

American Art: Mid-20th Century and Beyond

Key Ideas: Postwar United States (1940s/50s)

- Climate of paranoia: Soviet Union detonates its first atomic weapon in 1949; arms race begins; Communists take over in China.
- Malaise was theme of almost all 1950s avant-garde art and literature; loss of faith in traditional mores, ideals.
- If art reflects the culture, can modern artists make comfortable, “pretty” paintings and sculptures anymore?
- Post-Holocaust, full-anxiety art reconstitutes maker’s pain into the beautiful and the striking; a hunger for serenity.

Abstract Expressionism

- Based on Existentialist thought: In an absurd and meaningless world, the individual must prove his or her existence. In the visible brushstrokes and tracks of the artists, we feel his/her presence.
- Artists turn to personal sources of meaning: ancient religions have symbolic meanings for the modern world; make unconscious links to universal Jungian archetypes (mother, hero, child, etc.); painting as a revival of the *sublime*/sense of awe; provokes a spiritual experience.
- The work shows the individual’s struggle/isolation/alienation – cult of artist as celebrity.

Pre-Pop and Junk Aesthetic

- Artists see themselves as outsiders to the New York art world.
- Pushes American art beyond subject matter, beyond expression, beyond subjectivity of the artist as the creative force.
- Indifferent to notions of artist as hero, idea of beauty.
- Questions whether painting is a true image of reality or offers access to a world beyond itself.
- Satirizes icons of American culture.

Pop Art

- Borrows imagery from popular culture: TV/media, advertising, other art movements (both mocks and mimics); popular consumer items become the subjects.
- Often mass-produced for low cost.
- Unsentimental (or mocks sentimentality) and humorous.
- Stripped down, mechanical, flat surfaces.
- Questions distinctions between “high” and “low” art, the rules of the art world.

Minimalism

- “Much-less-is-much-more.”
- Pursues objects we can experience as fully concrete, but purged of all representation and illusionism.
- Eradicates the hand of the artist.

Conceptual Art

- The idea or the words associated with the idea alone make the work of art, and the creation in bronze, stone, or paint is merely incidental to the idea.
- The object, installation, action or documentation is no more than a vehicle for presenting the concept.
- At its most extreme, it foregoes the physical object completely, using verbal or written messages to convey the idea.
- Conceptual works appeal to the viewer's intellectual faculties, asking what is art? Who determines what it is? Who decides how it is exhibited and criticized?

Postmodernism

- “Less is a bore.”
- First applied to architecture: diversity of materials, styles, structures and environments in a celebration of late 20th-c. pluralism.
- Rediscovery of ornament, color, form, symbolic connections.
- Motifs from past works are “quoted” or “appropriated” in new, sometimes unsettling, ways.
- In the visual arts, artists deal with social and political issues; marginalized ethnic, sexual, and feminist identities; reflects social and cultural diversity.

Resources

Short film on Jackson Pollock and his action painting, from SFMoMA:

<https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/jackson-pollock-paintings-have-a-life-of-their-own/>

For a fun documentary about the vagaries of the modern American art market, check out this film, produced by Don Hewitt (of 60 Minutes) (video available on demand or DVD from Netflix or library): *Who the \$&% Is Jackson Pollock?*

Here is a resource from MoMA: “Find questions, hands-on activities, and other opportunities for enrichment. Gain insights and inspiration from MoMA educators on teaching and engaging with modern and contemporary art.” https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/tools_tips

Learn more about performance art, by looking at Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*:

<https://vimeo.com/106706806>

Check out this learning resource page on Ono's work from MoMA:

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964

For some more on performance art, check out the work of Marina Abramović, performance artist extraordinaire, and her Institute:

<https://mai.art/>

Here is a video showing one of her historic performances: <https://vimeo.com/71952791>

And with Ulay, her former partner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcaaVZrUC44>

Performance art at Mia, with Marcus Young: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqkBdBo_Y-g

Artist Chuck Close discusses his work: <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/chuck-close-on-following-the-grid/>

And <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=milXH-433vs>