

Art

The Tribal Style

Ab Ex at the Whitney Museum

As the first "grand" American style, mature abstract expressionism (painted from about 1950 onward) has been studied and shown almost to exhaustion. Shaped into an institution by the growing system of critics, dealers, curators and government cultural agencies, the once fragile and isolated-looking works of Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, Gorky and their peers became the emblems of a cultural empire: no style or movement since surrealism was diffused so fast, or imposed itself as completely on painters around the world. But the earlier work of these artists, done before, during and just after World War II, is still patchily known. Last week the first thorough retrospective of it, "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years," went on view at New York City's Whitney Museum: an altogether fascinating show of 120 paintings by 15 artists, assembled by Art Historians Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin.

It should give the *coup de grâce* to the lingering idea that abstract expressionism was a "native" movement. On the contrary: it was unimaginable without its source, surrealism. Indeed, it was the last great efflorescence of romantic imagery in art. The New York painters were very selective about the modernist enterprise. They had lived through the Depression and arrived on the edge of a world war. They were not apt to believe in art-induced utopias—the rationalization of mankind through ideal form. So the Bauhaus-constructivist line meant little to them. Surrealism, however, was more congenial. To begin with, it was an art of subject matter; and although platoons of later critics would discuss abstract expressionism in purely formalist terms, the painters themselves were obsessed by content. "We assert," said Mark Rothko, "that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and



A sense of ritual, an impossible totemism: *The Key*, 1946, by Jackson Pollock

timeless." His "we" included Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, William Baziotes, Theodoros Stamos and, in greater or lesser degrees, all the abstract expressionists with the possible exception of de Kooning.

But tragic and timeless subjects were not to be found on the street. The American artists wanted to locate their discourse beyond events, in a field not bound by historical time, that went back to pre-literate, "primitive" tribal antiquity. The notion of ritual occupied the same place in their work that the idea of the "marvelous" did in French surrealism. Totem, cave, prison, sentinel, medium, personage, priest: such were the recurrent images of the '40s.

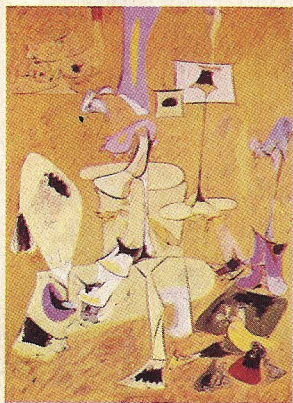
In a real sense the abstract expressionists in their early years were like religious artists without a context, practicing a deeply felt but homeless (and culturally impossible) totemism. Some, like Pollock, drew direct inspiration from Southwest Indian art, transforming it—as in *The Key*, 1946—into the congested, baroque rhetoric of shape which would later be refined as the allover skeins and webs of his drip paintings. Still and Rothko

regarded their art as mediumistic: it was, Still declared, a way of "being within a revelation," and this kind of priestly bombast was a regular feature of abstract expressionist utterances. Painting accumulated resonance by appealing to myth.

It was not a matter of getting into primitive fancy dress: all the painters involved were 20th century city dwellers, they had read Freud and Jung, some of them (notably Pollock) had been in analysis, and they were well aware that the "savage mind" cannot be mimicked by an act of will. The only form of primitivism available to modern man, their paintings argue in different voices, is the unconscious. Just as the young bourgeois intellectuals who formed surrealism turned their revolt against their own class into something like a religious principle, so the New York painters declared their separation from American materialism by means of an impassioned sense of the numinous. They found it in nature as well as culture: Arshile Gorky's paintings, full of flower stems and tendons and odd rhythmic copulations of not-quite-abstract form, are among the most exquisite animistic landscapes in the history of romantic painting.

In hindsight, one can easily see where they got their language: how Gorky's spidery, fluent line emerged from Miró, how the bulging shapes of early de Kooning derive from '30s Picasso, what Rothko got from Max Ernst and Pollock from Kandinsky, and how deeply Adolph Gottlieb's pictographs were influenced by Victor Brauner. But that is perhaps of secondary importance. What counts most in this show is the spectacle of those obscure but desperately committed artists painting as though art had the power to change life, as though culture itself depended on their efforts: which it did, in a way, but not in the fundamental way they hoped.

—Robert Hughes



Gorky's *The Betrothal, II*; de Kooning's *Light in August*; Rothko's *Baptismal Scene*

Caves, sentinels, priestly bombast and the last great efflorescence of romantic imagery.