

Different strokes: the forgotten women of abstract expressionism

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. What kind of art do you like the most? Rank them in order from 1 (most interesting) to 5 (least interesting). Give reasons for your choice.

- landscape paintings
- portrait paintings
- sculptures
- photography
- art installations

2 Key words

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

abstract	attention	celebrity	connection	debate
emotion	exhibition	initials	inspired	organized
point of view	technique	tradition	understanding	unique

1. _____ art shows an artist's feelings but not people, places, or things that look realistic.
2. An art show that is open to the public is one kind of _____.
3. Someone who is famous is a _____.
4. An _____ is a feeling you have, like love, fear, or anger.
5. A way of doing something using a special process or skill is a _____.
6. When you feel _____, you have a new idea that you feel excited about.
7. Your _____ are the first letters of your first, middle, and last name.
8. A very old way of doing things that has been passed down over time is a _____.
9. Your personal feeling or opinion about something is your _____.
10. When you give interest or thought to something or someone, you are paying _____ to it.

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11. When there is a relationship between things, events, or people, there is a _____.
12. Something that is _____ is planned carefully or arranged in a certain way.
13. In a _____, one group argues for something, but the other group is against it.
14. When you have a lot of knowledge about something, you have a good _____ of it.
15. Something very special and unlike anything else is _____.

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

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Gabrielle Schwarz

16 February, 2023

- 1 Abstract expressionism is changing. Until recently, abstract expressionism has been very white, male and American. However, east London's Whitechapel Gallery has put together an exhibition by 80 female artists from around the world.
- 2 Many of the paintings could be confused with famous ones from abstract expressionism in the late 1940s in New York, which made Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko international celebrities. Although they never formed a group, these artists shared ideas about how abstract expressionism used paint, colour and emotion.
- 3 But they were not alone. At the Whitechapel Gallery are paintings from the Jewish-Ukrainian Janet Sobel, who went 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 paintings with her initials to avoid being compared to her husband.
- 5 There are artists from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Each uses their own traditions and points of view. Li Fang, who was born in Taiwan but worked in France and Switzerland, was inspired by the European nature around her and used techniques from Taiwan.
- 6 The idea for this show came from a 2016 exhibition at the Denver Museum of Art with female painters from the US in the 1940s and 50s. The Whitechapel wanted to expand that.
- 7 To bring attention to some of the surprising connections in the show, it is organized into five groups. One group explores myths, symbols and symbolic routines, such as the Mozambique-born painter and sculptor Bertina Lopes.
- 8 Many of the artists are no longer living and are not well known. To find them, the team worked with 13 curators, art historians and collectors. They also reviewed catalogues from related exhibitions.
- 9 Recently, there have been more projects to find female artists and display their work. But, Stobbs said, "it was sometimes still hard to find them. Many of the artists were very active at the time," but have been forgotten. She noted, "Even if they were being noticed, it was still a male-dominated environment."
- 10 There is debate about whether projects that want to add women to existing art history have more value than making a separate "women-only" one. Is it better to understand why female artists were left out or to remove the limits on who is included in art history altogether?
- 11 Art historian Griselda Pollock's point of view is that these exhibitions are important to make sure our understanding of female artists is "as rich as" our understanding of the male artists. Why let the guys get all the attention?

The female gaze: five artists in the show
- 12 Behjat Sadr (1924–2009) Iranian-born Sadr first saw abstract expressionism on a trip to Rome in the 1950s. "Representing reality has never been important to me," she said. It was about "creating forms and colours."
- 13 Wook-Kyung Choi (1940–1985) In the 1960s, the Korean artist moved to the US, where she developed her unique approach, which is developing her paintings without a plan and then organizing and creating order.
- 14 Lee Krasner (1908–1984) Krasner achieved some recognition in her lifetime, but "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 only female founding member of a group of artists started in Taiwan in 1957. She later moved to Europe, and her art combines both influences.
- 16 Janet Sobel (1893–1968) Sobel is sometimes called "the grandmother of drip painting". She used the whole canvas for her paintings.

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. Abstract expressionism always included male and female artists from around the world.
3. This exhibition features 60 female artists from the UK.
4. People believe that Janet Sobel's painting technique inspired Jackson Pollock.
5. The artists in the exhibition all use the same traditions and share one point of view.
6. The idea for the Whitechapel show started in 2016, at an exhibition at the Denver Museum of Art.
7. Artist Bertina Lopes is a painter and sculptor from Mozambique.
8. Most of the artists are still alive and many of them are celebrities.
9. It was very easy to find the artists for this exhibition.
10. This exhibition wants to increase our knowledge and understanding of female artists.

4 Key language

a. Combine the sentences using *who*, *which*, or *that*.

1. Janet Sobel was an artist. She went to the US in 1908.
2. Li Fang was born in Taiwan. She later moved to Switzerland.
3. Abstract expressionism started in the 1940s in New York. It made Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko famous.
4. There is debate about these projects. The debate is between adding women to the history or creating a second, women-only history.
5. Griselda Pollock is an art historian. She has a point of view about the debate.
6. Wook-Kyung Choi has a unique approach to her paintings. Her approach is to start without a plan and create order later.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Female artists had a difficult time starting their careers and were often forgotten.”
- “It is better to add women to art history than to create a second art history for women only.”
- “Abstract art is harder to understand 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 want. Make notes about her life and include examples of her art.
- b. Report your findings to the class.