

Different strokes: the forgotten women of abstract expressionism

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. What kind of art do you like the most? Rank them in order from 1 (most interesting) to 4 (least interesting). Give reasons for your choice.

- landscape paintings (showing nature)
- portrait paintings (showing people)
- photography
- sculptures

2 Key words

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with the definitions in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. show | a. someone who draws, paints, dances, etc. |
| 2. famous | b. all of the living things, land, and water on Earth |
| 3. believe | c. easy to understand |
| 4. clear | d. group of people working together |
| 5. artist | e. art that people can see, for example, in a museum or theatre |
| 6. nature | f. think something is true |
| 7. international | g. someone or something that a lot of people know about |
| 8. team | h. from many different countries |

b. Fill the gaps in the sentences using words from task a.

1. That woman was in a lot of films. She's _____!
2. Do you _____ his story?
3. My company has offices in six countries. It's _____.
4. Let's see the new paintings at the art _____ this weekend.

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Gabrielle Schwarz

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- 1 Abstract expressionism is changing. Until now, most abstract impressionists were white American men. However, east London's Whitechapel Gallery has an art show with 80 women from around the world.
- 2 Abstract expressionism is a kind of art that started in the 1940s in New York. It made Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko famous. These artists shared ideas about how to use paint, colour and feelings.
- 3 But they were not alone. At the Whitechapel Gallery are paintings from the Jewish-Ukrainian Janet Sobel. She went to the US in 1908. Many people believe that Pollock saw her paintings and took ideas from them.
- 4 Then there is Elaine de Kooning. She put 'E de K' on her paintings to be clear about which paintings were hers. Her husband was also an artist, and he put 'de Kooning' on his.
- 5 There are many artists from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas too. Li Fang was born in Taiwan but worked in France and Switzerland. Her paintings show European nature and Taiwanese styles.
- 6 The idea for this show came from a 2016 one at the Denver Museum of Art. The Whitechapel wanted to make it more international. Many of the artists are now dead and are not famous. To find them, the team worked with 13 people, and they also looked at many pictures from other art shows.
- 7 Recently, there have been more projects to find women artists and show their work. But it was sometimes hard to find them. Many people don't remember their art. Artist Lee Krasner said, "It's quite clear I didn't fit in. There was not room for a woman." Some women were remembered, but men got famous more easily and more quickly.
- 8 Some people are asking if adding women to art history is better than having two art histories — one for men and one for women. Art history professor Griselda Pollock thinks that these art shows are important. She thinks that we need to understand the art from both women and men.
- 9 The female gaze: five artists in the show
 - Behjat Sadr (1924–2009), Iranian
 - Wook-kyung Choi (1940–1985) Korean American
 - Lee Krasner (1908–1984) American
 - Li Fang (1933–2020) Taiwanese-Swiss
 - Janet Sobel (1893–1968) Jewish-Ukrainian-American

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. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. The Whitechapel Gallery is in London.
2. This art show has art from 60 women.
3. Abstract expressionism started in the 1940s in Denver.
4. Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko are famous abstract expressionists.
5. Jackson Pollock got ideas from Janet Sobel's art.
6. The artists in the exhibition are from Europe.
7. All of the artists in the show are very famous.
8. A team of 13 people found the artists for the show.
9. In the past, it was difficult for women to become famous artists.
10. It was very easy to find the artists for this art show.
11. Griselda Pollock thinks these art shows are important.

4 Key language

a. Match each word to its meanings. Each word has two meanings.

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 1. kind | a. space you can use |
| 2. clear | b. a type of person or thing |
| 3. show | c. easy to understand |
| 4. room | d. give information you can see |
| | e. art in a place where people can see it |
| | f. something you can see through |
| | g. a part of a building |
| | h. caring about others |

b. Now complete the sentences with the words from the previous task.

1. How many _____ are there in this house?
2. Please _____ the table after we eat.
3. She bought me lunch. That was very _____.
4. I don't understand. Can you _____ me again?

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions. Give reasons.

- Why is it important to show art from both women and men?
- Who are some of your favourite artists? Why?

6 In your own words

a. Search online to find more information about women artists. Choose one and make notes about her name, her country and her art. Add an example of her art.

b. Report your findings to the class.