

Introducing Modern Western Art : Movements and Artists
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Lecture - 17
Abstract Expressionism

Welcome viewers to MOOC's online course on Introduction to Modern Western Art Movements and Artists. And in this section called modern movements in the 20th century today we will be looking at abstract expressionism.

Abstract expressionism or abstract expression movement was one of the most how to say most remarkable art movements that took place in the second half of 20th century.

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM
1945 - 1965

It developed between the 1940's and the early 1960's.

It was an American post WWII movement.

These works of American artists were a kind of competition with the Europeans who migrated to the USA as refugees during and after the war.

We have already seen the nature of abstract art or particularly abstract painting in the previous lecture, but that was not part of a concerted movement, it was a coincidence it was historical simultaneity that early part of 20th century for the imagination of the artists in terms of the possibilities of abstract painting. But around 1945 when a few artists in America United States of America began to explore abstract paintings, which are very specific philosophical and conceptual framework. That came to be known or understood as a movement, not as individual efforts or individual projects.

So, abstract expressionism is a movement development between the 1940s and early 1950s. Secondly, as I have already mentioned it was an American movement, American

post World War 2 movement. And third these works of American artists were a kind of competition with the Europeans who migrated to the USA as refugees during and after the war. So, this is very interesting that for the first time now we see America emerging as a very important player in the history of modern western art. Until abstract expressionism modern western art was by enlarge ruled or dominated by the European artists. So, for the first time we see America coming into the scene.

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The artist combine the emotional intensity and self-expression of the Expressionist with the anti-figurative images of other Avant-Garde movements.

It can be divided in two groups:

Action Painting

and

Color Field and Hard Edge painting.

The movements found some parallel in other European movements.

Now, the artists here they combined the emotional intensity and self expression of the expressionists artists, with the anti figurative images of other avant garde movements. So, abstract painting as an idiom as a language was already existing, even before the abstract expressionist painters came into being. But then they re modified the entire postulate the entire understanding of the abstract painting as they were driven by not just a linguistic search, but an expressionist search or a psychological quest. Now historically speaking abstract expressionist painting can be divided into 2 groups. One action painting and second colour field or hard edge painting. Both this movements found some parallel in other European movements as well.

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Action Painting is a term that was used for the first time to describe Jackson Pollock's paintings.

Artists like Pollock, Franz Kline or Willem de Kooning used their psyche as the driving force for their works.

The canvas was seen as an arena and painting was irrational, instinctive and impulsive.

Yet, it was not merely impulse or apparently irrational instincts that generated these creations but an extraordinary skill and command over the technique -- that made these paintings change the course of modern art history.

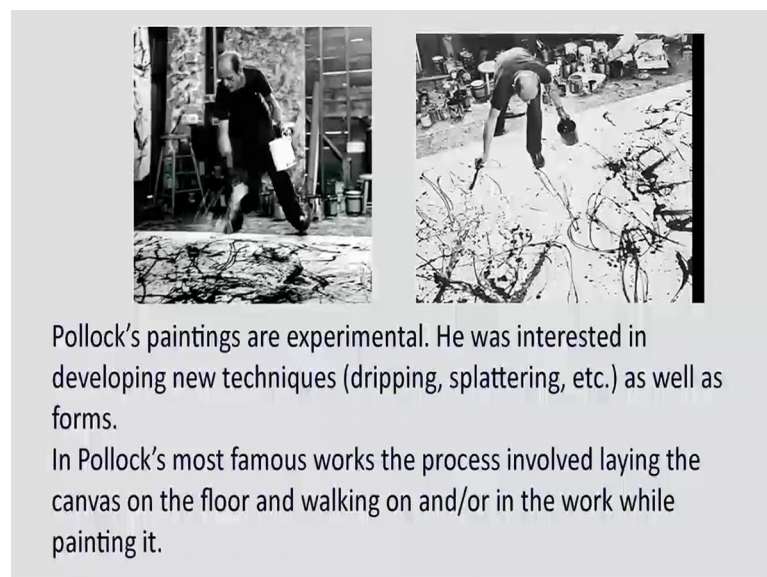
Now, action painting was a term that was used for the first time to describe Jackson Pollock's paintings, artists like Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline or Willem de Kooning used their psyche as the driving force for their works. And also used real life physical movement as a part of their process of their painting, and that is perhaps possibly why the action painting term came into being. The canvas was same as an arena and painting was same as an irrational instinctive and impulsive act. Yet it was not merely impulse or apparently irrational instincts that generated these creations, but an extraordinary skill and command over the technique that made these paintings change the course of modern art history.

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Even a quick look at 3 examples of abstract expressionist paintings by 3 distinctively famous artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline as we see; in this picture will give us an idea that now we are not just looking at so-called pure abstract paintings dealing with sensory impulses or sense of geometry, we are looking at a human expression, some kind of psychic irruption.

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Pollock's paintings are experimental. He was interested in developing new techniques (dripping, splattering, etc.) as well as forms. In Pollock's most famous works the process involved laying the canvas on the floor and walking on and/or in the work while painting it.

Now, these 2 photographs of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio, give us a clue why action painting as a term came into being, but before that it is to be understood that

Jackson Pollock's paintings are experimental in nature; in the sense that there was a huge element of unpredictability unknown elements in his works, because he was developing new techniques like dripping splattering which could not be controlled totally. So, he was depending on chance he was depending on accident to some extent, and Pollock's most famous works also have this process involved laying the canvas on the floor, and walking on and also in the work while painting it. But this is something that has never being done by any artists before.

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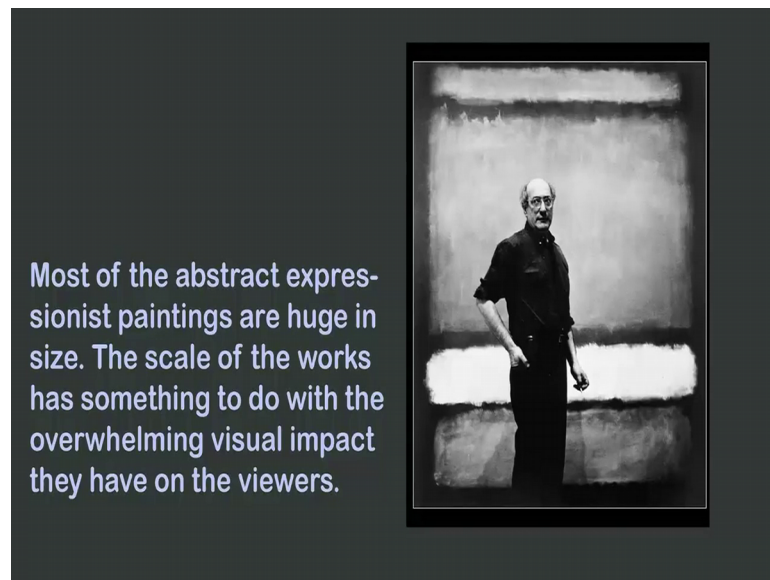


The act of painting was as important as the finished product;
the action should be felt by the viewer.

Walking on the painting and painting not by keeping the canvas vertical on the wall, but laying it on the floor. So, even the orientation between the artist and the painting between the painter and the painted object has been completely redefined in the work of Jackson Pollock.

So, the act of painting was as important as the finished product. The action should be felt by the viewers too this was something that was expected from the viewers.

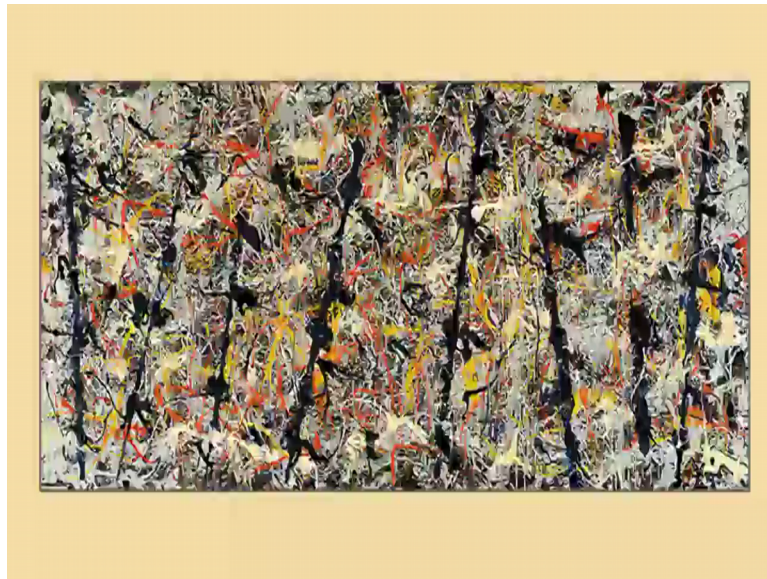
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Now, another important aspect with regard to abstract expression is paintings is the scale. Usually most of the abstract expressionist paintings whether it is by Jackson Pollock or William de Kooning Franz Kline, or in this photograph we see the photo the photography of painter Mark Rothko standing right in front of his paintings. The most of his paintings are big in size they are huge in scale, and thus they have an overwhelming visual impact on the viewers.

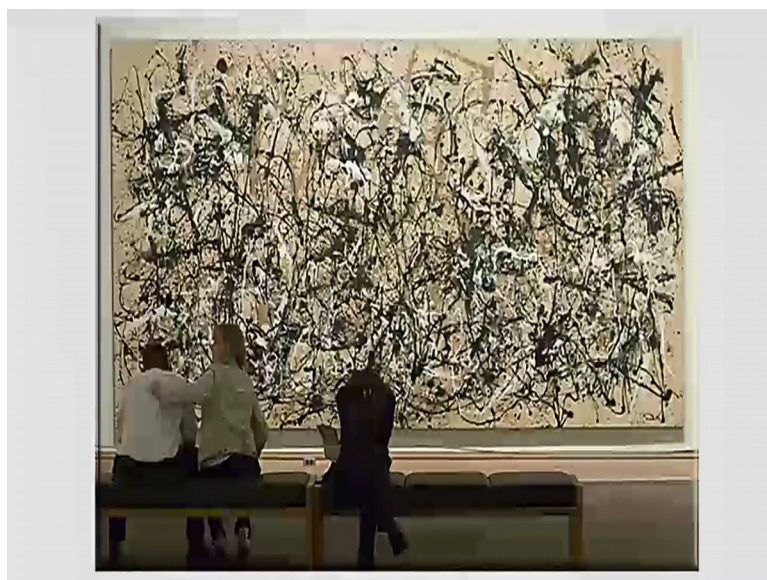
This is again I would say a conscious and a deliberate choice, to work on canvases which are big huge massive in scale, and I think there is this very this scale the size has got something to do with the very psychology or the psychological implication that these paintings might be having on us When we are looking at them.

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And that is why it is said that it is very difficult to experience, abstract expressionist paintings unless and until you have seen them in original. One has to see them in original one has to stand in front of them or sit in front of them like this one.

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I mean look at the scale the relationship in terms of size between the viewers, who are sitting right in front of one of the paintings by Pollock, and look at the size of the Pollock's painting itself. Now this overwhelming presence of a painting, that you are not looking at a representation or a view or an image or a motive, but you feel like immersed

in an environment created by a painting like this.

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And look at once again Another photograph of Jackson Pollock, who is not only painting, but he is also he has already entered into his own painting physically, very soon he will be walking over his painting And then finally, creating something like this.

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True abstract in nature, the very visual appearance of a painting like this it is completely abstract, but at the same time there is a tremendous sense of turmoil, agitation and a dynamic quality. And these things characterise a painting like this.

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Then you have somebody like Franz Kline and you can see in this photograph standing in front of extremely big huge massive paintings. To the extent that they do not look like paintings I mean studio paintings at all they look like murals, huge public wall murals, but they are not they are paintings painted inside the studio.

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So, when you stand in front of Franz Kline's painting once again, what you look at is not only a visual form or a symbol of expression, but you are encountering an experience and you are gradually getting engulfed by this visual experience. That was one of the

reasons why most of the abstract expressionists chose to work on huge scale or very, very big canvases.

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Now so, this proximity I mean huge scale and big canvas can push you away into a distance, but in these paintings they do not push you away, they bring you close to the form the forms get kind of over blown into size magnified in scale.

So, a very different relationship thus takes place between the viewer and the canvas when you are standing in front of an abstract expressionist painting like this, or this.

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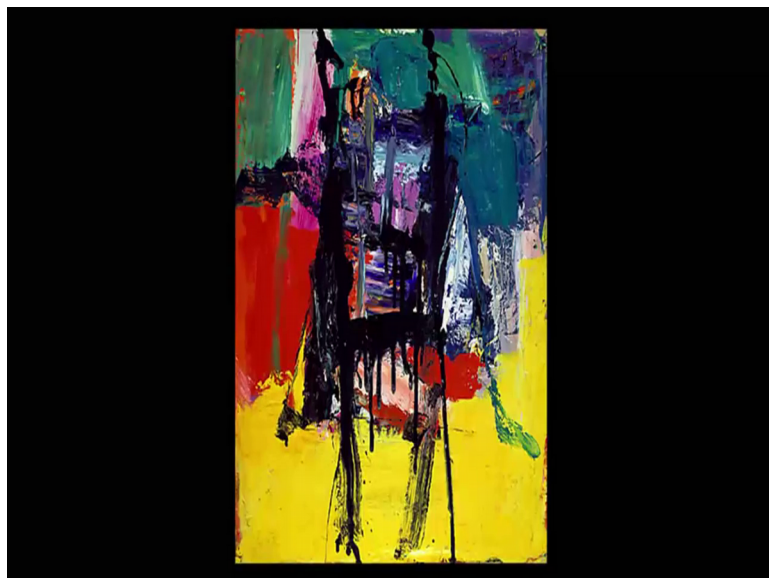


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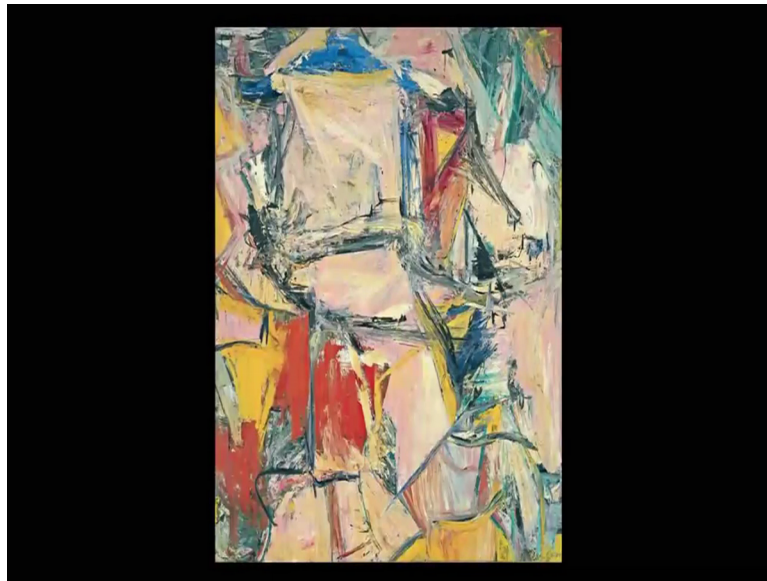


When you look at these images on your computer monitor or in a book or on a screen, they do not look really that big or huge. So, it is very important every time you look at an abstract expressionists painting printed on a book, or on a monitor screen. Please take note of the size of the canvas. And imagine that size in your mind and try to feel the impact of that canvas only after imagining the size following the scale or the dimensions given along with the reproduction of the paintings.

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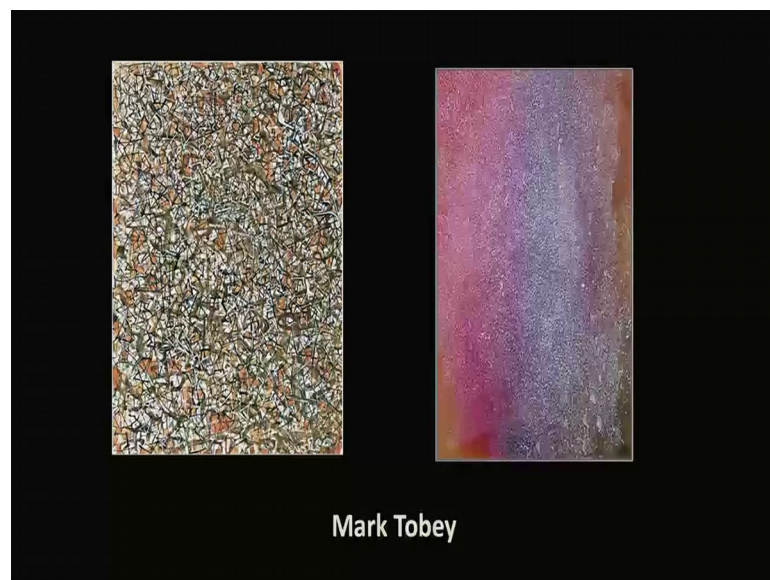


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Now, this is should be made clear that around late 1940s and fifties when these artists were doing abstract expressionist paintings.

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Abstract art language, abstraction as a visual idiom has already been more or less established and accepted by the viewers as a possibility of expression. But then most of the artists did not know how to go about it, where to take it further and this is where the contribution of these abstract expressionist painters is very, very significant.

All of them including marked obey here or previously we saw Willem De Kooning or

then Franz Kline Jackson Pollock. They all demonstrated to the world that abstraction can be taken to this enormous height, abstract paintings can create this huge impact on our visual psychic.

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And there are lot of painters who followed suit.

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Color Field and Hard Edge

There are two formal trends in American abstraction in the early 60's.

Color Field consists of large colored areas, without signs or forms that the eye can catch.

Color was used without any perspective, producing a sensation of impressive size.

The shades of color were diluted into the canvas.



Now, the second category of abstract expression is paintings, has been classified under this nomenclature called colour field and hard edge where; obviously, the action it is not So prominent or not there at all the paintings have been created by very, very careful,

application of colour with a clear predetermined idea where to apply which colour and to what extent. So, there is a very strong sense of calculation, in the second category of abstract paintings as opposed to the first category that is action painting, where calculation did not have any role to play. It by enlarge instinctive, instinctual and very impulsive.

Now, there are 2 formal trends in American abstraction in the early 60s. The color field consists of large colored areas without signs or forms that the eye can catch. Color was used without any perspective producing a sensation of impressive size. And the shades of colors were diluted in the canvas; so this color field and hard edge abstracts and expressionist paintings.

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Color Field and Hard Edge

Hard Edge described some works in which colourful atmospheres were emphasised.

The works have clearly defined outlines and edges and the precision clarify the compositions.

Representative of this movement are:

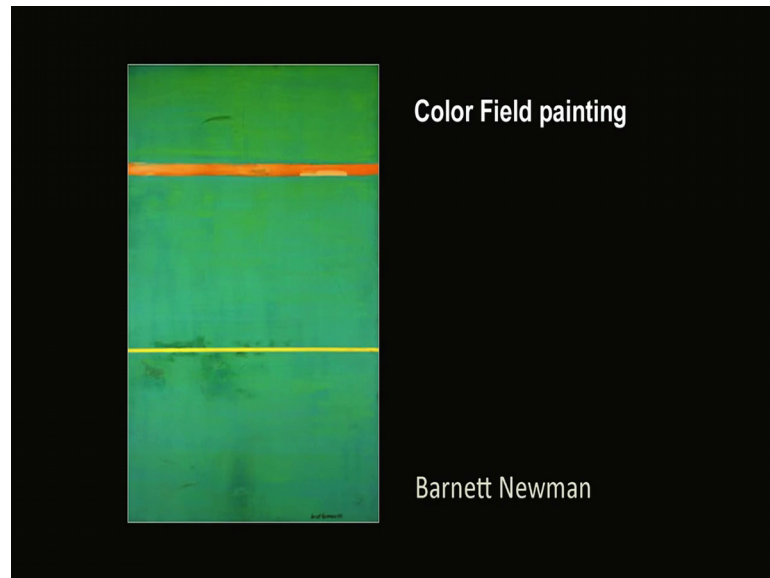
Rothko,
Barnet Newman,
Ellsworth Kelly,
Morris Louis,
Kenneth Nolan.

What you see is a very, very strong presence of color and or let us say a very strong presence of color as an entity by itself. Neither it has any sense of perspective or so called depth as we kind of perceive in our optical experience day to day experience, nor these colors represent anything from the real world. Now that is why hard edge color field paintings I mean describes some words in colorful atmospheres were emphasized. So, when you look at abstract expressionist paintings belonging to the second category, what you are looking at is an atmosphere created by very strong presence of colors, which do not have any references to the real world. The words have very clearly defined outlines and edges and the precision clarify the compositions and sometimes the edges

have been diluted deliberately as you see in mark Rothko's paintings.

The most important representatives of this movement are mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Kenneth Nolan beside others.

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Now, this is one example of color field painting by Barnett Newman. One can sense or feel a sense of depth with space, but that is not what has been intended in this painting. You are not actually supposed to measure any sense of space or depth. If you feel it is extremely subjective, it is not the part of the intention of this painting.

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Now, once again this photograph gives us an idea about the scale of a painting by Barnett Newman. Apparently it is a very simple painting huge blue expanse, with a very thin narrow white strip running through the painting. Vertically and that is what you will be looking at still you do not get bored there is no monotony.

Now, the fact that in spite of the fact that these kinds of paintings do not have many elements to offer to keep you engaged; yet there are 100s of viewers who can keep looking at a painting like this for hours, because these paintings are contemplative by nature. These paintings are not narrative, these paintings are not descriptive.

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These paintings do not want to engage you with details these paintings do not have any details, but these paintings do offer you a huge deep contemplative space for you to engage. With and that is what happens with the paintings by mark Rothko paintings by Barnett Newman.

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The paintings by many other abstract expressionist painters, who have worked with this color field expressions. But these are not expressions of direct experiences of human beings, their experiences of philosophical thought of an idea. Creating space for the human beings that is viewers to engage with mostly philosophically.

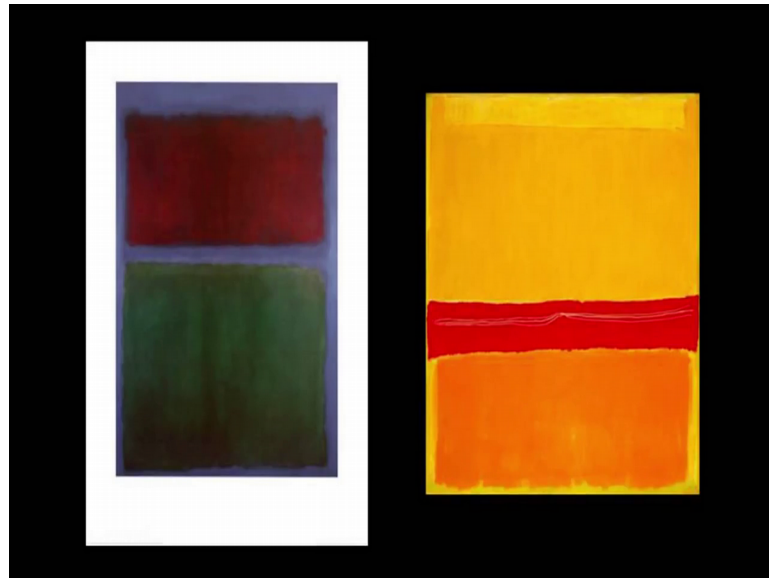
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Now, the fact that these paintings not only themselves, but they can actually help us the viewers to take the experience of looking at a painting beyond narrative, beyond descriptions, and in the realm of thought, in the realm of contemplation, in the realm of

deep absorbing movements. This entire credit goes to the movement called abstract expressionism like this.

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I mean you can keep looking at 100s of different abstractionist paintings, which apparently look very similar to each other, but once you make yourself familiarized with abstract expressionist paintings. So, you will realize that despite the apparent similarity between each other each of these paintings offer you a slightly different contemplative space.

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And once you are able to respond to different tones, hues, colors as you see them you not only contemplate philosophically or conceptually you can also contemplate on the colors, that these paintings have, because these colors may not have any representational references, but they do have a very strong quality of absorptions, like this one.

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And because they can absorb your mind you are looking for a long time, that is exactly why these painting can keep us engaged for long time for many hours, without any descriptive details, without any narrative clues, without any referential hints at all.

That is the real truth of abstract expressionist paintings. And that is exactly why abstract expressionist paintings as a movement, we can immensely successful in a world which was steeped in description and narration for a long time since the renaissance or even before the renaissance in the history of European art.

Thank you.