

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 • 1909-1994

Clement Greenberg:  
Detail View



GREENBERG

SUMMARY:

Clement Greenberg is noted for the dogmatic formalism of his contribution. Refusing what he regarded as purely speculative assertions about the content of paintings or sculptures, Greenberg concentrated instead on discussing the details of depicted shape, color, line and so forth. Only by attending to these formal matters, he argued, could a critic make judgements about the quality of a work of art, and its relationship to the historical development of modern art.

HAROLD ROSENBERG • 1906-1978

Harold Rosenberg:  
Detail View



ROSENBERG

SUMMARY:

Harold 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 paint a picture, but instead as a surface on which to record an event, an 'action'—the painter's expressionistic encounter with the canvas.

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*.

"AMERICAN-TYPE' PAINTING" (1955)

KEY ESSAYS

"THE AMERICAN ACTION PAINTERS" (1952)

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

Harold Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters," first appeared in *Art News* in 1952, and was republished in his 1959 collection of essays, *The Tradition of the New*.

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 for the radicalism of color field painting - relating it to Impressionism rather than Cubism; and argues that modern art evolved while pursuing ever greater pictorial flatness.

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 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.

"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.

ABSTRACTION

Vs.

ACTION

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' 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.

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.

FORMALIST

POSITION

EXISTENTIALIST

Greenberg's approach to art criticism was avowedly formalist. He believed that although form was not the total of art, it offered the only firm basis on which to make both judgements of quality and assessments about the relative character of different works of art. He even argued that was so easy to make contradictory assertions about subject matter in art, that it any discussion of subject was without purpose.

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 Intrastudies* in 1949. This shaped his interest in subjective, mythical, and existential ideas, and these went on to be important in his criticism.

GREENBERG

AFTER ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

ROSENBERG

As the 1950s unfolded, Greenberg began to feel that the gestural abstraction which had characterized the innovative work of de Kooning and others in the late 1940s was beginning to degenerate into a school or a manner - what he termed "the Tenth Street touch," after the area in New York where the painters gathered. This led him to place more importance on

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 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*.







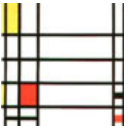



painting, for which Greenberg began to argue strongly. Inevitably, having praised gestural abstraction so much, Rosenberg was not a champion of post-painterly styles, and he argued that it resembled abstract art *theory*, rather than abstract art in *practice*. By the 1960s, Rosenberg's position was further threatened by the attacks of younger critics on the artist that was often taken to be the epitome of action painting, **Willem de Kooning**: many believed his work was conservative in its recourse to figuration and post-Cubist space.

GREENBERG ON ROSENBERG	ON THEIR OPPONENTS	ROSENBERG ON GREENBERG
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.		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 roles Greenberg had increasingly come to fill in the 1960s as an advisor to prominent galleries.

AGAINST	STANCE ON WILLEM DE KOONING'S WOMAN	FOR
Although Greenberg never directly commented on de Kooning's shift into figuration with the <i>Women</i> 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.		Although Rosenberg was never associated with de Kooning in the same way as Greenberg was associated with support for Jackson Pollock, Rosenberg stood squarely behind the painter who most clearly embodied his notion of action painting.

HISTORICAL PHENOMENON	STANCE ON MODERNISM	THE AVANT-GARDE
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 individual media more solidly in their own particular areas of competence. In the medium of painting, this encouraged increasing abstraction, since everything that was extraneous to the medium had to be purged from it. In particular, it encouraged moves towards pictorial flatness, since Greenberg saw the flatness of the canvas support as the overriding fact of the medium.		Rosenberg regarded Greenberg's attention to the historical character of modernism as academic, and, unlike his rival, who saw a continuity between recent American art and older modern painting, Rosenberg believed that the Abstract Expressionists had brought about a radical break with all that had gone before by treating the canvas in a new way ("as an arena in which to act."). In this respect, Rosenberg understood Abstract Expressionism as pursuing the dream of earlier avant-gardes - like Dada and Surrealism - of integrating art with life. In contrast, Greenberg saw the avant-garde as threatening the death of art.

FORMALISM AND MODERNISM	LASTING LEGACY	PAINTING AND PERFORMANCE
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.

GREENBERG	TASTES IN ART	ROSENBERG
    	 	  
<i>Composition in Brown and Gray</i> Piet Mondrian	<i>Red Balloon</i> Paul Klee	<i>Girl Before a Mirror</i> Pablo Picasso
<i>Man with a Guitar</i> Georges Braque	<i>Trafalgar Square</i> Piet Mondrian	<i>Egg Beater No. 4</i> Stuart Davis
<i>One Year the Milkweed</i> Arshile Gorky		<i>Woman I</i> Willem de Kooning
<i>Number 1</i> Jackson Pollock		
<i>The Gate</i> Hans Hofmann		

CONSEQUENTIAL ESSAYS	
<p>"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" <i>Partisan Review</i>, 1939</p>	<p>"The Fall of Paris" <i>Art News</i>, 1940</p>
<p>"The Crisis of the Easel Picture" <i>Partisan Review</i>, 1948</p>	<p>"The American Action Painters" <i>Art News</i>, 1952</p>
<p>"Modernist Painting" Originally delivered as a radio broadcast on The Voice of America Forum Lectures: The Visual Arts, 1960</p>	<p>"Parable of American Painting" <i>Art News</i>, 1953</p>
<p>"After Abstract Expressionism" <i>Art International</i>, 1962</p>	<p>"Revolution and the Concept of Beauty" <i>The Tradition of the New</i>, 1959</p>
<p>"'American-Type' Painting" <i>Partisan Review</i>, 1955</p>	<p>"Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism" <i>The Tradition of the New</i>, 1959</p>

INFLUENCES CHART
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