

# Abstract Expressionism Guide: Table of Contents

## CONTENTS

### Guide One: Things to Know

Background	2
Notable Abstract Expressionist Artists	3
Glossary	4
Talking About Abstract Expressionist Artworks	5

### Guide Two: Things to See

Abstract Expressionism at the Crocker	7
Sam Francis: A Brief Biography	10
Sam Francis for Students	11

### Guide Three: Things to Do

Art Activity: Color Field Painting	13
Art Activity: Action Painting	15
Art Activity: Texture Time!	17
Art Activity: Texture Time!	18
Writing/Research Project	20



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Background

Abstract Expressionism is a modern art movement that flourished in the post-World War II era, primarily in the United States. It includes mostly paintings, although some sculpture and other art forms are associated with the style as well. The artworks are non-representational, meaning there are usually no recognizable objects depicted. Large canvases and visible texture are common characteristics of the paintings. Another is the tendency for the artist to use an “allover” style, filling the painting space without creating a specific focal point. Color is perhaps the most striking and vital element—canvases saturated with one or more intense colors are hallmarks. The intention of the artworks usually focuses on inviting an emotional rather than an analytical response.

An interesting convergence of circumstances gave rise to Abstract Expressionism. Many modern artists fled Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s in the face of Nazi intolerance, seeking safety in the United States. There they encountered modern American artists who had been affected by the social and financial trauma of the Great Depression. The catastrophic effects of war and financial collapse naturally changed the outlook of countless human beings, artists among them, and the new art style reflected their search for meaning in the wake of tragedy. As the immigrants continued to create art and to teach, Americans were exposed to European modernism in a more intimate way. At the same time, American artists influenced the newcomers. After Paris fell to the devastation of war, New York City became the new epicenter of Western art.

The Abstract Expressionists of the East Coast included such renowned figures as Jackson Pollock, Willem deKooning, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko. Identifying

them as a group, however, is almost misleading, since their styles are significantly distinct from one another. The artists weren’t organized in any formal way during their lifetimes, and they were individually innovative along with being associated with a groundbreaking movement. Pollock and Rothko, in fact, emerged as the preeminent figures in two very different types of Abstract Expressionist painting: gesture (or action) painting and color field painting, respectively.

A lesser known but vital Abstract Expressionist movement took place on the West Coast of the United States as well, centered in California’s San Francisco Bay Area. The California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (later renamed the San Francisco Art Institute) was a significant center for the West Coast school of Abstract Expressionists; California artists Richard Diebenkorn and Sam Francis attended or associated with the school, and east coast figures including Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still taught there.

The Abstract Expressionist movement gained momentum during the 1940s and was at its height during the 1950s and early 1960s. Like most other art movements, it garnered mixed reactions from art critics and the public and continues to be somewhat controversial. While its nonrepresentational subject matter is challenging to many viewers, the style occupies an important place in American art history, and its influence continues to be evident worldwide.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Notable Abstract Expressionist Artists

The list below, while no means inclusive, can provide a starting place for an exploration of Abstract Expressionism. Each of the artists below contributed significantly to the movement and created works that are still widely viewed today.

Consider using this list for some of the activities suggested in this guide and in other Curriculum Enrichment Guides [on our website](#). Possible activities include using the internet to view images and video to learn more about the artists; comparing one artist's work with another's; sorting the artists into categories such as action painters and color field painters; creating a classroom display featuring the artists; or finding books about them to add to your classroom library. There are infinite possibilities to explore, but having a few names can get you started.

Charles Alston

Ernest Briggs

Alexander Calder

Willem de Kooning

Richard Diebenkorn

Sam Francis

Helen Frankenthaler

Michael Goldberg

Arshile Gorky

Adolph Gottlieb

Cleve Gray

Hans Hofmann

Paul Jenkins

Franz Kline

Lee Krasner

Joan Mitchell

Robert Motherwell

Barnett Newman

Jackson Pollock

Ad Reinhardt

Mark Rothko

Clyfford Still



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Glossary

A glossary of general art terms can be found in another Curriculum Guide ([available at crockerartmuseum.org](https://crockerartmuseum.org)). Here are a few terms that are more specific to Abstract Expressionism.

### **Abstract art**

A style of art in which the subject is represented in a less-than-realistic way, to one degree or another. Shapes and forms are sometimes distorted, unrealistic colors are sometimes used, and so on.

### **Action painting**

A work of art created by moving the whole arm rather than just the wrist and hand. Also called “gesture painting.” Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Sam Francis employed this technique.

### **Allover painting**

An artwork in which the canvas is completely covered with paint and which gives equal emphasis throughout, with no distinct focal point. Artworks by Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey are examples.

### **Automatism**

A term borrowed from physiology to describe actions performed without conscious thought, such as breathing. Applied to art that is created without conscious thought; in other words, drawing on the subconscious.

### **Canvas**

A strong woven cloth used as a surface for painting.

### **Color field painting**

An artwork characterized by large areas of color, usually with no subject other than the color itself. Works by Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still are representative of this technique.

### **Expressionism**

An art form that emphasizes the depiction of feelings, emotions, or experiences.

### **Gesture painting**

See “Action painting.”

### **Nonobjective**

Not representing a person, place, or recognizable thing. Also called “nonrepresentational.”

### **Stain painting**

A technique in which paint is thinned significantly and seeps into the canvas when applied. Stains are typically applied in layers. The works of Helen Rosenthaler and Paul Jenkins are representative of this technique.

## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Talking About Abstract Expressionist Artworks

*"I liked all the artwork, but my favorite was the abstract art. My most favorite art was the one that looked like nothing was painted really well, it also had all dark colors and had bumps on it. Thank you for showing us the art!"*

— A young visitor to the Crocker

Appreciating abstract art can be a challenge for some viewers. Interestingly, children don't seem to struggle with it as much as adults do. Perhaps we need to bring different expectations to the encounter. The "Crocker All-Stars" Curriculum Guide [on our website](#) includes some tips for discussing art with students. The process of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and connecting outlined there is effective with virtually any artwork. In addition, here are some ideas to consider that apply more specifically to abstract artworks.

First, let's address some common initial responses to Abstract Expressionist artworks.

### **"What's it supposed to be?"**

There is a natural tendency to seek meaning from an image by identifying its contents, and we may be at a loss when "it doesn't look like anything." Have you ever tried to describe the taste of salt? Sometimes words just don't communicate sensory information very well. When you're looking at a nonobjective artwork, some components can be named—the colors and media used, for example. And even when there is not a "nameable" subject, other components can still be described: the texture, the mood, or the feelings evoked. If we can let go of the desire to identify objects, we might be more open to observing other aspects of an artwork. Jay Meuser, an Abstract Expressionist painter, said about his painting *Mare Nostrum*, "It is far better to capture

the glorious spirit of the sea than to paint all of its tiny ripples." Consider looking for what the artist is trying to express rather than seeking to identify the ripples.

### **"Anyone could have painted that."**

At first glance, some abstract artworks can look unplanned, unskilled, and unimaginative. Remembering the elements of art (line, texture, color, etc.) and the principles of design (balance, movement, contrast, etc.) can be a helpful starting place. Analyzing how they're used can dispel the idea that no skill was required in the creation of the artwork. Even if the artist seems to push some limits, he or she has to know the "rules" in order to consciously challenge them. It can also be helpful to learn a little bit about the artist: personality, background, and other biographical details can be informative. "Anyone" didn't paint that, this particular artist did. Take the time to wonder why.

### **"I don't know..."**

We want to know! But try to become comfortable with saying you don't. You may not know what the artist was trying to convey, or what the title of the artwork means, or many other things, but you don't need to stop there. Try saying, "I don't know that, but I do know...." You may be surprised at what you discover—there are some pleasing color combinations, or it makes you feel anxious when you look at it, or the texture of the paint is really intriguing, and so on. If you find yourself feeling



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Talking About Abstract Expressionist Artworks

lost, return to the basics, and save the rest for another encounter. Try to base your judgments on what you do know or see rather than on what you don't.

Now, let's consider some ideas that may sound new, but that might help in your effort to appreciate artworks that are abstract.

### **Sometimes, paint and color are enough.**

In a painting such as a still life or landscape, an artist often uses paint to represent the three dimensions of an object or scene. In Abstract Expressionist paintings, however, the paint on the canvas essentially represents itself. A painting that appears to be an arrangement of areas of color may, indeed, be an arrangement of areas of color—it's not a hidden picture puzzle. Elements such as colors, swirling lines, or textures take on the role of being the subject rather than depicting the subject. Deciding that such an image can have value provides a new perspective for many viewers.

### **The product can serve as a record of the artistic act.**

This type of art, more than other types, invites us to reflect on the process of creation. Much of it also introduces an element of chance—an idea that can be difficult for some viewers but that helps us appreciate what we're seeing. The art critic Harold Rosenberg, who coined the term Abstract Expressionism, wrote, "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." Considering the creative process as art helps us see

the product as the tangible result of a series of both predicted and unforeseen occurrences. To put it another way, we enjoy the photographs we take when we travel, but we don't travel just to take a photo. The image is a token of the journey.

### **Ask different questions.**

When we look at an artwork, we often ask a lot of questions directed toward the art. What are you presenting? What are you trying to tell me? Why are you hanging in a museum? Abstract Expressionism, maybe more than other styles, invites us to look inward rather than outward. How does this make me feel? What is evoking that response—the composition? The colors? The size? Is there something happening in my life that affects how I interact with this artwork? Does it remind me of anything? We may find that knowing what an image makes us feel and think is more important than what it "is."

Being confronted with something we don't understand can be disconcerting, even uncomfortable. If we allow ourselves to submit to the discomfort long enough to interact with an artwork, we're much better equipped to help our students do so. Surely there will be many other occasions when they will need to deal with something foreign to them, and what a boost to their education it will be if they learn to do it without passing judgment too quickly. Henry David Thoreau once asked, "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" The arts—including paintings that "look like nothing"—give us opportunities to do just that.

## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Abstract Expressionism at the Crocker

There's no substitute for seeing the artworks in person, and the Crocker is fortunate to have a noteworthy collection of Abstract Expressionist artworks on display for you and your students to view. A sampling of them is described below, along with some suggestions that can help you make the most of your visit. The questions listed after the specific artworks follow the *Describe • Analyze • Interpret • Judge • Connect* pattern, with one from each category. They are only suggestions; you should feel free to come up with your own!

The Abstract Expressionist gallery is located on the third floor. It includes a number of paintings and several sculptures that represent the style in a variety of ways, all created by American artists, most of them Californian. Here are a few in the collection:

### **Untitled by Ronald Davis, 1962**

This is an oil painting with large swirls of color in earthy tones. It's representative of Davis's Abstract Expressionist work early in his career, before he began focusing on other abstract styles.

- What do you notice about the texture of this artwork?
- Do you get a sense of movement from this artwork? Why?
- How would this painting look if the artist had chosen different colors?
- What do you like most about this artwork?
- The artist left this painting untitled. What title might you give it?

### **Canofleur Gatein by John Saccaro, 1960**

An abundance of color and activity characterize this large oil painting. It tends to evoke strong reactions from viewers, which was part of the artist's intention.

- Tell me about the colors in this painting.
- How do the colors provide both variety and harmony?
- Can you imagine some of the movements the artist might have made to apply the paint? What do you think they looked like?
- Do you think the artist was successful in what he wanted to accomplish with this painting?
- Does this artwork bring to mind a place you've been or music you've heard, or maybe something else?

### **Body Centered Cubic by Claire Falkenstein, ca. 1960**

The artist who created this sculpture was a skilled jewelry maker, painter, and sculptor who used materials, especially wire and glass, in new and unique ways. Kilns, torches, and soldering irons were some of the tools she used in creating her art.

- Three-dimensional shapes are called forms. What are some shapes (e.g. circles, squares) and forms (e.g. spheres, cubes) you see in this sculpture?
- Does the sculpture seem balanced? Why or why not?

## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Abstract Expressionism at the Crocker

- Why do you think the artist chose sculpture instead of painting to express this idea?
- If you were opening an art museum, would you want this artwork in it?
- What are some of the special skills the artist needed to learn to create this artwork? How do you think she learned them?
- What do you like or dislike about this artwork?
- Jenkins was 83 years old when he created this painting. Do you know anyone about that age? Is he or she still working?

In the gallery next to the Abstract Expressionist gallery, there is another painting you and your students might like to view.

### **Phenomena Intervening Mantle by Paul Jenkins, 2006**

This painting was created much more recently by an artist who emerged during the height of the Abstract Expressionist movement and continued to work in that style until his death in 2012. Jenkins developed his style using the new acrylic paints, pouring them onto unstretched canvas and then manipulating the canvas to spread the intense color, incorporating both control and chance into his work.

- What is the first thing about this painting that gets your attention? Do you also notice some lines that you can describe?
- How is this painting different from some other paintings we've seen?
- Thinking about how Jenkins created his paintings, do you think anything surprised him as he was creating this one?
- Another Abstract Expressionist, Sam Francis, is the subject of an exhibition being presented by the Crocker January 26 – April 20, 2014. The Museum has one of his paintings in its collection. It will be on display during the exhibition, and you can also view it at [crockerartmuseum.org](http://crockerartmuseum.org).

### **SFP59-49 by Sam Francis, 1959**

This oil painting is an example of Francis's frequent preference for bright primary colors combined with white spaces. More information about Francis and his work is found elsewhere in this guide, but here are a few questions related to this particular painting.

- What do you see in this painting?
- What examples of contrast can you find—in color, size, shape?
- How would the painting look if its orientation was horizontal? Do you think the artist would have painted it differently?
- Do you enjoy looking at this painting? Does your appreciation increase or decrease the longer you view it?
- If you wanted to create a painting like this, what would you do first? What other steps would you take?



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Abstract Expressionism at the Crocker

Taking a broader view of the art can help students develop a better sense of Abstract Expressionism overall. Here are a few ideas you might use during your visit to the Abstract Expressionist gallery.

**Look at the nationalities of the artists and dates on the labels in the gallery.**

What do you notice? Abstract Expressionism was a movement that flourished in post-World War II America, and the collection reflects that. Notice that all the canvases are relatively large, which is characteristic of this style, and that most paintings have no identifiable objects.

**Pick two paintings to compare and contrast.**

Discuss features such as color, texture, technique, mood, etc. The Saccaro and the Davis might be good choices for this, but you and the students may have other ideas. Several of the paintings in the gallery are good examples of action painting, one of the types of Abstract Expressionist paintings. Have the students try to imagine the big movements required to make some of the specific marks on the canvases and, allowing enough space, invite them to act them out.

**Ask a question or make a statement, and have students respond by choosing an artwork and walking to it.**

Then give them one minute to discuss their choice with the others who joined them. Repeat this activity a few times to let the students select a few artworks and talk with a variety of classmates. Here are a few prompts to get you started:

- I love the colors in this artwork!
- If you could take one of these artworks home, which would it be?
- I wish I could ask this artist a question (have them share their questions with the others in their group).
- Which artwork caught your attention first when you walked into the gallery?

Exploring the world of Abstract Expressionism can be an exhilarating experience for you and your students. Take some of these suggestions as a starting place, and enjoy the journey.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Sam Francis: A Brief Biography

Sam Francis was born in San Mateo, California, on June 25, 1923. His father was a math professor, and his mother was an excellent pianist. Their home was full of music, books, and learning. Sam was close to his younger brother George, and he really loved to read.

Sam went to college at the University of California, Berkeley, and began studying to be a doctor. World War II interrupted his college plans, however, so he left school to begin training to be a fighter pilot. During his training in 1944, he was badly injured and spent years in the hospital recovering. For much of that time, he lay flat on his back in a plaster cast, and he spent many hours alone. The nurses gave him some watercolor paints to help make his time more enjoyable, and he used painting as a way to escape his painful injuries and work through his emotions.

When Sam finally left the hospital, he decided to study art seriously and went back to UC Berkeley to do so. He also spent time with the students and teachers of an important art school in nearby San Francisco, the California School of Fine Arts, which is considered the West Coast home of the type of art known as Abstract Expressionism. Sam earned a Master of Arts degree from UC Berkeley in 1950. That same year, he moved to Paris, France, where he continued to study art by spending time with artists and art experts. He also learned by looking at great artworks, including paintings by Henri Matisse and Claude Monet. Their use of color and light in art inspired him as he created his own paintings, and before long he was attracting a great deal of attention as an artist himself.

After several years learning and working in Paris, Sam began a trip around the world in 1957. He continued to create paintings in the places he traveled—Mexico City, New York, Tokyo, and Switzerland, for example. Many of those artworks were created for display in places like banks and government buildings. He moved to Southern California in 1962, setting up a studio in Santa Monica, but he continued to travel during his life and also maintained studios in France, Japan, Switzerland, and Mexico.

Like everyone, Sam had difficult times. He experienced health problems, disappointments, and other struggles. He also had times of great happiness, such as when his children were born. Throughout his life, he used painting to help him cope with and express his emotions. His paintings don't usually include objects you can identify. Instead they are full of color, light, and emotion. He is considered an "action painter"—he used large body movements to create his artworks, and that energy is obvious in his art.

Sam Francis was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1989, yet he continued to find ways to paint until he died on November 4, 1994, at the age of 71. He earned awards and recognitions during his life, and he is considered one of the most important artists of California. He is also considered an important part of the Abstract Expressionist movement in art. His bright, unique, emotional paintings continue to be exhibited, collected, and enjoyed throughout the world today.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Sam Francis for Students

As a premier Californian and Abstract Expressionist artist, Sam Francis is an excellent figure for students to study. If it's possible, visiting the Crocker's exhibition with your students is an ideal way to learn more about Francis and his art. You might also consider making him the focus of some learning activities in your classroom.

One way to proceed would be to have students create a learning portfolio about Sam Francis and his art. It could begin with the brief biography of Francis included in this guide. After that, think about designing an assignment that allows students a range of choices as they explore the topic. Some possibilities are listed below. You might stipulate a few required activities and then have students select a designated number of additional activities from a list you provide that aligns with your students' level of ability. Another method could be to assign point values to the elective activities you list and require students to earn a certain number of total points for the complete portfolio.

The list below can get you started; it will probably spark ideas for additional activities or ways to adapt these for your students. Enjoy learning about and exploring the life and art of this creative individual in an interesting way with your students.

- Create an illustrated timeline of Francis's life and several concurrent world events.
- Locate Francis's studios on a world map.
- Complete a graphic organizer with facts you learn about Sam Francis.
- Create a glossary of 10 new words you discovered as you learned about Sam Francis.
- Read a book about Francis or a related topic and answer some reflection questions.
- Write a poem (haiku, acrostic, cinquain, etc.) about Sam Francis or one of his paintings.
- Explore the [samfrancis.com](http://samfrancis.com) website and write a paragraph (or opinion essay, letter to a friend, etc.) about what you learned.
- Create an informative slideshow about Sam Francis' art to present to the class.
- Learn about Sam Francis's life and then write an imaginative journal entry as though you were the artist—describe a life event, the creation of a specific painting, etc.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Sam Francis for Students

- Thoughtfully analyze one of Francis's paintings. Then show it to a few other people of various ages and ask them to do the same. Ask them to share their responses with you. Write a brief summary of this activity.
- Create a painting in the style of Abstract Expressionism. Talk about it with a classmate.
- Sketch one of Sam Francis's paintings, while viewing it in person or online. What do you notice from the experience?
- Visit the Sam Francis exhibition at the Crocker Art Museum. Answer a set of response questions or write a reflection about your visit. (Additional ideas for an activity like this are found in the "Walk the Walk" Curriculum Enrichment Guide [on our website.](#))
- Write and illustrate a book about Sam Francis.
- Add an item to a classroom display about Abstract Expressionism or Sam Francis.
- Participate meaningfully in a classroom discussion about an artwork.
- Watch an online video about Sam Francis and write a response to it. YouTube and [samfrancis.com](http://samfrancis.com) are good sources.
- Compile a list of questions you have as you learn about this art. Select your top three and do some research to find the answers.
- Design a postage stamp honoring Sam Francis, or a gift shop souvenir related to the exhibition.
- Read some newspaper or online reviews of art exhibitions. Write your own review of the Sam Francis exhibition.
- Create a crossword, word search, or other type of puzzle using terms related to Abstract Expressionism or Sam Francis.
- Design a poster for the Sam Francis exhibition.
- Contribute to a class book about Sam Francis.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Art Activity: Color Field Painting

This activity is based on the artwork of Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko and can be adapted to any grade level. The time required will largely depend on the age of your students, but you will need to allow time for paint to dry.

### Materials Needed

- Book or song (see Attention Activity below)
- One or more art images (see Attention Activity below)
- Watercolor paints
- Brushes
- Heavy white paper, 9"x12"
- Cups for water and paper towels

### Attention Activity

Introduce the activity with one or both of the following, both available on YouTube and Amazon:

- The picture book *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss
- The song "I've Got the Blues, Greens, and Reds" by Tom Chapin, from the *Billy the Squid* CD

Discuss with the students the different ways colors can represent feelings. The connections in the book and song aren't the only associations that can be made—students should understand that they can make their own.

Show the students one or more images of Mark Rothko's paintings depicting rectangles of different colors. Rothko used colors in his paintings to evoke emotion. The paintings are nonobjective—the colors are the subjects of these artworks. If you are showing more than one,

ask the students to compare them. Help them think about the creative decisions Rothko made—which colors to combine and where to paint them, what sizes to make the rectangles, etc. Discuss how the colors relate to each other—complementary colors have opposite positions on the color wheel and provide greater contrast than analogous colors, which are near each other. A monochromatic look has variations of a single color. Point out the careful composition of the paintings, the layering of the colors, and the indistinct edges of the shapes.

Invite the students to think about what feelings they would like to depict with paint. They will create compositions like Rothko's, with two rectangles on a colored background.

## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Art Activity: Color Field Painting

### Art Project

1. Have the students first plan the color scheme for their artwork: one color for the background, and two for the rectangles. Demonstrate the process of adding water to the paint to make a thin wash.
2. Students will paint the entire paper with the wash. Encourage them to paint lightly and always in the same direction, minimizing the appearance of brushstrokes. Let the paint dry.
3. During the next painting session, have the students paint two rectangles of different colors on their background color, again using a thin wash and the same painting technique. The background color will affect the color of the rectangle. Encourage them to leave the edges indistinct, as Rothko did.

### Conclusion

Use one or more of the following to conclude this activity:

- Hold an “artist’s circle” discussion. Have the students sit in a circle holding their artworks. One at a time, the students share their paintings, describing the feelings they depicted, commenting about their technique, and adding any other relevant details they wish to include.
- Follow up the project with a writing activity that includes the information described above. The art and writing could be collected into a class book called “The Many Colored Days of \_\_\_\_\_’s Class”, or arranged in a wall display.

### Alternative Medium

Chalk pastels could be used for this project instead of watercolor paints. To save time and reduce dust, use colored paper for the background color. To maintain the feeling of layered colors, have the students choose two colors for each rectangle, layering one on top of the other, and show them how to blend the colors with a fingertip. Remind them to leave the edges indistinct. Have damp paper towels available for cleaning fingers as needed.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Art Activity: Action Painting

This activity is based on the artwork of Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock and can be adapted to any grade level. The time required will largely depend on the age of your students and the number of paintings they create.

### Materials Needed

- One or more art images (see Attention Activity to the right)
- Tempera paint: three bright primary (red, yellow, blue) or secondary colors (green, violet, orange)
- Bowls and plastic spoons
- Marbles
- Shallow boxes or box lids, approximately 12"x18", one per student or group
- White paper, 11" x 17"
- Classic jazz recordings – Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, etc. (optional)
- *Action Jackson* picture book by Jan Greenberg, Sandra Jordan, and Robert Andrew Parker (optional)

### Attention Activity

Ask the students how they imagine an artist makes a painting, and invite a few to describe or demonstrate what they picture. Most will probably imagine painting on an easel. Show images of one or more paintings by Jackson Pollock, explaining that he laid large pieces of canvas on the floor and dripped, poured, or flung the paint to make his paintings. After the students have had a good look at the images, invite them to describe or demonstrate some movements they think Pollock may have used; the movements will probably be much different! Because of the large motions involved, Pollock's style is known as action or gesture painting, and it was a major part of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Help the students understand that, although the paintings may look wild or chaotic at first, Pollock insisted that there was no chaos. The action painters incorporated both planning and chance into their artworks, along with the large movements. The following project uses all of those elements as well.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Art Activity: Action Painting

### Art Project

1. Pour the paint into the bowls, one bowl of each color for each group of students. Place several marbles into each bowl and roll them around with the spoons so they're covered with paint. Also provide a bowl of water for each group. (All of this can be done in advance.)
2. Give each student a piece of paper and a box, or have several students take turns with a box. To create the art, place a piece of paper in the box. Use the plastic spoons to drop one or more marbles onto the paper. Then tilt the box in various ways to roll the marbles around the paper. Help the students notice the things they can control (color selection, marble placement, the gestures they make) and the things they can't (the marbles can be a little unpredictable). Help them also notice what happens when the trails cross, and compare that to what they see in the Pollock artworks.
3. When the marbles are no longer leaving paint trails, they need to be returned to a bowl, either a paint bowl to be recoated or a water bowl to be washed. The students can decide when their action paintings are complete, allowing for sharing the materials. It's best to allow time for each student to make more than one—the paintings take a relatively short time to make, and there is value in trying new techniques.
4. You may want to explain that Pollock listened to jazz music while painting, and play recordings of Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, etc. while the students paint. Note that this combination of jazz and Abstract Expressionism unites two distinctly American art forms that emerged at approximately the same time.

### Conclusion

Use one or more of the following to conclude this activity.

- Have each student choose one of his/her paintings. Play some jazz music and have the students carry their paintings as they walk randomly around the room (like the marbles!). When the music stops, the students pair up and take 30 seconds each to describe their artwork and technique to their partners. Repeat several times.
- Read the picture book *Action Jackson* to your class to learn more about Jackson Pollock's life and work. Consider creating a bulletin board display that includes the student artwork and information about Pollock.



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Art Activity: Texture Time!

This activity is based on Ronald Davis's painting, *Untitled*, which is displayed in the Abstract Expressionist gallery of the Crocker Art Museum. One of the painting's most noticeable features is the remarkable texture in its thick paint with its visible strokes. The technique used to create this effect is called *impasto* and involves applying a thick layer of opaque paint such as oil or acrylic with a brush or a palette knife, or sometimes directly from the tube. The brush and knife strokes remain visible in the finished work. Impasto is not a new technique (it can be seen in the works of artists like Van Gogh and Rembrandt) but it was explored in new ways by Abstract Expressionist artists.

Sometimes artists use a thickening agent to enhance the textural capability of their paint. In this activity, students will use tempera paint, which is not naturally thick enough to achieve the impasto style, so it will be thickened as well. You can decide whether to prepare the paint in advance or to allow the students to do it.

The activity is adaptable to all grade levels, and the time needed can be adjusted as well. As with most Abstract Expressionist art, the process here is at least as important as the product. Have the students focus more on how to achieve different effects with the paint than on creating a "picture" as they work.

### Materials Needed

- Tempera paints
- Cornstarch, flour, or soap flakes
- Paint cups
- Painting tools such as sturdy brushes, tongue depressors, and plastic knives
- Heavy tagboard or cardboard
- Water and paper towels for cleaning hands and tools

## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Art Activity: Texture Time!

### Attention Activity

Discuss the Davis painting with the students, helping them focus on the texture and describing the impasto technique. Ask questions such as:

- What colors and lines do you see in this painting? Are there any identifiable objects?
- How would you describe the texture? Describe the variety of textures you see.
- How do you think the artist applied the paint? How would this painting be different if he had used different painting tools? How would it be different if he had used different colors?
- Do you think the noticeable texture makes the painting better or not as good? What makes you feel that way? Why do you think Davis made the artistic decisions he made?
- If you were to create a painting using the impasto style, what would you try to do? Would you use some of this artist's techniques? Do you have some different ideas?

Note: this discussion will be most meaningful if you're viewing the painting in the Museum. If that is not possible, use the best image you can obtain to discuss it in your classroom.

### Art Project

1. Prepare the paint by stirring some of the thickening agent (cornstarch, flour, or soap flakes) into it. You can adjust the thickness as desired, but a good ratio to start with is one tablespoon of thickener to 1/2 cup of paint. Have pairs or small groups of students share the paint. Provide the painting tools and cleanup supplies.
2. As they think about what they want to paint, many students will imagine "pictures"—places, objects, animals, etc. Help them think more abstractly by asking them to imagine how they might represent an idea (freedom, danger, curiosity, childhood) or a feeling (excitement, anger, disappointment, silliness) with paint.
3. Have the students use the tools to apply the thickened paint to their cardboard "canvas" to represent their ideas and/or feelings. Encourage them to experiment with creating different textures. Suggest that they mix colors directly on the painting. Remind them that visible marks left from the tools are part of the technique.
4. When they are satisfied with their painting, have them add their artist signature to their work, using one of the tools to apply it or to etch it in a bottom corner. They can either choose a title for their artwork or leave it untitled, as Davis did.



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### Conclusion

Use one or several of the following to conclude this activity.

- Create an impromptu Abstract Expressionist gallery in your classroom. As the paintings dry on the students' desks, have everyone walk through the room to view them all. Use this as an opportunity to practice respecting others' ideas and expressions as they talk about the art.
- Create a traveling Abstract Expressionist exhibition by displaying the artworks, complete with titles, in the school office, library, or other public place. Name the exhibition and invite others to visit. Older students might be assigned to write helpful background information about the style and technique of the artworks to include in the display.
- Have a discussion using some or all of the reflection questions below. Have students write independently, discuss the questions in small groups or try a Think/Pair/Share activity.
  - What was it like to create an artwork with no subject?
  - Was this experience more or less difficult than creating a "picture"?
  - Which method do you prefer?
  - Does this change how you feel about Abstract Expressionist art or what Ronald Davis did in the painting? What makes you say that?



## Abstract Expressionism Guide: Writing/Research Project

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) call for students in grades 3–6 to write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and to convey ideas and information clearly (Writing Standard 2). Students in these grades are also expected to carry out short research projects to build knowledge about a topic (Writing Standards 7 and 8).

Why not use the students' experience with Abstract Expressionism as a springboard for a writing/research project? Using sources such as library books about art, websites about artists, online videos about techniques, and so on, students will find that facts, definitions, and details will be interesting and relatively easy to gather. If students have taken a field trip to the Crocker or have seen art images in the classroom, they'll be able to draw on their own experiences, adding valuable impact and enthusiasm to their writing. Illustrating their work will be a natural extension of research about an art movement.

While the CCSS for writing and researching are very similar for grades 3–6, they increase in complexity as the students mature. Here are some suggestions for carrying out engaging research projects at each of those grade levels.

### **Grade 3**

This type of writing and research is new for third graders, so narrowing the topic will help make organizing their work easier. Possible topics could include a style of Abstract Expressionist painting (such as color field or action), or a specific artist from the movement (such as Jackson Pollock). Use a graphic organizer and provide categories such as media used, dates and places, new vocabulary, well-known examples, etc.

### **Grade 4**

Fourth graders should use language that is more precise and include more new terms in their writing. They will sort their research into categories they determine. The topics suggested for third grade would serve fourth graders well too. Since this grade studies California history, they might focus on Abstract Expressionism as it developed on the West Coast with artists such as Sam Francis.

### **Grade 5**

Students in fifth grade are beginning to think more analytically. Their projects will include a general observation ("Abstract Expressionism invited people to think about art in new ways," for example) followed by facts, details, examples, quotations, and other information organized in logical ways. Since this grade studies American history, they might focus on Abstract Expressionism as the first uniquely American art movement.

### **Grade 6**

Sixth grade writers are introduced to the concept of a thesis statement, and they conduct research to answer a specific question, drawing conclusions and assessing the credibility of their sources as they work. Abstract Expressionism lends itself easily to questions: What new methods and materials did artists from this movement use? What historical events were happening at the time? Did Abstract Expressionists only create paintings, or were other art forms part of the movement too? Encourage students to think of many more.