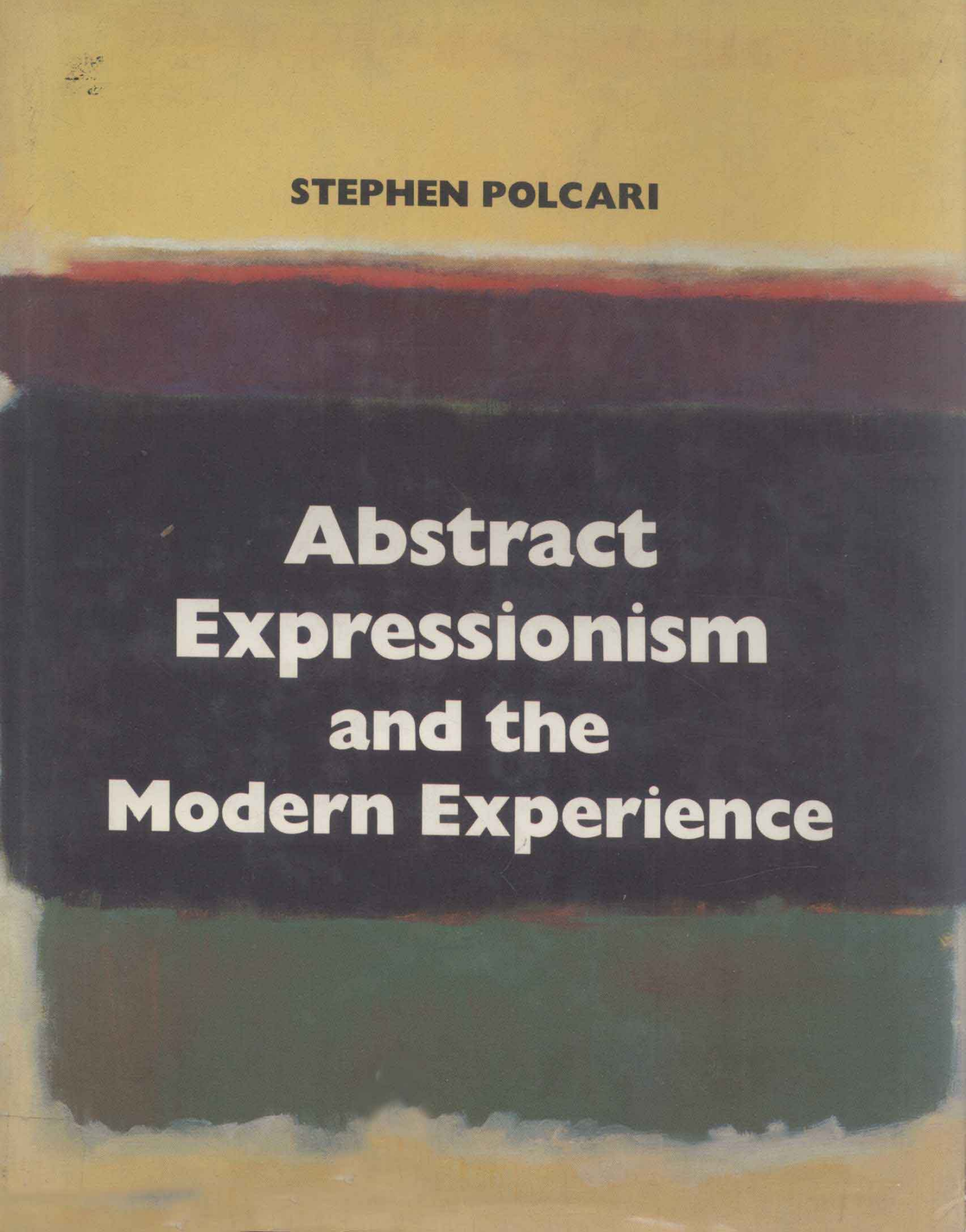
STEPHEN POLCARI

Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience



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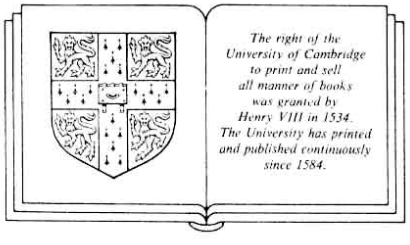

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE MODERN EXPERIENCE

TO P. AND W.,
MY PARENTS,
AND TO BETH

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURES

COLOR PLATES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman stimulated my inchoate interest in Abstract Expressionism as a young graduate student and critic years ago. This book is a product of their generosity, but even more of their example as human beings. Their grappling with the fate of their generation, even if one does not concur with their resolutions, made one realize that art can be serious business—although today it seems to be just business.

During the years of this study, I benefited from the generous support of many others. One never writes a book without a personal and professional support system too numerous to acknowledge. I would however like to thank the University of Illinois Research Board for summer, travel, and fellowship support. I would also like to thank Irving Lavin and the Institute for Advanced Study for a Visiting Member Fellowship, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for an Independent Fellowship, both for 1982–83. I am indebted to Debbie Edelstein and Mona Hadler for reading a draft and compelling significant selections, and to Beatrice Rehl, Russell Hahn, and Richard Hollick of Cambridge University Press.

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I want to say that those I have mentioned, important as they were for developing and challenging my thinking, are in no way responsible for my final manuscript. Art history is an endless debate, now more than ever, and this book can only be fuel for its fires.

The author and publisher wish to thank the museums, galleries, and private collectors who gave permission to reproduce and supplied photographs of works

in their collections. Photographs (listed by number) from other sources—individual photographers—are gratefully acknowledged below. All works are oil on canvas unless otherwise described; height precedes width.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Abstract Expressionism and the New York School in the post–World War II period, and the subsequent recognition of American art and culture, constituted a decisive rite of passage for American art. As the first American style of international renown, Abstract Expressionism was instrumental to generating an entire modern American art establishment. There were few American artists, critics, or even modern art historians of the 1950s and early 1960s who did not cut their teeth on it.

From its very beginning, Abstract Expressionism has been interpreted in the light of the cultural and intellectual ethos of whatever generation of critics was examining it. The generation of the 1950s understood Abstract Expressionism as Harold Rosenberg's Action Painting, according to which the artists theatrically expressed their personal anguish on a blank canvas, with little attention to form, style, or subject matter. For Rosenberg, painting was an autobiographical act of self-creation in the everyday world, and the expression of individual personality. The concept of Action Painting recapitulates the modernist romance of artists as rebels against society struggling to assert and maintain their integrity, and of Americans as anti-intellectual, naive, emotionally tortured, but honest noble savages. Although Rosenberg's criticism became more sophisticated later, Action Painting dressed Abstract Expressionism in the vogue of French existentialism during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The concept of Action Painting was supplanted in the late 1950s and early 1960s (although such elements of it as personal anxiety remained in most subsequent interpretations) by the New Criticism and formalism of Clement Greenberg and his supporters. Their interpretation dismissed Rosenberg's subjectivist melodrama and substituted the advancement of certain principles of a virtual international modernist art as the Abstract Expressionists' primary intention and achievement. Giving the art the best pedigree—by linking it with Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism—this formalist approach focused on the Abstract Expressionists' stylistic evolution while proposing for them an exclusive concern with formal questions: purifying the medium, squeezing out illusionism, and remaking space as optical rather than tactile. It limited the artists' subjects to personal expression, everyday experience, and a few generalizations about nature or the human condition.

Since the 1970s, a different line of thought has matured and come to dominate the critical debate—although the interpretations of Greenberg and Rosenberg continue to determine the understanding and reception of Abstract Expressionism among most "lay" people and several post-modernists. Beginning in the 1940s, but diffused among different authors and artists, critical attention has been addressed to the subjects and meaning as well as the forms of Abstract Expressionism. Evident at first in the often anonymous reviews and later in articles by the artists' friends, this tendency blossomed in the work of Dore Ashton and Irving Sandler, among others, and in that of a number of recent scholars. Abstract Expressionism was reborn as an art with serious subject matter, as the artists had long claimed it was. This revisionist criticism used traditional iconographic methodologies to examine the intellectual and cultural context of Abstract Expressionism and to arrive at an understanding of the work itself. The Abstract Expressionism that emerges from this scrutiny has transformed previous interpretations, as new information has revamped understanding of the artists' basic interests and thematic concerns and how these are embodied in the forms.

The fundamental change in all of this is the significance attached to the artists' early work in the 1940s. Dismissed by critics and played down by the artists themselves, the initial work of the Abstract Expressionists has previously been considered to be merely derivative of European modernism, especially Surrealism. New scholarship has examined the work in much greater depth. Still acknowledging Surrealism as a primary artistic influence, it now appreciates that the early work is as rich in thematic and stylistic innovation as the later, more abstract work.

The new perspective of the early work as significant not only adds to our understanding, however, but also completely transforms our perspective on Abstract Expressionism. Because of the formal originality of the abstract work of 1947 and later, Abstract Expressionism has been defined by critics from the beginning in terms of the late work. As a result, it has been seen to be a style with postwar themes such as existentialism, alienation, individuality, freedom, and universality. The Big Bang theory of Abstract Expressionism, as Robert Rosenblum has wittily called it, argued that this abstract work erupted suddenly, fullgrown from virtually nowhere. The early work was primarily examined only to demonstrate how it supposedly prefigured the forms and content of these themes, for example, in its use of automatism, in its probing of the unconsciousness, and in its absorption of the modern artistic tradition.

In the view of this observer, however, this traditional perspective has distorted and miscast the nature of Abstract Expressionism. Rather than thoroughly breaking with their early work, Abstract Expressionist artists pruned, synthesized, and concentrated their themes, added to them, and then recast their formal expression of them. They replaced cultural and symbolic forms with new pictorial metaphors. As Lee Krasner noted about the work of her husband, Jackson Pollock, Abstract Expressionism was formed in the late 1930s and early 1940s and was consistent throughout. Rather than looking backward from the 1950s and applying the artistic, political, and critical issues of that decade to the early work, we will simply begin at the beginning and move forward. It will become evident that there are no absolute breaks or total transformations in the art and thought of the mature artists. Rather, the themes and subjects of the early work provide a set of references for judiciously considering the more difficult abstract forms as well. There is continuity as well as change.

The Abstract Expressionism that emerges will be seen as a product of a complex of ideas present in the culture of the interwar and war years. Scholars

now realize that intellectual and literary figures such as Frazer, Joyce, Jung, and Eliot influenced Abstract Expressionist subjects and formed a wellspring of ideas from which arise both the early and late images and forms. They have redrawn the portraits of the artists, replacing the image of emotionally tortured, inarticulate figures with that of literate, informed artists who came of age in a fertile moment in American and Western cultural history and who consciously represented new ideas in their art.

This new image of the Abstract Expressionist artists in turn undermines the entrenched critical notion that their work is solely the product of spontaneous generation. Whether dressed up as Action Painting or as Surrealist automatism, Abstract Expressionist painting has usually been seen as the product of a direct, virtually seismic, tapping of the unconscious, as painting without preconceptions. While they painted without a model, and hence in one sense their work can be considered spontaneous, the artists' commitment to serious matter circumscribes the traditional interpretation of the *tabula rasa*. However they began, however different each resulting canvas, they had certain themes that they wanted to express and directed their energies to them accordingly.

Despite these changes, however, certain problems persist in contemporary scholarship. The continued emphasis on the individual artist and his or her achievement, paralleled by the production of monographic essays, Balkanizes Abstract Expressionism. Many scholarly works focus on single figures or on a single idea or element and thus minimize and ignore those elements that lie outside their range. Owing to this focus on individual style and iconography—and to the sheer difficulty of discussing more than one figure in depth—the artists have become enveloped in a mythology of individual concerns that cloaks their communality and their truly greater distinctness. Only through a close examination of each artist within the context of the whole group and the history and culture of its time can the Abstract Expressionists' accomplishments be appreciated.

Indeed, it quickly becomes evident that despite the claims to the contrary of friends, family, critics, and the artists themselves, the artists had a great deal in common and form a loose culture. Future generations of critics will undoubtedly see an underlying unity to the period despite the simultaneous appearance—and reality—of complete individuality and heterogeneity. While hardly intended as a complete review of the intellectual history of the period, this study investigates and attempts to sketch broadly the large features of the cultural climate out of which Abstract Expressionism arose; such material forms a semiindependent cultural history exploring the field of ideas of the Abstract Expressionist period in America. Individually and collectively, the Abstract Expressionists are seen as one voice among the many and analyzed and discussed as such. Indeed, this period—the late 1930s to the early 1950s—forms a distinctive cultural episode that has been largely unrecognized by historians. Its culture is that of the Second World War. After 1947 a postwar culture began to transform America and disguised the uniqueness of the war years and those that immediately preceded them. Much of the cultural material is presented in the chapter on intellectual roots. It is among the first attempts to look at Abstract Expressionist ideas as an integrated whole and constitutes the beginning of a "theory" of them.

It is rare to assert that there is such a thing as Abstract Expressionist culture. What I mean by this—and "culture" or complex is merely a shorthand reference to this meaning—is the matrix of preoccupations and thought, supported by the ideas and writings of many in diverse fields of cultural endeavor, from which each artist drew in his or her own individual way. This matrix can best be reconstructed by studying the interplay among the subjects, forms, titles, and

statements of the artists; and by comparing the artists' preoccupations, ideas, and themes to those of contemporary figures with which they were familiar. These ideas formed a group of crisscrossing explorations, points of contact, and analogies that, when taken separately, may be considered unique, but when examined together, constitute a circle of principles and beliefs. Considered as a group, the artists and writers provide an elaborate frame of reference or field of imaginative association, that is, a combination and overlapping of core themes along a shifting stream, that no single work of art or artist alone could communicate. The artists' works form a coherent spectrum in which the several parts illuminate the larger structure while casting light upon one another.

The importance of titles, among other data, has been a primary focal point for questions about the nature of Abstract Expressionist ideology. The artists seldom worked with programmatic intent, that is, they never planned their paintings as doctrinal or merely intellectual theses. Titles were most often added after the paintings were finished—sometimes several months after in titling sessions with friends—which has led to their dismissal as irrelevant to interpreting the artists' meanings.

The argument that titles are irrelevant is convincing if one concentrates only on the surface differences of the ideas implicit in the titles: they can be from Greek myth, Native American ritual, or nature, and so they cannot be related or share meanings. If one probes beyond the surface to the underlying, overlapping themes, however, the titles fall into place as different points along the thematic stream. They make perfect sense in regard to the mainstream of the artists' work and thinking. The classic case is Pollock's *Pasiphaë* of 1943, which was originally entitled *Moby Dick*. It was retitled after the suggestion of a critic and friend, James Johnson Sweeney. Moby Dick was a symbol of the struggle with the dark animal nature of human beings in the period. The story of Pasiphaë restates the struggle with the physical union of a Cretan Queen and a powerful bull that leads to the issue of the Minotaur, half human, half animal. While not identical, the two titles address the same idea from different angles. Such is the nature of Abstract Expressionist titles as a whole. They often can be interchanged from painting to painting, for example, Lee Krasner's *Gaea* and *Combat* of the mid-1960s with their dramatic, swirling, mythic, biomorphic forms, or Adolph Gottlieb's *Voyager's Return* with its sailing ship imagery and *Untitled—Heavy White Lines* with its ship-rowing forms, both of the mid-1940s—as long as the intended underlying associations are recognized. Such associations originate from the artists' and the culture's themes. That a critic suggested Pasiphaë as a title to Pollock also indicates how widespread were particular themes and associations in the period. As Lee Krasner once said of Pollock's titles, Abstract Expressionist titles ultimately had to agree with the artists' "thinking." Disinterring and integrating their "thinking" is the subject of this book.

The larger group that makes up the Abstract Expressionist context includes some widely divergent types—Friedrich Nietzsche, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Martha Graham, Herbert Read, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Winston Churchill, Hollywood film makers, and the World War II footsoldier and homefront volunteer. They disagreed on many issues, both among themselves and with the Abstract Expressionists. Yet, in reading their work and statements—from the most elaborate formulations to the diaries and memoirs of the war—it is hard not to be struck by congruences in their concerns, in their assumptions about what were the urgent issues and the possibilities for addressing them, in their conceptions of the past and of the status of nature, spirit, and human resources, past and present. These congruences build a picture of a historical and cultural moment specific to the West in the

1940s. This is not, of course, the whole culture, nor even the whole of intellectual culture, of the 1940s. The picture of it that I give is reconstructed from the evidence of the artists' own interests, in which were found thematic relations around very broad ideas. The ideas were widely, although not necessarily universally, shared beyond the Abstract Expressionist group. It has been my purpose to identify, describe, and explicate the ideas of the Abstract Expressionists, since their work was for many years discussed without searching reference to the concepts they claimed. It has been beyond my scope to criticize those ideas, particularly according to ideas of artistic probity current today.

The absence of a general account of the culture of the 1940s out of which Abstract Expressionism arose has been one of the unfortunate weaknesses of individual studies. Under the limitations of such investigations, scholars have had to rely on the "smoking gun" theory of evidence, which requires that a corroboration of direct knowledge be offered before the influence of a given figure or idea on an artist can be accepted. In the world of the specialized monograph, it can be difficult to offer anything else. But not all such influences can be definitively proved, and not all influences are so direct. It is the assertion of this study that a loose ensemble of ideas informed the cultural matrix of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and that the art and thought arose from it whether we can prove direct "influence" or not. I have written an argument by inference and analogy as well as direct evidence.

Abstract Expressionism consists of individual statements of historically and culturally bound and formed metaphors or symbolic generalizations that constitute an open network of interlocking ideas, influences, and events. The generalizations fall into suggestive and illuminating micro- and macro-patterns. It goes without saying that the artists are not academic intellectuals; rather, they express their context in the latent and manifest content of their shared and personal idioms. So much is shared and believed that open allusion is scarce. The repetition of sources, forms, and subjects (themes, topics, and ideas) not only in their paintings but in their verbal statements bears subtle witness to the prevailing culture. As De Kooning said, "You didn't talk about your painting directly. You talked in aphorisms because you could see each other's values."[1] Gottlieb concurred: "We had common assumptions, talked together, hung around and respected each other's works despite differences."[2]

This book reformulates an Abstract Expressionist culture and resets its individual voices. It posits a unique Anglo-American view of world culture beginning in the late 1930s and 1940s out of which Abstract Expressionism arose. It is an interaction of a multitude of forces—the work of Joyce and Eliot (the "Anglo"), Jung and the Bollingen program, surrealism, anthropological concepts of world culture, American art and culture of the 1930s, intellectual critics such as Lewis Mumford, and World War II. In England some of it lay behind what is called the neo-Romantic art of the 1940s. It forms an identifiable unit that can be understood as such fifty years later, when a perspective on it can be established.

The greatest influence on the artists' art and thought was the crisis in the West brought about by the perceived collapse of much of the political, social, and economic order during and after World War I, and intensified by the coming of World War II. Leftist scholars and critics have attempted to associate the production and reception of Abstract Expressionism with the Cold War. While the Cold War is related to some elements of the critical miscasting and sponsorship of American art and culture in the 1950s, the argument is incomplete and ultimately unconvincing.

Although more recent scholarship has mentioned the war as an influence, it has not fully assessed its impact. Through an examination of the crisis and the