



# Color as Field

American Painting, 1950–1975

Resource for Educators

 American Federation of Arts



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**Exhibition Itinerary**

Denver Art Museum  
November 9, 2007–February 3, 2008

Smithsonian American Art Museum  
Washington, D.C.  
February 29–May 26, 2008

Frist Center for the Visual Arts  
Nashville, Tennessee  
June 20–September 21, 2008

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Front cover: Helen Frankenthaler, *Flood*, 1967. Synthetic polymer on canvas, 124 x 140 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Back cover: Kenneth Noland, *Earthen Bound*, 1960. Acrylic on canvas, 103½ x 103½ inches. Courtesy the artist

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## CONTENTS

<b>About This Resource</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Exhibition Overview</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Color Field Painting</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Origins of Color Field</b>	
<b>The Pioneers of Color Field</b>	
<b>Post-Painterly Abstraction and After</b>	
<b>General Discussion Questions</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>General Activities</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Quotations</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chronology</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Selected Works of Art</b>	<b>19</b>
1. Adolph Gottlieb, <i>Sentinel</i> , 1951	20
2. Mark Rothko, <i>Number 18</i> , 1951	22
3. Hans Hofmann, <i>Yellow Hymn</i> , 1954	24
4. Kenneth Noland, <i>Earthen Bound</i> , 1960	26
5. Morris Louis, <i>Theta</i> , 1961	28
6. Robert Motherwell, <i>Chi Ama Crede</i> , 1962	30
7. Larry Poons, <i>Han-San Cadence</i> , 1963	32
8. Jules Olitski, <i>Tin Lizzie Green</i> , 1964	34
9. Clyfford Still, <i>1965</i> , 1965	36
10. Helen Frankenthaler, <i>Flood</i> , 1967	38
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>43</b>

Art can be a great source of inspiration for students. The aim of this resource is to facilitate the process of looking at and understanding modern art and to help educators interpret the works in the exhibition. Educators may utilize these materials either in conjunction with a class visit to the museum or independently. The discussion questions focus on overarching themes explored by these artists, as well as on specific works from the exhibition, and offer ways of making them more accessible to students. They are the first step in engaging students, in getting them to look at and analyze art. Students should be encouraged to make connections among various works of art; to establish links with topics and concepts they are studying in school; and to express their ideas about the works of art in this resource and about modern art in general. The discussion questions and activities in this resource can be adapted for use with elementary, middle, high school, or university level students.

This Resource for Educators was prepared by Suzanne Elder Burke, Director of Education, AFA, with Molly Cygan, Assistant Educator. The informational texts are drawn from the exhibition catalogue, *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975* (New York/New Haven/London: American Federation of Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2007). Michaelyn Mitchell, Director of Publications and Design, edited the text and supervised the design of the resource, with the assistance of Sarah Ingber, Editorial Assistant.

Color Field painting, which emerged in the United States in the 1950s, is characterized by pouring, staining, or spraying thinned paint onto raw canvas to create vast chromatic expanses. Exemplified in the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella, these paintings constitute one of the crowning achievements of postwar American **abstract** art. Surprisingly, there has not been a major exhibition or book to date that has examined **Color Field** painting—its sources, meaning, and impact—or Color Field artists as a group. The approximately forty-one large-scale canvases in *Color as Field* present a remarkable opportunity for viewers to gain insight into the aims of these artists, view their finest works in close relation to each other, and experience the beauty and visual magnetism of their pictorial handling of space and color.

Karen Wilkin, the exhibition's guest curator, is a specialist in twentieth-century modernism and has published widely on this period. The exhibition catalogue, published by the AFA in association with Yale University Press, features essays by Wilkin and Carl Belz, Director Emeritus of the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, on the Color Field artists as a group and as individual painters, and on such issues as the history of color in art.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse group of American painters created a new kind of abstraction based on the power of expanses of radiant color. Their paintings compelled attention by their ravishing hues and large scale and by confrontational **compositions** such as flowing sheets or concentric rings of brilliant colors, discrete bands, or syncopated dots. For all their commanding presence, however, these paintings were also uncannily disembodied; the zones of color seemed to have come into being almost independently of the hand. Often, the weave of the canvas remained visible through the soaked-in paint, so that the image was a purely optical phenomenon, virtually devoid of physical substance.

Now usually termed “Color Field painting,” the movement was first known as Post-Painterly Abstraction—from a seminal 1964 exhibition of the same name organized by the critic **Clement Greenberg**—to distinguish it from the free gestures and loose layering of **Abstract Expressionism**. Greenberg’s exhibition, a cross section of inventive work by painters from the east and west coasts and Canada, included Color Field pioneers Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski, along with Walter Darby Bannard, Jack Bush, Gene Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Sam Francis, and Frank Stella, all of whom were exploring the expressive possibilities of color relationships, in a great variety of manners. Missing were such innovators as Ronald Davis, Sam Gilliam, and Larry Poons, who were investigating related ideas in original ways. All of these artists are represented in this exhibition.

**Henri Matisse** is the ultimate ancestor of the Color Field painters, but their immediate roots are in American abstraction of the 1950s. While the Color Field painters rejected the **gestural**, emotion-driven side of Abstract Expressionism, exemplified by Willem de Kooning’s work, their art developed and expanded ideas about all-overness and the primacy of color posited by the paintings of Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. Through the inclusion of key works by these masters, *Color as Field* makes clear their pivotal roles as precursors to Color Field painting, during the 1950s and early 1960s. It also reveals how some of these artists later evolved into full participants in the movement.

The Color Field painters produced some of the most powerful and beautiful pictures in the history of recent art, images that test the limits of painting itself. Yet in the wake of **post-modernism**, with its cynicism, irony, and political agendas, Color Field abstraction—with its wholehearted quest for visual impact and wordless eloquence—has been somewhat overlooked.

This exhibition offers an opportunity to reevaluate this important aspect of American abstract painting.

### **THE ORIGINS OF COLOR FIELD PAINTING**

For the abstract expressionists, art sprang from the unconscious. An “authentic” painting was infused with its author’s personality, and the visible traces of a work of art’s evolution was an important part of its meaning. For many artists who espoused these ideas, “painterly” gestures were declarations of individuality and carriers of emotion. Layering was evidence of the painting’s previous and future states, a sign of the existential instability of the moment. But for the abstract expressionists included in this exhibition, signs of change were less important than a sense of openness and all-overness. For these artists, a painting was a surface of a particular dimension, inscribed with a record of the artist’s willed and unwilled intentions, a self-sufficient entity that was also a fragment of a larger continuum. If the repeated gestures of painterly abstraction evoked indecision and transience, all-overness suggested a desire for the infinite, even the eternal.

In painterly abstraction, sweeping pigment over underlying layers created an appearance of spontaneity and endless mutability, but it often muddied color. Such overlapping and muddying is conspicuously absent in the thinly painted, economical canvases of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman and (in different ways) in the work of Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, and Clyfford Still, where other concerns—especially color relationships—take precedence. These paintings were crucial to the next generation, the Color Field painters, pointing the way to a new abstraction. It can be argued, in fact, that in their later work, Gottlieb, Hofmann, and Motherwell participated fully in the new color-based approach they had prefigured.

### **THE PIONEERS OF COLOR FIELD PAINTING**

The painters most closely associated with the term “Color Field”—Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski—are notably diverse. Yet they share a commitment to the primacy of color, to frontality, and to spatial and emotional ambiguity. Moreover, in all their work—in Frankenthaler’s improvisations on the natural world, Louis’s mysterious Veils, Noland’s crisp Circles, or Olitski’s pulsing expanses—relationships of surprising hues assume the burden of associative meaning.

All of these painters, along with most of their colleagues—among them, Gene Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella—quickly began

to exploit the properties of newly developed acrylic paint after initially working in thinned-out oil paint. The rapidly changing technology of acrylic permitted large expanses of color to be both intense and very thin, allowing the Color Field painters to experiment with extremes of economy and clarity in their paint handling and resulting in the characteristic freshness and apparent directness of the best work of the movement.

Frankenthaler led the way with her large, transparent stain paintings that were as direct as watercolors but as commanding as any major works on canvas. Essentially, she had departed from Pollock's all-over pours, transforming the method into her own language of generously scaled, simultaneous drawing and painting. Louis and Noland soon responded to the implications of Frankenthaler's method, each, in a personal way, exploring the structural possibilities of all-overness, clarity, and symmetry, as well as the expressive possibilities of color. By the early 1960s, even more extreme pictorial ideas were probed by their friend Olitski, in his seamless floods of luminous, sprayed hues. Over time, these artists all continued to invent fresh formats and to create fresh challenges for themselves, testing the limits of how much meaning could be wrested from the inspired placement of color.

### POST-PAINTERLY ABSTRACTION AND AFTER

In 1964, the critic Clement Greenberg organized an exhibition of color-based abstract painting for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art titled ***Post-Painterly Abstraction***. The selection, by Greenberg and the museum's curator, included artists from New York, Washington, D.C., the west coast, and Toronto. They ranged in age from contemporaries of the abstract expressionists, such as the Canadian Jack Bush (b. 1909), to young newcomers such as Walter Darby Bannard (b. 1934) and Frank Stella (b. 1936). Cumulatively, by the 1960s, their work attested both to the currency of the underlying assumptions of Color Field painting and to how rapidly those assumptions had been diffused.

What was striking was the diversity of approaches of the artists included in *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, despite their common concerns. As can be seen from the works of the period included in this exhibition, the west coast painter Sam Francis constructed his pictures with repetitive, amply scaled touches informed by his interest in Asian calligraphy. Bush deployed an amazing range of colors in quirky configurations that hinted at origins in the real world without resembling anything. The extreme economy of Bannard's pictures seem to have anticipated **Minimalism**. Gene Davis's insistent bars forced unruly colors into systematic relationships.

For all its breadth, *Post-Painterly Abstraction* was not fully comprehensive in its inclusions. At the time, many other gifted, ambitious painters were exploring closely related ideas about making color a driving force, in extremely personal ways, notably Larry Poons, in New York; Sam Gilliam, in Washington, D.C.; and Ronald Davis, in Los Angeles. The inclusion of their work in *Color as Field*, along with that of their colleagues included in *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, broadens the view of the ideas about color, materiality, and process that engaged many of the most adventurous painters of the 1960s and early 1970s. Collectively, these works announce the individuality and originality of the practitioners of color-based abstraction at the same time that they make plain the shared concerns and the shared assumptions that connected—however loosely—this wide-ranging group of painters.

Why do you think an artist would choose to make a **non-representational** painting? What might the artist intend to communicate in such a painting?

Artists often use color to convey emotion. What colors do you associate with the following emotions: anger, sadness, love, joy, frustration, peace?

Color is the central focus of these paintings. Do you think the artists used the paint directly out of the tube or mixed them to create their own unique colors? What techniques do you think they used to create such a variety of color? In each painting, what colors do you think stand out? What colors recede? Do you see any of the same colors in the different paintings, or is every color slightly different? What colors do you prefer?

Consider the textures of the paintings in this exhibition. Can you tell where the artists have used thin paint? Thick paint?

Many of these artists used unconventional means, such as pouring or spraying, to apply the paint to their canvases. Why do you think they chose to do this? How does this affect the resulting painting?

Why do you think the artists chose to create their paintings on such a large scale? How does the size affect the way you view the painting? What do you think might be some of the challenges of creating large paintings?

How do these works relate to one another? What are their similarities? How are they different? Describe the effect of viewing these paintings as a group. Do you think it would be different to see them individually?

Consider the titles of the works in the exhibition. How do the titles relate to the paintings? Why do you think an artist would title a work *Untitled*? If you could give new titles to the untitled works in this exhibition, what would you call them? Why?

**Color Mixing and Interaction**

**Materials:** poster board, pencil, paint, scissors, tape

**Procedure:**

1. Have students make a color wheel. (A color wheel includes the following twelve colors evenly spaced in a circle: red, red-orange, orange, yellow-orange, yellow, yellow-green, green, green-blue, blue, blue-violet, violet.) Instead of twelve colors, have the students mix colors using only red, yellow, and blue paints in their color wheels.
2. During the color mixing for their color wheel, ask students to cover small squares of paper with the colors they like the best.
3. Have students hang the paper squares together to make a mosaic or quilt of the best colors, demonstrating the wide range of possible colors when mixing only three. Keep the squares loose, so they can be rearranged in different ways. You may want to create a pattern or design, or arrange them in spectrum order.
4. Ask students to choose a simple geometric shape such as a square, circle, or triangle, and make a stencil.
5. Using their stencils, have students transfer the shape to three pieces of paper or canvas.
6. Ask students to choose one of the colors they created in their color wheel to fill in the shape on all three pieces of paper or canvas.
7. The background color will be different in each of the three paintings. Have students apply the complimentary color and the analogous color to the background. Each painting will have only two colors in order to demonstrate how a color appears different according to what other colors are interacting with it. (Students may want to further these experiments by adding more colors and additional shapes.)

**The Push and Pull of Color**

**Materials:** sketch paper, poster board, tempera paint, paintbrushes, colored pencils, markers

**Procedure:**

1. Have students sketch loose, open scribble designs on sketch paper until they find one they like that has open spaces that can be filled in with color.
2. Have students make three copies of their design (if a copier is used, you will need to attach the copies to a study board or paper for painting).
3. Ask students to choose five colors to work with. They need not be primary colors.
4. On the first copy, have students paint within the lines of their design to create an abstract painting.
5. For the next two copies, ask students to use the same palette of colors but to change which areas are painted with which color. Students may also choose to add color to the lines of their design using markers or colored pencils.
6. Have students display their work and compare the three paintings. As a class, discuss the differing effects of color in each group of paintings.

**Doing the Ground Work: The Interaction of Colors**

Old Masters such as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) and Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) often covered their painting surface with a thin, even layer of red before beginning a painting. The effect of this red foundation, or ground, is a warming of the green and blue tones painted on top and an increased sense of depth. Many of the artists in this exhibition also experimented with the effects of layering colors on top of one another and/or working from a colored ground.

**Materials:** foam core, canvas, or poster board, paintbrushes, tempera, acrylic or oil paint

**Procedure:**

1. Have students cover the surface of their paper or canvas with a layer of watered-down red paint. Allow that to dry.
2. Ask them to paint a picture of a simple item of contrasting color such as a green apple on their red canvas.
3. Have students make a second painting depicting the same subject, and let them choose a different color for the under painting.
4. Ask students to compare the two paintings and discuss the results.

**Paint Play**

Many of the artists in this exhibition pushed the boundaries of possibilities in paint application by pouring, dripping, and even spraying the paint on their canvases.

**Materials:** poster board, tempera paints, buckets, sponges, oversized paintbrushes, mops, squirt bottles, strainers, straws, sticks, etc.

**Procedure:**

1. Have students discuss as a class possible ways to create a painting, other than those mentioned above, and make a list of their ideas. Encourage students to think about tools that could be used, as well as physical movements that may create interesting effects.
2. Ask students to use five different techniques (such as splattering with different instruments, pouring, using a palette knife, using a large brush, squirt bottles, or strainers).
3. Give students five large pieces of poster board and ask them to choose three colors to use in all five paintings. (Using the same colors throughout will help to highlight the diverse results that can be achieved through process.) Encourage students to mix the paint to create unique colors.
4. Have students apply their three colors to their boards using a different technique for each of the five boards.
5. Help students hang their five works around the classroom and have a discussion about their techniques and color choices.

**Writing about the Experience of Looking at a Painting**

**Materials:** notebook or sketchbook, pencil

**Procedure:**

1. Ask students to choose one painting in the exhibition.
2. Ask students to look very carefully at their chosen piece and think about it for at least fifteen minutes. Have them write down their thoughts. Suggested ways to look at the painting include standing as near to the painting as is permitted by museum staff (please never touch!); standing as far away as possible without losing sight of the work; looking at the painting for a long time; looking at the painting from different angles; watching how other people in the gallery react to the work.
3. Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.
4. When each student has finished sharing, discuss the similarities and differences of their experiences.

**Writing a Poem about a Painting****Materials:** paper, pencil**Procedure:**

1. Ask students to choose a painting from the exhibition and write a short poem describing it or inspired by it.
2. Ask students to consider these questions before they write: Can you picture the artist creating the painting? What tools and materials do you think the artist used? Why did the artist choose these particular colors? What was the artist trying to say? What mood does the painting convey? If the painting were set to music, what kind of music would be appropriate?
3. Ask students to share their poems with the class.

**Writing about the World of Color Field****Materials:** paper, pencil, markers, colored pencils**Procedure:**

1. Ask students to choose one painting from the exhibition and to think of the painting as a doorway to a different world.
2. Ask students to imagine they are entering this world and write down their thoughts.
3. Ask students to organize their notes and write about the imaginary world.
4. Ask students to share their descriptions with the class.

The following quotations are by some of the artists represented in the *Color as Field* exhibition.

"You have to know how to use the accident, how to recognize it, how to control it, and ways to eliminate it so that the whole surface looks felt and born all at once."

—Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in an interview at Tyler Graphics, Mount Kisco, New York, July 11, 1994, *Sound Reel 10*, International Prints, Drawings and Illustrated Books Collection, National Gallery of Australia.

"... I looked at and was influenced by both Pollock and de Kooning and eventually felt there were more possibilities for me out of the Pollock vocabulary. De Kooning made enclosed linear shapes and 'applied' the brush. Pollock used shoulder and ropes and ignored the edges and corners. I felt I could stretch more in the Pollock framework... You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could *depart* from Pollock."

—Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum* (October 1965): 37.

"The role of the artist, of course, had always been that of image-maker. Different times require different images. Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time."

—Adolph Gottlieb, quoted in "The Ideas of Art," *The Tiger's Eye* 1, no. 2 (December 1947): 43.

"When I started doing the Bursts, I began to do part of the painting horizontally. It was necessary to do that because I was working with a type of paint which had a particular viscosity which flowed and, if it were on a vertical surface, it would just run. If it were on a horizontal surface, I could control it. So I'd put my paintings down horizontally but I didn't put them on the floor. I had them set up on horses or stools, so that I was at a good working height... I was using a combination of brushes and knives, palette knives ... and spatulas. And for a while I was using squeegees for putting on paint. I've tried everything, rollers, rags. I've put paint on with everything."

—Adolph Gottlieb, quoted in an interview conducted by Dorothy Seckler in New York, October 25, 1967. *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution. <<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/gottli67.htm>>

“Art is a matter strictly of experience, not of principles, and what counts first and last in art is quality; all other things are secondary. No one has yet been able to demonstrate that the representational as such either adds or takes away from the merit of the picture or statue. The presence or absence of a recognizable image has no more to do with value in painting or sculpture than the presence or absence of a libretto has little to do with the value in music. Taken by itself, no single one of its parts or aspects decides the quality of a work of art as a whole. In painting and sculpture this holds just as true for the aspect of representation as it does for those of scale, color, paint quality, design, etc., etc.”

—Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 131–38.

“Size guarantees the purity as well as the intensity needed to suggest indeterminate space: more blue simply being bluer than less blue.”

—Clement Greenberg, quoted in “After Abstract Expressionism,” in John O’Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131.

“Artistic intuition is the basis for confidence of the spirit. Art is a reflection of the spirit, a result of introspection, which finds expression in the nature of the art medium.”

—Hans Hofmann, excerpts of his teaching from *Search for the Real and Other Essays by Hans Hofmann*, edited by S. T. Weeks and B. H. Hayes, Jr. and translated by Glenn Wessels (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1948), 65–78, *passim*.

“Art is always spiritual, a result of introspection, finding expression through the natural entity of the medium.”

—Hans Hofmann, excerpt from “On the Aims of Art” originally published in *The Fortnightly* 1, no. 13 (February 26, 1932): 7–11.

“You might as well get one thing straight ... I am not an abstractionist ... not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else ... I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on.”

—Mark Rothko, “Statement on His Attitude in Painting,” quoted in Jeffrey Weiss, *Mark Rothko* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 307.

- 1950 Korean War begins
- 1951 Mark Rothko paints *Number 18*; Adolph Gottlieb paints *Sentinel*; 9th Street Art Exhibition opens in New York and includes the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Robert Motherwell
- 1952 Helen Frankenthaler paints *Mountains and Sea*; Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is published; *The Diary of Anne Frank* is published
- 1953 Dwight D. Eisenhower is elected as the thirty-fourth president of the United States; Korean War ends; first color television sets go on sale
- 1954 Hans Hofmann paints *Yellow Hymn*
- 1955 Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks spark bus protest in the South; Albert Einstein dies
- 1956 Elvis Presley releases *Elvis Presley*, his first gold album
- 1957 Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is published; Russians launch Sputnik; Vietnam War begins
- 1959 Fidel Castro becomes Premier of Cuba; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City opens to the public
- 1960 Kenneth Noland paints *Earthen Bound*; President Eisenhower signs the Civil Rights Act of 1960 into law
- 1961 Morris Louis paints *Theta*; John F. Kennedy is elected as the thirty-fifth president of the United States; Vietnam War officially begins; Peace Corps is established
- 1962 Robert Motherwell paints *Chi Ama Crede*; Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is published and gives rise to the environmentalist movement
- 1963 Larry Poons paints *Han-San Cadence*; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech; Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*; John F. Kennedy is assassinated
- 1964 Jules Olitski paints *Tin Lizzie Green*; Clement Greenberg curates the exhibition *Post-Painterly Abstraction* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Beatles appear on the Ed Sullivan Show
- 1965 Clyfford Still paints *Untitled*
- 1967 Helen Frankenthaler paints *Flood*
- 1969 Richard M. Nixon is elected president of the United States; Apollo 11 is launched and successfully completes the first mission to the moon
- 1975 Vietnam War ends



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## **Selected Works of Art from the Exhibition**

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe this painting. What shapes and colors does Gottlieb use? Do you think these shapes and colors carry any meaning?
2. Gottlieb was interested in pictographs. Do you recognize any of the symbols? Do they mean anything to you?
3. What mood is expressed by this painting? Why do you think that?
4. View this painting as an abstract landscape and describe what kind of landscape you think it might depict. Why?
5. Look at the black shape running down the right side of this painting. Why do you think Gottlieb chose to include this form? What is the effect of the form being black?
6. Is there more than one layer of paint, or does it look like Gottlieb has only applied one layer?
7. Is there a sense of depth to this painting? If so, how does Gottlieb achieve this illusion of depth?

## 1. Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)

*Sentinel*, 1951

Oil on linen

60 x 48 inches

Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York

A native New Yorker, Adolph Gottlieb studied early in his career at the Art Students League under Robert Henri and John Sloan. In the 1930s, Gottlieb's art began to reflect the influence of Milton Avery and Henri Matisse and their tendency toward pared-down drawing and rich fields of color. Between 1935 and 1940, Gottlieb and nine other artists known as The Ten—among them, Ilya Bolotowsky, Louis Schanker, Joseph Solman, and Mark Rothko—exhibited their works together.

During the Depression, Gottlieb participated in the WPA's **Federal Arts Project** in order to support himself. As part of the easel painting division in the Arizona desert, he painted the native landscape and developed a more surrealist approach to his artwork. He also became interested in pictographs—symbols or images representing a word or idea. With his pictographs, Gottlieb created his own visual language with which to express the stylistic manifesto of the abstract expressionists.

In Gottlieb's Pictograph series (1941–51), he incorporated invented symbols as a way to create a universal experience. If Gottlieb discovered that one of his signs had an actual meaning in a past culture, he would stop using it. From 1951 to 1957, he developed his Imaginary Landscapes series, which featured shapes that suggest the night sky amid heavy brushstrokes. His Bursts series (1957–74) presented a radically simplified image usually consisting of a red disc above a black mass near the bottom of the picture. With these forms he continued to experiment with the relationship of object to ground in landscape painting. In 1963, he was awarded the grand prize of the seventh Bienal de São Paulo. During the last decades of his life, Gottlieb taught at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and the University of California in Los Angeles.

*Sentinel* combines Gottlieb's interest in pictographs, which developed early in his career, with the simplicity of shape and color characteristic of his later work. The lower half of the work is cluttered with Gottlieb's symbols (arrows, half-circles, slashes, and zigzags) while the upper portion is lined by five red and black orbs against a white background. This painting illustrates Gottlieb's interest in the flatness of a painting's surface.



## Discussion Questions

1. What colors do you see in this painting?
2. What do you think the artist was trying to communicate in this painting?
3. Rothko used color to express emotion. What colors do you associate with the following emotions or feelings: anger, sadness, love, tranquility, happiness, frustration?
4. Do you think Rothko put more than one layer of paint on the canvas? Why do you think he did that?
5. Do you think he put some colors on top of others? Which colors do you think might be on the top? What color do you think he used first? Are there any colors that stand out more than the others?
6. How do you think the artist applied the paint to the canvas? Can you see any brushstrokes? Why do you think he might have chosen this method?
7. What does this painting make you think of?
8. Why do you think Rothko chose to number his paintings instead of titling them?
9. Why do you think Rothko's works are featured in a chapel? Why do you think Rothko wanted to have the chapel created?

## 2. Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

*Number 18, 1951*

Oil on canvas

81½ x 69⅞ inches

Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, New York  
(53.216)

Born Marcus Rothkowitz, Mark Rothko was raised in Dvinsk, Russia (now Daugavpils, Latvia) and in 1913 immigrated with his family to Portland, Oregon. After a short period at Yale University, he moved to New York, studying with Arshile Gorky at the New School of Design and with Max Weber at the Art Students League. Rothko's earliest work reveals a strong influence from Weber; it was from Weber that he seems to have gained an understanding of the use of color to express emotion. In the 1920s, Rothko became one of a small group of artists, including Adolph Gottlieb, John Graham, and Barnett Newman, who gathered around the painter Milton Avery. The group socialized and vacationed together and enjoyed animated conversations about every aspect of art. During the Depression, Rothko, like other artists of his generation, found employment at various government programs, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Soon after, Rothko discovered the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's observations about the loss of myth in western culture interested Rothko, and with these ideas in mind, in the early 1940s, he and his artist colleagues, especially Adolph Gottlieb, began to explore mythological subjects through their growing interest in **form**, space, and color.

In 1946, Rothko began to create his Multiform paintings. Highly abstract works with an organic structure, these paintings demonstrate an important transition to the vertical oil paintings of the artist's mature style, which are composed of symmetrical rectangular blocks of two or three colors. He chose not to title the works individually but rather to number each one. Rothko shied away from the abstractionist and colorist labels, preferring to emphasize his art's communication of human emotion. He stressed the spiritual aspect of his paintings, a sentiment that culminated in his ability to convince art patrons John and Dominique de Menil to construct the Rothko Chapel in Houston, which opened in 1971.



### Discussion Questions

1. Hofmann uses a wide palette of colors. Can you identify each one?
2. Which colors do you think stand out the most?
3. Hofmann referred to his paintings as "happy accidents." Does *Yellow Hymn* illustrate this idea?
4. How does Hofmann utilize negative space?
5. Does he create a sense of depth in this painting? How?
6. Why do you think he titled this piece *Yellow Hymn*?
7. Do you think this painting represents anything, or is it non-representational? What might it represent?
8. How would you describe the composition in this painting?

### 3. Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)

*Yellow Hymn*, 1954

Oil on canvas

50 x 40 inches

The Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust, courtesy Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art, New York

Born in Weissenburg, Bavaria, and raised in Munich, Hofmann attended Moritz Heymann's art school in Munich, where he was introduced to the dominant styles of the time, including Impressionism. Hofmann showed great promise and was encouraged to continue his studies in France, where as a student at the Académie de la Grand Chaumière and the Académie Colarossi, he became friends with Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. Hofmann also became close to Robert Delaunay, whose emphasis on color deeply impressed him as he was beginning to form his own theories of color and composition. A leading teacher and painter in New York in the years following World War II, Hofmann became a crucial link between European and American **modernism**.

In 1930, Hofmann began teaching a summer session at the University of California, Berkeley. Eventually, he settled in New York, where he first taught at the Art Students League and then, in the fall of 1933, opened the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. Hofmann had his first New York exhibition in 1944 at **Peggy Guggenheim's** acclaimed Art of This Century Gallery. During the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Hofmann was better known as a teacher than as an artist. Among the notable American artists who studied with him are Burgoyne Diller, Helen Frankenthaler, Jane Freilicher, Red Grooms, Wolf Kahn, Allan Kaprow, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Larry Rivers. Hofmann became the first artist/teacher to bring the concepts of European modernism to the United States, and in doing so, he helped launch Abstract Expressionism.

Hofmann immersed his students in the principles of design and the investigation of color and its behavior, teaching that the interpretation of color depends on its environment. For example, an area of color in an image can come forward or recede depending on the colors that surround it. This was famously termed by Hofmann as "push and pull." Artist/teacher Josef Albers, another German émigré, greatly influenced Hofmann with his interest in the way color can fool the eye into seeing depth on a two-dimensional plane.

In 1958, Hofmann closed his school to devote himself exclusively to his own creative work. Throughout his career, he produced powerful works



that celebrated the material and expressive qualities of shape, color, placement, scale, and touch. In the last years of his life he produced a large body of inventive canvases, and his reputation as an artist finally began to equal his renown as a teacher. Today he is known primarily as an artist. His theories of the “push and pull” of color and of activating the picture plane are still influential.

### Discussion Questions

1. Noland was interested in the way shapes within a painting relate to the edge of the canvas. Do you think he thought about the shape of the canvas when he created this painting?
2. This painting is more than 8 feet tall and 8 feet wide. Why do you think Noland chose to make it so large? Do you think it would have the same effect if it were small? What do you think are some of the physical challenges of working at this scale? Do you think Noland painted this on the floor, on an easel, or on the wall?
3. Do you think Noland used a paintbrush to create this painting? Why?
4. Describe the way in which these colors interact. Do you think one color stands out more than the others? Has Noland used any complimentary colors in this painting?
5. Why do you think he chose to use orange to make the line for the inner circle?
6. How many circles do you see? Do the circles remind you of anything?
7. How does this painting compare to Helen Frankenthaler's *Flood* (no. 10)? What types of shapes do you see in each of the works?
8. Compare *Earthen Bound* to *Following Sea* (see illustration). How are they similar?

## 4. Kenneth Noland (b. 1924)

*Earthen Bound*, 1960

Acrylic on canvas

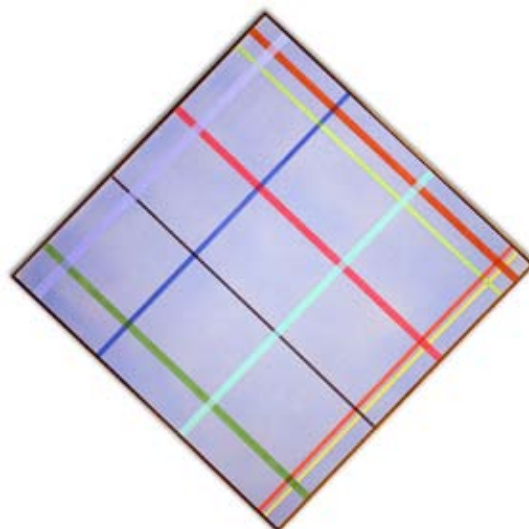
103½ x 103½ inches

Courtesy the artist

Noland was born in Asheville, North Carolina, and attended **Black Mountain College** in North Carolina. In the late 1940s, he worked with sculptor **Ossip Zadkine** in Paris, and in the early '50s he settled in Washington, D.C., where he met Morris Louis. The early influence of Abstract Expressionism proved decisive for Noland. He wrote: "Until Abstract Expressionism you had to have something to paint about, some kind of subject matter. Even though Kandinsky and Arthur Dove were improvising earlier, it didn't take. They had to have symbols, suggested naturally images or geometry, which was something real structurally. That gave them something to paint about. What was new was the idea that something you looked at could be like something you heard."<sup>1</sup>

After a visit to Helen Frankenthaler's studio in 1953, Noland adopted her "stain" technique and used acrylic paint on unprimed canvases. He began exploring his interest in the relationship of the image to the edge of the canvas through a series of studies of concentric rings using vibrant color combinations. Noland was one of the pioneers of the "shaped" canvas, starting off with a series of symmetrical and asymmetrical diamonds or chevrons. His later shaped canvases are often irregular and asymmetrical.

1. Kenneth Noland, quoted in Karen Wilkin, *Kenneth Noland* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990), 8.



Kenneth Noland, *Following Sea*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 98¼ x 98¼ inches (point to point). Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto



In the early 1960s, Noland briefly joined the art faculty at Bennington College in Vermont. From 1963 to 1965, he and fellow Bennington faculty members Jules Olitski and Anthony Caro frequented each other's studios. Noland's early work often has an industrial-like paint application, leaving no sign of the artist's hand. Beginning with his Target series, he also completed the Chevron, Stripe, Diamond, and Plaid series, among others, that allowed him to explore the limits of his love for color. Faithful to the process of art making, Noland believes in the craft and skill of his daily practice. Early in his career, he was struck by his friend David Smith's workmanlike habits and resolved to adopt a similar methodical approach.

He created new Chevrons in the 1980s characterized by their transparency and layering of forms. By experimenting with materials, he tested the limits of acrylic paint and used transparent gels that allow increased fluidity. About his work, Noland says, "Being an artist is about discovering things after you've done them. Like Cézanne—after twenty years of that mountain he found out what he was doing. If it isn't a process of discovery, it shows. I'm in it for the long haul."<sup>2</sup>

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2. Kenneth Noland, quoted in Karen Wilkin, *Kenneth Noland*, 24.

## Discussion Questions

1. Louis made different series of works including Veils, Flowers, and Stripes. This painting belongs to his Unfurled series. Why do you think the group was given this name?
2. Louis titled this painting *Theta*. What does this word mean? Why do you think he chose it as the title for this painting?
3. To create this painting, Louis poured paint onto the canvas. How do you think he achieved these marks? For example, was the painting on the floor, upright, at an angle?
4. Why do you think he left large areas of the painting white?
5. How many colors do you see? Did Louis use any of the same colors on the right side as he used to create the stripes down the left side? If not, how are the colors different? Why do you think he arranged the colors in this way? What might he consider when choosing the placement for each of the colors?
6. Do you think he allowed each color to dry before applying the next one? Explain your answer.
7. Does Louis create a sense of depth, or is he drawing attention to the flat surface of the canvas?

## 5. Morris Louis (1912–1962)

***Theta*, 1961**

**Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas**

**102 x 168 inches**

**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; anonymous gift (67.623)**

A leading American colorist, Morris Louis was born in Baltimore. From 1929 to 1933, Louis studied at the Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts, working at various odd jobs to support himself while painting. From 1936 to 1940, he lived in New York, where he met Arshile Gorky, David Siqueiros, and Jack Tworkov. In 1940, Louis returned to Baltimore and taught there privately. In 1952, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he taught at the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts and met fellow instructor Kenneth Noland, who became a close friend. Louis's first solo exhibition took place at the Workshop Center Art Gallery in 1953. Also that year, Louis and Noland visited Helen Frankenthaler's New York studio, where they were greatly impressed by her new "stain" paintings.

Upon their return to Washington, Louis and Noland experimented with various techniques of paint application. The following year, Louis produced his Veil paintings, which are characterized by layers of transparent color stained into canvas. Louis did not title his Veils either individually or as a group, and it is not clear when the term *veil* first came into general use.

In his catalogue for the Louis memorial exhibition in 1963, critic Lawrence Alloway suggests that the term *veil* was at the time applied to Louis's painting in general: "The words most often used, both by art critics and by journalists, about Louis's art, are 'veils' and 'drapes.' The terms are apt, obvious even, not only because of the preservation of the canvas as part of the paint . . . but also because of the configuration of the paint trails. These are continuous and undulating. Like veils, the thin washes of color are continually overlaid, which produces a shifting density and a subtle, reserved, internal color relationship."<sup>1</sup> The Veils were followed by Florals and Columns (1960), Unfurleds (1960–61)—consisting of rich veins of color flowing from both sides of large white fields—and the Stripe paintings (1961–62)—composed of vivid lines that careen down the canvas.

1. Lawrence Alloway, quoted in *Morris Louis 1912–1962, Memorial Exhibition: Paintings from 1954–1960* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1963), unpaginated.



## Discussion Questions

1. At approximately 6 feet 10 inches by 11 feet 9 inches, this is a very large painting. Why do you think Motherwell made it so big? How would the effect have been different if it were a smaller canvas?
2. How many colors can you see in this painting? Can you find blue? Why do you think Motherwell used such a limited palette?
3. How do you think he applied the paint? Can you see any brushstrokes?
4. Why do you think he chose this title? What do you think it means?
5. Describe the texture of this painting. Does it appear to be smooth? Is the paint thick or thin?
6. Has Motherwell left any areas of the canvas blank? Why do you think he chose to do this?
7. Does Motherwell achieve a sense of action or movement in this painting? If so, describe it.

## 6. Robert Motherwell (1915–1991)

*Chi Ama, Crede, 1962*

Oil on canvas

82 x 141 inches

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; purchased by The Phillips Collection through funds donated by The Judith Rothschild Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips, The Chisholm Foundation, The Whitehead Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Laughlin Phillips, Mr. and Mrs. Marc E. Leland, and the Honorable Ann Winkelman Brown and Donald Brown, 1998

One of the youngest members of the New York School, Robert Motherwell was born in Aberdeen, Washington, and studied philosophy at Stanford and Harvard universities before transferring to Columbia University to study art history with Meyer Schapiro. It was Schapiro who later encouraged Motherwell to concentrate on making art. In addition to his renown as an artist, Motherwell was a prolific writer, lecturer, and teacher. His rigorous academic background made him a natural spokesperson for the abstract expressionists.

Motherwell began painting seriously after a trip to Europe in 1938. After a sojourn in Mexico three years later with Chilean painter Matta Echaurren, he began to paint full-time. During the 1940s, he was introduced to and influenced by the European surrealists, including Max Ernst and André Masson. Through William Baziotis, Motherwell gained access to the group of artists later known as the abstract expressionists. Motherwell's work in the 1940s and 1950s evolved from abstracted Surrealism to a more gestural, nonobjective art. Motherwell was deeply affected by the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and devoted a series of more than two hundred paintings to the theme. He painted the first of these "Elegies to the Spanish Republic" in 1948.

In the spring of 1958, Motherwell married fellow artist Helen Frankenthaler. The couple vacationed that summer in Spain and France, which led to an important body of work known as the "Iberia" series. About the Iberia works Motherwell wrote: "I almost never start with an image. I start with a painting idea, an impulse, usually derived from my own world. Through images may sometimes emerge from some chord in my unconscious, the way a dream might. In Iberia, for example, you would have to know that a Spanish bull ring is made of sand of ochre color, and that Spanish bulls are very small, quick and coal black."<sup>1</sup>

1. Undated document by Robert Motherwell, Tate Gallery Archive, <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/> (accessed August 1, 2006)



Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Motherwell experimented with collage, as well as thinned paint and Magna (an early precursor of acrylic paint), developing the rich language of texture and form that he would work with for decades on both paper and canvas. In 1967, he began his "Open" series. These are large, almost monochromatic works that communicate a strong sense of emotion and space through a very sparse artistic vocabulary. After the early 1970s, Motherwell lived and worked in Connecticut, continuing to explore color, form, and light and becoming a prolific printmaker.

## Discussion Questions

1. Does this painting make you think of anything?
2. Stare at this painting for thirty seconds. Can you describe what you see? Does it change as time passes? When you look away from the painting, do you see anything? How do you think Poons achieves this affect?
3. What does *cadence* mean? Why do you think Poons included this word in the title for this painting?
4. Orange and blue are complementary colors. Why do you think Poons chose to use these colors?
5. Does Poons create a sense of depth in this painting?
6. Do you see a pattern in the dots or do you think they are arranged randomly?
7. What do you think Poons is trying to communicate with this painting?
8. Read the following quotation by Poons and explain what you think it means.

"... you've got a dot here and you've got a dot there ... and you've got four other dots somewhere else and they set up a relationship, sometimes ... they set up an obvious relationship to each other. What I'm trying to do is to destroy any relationship between anything in the paintings so that everything has a chance instead of just one thing or two things coming to the front. Like everything has an equal chance."<sup>1</sup>

Does this quotation relate to this painting? Do you think everything in this painting stands out equally?

1. Larry Poons, quoted in an interview conducted by Dorothy Seckler, March 18, 1965. *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution. <<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/poons65.htm>>

## 7. Larry Poons (b. 1937)

*Han-San Cadence*, 1963

Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas

72 x 144 inches

Des Moines Art Center; purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center (1970.19)

Born in Ogibuko, Japan, to American parents, Larry Poons studied music at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music after he graduated from high school. After about a year, he left the conservatory and attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts to study art. Poons received national acclaim when he was included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, which included his iconic paintings of elliptical dots of intense color arranged along grids. These paintings take the visual experiments of Kenneth Noland and Bridget Riley to the extreme. By creating a kind of optical flickering with colored dots on colored fields (often the complementary color of the dots), his compositions elicit retinal afterimages. Poons began drawing constellations at an early age and later began copying musical scores. This imagery seems to be informed by these early drawings and his musical training, as if visually communicating tone and rhythm. Influenced by Mondrian's experiments with color and composition, Poons's highly graphic style was a strong influence on the Op Art that followed.

By 1966, Poons's palette had softened, and he was experimenting with subtle variations in harmonious color. In the 1970s, he began his "thrown" paintings. These dense waterfalls of color and paint offered a wholly fresh vision of how paintings could be structured with color. Recently, Poons has returned to the use of the brush, without diminishing his interest in texture and color. In his most recent work, he creates typhoons of line and color on canvases that allude to representation without offering wholly recognizable forms. His exuberant paintings abound in explosive, broken color, applied in staccato, all-over rhythms. An influential instructor, Poons teaches at the Art Students League and the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture.



### Discussion Questions

1. What colors do you see in this painting? How would you describe the palette?
2. Do you see any shapes in this painting? Can you see three dots of color? Why do you think Olitski included them?
3. Does this painting make you think of anything?
4. "Tin Lizzie" was the nickname for a Ford Model T automobile, which was produced from 1908 through 1927. Why do you think Olitski chose to title this painting after the Model T?
5. How do you think the artist created this painting? Do you see any brushstrokes? Olitski often used a spray gun to apply paint. Do you think he used one for this painting? Why?
6. Do you see more than one layer of paint? Which color do you think is on top? Can you tell what color he used first? Why?
7. Did Olitski leave any areas of the canvas empty? Why?
8. Why do you think Olitski chose to make his painting so large?
9. Compare and contrast *Tin Lizzie Green* with *Cleopatra Flesh* (see illustration).

## 8. Jules Olitski (1922–2007)

*Tin Lizzie Green*, 1964

Alkyd and oil/wax crayon on canvas

130 x 82 inches

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (1977.617)

Jules Olitski and his family came to New York from Snovskiy, Russia (now Ukraine), in 1923. After a traditional art education at the National Academy of Design and the Beaux-Arts Institute in New York, Olitski spent 1949 to 1951 in Paris, working in the studio of the sculptor Ossip Zadkine. Olitski came to Clement Greenberg's attention in March 1958, when the critic saw the painter's crusty French-inspired paintings in a New York gallery and signed the guest book. Olitski contacted Greenberg, initiating a friendship that lasted more than thirty-five years.

Olitski's work changed rapidly as he became familiar with Helen Frankenthaler's color-based abstractions. He began adopting Frankenthaler's method of staining the unprimed canvas. His Core series of the early 1960s achieved a sophisticated balance between spreading color zones and tautly balanced organic shapes. In these works, Olitski's stain technique, which flattens the figure and the ground, draws attention to the flatness of the canvas. His work changed dramatically after he joined the faculty at Bennington College in 1963, in part because of his friendships with Kenneth Noland and Anthony Caro and his familiarity with their work. He began to move away from the organic forms in favor of large expanses of sweeping color. The three frequented one another's studios and engaged in passionate discussions about art, a conversation often joined by Greenberg, who was a frequent visitor.



Jules Olitski, *Cleopatra Flesh*, 1962.  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
104 x 90 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of G. David Thompson, 1964 (262.1964)



In 1965, Olitski began to apply paint with a spray gun, moving away from linear drawing to concentrate on intense color sensations. In his catalogue essay for Olitski's exhibition at the 1966 Venice Biennale, Greenberg declared the centrality of these pictures to his conception of modernist painting: "The grainy surface Olitski creates with his way of spraying is a new kind of paint surface. It offers tactile associations hitherto foreign, more or less, to picture-making; and it does new things with color. Together with color, it contrives an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface; it is as if that surface, in all its literalness, were enlarged to contain a world of color and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manage not to violate flatness."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance*, 1957–1969 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 230.

## Discussion Questions

1. What colors do you see? Why do you think the artist chose to use these colors? What mood do they convey?
2. In paintings, some colors often appear to recede into the background while others appear to stand out. Are there any colors in this painting that appear to stand out? Which ones recede?
3. How do you think Still applied the paint to the canvas? With a large brush? In layers?
4. Does Still create a sense of depth in this painting?
5. This painting is purely abstract—meaning it does not represent anything. Sometimes, however, abstract works are reminiscent of something in reality. Does this painting remind you of anything?
6. Compare this painting to the painting by Rothko (no. 2) How are they similar? Different?
7. Still preferred his works to be exhibited together instead of with the work of other artists. Why do you think he felt that way? What do you think would be the effect of having several of his paintings in one room?
8. How does Still use positive and negative space?
9. Describe the texture of this painting. Do you think Still used thick or thin paint?

## 9. Clyfford Still (1904–1980)

**1965, 1965**

**Oil on canvas, 111¾ x 89 inches**

**Private collection, Denver**

Clyfford Still was a precursor to the Color Field painters and their experiments with bars of rich vertical color. Born in 1904 in Grandin, North Dakota, Still spent his childhood in Spokane, Washington, and Bow Island in Alberta, Canada. He attended Spokane University. He spent the summers of 1934 and 1935 at the Trask Foundation (now Yaddo) in Saratoga Springs, New York. In 1943, his first solo exhibition was held at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Still's early works are influenced by Surrealism but also begin to explore pure abstraction. His shift from representational painting to abstraction occurred between 1938 and 1942. After World War II, the artist entered what has been termed his "breakthrough period" of high abstraction in a large format. He was a pioneer of mural-sized canvases that concentrate on sensations of pure color. Still's mature work, such as *1965*, is characterized by vast fields of color with jagged edges.

In 1948, Still worked with William Baziotes, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and others to develop the school known as Subjects of the Artist in New York's East Village, which held open discussion sessions and artist lectures. In 1959, a Still retrospective was held at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. In 1979, the Metropolitan Museum of Art organized the largest survey of Still's art to date and the largest presentation afforded by this institution to the work of a living artist.

Still did not like his pictures to be separated from one another or exhibited with work by other artists because he felt his paintings could only be understood as part of a whole. His obsession with maintaining total control resulted in his rejecting offers to buy his paintings and declining invitations to exhibit. The Clyfford Still Museum, slated to open in Denver in 2010, will house more than 2,150 works from the Clyfford Still Estate.



### Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the colors in this painting?
2. What do you think the title of this painting refers to? Do you think this painting is purely abstract, or do you think it represents something?
3. How do you think Frankenthaler made this painting? Do you think she used a paintbrush?
4. Do you see more than one layer of paint? Are there overlapping colors? What colors do you think she used first?
5. Do you think Frankenthaler uses thicker paint in some areas? Where? Why?
6. Helen Frankenthaler uses unprimed canvas, a type of canvas that was not prepared with a protective layer of gesso, an acrylic primer. Without the protective layer, the paint soaks into the fabric instead of sitting on top, as it would on a primed canvas. Her method has been likened to the dyeing of fabrics. Why do you think she chose to do this? Do you think this symbolized anything?
7. Frankenthaler's works have a glowing quality. How do you think she achieves this?
8. Compare *Flood* to *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (see illustration). How are they different? How are they similar? Frankenthaler created *Seven Types of Ambiguity* ten years earlier than *Flood*. How did her work evolve?

## 10. Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928)

### *Flood*, 1967

Synthetic polymer on canvas, 124 x 140 inches

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art (68.12)

A native New Yorker, Helen Frankenthaler studied with Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo at the Dalton School in Manhattan and went on to Bennington College in Vermont, where she had classes with the instructor and abstract artist Paul Feeley. Later on, she briefly received private instruction from Hans Hofmann. In 1950, Frankenthaler met critic Clement Greenberg, who introduced her to the work of the most progressive artists of the period including **Jackson Pollock**.

A precocious talent, Frankenthaler started to produce her first mature paintings in her late twenties. Her work draws from the mysterious calligraphy of Jackson Pollock. About Pollock, the springboard for her artistic evolution, she said: "I looked at and was influenced by both Pollock and de Kooning and eventually felt there were more possibilities for me out of the Pollock vocabulary. De Kooning made enclosed linear shapes and 'applied' the brush. Pollock used shoulder and ropes and ignored the edges and corners. I felt I could stretch more in the Pollock framework ... You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could depart from Pollock."<sup>1</sup>

1. Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum*, October 1965, 37.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 95½ x 70⅞ inches. Private collection



A major breakthrough in her work occurred in 1952, when she concocted a mixture of house paint, enamel, turpentine, and oil, which she spilled onto unsized raw canvas. In her first major work executed in this manner, gestural lines in charcoal were used to suggest an abstracted memory of landscape. Eventually these lines disappeared in her work, in paintings such as *Mountains and Sea* (1952), which inspired both Louis and Noland when they visited her studio in 1953.

Soon Frankenthaler abandoned even covert allusions to subject matter in her paintings, preferring purely abstract formations. Unlike Noland, Stella, Louis, and others, she never chose to organize her color but preferred a more fluid drawing to guide her art making. After the mid-1970s, Frankenthaler's paintings became more dense and lush. The textures, density, and movement of her paint play a more central role and the sensuous richness of her color reached new heights.

A skilled printmaker, Frankenthaler has worked with many international graphic studios to produce an impressive oeuvre of luminously colored prints including etchings, lithographs, serigraphs, and Japanese-style woodblocks, the last made in collaboration with Japanese masters.

**Abstract**

A work of art that does not necessarily depict objects in the natural world but instead emphasizes color, composition, and form.

**Abstract Expressionism**

An American art movement of the late 1940s and 1950s noted for experimental, nonrepresentational painting and large canvases by artists such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. The first major school of American painting to develop independently of European styles.

**Black Mountain College**

Founded in 1933 and operational until 1957, Black Mountain College was a multi-disciplinary art institution located in Asheville, North Carolina. Some of its most famous teachers are the artist Josef Albers, the dancer Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and John Cage. Its alumni include Kenneth Noland, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly.

**Clement Greenberg (1909–1994)**

An influential American art critic closely associated with the abstract art movement in the United States. Greenberg promoted Abstract Expressionism and had close ties with the painter Jackson Pollock.

**Color Field**

An abstract art movement that emerged after the Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s. Paintings of this style are known for their oversized canvases and solid washes and stains of vibrant color. Well-known color field painters include Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis.

**Composition**

The arrangement of forms in a work of art.

**Federal Arts Project**

Programs sponsored by the U.S. government that were established in 1935 to help artists during the Great Depression. The project's aim was to employ artists to decorate nonfederal public buildings and parks. It was closed in 1943.

**Form**

Refers to the composition of the elements of a work of art perceived separately from its subject matter. The formal elements of a work of art include line, composition, shape, and color.

**Gestural**

Describes the marks on a canvas that reveal the artist's hand, such as brushstrokes.

**Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979)**

An American art collector and niece of Solomon R. Guggenheim, Peggy Guggenheim was highly influential in the development of the New York City museum named after her uncle. In 1942, she opened her own gallery, The Art of this Century Gallery in New York. There she exhibited the work of William Baziotés, Alexander Calder, Joseph Cornell, Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, among others.

**Henri Matisse (1869–1954)**

Often regarded as the most important French artist of the twentieth century, Matisse is best known for his use of expressive, luminous color. His subjects were primarily women, interiors, and still lifes. Beyond painting, he worked with lithographs, sculpture, and book design.

**Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)**

A major force in the abstract expressionist movement who developed a technique for applying paint by pouring or dripping it onto canvases laid on the floor.

**Minimalism**

Identified with the developments in post–World War II western Art, most strongly with American visual arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Minimalism refers to art and design reduced to its most fundamental elements and is often interpreted as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism and a bridge to post-modern art practices. Prominent artists associated with this movement include Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Richard Serra.

**Modernism**

A term introduced during the twentieth century that refers to a work in which the artist focuses more on formal qualities such as shape, form, line, and color, as opposed to iconographical, historical, or biographical content.

**Non-Representational**

A term relating to art that does not depict objects in the natural world but instead depicts pure color and form. Nonobjective.

**Post-Modernism**

A genre of art and literature, and especially architecture, defined as a reaction against the principles of modernism. Some characteristics of post-modernism are that it eliminates the distinction between high culture and popular culture and the boundary between art and everyday life; and that it does not recognize the authority of any single style or definition of what art should be.

***Post-Painterly Abstraction***

An exhibition held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1964. Curated by Clement Greenberg and LACMA Curator James Elliott, it included artists such as Walter Darby Bannard, Jack Bush, Gene Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Al Held, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella, and a number of other American and Canadian artists.

**Representational**

Depicting recognizable objects, figures, or elements in nature, as opposed to being nonobjective or abstract.

**Ossip Zadkine (1890–1967)**

A Russian Jewish artist and sculptor who is primarily known as a sculptor but also produced paintings and lithographs. Both Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski worked with him early in their careers.

**SUGGESTED READING****General**

Ashton, Dore. *Twentieth Century Artists on Art*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Brennan, Marcia. *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction*. Boston: The MIT Press, 2006.

Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Perry, Vicky. *Abstract Painting: Concepts and Techniques*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2005.

**Helen Frankenthaler**

Fine, Ruth E. *Helen Frankenthaler Prints*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993.

Geldzahler, Henry. "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler." *Artforum*, October 1965, 36–38.

Rose, Barbara. *Frankenthaler*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971.

**Adolph Gottlieb**

Alloway, Lawrence. *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective*. Manchester, Vermont: Hudson Hills Press, 1995.

Hirsch, Sanford. *The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb*. Manchester, Vermont: Hudson Hills Press, 1995.

**Hans Hofmann**

Hofmann, Hans, and Karen Wilkin. *Hans Hofmann*. George Braziller, 2003.

Hunter, Sam. *Hans Hofmann: Revised and Expanded*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2006.

**Morris Louis**

Elderfield, John. *Morris Louis: The Museum of Modern Art, New York*. North Vale, New Jersey: Marboro Books, 1986.

**Robert Motherwell**

Ashton, Dore, and Jack D. Flam. *Robert Motherwell*. New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Abbeville Press, 1983.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Robert Motherwell*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

**Kenneth Noland**

Waldman, Diane. *Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979.

**Jules Olitski**

Wilkin, Karen. *Jules Olitski: Six Decades*. Miami: The Goldman Warehouse, 2005.

**Larry Poons**

Moffett, Kenworth, and Larry Poons. *Larry Poons: Paintings, 1971–1981*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1981.

Robbins, Daniel. *Larry Poons: Paintings 1963–1990*. New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries Inc., 1990.

**Mark Rothko**

Waldman, Diane. *Mark Rothko 1903–1970: A Retrospective*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979.

Ottmann, Klaus. *The Essential Mark Rothko*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005.

**Clyfford Still**

O'Neill, John P. (ed.). *Clyfford Still*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.

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## **FILM RESOURCES**

### ***Color as Field Podcast—Larry Poons in Conversation with Karen Wilkin***

Produced by the American Federation of Arts in conjunction with Media Combo. 2007. Available at [www.afaweb.org](http://www.afaweb.org)

### ***Hans Hofmann: Artist/Teacher, Teacher/Artist***

Narrated by Robert De Niro. [http://www.pbs.org/hanshofmann/about\\_the\\_film\\_001.html](http://www.pbs.org/hanshofmann/about_the_film_001.html)

### ***Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko: Icons of Abstract Expressionism***

Originally broadcast on PBS as a segment on The Jim Lehrer News Hour, 1999. 23 minutes

### ***Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: An Abstract Humanist***

Produced by Films Media Group. Copyright 2004. 52 minutes

### ***OK to Print: Helen Frankenthaler at Tyler Graphics***

Produced by the National Gallery of Australia, 2005. 10 minutes

### ***Painters Painting***

Produced and directed by Emile de Antonio. Copyright 1989. 116 minutes

### ***Robert Motherwell and the New York School: Storming the Citadel***

Originally broadcast on PBS as a segment of The American Masters, 1990. 56 minutes.

### ***Robert Motherwell***

Michael Blackwood Productions, Inc., 1971. 45 minutes

### ***The New York School***

Michael Blackwood Productions, Inc. 55 minutes

### ***Who Gets to Call it Art? The Legend of Henry Geldzahler, 1935-1994***

Peter Rosen Productions, 2006. 78 minutes

## **WEB RESOURCES**

### **General**

American Art Archives

[http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/collections\\_list.cfm](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/collections_list.cfm)

The Artchive

<http://www.artchive.com>

Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color\\_Field](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_Field)

The Artist.org

[http://www.the-artists.org/movement/Post\\_Painterly\\_Abstraction.html](http://www.the-artists.org/movement/Post_Painterly_Abstraction.html)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Timeline

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/11/na/ht11na.htm>

### **Helen Frankenthaler**

National Museum of Women in the Arts

<http://www.nmwa.org/collection/profile.asp?LinkID=249>

Smithsonian Institution Research Information System

[http://sirismm.si.edu/aaa/newPOA/AAA\\_miscphot\\_5190.jpg](http://sirismm.si.edu/aaa/newPOA/AAA_miscphot_5190.jpg)

Museum of Modern Art

[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=69050](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=69050)

### **Adolph Gottlieb**

Gottlieb Foundation

<http://www.gottliebfoundation.org/>

Krannert Art Museum

<http://www.uiuc.edu/galleries/kam/collections/american/am2.html>

Museum of Modern Art, New York

[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O:AD:E:2268](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O:AD:E:2268)

The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art

[http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase.cfm?id=34554&theme=m\\_c](http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase.cfm?id=34554&theme=m_c)

**Hans Hofmann**

PBS Public Broadcasting Service Online

<http://www.pbs.org/hanshofmann/>

Auckland Art Museum

<http://www.auckland.org/art/collection/contemporary/88.27.html>

Estate of Hans Hofmann

<http://www.hanshofmann.net/bio/bio.html>

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_bio\\_64.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_64.html)

Smithsonian Institution Research Information System

[http://sirismm.si.edu/aaa/newPOA/aaa\\_reynkay\\_4523.jpg](http://sirismm.si.edu/aaa/newPOA/aaa_reynkay_4523.jpg)

**Morris Louis**

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_bio\\_91A.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_91A.html)

Smithsonian: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

<http://hirshhorn.si.edu/exhibitions/description.asp?ID=54>

Tate Collection

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=8992>

Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery

<http://www.npg.si.edu/cexh/artnews/louis2.htm>

**Robert Motherwell**

PBS

[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/motherwell\\_r.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/motherwell_r.html)

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_bio\\_116.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_116.html)

Museum of Modern Art

[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results)

[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=0:AD:E:4126&page\\_number=1&template\\_id=6&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=0:AD:E:4126&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1)

**Kenneth Noland**

Kenneth Noland.com

<http://www.kennethnoland.com/>

American Art at the Phillips Collection

[http://www.phillipscollection.org/american\\_art/artwork/Noland-April.htm](http://www.phillipscollection.org/american_art/artwork/Noland-April.htm)

[http://www.phillipscollection.org/american\\_art/artwork/Noland-In\\_the\\_Garden.htm](http://www.phillipscollection.org/american_art/artwork/Noland-In_the_Garden.htm)

[http://www.phillipscollection.org/american\\_art/artwork/Noland-Untitled.htm](http://www.phillipscollection.org/american_art/artwork/Noland-Untitled.htm)

National Gallery of Art, Washington

<http://www.nga.gov.au/InternationalPrints/Tyler/Default.cfm?MnuID=3&ArtistIRN=19067&List=True>

**Jules Olitski**

Jules Olitski.com

<http://olitski.com/>

Tate Collection

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ArtistWorks?cgroupid=999999961&artistid=2198&page=>

Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jules\\_Olitski](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jules_Olitski)

**Larry Poons**

Smithsonian: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

<http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/search.asp?Artist=Poons&hasImage=1>

Smithsonian Archives of American Art

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transSCRIPTs/poons65.htm>

Hunter Museum

<http://www.huntermuseum.org/FrameForCollections.aspx?page=Include/HTML/Artists/lawrencepoons.htm>

**Mark Rothko**

National Gallery of Art, Washington  
<http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/>

PBS: Online Newshour  
[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec98/rothko\\_8-5.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec98/rothko_8-5.html)

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_bio\\_138.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_138.html)

BBC Arts  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/powerofart/rothko.shtml>

**Clyfford Still**

Clyfford Still Museum  
<http://www.clyffordstillmuseum.org/museum.html>

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_works\\_149\\_0.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_works_149_0.html)

New York Times.com  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/18/arts/design/18mado.html?pagewanted=all>

American Art at the Phillips Collection  
[http://www.phillipscollection.org/american\\_art/artwork/Still-1950B.htm](http://www.phillipscollection.org/american_art/artwork/Still-1950B.htm)

