

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

Exploring Modern Art

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



The Tragedy

1903

by Pablo Picasso

(pronounced: Pea-kahs-so)

(Spanish, 1881–1973)

■ Three figures, a woman, a man, and a child, stand together on a shore. The tragedy alluded to in the title is not specified. Are these figures reacting to some loss, or does their air of privation itself constitute the “tragedy” of the title? Color, composition, and articulation of the figures are used as emotional tools to establish the mood of this work. Although grouped together, a gulf separates the individuals pictured by Picasso. The man and woman are withdrawn into themselves. Only the child makes a gesture of connection with the man, seeming to touch his thigh, but the caress is not returned. The postures of the figures—eyes downturned, bodies hunched—contribute to the melancholy air, as do their ragged clothes.

The mood of the group is further accentuated by the painting’s blue palette—this was painted during Picasso’s blue period, early in his career. A sense of the figures’ isolation is reinforced by the organization of the painting’s background into three distinct zones of sky, sea, and shore. These broad, unmodulated areas of color compress the painting’s volume, although the figures themselves have an almost sculptural solidity. Picasso’s interest in the relationship between the formal, geometric arrangement of his canvas, evident here, would be further developed in subsequent years as he became a pioneer of cubism.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What mood does the painting convey to you? Choose two adjectives. Would the painting convey a different feeling if painted in shades of red? Identify the feeling with two more adjectives.
- 2 What do you make of the child’s gesture? Why do you think he (rather than either of the adults) reaches out?
- 3 Does anything in the painting locate the figures in a specific historical period or geographical area? What do you think Picasso’s goal was in generalizing their portrayal?

Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)

1913

by Wassily Kandinsky

(Russian, 1866–1944)

(detail, cover)

■ Painting at the beginning of the twentieth century, Wassily Kandinsky was one of the first artists to develop an abstract style, that is, an approach to painting that emphasized the expressive potential of color and shape. Kandinsky’s recognition of the importance of shape and color stemmed from his reaction upon returning to his studio and seeing one of his paintings upside down. He did not recognize the subject but was impressed by the picture’s radiant appearance.

Accordingly, it is shape and color that first strike your attention when you look at Kandinsky’s *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)*. The importance of these abstract elements is suggested by the work’s title, which speaks first to the nature of its composition (an “improvisation”) and secondly, and parenthetically, to its ostensible subject, a sea battle. Although a careful examination of the painting reveals the forms of two warring boats (strong black vertical lines define their masts and the triangular shapes of their sails), this is not the exclusive “subject” of the painting. The work testifies to the power of form and color, both of which Kandinsky believed could convey meaning. Blue, according to Kandinsky, was a “heavenly color,” while yellow was “aggressive.” Green, a combination of the two, implied calm. Kandinsky identified the triangle, with its suggestion of upward motion, as a particularly spiritual shape.

As such theories might suggest, Kandinsky’s painting, which appears spontaneous, was in fact carefully thought out and not simply an “improvisation.”

QUESTIONS

- 1 If this painting were a piece of music, what would it sound like?
- 2 What colors do you associate with excitement? With a quiet mood?
- 3 Why do you think a painter would make a work almost entirely abstract, leaving just a hint of representational subject matter?

Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)

1950

by Jackson Pollock
(American, 1912–1956)

■ Jackson Pollock came to prominence immediately following the Second World War. He was one of the leaders of a group of highly accomplished American artists, known as abstract expressionists for their non-objective but emotionally evocative paintings. Jackson Pollock's *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* does not strive to imitate an object in the world but rather celebrates the painted surface itself.

Pollock created “drip” paintings such as *Lavender Mist* with unconventional means. He rolled canvas out on the floor and moved quickly around it, splashing, pouring, and flinging paint over a vast surface. He used new types of paint, including aluminum paint and commercial house paint. He did not lay down a protective layer of “gesso,” or priming, but instead let the paint soak directly into the canvas. His tools were equally innovative—paint was applied with sticks, paint-hardened brushes, or poured directly from the can. One critic dubbed his energetic method “action painting.”

Pollock, who had been greatly influenced by the work of European surrealists early in his career, believed that by painting spontaneously he could access his unconscious mind and create imagery that was both personal and universal. Yet although Pollock worked rapidly and intuitively, his painting was by no means uncontrolled. As he once said, “I deny the accident.” His technique was polished and carefully deliberated. Repeatedly approaching his large canvases from all angles, Pollock transformed the painting into an independent environment, and spoke of being “in” the painting. He left evidence of his presence in the form of handprints along the upper edges of the painting.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Can you tell in what order Pollock laid down his various colors? Why or why not?
- 2 If you were given the opportunity to title this painting, what might you call it? Why?
- 3 Could you imagine yourself making a painting like this? Why or why not?

Orange and Tan

1954

by Mark Rothko
(American, 1903–1970)

■ Like his contemporary Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko was an important abstract expressionist painter. However, his luminous, color-saturated canvases convey a powerful serenity that distinguishes them from Pollock's gestural compositions. In Rothko's abstract painting *Orange and Tan*, an orange rectangle hovers above a yellow rectangle tinged with green. These blocks of color float over a tan background. Rothko achieved the shimmering, light-filled quality of his paintings by using extremely thin oil paint. He successively layered these thin washes, allowing light to pass through each one of them as they gradually soaked into the canvas. The warm tones of *Orange and Tan* are particularly radiant.

While Rothko did not intend his mature canvases to represent something specific, he did compare their appearance to the fronts of buildings. Others have responded to this effect by seeing his rectangles as doors into a spirit world because of the luminous color and texture of the painting. Rothko was concerned with the viewer's physical relationship to his canvases and the impression that one could be absorbed by the painting is consistent with his aims. *Orange and Tan* is almost seven feet tall and five feet wide. He did not like his large works displayed in large spaces, but felt that “they must be first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture.”

QUESTIONS

- 1 Both Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko are considered abstract expressionist artists. What do their paintings have in common? What is different?
- 2 Think about Rothko's use of rectangular shapes only on a field of color. Would his paintings have the same impact if he had used only circles or triangles? Why or why not?
- 3 Imagine that you were asked to make a painting inspired by Rothko's *Orange and Tan*. What would it look like?

Information

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