

New York: The New Art City

Introduction

New York did not become the art capital of the world by accident. Scholars and critics tend to attribute the emergence of Abstract Expressionism and the transfer of artistic supremacy to New York to the effects of WWII and the subsequent disarray Europe fell into. However, this thesis, while not discrediting the importance of the war and its aftermath, takes a more holistic view, arguing that the situation in America, and New York in particular, also set the scene for this radical artistic development. Moreover, it was uniquely American qualities of Abstract Expressionism, especially its creative freedom that eventually led U.S. government agencies to exploit it as Cold War propaganda.

Abstract Expressionism, while inspired by previous movements of Surrealism and Cubism, is known as a radical and innovative artistic form of its own. The Abstract Expressionists looked inward, focused on individualism, freedom of expression and created in many ways a daring liberation from other aesthetics. The artists involved worked for their distinction and “continuously safeguarded the autonomy of their work... that advocated independence as the only legitimate pursuit for responsible individuals.” Formalized during the second half of the 1940s, Abstract Expressionism was categorized into two major, distinct groups, “gesture painters” and “color field painters.”¹

¹ Carleton Robert Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*. Cornell University Press, 1978, 9; Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American*

Charlie Pasciucco

The “gesture painters”, most notably artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, focused their attention on formal principles of painting, specifically the brushstroke and how it was to be applied. Achieving meaning in their work required a specific self-reflective process and by employing this inward process for creation, these artists felt that their abstract subject matter would find “meaning” in their viewers as it did in them. As Irving Sandler explains, the “gesture painters” “refused to preconceive particular meanings regarding the process of painting as an intense, premeditated search for the images of their creative experiences.” Through this extensive, personal search by way of their own “experiences...they believed if they followed the dictates of their passions, the content would finally emerge.”²

Freedom and personal painterly touch, through distinct brushstroke, created for these artists an opportunity on the canvas. As Sandler notes, “each in their own (their) own way would build an open field of free gestures, every detail would be painted with equal intensity”. The “gesture” artists were most concerned with creating a “‘mass image’, composed of mobile and painterly marks” that would make their painted, static works “dynamic, and to expand beyond the framing edges”. Where these artists closely aligned with their “color field” counterparts came in their daring, individualized meaning behind their art, work that “had contemporary significance beyond its physical attributes.”³

Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, 92, 148

² Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 93

³ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 92

The other distinct group of Abstract Expressionists is known as the “color field” painters. This group, which includes artists Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko also sought to push formalist artistic boundaries by instead using dramatic color to compel and more significantly “transcend” their viewer. Their specific artistic process and “solution was to adjust color areas to create a unified field, each zone with equal chromatic intensity.” Like the work of “gesture painters” the “color field” artists also cared to “treat a surface as a field”, however, were most concerned with how vibrant, arranged color would have a powerful “visual impact” for the viewer. The “color field painters” achieved this by their “immediacy of colors” and by applying such intense colors “in large expanses that saturate the eye.”⁴

In terms of artistic significance, “color field” like “gesture” went far beyond the altering of color on the canvas. The artists’ care for color was focused on “transcendence” for their viewer, as Sandler describes, “the intentions of the color field painters were visionary; they aimed to create an abstract art suggestive of the sublime, of transcendence, revelation.” In this regard, the “color field” artists were re-defining the issue of “revelation” in non-religious terms, rather than in new spiritual, artistic terms. Their innovative, colorful canvases found a new way in which to “grip the imagination of artists” much like the way “religious dogmas” had in the past. How these two famous sects of Abstract Expressionism came to form in

⁴ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 148-150

Charlie Pasciucco

New York was an immediate impact of WWII and the mass migration of avant-garde artists from Europe.⁵

WWII and the hostile, fearful environment surrounding it within Europe facilitated New York replacing Paris as the new art capital. The ideological climate of the WWII era was immensely grim; a situation in which intellectual and artistic norms that had been practiced or celebrated were being whole-heartedly challenged. Coined by Henry James, the term “The Imagination of Disaster” well articulates the hopelessness many felt regarding guiding moral principles within a world filled with such violence and uncertainty. Irving Sandler explained that, “the ideologies that engaged intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s were proven to be abstract schemes that did not account for man’s behavior.” Artistically, groups denied pre-established notions as, “many rejected Neoplasticism, Constructivism, because the conception of man’s nature and condition posited by these styles had lost its relevance.” Europe could no longer remain the center of the intellectual and artistic world with such barbarism, violence and fear existing. Therefore, the WWII’s dramatic effect on Abstract Expressionist came through a massive migration to the United States and specifically New York, a Nazi-free city that already possessed artistic innovation and culture.⁶

New York City became the safe and preferred destination of numerous émigré, “leading contemporary artists” seeking shelter from European destruction and occupation by the Nazis. These influential, validated artists became immensely

⁵ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 148-150; avant-Garde definition: New and unusual or experimental ideas, especially in the arts, or the people introducing them (Oxford English Dictionary)

⁶ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 29

Charlie Pasciucco

important for the New York scene. A group that included artists Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, or the, “Artists in Exile” (a denomination given to them by the Pierre Matisse Gallery) became major European influences for the development of the American avant-garde movement. This mass migration of artists, paired with an already vibrant artistic situation in New York, created a platform for a new, creative powerful aesthetic.⁷

The existing situation in United States, especially within New York made it ripe for innovative artistic developments. During the 1930’s, the United States was at a standstill regarding domestic artistic innovation with movements like Social Realism and Regionalism. However, New York City already was home to an informed group of artists well versed with European modernism and armed with creative individualism that would help facilitate the true beginnings of Abstract Expressionism. These circumstances, paired with dramatic American events like the Great Depression and programs such as the “Federal Arts Project”, helped to bring together a vibrant artistic community, one that would be validated and harnessed by influential teachers and patrons.⁸

The creative independence achieved by Abstract Expressionism was not just a characterization reserved for the artists but also defined the ambitious teachers and patrons such as Hans Hoffman, John Graham, Alfred Barr, Solomon and Peggy Guggenheim in addition to influential critics such as Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. These individuals helped to collectively shape the American artistic

⁷ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 28

⁸ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 10; Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, 17-18, 44-45

Charlie Pasciucco

avant-garde movement within the United States, one that would personify far more than a radical artistic aesthetic. Considering Abstract Expressionism embodied an American artistic narrative of creative freedom, and a general loosening of boundaries, it conveniently became a political vehicle used by the United States government to promote an American, anti-communist, anti-fascist message globally. Promoted covertly, the artistic movement of the American avant-garde became an influential political “weapon” for the United States Central Intelligence Agency to showcase through traveling exhibitions worldwide to use in stark contrast to Soviet propaganda.⁹

To establish the unique nature of the American avant-garde, why and how it was formed and what eventually the movement came to represent, the artistic context surrounding New York must first be outlined. Therefore, the first section of this paper will discuss in detail the unique artistic and cultural context of New York City. How stagnant, uninspiring domestic art forms (Social Regionalism and Regionalism), along with numerous daring, creative artists, patrons, and critics helped it to become the capital of the art world. Even the pre-War, Great Depression era artistic milieu New York City possessed the ingredients for becoming a center for avant-garde art and creativity. The tragic effect of the Great Depression ironically influenced a stimulated and talented artistic community, forcing them to

⁹ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 174, 199; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: the CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: The New Press, 1999, 217-219

Charlie Pasciucco

further reconcile their own aesthetic and move towards their artistic identity and independence.¹⁰

Preceding Artistic Situation

It was the situation of American art in the 1930s as well as the influence of European modernism that created fertile ground for the development of a new style and artistic approach. Art in America preceding Abstract Expressionism was uninspiring to many avant-garde artists as the subject matter placed a tremendous emphasis on “communicating to a mass audience” and restricted these artists from pushing boundaries. The two popular American movements, Regionalism and Social Realism, often portrayed the lives and experiences of American urban factory workers and farmers, which while broadly applicable for viewership was distinct from the avant-garde work within Europe. This “poor art for poor people,” as member of the avant-garde Arshile Gorky described it, while relatable, was preventing the American artists from entering the conversation with European greats. Best summarized by the notion these artists “could not rival modern European paintings and that what was good for political causes was not necessarily good for art.”¹¹

The capturing of an agricultural lifestyle by artists such as Thomas Hart Benton was not only seemingly unsophisticated but also misrepresented the situation within the United States. If the farming industry was an industry to be

¹⁰ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 5-6; Ashton, *The New York School*, 17-18

¹¹ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 10

Charlie Pasciucco

celebrated, the 1930s was not the era. Sandler explains that, “in a decade of widespread farm foreclosures, the Regionalist conception of America as a paradise of independent small farmer came to be seen as a fantasy.” Artists of the new generation, figures like Gorky, knew New York possessed all the ingredients to break ground; the vibrancy, the artists, the community and the teaching expertise.¹²

Pre-War New York City was already a bustling hub for artists, many of whom were beginning to tap into their own creative individual aesthetic. Dore Ashton in The New York School emphasizes the existence of a well-informed “artistic vanguard” residing in downtown Manhattan. This “artistic vanguard” included the likes of “Arshile Gorky, Stuart Davis, John Graham and Frederick D. Keiseler,” all artists who garnered credit as major influences leading up to and surrounding the Abstract Expressionist movement. This influential group of artist “pioneers” was approaching its issues regarding subject matter and more significantly their place as artists within New York society. While earning a living as an artist previous to the Great Depression was quite difficult at best, the situation began to change when the New Deal facilitated a publicly funded initiative for struggling artists commonly referred to as “The Federal Arts Project.”¹³

Historical Situation

“The Federal Arts Project,” funded through the New Deal, drastically benefitted the life of the professional artist. Specifically, an action taken under the Works Progress Administration, it employed up to “5500 needy artists, craftsmen,

¹² Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 11; Ashton, *The New York School*, 16-18, 44-45

¹³ Ashton, *The New York School*, 16-18, 44-45, Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 5-7

Charlie Pasciucco

photographers” who were paid monthly. “The Project” not only employed many of these “starving” artists, but allowed them to completely focus their professional efforts on their craft. As Irving Sandler explains:

The Project played a vital role in the development of American art by paying artists to paint, thereby enabling them to devote their energies to art with little distraction. Such younger painters as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, could experiment freely during their formative years. The opportunity to concentrate on painting altered the attitude of a number of painters toward a career in art.¹⁴

These artists were no longer isolated from the professional world, a condition which had a tremendously positive effect on their outlook. Sandler contextualizes this change in attitude well by explaining, “The dedication of artists to art was deepened by a change in their social position. The very existence of ‘The Project’ was partly responsible for this,” and “since it indicated that the national government recognized an artist’s worth to society.” The artists new found security not only allowed them to devote full attention to their work, but more importantly gave them the opportunity to meet and interact with other artists, to exchange various artistic ideas, and to open, a new creative dialogue.¹⁵

The emphasis of “The Federal Arts Project” as a key factor for the development of an American avant-garde should not be placed solely upon the employment of the artists, but rather on the resulting evolution of a genuine, “art community” in New York. Now, the exchange of ideas, as well as meeting and discussing the significance of one another’s work was not only permitted but encouraged. In addition to “The Project” and its immediate effects being a large

¹⁴ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 5-7

¹⁵ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 5-7

Charlie Pasciucco

boost of confidence for the artists, events surrounding the Great Depression vastly influenced the artists' states of mind and provided a new, up-ended climate for them to address.¹⁶

The Depression, such a catastrophic event for the city of New York, a true center for commerce, forced artists to confront a new home full of uncertainty concern and anxiety. The climate surrounding the Depression also left the artists confronting a similar notion of immense "despair". As Dore Ashton explains:

nothing...could have prepared the artist for universal despair... this tremendous upheaval...to the problem of what to do without paint and canvas...and how to preserve one's individualism in the midst of mass prostration... accelerated social change was indisputably a major force in the shaping of the new generation of artists.¹⁷

An eager artistic community, now armed with subject matter to confront, was helped by teachers and patrons. Both groups were helping to inspire and expose the work of the avant-garde.

New York was not just fertile land for artists but full of influential teachers, patrons and critics who were bringing avant-garde work to the forefront of culture. This group included European influenced teachers such as Hans Hoffman and John Graham in addition to patrons like Alfred Barr, Solomon and Peggy Guggenheim. By teaching or showcasing elements of the European avant-garde, these figures were simultaneously helping to inspire young emerging artists of New York.¹⁸

¹⁶ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 7; Ashton, *The New York School*, 18

¹⁷ Ashton, *The New York School*, 18

¹⁸ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 23, 138; Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27-28

Charlie Pasciucco

The first teacher of note is Paris-taught, Hans Hoffman. Hoffman was “an innovator, influential in the development of Abstract Expressionism” by way of his “loosening” of formal techniques in painting. While “devoting most of his time to the teaching of art”, he focused on implementing elements of artistic freedom, a notion important in the development of mature Abstract Expressionism. For example, while Cubism was always a consideration in his formal techniques, he wanted to deviate from it formally by “letting color in itself determine structure.” In this sense, Hoffman challenged artists to allow their own formal elements guide their work rather than other way around. Rather than conform to established rules or tendencies regarding color within a painting style, he encouraged the freedom of color implementation to define a new style.¹⁹

Hoffman encouraged a notion that would greatly impact the developments shared within the Abstract Expressionism; that of allowing elements of painting to happen by chance. Irving Sandler explains Hoffman possessed a “delight in spontaneous improvisation...” and, “believed that painting ought to be freely executed with a minimum of premeditation.” Both his teachings of and tendencies regarding “improvisation” would prove vital for the New York artists considering “he was pouring paint on his canvases three years before Pollock.” Unsurprisingly, the instruction of Hans Hoffman was “nurtured by modern European art”, however possessed the unique exploration of artistic boundaries, with emphasis on “the sense of push and pull turns a picture into a dynamic field of forces.”²⁰

¹⁹ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 138

²⁰ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 138-139

Charlie Pasciucco

Teaching and formalizing of such radical and innovative techniques was happening with another teacher within New York by the name of John Graham. Graham, like Hans Hoffman was a figure “particularly important for the developing young artists in New York.” While the Ukrainian-born teacher had also been formally trained amongst the avant-garde of Paris, he gravitated towards other influences like Russian “Expressionist” painter Wassily Kandinsky best known for powerful “color and fluid forms.” As the artist himself describes, when painting with expressive color, you can “awaken in the soul emotions too fine to be expressed in prose.” Artists like Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning became familiar with the work of Kandinsky, mainly by way of pressure from John Graham.²¹

Graham, an “enigmatic character” with a “vast knowledge of the European avant-garde”, was well respected by many of the emerging Abstract Expressionists for both his sustained relationships with greats like Pablo Picasso and through his formalized writings. Graham became friendly with Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Arshile Gorky and exposed them to new ways of thinking about art.²²

However, aside from teachers like Graham, the art needed to be seen on gallery and museum walls to have impact. Young American artists were exposed to and able to assimilate to the work of the European avant-garde, (artists like Kandinsky among many others) through major exhibitions in New York. The most influential force besides John Graham for exposure of Kandinsky was a 1945 retrospective at The Museum of Non-Objective Painting that followed the death of

²¹ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27, 33-34

²² Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27

Charlie Pasciucco

the artist. As Carleton Hobbs explained the “tremendous impact of this exhibition on artists in New York makes it comparable to the important Cezanne retrospective in Paris of 1907.” Considering exhibitions of this magnitude, it started to become apparent that New York, the émigré destination of war-torn Europe had now become the preferred location for such shows. Both extensive funding and influence were essential throughout this process as such exhibitions were generally put on by important individual patrons or curators whom were committed to the large-scale exposure of past and present European avant-garde art to New York artists.²³

Among the most influential forces to shape the American avant-garde were individual art patrons. Most notably, these figures were often wealthy collectors, or curators and gallerists who were show-casers and proponents of specific European avant-garde work. Alfred Barr, Solomon Guggenheim and Peggy Guggenheim were but a few major shapers of the American artistic narrative. The European avant-garde was no longer a foreign, fantasized art form across the vast Atlantic, but, in fact, the opposite, as Hobbs explains “European abstraction could be seen regularly in New York City”. Acting as individual gatekeepers, these individual’s cherry picked the European avant-garde works, shows and retrospectives that did not explicitly create the American avant-garde aesthetic, but rather, like Hoffman and Graham, steered the ship towards specific European influences.²⁴

Alfred Barr, the director of The Museum of Modern Art was one of the first influential figures to display European avant-garde, which focused attention on the

²³ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27-28, 33-34

²⁴ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27- 28; Gatekeeper definition, “a person or thing that controls access to something”, Apple Dictionary

Charlie Pasciucco

movements of Abstraction, Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism. As early as 1929 when the Museum was founded, Barr focused his efforts on offering “important shows of European modern art”. During the 1930s, Barr and the MOMA exhibited two highly influential shows, one of which was entitled “Cubism and Abstract Art” in 1936. The exhibition included the work of great cubists like Pablo Picasso and used various examples of differing mediums to convey the “wide ranging” nature of “abstract” art in general. With this show, Barr was breaking ground by “demonstrating the breadth of this modernist impulse toward abstraction” with an “exhibition of nearly 400 works of painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, architecture, furniture, theater design, and typography.”²⁵

The other important show that Alfred Barr presented at MoMA during 1936-1937 was entitled, “Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism.” The exhibition proved significant given Abstract Expressionism emulation of both movements Dada and Surrealism by way of references to artistic freedom, and a rejection of formalized, painfully structured techniques. Abstract Expressionism would, like both Dada and Surrealism, emphasize the notions of “abstraction, (and) chance procedures.”²⁶

Influential patrons like Solomon Guggenheim contributed to shaping New York art through the channel of personal collection. Guggenheim built his vast and influential collection with specific focus on works he assumed would shape the artistic future. He collected with direction from Baroness Hilla Rebay, an artist, trusted advisor and friend. Under her guidance, Guggenheim’s collection showcased

²⁵ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27-28; “Cubism and Abstract Art”, MOMA Online, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2748?locale=en>

²⁶ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27; “DADA at MOMA”, MOMA Online, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2008/dadaatmoma/>

Charlie Pasciucco

the works of European greats Wassily Kandinsky, Fernand Leger, Paul Klee, Rudolf Bauer and Marc Chagall.²⁷

In 1939, Guggenheim opened the Museum of Non-Objective Painting to share his collection with the public. The Museum's "first official exhibition" entitled "Art of Tomorrow", symbolized the notion that New York City was now the destination for exhibitions of the avant-garde and the ground-floor of where to observe what was to come artistically. Considering this climate, patrons like Peggy Guggenheim, Solomon's niece, seized the opportunity to then pair the European and American avant-garde work together, finally putting the two groups in the same artistic conversation.²⁸

In 1942, Peggy Guggenheim brought the European and American art cannons together, under the banner of her appropriately named gallery "Art of This Century", creating the necessary bridge between the two individually influential movements. Like her uncle, she had amassed her own collection of European masters with the exciting work of the vibrant American avant-garde. As Hobbs explains, "she showed her own extensive collection of Modern European art, as well as the art of younger American painters such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko." Peggy Guggenheim by bringing together the validated European avant-garde and radical Americans, not only helped to tacitly approve the American artistic cannon but was also a clear technique that would serve to solidify her role as a gatekeeper.²⁹ Now

²⁷ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27; "Hilla Rebay", Guggenheim Online, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/hilla-rebay>

²⁸ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 27-28

²⁹ Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 28

Charlie Pasciucco

with New York firmly established as an influential art hub, there arose a need for important critics and theorists.

Two major, political, influential art critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg appeared on the New York art scene in the 1930s. These high profile, figures shared part of the responsibility for evaluating and disseminating the new American art aesthetic, as art historians credit the pair with being the first to “popularize” Abstract Expressionism and deem it “as a worthy successor to the School of Paris.” Two gatekeepers themselves, Greenberg and Rosenberg validated an original art by producing writings that not only praised the technique of the artists, but more significantly, celebrated individualistic qualities of Abstract Expressionism. Years before a mature Abstract Expressionist group had been properly defined, Greenberg was already using his writing to celebrate what he defined as “avant-Garde”, specifically how formal qualities like originality of technique should be practiced in order to receive this denomination.³⁰

Greenberg’s famous, some may say notorious, article published in 1939, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” serves as a helpful road map for understanding and contextualizing what eventually became important for the Abstract Expressionist movement.³¹

Throughout “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” Greenberg praised originality of artistic technique, a priority and defining feature of the Abstract Expressionist

³⁰ Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2000, 23; Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters” ARTNEWS, December, 22-23, 48-50; Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, 5-22;

³¹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays*, 8-9

Charlie Pasciucco

movement. He expressed tremendous admiration for Europeans who had previously achieved this, noting “Picasso...Mondrian... Kandinsky... derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in arrangement of spaces, surfaces.” These ideas resonated with the emerging Abstract Expressionists. Their work would be defined not only by what was said, but rather also by what was said and why it was said that way. The most important emphasis of the movement was the individual choices of the artists in with respect to belief in “independence as the only legitimate pursuit for responsible individuals.”³²

While the early writings of Greenberg helped to frame an already existing concern of avant-garde artists in New York, other critics contributed to the defining and popularizing of the Abstract Expressionist movement when it came to maturity. During the early 1950s, when the movement had become more formalized, another vital critic was Harold Rosenberg. Rosenberg outlined in his work the monumental artistic strides made by the Abstract Expressionists and further specified the process, psychology and care behind the ground-breaking art form that was exploding within New York City.³³

Rosenberg’s December 1952 landmark essay in ARTNews, “The American Action Painters” is a quasi-manifesto that well characterized the Abstract Expressionist movement by examining what many of the artists were trying to achieve with the new process and aesthetic. Rosenberg opened by reiterating and confirming the individualistic quality of the American avant-garde by explaining,

³² Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 8-9

³³ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters”, 22-23, 48-50

Charlie Pasciucco

“This new painting does not constitute a school. What they (American vanguard) think in common is only represented by what they do separately.” He moves on to describe the process of action painting and the philosophical aspect behind such a process; the why and how the new American vanguard was achieving this new form.³⁴

As Rosenberg explained “the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act- rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or express and object.” Such groundbreaking characteristics would align the movement with more than an artistic gesture but rather with existential meaning, a focus on ideas much grander and significant than what existed on the canvas for the viewer. Rosenberg characterizes this notion in a sentence by explaining, “the big moment came when it was decided to paint.... Just to paint. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value, political, aesthetic, moral.” These writings in conjunction with Rosenberg and Greenberg’s presence in general serve as a tremendous bridge from the cultural context of this essay to the political. Considering freedom of technique and the very, open creative nature of the form, Abstract Expressionism became a motif that would be highly “political” in nature.³⁵

The Politicization of Abstract Expressionism

While the movement of Abstract Expressionism did not directly align itself with any specific political parties or motivations, during the 1940s and 1950s, it did become a political form of culture, a symbol and icon for extensive political rhetoric.

³⁴ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters”, 22-23

³⁵ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters”, 23

Charlie Pasciucco

As outlined by the cultural context section, the movement could conveniently be aligned with a type of leftist liberalism, as it embodied freedom of expression, a breaking down of previously established barriers and most notably “advocated independence”. The following section of this paper focuses on how the political climate surrounding Abstract Expressionism, the post-War and Cold War era, created a new platform and unique opportunity for New York to stand alone as the art capital of the world. Like the cultural context, many different parties were involved in the promoting, validating and in this case capitalizing upon this new, ground-breaking American form. While a leftist characterization of the form was perpetuated by both the artists and critics alike, government agents like the Central Intelligence Agency covertly used the aesthetic by way of traveling exhibitions to promote a freer, more democratic image of the United States abroad during the Cold War, to advance in many cases their own, political agendas.³⁶

The above-mentioned parties pushed and validated the notion of an individual, liberated, artistic aesthetic of the American avant-garde. The political climate surrounding this transfer of power was even affected by Greenberg and Rosenberg.³⁷

Leftist Interpretation

Greenberg and Rosenberg were as committed to political issues as they were to artistic ones. The pair understood the work of the American avant-garde with emphasis on freedom of technique, well aligned with a particular liberalism and

³⁶ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters”, 22-23, Hobbs, *Abstract Expressionism*, 9, Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 23, 32-33

³⁷ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters” 22-23; Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 213-214; Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 23

Charlie Pasciucco

were willing to exploit this notion given their own leftist political leanings. Nancy Jachec in *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, frames both Greenberg and Rosenberg as instrumental figures in this process, as true forces in shaping how Abstraction Expressionism would be “situated” to the political left both within New York City and beyond. The pair, through their writings, used both their tremendous artistic influence and approval of the form to help label Abstract Expressionism as leftist in nature. Jachec explains given their “growing support for Abstract Expressionism between 1947-1950 would lend it a particular leftist cachet and this would amplify the ideological position that was intrinsic to the art itself.”³⁸

Additionally, Jachec explains that the critical influence of Greenberg and Rosenberg would help the characterization to stick:

the expectations that Greenberg and Rosenberg outlined ... for the new international modernism that Abstract Expressionism would help to define after the fall of the School of Paris... it will be argued, they formed the core around which the leftist identity of Abstract Expressionism would develop during the post war period.³⁹

Another critic of note partaking in this dialogue was Meyer Shapiro. Like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, Shapiro was a knowledgeable, effective voice who helped to contribute to the political characterization of the American avant-garde. He both understood the liberal characterization of the movement and showed how support of it could be based in what the artwork stood against. For example, it was explained that, “By defending the avant-garde in 1947, Schapiro was

³⁸ Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 23, 32-33

³⁹ Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 23

Charlie Pasciucco

indirectly setting it in opposition to its enemies: the right wing, fascism and communism, all of which despised avant-garde art.”⁴⁰

However, a leftist characterization of Abstract Expressionism was merely where the political discussion began and the movement would come to have far greater implications than a “leftist cachet.” The leftist ideology behind Abstract Expressionism was not only perpetuated by politically motivated art critics but also by several artists who took part in the dialogue.⁴¹

Contextualizing experiences and remarks of certain Abstract Expressionist artists helps make it clear that art and politics were two concepts intended to go hand in hand. During the early 1940s, it became apparent that some of the American avant-garde were too making overt, political statements with their work by way of creating a cannon that was “anti-totalitarian”. Their art, no longer solely specific to scenes of idealized American life rather looked to a unique abstract aesthetic willing to grab the attention of the international artistic community. Jachec explains the concept, “that at last some of the future Abstract Expressionists did have clear political expectations of their biomorphic canvases which they sought to situate within an international modernist tradition.” The artists chose to abandon the outdated American Social Realist approach for elements of the European practice of Cubism. Many of these artists were outspoken about this change, and wanted to make clear their intentions for such a shift. As Jachec states “having been active participants in the debates around art and politics during the 1930’s, Gottlieb and Rothko with the assistance of Newman, would be the earliest

⁴⁰ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 199

⁴¹ Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 32-33

Charlie Pasciucco

and most vociferous of the nascent Abstract Expressionist group in redefining the ideology of their art.” It would be redefined by representing a new perception for both America and American art, something that was, as previously noted, “anti-totalitarian” in its views. One of the most outspoken figures regarding this new identity was Barnett Newman.⁴²

A number of Newman’s first-hand accounts speak directly to the issue of politicization of American avant-garde art. The most telling is a passage in which Newman characterizes how the avant-garde was obliged to represent a new vision for America, one not only of artistic freedoms but a country rid from any restrictive policies in general. Newman wrote in 1943:

We have come together as American modern artists because we feel the need to present to the public a body of art that will adequately reflect the New America that is taking place today and the kind of America that will....to free the artist from the stifling control of outmoded politics.⁴³

Ironically, this idea of “freedom” Barnett Newman spoke to was harnessed by the United States via the Central Intelligence Agency to advance their own Cold War political agenda. While these artists were trying to become free, covert agents of the United States were placing nationalist goals in conjunction with their art.

During the Cold War period, the political climate divided the world into distinct binaries. The United States on one end cared deeply to separate themselves and Western Europe from Soviet political aims via “the lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism”. To guard against this, The United States promoted a private program, The Congress of Cultural Freedom to both fund and support

⁴² Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 33-35

⁴³ Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 35

Charlie Pasciucco

curated, cultural propaganda which included art exhibitions of the American avant-garde intended to project to the world, “the American way”. Therefore, the work and perceived liberal message behind it made the avant-garde a point of interest for the CIA and the State Department. It was to be used not simply to project a “leftist cachet” but rather the United States as a country that possessed freedom of expression in their art; their own form of cultural propaganda in the global sphere.⁴⁴

Art for Country

The art of the American avant-garde now could be imbued with significant political implications, ones related directly to national sentiment. The new American art aesthetic was to be broadcast to the world by way of traveling exhibitions, supported by the Central Intelligence Agency in conjunction with prominent curators and collectors. Now, the art meant far more than to visitors of the galleries and the museums that displayed such work. Frances Stonor Saunders in his book, The Cultural Cold War outlines a few iconic examples of how the Central Intelligence Agency aligned themselves with the American avant-garde.⁴⁵

While the work of the American avant-garde was available within the United States, it had to be shown elsewhere throughout the world to convey the necessary political sentiment the CIA intended. The traveling exhibitions funded by the Agency with the help from influential American patrons like Nelson Rockefeller would be closely curated as the circumstances surrounding these exhibitions had transparent, global political implications.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 1, Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics*, 32-33

⁴⁵ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 212-219

⁴⁶ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 216-217

Charlie Pasciucco

The first attempt of this cultural espionage was executed by the State Department. The State Department tried to align themselves with Abstract Expressionism by way of an exhibition entitled, "Advancing American Art". The goals of the show were very clear and overt, to simply to use the avant-garde art as a "propaganda weapon". The show had "a selection of seventy-nine 'progressive' works, including those of Adolf Gottlieb (and) Arshile Gorky" with plans to travel internationally, specifically to Latin America and throughout parts of Europe. Though, the exhibition was blocked by the likes of a passionate opponent of the avant-garde, Missouri Republican congressman, George Dondero. He was among many politicians who considered the show and the idea behind it to be severely "un-American."⁴⁷

This was not an uncommon feeling towards avant-garde artwork. Many members of the United States government were highly opposed to the idea of modern art and felt that abstraction was not a point for celebration of American culture but rather a farce and a "communistic" art form that would rather serve a severe disadvantage to American nationalism. Of the numerous politicians opposed to showing Abstract Expressionism abroad, most notable and outspoken on this subject was the above mentioned, George Dondero. The congressman disliked all types of European and American avant-garde, and "declared modernism to be quite simply part of a worldwide conspiracy to weaken American resolve." His characterizations of art in general show how elements of both Abstract

⁴⁷ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 215

Charlie Pasciucco

Expressionism and other avant-garde movements were also characterized in a severely negative, polarizing light.⁴⁸

For example, Dondero proclaimed this message on the floor of Congress in 1957:

All modern art is communistic, cubism aims to destroy by designed disorder. Futurism aims to destroy by the machine myth...Dadism aims to destroy by ridicule. Expressionism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and insane. Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorms...Surrealism aims to destroy by the denial of reason.⁴⁹

While the congressman's characterization did represent a wide-reaching, popularized viewpoint of many politicians, the work of Abstract Expressionists posed a certain, political opportunity for the Central Intelligence Agency for cultural propaganda.⁵⁰

Abstract Expressionism, was in the eyes of the Agency a movement (characterized by Saunders) as "precisely the kind of art the Soviets loved to hate". The form was an "independent, self-reliant, a true expression of the national will, spirit and character" and the perfect attack on the elements of suppressive, mandated Soviet culture. While the form appeared to Dondero as a true crux for representation of the United States abroad, the CIA viewed it as an exciting opportunity that could be turned on its head. Saunders explains "where Dondero saw in Abstract Expressionism evidence of a communist conspiracy, America's cultural mandarins detected a contrary virtue: for them it spoke to a specifically anti Communist ideology, the ideology of freedom, of free enterprise." These acute

⁴⁸ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 212

⁴⁹ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 213

⁵⁰ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 213

Charlie Pasciucco

observations about the work of Abstract Expressionists is what greatly attracted and the Central Intelligence Agency to take the necessary, political action.⁵¹

Because of “domestic opposition” by figures like Dondero, the State Department failed in their first attempt to implement a show of this kind. However, the silver lining was that the United States was forced to turn to an even more covert and effective channel, the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA turned to a tremendous source of art influence within the sector, the Museum of Modern Art, for help with curating and assembling properly such prestigious traveling exhibitions. Conveniently, the Museum and the president at the time, Nelson Rockefeller, were a match made in heaven. Rockefeller, not only willing to help extensively, had held previous support of “left wing artists” and this type of covert relationship for him would be “familiar territory.”⁵²

The CIA and Rockefeller worked very closely and other figures like Rockefeller became immersed in these tightly knit relationships, as Saunders explained,

“the really deep connection between Abstract Expressionism and the Cultural Cold War can be found here. It was according to this principle that the CIA, together with it’s private venture capitalists, operated.”⁵³

This relationship between the CIA used influential figures like Nelson Rockefeller to advance their interests by extensively promoting the American avant-

⁵¹ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 213-215

⁵² Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 216-217

⁵³ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 219

Charlie Pasciucco

garde.⁵⁴ For example, Saunders notes within his passage the two foundations intense, mutual connection:

“An inspection of MoMA’s committees and councils reveals a proliferation of links to the Agency. First and foremost was Nelson Rockefeller himself, who had headed up the government’s wartime intelligence agency for Latin America. This Agency, among other activities sponsored touring exhibitions of ‘contemporary American painting.’ Nineteen of these shows were contracted to MoMA.”⁵⁵

This relationship between the CIA and their “private venture capitalists” was only strengthened by the creation of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. This organization became “the ideal sponsor”, or more accurately characterized as a “front” for the CIA to freely fund such exhibitions. Even though the motivation for the project was under wraps, there was tremendous influence of this organization around the globe as the, “organization put together several exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s. One of the most significant, “The New American Painting”, visited every big European city in 1958-59. Other influential shows included “Modern Art in the United States” (1955) and “Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century” (1952).”⁵⁶

This deep-rooted relationship between the CIA, The Congress for Cultural Freedom, American patrons and museums clearly summarizes how vastly influential and important the American avant-garde had become. Abstract Expressionism garnered such tremendous respect that the United States government felt not only was it was an influential tool of their own but one they

⁵⁴ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 217

⁵⁵ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 219

⁵⁶ “Modern Art Was A CIA Weapon”, Independent, UK Online
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>

Charlie Pasciucco

were willing to label as distinctly American. The pendulum had swung, as shows that traveled the world were now “The New American Painting”, “Modern Art in the United States,” visiting some of the same European cities that had previously held the artistic torch. However, was this artistic shift of power inevitable given the United States political standing in the world? Serge Guilbaut seems to believe so.⁵⁷

Guilbaut approaches the broader subject from a post-colonial perspective, explaining that American art had moved past a “provincial” level and their new identity as a nation needed to adopt, powerful avant-garde work to parallel that shift. Guilbaut notes that the timing for America was key, and that the transition in which, “America was now on the point of making the transition from colonized nation to colonizer” was occurring rapidly. One way to validate this new position globally was to use “the painted canvas” as an effective means to achieve this.⁵⁸

The trajectory of how this happened is explained within this passage.

“The transition occurred in two steps: American art moved from nationalism to internationalism and then from internationalism to universalism... In a gesture of egalitarianism, it broke down the barriers separating different national schools and thereby raised itself up to the level of modern art.”⁵⁹

While Guilbaut’s logic serves as a convenient historical theory, the specificity of his analysis (at least this part) does not lend itself to the holistic nature of this paper. Re-centering the art world in New York, as evidenced, may have been inevitable but because of a great number of varied, eclectic sources.

⁵⁷ “Modern Art Was A CIA Weapon”, Independent, UK Online <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>; Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 174

⁵⁸ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 174

⁵⁹ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 174

Charlie Pasciucco

The green shoots of an American avant-garde, inspired by the effects of the Great Depression and aided by programs designed to promote artists helped to create the stable environment within New York for artists to work. Following, the exposure to and migration of European avant-garde work and artists facilitated an opportunity for great support from both collectors and attention from proper critics. The most unique element of the narrative, the post war and Cold War focus on freedom and other leftist values associated with the movement created a political power and influence that that looked to make the work, American in distinction.

It was the combination of these many different factors, not any one factor (emigration of artists, WWII) that led to this unique cultural and political moment. Avant-garde art birthed out of New York could not only represent the United States but the carry the baton for the greater, global art world.

Charlie Pasciucco

Sources Cited

Ashton, Dore. *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972. Print.

Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955. Print.

Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.

Hobbs, Carleton Robert and Gail Levin. *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*. Cornell University Press, 1978. Print.

Jachec, Nancy. *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.

Rosenberg, Harold, "The American Action Painters" ARTNEWS, December, 1952. Print. 22-23, 48-50

Sandler, Irving. *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Praeger Publishers. 1970. Print.

Saunders, Stonor Frances. *The Cultural Cold War: the CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: The New Press, 1999, 2013

Saunders, Stonor Frances. "Modern Art Was A CIA Weapon", Independent, UK Online

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>

"Cubism and Abstract Art", MOMA Online,
<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2748?locale=en>

"DADA at MOMA" MOMA,

Online,<https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2008/dadaatmoma/>

Charlie Pasciucco

“Hilla Rebay”, Guggenheim Online,

<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/hilla-rebay>