# Chapter 25: Modernism in North America

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**Video Transcript**

### Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement. It began in Harlem, New York, in the 1920s and was centered on expressing what it meant to be Black in America.

The movement embraced and celebrated African (including Egyptian) history as their heritage and asserted civil and political rights.

The art of the Harlem Renaissance often explores themes of self-expression and identity. It exhibits the influence of traditional African art as well as modern abstraction and stylization.

### Social Realism

Social realism was an artistic movement that took place between World War I and World War II. It focused on using art to highlight the real-life conditions of ordinary, working-class people.

In America, social realist works depicted the hardships experienced during the Great Depression.

### Abstract Expressionism

Due to the physical and financial devastation Europe experienced during WWII, New York City took on a more prominent role as a center of Western artistic innovation after the war. Abstract expressionism was one of the first movements to emerge from New York.

Abstract expressionist artists were influenced by Carl Jung’s notion that all mankind is connected by a collective unconscious and wished to create works of art with universal significance and meaning. An abstract, non-representational style was often used to convey the artist’s state of mind and evoke an emotional response in the viewer.

Abstract expressionist paintings exhibit a sense of spontaneity and energy. Artists in this movement were interested in the process of creation, which was believed to be as important as the finished product. A range of methods were used when creating their works, including color field painting and the action painting technique utilized by Jackson Pollock.

If much of the history of the 20th and 21st centuries development of styles in visual arts came through the lens of fracture, during this period, North America functioned as one of the epicenters of this splintering. Early in the century, the country collectively dealt with the challenges of extreme extravagance and decadence (such as in the "roaring 20s") and extreme economic strain (after the infamous crash of the stock market and the onset of the Great Depression). This rapid flux between extremes parallels similar oscillations in other European countries, like the Weimar Republic. In addition, North America faced extreme political and social challenges that were both rooted at home (such as in the countercultural revolution of the 1960s) and abroad (such as World War II). What follows is far from an exhaustive survey of the various styles and approaches in the visual arts, each of which represented one solution to perceived challenges at the time. Instead, this is a brief mention of a few of the works that have gained significant recognition.

**Video Transcript**

### New York School

The New York School is a term that refers to the avant-garde artists who worked and associated together in New York during the 1950s. There was a wide diversity of styles within the group, which produced innovative and expressive works.

### Postwar Abstraction

Postwar abstraction refers to the abstract artists working separately from the larger abstract expressionist, pop art, and minimalist groups in New York between the 1940s and 1980s.

### Pop Art

Pop artists sought to incorporate art into everyday life by drawing on recognizable subject matter from mass media, consumer, and popular culture.

Pop artists were influenced by the mid-century emphasis on mass production and drew their techniques from industrial processes (Lichtenstein’s use of Ben-Day dots, Warhol’s interest in silk screen printing, etc.)

## Regionalism

Throughout this period, artists used their media to offer commentary about the time in which they were living, often intentionally referencing known artworks to create a subtle subtext with which the viewer is encouraged to engage. In an effort to combat the prevalence and preference for art products in major artistic cities (such as New York or Paris) in the years leading up to World War II, some artists opted to draw their models from less prominent regions throughout North America. In his famous American Gothic, for example, Grant Wood synthesizes a number of historical styles (which he had absorbed in his studies throughout Europe) into a midwestern scene that is equally simple and complex. While some saw the work as a celebration of the innocence and virtue of the American heartland, others saw it as a mockery of a conservative narrow-mindedness that was out of touch with the progress of modernity.

**Video Transcript**

So, how do you approach a painting that is so famous that has become an icon of a nation? We're looking at Grant Wood's American Gothic from 1930, which, more than any other painting, has come to represent America and Middle America and small-town America for many people. Wood said that this was a father and a daughter, but we know that the models were his dentist and his sister. It's as contested as our nation is. It has as many readings as we have ideas about what our country is. So, in some ways, it depends on which side of the political spectrum you're on. If you're a city person, you think that he's mocking the people who live in the Midwest, and if you're a midwesterner, you think, oh, he's one of us, and he captured who we are.

Although, the opposite could also be true. The easterners, perhaps, looked at these Iowans represented in this painting, and said, "Ah, that's what they're like." And the Iowans sometimes looked at this and we're worried they were being mocked. There's a lot of meaning in this painting. Okay, so we can look at it at face value at its most simplified and see this farmer, see, perhaps, as the artist said, his daughter, standing before their simple farmhouse. So there's a sense of hard-working, practical people, a kind of conservative aspect of America. There's something archaic here. Everything in this painting does seem homemade. The carpenter Gothic house in back of them, the apron that the woman wears, his overalls, everything seems as if it could have been made by these people. This is 1930, and the United States is an intensely industrial culture. And even by Iowa standards, this painting is a very archaic image.

But the quality that is most present here for me is the confrontation with these figures. They stand right up in front of us. We're not sure what he's going to say. But I do get the sense that his face is about to change, and he's either going to open up with a smile, or there is going to be something fairly stern coming from him.

It's hard to read him, actually. And I'm not sure that he's looking directly at us. But whether he is stern or kind seems to really be indeterminate. And she looks off at something that we can't see, something outside of the space of the painting. In fact, that ambiguity, I think, is pervasive throughout this painting. I think it's one of the reasons this painting is, in fact, so powerful and has become such a symbol of the American heartland: because people can see in it what they want.

I think it helps to know something about Grant Wood himself. He grew up on a really remote farm in a remote part of Iowa with his two brothers and sister and his parents. He was really isolated. His father was very strict. He didn't really fit in with his family. He had a kind of softer, more artistic side to him than the masculine side of his brothers and his father, and he was very close to his mother. His father died young. So a complicated biography that I think does make its way into this painting.

Well, he is a complex figure. Sometimes we think of him as a kind of two-dimensional figure, an Americanist, a regionalist, the American scene, that is, somebody who painted from the heartland. These were his people. Grant Wood, along with Thomas Hart Benton and a number of other artists, are establishing what they're calling regionalism, what others call American scene painting. That is, a figurative tradition of the Middle West that speaks to American values. But he was a much more complex figure.

He spent a lot of time in Paris, as did most artists of his generation, painting in a semi-impressionist style. He also spent time in Munich. So he wasn't quite as American as our idea of him or the idea that this painting gives us. In fact, art historians link the kind of hard-edged style and the change from impressionism to his having absorbed the influence of early northern Renaissance painters like Van Eyck and Memling, and perhaps also the Neue Sachlichkeit of contemporary German painting.

Right, on his visit to Munich in the 1920s.

And so this is a painter who is influenced by European traditions, although he's turning those lessons on his own people, on the American landscape, on the American psyche.

We certainly see that influence of the Northern Renaissance, I think, especially in the face of the male figure where we have almost a map of this man's face with every wrinkle and crease.

We can see the individual lines of his eyebrows, for example. You can almost see where the pores will allow the beard to emerge ultimately. I mean, there is a kind of specificity here that is almost terrifying.

And I think that specificity is in his face and not so much in the rest of the picture. If you look at the trees in the background, they've become rounded, geometric shapes that are generalized. And so the rest of the painting has a sense of geometry, of lines and circles and zigzags.

So there's a way that the artist takes the specific and creates a kind of more universal form out of it. I think the trees are a perfect example of that.

Right. This is both real and symbolic.

But I think it is important not to ignore the broader context in which this work was made. This is 1930. The United States had recently gone through one of its most prosperous moments, but just the year before, 1929, the stock market crashed and the economy stalled. If you think about the broader political situation you have in Europe, the fascists just beginning to take power, and there is an important political ideology that goes with that, which is often speaking of going back to a kind of rural, primitive experience. And so, some art historians have looked at this American scene painting and seen a kind of echo of anti-internationalism that was seen as very dangerous and, in a sense, the root of European fascism. I suppose, like patriotism itself, this painting has been read in a whole bunch of different ways. It's had psychoanalytic readings. It's had political readings. And it's had kind of historical readings. And I think it is important to embed this painting in not only the artist's biography but also the historical moment in which it was made.

## The New York School

The end of World War II was a pivotal moment in world history and, by extension, the history of art. Many European artists had come to America during the 1930s to escape fascist regimes, and years of warfare had left much of Europe in ruins. In this context, New York City emerged as the most important cultural center in the West. In part, this was due to the presence of a diverse group of European artists like Arshile Gorky, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalì, Piet Mondrian, and Max Ernst and the influential German teachers Josef Albers and Hans Hofmann (they taught at a socially charged and culturally significant school called Black Mountain College). American artists’ exposure to European modernist movements also resulted from the founding of the Museum of Modern Art (1929), the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later the Guggenheim Museum, 1939), and galleries that dealt in modern art, such as Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century (1941). Both Americans and European expatriates joined American Abstract Artists, a group that advanced abstract art in America through exhibitions, lectures, and publications.

These institutions and the art patrons affiliated with them actively promoted the work of New York City artists. During the 1940s and 50s, the scene was dominated by the figures of abstract expressionism, a group of loosely affiliated painters participating in the first truly American modernist movement (sometimes called the New York School), championed by the influential critic Clement Greenberg. Abstract expressionism’s influences were diverse: the murals of the Federal Art Project, in which many of the painters had participated, various European abstract movements, like De Stijl and especially Surrealism, with its emphasis on the unconscious mind that paralleled abstract expressionists’ focus on the artist’s psyche and spontaneous technique. Abstract expressionist painters rejected representational forms, seeking art that communicated on a monumental scale the artist’s inner state in a universal visual language.

### Abstract Expressionism

The group of artists known as abstract expressionists emerged in the United States in the years following World War II. As the term suggests, their work was characterized by non-objective imagery that appeared emotionally charged with personal meaning. The artists, however, rejected these implications of the name. They insisted their subjects were not “abstract,” but primal images deeply rooted in society’s collective unconscious. Their paintings did not express mere emotion. They communicated universal truths about the human condition.

Although distinguished by individual styles, the abstract expressionists shared common artistic and intellectual interests. While not expressly political, most of the artists held strong convictions based on Marxist ideas of social and economic equality. Many had benefited directly from employment in the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project. There, they found influences in the regionalist styles of American artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, as well as the socialist realism of Mexican muralists including Diego Rivera and José Orozco.

The growth of fascism in Europe brought a wave of immigrant artists to the United States in the 1930s, which gave Americans greater access to ideas and practices of European modernism. They sought training at the school founded by German painter Hans Hoffmann, and from Josef Albers, who left the Bauhaus in 1933 to teach at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina and later at Yale University. This European presence made clear the formal innovations of cubism, as well as the psychological undertones and automatic painting techniques of surrealism.

Whereas surrealism had found inspiration in the theories of Sigmund Freud, the abstract expressionists looked more to the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung and his explanations of primitive archetypes that were a part of our collective human experience. They also gravitated toward existentialist philosophy, made popular by European intellectuals such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Given the atrocities of World War II, existentialism appealed to the abstract expressionists. Sartre’s position that an individual’s actions might give life meaning suggested the importance of the artist’s creative process. Through the artist’s physical struggle with his materials, a painting itself might ultimately come to serve as a lasting mark of one’s existence. Each of the artists involved with abstract expressionism eventually developed an individual style that can be easily recognized as evidence of his artistic practice and contribution.

Although abstract expressionism informed David Smith's sculpture work and Aaron Siskind’s photography, the movement is most closely linked to painting. Most abstract expressionist paintings are large-scale. They include non-objective imagery, lack a clear focal point, and show visible signs of the artist’s working process, but these characteristics are not consistent in every example.

In the case of Jackson Pollock's Autumn Rhythm (Number 30), the visible brush strokes and thickly applied pigment are typical of the “action painting” style of abstract expressionism. Looking at Autumn Rhythm, we can easily imagine Pollock at work, using strong slashing gestures, adding gobs of paint to create heavily built-up surfaces that could be physically worked and reworked with his brush and palette knife. Pollock’s innovative technique of dripping paint on canvas spread on the floor of his studio prompted critic Harold Rosenberg to coin the term action painting to describe this practice. Action painting arose from the understanding of the painted object as the result of the artistic process, which, as the immediate expression of the artist’s identity, was the true work of art. Helen Frankenthaler also employed experimental techniques by pouring thinned pigments onto untreated canvas.



**Video Transcript**

We're in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, looking at an enormous painting by Jackson Pollock. This is 17 feet wide, and he originally titled it Number 30, but then later Autumn Rhythm. So the museum is creating a compromise and they're calling it Autumn Rhythm (Number 30).

This is a complicated painting. And for some reason, to me today, in the midst of the pandemic, less than two weeks before a presidential election, I feel like I might be projecting some of my own darkness into this painting that I know is painted in 1950, just five years after the end of World War II.

A lot of the discussion about the abstract expressionists, of which Pollock was one of the leading figures, deals with the issue of angst and anxiety. These were issues that were dominant in the postwar moment. 1950 was the Cold War. The atomic bombs were threatening in a way that had never happened before in human history. The enormity of the Holocaust had been revealed only a few years earlier.

And there were the trials of Nazis that went on for years after the end of the war. I can imagine there was a sense for artists that a new language was needed to express this post-World War II era, and that the old systems of naturalism coming out of the Renaissance was not a language that was viable given the new circumstances.

I think a number of artists didn't feel that naturalism, that figuration, the representation of the human body was going to cut it. They were looking for something that was more profound, that was able to grapple with existential issues, issues of human existence and the potential extinguishing of human existence.

If you think about the decade or two before this, we have surrealism and this interest in the unconscious and delving beyond the conscious everyday mind and looking for a greater, deeper truth about human existence, about the way our minds work.

Well, there was this idea that goes back to the surrealist. It goes back even to Dada, that the conscious rational mind got in the way, that it was antithetical to the creative impulse, that if we could somehow step out of the way and allow something more elemental, more unintentional, to come to the fore, that would somehow be more truthful and more universal. What we're seeing is a high point in modern art, where artists were stepping away from the representation of nature, something that had been central to the making of art, this interest in something that was not abstracting nature, but it was purely abstract. Its radicality can't be overstated. This was completely upending the traditions of image-making. He's turning away from the representation of nature and looking into himself, his own physical movements, his own emotional state at this specific moment in time.

So we're not looking at, for example, analytic cubism, which is an abstraction from nature where Picasso takes a guitar and disassembles it into geometric forms, but here, he's not starting from nature, but starting from the place of an individual in a moment in time.

And in a particular place, this was made in his studio, a small barn in the back of the house at Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner's property out in the Springs in East Hampton. It's a relatively small space. This is an enormous canvas; he unrolled it on the floor. He didn't prime it; he didn't add gesso. He didn't seal the surface. He painted directly on the raw canvas, but I can't say even that he painted it. He didn't touch the canvas with his brush. He moved over the canvas and let paint fall on it.

So there is a kind of rawness. For centuries, whenever an artist painted, not only did they prime the canvas, but they most often prepared drawings, organized the composition, thought it through. There was a real intentionality and consciousness that was an important part of the value of a work of art.

And here he's flipping that value on its head. Pollock used house paint; that black is an enamel. It's a break with the refinements of fine art materials, bringing art into the real world. And that's a reminder that Pollock had been, especially earlier in his career, interested in social issues. This is an enormous canvas that might remind us of large-scale mural paintings.

So he's looking back to the great Mexican muralists like Siqueiros and Diego Rivera and thinking about the enormous scale of those murals, and in art, that was not a small painting for a collector, but large paintings for the masses.

What Pollock is after here is a kind of spontaneity. It's an immediate invention. He's drawing on his tremendous skill, but he's then letting loose, and probably the best analogy is to a highly accomplished jazz musician, somebody who can play the saxophone or the piano with extraordinary skill but then allows themselves to riff, allows themselves to play, and allows the unconscious and the moment to come to the fore.

And the emotion of the moment becomes the guiding principle.

And I want to go back to a point you made a moment before: he's not painting on unprimed canvas simply to break with tradition. He wants the paint to seep in and stay in the canvas itself, not to ride on its surface always. And so there was a specific quality that was achievable because the paint was in direct contact with the weave of the cloth.

And there's so many ways that we experience the paint here. We see areas where it did seep into the fabric. We see dots that look like splashes. We see other dots that have a feeling of a night sky. We see areas where the paint has pulled up and dried and cracked. We see areas where the paint is soft and atmospheric, areas where it's sharp and linear, where it's matte, areas where it's shiny. There's so much to explore when you go up close.

But then you can also pull back and you can see these long trails of paint. And you can imagine the artist moving around and rhythmically, with large arching motions, flinging that paint into the air and allowing gravity to pull it down. The surface of this painting then becomes of register of Pollock's movement through time and through space. It becomes a kind of stage. And in one sense, it's a shame that the painting is vertical hanging on the wall because it was made horizontally; he was over it. And sometimes when I walk up to a Pollock, I'll look at it from the side and tilt my head so I can look across it the way he saw it, more as an arena to act in than a canvas to look at it.

In contrast to the dynamic appearance of de Kooning’s art, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman exemplify what is sometimes called the “color imagist” or “color field” style of abstract expressionism. These artists produced large-scale, non-objective imagery as well, but their work lacks the energetic intensity and gestural quality of action painting. Rothko’s mature paintings exemplify this tendency. His subtly rendered rectangles appear to float against their background. For artists like Rothko, these images were meant to encourage meditation and personal reflection. Adolph Gottlieb, writing with Rothko and Newman in 1943, explained, “We favor the simple expression of the complex thought.”

**Video Transcript**

We're in the Museum of Modern Art, and we're on the fourth floor, in the rooms devoted to abstract expressionism, and we're standing in front of Mark Rothko's No. 3/No. 13, which dates to 1949.

Those abstract expressionists love to not name their paintings. In fact, it's sort of a modernist problem.

 It is. It is.

Composition number blah.

Well, they don't want to close down meaning. Right?

I understand. That ambiguity is incredibly important for artists in the 20th century.

It is, but I think that the weird No. 3/No. 13 part, I wonder if that has to do with the curators trying to figure out really what this thing was called and not being sure about it.

Yeah, that could be it.

I have no idea, actually.

You know, it's interesting because Rothko is an artist that, even at a time when I was a little bit put off by abstract painting I always loved the Rothkos. They have a kind of brooding heaviness about them.

A gorgeous melancholy.

Yeah, and I don't think I even knew why it made me feel that way.

I think Rothko would have been really, really happy to hear you say that. I think Rothko really wanted people, in fact, I seem to remember a quote where he said if people understood his paintings, they would be in tears before them.

Yeah, I think it did that to me.

There's something wonderfully sort of solemn and almost kind of the feeling you sometimes get when you look at stained glass windows in a Gothic cathedral. You know, there's something incredibly sort of awesome about them in the old-fashioned sense.

There is.

What is it that evokes those feelings really? You know, it's a lot of things. It's the horizontality. It's the way that the forms are sort of behind and in front and have no edges and kind of hover.

Until you said no edges and hover it sounded like you were talking about a Mondrian.

Yeah. But also, there's that kind of way that you can see underneath the paint and it comes in front.

That's true.

There's a kind of incompleteness.

A kind of finding. It's a process, right?

Yeah.

You can feel, almost, Rothko's efforts to find his way through this.

Now you sound like we're talking about a Cezanne.

Oh, that's interesting, but I think there are elements of Cezanne and Mondrian here, which is not what you would think of at first.

No.

I think these are paintings that, as you were saying that you were moving your hands back and forth, and I think this is exactly right. It took me a while to figure this out about Rothko, but I think that these are paintings that are about space rather than color. I think color is important, obviously, and color is gorgeous. These are forms, these almost clouds of forms that exist in some sort of space of their own construction.

That makes sense.

And it's interesting when you said the horizontality because they are horizontal paintings even though the canvas is vertical.

Yeah.

But they create and occupy space in a very important way, and the heaviness of that black form, that sort of cloud of black rectangle, soft in its edges.

It's so ominous.

Because it's high, its center of gravity is ever more powerful. Do you see what I mean?

I feel like it almost pulls me into it.

It does, right.

Is that what you mean by the gravity?

Yeah. Well, I think so, but it also presses down vertically on the cream white below the line of dark blackness below that and the green below that. Absolutely.

It's oppressive.

There's this kind of incredible luminosity that exists here, but actually, according to some conservators, Rothko's colors have lost a lot of their edge, and I wonder what they would have looked like, even been more luminous.

They're very vivid.

So this notion that one's not after a sort of finished product, but these are process oriented paintings. You know the famous term that Rosenberg used was action painting. We don't usually think about that term in relationship to Rothko because there's a kind of centrality and a kind of balance that's so important to his work.

Well, and when you think of action you think about Pollock leaning over the canvas.

But I think that there is a kind of provisionalness in the kind of process of finding. I think you're absolutely right, which is very much tied to the artist and his experience in the making of this canvas. And I think that the authenticness of the canvas can really be embedded in that notion.

Of finding, of the artist exploring.

Finding and feeling, yeah. I think that's exactly right.

So there's a kind of turn toward the psyche of the artist.

Yes, exactly right. This is an expression of the interior. What's sort of funny is in the next generation some artists will begin to disavow that.

A complete rejection of that.

Right, because this is seen as this kind of psychoanalytic heroicism growing out of European surrealism, etc., growing out of Jung, out of Freud, but in a kind of purely American idiom and a kind of American scale, the sort of grandeur and space.

So to use Warhol as a kind of reaction to this.

Yeah, absolutely.

The soup cans.

Absolutely, or Rauschenberg or even Jasper Johns.

That sort of statement that art is not about some kind of inner psychic state that's here.

 But this is in some ways a very beautiful and expressive kind of romanticism in that way. Isn't it?

I think so.

Throughout the 1950s, abstract expressionism became the dominant influence on artists both in the United States and abroad. The US government embraced its distinctive style as a reflection of American democracy, individualism, and cultural achievement, and actively promoted international exhibitions of abstract expressionism as a form of political propaganda during the years of the Cold War. However, many artists found it difficult to replicate the emotional authenticity implicit in the stylistic innovations of de Kooning and Pollock. Their work appeared studied and lacked the same vitality of the first-generation pioneers. Others saw the metaphysical undertones of abstract expressionism at odds with a society increasingly concerned with a consumer mentality, fueled by economic success and proliferation of the mass media. Such reactions would inevitably lead to the emergence of pop, minimalism, and the rise of a range of new artistic developments in the mid-20th century.

### Art of the Everyday

Because of the huge influence of abstract expressionism in postwar New York City, other artists and movements are generally understood in relation to it. The artist Jasper Johns and his close friend Robert Rauschenberg rejected abstract expressionism’s attachment to the universal meaning expressed in a work of art, instead creating multiple or fluid meanings through combinations of everyday objects and images. Johns depicted “things the mind already knows,” such as American flags, targets, numerals, and beer cans, and incorporated newsprint and plaster casts into his works. Rauschenberg also blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture with his combines, such as Bed of 1955. These works are related to both assemblage and collage in their use of found three-dimensional objects (bedding, furniture, taxidermied animals) and layering of printed material (product packaging, newspaper, photographs) on painted surfaces.

**Video Transcript**

This is one that actually does speak to me in a very powerful way. When you look at something like an American flag, I think I kind of get it. I mean, it's such a powerful icon or image, and it evokes so many things. And it's something that you see so frequently, at least if you're an American. And if you're not American, it's something that you still probably see relatively frequently, and probably does represent something to you. But then to have it kind of re-imaged and re-imaged in this antiqued way. I can't fully articulate it and I won't claim that it's somehow challenging my philosophy in some profound way, but I kind of get it at a base level, what's trying to go on here. And I think that's why this painting has gotten so much popular attraction. I mean, it was on the cover of one of my history books when I was in high school. There are shirts that are made with this image. Am I not seeing the full "there" when I'm describing it that way, or is there even more to it?

I think you're absolutely right. And I think that Johns would be really happy to hear what you just said. And I think he wanted this painting to function as something that did raise all kinds of meanings in the person who walked up to it. In a sense, what he's showing us is not so much a flag as a mirror, because it is such a potent symbol. And we all walk up to it with a lot of personal life experience. And it can mean very different things to very many different people. And in a sense, he's given us a very neutral field. So let's look at it really closely. We're not looking at a printed American flag, and we're not looking at a flag of cloth. And in fact, some critics at the time asked, is this a painting, or is this a flag? In other words, is it a representation, or is it an actual flag? And of course, something that is symbolic, like a flag, can raise that kind of issue, which is one of the reasons that I think Johns was interested in it. But let's just look at the surface for a moment. This is an object that actually stands off the wall a few inches. It's canvas that's on top of plywood. And so it is this slightly shallow box-like form. And if you look at the surface, it's really heavily worked. And it's not traditional oil paint or even the more modern acrylic. This is something that's called encaustic, which is an ancient Egyptian painting technique that Johns revived. And other people have used in history. But it's ancient. And it's translucent and it's lumpy, but it also allows you to see through it. And when you look through this sort of lumpy surface of the wax what you see are strips of newspaper. It's sort of torn up. And so you can't really read it. There's not a continuous story, but it is clearly this pigment, this wax, on top of the debris of our political life.

And I think that's why. Maybe you guys are just doing a good job training me. I mean, this one really speaks to me, because especially the texture and the fact that it is not printed. It is handmade and it has those layers to it. It's a very powerful idea. When you just have a printed flag, it simplifies what a country is, or what the ideas a country represents are in its history. And when you look at this painting, yes, it's an American flag. But you appreciate, look, there's context to America. There's a history to America. There's depth to America. There's texture to America. You look closer at America; it's not this simple idea. There's many, many, many layers to it. And I think this does a really good job. And I think this is why this is a painting a lot of people respond to, even people who might be traditionally skeptical to modern art. I think they viscerally feel a lot of those things when they see that. They feel a depth, a connection, to the narrative of America more than just this very red, white, and blue, simple idea of it.

I think that that's exactly right. And I think that Johns is taking this opportunity to re-imagine then what art can be. That art can still, in some really fundamental way, represent really complex things. Not necessarily through the careful rendering or the careful representation of objects on a table, or a human face, but through a kind of symbolic language actually reference, and in some ways, actually depict a very complex American history. I think that's exactly right.

We talk a lot about a lot of artists. What's really of note—although, I think this is one of those pieces that I actually don't need that much context to really appreciate it. But to go to the next level of context, I mean, was Jasper Johns really one of the first to take really powerful images like an American flag and kind of re-render them in this type of way?

He was. In fact, this is art that's being produced before pop art exists. And so this idea of actually turning his canvas, turning his paintbrush, on a visual form that is itself fixed is a fascinating idea. Think about what he's giving up. The things that we value in painting traditionally have to do with the artist's choice of color, of composition, and those things are given here. Those are already set. He's not messing with that. And yet, this is still not entirely a flag so much as a representation of a flag. And in that way, it's walking on this very narrow edge.

I mean, it's really strange to me, because we've talked about the traditional art. If you go back 500, 800 years ago, it was always representational, all the way to the Renaissance. And then more modern art has all been about ideas and pushing our thinking. And this definitely falls into that latter category. But it really does, maybe it's just me, but it emotes something in me that is aesthetic, that is as powerful as any of these. And obviously, it's an American flag, and that by itself can create powerful emotions, but just the way it was rendered also creates feelings and depth that I haven't actually felt from a lot of the modern pieces we've looked at.

Both Johns and Rauschenberg provided a critical departure from the pure abstraction of the dominant painters of the 1950s, setting the stage for the flourishing of pop art in the 60s. Andy Warhol was unquestionably the central figure of the American pop art movement. He first worked as a highly successful advertising artist in New York before exhibiting paintings and silkscreen prints beginning in the early 1960s. Best known for his images of Campbell’s soup cans, Coke bottles, and American public figures, Warhol’s work seems to celebrate icons of consumer culture—both actual products and celebrities who were marketed and sold as such, like Marilyn Monroe—but is also often interpreted as a critique of passive, unthinking consumption. James Rosenquist, a contemporary of Warhol, also took inspiration from his work in advertising as a billboard painter. His huge canvases depicting images from print media and advertisements, such as Marilyn Monroe I (1962), are rooted in the vulgarity of contemporary life, but reminiscent of Surrealism in their juxtaposition of disparate, fragmentary imagery.

## Popular culture, “Popular” Art

At first glance, pop art might seem to glorify popular culture by elevating soup cans, comic strips, and hamburgers to the status of fine art on the walls of museums. But, then again, a second look may suggest a critique of the mass marketing practices and consumer culture that emerged in the United States after World War II. Andy Warhol’s Gold Marilyn Monroe clearly reflects this inherent irony of pop. The central image on a gold background evokes a religious tradition of painted icons, transforming the Hollywood starlet into a Byzantine Madonna who reflects our obsession with celebrity. Notably, Warhol’s spiritual reference was especially poignant given Monroe’s suicide a few months earlier. Like religious fanatics, the actress’s fans worshipped their idol, yet Warhol’s sloppy silkscreening calls attention to the artifice of Marilyn’s glamorous façade and places her alongside other mass-marketed commodities like a can of soup or a box of Brillo pads.



Pop art’s origins can be traced back to the term's first appearance in Great Britain in the 1940s, connected to a group of artists called the Independent Group and their use of American popular magazines as a social critique of British society. Nevertheless, the approach to art has roots even further back. In 1917, Marcel Duchamp asserted that any object—including his notorious example of a urinal—could be art, as long as the artist intended it as such. Artists of the 1950s built on this notion to challenge boundaries distinguishing art from real life, in disciplines of music and dance, as well as visual art. Robert Rauschenberg’s desire to “work in the gap between art and life” led him to incorporate objects like bed pillows, tires, and even a stuffed goat in his “combine paintings” that merged features of painting and sculpture. Likewise, Claes Oldenburg created The Store, an installation in a vacant storefront where he sold crudely fashioned sculptures of brand-name consumer goods. These “proto-pop” artists were, in part, reacting against the rigid critical structure and lofty philosophies surrounding abstract expressionism, the dominant art movement of the time, but their work also reflected the numerous social changes around them.

**Video Transcript**

We’re in the fourth floor of the Museum of Modern Art, in the room devoted to pop art. And we're looking at a really great painting.

It's actually a really large painting.

And it's not really a painting, entirely. It's called Gold Marilyn as in Marilyn Monroe. It's from 1962. And it's not only that it's big, but it feels expansive, because most of the canvas is covered with this kind of slightly metallic bronzish gold paint.

Marilyn's head sort of floating in the very center of it.

In a rectangle in the center. Too small. I mean, really sort of weirdly isolated within the plane of the gold. But look at Marilyn's head. First of all, this is interesting because it was from, if I remember correctly, the last photo session that she vetted and she sort of approved. And if you look at it, it's actually terribly printed. It's not painted at all.

No. It's a print, right?

Yeah, from a newspaper, right? From a photograph from a newspaper that's been blown up, printed in black, and then really garishly over-printed with bad registration with these horrible colors that came right out of Dick Tracy comic strips. This yellow on top of the black for the hair, right?

And the red for the lipstick, and the green eye shadow.

Oh, god. This turquoise. It's just awful, isn't it? And then, really, the most glamorously garish, the red of the lips over the black. Now, this was right after her suicide. So this is very powerful stuff. So this is almost in memorial. I think it's got religious overtones. I think this is a kind of icon. I think that the gold is functioning like the gold in a Byzantine painting, and she's replaced the Virgin Mary. She is, in our consumer culture, in our culture of glamour, of fame, which was incredibly important to Warhol, she is now . . .

Well, that is our culture. That is who we are.

And that's Warhol's brilliance, that he's not thinking about the history of art so much as what is authentic to now. And in fact, let's go back to the printing issue. Warhol, I think, makes this really interesting assessment, which is that painting is no longer an entirely authentic process in 1962, when we live in a world that is a world of manufacture, of mass production. Then he steps back and he stops painting. He starts making prints, which are in multiple. He starts hiring people to make his prints for him, and he does this in a studio, which he calls The Factory. This has got to have been upsetting, in fact, to people who were still looking for the craft of painting.

Painting.

And worse than that, what pop's main issue was, turning the still life, the landscape, traditional history painting, what was left of it, all of those, in a sense, ancient traditions, on its head and looking to popular culture. I mean, painting no longer the Virgin Mary but a pop icon is an incredibly powerful, aggressive statement against Western culture. It was Lichtenstein who was asked in—I think it was 1961 or '62—what was pop art? And he said after abstract expressionism, we could take an oil-soaked rag, put it on the wall, and somebody would call it a work of art. We were looking for something that was still despicable. And he said the thing that was still really despicable was popular visual culture.

Right.

Was the stuff of our commercial world.

The low culture. To me this opens up a whole issue about identity and the way we assume identity.

This is not Marilyn. In fact, we don't have any access to who she actually is at all.

Exactly.

What we have here is her mask.

The years following World War II saw enormous growth in the American economy, which, combined with innovations in technology and the media, spawned a consumer culture with more leisure time and expendable income than ever before. The manufacturing industry that had expanded during the war began mass-producing everything from hairspray and washing machines to shiny new convertibles, which advertisers claimed would bring ultimate joy to their owners. Significantly, the development of television and changes in print advertising placed new emphasis on graphic images and recognizable brand logos—something that we now take for granted in our visually saturated world.

It was in this artistic and cultural context that Pop artists developed their distinctive style of the early 1960s. Characterized by clearly rendered images of popular subject matter, it seemed to assault the standards of modern painting, which had embraced abstraction as a reflection of universal truths and individual expression. In contrast to the dripping paint and slashing brushstrokes of abstract expressionism—and even of proto-pop art—pop artists applied their paint to imitate the look of industrial printing techniques. This ironic approach is exemplified by Lichtenstein’s methodically painted Ben-Day dots, a mechanical process used to print pulp comics.

As the decade progressed, artists shifted away from painting and towards the use of industrial techniques. Warhol began making silkscreens, before removing himself further from the process by having others do the actual printing in his studio, aptly named The Factory. Similarly, Oldenburg abandoned his early installations and performances to produce the large-scale sculptures of cake slices, lipsticks, and clothespins that he is best known for today.

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