**Abstract Expressionism**

However great a disaster World War II was, it did at least mean that artists such as Piet Mondrian and Max Ernst, in leaving Europe for the safety of the USA, greatly extended their artistic influence. It is impossible to estimate how much they affected American art, but the fact remains that in the 1940s and '50s, for the first time, American artists became internationally important with their new vision and new artistic vocabulary, known as Abstract Expressionism.

The first public exhibitions of work by the ``New York School'' of artists-- who were to become known as Abstract Expressionists-- were held in the mid '40s. Like many other modern movements, Abstract Expressionism does not describe any one particular style, but rather a general attitude; not all the work was abstract, nor was it all expressive. What these artists did have in common were morally loaded themes, often heavyweight and tragic, on a grand scale. In contrast to the themes of social realism and regional life that characterized American art of previous decades, these artists valued, above all, individuality and spontaneous improvisation. They felt ill at ease with conventional subjects and styles, neither of which could adequately convey their new vision. In fact, style as such almost ceased to exist with the Abstract Expressionists, and they drew their inspiration from all directions.

The painters who came to be called ``Abstract Expressionists'' shared a similarity of outlook rather than of style-- an outlook characterized by a spirit of revolt and a belief in freedom of expression. The main exponents of the genre were Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, but other artists included Guston, Kline, Newman and Still. The term Abstract Expressionism was first used by Robert Coates in the March issue of the New Yorker in 1936. The movement was hugely successful, partly due to the efforts of the critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg who also originated the terms Action Painting and American Style.