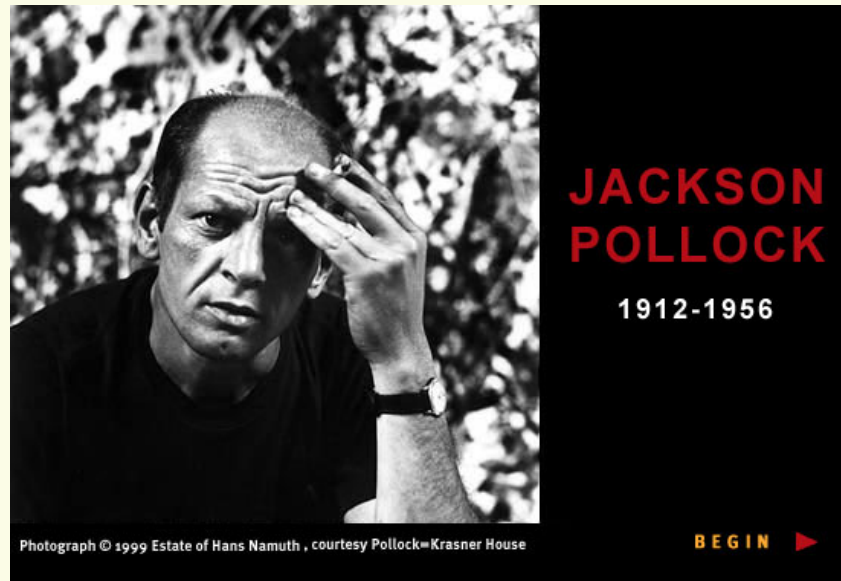


Abstract Expressionism

And

The Art of Jackson Pollock



Photograph © 1999 Estate of Hans Namuth, courtesy Pollock-Krasner House

**JACKSON
POLLOCK**

1912-1956

BEGIN ▶

Abstract Expressionism

- "A term first used in connection with Kandinsky in 1919, but more commonly associated with post-war American art. Robert Coates, an American critic, coined it in 1946, referring to Gorky, Pollock and de Kooning.
- By the 1951 Museum of Modern Art exhibition 'Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America', the term was used to refer to all types of non-geometric abstraction.
- There are two distinct groups within the movement: Colour Field artists (Rothko, Newman, Still) worked with simple, unified blocks of colour; and gestural painters like Pollock, De Kooning and Hofmann who made use of Surrealist techniques of automatic art.
- Not all the artists associated with the term produced either purely abstract, or purely Expressionist work: Harold Rosenberg preferred the phrase Action Painting, whilst Greenberg used the less specific 'American Type Painting', and because of the concentration of artists in New York, they are also known as the New York School. The only real connection between Abstract Expressionists was in their artistic philosophy, and publications like *Tiger's Eye*, an avant-garde magazine that helped spread their ideas.
- All were influenced by Existentialist ideas, which emphasized the importance of the act of creating, not of the finished object. Most had a Surrealist background, inspired by the presence of Breton, Masson and Matta in New York in the 1940s and by retrospectives on Miró (1941) and Kandinsky (1945), and the Abstract Expressionists sought to express their subconscious through their art. They also shared an interest in Jung's ideas on myth, ritual and memory (inspired by exhibitions of African and American Indian art in 1935 and 1941 respectively) and conceived an almost Romantic view of the artist, seeing their painting as a way of life and themselves as disillusioned commentators on contemporary society after the Depression and the Second World War.
- Other American artists associated with the movement were Motherwell, Tobey, Kline and Philip Guston."

About the Principles and Techniques of Abstract Expressionism

- Principle is defined as the rules under which artists from this movement painted, and how those rules dictated how the work would be presented.
- With regards to technique, what is meant is the formal process used in the production of their compositions. The elements of line, shape, scale, texture, and medium are great examples of what constitute form.
- Abstract Expressionism can be divided into two categories; Colour Field Artists, such as Mark Rothco, Clifford Still, Barnett Newman,; and the Action Painters, Jackson Pollock, William DeKooning, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hoffman, and Robert Motherwell. Generally, artists of these two subgroups intended to convey subconscious emotions, feelings, intensity, creativity, and personality to the viewer, much like the Surrealists did earlier in the 20th century.
- There are differences between the two categories of Abstract Expressionism to note. Whereas Action Painters looked to capture all of these portions of the hidden mind through the gestural movement of paint, Colour Field Artists were more intrigued with the revelation of the subconscious through the use of patterns of colour. Ultimately, the truth to their principle was determined by how "in the zone" the painter was at the time he or she was working on the composition. That is, how completely attuned the artist was in the piece with which they were involved. As well, some Abstract Expressionists painted representational images. In some cases, an Abstract Expressionist painter would leave the image unfinished. However, the composition was finished. In regards to Abstract Expressionist techniques, the creation of patterns and shape, colour, scale, and medium were very important.
- Colour Field Artists, such as Rothco, Newman, and Still focused on the use of basic forms of colour. Their work was somewhat akin in appearance to the earlier works of Joseph Albers, and Piet Mondrian. However, unlike Albers and Mondrian, Colour Field Artists used less precise shapes of colour and much softer edges (Fineburg, 158). For example, in Mark Rothco's composition, *Green and Tangerine, and Red*, of 1956, the soft rectangular shapes of colour on colour seem to bleed into the field of colour underneath. The colour palette is distinctly warm and earthy even though there is a tinted hue painted for the backing field of the canvas. The size of the painting (7'9 1/2" x 5'9 1/8"), is large enough to walk into, and is indicative of the scale at which many Colour Field Artists laboured. Due to the overall scale, simplicity, and colour selections of this oil on canvas painting, the viewer cannot be anything but overcome by the monumental, dramatic revelation of Rothco's hidden feelings of isolation, aggression, and uncertainty. (Fineburg, 106) The separation of the two areas of shaded hue only accentuate the sense of isolation. The uncertainty of the edges around the coloured patches highlight the uncertainty, and the choice of colour placement, and amount produces an overall aggressive undertone.

- The Action Painters were separate in that their work was less a presentation of colour than a manifestation of spontaneous lines and shape. A characteristic of many Action Painters was their approach to the canvas. Typically, the paint was aggressively stroked, poured, splashed, or thrown onto the canvas.
- Of the Action Painters, Jackson Pollock is perhaps the most famous. In describing his process, Pollock states "I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto (paste) with sand, broken glass, and other foreign matter added." Pollock usually worked on a large scale, often placing the canvas on the floor so that he could walk around it and enter from all four sides and corners. When a woman once asked Pollock when he knew he'd poured enough paint on the canvas, Pollock is said to have asked in reply "how do you know sex is over?". The overall complexity of Pollock's compositions, as seen in **Full Fathom Five**, might seem to be a completely uncontrolled exercise in paint application. But, in reality, Pollock is believed to have had a good degree of control over his application of medium onto the surface. (Phaidon, 372) The scale of the painting, 50 7/8" x 30 1/8", lends even greater importance to the piece because the complexity of the patterns then demand your attention.



Early Works 1942 - 1953



Male and Female

1942 (240 Kb); Oil on canvas, 73 1/4 x 49 in; Philadelphia Museum of Art



The Moon-Woman

1942 (170 Kb); Oil on canvas, 69 x 43 in; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice



Stenographic Figure

1942 (180 Kb); Oil on canvas, 40 x 56 in; The Museum of Modern Art, New York



The She-Wolf

1943 (230 Kb); Oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas, 41 7/8 x 67 in; The Museum of Modern Art, New York



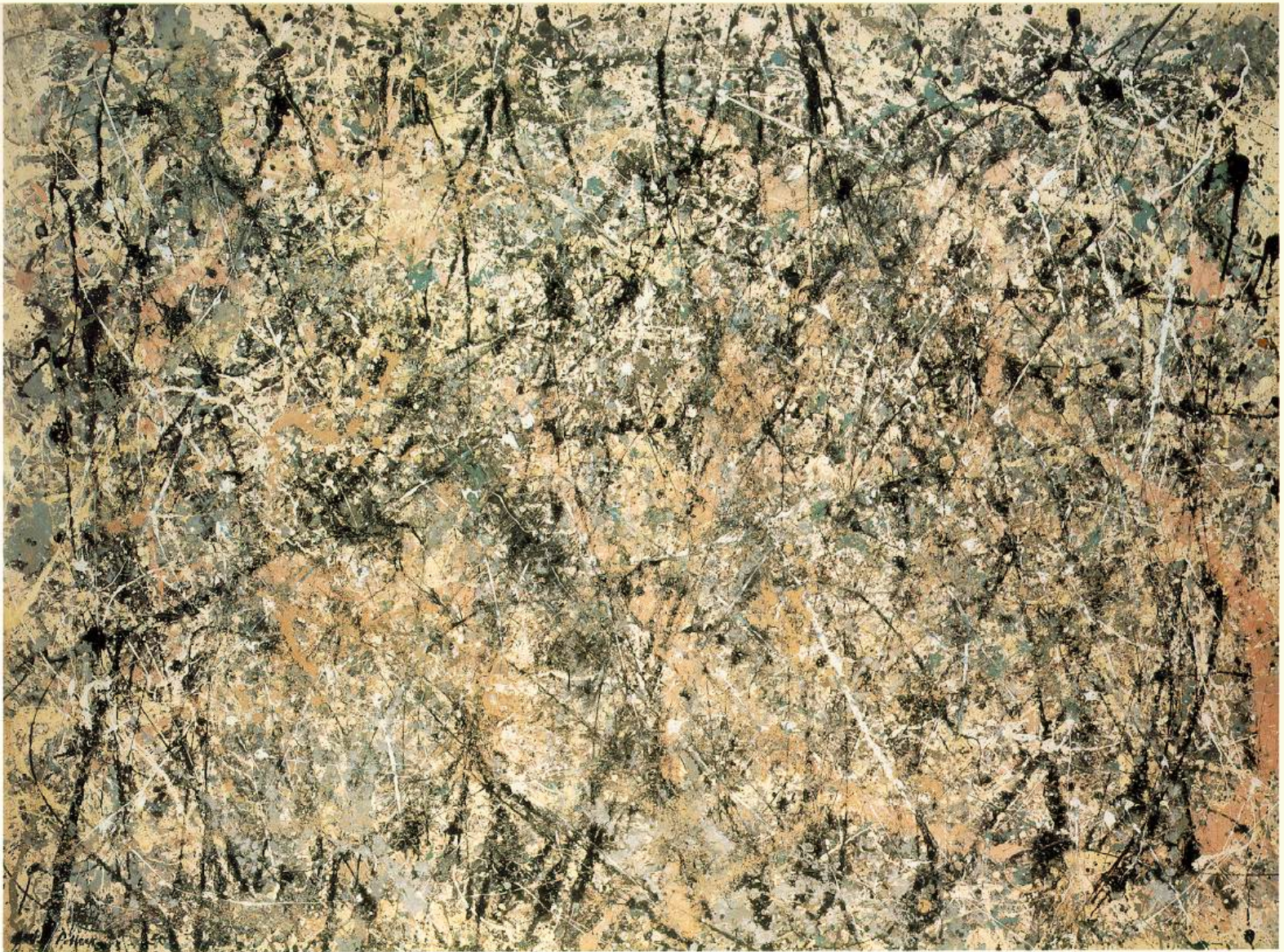
The Tea Cup
 1946 (230 Kb); Oil on canvas, 40 x 28 in;
 Collection Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden



Easter and the Totem
 1953 (150 Kb); Oil on canvas, 84 1/4 x 58 in; The
 Museum of Modern Art, New York

“Breaking the Ice”

Action Painting



Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950; Oil on canvas, Oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas; 221 x 300 cm (7 ft 3 in x 9 ft 10 in); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Pollocks first action painting)



A derisive reviewer who nicknamed Pollock "Jack the Dripper" had inadvertently grasped the crux of his pioneering contribution. To achieve the complex and subtle structural interlace that characterizes his mature work, Pollock had indeed dripped, poured, and spattered his pigments across the vast expanse of raw canvas. The painting is the result of both split-second decision making and happenstance, choreography and chance. Each physical "performance" was a unique, spontaneous, and unrepeatable event, but the final product was always subject to artistic will. I can control the flow of the paint," Pollock contended. "There is no accident."



Hans Namuth photographed the artist at work and filmed his choreographic process in the summer and fall of 1950. This footage documented the combination of physicality and intent that was the mark of Pollock's working process.



It seems to me, Pollock observed, "that the modern painter cannot express his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique." It was Pollock's legacy to have developed a style that reflected the aesthetic concerns of his time, yet retained a high level of individuality. His art is instantly recognizable and inimitable. By focusing our attention on the very act of painting, he allowed us to witness the challenge, the trauma, and the eventual triumph of his creative process.



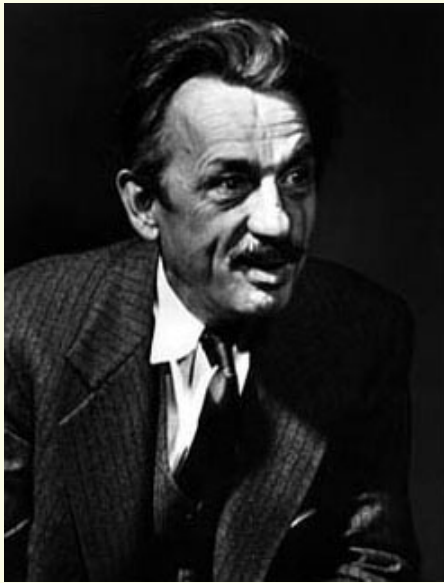
Total physical involvement of the artist defines this "action painting." Pollock spread canvas on the floor in his barn studio, or on the ground outside, and then splashed, dripped, and poured color straight from cans of commercial house paint. It was essential, he said, to "walk around it, work from all four sides, and be in the painting, similar to the Indian sand painters of the West."



In the twenty years between his arrival in New York City to study art and his premature death, Jackson Pollock had emerged as the most original painter in America--famous for his unprecedented physical involvement with the act of painting.

His friend and patron, the artist Alfonso Ossorio, described Pollock's artistic journey this way: "Here I saw a man who had both broken all the traditions of the past and unified them, who had gone beyond cubism, beyond Picasso and surrealism, beyond everything that had happened in art....his work expressed both action and contemplation."

The Development of Pollock's Style



Pollock's first mentor was Thomas Hart Benton. In 1930, Pollock left California before finishing high school to study under the famous regionalist painter at the Art Students League in New York. He was Benton's student for the next three years.



Jackson Pollock, *Going West*, c.1934-1935, oil on fiberboard. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Thomas Hart Benton

Pollock's 1934 painting of a frontier journey connects his teacher's energetic style to his own roots in the American West: the scene may have come from a family photo of a bridge in Cody, Wyoming, where Pollock was born. The abstract swirling patterns evident in this landscape help illustrate why Benton boasted that with him Pollock had found "the essential rhythms" of art.



Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, 1933-1938, pencil and coloured pencil on paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Anonymous Gift, 1990 (1990.4.8ab) © 1993 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Pollock's sketchbook, containing more than 500 drawings, shows his continued efforts to organize compositions rooted in twisting counter shifts, as Benton had counselled. Pollock's early artistic training focused on traditional historical sources. Benton made his students study and reproduce the planar dynamics of European masterworks.



Thomas Hart Benton, *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley*, 1934, Spencer Museum of Art/University of Kansas, The Elizabeth M. Watkins Fund

Benton's depression era pictures swirl with the turbulence and tension of the 1930s. Pollock, who often posed for his teacher, is the young harmonica player in the foreground.



Jackson Pollock, *Flame*. (c. 1934- 1938)
Oil on canvas mounted on composition board, 20 1/2 x 30" (51.1 x 76.2 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Enid A. Haupt Fund. Photograph © 1999
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Pollock's post-student work *Flame* represents a surprising and radical shift in artistic direction. The painting was Pollock's first attempt to free expression from subject and is a clear step toward abstraction.



Jackson Pollock, *Bird*. (1941)

Oil and sand on canvas, 27 3/4" x 24 1/4" (70.5 x 61.6 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lee Krasner in
memory of Jackson Pollock. Photograph © 1999 The
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Pollock's sources for a personal artistic language expanded under the influence of the Mexican muralists. Their belief in the primal continuum between ancient and contemporary cultures spurred Pollock's passion for Native American art. *Bird's* sand-embedded surface is reminiscent of the practice of Indian sand painting, while symbols such as the heraldic eye and eagle are incorporated from Indian pictographic tradition.



Jackson Pollock, *Orange Head*, 1938-1942, Collection Lee Krasner Pollock, Courtesy Jason McCoy Inc.,

New York At 26 Pollock suffered a breakdown caused in part by creative blocks and alcoholic binges. Sessions with a Jungian psychoanalyst made him aware that emotions had become the central challenge in his life and work.



Miró, *Shooting Star*, 1938, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Joseph H. Hazen, 1970.36.1. © 1998 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Flat areas of poster like colours and a fantastic, distorted rendition of the human figure link Pollock's painting with Miró's imagery. The presence of tic-tac-toe graphs, floating numbers, and seemingly random doodles stem from Pollock's avowed interest in being open, as were surrealists like Miró and André Masson, to the unconscious as a source of creativity. Pollock saw a Miró retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941.



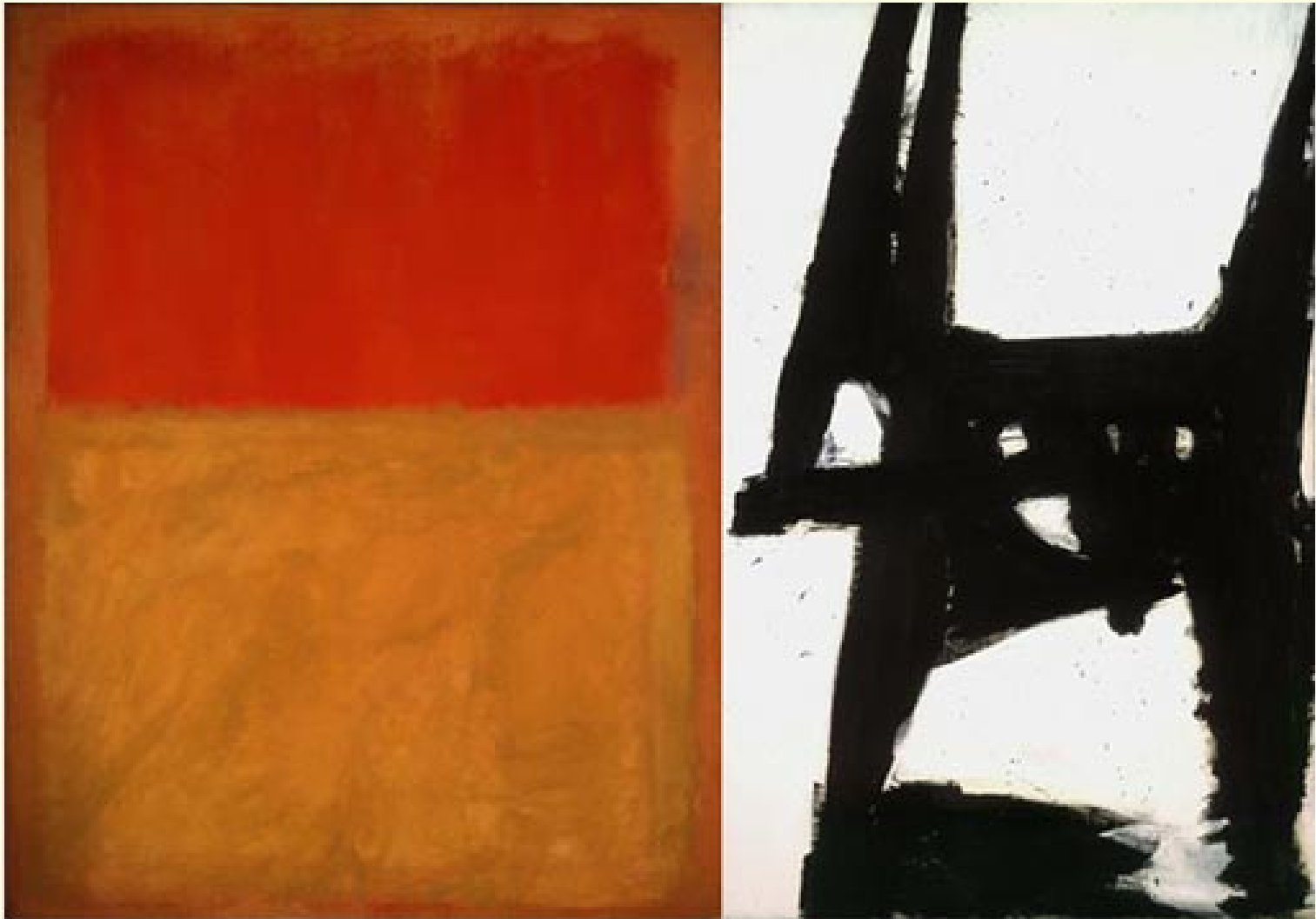
Jackson Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, Albert M. Bender Bequest Fund Purchase

Guardians of the Secret represents a nearly complete synthesis of Pollock's sources, with imagery rooted in archaic forms. Two Northwest Indian totems flank the sides, on the bottom is a dog reminiscent of the jackal-god of the ancient Egyptian underworld, and an African mask, a scarab like embryo, and a rooster line up like relics across the top. In the centre, there is a densely inscribed slab reminiscent of ancient tombs.



Jackson Pollock-Lee Krasner House. Hans Namuth, 1984. © 1999
Estate of Hans Namuth

Today, one has only to step into the meadow behind Pollock's house to understand the overwhelming presence of nature in the dense, interwoven surfaces of his work. Pollock once defended the source of his imagery saying, "I am nature."



Above Left: Mark Rothko, *Orange and Tan*, 1954, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Enid A. Haupt © 1999 Christopher Rothko and Kate Rothko Prizel 1977.47.13

Right: Franz Kline, *Four Square*, 1956, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine 1971.87.12