

# Off the Wall – Abstract Expressionism

**Mark Rothko** – worked on the **surface** of the painting and created incredible depths that inspire pure, simple emotions in the viewer. Yet it is really just paint on canvas, isn't it? This was to become the preoccupation of the **1950s New York School** and ultimately to bring us the **Pop Art** Movement that brought high art into the consciousness of everyone.

## **Jackson Pollock 1912 -1956 USA, Abstract Expressionist**

**Jackson Pollock** – was the first **American** artist of any real note in the eyes of Western Art History. Despite his unorthodox methods, **Pollock** never seemed in any doubt about the validity of using **paint and canvas**. He saw himself first and foremost as a painter.

He firstly **removed the figure**, (the person) from art, removing with it centuries of 'weight and importance'. Although that sounds like nothing to us now, Pollock was the first to do it and he knew it would not be well received – America is a very **conservative** audience! This was a major struggle for Pollock and he **suffered** personally from it. **Mental illness, alcoholism and drug misuse almost overtook his daily life.**

Between **1939** and 1940 **Pollock** underwent 18 months of **therapy** with **sketching** as a part of this process. He was treated by a **Doctor Joseph L Henderson** who had a particular interest himself in a art. During this period, he sketched like **Picasso** and struggled to accept the conclusions he was drawing regarding the direction of his painting.

Eventually **Pollock** felt brave enough and chance was introduced to his painting method. The **trance** like state in which he painted allowed the **unconscious** to make as many decisions as chance as to where the paint fell. Often in a haze of **alcohol and other substances**, Pollock would **lay his canvases on the floor** or on the ground outside his studio **and walk around, over and sometimes through the painting**. He **poured, drizzled, dripped and splattered the liquid paint**, trying as little as possible to influence too greatly the placing of the marks.

*"I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since in this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting...When I am 'in' my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing"*

The effect is to totally **remove any idea of a focal point** from the painting. Indeed, everything is on the surface and there is absolutely no intentional idea of **foreground, middle or background**. The eye is led continually around the canvas.

Life and movement are captured in **pure abstraction**. The elements of it are there but in the same way that life is present in a petri dish.

Pollock believed that this outpouring of his **unconscious** was the most personal method he could employ to offer himself as the artist to the viewer.

*Sounds in the grass: Shimmering substance* 1946

*Full Fathom Five*, 1947

This became known as '**action-painting**', (Harold Rosenberg). "A joke without humour, told over and over again"

It describes the fundamental movements of life in general and of the artist in particular. What I created was a striking visual 'language', for which there was no precedent.

### **Willem de Kooning 1904 – Abstract Expressionist**

The process was much like **Pollock's** although **de Kooning's** mental health issues are far clearer and better documented. He checked himself into an **asylum** and set himself an allowance that provided only the basic necessities and , crucially, left no extra cash for alcohol. He is the poorest, richest man in the world.

A more traditional paintbrush and easel type painter, de Kooning didn't go as far as Pollock did and the figure still emerges often in his work. The chance element is still used though and de Kooning's paintings present the viewer, like Pollock's, with a whirl of movement and intrigue, again not offering any single focal point.

*Marilyn Monroe*, 1954

The Hollywood starlet is presented here like a shop dummy, not flattered and not complimentary, instead she is like a shop dummy. The subject has no real bearing on de Kooning's approach to painting it.

### **Robert Rauschenberg 1925 –**

Dismissed the drawn out processes of **casting preparation** in sculpture or **canvas priming** in painting. He gathered around him the **objects of everyday** life such as tyres, dead birds, bedclothes etc and introduced them into his work. The images explode out of the canvas and into **relief**

He collected all of this 'stuff' because of what he called 'retinal bombardment' – the way in which our eyes are assaulted daily by millions of images. This was something that Rauschenberg wanted to put across in his artwork.

He employed them to make what he called '**combines**', but this opened the door for later artists to explore , '**ready mades**' and pop art icons.

Bed 1955

Monogram 1955-59

Erased De Kooning 1953 – De Kooning drew a pencil sketch for Rauschenberg which he then erased, leaving only a 'ghost' of the marks. He then exhibited this piece. The action painting in reverse?

### **Jasper Johns 1930-**

If Rauschenberg is the painter of the everyday, then Jasper Johns was the artist of the everyman. Like Jackson Pollock, he took the personality out of painting and left a bland, emptiness. Johns felt that that was what life was like in 1950s America. Johns shared a studio with Robert Rauschenberg and the two were lovers for a time. Even in New York, it was not wise to be openly gay and Johns especially felt the weight of this. Like Pollock, Johns feared the backlash of the very conservative American audience and felt constrained by it.

3 Flags, 1958

Encaustic and Collage with Objects, 1955

Map, 1961

He called his Flag painting " a flat painting of a flat thing". The collage mainly involved a target from the **Target** washing powder – one of the USA's best known brands and biggest advertisers of the 1950s. Map was in fact, a map of the USA, doctored by **Johns**. He took the idea of combine that **Rauschenberg** offered and made it peculiarly American. This was probably one of the most influential ways of working that the later **Pop** artists picked up on and became very famous for.

**John Cage** said

*"All life is art, it is the job of the artist to isolate it and appreciate it".*

The New York School of the 1950s took this statement, which can really be traced back through all art history, and updated it, made it contemporary and challenging and won significant freedoms for the generations of artists that were to follow.