



“The Search for the Real”

This was the title of a famous essay that Hans Hofmann wrote, and which I borrowed as the title for the work above, which tries to show some of the key principles of Abstract Expressionism as Hofmann taught them. Hofmann’s purpose in writing the essay was to explain the central ideas which formed the basis for one of the most important and influential art movements in modern times. My authority for writing this “broadsheet” is the fact that my mother, Marjorie McKee was one of Hofmann’s scholarship students and she studied with him in New York and in Provincetown, Mass, where he spent many summers with his wife and students. I met him there myself in the early sixties. He was that extraordinary rarity in the arts, a great artist who is also a great teacher. His

students loved and honoured him. Indeed, my mother called him “Mr. Hofmann” and nothing else until the end of her life at 96.

So what’s so important about Abstract Expressionism? It is actually a way of seeing and understanding relationships in a painting (any artwork really) and the ideas were so useful that it influenced an entire generation of artists. But the most remarkable thing about “Mr. Hofmann’s” students was that all their paintings looked different from each other. No two alike, even though they studied with the same teacher. Jackson Pollock studied with Hofmann, so did Barnett Newman, so did Mark Rothko. “Mr. Hofmann” did not believe in being a cookie cutter teacher. What he taught and what was utilized by the Abstract Expressionist movement were principles of art. Here’s a very simple example:

A DIAGONAL LINE OR BRUSH STROKE WILL ALWAYS BE PERCEIVED AS HAVING MORE ENERGY THAN A HORIZONTAL OR STRAIGHT UP AND DOWN VERTICAL ONE. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME LOOK UP AT THE PICTURE ABOVE AND NOTICE THAT MOST OF THE VERTICALS ARE STRAIGHT UP AND DOWN, EXCEPT ONE, THE BLUE WHICH IS SLANTED. IT IS THE STRONGEST STROKE IN THE WHOLE PIECE. IT HAS ALSO BEEN USED TO SEPARATE ONE PLANE FROM ANOTHER (IN TERMS OF 3D WORK THIS WOULD BE THE Z AXIS, THE “DEPTH” OF AN IMAGE).

I want to stress that this is not my opinion, or your opinion, it is the way the blue stroke will be perceived by any human. This is “real”. Now, “Mr. Hofmann” meant a whole lot more than this when he wrote “Search for the Real.” In fact, he believed that this “search” was actually a metaphysical one, a spiritual quest for the artist. But

Abstract Expressionism had some principles that were very useful—no matter what “style” you work in or what your beliefs are.

Hofmann said it much better than I am doing so here, from my website, is the quote of his I used as an introduction: “The artist’s technical problem is how to transform the material with which he works back into the sphere of the spirit.”

So now the cat is out of the bag. Art is essentially about the human spirit, which I will not try to define since, art itself is a means of defining (expressing) what it means to be human, taking into account our particular biology and modes of seeing and perceiving. This means that each one of us is capable of manipulating colours, textures and space (or spatial relationships) in a way that other humans can comprehend and respond to. Abstract Expressionism tried to lay down some key principles in order to get this done. “Mr. Hofmann” was a master at expressing those principles to his students. But these were NOT mechanical absolutes that produced a dull sameness. No, they were principles that enabled individuals to better do whatever they were trying to do.

Hofmann came, along with a host of other European artists, from Germany when Hitler took over there. He had been at the Bauhaus which was the premier school of 20th Century modern art in the world. Paul Klee, Hans Hofmann, Walter Gropius, Moholy Nagy, Herbert Bayer

and a host of other major figures of twentieth century art came out of the Bauhaus (which means craft house).

So why should you or any of today's artists care about an art movement that is now around a century old? Because it is practical—it works. I'll show you. Look at the picture above. See the black shape? What is it doing? Why is it there? It's there because it is the darkest and coldest (in terms of colour temperature) form in the image and therefore it becomes the farthest point spatially we can see in the image. It defines the BACK of the image, THE FARTHEST PLANE. Again, this is not my opinion. Use your own eyes. And which is the closest image plane to the viewer? The yellow rectangle on the far left. Why? Because it is the brightest colour in the image and stands before all the other planes.

Start to look at your own work and work of others this way and you'll make some useful discoveries. If you are sincere about applying what you learn, you will be participating in “the search for the real” in your own, unique way. ■