its Influence





*Yellow Islands* 1952  
By Jackson Pollock 1912-1956  
© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2004

## Classroom activities

### About the artist

Jackson Pollock is one of the most important and celebrated artists of the twentieth century. His early work used fragmented imagery to suggest primitive myths and violent ritual; it revealed an admiration for the work of Pablo Picasso. During the 1940s Pollock's work became increasingly abstract. Symbols and figures were replaced or obliterated by complex networks of trailed paint that covered the entire canvas. He began to stop painting on an easel, preferring to place his large canvases directly on the floor, pouring the paint from the tin or dribbling it from the end of his brush in dramatic, physical gestures. He said, *"I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides, and literally be in the painting."* The resulting drips and splatters of the paint revealed the actions of an artist and the outpourings of his unconscious self, as he moved across the canvas. Pollock, who struggled against depression and chronic alcoholism during his adult life, died in 1956 in a car crash.

### About the painting

*Yellow Islands* is composed of poured black paint, upon which the artist has applied dabs of yellow and a loose network of dribbled paint. The large black form at the very centre of the painting was created by throwing paint at the canvas whilst it was in an upright position. Notice the way this act, possibly made in a fit of anger or frustration, has resulted in the paint running down the surface of the painting in an apparently random way. This painting is a good example of the energy and physicality of Pollock's painting. According to Pollock, the results had *"...a life of their own."* He was known to have a violent nature, which sought and often found release in his work. Painting for him was a vital form of expression.

### Investigating the painting: some questions

- What colours has the artist used and what effect do they create?
- How does this painting make you feel?
- Why do you think the painting is called *Yellow Islands*?
- What kind of mood was the artist in when he painted this piece?
- What mood does the painting make you feel?

## Art Links

### Using different tools

- Pollock abandoned traditional painting techniques, preferring to drip, pour and even throw paint straight on to the canvas. He also added objects to the paint: fragments of glass, tacks and even cigarette butts have all been found on the surfaces of Pollock's paintings. Using different tools and media, experiment with ways of applying paint. Place a big sheet of paper or card on the floor and have a go at trailing, dribbling, dropping and splashing paint to see the different results created.

### Expressions and Mood

- Listening to a piece of music the class should create a picture or painting using different mark making, dripping techniques and colour to convey the different expressions and moods in the music. The marks can be sweeping, rhythmic patterns of line. Children may prefer to have the piece of paper on the floor so they can move around it with the music!

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### Webs of Colour

- Jackson Pollock's paintings are often described as "Great Webs" because of the layers of paint that were built up and the richness of colours that weave across the surface. In a large group students should build up their own weaving. Using a wooden frame they can weave different thicknesses of thread and wool to create a web and network of lines.

### Language-based links

- Pollock created his paintings by moving round the canvas, which was often placed on the floor. Use words to describe the kinds of movements he might have made with his arms, hands and body.
- Use those words to write a poem conveying that movement.







Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c.1950-52 Tate London 2004  
© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/DACS 2004

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Abstract Expressionism and its Influence



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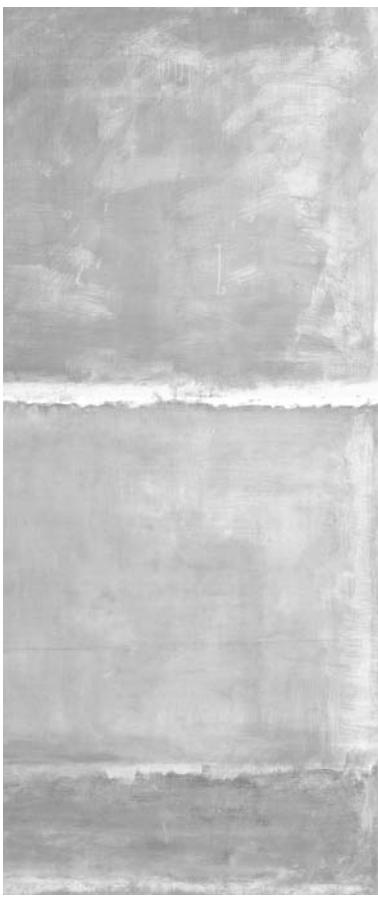
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*Untitled* c. 1950-52

By Mark Rothko 1903-1970

© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/DACS 2004

## Classroom activities

### About the artist

Mark Rothko is one of the most important artists to be associated with Abstract Expressionism. An interest in myth and surrealism were key influences on his early work. During the 1940s these led to paintings that featured ambiguous abstract imagery, suggestive of strange, primordial forms. By the end of the decade this imagery began to be replaced by floating blocks of colour, a format that can be clearly seen in this painting.

The scale of Rothko's work is an important feature of his painting. He painted large canvases because he wanted to envelop the viewer in his paintings, to create an intimacy between the painting and the viewer. He carefully mixed his paints to ensure that light reflected from the particles of pigment on the paintings' surfaces. This light gives the impression of an inner luminosity to the paintings and also creates depth and an atmospheric quality. In this way they can be seen to respond to universal human emotions and are often interpreted in relation to spiritual or transcendental experiences. Rothko always denied he was an abstract artist; his work is about the direct expression of feeling. Rothko himself said;

*'I am for the simple expression of complex thoughts . . .'*

### About the painting

*Untitled* is a good example of Rothko's signature style. A pink band of colour hovers at the bottom of the canvas, whilst a thin strip of pink divides two large blocks of yellow. Although these simple blocks of colour appear to be entirely abstract, they have often been related to landscape and the human figure.

### Investigating the painting: some questions

- What colours has the artist used?
- What mood does the artist create?
- The painting doesn't have a title. What do you think the subject of this painting is?
- What do you think it might represent?
- What is your response to the painting?
- How does this painting make you feel?

## Art Links

### Colour and mood

- Rothko used colour as a major source of expression. Think about which colours express different moods. Using wet paper or cartridge paper layer washes of colour using watercolour or dyes so they bleed into each other. Think about which colours express certain emotions and use colours that are closely related to each other.

- You could be tempted to say that Rothko's work is just a flat pattern, but its background has depth. Rothko's technique included applying one colour on top of another; not quite covering up the earlier one so the colour behind can be seen. Thinking about Rothko's technique, layer tissue paper and build up colours. The finished piece can then be framed and hung in front of a window so that light shines through.

### Landscape and abstraction

- The horizontal blocks of colour in Rothko's painting have been linked to landscape. Collect some postcards and/or magazines with landscape scenes and produce a landscape in paint or watercolour, breaking up the shapes in very simple rectangular forms. Think about the edges of these shapes, eg, sharp or soft and rounded. Then think about the lightness and darkness in the painting and experiment with different brush strokes using smooth or brushy textures.

### Language-based links

- What is your favourite colour? Think about how this colour makes you feel and write a list of descriptive words or different emotions that spring to mind when you think of this colour. Write a mood poem, describing the mood Rothko's painting conveys to you.

- This painting is called *Untitled*. What title would you give the painting? Think about how Rothko might be feeling as he painted or how the painting makes you feel.

