Art Critics Comparison: Clement Greenberg vs. Harold Rosenberg

Many modern art movements have been supported and promoted by critics who have sought to shape understandings of the artists' work in distinct ways. Abstract Expressionism is notable for the contributions of two critics, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, who put forward influential interpretations of the movement which were often starkly opposed. The following chart compares and contrasts their ideas.

Clement Greenberg: 1906-1994

Born in New York, the child of first generation Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, Clement Greenberg studied English literature at university, but later gravitated towards writing about art. He emerged as a critic in the pages of the so-called 'little magazines' that gave voice to New York's intellectuals, and his first major essay was 'Avant-garde and Kitsch,' which was published in Partisan Review in 1939. From 1942 until 1949 he served as art critic for The Nation, beginning a period of nearly thirty years during which Greenberg devoted himself almost exclusively to writing about visual art.

The title of the essay suggests Greenberg's discomfort with the term 'Abstract Expressionism,' which he believed was "inaccurate." However, although he borrowed the essay's title from a phrase that British critics had used to speak of recent American painting, he was generally happy to refer to the movement as Abstract Expressionism.

Greenberg viewed abstraction as a characteristic facet of modern painting, for if art was to be authentically modern, each medium had to pursue a process of rationalisation which would progressively disentangle it from other, related mediums. Indeed, it was also increasingly a necessary facet of modern painting, since art was being threatened by the intrusion of clichés, ideology and commerce.

Figurative art, and the sorts of anecdotal subjects that were common of American painting in the 1930s, were, for Greenberg, typical of the kind of extraneous, 'literary' material which needed to be excluded from painting. The goal was an abstraction which referred back to painting itself, and disavowed any reference to the external world - for Greenberg, this would be epitomised by the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.

Harold Rosenberg: 1906-1978

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Harold Rosenberg earned a law degree before gravitating towards the circles of New York bohemians and intellectuals. Like Greenberg, he too wrote for the 'little magazines,' and for many years he ranged more widely over culture than his rival, but his few early contributions to art criticism made him famous, and from 1967-1978 he served as art critic of The New Yorker.

Rosenberg's emphasis on the creative act - at the expense of the formal aspects of an artwork - meant that abstraction was a less important quality for him than for Greenberg. However, that is not to say that his tastes were broader than his rival's - in fact, though Rosenberg had been careful, in "The American Action Painters," not to single out any painters as examples of his concept of 'action painting', the phrase implicitly championed gestural abstraction of only a few artists (it was less useful in describing color field painters such as Newman, Rothko, and Still.) If Greenberg's opinions led him to value Pollock above all, Rosenberg's lead him to celebrate de Kooning as well as others such as Motherwell and Kline.

"AMERICAN-TYPE PAINTING" (1955)

**SUMMARY:**

Rosenberg is chiefly remembered for his assertion that certain Abstract Expressionists had made a significant breakthrough in the history of painting, by ceasing to regard the canvas as a surface on which to picture a form, but instead as a surface on which to record an event, an 'action'-the painter's expressive encounter with the canvas.

Rosenberg considered that he was generally happy to refer to the movement as Abstract Expressionism. 'Expressionism,' which he believed was "inaccurate." However, although he borrowed the term, he used it with a different meaning.

**KEY ESSAYS:**

"THE AMERICAN ACTION PAINTERS" (1952)

The essay interpreted new American art along broadly existential lines. Painters, Rosenberg wrote, were now treating the canvas as an "arena in which to act..What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

"The American Action Painters" did much to establish Rosenberg's reputation as a critic, and ultimately brought him an important following among other critics and artists such as Lawrence Alloway, Allan Kaprow, and Robert Goldwater. However, much of his argument contradicted Greenberg's reading of painting, which saw the formal qualities of the art work as crucial, and also understood American painting as an integral part of an unfolding tradition of modern painting stretching back to Manet. It thus laid the basis for a long-standing and oftentimes bitter rivalry between Greenberg and Rosenberg.

"AMERICAN-TYPE PAINTING" (1955)

Clement Greenberg's essay "American-Type Painting" was first published in Partisan Review in 1955. It reappraised his 1961 collection of essays, Art and Culture.

In some respects "American-Type' Painting' was prompted by Greenberg's desire to counter the increasing popularity of the ideas that Rosenberg had launched, in 1952, with "The American Action Painters." It represents one of his central statements about the development of modern art. It tackles the development of Abstract Expressionism; it argues that modern art evolved while pursuing ever greater pictorial flatness.

The essay's title suggests Greenberg's discomfort with the term 'Abstract Expressionism,' which he believed was "inaccurate." However, although he borrowed the essay's title from a phrase that British critics had used to speak of recent American painting, he was generally happy to refer to the movement as Abstract Expressionism.

**KEY QUESTIONS:**

- **THE PERSONALITIES**
  - Born in New York, the child of first generation Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, Clement Greenberg studied English literature at university, but later gravitated towards writing about art. He emerged as a critic in the pages of the so-called 'little magazines' that gave voice to New York's intellectuals, and his first major essay was 'Avant-garde and Kitsch,' which was published in Partisan Review in 1939. From 1942 until 1949 he served as art critic for The Nation, beginning a period of nearly thirty years during which Greenberg devoted himself almost exclusively to writing about visual art.
  - Born and raised in Brooklyn, Harold Rosenberg earned a law degree before gravitating towards the circles of New York bohemians and intellectuals. Like Greenberg, he too wrote for the 'little magazines,' and for many years he ranged more widely over culture than his rival, but his few early contributions to art criticism made him famous, and from 1967-1978 he served as art critic of The New Yorker.

- **ABSTRACTION**
  - Greenberg viewed abstraction as a characteristic facet of modern painting, for if art was to be authentically modern, each medium had to pursue a process of rationalisation which would progressively disentangle it from other, related mediums. Indeed, it was also increasingly a necessary facet of modern painting, since art was being threatened by the intrusion of clichés, ideology and commerce.
  - Rosenberg's emphasis on the creative act - at the expense of the formal aspects of an artwork - meant that abstraction was a less important quality for him than for Greenberg. However, that is not to say that his tastes were broader than his rival's - in fact, though Rosenberg had been careful, in "The American Action Painters," not to single out any painters as examples of his concept of 'action painting', the phrase implicitly championed gestural abstraction of only a few artists (it was less useful in describing color field painters such as Newman, Rothko, and Still.) If Greenberg's opinions led him to value Pollock above all, Rosenberg's lead him to celebrate de Kooning as well as others such as Motherwell and Kline.

- **ACTION**
  - Although Rosenberg contributed to similar magazines as Greenberg in the 1930s, he came to art criticism later, and his outlook was shaped in part by working alongside Samuel Kootz in organising the exhibition The Intrasubjectives in 1949. "This shaped his interest in subjective, mythical, and existential ideas, and these went on to be important in his criticism.
  - Rosenberg was the dominant critic in the 1950s, the critic who offered the most popular and compelling description of gestural abstraction, and whose writing inspired a new generation of gestural painters such as Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan. However, his primacy was threatened towards the end of the decade by the increasing importance of color field

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  - "The American Action Painters" did much to establish Rosenberg's reputation as a critic, and ultimately brought him an important following among other critics and artists such as Lawrence Alloway, Allan Kaprow, and Robert Goldwater. However, much of his argument contradicted Greenberg's reading of painting, which saw the formal qualities of the art work as crucial, and also understood American painting as an integral part of an unfolding tradition of modern painting stretching back to Manet. It thus laid the basis for a long-standing and oftentimes bitter rivalry between Greenberg and Rosenberg.

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the work of color field painters, who he argued were pursuing a more radical deconstruction of the traditional easel picture. He first elaborated these ideas in his essay "American-Type Painting," and pushed them further in "After Abstract Expressionism," and in the introduction to an exhibition he curated in 1964, Post-painterly Abstraction.

Privately, Rosenberg and Greenberg are said to have come close to fist fights on a couple of occasions. In public - or on the page - they were more circumspect, though Greenberg made no secret of his contempt for Rosenberg's writing. His most famous attack on his rival came in his 1962 essay "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," in which he slyly remarked that he had never wanted to comment on the apparent subject matter of artworks (as Rosenberg was wont to do), since he found that he could easily assert the opposite and feel on equally safe ground - so slippery was subject matter as a grounds for discussion. He argued that the only true, solid grounds for assessment of works of art - for judging their quality, and for assessing their contribution to modern art - was to discuss form alone.

Although Greenberg never directly commented on de Kooning's shift into figuration with the Women series, his silence has long been taken as a sign of his disapproval. In any case, his supporters gave voice to his view in the 1960s as they increasingly attacked de Kooning's style as conservative.

Greenberg began to evolve a historical understanding of the origins and development of Modernism as early as the 1930s, and elaborated it - and at times significantly altered it - in the following decades. He saw modern art as driven forward by a need to entrench its boundaries of the traditional canvas. He first elaborated these ideas in his essay "American-Type Painting," and pushed them further in "After Abstract Expressionism," and in the introduction to an exhibition he curated in 1964, Post-painterly Abstraction.

Ten years after Rosenberg published "The American Action Painters," he penned another essay for Art News entitled "Action Painting: A Decade of Distortion," in which he hit back at Greenberg. He argued that his rival's focus on form was academic, and ignored the importance of the historic rupture that had come about with the advent of action painting. He also attacked the role Greenberg had increasingly come to fill in the 1960s as an advisor to prominent galleries.

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Greenberg's writing sought to elucidate the development of modern art, and to demonstrate that a logic governed the progress from one movement to the next. Although his premises were often challenged - and many of his arguments are now discredited - the rigor that he brought to the criticism of art, both in terms of the practical analysis of individual works, and in terms of historical perspective, has had a huge impact both on art history and on art itself.

Although Greenberg's legacy has been immeasurably more fruitful for art history than Rosenberg's, the latter not only left behind one of the most useful and persuasive descriptions of Abstract Expressionism, but also sowed the seeds of new understandings of painting. In arguing that artists such as de Kooning had transformed the canvas into an "arena in which to act," Rosenberg encouraged a rethinking of the act of painting. This would be picked up by Allan Kaprow in 1958 when he suggested that Pollock's might have an important legacy for performance art, and in more recent times the idea has echoed contemporary artists attempts to further expand the medium of painting beyond the boundaries of the traditional canvas.
ARTISTS
- Piet Mondrian
- Joan Miró
- Wassily Kandinsky
- Jackson Pollock
- Hans Hofmann

Writers/Theorists
- Roger Fry
- Stanton Macdonald-Wright
- Leon Trotsky
- Karl Marx
- Wallace Stevens

ARTISTS
- Willem De Kooning
- Jackson Pollock
- Franz Kline
- Robert Motherwell
- Hans Hofmann

Writers/Theorists
- Charles Baudelaire
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- Guillaume Apollinaire
- Friedrich Nietzsche
- Jean-Paul Sartre

Clement Greenberg
Years Worked: 1939 - ca. 1991

Harold Rosenberg
Years Worked: 1936 - 1978

ARTISTS
- Barnett Newman
- Morris Louis
- Jackson Pollock
- Kenneth Noland
- Jules Olitski

Writers/Theorists
- Michael Fried
- Leo Steinberg
- Rosalind Krauss
- Robert Hughes
- Robert Rosenblum

ARTISTS
- Fairfield Porter
- Willem De Kooning
- Elaine De Kooning
- Al Held
- Saul Steinberg

Writers/Theorists
- Fairfield Porter
- Barbara Rose
- Thomas B. Hess
- John Russell
- Herbert Read

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