Decades of Abstraction

The rise of Abstract Expressionism, in the late 1940s, marked the first time an American visual art movement attained international status and influence. Grounded in a language of abstraction that was based in the concrete world of material existence as well as the visual representation of sociopolitical realities and philosophical theories, Abstract Expressionism transformed the art world in the mid-twentieth century, with its style and aesthetics widely extending their influence over subsequent art.

Decades of Abstraction—drawn from the Academy's collection—comprises paintings and sculptures, as well as a section dedicated to works on paper, revealing the long and rich evolution of abstraction in the twentieth century.

The development of Abstract Expressionism was based in the context of numerous and diverse sources, though exposure to European Modernism set the stage for the movement's advancement as a dominant aesthetic. The outbreak of World War II resulted in direct contact of the early American Abstract Expressionists with their European mentors, modernist painters who had come to the United States to seek refuge from the war. By the end of WWII, the vocabulary of abstract form, combined with the immediacy of gesture, and the urgent need for expressive emotional and psychological outlets resulted in the Abstract Expressionist movement that dominated art in America for over a decade.

Valuing spontaneity and the process of artistic creation, the Abstract Expressionists were never a cohesive group, thereby defying stylistic categorization; instead, they may be recognized by abstract imagery and either dynamic gesture or cerebral color fields. Having forged into new territory in terms of both technique and subject, Abstract Expressionists sought to address universal questions of humanity while reflecting and expressing their own individual psyches—in effect, creating an existential endeavor out of the process of their art form.