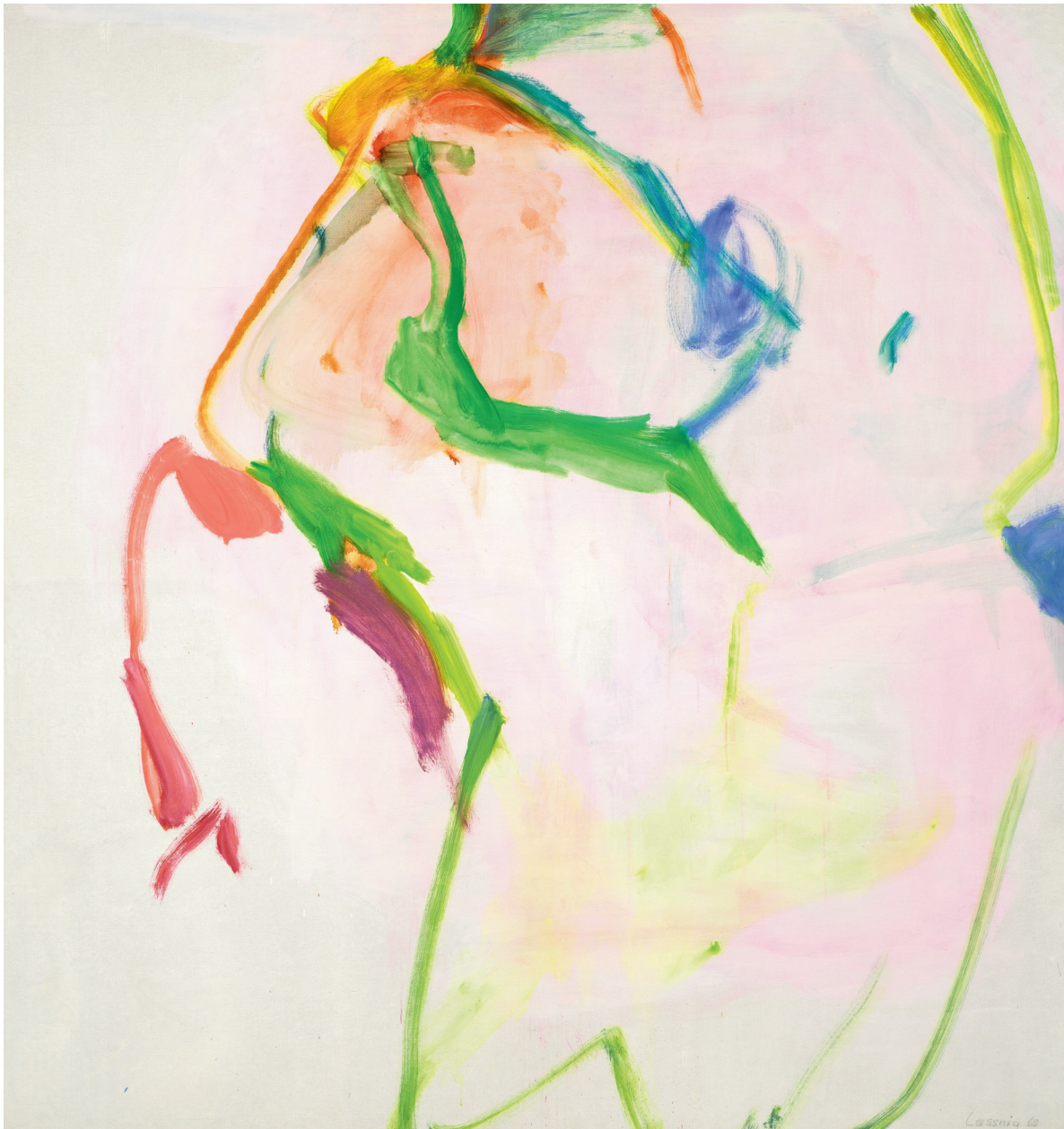


WAYS OF FREEDOM

# JACKSON POLLOCK

TO

# MARIA LASSNIG



ALBERTINA modern

15.10.2022 – 22.1.2023



## Exhibition Facts

Duration	15 October – 22 January 2023
Venue	ALBERTINA MODERN
Curator	Angela Stief
Assistant Curator	Martina Denzler
Works	85
Catalogue	Available for EUR EUR 34,90 (German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>

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**Die Presse**

# Ways of Freedom

## Jackson Pollock to Maria Lassnig

15.10. 2022 – 22.1. 2023

ALBERTINA MODERN's autumn exhibition is devoted to the abstract expressionism of the New York School, which took Europe by storm after 1945. In the wake of the Second World War, painting set out on entirely new paths as art at large abruptly liberated itself from all things previously known, with abstraction rising to become a worldwide language. 1945 hence proved to be a turning point in the development of modern painting. European avant-garde artists in American exile elevated New York to stand alongside Paris as a center that would set entirely new standards.

It was with abstract expressionism in the USA and informalism in Western Europe that a young generation of artists turned their backs on the styles of the interwar period: eschewing figurative depiction and geometric abstraction, they proceeded to take an impetuous and expressive approach to dealing with form, colors, and materials. Spontaneous artistic gestures, employed as expressions of individual freedom, took on great meaning and symbolic charge. It was in action painting that artists including Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Franz Kline, and Joan Mitchell found an intersubjective expressive form. Artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and Clyfford Still, on the other hand, produced large-format, planar color field paintings that gave rise to a meditative space in which to deal with the fundamental questions of human existence.

This exhibition examines the creative interplay between abstract expressionism and informalism that took place as a transatlantic dialog beginning in the mid-1940s. In contrast to the intentions of National Socialist art and socialist realism, it was involuntarily that American abstraction became involved in the ideological competition over the question of who was representing the better society—a contest that saw the Americans' complete freedom, born of an abstinence from reality, pitted against the verisimilitude that one finds in the art of communist countries and the Soviet Union.

A major focus of this presentation is on output by artists who worked in the abstract expressionist style—figures such as Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, Maria Lassnig, Judit Reigl, and others. All of them were active on either the West or the East Coast of the USA as part of the first and second generations of abstract expressionism and were central to how things developed. In doing so, they also made important contributions to art history in Europe.

On a level equal to that of international greats, artists in Austria exhibited a keen feel for the spirit of the times and engaged quite intensely with contemporaneous international artistic developments—in part through travels abroad. In 1951, following a stay in Paris, Maria Lassnig and Arnulf Rainer staged an informalist exhibition in Klagenfurt. 1956 saw the prominent group of painters associated with the Galerie St. Stephan—including Hollegha, Mikl, Prachensky and Rainer—come together under the aegis of Monsignor Otto Mauer. In Vienna, Georges Mathieu took up the abstract notion of freedom: his monumental work shown here was created in 1959 as part of a painting action on Fleischmarkt. A counterpoint at this ALBERTINA Modern exhibition is provided by the ten-meter-wide work *Red on White* by Markus Prachensky from the series *Peinture Liquide*, which stands out for its calligraphic borrowings.

1,500 square meters of the ground floor exhibition hall at ALBERTINA Modern have been set aside to present around 100 works by international artists including Mary Abbott, Perle Fine, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Hans Hartung, Hans Hofmann, Wolfgang Hollegha, Franz Kline, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Maria Lassnig, Morris Louis, Georges Mathieu, Joan Mitchell, Robert Motherwell, Ernst-Wilhelm Nay, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Markus Prachensky, Arnulf Rainer, Ad Reinhardt, Judit Reigl, Mark Rothko, Hans Staudacher, and Clyfford Still in an international dialogue.

An exhibition of ALBERTINA MODERN, Vienna, and Museum Barberini, Potsdam, with generous support from the ASOM Collection, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva, and the Levett Collection.

# Exhibition Texts

## Introduction

Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel were the order of the day following World War II: both the mission and the manifestation of a radical new beginning. After the horrors of the war, abstraction became the universal language in the years between 1950 and 1960. The subjective gesture represented the high point of the individual painter's expressive articulation. New York was the epicenter of the movement, and its offshoots spread at lightning speed throughout the free world.

In the liberal world, the aesthetics of the Nazis had become just as obsolete as Social Realism. The end of World War II, the atrocities of the Holocaust, and the shock effect of the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki demanded a radical realignment of society: this marked a turning point in the development of Western painting.

A new visual concept was established through Abstract Expressionism in the United States and Art Informel in Western and Central Europe. Instead of figuration or geometric abstraction, an expressive approach to color, form, and material became extremely important. While the spontaneous gesture acquired symbolic meaning as an expression of individual freedom after the years of totalitarianism, large-format paintings with fields of solid color created a meditative space that inspired viewers to explore fundamental issues of human existence.

This exhibition brings together over thirty artists who, in a transatlantic dialogue between New York and Paris, shaped abstract painting in Germany and Austria between 1950 and 1960. In addition to Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock, the show focuses on works by women artists such as Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Judit Reigl. Expressive subjectivism was practically predestined to empower female artists to express themselves and succeed in the art establishment that had been dominated by men for centuries. On equal footing with international artists, Austrian painters including Wolfgang Hollegha, Maria Lassnig, Arnulf Rainer, and Markus Prachensky developed a deeply independent form of actionist painting through their exploration of Art Informel in France and Abstract Expressionism in the United States.

## Action Painting

*At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.*

Harald Rosenberg

Prior to the onset of World War II, the Surrealists in Paris allowed random elements to flow into their compositions by developing numerous techniques such as semiautomatic processes. Using this approach, they aimed to liberate the creative power of the unconscious.

These works by older European artists inspired American Abstract Expressionists to develop Action Painting. They created dynamic and colorfully expressive works, often without the aid of preparatory studies. During the act of painting, which was considered a performance, they covered the canvas with colors and forms that playfully combined intuition and improvisation. The essential elements were spontaneity, a powerful style, and a quick, energetic application. The Action Painters wanted to create a material reflection of their inner emotions. In addition, they understood the expressive, gestural process of painting as a departure from the traditional rules of academies and an expression of artistic freedom and assertiveness.

## All-Over Structures

*My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting.*

Jackson Pollock

The Abstract Expressionists tried to redefine the relationship between the picture plane and the paint layer. They avoided spatial illusion from traditional panel painting and emphasized the two-dimensionality of the canvas support, establishing “radical flatness” as the badge of the avant-garde.

Since all parts of the painting were given equal treatment, the compositions have no center. In these all-over structures, categories such as “up” and “down” or “foreground” and “background” are obsolete. The pictorial space appears to show a random detail of a larger whole, and the compositions can be imagined beyond the limits of the support.

To create his “drip” paintings, Jackson Pollock lay the canvas directly on the studio floor and covered it with a dense network of paint that he dripped, hurled, or poured onto the support in rhythmical, dancing movements. Starting in the early 1950s, this revolutionary technique influenced the development of European abstraction. The works, which are characterized by both chance and control, often have a quite decorative quality.

## European Avant-Garde

*The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to “hole through” it for realistic perspectival space.*

Clement Greenberg

New York became an important art city in the 1940s, alongside Paris. Many artists of the European avant-garde—particularly the Surrealists—had recently emigrated to the United States. Young Americans could exchange ideas with exiled artists in galleries such as Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century. Although the artists did not develop a unified style, they agreed that painting was no longer to depict external reality. They viewed the canvas as a stage on which creative energy were to develop freely and spontaneously. Intuition, expressive gestures, and the investigation of the unconscious and irrational were some of their most important issues. Although the visual language is abstract, the works—especially early works—often contain figurative elements or hints of traditional genres such as landscape, still life, or interior. In many cases they also reflect the influence of the European avant-garde and are reminiscent of the planar spatiality of Cubism or of the organic forms of Surrealist painting.



## **“Soak-Stain” Technique**

*The painter makes something magical, spatial, and alive on a surface that is flat and with materials that are inert. That magic is what makes paintings unique and necessary.*

Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler developed the “soak-stain” technique, a process with which she united elements of Action Painting and Color Field Painting. In the early 1950s, Frankenthaler began pouring and dumping thinned paint on ungrounded and unmounted canvas that lay directly on the floor. By lifting and moving the loose canvas and allowing the paint to flow freely over the surface until it was absorbed by the fibers of the woven canvas, paint and canvas became one. The luminosity of the works is reminiscent of the transparency of watercolors.

Frankenthaler’s use of the “soak-stain” technique in her early work made her important to the second generation of Color Field Painters after Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still. After visiting her studio in New York in 1953, Morris Louis and Sam Francis were deeply impressed by her approach to applying paint and used it in their own work from that point on.

## **Color Field Painting**

*Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.*

Clement Greenberg

In addition to Action Painting, Color Field Painting was a second development in Abstract Expressionism. The artists limited themselves to a few colors on rhythmically ordered surfaces, producing large, often monumental formats without perspectival depth. Many works of Color Field Painting were designed to be seen from up close, inviting viewers to engage in contemplative immersion. Artists such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko aimed to convey a spiritual visual experience through the underlying meditative atmosphere of their paintings. Their formal principles, however, diverged markedly from each other: while Rothko’s works feature pulsating, unclearly defined areas of color, Newman divided his monochrome canvases using clearly articulated bands

with sharp edges, which he called “zips.” This reduction increased the tendency toward flatness, which was prefigured in the large-format water-lily pictures by Claude Monet and works by other modernist artists.

## **The 9th Street Art Exhibition**

*When I start painting, I don't know what will happen. When you dance, you stop thinking, "Now I am going to do the first step, then the second one!" You just start dancing, and the flow begins.*

Elaine de Kooning

The 8th Street Club, an addition to the many informal meeting places of the Abstract Expressionists in Downtown Manhattan, was created in 1949. There, the cultural scene debated contemporary art with the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, or the composer Morton Feldman. It was also where the idea of the pioneering *9th Street Art Exhibition* was born, which took place from May to June 1951 on the ground floor of a derelict office building on 9th Street. Sixty-one male artists including Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, and Robert Motherwell and eleven women artists such as Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, and Perle Fine participated. Curated by Leo Castelli, this exhibition marked the birth of the new postwar aesthetics and brought together the American avant-garde that would later be known as the New York School. All artists in this exhibition shared an interest in authentic expression of the individual and aimed to paint works that have a universal meaning.

## **Large-Format and Expansive Painting**

*I realize that historically the impact of large pictures is very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however is precisely because I want to be intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience. But if you paint the larger picture, you are in it. The large painting is not something you command.*

Mark Rothko

The inner development of art compelled artists to create canvases of increasingly large dimensions. This also applies to the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Jackson Pollock, who created many monumental works between 1948 and 1951, including many of his most famous “drip” paintings, which were influenced by the Mexican muralists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Unlike the relatively small paintings of modernism, which were to be experienced while standing opposite the picture, Abstract Expressionist works cannot be grasped at one glance and visitors were expected to become part of them. Although Claude Monet’s late water-lily paintings set a precedence for artists to create large, wall-filling decorative works, the often monumental dimensions of Abstract Expressionist works were necessitated by the goal of creating the sublime. It is contended whether large formats and the treatment of space were American innovations or inspired by European developments. In any case, the popularity of large formats in the 1950s is seen both in the United States among artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Sam Francis and in Europe among artists such as Georges Mathieu, Judit Reigl, and Markus Prachensky.

### **Art Informel Painting**

*Painters who have a technique at their disposal that can be infinitely modified in new experiments consciously dispense with strict form. They paint without form, meeting customary formalism with casual indifference and the most productive anarchy.*

Michel Tapié

In Europe, following the liberation from the Nazis, figuration became less prevalent, similar to the situation in American art. Art Informel developed in Paris and other Western European cities parallel to Abstract Expressionism in the United States. The term *Art Informel* was established by the French art historian Michel Tapié, replacing the derogatory term *Tachismus*, which is derived from *tache*, meaning “stain.”

The open, “formless” structure of these works is based on improvisational brushwork. This corresponds with the claim of the French Surrealist Georges Bataille that no situation is as similar to the universe as Art Informel. In a postwar world traumatized by violence and fascist terror, the

extreme subjectivism of gestural painting was an expression of the existential search for meaning of individuals left to their own devices. Abstract Expressionist works were exhibited in Paris for the first time in 1947. Conversely, French and Italian works of Art Informel were discovered early on by American collectors.

## **European Action Painting**

*In art, rebellion is consummated in its true form. A true revolution can only affirm itself in a free society, not in terror or tyranny.*

Albert Camus

The decade of the 1940s was a period of profound change that also had an impact on European painting. Many artists had participated in the war and suffered under fascist regimes. Starting in the late 1940s Europeans developed their own version of Action Painting. Artists applied the unconscious, automatic techniques from Surrealism to their gestural, abstract painting, creating actionist works without ordering principles of composition that are distinct from geometric abstraction. The act of painting became increasingly important in these works.

Other sources of inspiration for artists such as Georges Mathieu and Judith Reigl are the ornamental structure of East Asian calligraphy and the reduced palettes of Chinese ink drawing on white paper. In Paris in 1951 the pioneering exhibition *Véhémences confrontées* (Confronted Vehemences), with the subtitle "Extreme Tendencies in Nonfigurative Art," was the first to juxtapose abstract art from the United States and Europe. In these years, nonfigurative art was declared an international language. Abstract art, far removed from any attempt at illusionistic representation, was considered the irreversible goal of art history.

## ***documenta II, 1959***

*As one of the fundamental forms of expression of personal being, modern art is a nuisance in those places where belief in authority, the will to power, and the contemporary variants of political totalitarianism are in contrast to the freedom of the individual.*

Werner Haftmann

Art Informel painting established itself as the dominant movement of the European avant-garde in the 1950s. Its solidarity with modernism and artists such as Max Ernst, Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Claude Monet and American postwar art was reflected in *documenta II* in Kassel in 1959. This exhibition presented mostly abstract art under the heading "Art after 1945." In addition to works by European artists including the exiled painter Hans Hofmann as well as Hans Hartung, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, and Pierre Soulages, it also included a room dedicated to the life's work of Jackson Pollock. This *documenta* was also dominated by American Abstract Expressionists, such as Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Clyfford Still.

In Action Painting and Color Field Painting, each individual artist decided on the precedence of color or form and of subjective gesture or arranged color fields. Women Abstract Expressionists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, and Joan Mitchell participated in this influential international exhibition of contemporary art, which was curated by Werner Haftmann.

## **Austrian Action Painting**

*I began with Art Informel: performance in front of the canvas, the attempt to break out of the canvas, with the idea that pictures are unlimited. Rather than pictures, I view my last works as works in space. The whole room is my canvas!*

Günter Brus

Two main issues of modernism are abstraction over representation and the blurring the boundaries between art and life. Following the interruption of Nazi totalitarianism, the unfinished project of modernism was continued after 1950 by Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism. Art and life were brought together through radical aesthetics and the psychophysical use of the body in theatrical painting. Action Painters such as such Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, and Alfons Schilling attacked traditional panel painting and experimented with performative processes that led directly to Viennese Actionism, with Action Painting guiding the transition from Art Informel to Actionism. The French painter Georges Mathieu demonstrated the abstract meaning of freedom in a theatrical painting performance in Vienna. One of his monumental works was created in 1959 in connection with a performance in the Theater am Fleischmarkt in Vienna. In the 1960s this concept of performative art was more vehemently presented through the Viennese Actionists.

**Viennese Avant-Garde: Galerie St. Stephan**

*We are no longer interested in artistic movements known as “isms,” but something much rarer: authentic individuals. An individual who is worthy of this title is not a prisoner of his past, but a herald of his future.*

Michel Tapié

In 1954 the cathedral pastor Monsignor Otto Mauer founded Galerie St. Stephan in Vienna, which became one of the most important centers of contemporary art and a place of exchange for international and Austrian artists. While Mauer rejected Dadaism and Surrealism, he considered abstract art part of religious revelation and truth. His understanding of art existed in the space between cultural conservatism and avant-garde. Soon after the gallery was founded, Wolfgang Hollegha, Josef Mikl, Arnulf Rainer, and Markus Prachensky—all in their twenties—became the leading artists of the gallery: a loosely associated artist group that was not bound to the gallery by contract. In the early years, Mauer strove to focus on the international avant-garde. This was also reflected in an exhibition program that vigorously explored Art Informel from France and abstract painting, impressively refuting the preconception that Austria was behind the times. There was little room for women, however, with Maria Lassnig and Kiki Kogelnik representing the few exceptions that had exhibitions at Mauer’s gallery.

**Abstract Impressionism**

*As soon as I become aware of myself, I stop painting. When I think about what I am painting, I soon become bored.*

Joan Mitchell

In its liberation of color from form, the American postwar avant-garde took up a tendency that was characteristic of French landscape painting in the late nineteenth century. The American painter Joan Mitchell lived and worked in France starting in 1959. In 1968 she moved to Vétheuil, a village on the Seine, where she stayed near the house where Claude Monet once lived. Many of her colorfully

expressive Action Paintings are reminiscent of nature scenes and luminous landscape pictures. Feminist art history interprets them as an emotional reaction to social and personal restrictions consistent with the stylistic demands of the time. Rage, violence, and anger are keys to understanding Mitchell's work. The gestural painting that is reflected in the constantly returning impression of stormy waters in her works represent a direct connection to the artist's psyche. It conveys the emotional dynamism of a specific feeling, a rebellion against social resistance and against the suppression of female creativity.

## **Women Abstract Expressionists**

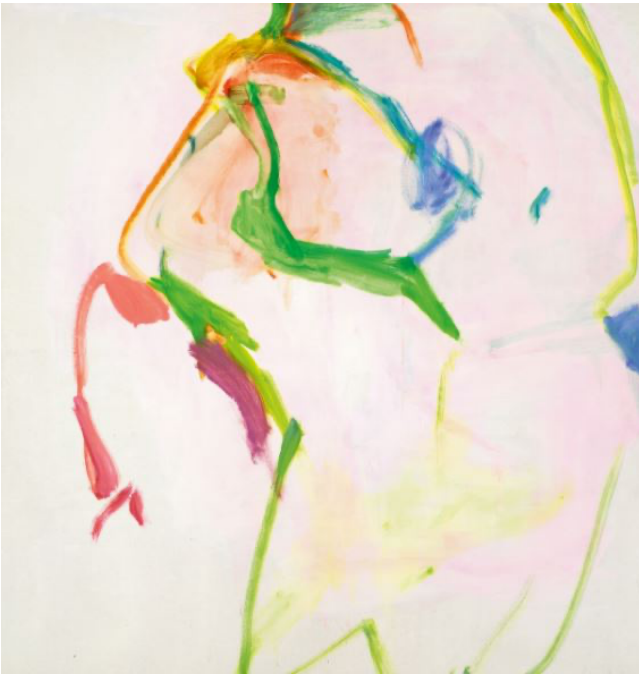
*We've ignored for too long the great extent to which women have influenced the success of the most exciting period of American art history and that men and women have worked together and supported each other in the largest artistic project that American art history had ever experienced within a society that had opposed them and their art.*

Mary Gabriel

The important contribution made by women to the aesthetics of abstract painting in the 1950s has only come to the general public's attention in recent times through research and exhibitions. The fact that women artists on both sides of the Atlantic not only met the most advanced criteria of the period's aesthetic canon but also further developed them while also using the freedom of artistic expression for their own emancipatory purposes proves their confidence and originality. Women artists were really the pioneers of the period. They emancipated themselves from their century-long role as models and passive muses just as much as from the idealizing images of male longing. Women stood up against social resistance to be taken seriously as artists by exhibition curators, galleries, and collectors. *Ways of Freedom* is not only a fulfillment of the stylistic demands of modernism and individualist paradigms of the era; it is also deeply indebted to women's personal emancipation and self-empowerment.

## Press images

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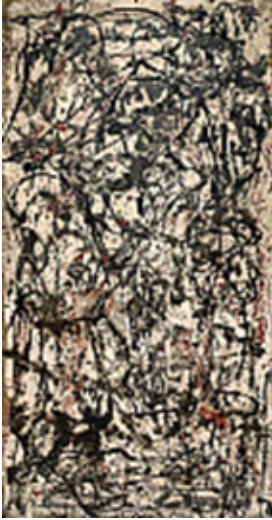


Maria Lassnig  
Big Dumpling Figuration, 1961/62  
Oil on Canvas  
199 x 188 cm  
Maria Lassnig Stiftung  
© Maria Lassnig Stiftung Bildrecht, Vienna 2022

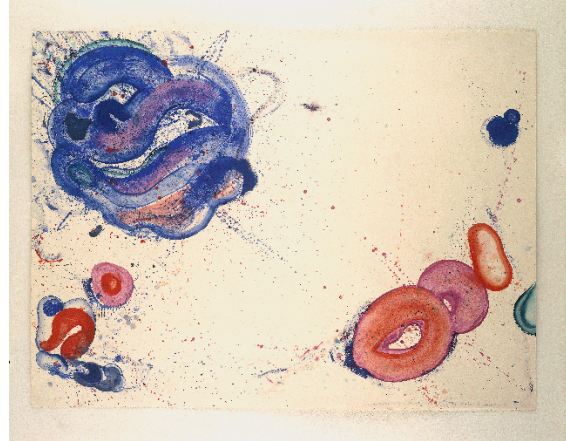


Mark Rothko  
Untitled (Blue, Yellow, Green on Red), 1954  
Oil on Canvas  
197.5 x 166.4 cm  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President  
© 2022. Digital image Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala  
© Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/ Bildrecht, Vienna 2022





Jackson Pollock  
Enchanted Forest, 1947  
Oil on Canvas  
221.3 x 114.6 cm  
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice  
(Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)  
Photo: David Heald©The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation  
© Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2022



Sam Francis  
Untitled, 1962  
Acrylic on paper  
155 x 195 cm  
ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The ESSL Collection  
Photo: ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Sam Francis Foundation, California / Bildrecht, Vienna 2022



Morris Louis  
Quo Numine Laeso, 1959  
Oil on Canvas  
262 x 196 cm  
ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Loan from E. Ploil  
Photo: ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
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Franz Kline  
Sasoon, 1955  
Oil on Canvas  
149,9 x 101,6 cm  
ASOM Collection  
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2022



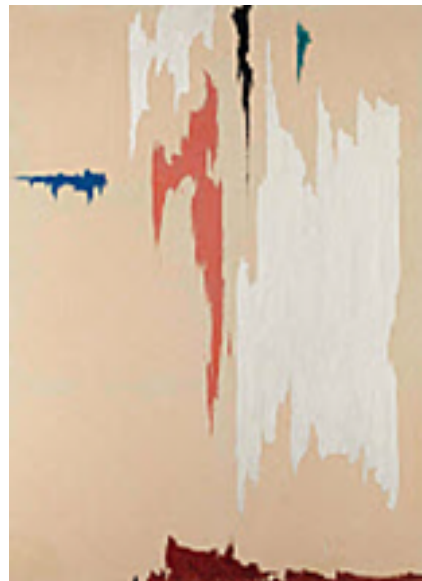
Joan Mitchell  
Composition, ca. 1960  
Oil on Canvas  
97,2 × 130,2 cm  
Sammlung Hasso Plattner  
Photo: Joan Mitchell – Sammlung Hasso Plattner  
© Estate of Joan Mitchell



Helen Frankenthaler  
Blue Bellow, 1976  
Oil on Canvas  
© 2022 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Bildrecht, Vienna  
2022



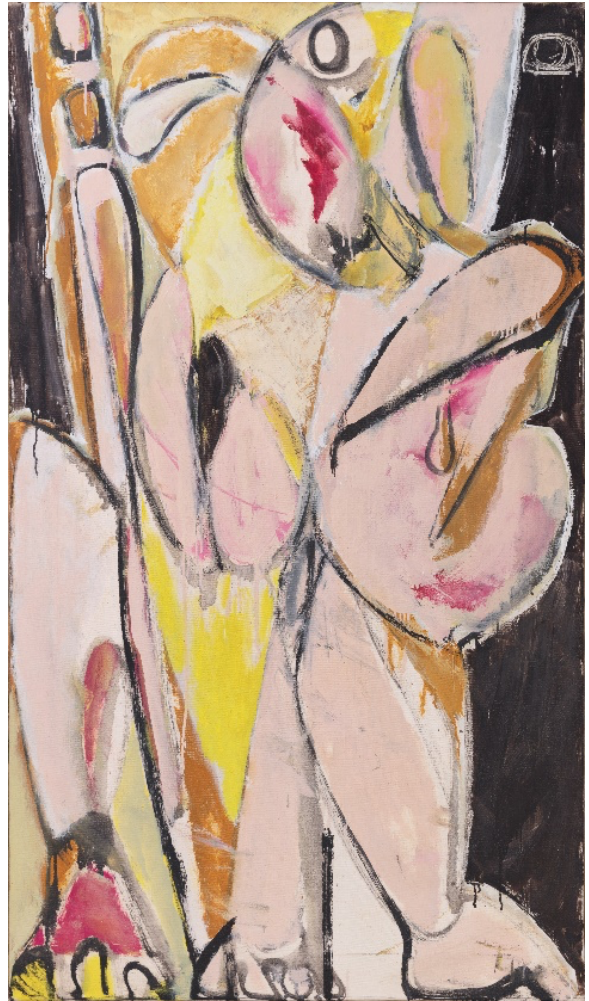
Arnulf Rainer  
Vertical Formation, 1951  
Oil chalk and oil on chalk-primed cardboard  
72 × 104 cm  
ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The ESSL Collection  
Photo: Photoatelier Laut  
© Arnulf Rainer



Clyfford Still  
PH-66, 1955  
Oil on Canvas  
229,9 x 171,4 cm  
Private Collection  
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2022



Lee Krasner  
Bald Eagle, 1955  
Oil, Paper and canvas on linen  
195,6 x 130,8 cm  
ASOM Collection  
© Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ Bildrecht, Vienna 2022



Lee Krasner  
Prophecy, 1956  
Oil on Canvas  
Levett Collection  
147,6 x 86,4 cm  
© Frasmarr.com  
© Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Courtesy of The Levett Collection,  
Bildrecht, Vienna 2022



Helen Frankenthaler  
April Mood, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas  
152 x 434 cm  
ASOM Collection  
Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./ Bildrecht, Wien 2022



Georges Mathieu  
Hommage au Connétable de Bourbon, 1959  
Oil on Canvas  
250 x 600 cm  
ASOM Collection  
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