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Abstraction in Modern Painting: A Comparison

by IRVING LAVIN, *Department of Art, Vassar College*

Among the currents of contemporary painting few people would fail to agree that the major one, at least from the quantitative point of view, is "abstraction." The word itself is perhaps the most hotly debated one in the terminology of modern art. To the initiated, abstraction is an article of faith, even a way of life, while to most laymen and many professionals as well, it is anathema, signifying the final alienation of the artist from the broad masses of society with which artists of earlier periods were, supposedly, much more in tune.

It is not unusual for a style of painting, or rather a name for a style, to incite such widely opposed reactions, but it is remarkable that in this case the polemics have lasted so long. The usual cycle is that a name is first applied derogatorily to an innovation that runs counter to commonly accepted values. Then, after a period of subversive infiltration, common values are themselves reoriented to accept, even to admire, the innovation. Finally the name for it becomes virtually neutral. Few people today hate or admire all baroque art on principle, merely because it is baroque. Some baroque art we like, some we dislike. But the term itself is no longer "charged," either positively or negatively.

Perhaps "abstraction" will follow the same line of evolution; but thus far it has not. This is rather curious, for if we date the beginnings of modern abstract art to the emergence of cubism, then the style has been with us for more than half a century. And in this day of mass communication some explanation is required for the

fact that we, meaning society in general, still have not been able to come to terms with abstraction, either by rejecting or accepting it.

Many supporters of abstraction argue that the fault (if fault it is) lies with the public. Modern man, especially in America, is so concerned with the material, the physical, aspects of life that he cannot understand and therefore cannot abide a point of view that regards a painting as something more or at least something other than a two-dimensional counterfeit of the visible world. Others claim that it is just a matter of time: after centuries of naturalism people require a period of "adjustment" to get used to abstract art. There is probably a good deal of truth in both these arguments, but they are really questions for the sociologist. In any case I do not feel they can give the whole answer, for it is also possible that there is something about abstract art itself that makes it stick continually in the throat as society tries to swallow it.

I do not believe this something to be the fact of its abstractness. There have been many periods in which abstraction in one form or another was considered an entirely valid artistic idiom. And I feel that if abstraction had stopped with the various phases of cubism, as it did in the case of Picasso, whom even the man on the street today regards as an old master, the educated public would certainly by now have digested it.

This may lead us to the heart of the matter. Reproduced in Figure 1 is a painting by the Italian-born American artist Joseph Stella, done in 1914. Figure 2 represents a canvas by one of the prime movers of contemporary American abstraction, Jackson Pollock, dated 1950. In certain respects these two works are remarkably

This paper was first presented in June 1960, before a gathering of alumnae at Vassar College.

alike. Both are very large—the Stella over six feet high, the Pollock more than eight feet high and seventeen feet wide. Both seem entirely abstract, that is, nonrepresentational. Both artists covered the entire canvas with a homogeneous design that does not involve a normal spatial recession. Both used strong pure colors that are distributed more or less evenly throughout. Clearly, then, the two works have many things in common. And if one were to consider only the similarities it would be all the more remarkable that the thirty-six intervening years have not been long enough for people to make their peace with this kind of painting.

But the similarities are actually quite superficial. The work by Stella consists of a large number of small geometric shapes whose visual effect is extremely ambiguous. We can read them as all being flat on the surface, in which case the painting becomes a huge, brightly colored jigsaw puzzle. Or we can read them as if they were all projecting into space at different angles, like splinters of glass, absorbing or reflecting light in different intensities and of different colors. In that case, the painting reads as though we were looking out on a scene through a sheet of glass that has been systematically worked over by a steam roller. The impression is intensified by the fact that the colors and shapes are not entirely uniform. The colors at the bottom are darker and more saturated than those at the middle and top. In the center of the composition there is an area in which the colors are lightest of all. And running diagonally are a number of lines that converge and diverge in such a way that again we can read them on the surface, but also as suggestive of space and depth—like the orthogonals in a perspective drawing. This view of the painting is confirmed by the fact that it is entitled *Spring*. The artist has given a geometrized rendering of a spring landscape in which light, bouncing off and passing through objects, is broken up into a kaleidoscopic and scintillating array. It is, in a word, a cubist analysis of a visual phenomenon. By reducing each shape and color to its simplest terms the artist has captured and made permanent a transitory visual experience without, however, producing a two-dimensional counterfeit of it in the impressionist sense.



Fig. 1. Spring, 1914, by Joseph Stella (1880-1946), American

Yale University Art Gallery

So far so good. A systematic, logical analysis has taken place which, like the proof of the Pythagorean theorem, is very beautiful when you think about it, but not really very difficult to follow once you understand the problem. This

is why I said that if abstraction had gone no further than cubism, people by now would have no trouble appreciating it.

In the Pollock, by contrast, there are no simple shapes at all, and certainly no direct reference to nature, even in the highly distorted sense we found in the Stella. What is more, there is no systematic analysis of a visual experience or, for that matter, any other kind of experience. On the contrary, we feel that systematic analysis was the farthest thing from the artist's mind. He was painting, as it were, entirely on impulse.

Taking a big brush or stick (which in addition to knives, trowels, and so on, he increasingly preferred to more orthodox implements), he loaded it with beige paint and slashed it on the canvas. The arrangement of these slashes seems entirely haphazard; yet they are very consistent and different from the other areas of paint. They tend to be broad, not thin. They tend to be straight, not curved. They tend to meet in sharp angles, like colliding comets. They are placed at almost but not quite regular intervals, so that they serve to punctuate the space, as a syncopated drumbeat might punctuate a continuous melody above it.

Alternatively, Pollock took a stick loaded heavily with black. But instead of slashing, he swung it about above the canvas, throwing off thin streams of paint that flow continuously in sweeping curves. The lines weave round and about and in and out, so that wherever the eye lights it is caught up in the same swift path that Pollock's body followed.

Another stick he quickly jerked at the canvas, peppering the surface with tiny dots of paint. This he did several times with black, brown, and white. Because of their different sizes, colors, and spacing, some of the dots seem far away while others seem quite near; some seem dead and lifeless, others bright and shimmering. Again without painting away the canvas with an illusion of reality, Pollock created a vast space that gives this passionate and utterly private drama a cosmic setting.

Although he used five or six colors, the overall tonality of the painting is brown; it is a brown mood. And of the elements of paint, whether lines, dots, or slashes, none stands out for very long. Our eye picks out first one, then another,

in a never-ending series in which the intervals consist not only of space, the distance from one to the next, but also of time, the time it required for the artist to make them and for our eye to move from one to the next. What with the brown mood and this space-time sequence, I think we can understand the painting's seemingly enigmatic title, *Autumn Rhythm*. It too is a landscape, and a landscape at a particular season. But of course it is a very different sort of landscape from Stella's. Stella analyzed what he saw—which after all is what painters had been doing for centuries. Pollock did at once a great deal less and a great deal more: he recorded only what he felt.

This requires a certain qualification, however. To say that Pollock recorded what he felt implies that first he felt something and then he put it down on canvas; it implies a period of analysis. But there was no such period, at least not in theory. Discounting interruptions for sleeping, eating, or what have you, it may have taken Pollock, let's say, six hours of actual painting time to execute this picture. And if we continued our exploration of it we could, indeed we would almost be forced to, reconstruct each splash and slash. It would also take us about six hours, in the course of which we would in a sense have re-experienced every act and hence every impulse that produced the painting.

What we are experiencing, therefore, is not Pollock's reaction to a scene viewed or an emotion felt some time ago, but the very act of creation. Needless to say, this is a degree of audience participation that had never even been dreamt of before. And in the face of this achievement I am sure you will agree that the fact that the painting seems by its title to have something to do with an autumn landscape is all but inconsequential, if not actually accidental. It would not surprise me in the least to learn that Pollock named this picture after it was finished. Few of his paintings at this period have such naturalistic titles; mostly they have names such as *Three*, or *Number 28*, or the like. In a work by Stella a reference to nature is absolutely essential; that is his whole point. But in Pollock such a reference is a downright hindrance. The more nature enters, the more description and analysis are required, hence the further removed you are

from the emotion that produced the painting.

One must not ask what emotion the picture is describing; it is itself an emotion that we can discover only by having it ourselves, by participating in the picture to the fullest extent. Pollock is not after "fear" or "love" or "anger," but rather that basic psychic energy in all of us that may take the form of different emotions under different circumstances. He may have painted in anger, and it may be an "angry" picture; but it is not a picture of anger.

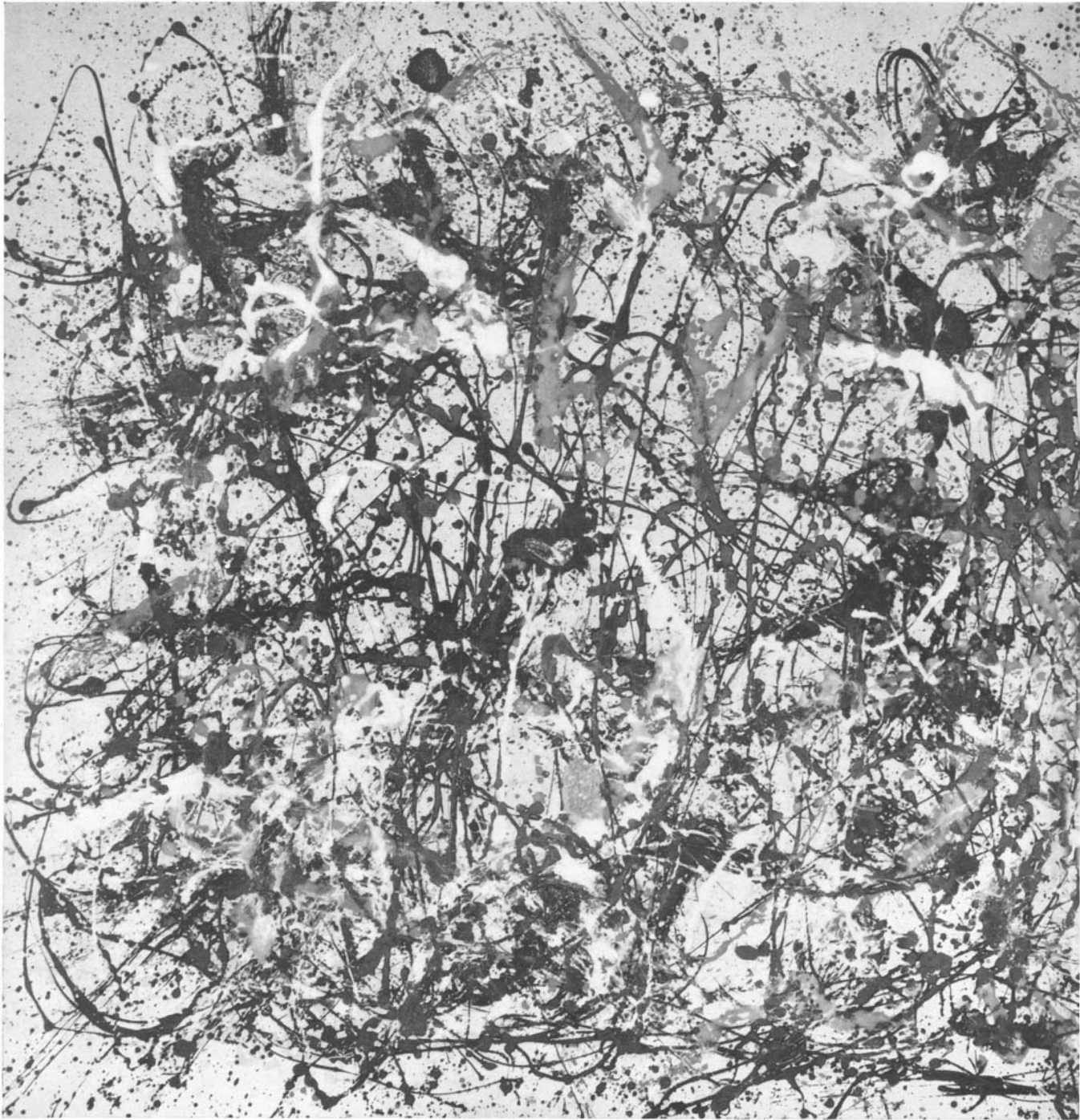
This total absence of naturalism either in a physical or emotional sense brings us to the matter of technique. Since Stella was interested in presenting a certain analysis of nature, he had carefully to draw each shape and place it in its proper position in order to make it represent his analysis. But by the same token, the more care he lavished on each shape and color, the further he got from the initial creative impulse that is, after all, the origin of all art. Pollock, on the other hand, wanted to make the paint on the canvas function not as a description of anything, but as the instantaneous visual expression of his impulse. This he accomplished, for his splashing and slashing and dripping technique not only allows but demands that we ourselves duplicate his creative process.

Yet, one may say, any child can splash paint on a canvas. Where is that element of control by which we distinguish art from mere accident or whimsy, by which the raw creative impulse is fashioned into communication? It is true that once the splatter of paint left his stick, Pollock could no longer control it. But he did determine the splatter's direction and angle of impact, and so controlled its general size and pattern. This seems precious little, but thus far the difference from traditional painting is only a matter of degree, or rather of scale. In paintings by the early Flemish masters such as Jan van Eyck, brushes containing a single hair were often used. This is the ultimate of control, and their pictures were painted with the tips of the fingers, from very close up: often, certainly, under the magnifying glass. The artist all but lost himself in the myriad details of nature. Rembrandt, on the other hand, sometimes used brushes an inch or more wide. He painted his pictures at arm's

length. And he had far less control than did Van Eyck. He could establish a general pattern with the brush, but he could no longer manipulate each individual bristle, and his paintings are far less realistic. At the same time it is interesting to recall that we often speak of Rembrandt's brushwork as his "artistic handwriting," thereby implying that, rather than losing himself, he was expressing his individuality through his technique. Most of us do have a strong feeling for Rembrandt's own intimate personality. Pollock got even farther away from the canvas, and he no longer painted with his arm. He painted with his whole body—which, incidentally, is one reason many of his canvases are so big.

The really fundamental difference between Pollock and Rembrandt, however, is not just a matter of degree or scale, nor of technique. For although to a lesser extent than Van Eyck, Rembrandt too was still sacrificing himself to the details. When we look at one of his paintings, what we see in the first instance is a Biblical scene, or a landscape, or the face of Rembrandt. In the case of Pollock, what we see is Pollock himself—nothing more, nothing less. In contrast to Rembrandt, Pollock was no longer painting nature; we call his art, for want of a better word, abstract.

All this, I hope, helps answer the original question why abstraction, introduced over fifty years ago, is still a bone of contention. Here it must be emphasized that we have dealt with only one really recent abstract painting, and even that one is a decade old. But that is exactly my point: abstract art has continued to evolve. In the case of Pollock and others, it is no longer "abstract" in the original sense of the term. It has been transformed from a means of analysis into a means of expression. As a means of expression, no less than as a means of analysis, it can be a sharper, more sensitive, and more penetrating instrument than traditional art. It has had to upset traditional concepts of order and discipline, but as a result it can expose depths and areas of feeling that many people are reluctant to recognize in themselves. Part of the reason abstract art continues to be a problem, I believe, is that it has gained new power to disturb and to challenge us.



*Fig. 2. Autumn Rhythm, 1950, by Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), American. 8 feet 9 inches x 17 feet 3 inches
George A. Hearn Fund, 1957*

