

Abstract Expressionism National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
International Galleries: 14 July 2012–24 February 2013, Orde Poynton Gallery: 4 August 2012–20 January 2013

Abstract Expressionism is an art movement that dominated the international art world after World War II. It emphasised spontaneity, intuition and the physical act of painting. This set it apart from earlier abstract art, which had a stricter geometric basis.

Although the term Abstract Expressionism encompasses several different styles and techniques, some common features of this approach include the prominence of dramatic scale, colour and texture; a visible emphasis on the dripping, scraping and brushing of paint; and the radical simplification of the image. The artists were also seen as socially rebellious, sharing a strong belief in the value of individual creative freedom.

In the history of art, Abstract Expressionism marks a shift in focus from Paris to New York as a global centre for cultural production. Its influence also spread to Australia, where it shaped the work of a generation of abstract artists.

The works in the exhibition are drawn from the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Australia, with the addition of two loans from the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and one from the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.



Jackson Pollock *Blue poles* 1952

oil, enamel, aluminium paint, glass on canvas 212.1 x 488.9 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1973

© Pollock/Krasner Foundation/ARS. Licensed by Viscopy

Abstract Expressionism is a style renowned for gestural expression and the creative role of chance. As always, however, artistic forethought played a part in the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock.

- What evidence can you see for planning and structure in this composition? Why do you think the artist has included the 'blue poles'?
- By following individual drips, can you trace the order in which colours were applied?

When *Blue poles* was acquired for the Gallery in 1973, it provoked controversy over its value as an artwork and an investment of public money.

- How do you think our view of this work has changed since it was created in 1952? And since the year of its purchase?



Willem de Kooning *Woman V* 1952–53

oil and charcoal on canvas 154.5 x 114.5 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1974

© Willem de Kooning/ARS. Licensed by Viscopy

Willem de Kooning established his artistic reputation with abstract paintings. But the human body was a subject he returned to throughout his career.

- Can a painting that portrays the human figure still be called abstract?
- Do you think this is an image of a specific person, or a generalised concept of woman?
- In what way does the work relate to traditional depictions of the female nude?



Hans Hofmann *Pre-dawn* 1960

oil on canvas 183.9 x 152.8 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1976

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When Hans Hofmann came to live in America in 1932, he shared his direct experience of European modernism with the New York School of painters through teaching and making art. In *Pre-dawn*, the influence of Cubism's deconstructed shapes and the Fauvists' love of bright colour is evident.

- What is the importance of surface texture in this work?
- Identify some of the different ways in which the paint has been applied.



Mark Rothko *1957 #20* 1957

oil on canvas 233 x 193 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1981

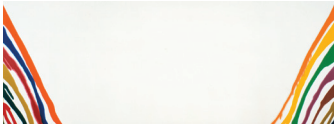
© Mark Rothko/ARS. Licensed by Viscopy

Mark Rothko's work influenced the development of a style within Abstract Expressionism known as colour field painting—literally, fields of colour. His paintings look flatter, smoother and denser than the 'action paintings' of Pollock, de Kooning and others.

- Which works in the exhibition might be considered colour field paintings?

Rothko's work is regarded as profoundly spiritual, a view that was encouraged by the artist himself.

- Do you agree? If so, how do you think this effect is created?
- What emotions does this painting inspire in you?



Morris Louis *Beta Nu* 1960

synthetic polymer paint on unprimed canvas 259.1 x 701 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1972

© 1960 Morris Louis

Morris Louis' *Beta nu* shows the artist's distinctively minimalist style of painting. It consists of two rows of paint in rainbow colours, flowing across opposing lower corners. The wide composition plays with the viewer's sense of perception and issues a challenge: to take in the whole canvas in a single glance.

- Why do think the artist has left so much white space?
- Would this work be as powerful if it was smaller in size?



Helen Frankenthaler *Other generations* 1957

oil on canvas 174.7 x 177.9 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1973

© Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler's technique was notable for its originality. This painting has been created by 'staining' the canvas with thinned washes of colour, so that the image appears to merge with the surface texture of the canvas.

- How does this compare to the process used by other artists in the exhibition? Does it create a different kind of emotional impact?
- Frankenthaler was aware of her place in art history and the 'other generations' of artists that came before and after her. Discuss whether the title should matter to us when looking at abstract art.



Robert Motherwell *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* 1958

synthetic polymer paint on canvas 175.3 x 248.9 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased with the assistance of American Friends of the National Gallery of Australia Inc., New York, NY, made possible with the generous support of The Dedalus Foundation and the Foundation of the National Gallery of Australia 1994

© Robert Motherwell/VAGA. Licensed by Viscopy

Robert Motherwell created a series of over 170 works on this subject, which refers to the events of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). It was a significant theme for the artist because he felt that it symbolised universal human tragedy and the relentless nature of historical forces.

- How is it possible for an abstract painting to express political ideals? Consider colour, form, shape and scale.
- Explain how the formal qualities of this work create the sense of an elegy (a funeral song or poem). Write your own poem inspired by the painting.



Tony Tuckson *White over red on blue* c 1971

synthetic polymer paint on two composition boards 213.4 x 244 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1978

© Tony Tuckson. Licensed by Viscopy

Tony Tuckson was an important figure in the Australian art world and, as well as being an accomplished artist, was instrumental in building and promoting early art museum collections of Aboriginal art.

- Can you think of any similarities between Aboriginal art and Tuckson's work?

This painting combines areas of dense colour punctuated by lively brushstrokes, bringing together elements of colour field painting and action painting.

- What do the lines and shapes remind you of—do you think they tell a story? Would the story be the same for all viewers?



Peter Upward *June celebration* 1960

synthetic polymer paint on composition board; three panels 213.5 x 411.5 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1972

Peter Upward worked at a time when there was a rift between figurative and abstract artists in Australia. While some of his generation were creating images of urban life or landscapes, Upward said of his paintings 'the works are about themselves'.

- Can you explain what the artist meant by this statement?
- How do the brushstrokes convey a sense of energy and physical movement?
- Do they remind you of any other artforms—such as music, poetry or calligraphy? Name a poem, text or piece of music that has a similar feel to this work.
- Define the painting technique 'impasto' and describe how it is used by this artist.



Franz Kline *Untitled* 1950

synthetic polymer paint on telephone book page 22.6 x 27.8 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1980

© Franz Kline. Licensed by Viscopy

During the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism began to give way to Minimalism, which rejected the possibility of hidden meanings in art. Franz Kline's style is distinguished by strong, bold lines in black, resembling architecture, or perhaps mechanical forms.

- This work is painted on a page from a telephone book. Would it be different if it had been painted on a blank canvas? In what way?
- Discuss the use of positive / negative space in this work. Which other artists in the show actively use negative space?