

Atmospheric Abstraction



01 JMW Turner, *A Clear Sky above a Landscape* c.1816-20

Joseph Mallord William Turner RA (1775 – 1851) was an English Romantic painter, printmaker and watercolourist, known for his expressive colourisation, imaginative landscapes and turbulent, often violent marine paintings.

The Tate catalogue lists more than 40,000 works (oil and watercolour paintings, drawings and sketchbooks) by Turner. Among the over 300 oil paintings and 30,000 sketches he bequeathed to the nation are a large number of near abstract pictures which he called his 'beginnings.' These remained rolled up and unseen for nearly a hundred years after his death, and although 'unfinished' in his terms, they are now regarded as exhibitable artworks which are highly regarded by the modern generation of artists.



02 JMW Turner, *The Château and Bridge at Saint-Cloud, Île-de-France* c1833

Turner's work drew criticism from contemporaries, in particular from Sir George Beaumont, a landscape painter and fellow member of the Royal Academy, who described his paintings as 'blots.'

The intensity of hue and interest in evanescent light not only placed Turner's work in the vanguard of English painting, but exerted an influence on art in France; the Impressionists, particularly Claude Monet, carefully studied his techniques.



03 Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral in the Fog* 1894

Oscar-Claude Monet (1840 – 1926) was a founder of French Impressionist painting, and the most

consistent and prolific practitioner of the movement's philosophy of expressing one's perceptions before nature, especially as applied to plein air landscape painting. The term "Impressionism" is derived from the title of his painting *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*), which was exhibited in 1874 in the first of the independent exhibitions mounted by Monet and his associates as an alternative to the Salon de Paris.

The Rouen Cathedral series was painted in the 1890s. The paintings in the series each capture the façade of the Rouen Cathedral at different times of the day and year, and reflect changes in its appearance under different lighting conditions.

Painting the cathedral was a challenging task, even for Monet. Michael Howard, in his *Encyclopedia of Impressionism* (Carlton, 1997), writes:

'As always, the pictures gave him intense difficulties, which threw him into despair. He had vivid nightmares of the cathedral in various colours – pink, blue and yellow – falling upon him... [Monet wrote:] 'Things don't advance very steadily, primarily because each day I discover something I hadn't seen the day before... In the end, I am trying to do the impossible.'

Monet found that the thing he had set out to paint – light – was, because of its ever-changing nature and its extreme subtlety, an almost impossible thing to capture. He was assisted, however, by his ability to capture the essence of a scene quickly, then finish it later using a sketch combined with his memory of the scene. For these paintings, he used thick layers of richly textured paint, expressive of the intricate nature of the subject. Paul Hayes Tucker, in *Claude Monet: Life and Art* (Yale University Press, 1995), writes:

Monet's sensitivity to the natural effects he observed are just one factor that make these pictures so remarkable; the way he manipulates his medium contributes to their majesty as well. For the surfaces of these canvases are literally encrusted with paint that Monet built up layer upon layer like the masonry of the façade itself.

The subtle interweaving of colours, the keen perception of the artist and the use of texture all serve to create a series of shimmering images in light and color—masterpieces worthy of the grandeur of their subject matter.



04 Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Vieira da Silva (1908 – 1992) was a Portuguese abstractionist painter.

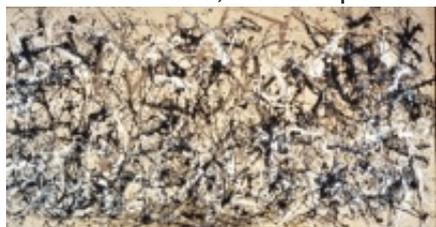
In 1928 she left Lisbon to study sculpture in Paris, but decided in 1929 to focus on painting. Apart from brief periods back in Lisbon and a period spent in Brazil during World War II (1940–1947), Vieira da Silva lived and worked in Paris the rest of her life. She adopted French citizenship in 1956, and received the French government's Grand Prix National des Arts in 1966, the first woman so honored. She was named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1979.

In the 1930s Vieira da Silva began producing her characteristic works which were heavily impastoed, and overlaid with a complex arrangement of small rectangles.

By the late 1950s she was internationally known for her dense and complex compositions, influenced by the art of Paul Cézanne and the fragmented forms, spatial ambiguities, and

restricted palette of cubism and abstract art. She is considered to be one of the most important Post-War abstract artists although she is not a “pure” abstract painter. Her work is related to French Tachisme, American Abstract expressionism, and Surrealism—as were many of her contemporaries who were painting in Post-War Paris during the mid to late 1940s and early 1950s. Her paintings often resemble mazes, cities seen in profile or from high above or even library shelves in what seems to be an allegory to a never-ending search for Knowledge or the Absolute.

There is a foundation dedicated to her work in Lisbon, which holds a large collection of her work, and of her husband, from all periods of her career.



05 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (No 30)* 1950

Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956) was an American painter and a major figure in the abstract expressionist movement. He was well known for his unique style of drip painting.

In a famous 1952 article in ARTnews, Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting", and wrote that "what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The big moment came when it was decided to paint 'just to paint'. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation from value—political, aesthetic, moral."

Pollock said about his decision to abandon titles and give his paintings numbers: "...look passively and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for." Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, said Pollock "used to give his pictures conventional titles... but now he simply numbers them. Numbers are neutral. They make people look at a picture for what it is—pure painting."

Pollock, himself described his art as 'motion made visible memories, arrested in space'



06 Ben Nicholson

Ben Nicholson, OM (1894 – 1982) was an English painter of abstract compositions (sometimes in low relief), landscape and still-life.

On visits to Paris he met Mondrian, whose work in the neoplastic style was to influence him in an abstract direction, and Picasso, whose cubism would also find its way into his work. His gift, however, was the ability to incorporate these European trends into a new style that was recognizably his own.



07 Mark Rothko, *Untitled* 1951



08 Mark Rothko

Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970), was an American painter of Russian Jewish descent. Although Rothko himself refused to adhere to any art movement, he is generally identified as an abstract expressionist.

Inspiration from mythology:

Fearing that modern American painting had reached a conceptual dead end, Rothko was intent upon exploring subjects other than urban and nature scenes. He sought subjects that would complement his growing interest with form, space, and color. The world crisis of war gave this search a sense of immediacy. In his essay "The Romantics Were Prompted", published in 1949, Rothko argued that the "archaic artist... found it necessary to create a group of intermediaries, monsters, hybrids, gods and demigods", in much the same way that modern man found intermediaries in Fascism and the Communist Party. For Rothko, "without monsters and gods, art cannot enact a drama".

Rothko's use of mythology as a commentary on current history stemmed from his reading of Freud and Jung and his interest in psychoanalytical theories concerning dreams, and archetypes of a collective unconscious. Rothko later said that his artistic approach was "reformed" by his study of the "dramatic themes of myth".

With an absence of figurative representation, what drama there is to be found in a late Rothko is in the contrast of colours, radiating against one another. His paintings can then be likened to a sort of fugue-like arrangement: each variation counterpoised against one another, yet all existing within one architectonic structure.



09 Zóbel, *Rio Júcar X*

In this painting a grid of fine pencil lines create a delicate sense of space and mist, through which the progress of the river flows between distantly seen banks.

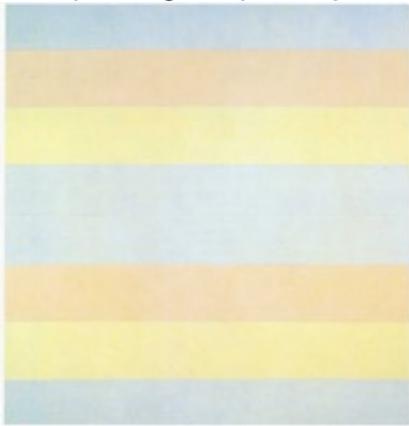
Fernando Zóbel (1924 – 1984) was a Spanish Filipino painter, businessman, art collector and museum founder.

An exhibition by Mark Rothko, which he saw in America, made an impression on Zobel that increased his interest in painting abstractly.

Zóbel is best known for his first artwork series called the Saetas. Named after the liturgical song sung in Holy Week in Spain, they were developed for the most part in the Philippines. Zóbel faced the technical problem of how to achieve the lines that his theme required, lines that were, in his own words, "long, fine, and controlled." The artist's use of a surgical syringe to eject fine lines of paint was a hallmark of this series.

He founded the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español at Casa Colgadas in the town of Cuenca, Spain in 1963.

Zóbel was a mentor and collector who aided the careers of Spanish modernist painters including Eusebio Sempere, Antonio Saura and many others. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he made a series of paintings inspired by Cuenca's River Júcar.



10 Agnes Martin, *With My Back to the World*, 1997

Agnes Bernice Martin (1912 – 2004), born in Canada, was an American abstract painter. Her work has been defined as an "essay in discretion on inward-ness and silence". Although she is often considered or referred to as a minimalist, Martin considered herself an abstract expressionist.

Her work is most closely associated with Taos, in New Mexico, with some of her early work visibly inspired by the colours and the desert environment of New Mexico.

Martin praised Mark Rothko for having "reached zero so that nothing could stand in the way of truth". Following his example Martin also pared down to the most reductive elements to encourage a perception of perfection and to emphasize transcendent reality. Her signature style was defined by an emphasis upon line, grids, and fields of extremely subtle colour.



11 Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park 60* 1973

Richard Diebenkorn (1922 – 1993) was an American painter. His early work is associated with abstract expressionism and the Bay Area Figurative Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. His later

work (best known as the Ocean Park paintings) were instrumental to his achievement of worldwide acclaim.

In the winter of 1966–67 he returned to abstraction, this time in a distinctly personal, geometric style that clearly departed from his early abstract expressionist period. The "Ocean Park" series, begun in 1967 and developed for the next 18 years, became his most famous work and resulted in approximately 135 paintings. Based on the aerial landscape and perhaps the view from the window of his studio, these large-scale abstract compositions are named after a community in Santa Monica, where he had his studio.

The Henri Matisse paintings *French Window at Collioure*, and *View of Notre-Dame* both from 1914 exerted tremendous influence on Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park paintings. According to art historian Jane Livingston, Diebenkorn saw both Matisse paintings in an exhibition in Los Angeles in 1966 and they had an enormous impact on him and his work. Livingston says about the January 1966 Matisse exhibition that Diebenkorn saw in Los Angeles:

"It is difficult not to ascribe enormous weight to this experience for the direction his work took from that time on. Two pictures he saw there reverberate in almost every Ocean Park canvas. *View of Notre Dame* and *French Window at Collioure*, both painted in 1914, were on view for the first time in the US."



12 Esteban Vicente, *Untitled* 1973



13 Esteban Vicente

Esteban Vicente Pérez (1903 – 2001), was an American painter born in Turégano, Spain. He was one of the first generation of New York School abstract expressionists.

Vicente has a museum devoted to him in Segovia, Spain, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, and a street named after him in Turégano.