

Press release



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Fundación **BBVA**

Cultivating and promoting knowledge based on scientific research and artistic and cultural creation, added to interaction between both domains, constitute the nucleus of the Fundación BBVA work program. This is the framework of our collaboration as Strategic Sponsor of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, an institution we have accompanied and supported since its birth. The institution opened its doors to the public in October 1997 with *The Guggenheim Museums and The Art of This Century*, and the next major exhibition – opened a few months later – was *China: 5000 years*, which already carried the stamp of our institution. Since then, and every year, we have enabled an exhibition that has brought visitors art from the major cultural and geographic areas (Russia or the Aztec Empire), artistic techniques like drawing, completely new forms of creation (such as Louise Bourgeois' *The Cells*), and the work of authors who have helped us to better understand our time, the social changes that constitute it and the very essence of the human condition, including Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, Claes Oldenburg, and Jeff Koons.

The Fundación BBVA contributes to the enormous effort thanks to which the more than 130 works constituting *Abstract Expressionism*, created by the leading exponents of the tendency, have found their way to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. I observe the pages of the catalogue with the satisfaction of sponsoring an extraordinary exhibition given the importance of its works, some of which are leaving the American continent for the first time. I would also like to share with readers the satisfaction felt by the Fundación BBVA on participating with an extraordinary project such as this in the Museum's 20th Anniversary celebrations, thereby renewing our commitment to the institution. Fostering the art of our time is part of our contribution to society by means of its cultural dimension.

The vibrant energy emanating from these paintings, sculptures and photographs expresses the dynamism of one of the most influential art movements of the 20th century, which had its origin in New York and became an international tendency. Adopting formal abstraction, the artists develop a freedom of expression unprecedented in the history of art. Although Abstract Expressionism constitutes a ground-breaking phenomenon, its leading figures took recourse to sources as heterogeneous as primitive art, German Romanticism, Surrealism, Cubism or Expressionism and received the influence of great masters like Bosch or Rembrandt. Both the biographies of many of the abstract expressionists, marked with countless dramatic or difficult episodes, and the international post-war context in which they developed their art contributed to the intensity appreciable in the majority of these pieces, which cover a wide spectrum of human existence, from the worldliest aspects to poetic, mythical and even transcendental subjects.

I am certain that numerous visitors will want to observe these iconic creations by the most celebrated North American artists and to approach the formal, intellectual, emotional and spiritual investigations of their authors. Lending strength to each work with the spectator's response to it was one of the premises of Abstract Expressionism. This retrospect constitutes an excellent opportunity to give free rein to the emotions prompted by art.

I would like to congratulate on this 20th anniversary the team of fine professionals at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, with Juan Ignacio Vidarte at its head, and the curators David Anfam, Lucía Agirre and Edith Devaney, who have made this exhibition possible, for once again turning the focus on Bilbao as the national and international center of contemporary culture and for permitting us to participate in an excellent museum project.

Francisco González
Chairman of the Fundación BBVA

Abstract Expressionism

- Dates: from February 3 to June 4, 2017
 - Exhibition organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, London, with the collaboration of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
 - Curators: David Anfam, Edith Devaney, and Lucía Agirre
 - Sponsored by Fundación BBVA
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- Unlike the other key 20th-century artistic movements, Cubism and Surrealism, which predated it, Abstract Expressionism refuses to be bound by any formula and is instead a celebration of individual diversity and freedom.
 - Mostly colossal canvasses, some of these works are intense, expressive, and spontaneous, while others are contemplative, yet they all redefined the nature of painting.
 - In Jackson Pollock's words, "Abstract painting is abstract. It confronts you." The artists express their emotions and convey their presence through the works, but the observer's perception is what brings them full circle.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Abstract Expressionism*, an ambitious selection of works by the artists who spearheaded a major shift and new apogee in painting in New York which began in the 1940's. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, David Smith, and Clyfford Still are just some of the artists in the show, which brings together more than 130 paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs from public and private collections all over the world. This exhibition sheds new light on Abstract Expressionism, a diverse, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon which is often erroneously viewed as a unified whole. The presentation in Bilbao has been made possible thanks to the generous sponsorship of Fundación BBVA, and with support from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Back in the years of free jazz and the poetry of the Beat generation, with the Second World War as the backdrop, a group of artists broke with the established conventions and ushered in a movement which was born of a shared artistic and life experience, even though they each had their own style. Unlike the Cubism and Surrealism which predated it, Abstract Expressionism refuses to be bound by any formula and is instead a celebration of individual diversity and freedom of expression.

Characteristics of this movement include works on a colossal scale which are sometimes intense, spontaneous, and extraordinarily expressive, while other times they are more contemplative through the use of vast color fields. These creations redefined the nature of painting and aspired not only to be admired from afar but also to be enjoyed in two-way encounters between the artist and the viewer. Just as the artists express their emotions and convey the sense that these emotions are brought into the work, the viewer's perception is the last step in this interaction. Thus, "Abstract painting is abstract. It confronts

you,” as Jackson Pollock stated in 1950. Furthermore, the intensity of this encounter could be further accentuated by the way the works are displayed, as exemplified in the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

Tour through the exhibition

Gallery 205

Early works

The early years of Abstract Expressionism reflect the ill-fated era in which the movement materialized, a time that was marred by two World Wars and the Great Depression. This can be seen in the sinister skeletons of Jackson Pollock's series *Untitled Panels A–D* (1934–38), the architecture depicted by Mark Rothko in *Interior* (1936), and the Philip Guston work *The Porch* (1946–47), where the human figure seems to be threatened and takes on a macabre tone clearly influenced by the Holocaust. In the 1940's, these connotations evolved towards a more universal language which included the creation of myths such as *Idolatrix I* (1944) by Hans Hofmann (1942–43), archetypes such as Pollock's totemic *Male and Female*, and primitivistic forms such as the savage biomorphs of Richard Pousette-Dart's *Undulation* (ca. 1941–42). Willem de Kooning conferred a subjective sensitivity on abstract motifs in *Untitled* (1939–40), while in their collaborative piece *Untitled* (1940–41), William Baziot, Gerome Kamrowski, and Pollock showcase another popular trend of allowing the paint to flow almost at whim.

Arshile Gorky

Arshile Gorky's (Armenia, 1904 –Connecticut, 1948) importance stemmed from his in-depth knowledge of art history, which he conveyed to his protégé De Kooning, coupled with his ability to fuse trends like Cubism and Surrealism to create a new syntax. This hybrid language appeared early on in *Untitled (Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia)* (ca. 1931–32), which evokes the proto-Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico.

Gorky later revealed his talent as a master of color and line, and between 1944 and 1945 he reached his peak with paintings like *Water of the Flowery Mill* (1944) and *The Unattainable* (1945). Tragic events, like the fire in his studio and a traffic accident which almost cost him his life, made Gorky's art take on a cold, elegiac tone, as seen in *The Limit* and *The Orators*, both from 1947, until his tragic death in 1948.

Gallery 206

Willem de Kooning

De Kooning (Rotterdam, 1904 - New York, 1997) was the master of the gesture as a reflection of raw emotion. His paintings swayed between abstraction and figuration, creating explosive, rebellious effects. After an early obsession with female eroticism, he went on to explore another dimension. His 1949 work *Zot* (which means “demented” in Dutch) conceals a condensed dramatic quality in which vestiges of the figure and other details clash with and blur into each other.

From the same period, *Abstraction* (1949–50) revealed the potent religious symbolism that permeated the artist's iconography, which spans from lust and perdition to salvation, making it a modern take on the reflections on the human condition rendered by the masters of classical painting.

Representations of females were a constant feature in de Kooning's oeuvre, although by the 1960's they took a turn towards the grotesque, while he simultaneously made these women more accessible, such as in *Woman as Landscape* (1965–66). De Kooning contrasted the febrile universe of female sexuality with the chaos of the modern city in what the artist called feelings of "leaving the city or returning to it." Thus, in *Villa Borghese* (1960) and *Untitled* (1961), the strips of pastel hues exude an air of freedom, in line with the enjoyment and serenity that the artist got from nature. And in the 1970's, his style became more fluid and contemplative, as can be seen in the work ... *Whose Name Was Written in Water* (1975), in which the use of paint diluted with oil yielded longer and more gestural brushstrokes.

Franz Kline

By the time he held his first solo show in 1950, Franz Kline (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1910 – New York, 1962) revealed a mature oeuvre in which he explored black and white in contradictory configurations and violent imbalances, creating images that were at once architectural and poetic. The titles of Franz Kline's works summon a universe made up of people and spaces from the industrial and mining region of Pennsylvania, where he was born, along with romantic reminiscences of Europe, such as *Requiem* (1958), in which Kline depicts an ominous world. Even though his monochromatic brushstrokes look spontaneous, his technique was among the most deliberate of all the Abstract Expressionists. Kline, who often created his paintings based on drawings, worked at night and used diluted commercial paints and thick brushes, as in *Untitled* from 1952, one of his most celebrated works. Shortly before his premature death, he managed to achieve extraordinary horizontal dynamism and once again introduced an almost fluorescent glow which stressed the bravado of his large-scale dramas, as seen in *Andrus*, named after the doctor who treated his heart disease.

Gallery 207

Mark Rothko

The paintings that Mark Rothko (Daugavpils, Russia [now Latvia], 1903–New York, 1970) made in the 1950's and 1960's perfectly capture his zeal for creating abstract personifications of powerful human feelings such as tragedy, ecstasy, and fatality, as the artist himself explained. Instantly recognizable, Rothko's floating rectangles have inspired countless interpretations, such as that they replace the human presence, that they abstractly and sublimely symbolize the landscape, and that they express moods.

By eliminating any trace of narrative from his compositions, which are simple in appearance, he clears the path to a more direct emotional response to the image. Rothko called his paintings "façades," a term that refers to both the frontality with which the works confront the viewer and their enigmatic hypnotism, given that by definition façades both reveal and conceal at the same time. The auras which sometimes surround the color fields give them a luminous halo and a strange mix of stillness and drama, such as in the large "wall of light," *Untitled*, from 1952-53, which is part of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Collection.

Even though Rothko created more colorful or darker canvases at different stages in his life, after 1957 his works primarily veered toward darkness. The paintings displayed here span from his early exploration of light to his later relationship with shadows.

Gallery 209

Jackson Pollock

Jackson Pollock (Cody, Wyoming, 1912–Springs, New York, 1956) is regarded as the leading practitioner of Abstract Expressionism. With the giant mural that he painted for the home of the collector and patron Peggy Guggenheim in 1943, he reached a milestone in the history of early Abstract Expressionism, paving the way for both Rothko and Gorky to produce their largest paintings the following year. His *Mural* (1943), which combines bold paint application with a colossal size, gave Pollock the confidence to explore the painting process on the huge surfaces in *Portrait of HM* (1945) and *Night Mist* (1945), until he reached his characteristic style in 1947–1950.

With the untreated canvas spread over the ground, Pollock poured and splattered his pigments with surprising control, creating labyrinths that followed the rhythm of his body and suggested both a kind of mental script and muscular release. Pollock described these extraordinary tracings as “energy and motion made visible, memories arrested in space.” Perhaps the most striking feature is how Pollock’s extraordinarily personal style was anything but a constraint and instead managed to generate such a wide range of effects.

Traumatized by Pollock’s death in the summer of 1956 it took his wife Lee Krasner until 1960 to wrestle with his formidable ghost. The outcome was the bounding rhythms and arcing vectors of *The Eye Is the First Circle*. As such, this monumental canvas ranks as perhaps the most memorable single tribute to Pollock’s seismic achievement. A similar sense of inward immensity marks the almost micrographic fields that Krasner and the Ukrainian-American artist Janet Sobel crafted in the late 1940s. In turn, Sobel’s fusion of the micro- and macrocosmic most likely impressed Pollock and influenced his subsequent adoption of the “all-over” painting style. Similarly Robert Motherwell, whose more than 200 *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (1965–75) are contemplative; the version in this gallery in particular was inspired by Pollock’s *Mural*, doubling as a memorial to that artist. Smith’s sculpture *Tanktotem III* (1953) evokes a prancing bestial presence spun out of *Mural* into three dimensions.

Gallery 203

Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt

Two artists with such different backgrounds and temperaments like Barnett Newman (New York, 1905 – New York, 1970) and Ad Reinhardt (Buffalo, New York, 1913 – New York, 1967) took color to the limit, and their decorative and sensorial associations tended towards the absolute. By the late 1940’s, Newman had established his two main painting motifs: thin vertical lines, also known as zips, which were used to create focal points, and the range of bright colors that these lines organized. In *Galaxy* (1949), Newman suggests an embryonic cosmos, while in *Eve* (1950) and *Adam* (1951–52), the lines combined with earthy browns and reds take on an organic aura, as if the couple were announcing an act of creation. In *Ulysses* (1952) and *Profile of Light* (1967), blue evokes the immensity of the ocean in the former and a transcendental sublimity in the latter.

Reinhardt, in turn, takes the rectangle as the basic element of painting in order to condense the chroma, or the apparent saturation of the colors, to the utmost. The reds and blues he created in the 1950’s led to

a darkness that hinted at the idea of emptiness and the irrevocable. After 1953, Reinhardt only made “black” paintings, sensing that he had managed to strip art down to its purest essence. Yet despite their monochromatic appearance, these works are actually made up of grids painted in saturated tones of red, blue, and green, in a hypnotic interaction that tests the limits of vision.

Gallery 202

Blurred Epicenter

Even though Abstract Expressionism has its roots in New York, its sphere of influence spread to artists on the U.S. West coast as well, such as Sam Francis (San Mateo, California, 1923–Santa Monica, California, 1994).

During the 1950s, Francis’s work shifted from almost monochromatic compositions dense with corpuscular motifs to others glowing with rich hues and, finally, an uplifted openness evoking rarefied, empyrean voids. Outpacing neat categories that sometimes pigeonhole the Abstract Expressionists into “colour-field” artists versus “gesturalists”, Guston, Joan Mitchell and the young Helen Frankenthaler evolved their own respective visual palimpsests by the second half of the 1950s.

Mitchell’s *Salut Tom* is an apotheosis wherein sunlight and shade contend. The quadriptych format probably recalls Monet’s enveloping *Nymphéas* as it aggrandizes the artist’s faith in the “landscape I carry around inside me”. Again, though, the sentiment is valedictory: the title commemorates the critic Thomas B. Hess, who championed Abstract Expressionism. Whether in Guston’s lush yet fragile impasto, Mitchell’s fleet, tactile brushwork or Frankenthaler’s lyrical oil washes that sketch myths and memories as they permeate the canvas, each artist created their own unique fusion of colour and gesture.

More A “Phenomenon” Than A “Movement”

In its late phase, the Abstract Expressionists went in different directions, faithful to their individualism. Some artists embraced darkness, like Motherwell in the work *In Plato’s Cave No. 1* (1972). Tworkov’s gravely meditative *Idling II* (1970) makes a tacit yet eloquent complement to his friend Rothko’s stern visual endgame, the latter works sealed by their distancing white borders. Mark Tobey’s works are imbued with spirituality. In *Parnassus* (1963), dynamic black lines show the influence of Zen calligraphy on Tobey, whose “white writing” ended up becoming his hallmark. Other artists explored more luminous terrains, such as William Baziotes and his watery world, in which phantasms sporting tentacles roam through phosphorescent depths. Their mythic cast – redolent with deep time and primitivism – recalls Abstract Expressionism’s early interests, now writ large, while the opalescent textures intimate a universe glimpsed distantly in the mind’s eye. Guston, in turn, went back to his origins by painting figurative images in the late 1950’s, which earned him fierce criticism that led him to retire from the art world.

Guston’s figuration, which is present in his early work, is revisited here in *Low Tide* (1976), where the waters of abstraction ebb to reveal unsettling fragments. Simultaneously hobnail heels and parodies of the letter “omega” – the last in the Greek alphabet – Guston’s quiet apocalypse also doubles as timely pictorial metaphor. Ominous orbs rise / set on the ruddy Abstract Expressionist horizon.

Gallery 204

Photography

The critic Harold Rosenberg's definition of Abstract Expressionism as "action painting" in 1952 excluded photography. However, Aaron Siskind had close ties to the Abstract Expressionist painters, as did Minor White, who taught alongside Clyfford Still for many years. The bold marks, graffiti, and textures captured by Siskind and other photographers like Frederick Sommer share the same expressive concern with violence, darkness, and immediacy that we find in the Abstract Expressionists' paintings. Harry Callahan, Herbert Matter (a close friend of Pollock), the prolific Albanian-born 'Life' photographer Gjon Mili, and Barbara Morgan all conjured up abstract ideograms and swift motion that match the painters' goals. The most influential photographic images include the ones by Hans Namuth portraying Pollock in action, which were used to expand the limited, hierarchical definition of Abstract Expressionism.

Gallery 208

Clyfford Still

Clyfford Still (Grandin, North Dakota, 1904–Baltimore, Maryland, 1980) was always a diehard outsider. He remained close to the immensity of the western U.S. and only lived in New York for 12 of his 75 years. This geographic distance from the center of art tinged his originality. He was gifted at drawing, had extensive knowledge of art history, and was a fan of some of the great masters. This paradoxically kindled Still's radicalism, as heralded in *PH-235* (1944), one of the early milestones in Abstract Expressionism. Beginning in dispersed landscapes, verticality became the main theme in his oeuvre through either extremely thin "lifelines" or imposing monoliths. Still associated verticality with the uprightness of the erect being and spiritual transcendence, whose opposite was the yawning abyss. Thus, his work wages a battle between luminosity and darkness, somehow merging life and death. For the first time, the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, which holds 95% of the artist's work, will loan nine major paintings to the exhibition, establishing the artist at the very forefront of Abstract Expressionism.

David Smith (in several galleries)

In 1934, David Smith (Decatur, Indiana, 1906 - Vermont, 1965) began to weld metal sculptures using an oxyacetylene torch; these were probably the first welded-metal sculptures made in the United States. He soon discovered Terminal Iron Works, a commercial welding operation on the Brooklyn Waterfront. Smith is the leading sculptor from the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, and his ideas and visual universe echo the concerns of the movement as a whole. The sculptures scattered about different galleries represent the oeuvre Smith produced from the late 1940's until his premature death in 1965, and they evince the constant interaction between the sculptor and the painters. Some of his works explore upright forms that abstractly evoke the human presence, while others are more austere, sometimes mechanistic and other times architectural, such as the dazzling stainless steel surfaces of *Cubi XXVII* (1965).

Didactic Space

In the didactic hallway on the second floor, discover how the origins of Abstract Expressionism were directly related to political events such as the Cold War. Texts, images, and film fragments describe the political and cultural changes that took place at the time when New York became the international center of artistic creation.

Shared Reflections

Discover the newest exhibitions on tours led by museum professionals.

- Wednesday February 15, Curatorial Vision led by Lucía Agirre, Curator
- Wednesday February 22, Key Concepts led by Marta Arzak, Associate Director for Education and Interpretation

Meeting point: Information desk. Time: 6:30-7:30 pm. tickets: € (Members €), museum ticket not included. Must reserve in advance by visiting guggenheim-bilbao.eus. Minimum: 8 people per group, maximum: 20. * Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Catalogue

Abstract Expressionism will come with a fully illustrated catalogue. Its authors include David Anfam, author of the seminal book *Abstract Expressionism* (1990); Susan Davidson, Senior Curator, Collections and Exhibitions, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Edith Devaney, Contemporary Projects Curator, Royal Academy of Arts; Jeremy Lewison, former Director of Collections at the Tate; Carter Ratcliff, author of *Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art* (1996); and Christian Wurst, researcher for *The Catalogue Raisonné of the Drawings of Jasper Johns* (forthcoming).

For more information:

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For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: media@guggenheim-bilbao.es

Willem de Kooning

Untitled, ca. 1939

Oil on paper mounted on canvas

95.8 x 73.7 cm

Private collection

© The Willem de Kooning Foundation, New York /VEGAP,
Bilbao, 2016



Jackson Pollock

Male and Female, 1942–43

Oil on canvas

186.1 x 124.3 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mr and Mrs H. Gates Lloyd,
1974

Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art

© The Pollock-Krasner Foundation VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016



Jackson Pollock

Mural, 1943

Oil and casein on canvas

243.2 x 603.2 cm

The University of Iowa Museum of Art. Gift of Peggy
Guggenheim, 1959.6

© The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016



Philip Guston

The Porch, 1946–47

Oil on canvas

147.6 x 91.4 cm

Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois on behalf of the
Krannert Art Museum, Champaign. University of Illinois
purchase, 1948-10-1

© The Estate of Philip Guston/Cortesía Hauser & Wirth



Barnett Newman*Galaxy*, 1949

Oil on canvas

60.1 x 50.8 cm

Collection of Lynn and Allen Turner

© The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York/VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

**David Smith**

Star Cage, 1950

Painted and brushed steel

114 x 130.2 x 65.4 cm

Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

The John Rood Sculpture Collection

© The Estate of David Smith, VAGA, New York / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

**Clyfford Still***PH-950*, 1950

Oil on canvas

233.7 x 177.8 cm

Courtesy Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, Colorado

© City and County of Denver, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

**Robert Motherwell***Wall Painting No. III*, 1953

Oil on canvas

137.1 x 184.5 cm

Private collection. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

© Dedalus Foundation, Inc. /VAGA, NY/VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

**Mark Rothko***Yellow Band*, 1956

Oil on canvas

218.8 x 201.9 cm

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska – Lincoln. Sheldon

Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial, N-130.1961

© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/VEGAP, Bilbao,

2016

Photo: © Sheldon Museum of Art

**Helen Frankenthaler***Europa*, 1957

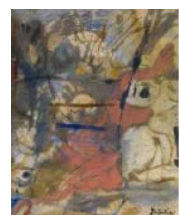
Oil on canvas

177.8 x 138.4 cm

Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York

© Helen Frankenthaler / VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

Photo: Robert McKeever



Conrad Marca-Relli

East Wall (LL-10-59), 1959

Collage and mixed media on canvas

197.5 x 305 cm

Private collection, Parma. Courtesy Archivio Marca-Relli

© Archivio Marca-Relli, Parma.

Photo: Roberto Ricci

**William Baziotes**

Mariner, 1960–61

Oil on canvas

167.8 x 198.2 cm

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.

Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991

© The Estate of William Baziotes

**Willem De Kooning**

Untitled (Woman in Forest), ca. 1963–64

Oil on paper, mounted on Masonite

73.7 x 86.4 cm

Private collection

© The Willem de Kooning Foundation, New York /VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

**Jack Tworkov**

Idling II, 1970

Oil on canvas

203.2 x 177.8 cm

Courtesy The Estate of Jack Tworkov, and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

© Estate of Jack Tworkov/VEGAP, Bilbao, 2016

