

Different strokes: the forgotten women of abstract expressionism

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. What kind of art is most interesting to you? Rank them in order from 1 (most interesting) to 7 (least interesting). Give reasons for your choice.

- abstract paintings
- landscape paintings
- portrait paintings
- sculptures
- photography
- art installations
- mixed media

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

acknowledge canon chronologically conclude feminist fundamental gesture
incorporate landmark masterpiece merit official perspective

1. The most basic or essential part of something is the _____ part of it.
2. Someone who believes in equal rights and opportunities for women is a _____.
3. Things in the order they happened in time are arranged _____.
4. When you decide something after looking at the evidence, you _____ whether it is true or not.
5. A _____ is a work of art that is excellent and one of the best from that artist.
6. An _____ document may have a stamp, seal, or signature on it.
7. A _____ is a movement that has meaning or gives an instruction.
8. When you _____ something, you include it in something else.
9. Each person has a unique _____ on things.

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10. A _____ event is one that marks an important stage and shows progress.
11. When you admit that something is true or real, you _____ it.
12. When something has _____, you can clearly see its value and good qualities.
13. A _____ lists important works of art which are studied for their importance.

b. Choose five of the words from the task above and write personalised sentences using them.

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A new exhibition highlights 80 female artists from the group that made Rothko and Pollock famous. But does adding them to the group help to correct any of the sexism that hurt their careers in the first place?

Gabrielle Schwarz

16 February, 2023

- 1 Abstract expressionism, that all-American boys' club, is changing. In the latest revision to art history that is very white and male, east London's Whitechapel Gallery has put together an exhibition by 80 female artists from around the world.
- 2 Many of the works could easily be confused with the best-known masterpieces of abstract expressionism, which emerged in New York in the late 1940s and made international celebrities of figures such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko. Although never forming an official group, these artists shared beliefs about the possibilities of abstraction and its fundamental elements: paint, colour and gesture.
- 3 But they were not alone. On view at the Whitechapel Gallery, there's the Jewish-Ukrainian Janet Sobel, who emigrated to the US in 1908. It is believed that her technique directly inspired Pollock's paintings.
- 4 Then there is Elaine de Kooning, who signed her energetic paintings with her initials to avoid comparisons with her husband.
- 5 There are representatives from Africa, Asia, Europe and across the Americas, each incorporating their own traditions and perspectives. The Taiwan-born Li Fang, for instance, who worked in France and Switzerland, painted nature-inspired oils using techniques from calligraphy.
- 6 The starting point for this show was a landmark 2016 exhibition at the Denver Museum of Art that featured female painters in the US in the 1940s and 50s. The Whitechapel wanted to expand that. As Assistant Curator Candy Stobbs explains, in the decades after World War Two, "artists all around the globe were thinking about how to represent the world after such destruction; how to begin again."
- 7 To emphasize the sometimes surprising connections, the show is organized not chronologically or geographically but in five thematic groups. One grouping explores myths, symbols and rituals, such as the Mozambique-born painter and sculptor Bertina Lopes. Elsewhere, there are works relating to "material, process and time"; "environment, nature and perception"; "being, expression and empathy"; and "performance, gesture and rhythm".
- 8 Many of the artists are no longer living and remain little-known. To identify them, the curatorial team worked with an advisory board of 13 curators, art historians and collectors. They also combed through catalogues from related exhibitions.
- 9 In recent years, there has been a notable increase in initiatives to rediscover and reintroduce overlooked female artists. But, Stobbs says, "it was sometimes still hard to find published material. Many of the artists were very active at the time, but have slipped out of the art-historical narrative. Even if they were being noticed to an extent, it was still a male-dominated environment. They didn't always get to develop their careers in the same way as male artists did."
- 10 There is debate about the merit of projects that seek to simply add women to the canon or create a separate "women-only" body of work. Is it not better to examine the conditions that have historically led to the exclusion of female artists or to dismantle the notion of a canon altogether?
- 11 In her essay for this show, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock acknowledges these questions but concludes that such exhibitions are "tactically necessary" – to ensure that our understanding of female artists is "as rich and as intelligible as that of their male co-creators of modern art". Why let the guys take all the credit?

The female gaze: five artists in the show
- 12 Behjat Sadr (1924–2009) Born and educated in Iran, Sadr first encountered abstract expressionism on a study trip to Rome in the 1950s. "Representing reality has never been important to me," she said. "Reality was a pretext for creating forms and colours."

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- 13 Wook-kyung Choi (1940–1985) In the 1960s, the Korean artist moved to the US, where she developed her unique approach to abstraction. “I develop various situations without any conception or any plan,” Choi once said. Then, “I select, organize and create order.”
- 14 Lee Krasner (1908–1984) Her painting *Bald Eagle* from 1955 is composed of cut-up fragments of newspapers, burlap, and discarded drawings by Krasner and her husband, Jackson Pollock. Krasner achieved recognition in her lifetime, but her gender remained an obstacle. “It’s quite clear I didn’t fit in,” she said. “There was not room for a woman.”
- 15 Li Fang (1933–2020) Fang was the sole female founding member of the Fifth Moon Group, a collective of artists formed in Taiwan in 1957. Two years later, she travelled to Paris, eventually settling in Switzerland. “Her works are impressions of the natural world,” says Stobbs. “But she was still interested in using the calligraphic techniques she’d grown up with in Taiwan. She brought that context with her to Europe.”
- 16 Janet Sobel (1893–1968) Sobel is sometimes called “the grandmother of drip painting”. Her influence extends to her interest in “all-over composition”, says Stobbs. “Nothing is privileged on the canvas – it’s the whole thing.”

Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940–70 is at Whitechapel Gallery, London until 7 May, 2023.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What art style does the article talk about?
2. Why is the art exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery important?
3. What are the three fundamental elements of this art style?
4. Which painter is said to have inspired Jackson Pollock?
5. What two things do these international artists incorporate into their paintings?
6. What other exhibition was the starting point for this show?
7. How is the show organized?
8. Who did the art curators work with to find the paintings?
9. What kind of initiatives about female artists have there been in recent years?
10. Who are two of the artists profiled at the end of the article?

4 Key language

a. Read the descriptions and write the compound adjectives from the text.

all-American all-over art-historical best-known cut-up
little-known male-dominated nature-inspired women-only

1. Something that is everywhere is _____.
2. Something divided into many small pieces is _____.
3. Someone or something showing qualities typical of American culture is _____.
4. Something not known well is _____.
5. Something controlled by or consisting mostly of men is _____.
6. The most familiar or famous thing about a person or place is what they are _____ for.
7. An area specifically for women is a _____ space.
8. Something that relates to both art and history has an _____ perspective.
9. Something in nature that causes an idea to happen is _____.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Women were not allowed to develop their art careers in the same way men were.”
- “It is better to add women to the existing canon than to create a women-only body of work.”
- “Abstract art is more expressive than realistic art.”

6 In your own words

- a. Search online for more information about one of the women artists in abstract expressionism or in another style of art, if you wish. Make notes on her biography and include examples of her work.
- b. Report your findings to the class.