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.

**ART CRITICS COMPARISON: Clement Greenberg vs. Harold Rosenberg**

**CLEMENT GREENBERG • 1906-1994**

**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.

**KEY QUESTIONS:**

- "AMERICAN-TYPE' PAINTING" (1955)
- ABSTRACTION
- THE PERSONALITIES


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.

**SUMMARY:**


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.

**KEY ESSAYS**

- "THE AMERICAN ACTION PAINTERS" (1952)

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.

**FORMALIST**

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 it was so easy to make contradictory assertions about subject matter in art, that it any discussion of subject was without purpose.

**POSITION**

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.

**EXISTENTIALIST**

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
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.*

**GREENBERG ON ROSENBERG**

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.

**AGAINST**

Although Greenberg never directly commented on de Kooning's shift into figuration with the *Woman 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.

**HISTORICAL PHENOMENON**

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 enframe 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 individual media more solidly in their particular areas of competence. In the medium of painting, this encouraged increasing abstraction, since everything that was extraneous to the individual 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.

**FORMALISM AND MODERNISM**

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.

**LASTING LEGACY**

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 been picked up by Allan Kaprow in 1958 when he suggested that Pollock's might have

**ROSENBERG ON GREENBERG**

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.

**THE AVANT-GARDE**

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.

**PAINTING AND PERFORMANCE**

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

---

**CONSEQUENTIAL ESSAYS**

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch"
*Partisan Review*, 1939

"The Crisis of the Easel Picture"
*Partisan Review*, 1948

"Modernist Painting"
Originally delivered as a radio broadcast on The Voice of America Forum Lectures: The Visual Arts, 1960

"After Abstract Expressionism"
*Art International*, 1962

"American-Type Painting"
*Partisan Review*, 1955

"The Fall of Paris"
*Art News*, 1940

"The American Action Painters"
*Art News*, 1952

"Parable of American Painting"
*Art News*, 1953

"Revolution and the Concept of Beauty"
*The Tradition of the New*, 1959

"Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism"
*The Tradition of the New*, 1959

---

(c) The Art Story Foundation - All rights Reserved

For more movements, artists and ideas on Modern Art
visit www.TheArtStory.org
