

The Irascibles and Advancing American Art

Senior Thesis by James Matson

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Untitled by Mark Rothko(1903-1970), signed and dated 1952

On display in *Christie's* galleries; Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

Photograph by: James Matson, May 2014.

During Christie's Spring 2014 Evening Sale of Post-War and Contemporary Art at Rockefeller Plaza in New York, the painting *Untitled* by Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was sold at auction for sixty-six million, two hundred and forty-five thousand dollars. Painted in 1952, the canvas (an image of which is included on the previous page) stands eight feet, nine inches tall and the entirety of it is made up of three distinct, rectangular, fields of color. Certainly this is an impressive object to behold, if only due to its size and current monetary value. To comment on the esthetic qualities of the painting however, brings in to question the preferences and opinions of the individual who is viewing and evaluating it. One person could look at this object and express their delight in the contrasts of colors and textures that are being displayed by the artist; another could simply dismiss this painting as simplistic and boring, saying "I could do that". The subjective nature of the esthetic value of this work of art can cause some (such as the author of this essay) to question why *Untitled* is worth what it is.

If the value of a work of art were simply based upon individuals' opinions about the content of the painting itself, it seems that prices in today's market would be subject to the same potential differences in opinion brought on by the esthetics of the painting. However, in today's high value market for the sale of art by auction houses and galleries, similarly abstract paintings by certain artists such as Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock continue to sell for millions of dollars year after year, and make headlines for achieving record prices. Therefore, it follows that the price of these artists' works must be attributable to a less subjective, and more consistent form of value creation than simply the technique with which

the painting is executed. The contextual history of abstract expressionist art such as *Untitled* by Mark Rothko, offers an explanation as to why works by this group of artists of the mid-twentieth century, post-war era are highly valued in today's art market.

Advancing American Art

During the Second World War, Nazi propaganda attacked the United States for being a solely industrial and militaristic society. The motivation was therefore created, for America to promote itself abroad as a country also possessing intellectual and cultural merits. Whereas before, the promotion of American society and art had been left to the private sector, there was now a demonstrated need for the U.S. Government to fund this type of propaganda abroad. The Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and the Office of War Information were created during the war to meet this need in Latin America and Europe respectively. (Ausfield, pg. 12) At the close of the war these office's staff and responsibilities were absorbed into the State Department, which consolidated its art programs into the Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs.

During the years after the war the world's geo-political landscape shifted enormously. It was during this time that the United States' powerful political and economic position caused it to fully emerge from its historically isolationist foreign policy. America moved into a new, heavily involved role in world affairs. Following the end of what was the largest military conflict in human history, there emerged a new form of global confrontation. The Cold War, was a conflict between the post-

war superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. Each of these nations sought to promote its own way of life as a structure for rebuilding global order. During this conflict the United States found a strong need to promote American capitalism and democracy as being superior to the Soviet alternatives of communism and totalitarianism. Thus, American art and culture became an important medium through which the nation's political ideologies could be propagated. Therefore, the Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs sought to maintain the type of cultural promotion that the United States had begun during the war.

J. LeRoy Davidson began working in the State Department in 1945 as its Visual Art Specialist. He had gone to school at Harvard and had worked as an assistant director at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Davidson, and his supervisor Richard Heindel, the head of the State Department's Division of Libraries and Institutes, were responsible for coordinating American art exhibitions that were contracted through institutions such as the National Gallery of Art.¹ Davidson and Heindel both felt that these exhibitions were too conservative and did not properly represent American culture. The exhibitions included European art that was contained in American collections and it was thought that they lacked an adequate amount of art by modern American artists. Davidson and Heindel had begun to circulate prints of more modern American art throughout the international embassies. The U.S. embassies abroad responded positively to these modern works,

¹ Though the National Gallery of Art is property of the United States Government, the site of the Museum, and its vast collection, have all been built from the generosity of private donors.

and this provided the Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs with the motivation to begin plans for a formal exhibition of this type of artwork.

During the Spring and Summer of 1946, with a budget of \$49,000 from the State Department, J. LeRoy Davidson managed to purchase a collection of 79 oil paintings for the purpose of a modern art exhibit that would counterbalance the more conservative portrayal of American art that was being put forth in the shows run by the National Gallery. Davidson was able to acquire a relatively valuable collection with such a small budget because of his connections with private dealers and artists, and their eagerness to contribute to the cause. His decision to purchase the paintings, rather than to consign them on loan from the artists and owners, was due to the logistical benefits that this would allow the State Department when distributing and exhibiting the works of art over seas for lengthy amounts of time. (Ausfield, 1984) The seventy-nine paintings that were purchased by Davidson were then supplemented by thirty-eight watercolors purchased by the American Federation of Arts. This collection of works by relatively modern and abstract American artists was formed for the purpose of an overseas exhibition to promote U.S. culture; the show was titled "Advancing American Art".

The seventy-nine oils of the "Advancing American Art" exhibition made their first public debut at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The Paintings were put on display there from October 4th until October 18th of 1946.

The paintings are owned by the State Department and were purchased to further the Government's foreign cultural program. The sizable collection consists largely of modern works as a result of requests from missions abroad.

(New York Times; 1946, Sep 29)

While it sat on view at the Metropolitan, the State Department's collection received adequate reviews from the art critics who covered the exhibition. Edward Alden Jewell, who covered the event for the New York Times gave reviews that were considerate of Davidson's budgetary constraints; he complimented Davidson for forming a collection of American modern works with relatively little money, for what Jewell thought to be a justified cause.

... it was organized by a very "modern" young man in accord with the expressed wishes of "missions" abroad, which are later to exhibit this work.

It develops that Europe and South America want(ed) to look at more "advanced" phases of American art, (...). So J. LeRoy Davidson, who has been directing the State Department's art program for more than a year, set out to meet that request. And he has done no half-way job.

(...). Of course there would have to be a budget, and some compromising couldn't be avoided. (...). But by and large Mr. Davidson has spent the State Department's money advantageously.

(Jewell, Edward; 1946, Oct 06)

In this and other coverage of the exhibition, the New York Times makes reference to the "advanced" nature of the art contained in the State Department show. The journalist remains clear that the paper's opinion on the subjective nature of the art being displayed is not based upon esthetic. Jewell justifies the noteworthy nature of the State Department's exhibit because it is "in accord with the expressed wishes of 'missions' abroad," (Jewell, Edward; 1946, Oct 06). Throughout the New York Times coverage of the event though they make an effort to note the "radical" nature of the paintings that were purchased and put on display by the State Departments.

... the assembled work, most of which represents "radical" developments. Overwhelmingly preponderant are canvases belonging

in categories of extreme expressionism, fantasy, surrealism, and abstraction.

(Jewell, E.; October 3, 1946)

The American painters, who had produced the canvases in these styles of expressionism and abstraction, were those who were relatively more established in these genres of painting. The works, however, that were chosen to represent them in the exhibition “Advancing American Art” were those that J. LeRoy Davidson and the State Department could afford. The artists represented in “Advancing American Art” included: Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Robert Gwathmey, William Baziot, Marsden Hartley, Stuart Davis, Milton Avery, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Jack Levine, Ben Shahn, Philip Evergod, Romare Bearden, Karl Zerbe, Robert Motherwell and Adolph Gottlieb among others. This group of artists, who had been chosen by J. LeRoy Davidson in the State Department to represent the ‘advancement’ of American Art, would soon face ridicule and criticism for the ‘radical’ nature of their paintings in the show. This criticism would not come from art critics in countries abroad however, but from the media, citizens, and politicians at home in the United States.

In late October of 1946, following their exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, the paintings of the “Advancing American Art” exhibit were split into two groups. Forty-nine of the paintings were packaged to travel for exhibition in Europe, while the remaining thirty canvases of the seventy-nine paintings left for a tour of Latin America. Upon the event of their leaving, the Washington Post described the then growing debate concerning the ‘radically’ modern nature of these paintings, combined with the fact that they were works of art that were wholly owned by the State Department of the United States.

This group of paintings has been the subject of violent discussion. (...) ... , this exhibit was assembled by one State Department official, J. Leroy Davidson, (...). It is the first time that the Government has bought outright for this purpose, (...).

... With an eye primarily on what would interest Parisians, he has aimed to show some of the more advanced aspects of contemporary work. The result is a group that includes many excellent paintings, but also some weak ones (...).

(Crane, 1946)

This article in the Washington post is telling of what would become a growing trend in the United States' media coverage of the government sponsored art show. Jane Watson Crane, the journalist writing for the Washington Post pays more attention to the detail that the "Government (had) bought(,) outright" the paintings for this exhibit. Crane also accuses Davidson of making his selections of American modern and abstractionist art with the object of choosing pieces that "would interest Parisians". This is an accusation that would be repeatedly made against the styles of painting that were included in the State Department show. Some critics in the American public believed that the abstract works of art represented American artists' catering and pandering to the trending European styles, and that these paintings therefore did not represent American society at all. Although Crane does say that the show includes "many excellent paintings" her take on the European influence of the exhibitions modern, 'radical' content serves to belittle the very intended purpose of the State Department show. This article, in which the Washington Post both highlights the aspects of government spending and the highly subjective nature of the canvases included in its art show, is an example of how vulnerable the "Advancing American Art" show was to attacks from the media and the American public.

As the exhibition arrived abroad it was met with good response in the U.S. foreign embassies and among foreign art critics. Attacks on the 'radicalism' and lack of justification for the show however, only increased within the domestic media at home in America. The American Artists Professional League (AAPL) and the Hearst press were early attackers of the "Advancing American Art" exhibition. They wrote letters and produced articles respectively, lambasting the State Department collection for its appropriation of government funds to purchase modern and 'radical' works of art. As the State Department's works of art continued upon their scheduled tours abroad, they received even more flack in the media and attacks from members of congress. During February of 1947, radio personality Fulton Lewis attacked the "Advancing American Art" show as a waste of public funds. In the same month *Look* magazine ran an article, which reproduced paintings from the show under the headline: "You're Money Bought These Paintings". Because of the subjective nature of the abstract and modern art that was exhibited, a public movement against the State Department exhibition found rapid and easy support in a condemnation for this use of government funds. (Krenn, 2005)

President Harry Truman himself spoke out about his disapproval of modern art. In a letter that he wrote to Assistant Secretary William Benton, Truman stated his opinion that modern, abstractionist art was "the vaporings of half-baked, lazy people." (Ausfield, 1984) Truman's personal negative opinion of this type of art is shown even clearer in a now public record of his diary where he writes "I dislike Picasso, and all the moderns--they are lousy. Any kid can take an egg and a piece of ham and make more understandable pictures." (Truman, 1953) The opinions of the

commander and chief serve as a good example of how the general public of the United States thought the selection for “Advancing American Art” to be distasteful. Amid a rising controversy, and conversations that frequently questioned the State Department for its selection of American artists, the exhibition, which was in Prague and Port-au-Prince Haiti at the time, was abruptly closed on April 4th 1947. Later that same month, J. LeRoy Davidson resigned from his position in the State Department. (Littleton, 1989)

It was decided that the paintings and watercolors that had belonged to the government exhibition would be categorized as ‘war surplus’ and sold at auction. The seventy-nine oil paintings and thirty-eight watercolors were sold at heavily discounted (95%) rates, with priority bidding given to public educational institutions. In this manner, the government received \$5,544 for the sale of its collection. (Ausfeld, 1984) Before they were sold at auction these works of art were brought together for an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. On the occasion of what would be the last showing of this collection owned outright by the U.S. Government State Department, the New York Times reported.

(...). In the great campaign toward better understanding, art constitutes a small but important activity. Our monuments officers in Germany are constantly urging exhibitions of modern American art, for they have witnessed the activities of the more propaganda-wise French and Russians and can calculate its effect. The materialistic myth has gone on too long. We supply grain and groceries, chewing gum and cigarettes. Shall we balk at displaying our cultural produce? We should be proud to show it.

If we do exhibit our art abroad let it be exactly that kind which the State Department sought---our most imaginative and fresh expressions. Such art is proof of our maturity and independence: though we have built on the traditions of twentieth-century European

painting there is no baneful imitation. Throughout there is the vitality, purpose and diversity which a democracy allows. ...

(Louchheim, 1948)

Here we see this New York Times reporter and critic pioneering a change in rhetoric moving away from the recent smear campaigns that had criticized the necessity of the “Advancing American Art” show and attacked the content of the modern paintings contained in the exhibition. The journalist, Louchheim, points out that it would be necessary for the United States to portray itself as more than just a factory for material goods as it continued upon its path toward greater involvement in global affairs. Secondly, the writer for the paper then points out that the United States should endorse its most modern art because it is representative of democracy. It shows “the vitality, purpose and diversity which a democracy allows.” The article then continues on and concludes with some suggestions for the art community.

The Future

The State Department has neither funds nor personnel to undertake such exhibitions now, nor should it be asked to assume the responsibility. But if museums and artist and professional groups were to initiate these shows, the State Department should be encouraged to dignify them with official blessing and to facilitate transportation and arrangements abroad. Ultimately Congress might learn the value of such cultural gestures.

(Louchheim, 1948)

In the closing column of this article in the New York Times, which detailed the ultimate failure of the “Advancing American Art” exhibition, the journalist offers a solution for how cultural propaganda of this nature should be conducted moving forward. Having identified modern art as a necessary aspect for the promotion of

the United States and democracy's vitality abroad, the article concludes with the suggestion that this propagation be conducted by the private sector (i.e. "museums and artist and professional groups") in the future. This suggestion would become heavily implemented by private American art institutions during the Cold War.

The failure of the "Advancing American Art" exhibition showed that the promotion of American abstract and 'radical' art could not be successfully conducted by the State Department. This failure however, did not eradicate the importance of this task. Therefore, it proved necessary in the subsequent decades, that American modern painting should be promoted and exhibited abroad by the learned and respected private institutions of art in America. This would be more in keeping with the very rhetoric of democracy, diversity, and individualism that the art was supposed to represent for America. The American art community was eager to participate in this cause, and in order to stay in line with this, most patriotic of causes, the American media would need to shift the content of its discussion on the subject away from that of disgruntled confusion. It was at about this time, after the "Advancing American Art" exhibition was retired, that a trend of this nature can be seen in the content of more mainstream periodicals such as *Life* magazine.

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In the fall of 1948, the "Life Round Table on Modern Art" brought together an international group of esteemed art critics, curators, and connoisseurs. This seventeen page article in the October/November 11 issue of the magazine was

intended to answer the question of “How can a great civilization like ours continue to flourish without the humanizing influence of a living art that is understood and enjoyed by a large public?” (Davenport, pg. 56) The men included in this round table discussion were to deliberate on the esthetic quality of the modern and abstract art of their time. The opinions of the art critics that were present was well balanced by a representation of both the outspoken conservatives and the those who were more well known for supporting modern art. If the article was to influence readers’ opinions on the subject of modern art, it was important that the opinions presented should come from men educated in art, and situated among recognizable institutions within the art world. The panel included prominent art critics of the time such as Clement Greenberg, an assortment of high-level academics including professors from the Columbia and Yale Universities, and museum directors from highly regarded institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “The object was to obtain a discussion between persons whose knowledge of art could not be questioned, irrespective of whether one might or might not agree with their evaluations.” (Davenport, pg. 56) By assembling a group of recognized authoritarians on the subject, *Life* allowed for a discussion of some weight to take place on the esthetics of modern art and how the common person (referred to frequently in the article as the “layman”) could potentially proceed in their appreciation and understanding of this visually confusing material.

A number of paintings were brought up for discussion during the round table debate, which was held in the penthouse of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Their debate was heavily concerned with the 'esthetic' quality of the works of art. Much reference was continually made in their speech to the "experience" of the painting, rather than to the subject matter presented in the canvas. The consensus then, was that a work of art should be viewed for its personal value as an object rather than to be judged by the way in which it could portray a particular subject matter or lack thereof. The curator of the discussion, Russell Davenport, consolidated their rhetoric on this subject into four concise suggestions for a person who would judge modern art.

1. The layman should guard against his own natural inclination to condemn a picture just because he is unable to identify its subject matter in his ordinary experience.
2. He should, however, be equally on guard against the assumption that a painting that is recognizable in ordinary experience is no good. He should not fall a victim to the kind of academicism that insists upon obscurity for its own sake.
3. He should look devotedly at the picture, rather than at himself, or at any aspect of his environment. The picture must speak. If it conveys nothing to him, then he should remember that the fault may be in him, not the artist.
4. Even though he does not in general like nonrepresentational painting, this open-minded attitude will very much increase the layman's enjoyment of artistic works, ancient or modern.

(Davenport, pg. 68)

The positive benefit of these criteria for judging a painting is that they can be applied across all genres and eras of art. These critics and knowledgeable art professionals suggest that it is wise and culturally prodigious for members of society to include these abstracted works of art within an entire historical repertoire of painting when viewing them. The effect of this is to give these new pieces of modern art meaning and value in a historical and international context.

Works discussed by the panelists included those by Picasso, Rembrandt, Miro, Matisse, and Rouault. Alongside these artists, who had successfully earned a place in the canon of European art history as modernist painters, were included the “Young American Extremists” in a category of their own. Pages sixty-two and sixty-three of the article open up to a two page spread on the debate about the esthetic quality of a set of paintings by William DeKooning (*Painting*, 1948), William Baziotes (*The Dwarf*), Theodoros Stamos (*Sounds in the Rock*), Adolf Gottlieb (*Vigil*), and Jackson Pollock (*Cathedral*). The text of the critics’ discussion is accompanied by reproductions of the paintings, which dominate the space of the two pages and are printed in full color.²

The moderator of the article notes that, when confronted with the work of the young American artists, the members of the discussion are quick to form an opinion, but there seems to be no clear criteria upon which their opinions are based for judging these works of art. The vagueness and opinionated nature of the debate is increased by the fact that these paintings cause members of the so-called ‘moderate’ group and the ‘enthusiasts’ to disagree among themselves respectively.

In the final column of this article which begins with the subtitle “The struggle for freedom” the moderator sets forth what he believes to be the meaning of modern art as concluded from this round table discussion. He states, “The meaning of modern art is, that the artist of today is engaged in a tremendous individualistic

² Excluding Willem de Kooning’s *Painting*, which the artist executed in an all black and white pallet. *Painting* is included on page 62 beside the text and photography of the speakers (p. 62 is printed in black and white). Page 63 contains the four plates of Pollock, Stamos, Gottlieb, and Baziotes, printed in full color.

struggle--- a struggle to discover and to assert and to express *himself*." (Davenport, pg. 79) The concept of individuality and self-expression are pervasive throughout the entirety of the *Life* article on this round table discussion. However, it is only at the end of the article, under the final column header that this artistic significance is shown by the author to connect to the concept of freedom. In the last space of his writing on the subject of modern art, Davenport enlists the help of his esteemed colleagues dialect to further enforce the notion that modern and abstract art, expresses individual freedom. This process begins with the individual expressions of the artist.

"In the great artist the results of this highly individual attitude can be set up beside the great work of the past."

"This attitude further involves a freedom of the individual, an openness to experience--- qualities that we consider important, not only in art, but in the broader field of life itself. We value these qualities in human relationships, in science, in ethical behavior; and it is through the arts to some extent that they become evident to us"

-Dr. Meyer Schapiro, professor of fine arts, Columbia University
(*Life Magazine*; Davenport, pg. 79)

Here, we see the further transition in this rhetoric on freedom from the individual to society as a whole. Davenport allows this quotation of Dr. Schapiro to compare the artist's individual and free nature to the same freedom that the United States was promoting in its foreign policy after World War II. Immediately following Dr. Schapiro's testament to this individualist quality of art and society the author of the report, Russell W. Davenport, continues:

Yet this tremendous, individualistic struggle, which makes modern art so difficult for the layman, is really one of the great assets of our civilization. For it is at bottom the struggle for freedom. As several at the Table pointed out, the temptation in authoritarian societies is to

settle the problem of modern art by fiat. Both Hitler and Stalin have actually done so--- and in both cases the artists were ordered to return to representational painting.

(Davenport, Pg. 79)

As this information is presented, it would be clear to a reader of this article in the time period, in an almost aggressive manner, that now if he or she (the layman) did not learn to appreciate modern works of art, not only would they be culturally and esthetically deprived, but they would also be likened to “both Hitler and Stalin”. In the closing paragraphs of this article the author begins to draw multiple parallels between the modern art that is being discussed, patriotism, and freedom within society. In an argument that further entwines these potential relationships, Davenport suggests that modern, impressionistic art exists within American society as a result of the values of freedom that it holds dear.

Maybe obscurity is a high price to pay for freedom, culturally speaking. Yet it has been, and may for some time continue to be, an inescapable cultural by-product of the great process of freedom which is so critical in our time.

(Davenport, Pg. 79)

This correlation between a society’s art and its politics that is constructed and explained in the end of this article is a successful explanation for why modern art could be a good representative of American culture and society. The type of rhetoric presented in this media piece in 1948 set the stage and explained the logic for how the paintings of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Adolph Gottlieb could mature further into their roles as America’s cultural ambassadors around the globe.

The Irascibles

On May 22nd 1950 the front page of the New York Times carried a story with the headline “18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan; Charge ‘Hostility to Advanced Art’”. The painter’s protest, which this article detailed, was against an upcoming competitive exhibit titled “American Painting Today – 1950” being held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They declared that they would not be submitting their works to be judged in this contest, based on the argument that the conservative art critics, who had been selected to judge the event, would not give fair consideration to works of “advanced” art. Within their open letter to Roland L. Redmond (then president of the museum), eighteen painters presented their complaint about the judges’ bias; they simultaneously proclaimed their worth as members of the Avant-garde responsible for ‘advancing’ American art and making a “consequential contribution to civilization”. (New York Times, 1950) The signatories of the letter were Jimmy Ernst, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, William Baziotas, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Richard Pousette-Dart, Theodoros Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Willem de Kooning, Hedda Sterne, James Brooks, Weldon Kees and Fritz Bultman.³ They are now considered within art history as members of the New York School of Abstract Expressionist artists, and for their involvement in this brief

³ The open letter to the times also included the signatures of ten sculptors. They’re names were included below the painters under the header: “The following sculptors support this stand.” They were: Herbert Ferber, David Smith, Ibram Lassaw, Mary Callery, Day Schnabel, Seymour Lipton, Peter Gripe, Theodore Roszak, David Hare, and Louise Bourgeois. (New York Times: May 22, 1950)

protest against the Metropolitan museum they have also become known as “The Irascibles”.

On May 23rd 1950, the day after the New York Times ran their article covering the open letter, the New York Herald Tribune published an editorial entitled “The Irascible Eighteen”, which sympathized with the Metropolitan museum, citing the fact that the Metropolitan had already either purchased or exhibited works produced by eleven of the eighteen signatories. The editorial therefore accused these artists of misrepresentation in their “highly publicized protest to the museum,” and attributed this all to be a result of “their irascibility”. (New York Herald Tribune, 1950) The artists were able to show that the statistics presented by the Tribune were also a misrepresentation of their own sort. The works by the eleven artists cited in the Tribune editorial were included in three exhibits that were put together by organizations outside of the Metropolitan. These organizations included the Artists for Victory Incorporated, *Life* Magazine, and the United States State Department Collection: “Advancing American Art”. (Letter to the Editor: May 25, 1950) Despite the arguable legitimacy of the Tribune’s claims against them the title it gave to “The Irascible Eighteen” in its editorial stuck. It was then reused and reinforced as a name and label for this group of artists.

In their January 15th, 1951 issue of *Life*, the magazine decided to report on the competitive show of American art that had taken place at the Metropolitan museum the month before. The five-page spread detailed the event and included images of the artists’ works that were included in the exhibit. The prize winners’ works were shown alongside the title of the short piece. However, opposite these, a

full page was devoted to displaying a group of artists who had not participated in the event at all. This was the group of New York City painters who had boycotted the show by refusing to submit works to the competition. Life magazine included a black and white photograph of fifteen of the eighteen New York painters who had protested the show. The photograph of these 'irascible' artists was displayed larger even, than the images of the art that had won the competition at the Metropolitan Museum. It is also important to note that the *Life* magazine article included no images of any artists who were participants in the show being discussed. The attention granted to the protesting grouping of abstract expressionist painters is replicated in the text of the article, where the discussion is more heavily focused on their boycott of the show than upon the content of the show itself. The effect of this within the article as a whole creates an image of greater individuality conveyed by the bohemian group of artists who protested the show. Because a photograph of these artists is included in the article as well, it contributed to an image of personality and notoriety that would, from then on belong to the members of the "Irascibles".

Before the magazine article even began to detail the event of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, it introduced its readers to the "Irascibles". Directly preceding the title page of this article in the 1950 January issue of *Life* Magazine was an image of the artists in New York with a detailed caption beginning as follows:

"The solemn people above, along with three others, made up the group of "irascible" artists who raised the biggest fuss about the Metropolitan's competition (*following pages*). All representatives of advanced art, they paint in styles which vary from the dribblings of Pollock (LIFE, Aug. 8, 1949) to the Cyclopean phantoms of Baziotes,

and all have distrusted the museum since its director likened them to “flat-chested” pelicans “strutting upon the intellectual wastelands.”
(Life, 1951; Pg. 34)

The caption to the “Irascibles” photo then continues on to name each of the artists in the picture. It also adds a certain amount of weight to their actions by comparing their protest to similar moments in art history involving European impressionist painters as well as more classical American painters. The remainder of the text beneath the photo of the Irascible artists is as follows:

“Their revolt and subsequent boycott of the show was in keeping with an old tradition among avant-garde artists. French painters in 1874 rebelled against their official juries and held the first impressionist exhibition. U.S. artists in 1908 broke with the National Academy jury to launch the famous Aschan School. The effect of the revolt of the “irascibles” remains to be seen, but it did appear to have needled the Metropolitan’s juries into turning more than half the show into a free-for-all of modern art.”
(Life, 1951 ; pg.34)

By drawing direct comparisons between esteemed artists of the past and attributing the boycott of the museum show by these present day artists as an act of “an old tradition among avant-garde artists” this text provides the reader with a reason to wonder whether or not this group of painters could be monumental.

Following the photograph and its caption the article then begins its discussion of the exhibit at the Metropolitan. Because of the ordering of how this article presents its information, the museum exhibit becomes an explanation as to the significance of the artists included in the image. Therefore, for the uninformed reader picking up this magazine it would immediately seem to be presented more as a ‘people-story’, and the event of the art show at the museum would only serve as the necessary backdrop for highlighting the importance of this “Irascible Group of Advanced Artists”(Life, 1951 ; pg.34).

Even when the article goes on to cover the events of the museum exhibition on the following page it makes continued reference back to the 'Irascibles', "a crew of 18 indignant painters (*opposite page*), all exponents of the most extreme varieties of abstract art," (Life, 1951 ; pg.35). The effect of the photograph and the article as a whole is to embellish the abstract, artistic, and individualistic nature of this group of artists. All these traits are in keeping with the ideologies that were presented in "A *Life* Round Table on Modern Art" in 1948, for why Modern art should be viewed as a success of American culture. The resulting effect therefore of this magazine's selective coverage of the modern art of the period, is to present this particular group of "Irascible" New York artists as having the potential to be the cultural representatives of individualism and freedom in American society.

This article on "The Irascibles" was included in an issue of *Life* magazine, which also covered the Korean War, Yugoslavia's resistance to Russia (in a photo essay called "Our Communist Ally"), and the Political movements of President Harry S. Truman. The five-page spread on the metropolitan is immediately followed (with the exception of two pages of advertisement) by the article concerning the cover of the magazine: describing a wounded corporal, who carried out the governing ceremonies at the Pasadena rose fete. He took the place of General Eisenhower, who would have conducted the ceremony himself had he not had other responsibilities to be abroad in Europe.

"General Eisenhower had agreed to be grand marshal of Pasadena's Tournament of Roses this year, but preparations for his flight to Europe as the West's Supreme Commander kept him tied up at New Year's, and Ike suggested that some soldier back from Korea take his place. The honor went to a 21-year-old Marine named Robert Stewart

Gray (*see cover*) who, in a situation almost unprecedented for a corporal, was detailed to do a general's job."

(Life pg. 41 ; January 15, 1951)

The article which profiled "The Irascibles" and which concerned the state of abstract and advanced art in America was included adjacent and prior to the magazine's cover story. The lead article in this issue of Life was concerned with a patriotic tale surrounding the Korean War and General Eisenhower's movements as the "West's Supreme Commander" in Europe. The effect of this was to place the subject of art, and the individuals involved in American abstract painting, on a level of importance adjacent to the nation's foreign policy. This inclusion along with the development, through articles such as "A Life Round Table on Modern Art", of a new way to look at America's modern art, allowed for these painters to become an integral part of American domestic culture, and the nation's image abroad.

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During its Spring 2014 evening sale of post-war and contemporary art in New York, Christie's auction house sold sixty-eight works of art for a total value of almost \$745 million. Without calculating for inflation, this amount marked a world record as the highest total achieved by any single auction. (Vogel, 2014) Among the works of art included in the sale were paintings by Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning. The seven paintings that were attributable to these individual artists sold for a total of almost \$208 million, meaning that well over a quarter of the auction's total value was derived from the

sale of works of art done by American Post-war abstract expressionists who were among “The Irascibles”.

In his novel “The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark” (2008), Don Thompson makes a thorough account of the type of factors that can contribute to a work of contemporary art’s price in the modern market. Thompson elaborates on the topic or “branding” as it relates in the art world to artists, dealers, collectors, and auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s. Thompson even details the record-breaking sale of a painting by Mark Rothko for \$72.8 million at Sotheby’s in 2007. In his account of the sale and the marketing strategy implemented by the auction house leading up to it, Thompson attributes much of the value of the painting to have been judged upon its previous ownership by David Rockefeller. (pg. 21-23) He argues that the price of an individual work of art can be determined by multiple factors including the renown of the artist who created it, the notoriety of the museums and collectors who have possessed the piece before, and the entrepreneurial tactics of gallery owners and auction houses that make the sales of these artworks to their clients.

Artists who were among “The Irascible Eighteen”, including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still and Ad Reinhardt, are frequently included in Christie’s prestigious evening sales of Post-war and Contemporary art. It could even be said that these “branded” artists are a necessary component in order to form a prestigious sale of contemporary art; that it is therefore important to an auction house such as Christie’s that it be able to include a “Pollock”, a “Rothko”, and a painting by Willem de Kooning in its sale.

These artists possess the type of “branding” described by Thompson in his analysis of the art market.

Though this may be true for some of these artists, not all of the eighteen “Irascibles” achieve the same high prices in the modern art market. This may be due in part to the individual differences that each of these artists experienced in their own media exposure. Jackson Pollock was featured in a three-page spread alongside images of his paintings in a 1949 issue of Life magazine. The personal tastes of the collectors and curators of their time heavily influenced these artists’ inclusion or lack-there-of in gallery and museum exhibitions. It is important to remember that during the 1950s when the abstract expressionists were creating these works of art, the sale of their artwork generated only a fraction of what these canvases sell for at auction today. Varying degrees of media attention and critical acclaim have led certain members of the “Irascibles” to be more highly valued than others. However, it can be seen that these same forces in the American media that promoted these individual artists during the post-war era are still being used as a method of marketing the value of this art today.

During the twenty-first century, Christie’s auction house has led the international art market in its sales of modern and contemporary art. Christie’s engages in many promotional strategies, but the most fundamental and basic marketing tool that it creates to accompany each of its auctions is its catalogue for sale. These catalogues contain images and text to accompany each of the lots included in an auction. The amount of time and effort that is expended on creating them is extraordinary; they are intended to present each work of art as a desirable

object for sale. The catalogues for the Post-war and Contemporary evening sales at Christie's are by no means an exception, as these include some of the highest valued items that the company intends to put up for auction. For the most part the text that accompanies the images of the art in these catalogues is concerned with describing the aesthetic mood of a piece, along with the history of its creation, exhibition, and ownership. Frequently however, references are also made to the historical and political context of a painting's era. This is certainly true within the sections of these catalogues devoted to works of art from the post-war abstract expressionists.

On multiple occasions, the 1951 *Life* magazine photograph of the "Irascibles" has been reproduced in Christie's catalogues for sale. Further references are often made within the text of these catalogues to the proximity of these artists to one another, as well as to the political framework of their era. The Christie's catalogue for their November 2013 evening sale of Post-War and Contemporary Art includes both images of Jackson Pollock sourced from *Life* magazine, an attention to the parallels between Mark Rothko's painting and the images of an exploding atomic bomb, and reference to Ad Reinhardt's close relationship with his abstract expressionist colleagues, who were among the "Irascibles". (Christie's, 2013) While this may not be the most prominent way in which these paintings are advertised for sale, this type of historical referencing done by today's leading auction houses serves to draw from the initial "branding" that was created for these artists during their rise to prominence in the mid-twentieth century.

As a Senior Writer in the Post-War and Contemporary art department at Christie's, Stephen Jones is responsible for managing the editorial material that

accompanies a work of art throughout the sale process. This includes the description and lot notes that appear alongside the item in Christie's sale catalogues, as well as information that can be found about the object on the company's website. Mr. Jones works with a team of researchers and writers to create a context and a story behind each work of art selected for sale. Therefore, his knowledge of the history of these objects and the artists is extensive. Following Christie's Spring 2014 record-breaking sales of Post-War and Contemporary art, Mr. Jones took some time to discuss the subject of the "Irascibles" and the abstract expressionists as it pertains to the work that he does at the auction house. When asked about his familiarity with "The Irascible Eighteen" and the use of the abstract expressionists' history in his editorials he was able to recollect numerous occasions on which Christie's catalogues had made reference to these artists together and/or had used the image of them from the 1951 Life magazine article. He felt that this photograph is often used because it "sets the tone for this group of American artists" (Jones, 2014). When asked a similar question with reference to the exhibition of "Advancing American Art" put on by the state department in 1946, Mr. Jones was not familiar with his having included this piece of art history in a sale catalogue. The reason he thought for this was obvious, that the purpose of the editorials in these catalogues is to market works of art for sale rather than to focus on negative topics.

Throughout his conversation on the subjects of the abstract expressionists and Christie's contemporary art sales, Mr. Jones articulated one valuable piece of insight: that art is not like science, and that there are therefore many possible interpretations for it. The idea that art is subject for interpretation is important to

both a discussion of its current value in the art market as well as its initial arrival in a place of critical acceptance. The transition that occurred in the United States' media coverage of the abstract expressionists during the late 1940s and early 1950s is a striking example of the way in which interpretations for this form of art shifted on a macro level in the United States. Modern art dealers and auction houses' decision to reference and reinforce these interpretations have led in part to the astounding prices that these works of art achieve in the modern art market.

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The years following the conclusion of World War II witnessed the powerful emergence of United States' political influence during the Cold War. At just this moment in history, new forms of painting were emerging in the United States, challenging the conventions of the art world with their abstraction and radicalism. In 1946, the State Department organized the "Advancing American Art" exhibit in an early attempt to promote these evolving types of American art abroad. This government-funded exhibition was canceled due to the fact that the subjective nature of its abstract paintings was met by negative criticism in the press at home. The scandal exposed the confusion that existed within the American public and media about how to understand these modern artworks as a representation of American society.

Prior to the arrival of the abstract expressionists, much of the work by American painters had been done in the European school of realism. These works

depicted landscapes and subject matter that was native to the United States, but the style and execution of the art was heavily influenced by European traditions. Due to the subjective and abstract nature of the modern art works that were emerging in America following the war, a new form of critical rhetoric for evaluating this art had to be developed in order to show how these paintings were representational of American culture.

An analysis of the development in the American media's portrayal of abstract expressionism in the post-war era shows how they came to embrace this art form as a representation of American democracy and freedom. The new manner with which newspapers and periodicals such as *Life* magazine began to discuss the abstract art at this time, emphasized the importance of the individual expressionism that was being conveyed in the art. Art critics and institutions in the media promoted the idea that abstract painting represented freedom and democracy. In the process of establishing an argument for how to appreciate American abstract expressionist painting, the media also engaged in the profiling of the particular individuals who were creating this art.

A group of New York City abstract expressionist artists who came to be known as "The Irascible Eighteen" received a large amount of this media coverage. The controversy surrounding the Irascibles' protest, served to emphasize these particular eighteen painters' greater level of individuality within the modern art world. They were fashioned by press coverage to represent individual expression, vitality, freedom, and thus, democracy on the highest level. In this way, this group of artists evolved to become representative of post-war American culture both at

home and abroad. They arrived at a time when the United States political objectives in the Cold War encouraged the propagation of its culture internationally. During the 1950s, the promotion of these paintings through private American institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art was rapid and global. The abstract expressionism that these artworks conveyed is not only etched in the content of the paintings, but is also deeply embedded in the political and cultural history of their time. The historical value of these pieces of art serves to offer one explanation for the demand that fuels their continually large dollar value in art markets around the world today.

Museums and private collectors vie for canvases from many of this group of artists at incredibly high prices. During the Cold War the works of the abstract expressionists' represented American freedom, democracy, and capitalism in the face of communist conformity and stagnation. Today, however these painters' masterpieces of individuality are subject to a highly capitalized market for modern and contemporary art. Although many entrepreneurial business groups, institutions, and individuals have had an effect on the prices that art can achieve in the modern market, the provenance and history of a painting continues to be a steadfast intangible asset for marketing and appreciating the value of art. In this regard, the New York School of abstract expressionist painters, known at one point as "The Irascibles" have incredible worth.

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