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<http://www.artistrue.com>
ARH 1000
02/21/2001
World War II and Beyond

The events of the Second World War changed the course of art. In Europe the “unbelievable scale of the Nazi genocide against the Jews left Europeans with the task not only of restoring their broken cities, but of repairing their shattered culture. In America the explosion of the first atomic bomb out in the deserts of the South-West meant that for the first time the fears of the Medieval man might come true—that the entire world might be destroyed in a single, terrifying Apocalypse” (Wood, TV Course). These factors provided the perfect matrix for the new styles in art.

In the United States, the first stylistic movement identified with the **New York School** was **Abstract Expressionism**; however, unlike the European one—which had a more controlled, finished result—the American Abstract art had no subject matter but content, as we can see very well in **Jackson Pollock**’s beautiful paintings.

In the **painting in Post War-Europe**, we will witness the CoBrA movement through a group of artists in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, the sensibility of the figurative paintings of Francis Bacon in England, the “Art Autre,” “Tachisme,” “L’Art Informel” in France or the sensibility of Alberto Burri from Italy.

We are also witnessing the birth of the “**Color Field**” art, with its non-objective, extremely large, flatly painted yet optically illusionistic style.

The **Minimalism** art refers to art that “approaches zero-content and zero pictorialism...The Minimalist image is holistic, avoids the illusionism of movement across its surface or into depth, and has been called ‘cool’.” (Stewart et. al., 259). Minimalism as a medium gives little information; therefore, demanding viewer’s utmost attention.

Pop Art, also called “Junk Art,”—a term invented by Lawrence Alloway—was at the opposite end of the sensibility. Pop Art broke with “traditional ideas of picture-making and sculpture by incorporating three-dimensional or free-standing objects within a painting or within its presumed space, or by applying paint to three-dimensional objects; by using industrial materials and techniques, including having works manufactured by machine; by ‘imitating’ man-made objects in the popular environment; and by denying the value of any person or thing as superior to any other person or thing as material for a work or art” (Stewart et. al., 262).

The **Earthworks** allowed artists to leave the studio and create outdoors. Nature would become the means for producing art. “Spiral Jetty” by Robert Smithson (1938-70) is a great example of such works.

Art would slowly become a pluralist medium where “parallel tendencies of constructivism and expressionism, and of abstractionism and representation, have continued their

sometimes fugal, sometimes harmonious relationship with neither one nor the other dominating the art scene” (Stewart et. al., 267). We would often witness in art a visual shift from formal to figurative.

New image art “frequently employs the camera as a tool and a medium alongside traditional tools and media such as brushstrokes, paint, chisel, and clay” (Stewart et.al, 270).

Women also became recognized for their powerful art, through a range of styles and subject matter. Some women artists would use gender as their subject.

In this period, art around the world holds the power to become anything anywhere, in a multitude of styles and expressions. For art and artists of the twentieth century, the sky was the limit. We would witness an explosion of freedom, where guidelines could shift and change with the artist’s mood: from loneliness to happiness, from an obscure thought to a precise one.

As Michael Wood remarked: “We are in the presence of an absolute sublimity, and our stillness, our isolation, and our receptivity are fundamental to it. Art is not in front of our eyes. It is within them” (Stewart et. al., 275).

Works Cited

Stewart, Andrew et. al. *Art of the Western World: Study Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1989.