

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

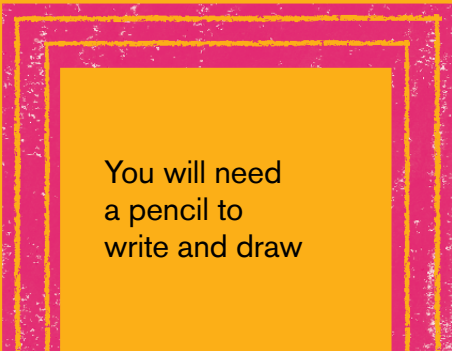
Art Detectives

A guide for
young visitors

Art Detectives are supported
by the Flow Foundation



Abstract Expressionism



You will need
a pencil to
write and draw

Introduction

Instead of painting their families, pets or things in their houses, most of the artists in this exhibition created abstract artwork. They painted paintings and made sculptures that did not represent objects, people or places. Using many new techniques, they expressed feelings and movement. By making their work very large, these artists broke away from the past and created art unlike anything the world had ever seen.

Some painters like Jackson Pollock used the action of lines, splashes and drips to play out a performance on the canvas. Others used large expanses of flat, smooth colours. The works you will see are all very different because each artist expressed his or her individuality through expressive marks, none of which could be ever be the same.

Pay attention to how the different artists use different mark-making techniques, the size of their canvases, and try to think about how each work makes you feel when you stand in front of it.

Let's explore...

Section 1.

Go through Gallery 1 and start in Gallery 2



Arshile Gorky was one of the first painters of Abstract Expressionism. He influenced some of the artists you will see later in this exhibition. He did paint people but in many works he painted shapes that sometimes look like plants, animals or bodies.

Organic Shapes Find *The Unattainable*, by Arshile Gorky, 1945

Look at the shapes and lines in the painting. What do they look like to you?

Look carefully. How does Gorky's use of repeated colours and shapes move your eye around the canvas? This kind of composition, one that has no single central focal point, will influence later artists.

What makes this painting different from a doodle you might do on a piece of paper?

Do you think this painting is abstract? Why or why not?

Section 2.

Go through to Gallery 3



Abstract Sculpture Walk around the sculpture in this room, *Star Cage*, 1952, by David Smith

There is a sculpture by David Smith in almost every room in this exhibition; there are even some outside in the courtyard. He worked in a new way, melting and welding found pieces of steel, like tools or pieces of machinery, together to create sculptures.

Choose one side of the sculpture to focus on and stand in one place, looking at it from an angle.

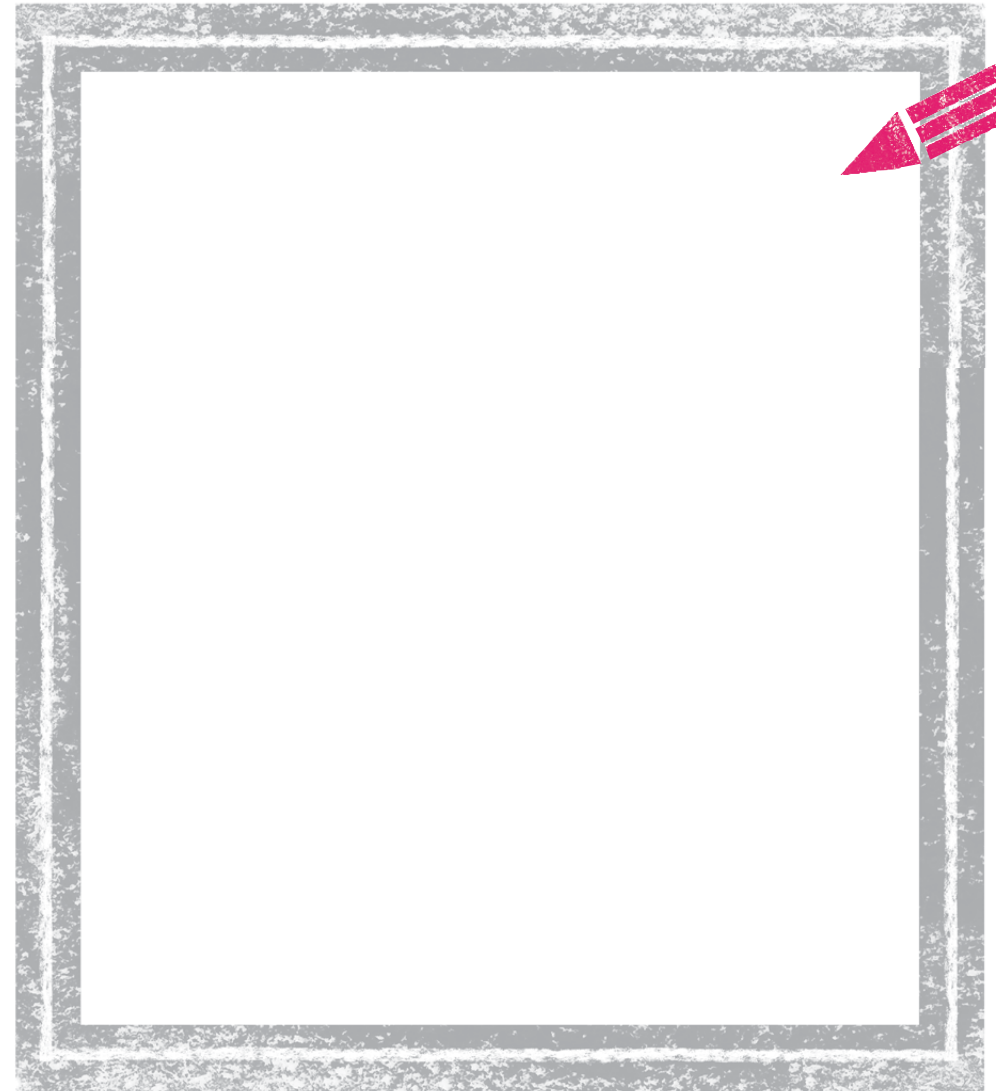
Sketch the pattern created by the shadows the sculpture casts on the white base surrounding it.



Section 2.

(continued)

Choose another sculpture by David Smith in a different room and draw the shadows that the sculpture makes on the surfaces around it.



Section 3.

Go to the far end of Gallery 3



Technique

Find *Blue Poles*, 1952, by Jackson Pollock

Jackson Pollock was one of the most famous painters associated with Abstract Expressionism. His distinct style is hard to mix up with any other artist's as he had such an original technique. Pollock rolled out his canvas on the floor and, moving around it, layered paint onto the canvas, by throwing and dripping it from a great height.

Pollock would let each layer dry entirely before painting a new layer. How many layers do you see in this painting? Describe them.

How can you tell there are layers?

Section 3.

(continued)



Find the “blue poles” referred to in the title of this painting

Pollock used lots of ways to get the paint onto the canvas the way he wanted it. He even used a turkey baster, a glass pipette used in cooking. He crunched the glass into the canvas and left it there. Look carefully and try and spot the place where this glass is crunched into the painting.

What do you think Pollock used to create the “blue poles”?

- A big paintbrush?
- A twig?
- A catapult?
- A sponge?
- Something else?



Circle the words that best describe Pollock's technique:

Traditional Crazy Dripping
Still Moving Calm Safe
Splattering Scraping Simple
Clean Contained Juggling
Poured Brushed

Section 4.

Go through into Gallery 4



Colour

Find Sam Francis, *Untitled*, 1956

Many of the Abstract Expressionists used colour and mark-making techniques to express themselves.

As you walk in, you will see a huge painting in front of you, it is *Untitled*, 1956 by Sam Francis. Sam Francis lived on the West coast of the United States instead of in New York like many of the Abstract Expressionists.

Look at the different textures of paint. Find areas that are

- thick
- dense
- thin
- watery
- drippy
- solid



Look at the colours. Which colours are hot, like fire or the sun?



Which colours are cool, like water or shadows?

Section 4.

(continued)



Explain how the warm and cool colours are balanced across the whole painting. What effect do the white parts have on the rest of the painting?

Do they make the colours seem brighter or duller?

What emotions do you think Sam Francis was trying to express?

How does this painting make you feel? Based on your feelings, what title would you give this painting?

Section 5.

Go to Gallery 5



Making marks

Find *Untitled*, 1952, by Franz Kline

Franz Kline's paintings look as though he painted them very quickly. But in fact he planned his paintings carefully. In this room you will find a number of his black and white paintings. They may look as if we are seeing a small part or detail of a bigger image.

If the painting were only one section of a bigger image, what do you think the rest of the image would look like? Draw the rest to fill the frame below.



Section 6.

Go to Gallery 6



Painting figures

Look at the wall of Willem de Kooning's *Women* paintings

Though de Kooning was the Abstract Expressionist with the most traditional art training, he believed that art should not have rules. His series of paintings of women were scandalous at the time. Though he was painting women, these artworks are still considered to be part of Abstract Expressionism.

Which painting among these of women do you think is the most abstract? The least abstract? Why?

Draw your own abstract-inspired picture of a person in the box below. Remember: You can decide where their feet go, where their eyes go, and what their outline is and what is behind them and even on them – there are no rules!



Section 7.

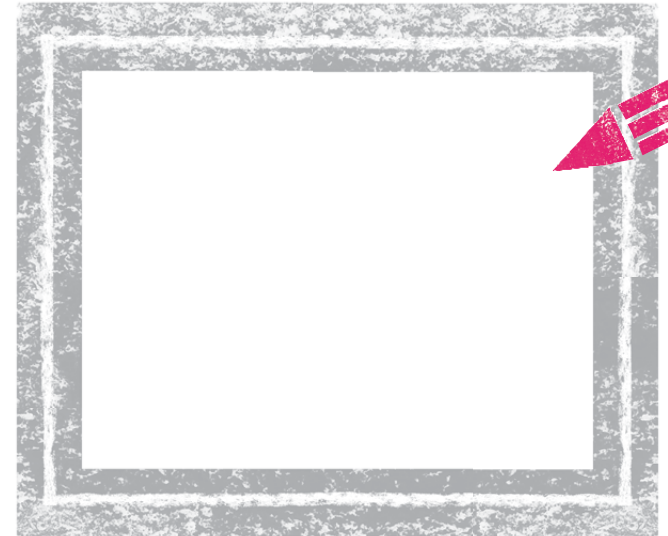
Turn right into Gallery 7



Worlds of colour and light Find *No.1, White and Red*, 1962, by Mark Rothko

In this round room you are surrounded by the work of Mark Rothko. He is famous for floating rectangular shapes of colour which have provoked intense responses from viewers since they were created.

Look carefully at the painting. What do you notice about the edges of the rectangles? Draw what they look like here:



Imagine you're inside one of the paintings, in a world made up of its colours. What is the world like that you have entered? What do you see? How do you feel?

Section 8.

Go to back to Gallery 8



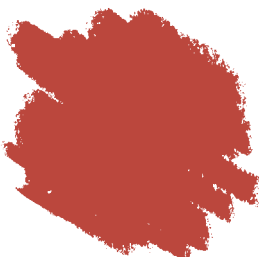
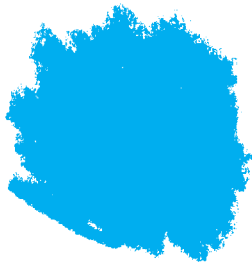
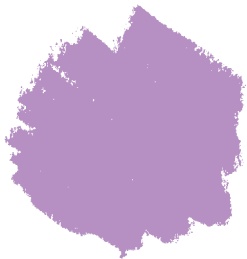
Pushing the limits Find *Red Painting*, 1952, by Ad Reinhardt

Ad Reinhardt was innovative in his technique and use of colour and pushed the limits of painting.

Look at this painting from the opposite side of the room. What colours do you see?

Now move closer to it.
Are all the different colours really red?
What colours do you see?
Look really hard to see the different colours.

Circle the colours you can see:



Section 8.

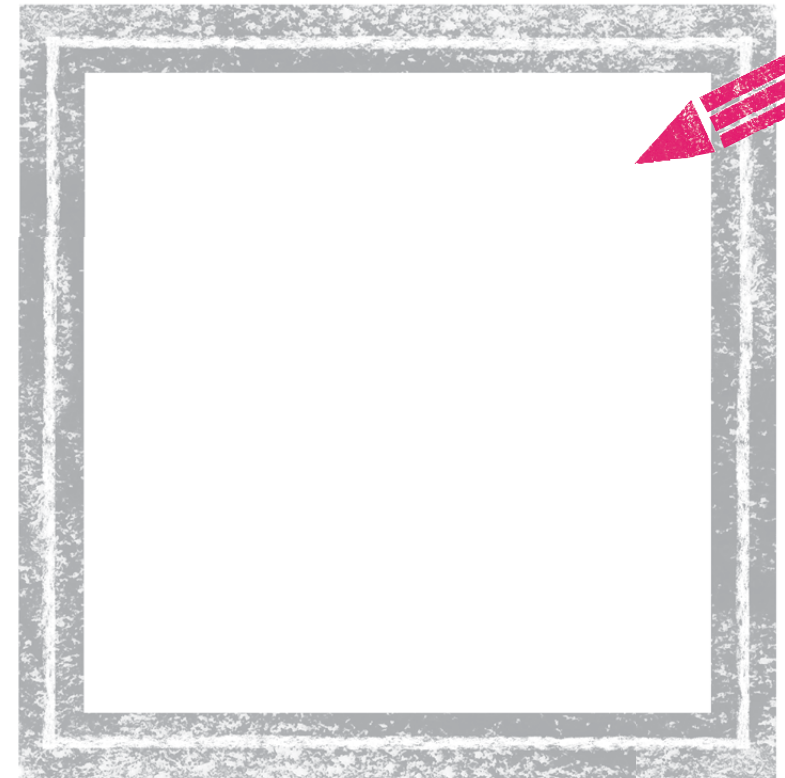
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Look at *Abstract Painting No. 23*, 1963, by Ad Reinhardt

Now that you are good at looking really closely, look at *Abstract Painting No.23* by Ad Reinhardt. What colours do you see?

- Is the painting entirely black or do you see other colours?
- Where are those colours on the canvas?
- Draw the composition in the square below



Section 9.

Go to Gallery 11



Clyfford Still
Find *PH-1123*, 1954

Clyfford Still's paintings have been likened to monumental landscapes. Looking around this room you will most likely feel very small in front of these paintings which are much bigger than you!

How would you describe this landscape?

Where are you?

- In the depths of a canyon
- Above the clouds
- At the edge of a cliff
- Under the sea

Section 9.

(continued)



How did you get there? Write your story here.

Clyfford Still gave his paintings numbers, not titles. What title would you give this painting?

Section 10.

Go to Gallery 12



Late Work

Find *Salut Tom*, 1979, by Joan Mitchell

This work could also be described as a landscape and was painted in the 1970s. This work draws clearly on the work of the earlier Abstract Expressionists.

If this painting were a season, which one would it be?

How do the colours make you feel?

Section 10.

(continued)



This painting is made up of four separate panels. If you moved the four pieces around, what effect would it have?



Would it matter, as this is an abstract painting?

Written for the Learning
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Designed by Kathrin Jacobsen

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