

Art has always held a greater purpose than entertainment alone. In the hands of a government, a decorated canvas can become a symbol or a weapon. During the Cold War, it became both. On June 14, 1940, Paris fell to Germany and a consequential question arose: whose art would fill the cultural hole left by France? For the last century, Paris had been the art capital of Western culture, and the fall of this influential city to the Nazis marked the collapse of the Western cultural image, leaving the strands of modernism hanging.¹ European artists fled the continent and many of them landed in New York, bringing techniques of modern art with them. As critic Harold Rosenberg wrote in December 1940, “No one could predict which city or nation will be the center of this new face,”² because a capital of culture did not arise by genius alone, but rather with the constant interaction of international activity. Subsequently, this group of French artists in America helped start a new art form: abstract expressionism.

Looking at works by William Hayter, Andre Masson, and Jackson Pollock, no one could tell what story each painting told; they all consisted of chaotic, tangled gestures that seemed to represent the artist's emotions more than concrete images. With no central figure or message, there were only raw feelings presented on the canvas. This radical art form was unprecedented in Western art, and arose at the same time the world was searching for a new cultural haven safe from Adolf Hitler's Germany, a seemingly coincidence. Although abstract expressionist artists painted purely from personal impulse rather than political conviction during the 1950s, the United States government and the Central Intelligence Agency used their work for Cold War propaganda, utilizing the movement's emphasis on individual freedom to reclaim American cultural dominance against the collectivist Soviet art abroad.

¹ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole The Idea of Modern Art : Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 24.

² Harold Rosenberg, “On the Fall of Paris,” *Partisan Review* 7, No. 6 (December 1940), 441.

After the Allied victory in World War II in 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two dominant global powers. Without a common enemy to fight against, the ideological conflict that had existed between the two countries, since the inception of the Soviet Union in 1919, resurfaced and broke the alliance. Now on their own, the USSR expanded their sphere of influence through neighboring states along its western border. The nations of Eastern Europe fell under Soviet control and their governments were aligned to the communist ideologies of the USSR.³ The United States responded with the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan in 1947, aimed to give American military support to vulnerable European countries to “contain” communism.⁴ The Cold War, unlike any other wars in the physical sense, consisted of proxy wars, ideological battles between democracy and communism through nuclear threats and militarization.⁵ The fear of communism created an atmosphere of cultural repression, yet the Cold War in the cultural sphere has received comparatively less scholarly attention. This paper will illustrate how both countries fought to gain alliances and influence in a broken postwar world, making cultural propaganda a strong, necessary weapon. Between the USSR and the US, art entered the geopolitical world with a new purpose.

Beginning in the early 1930s, Joseph Stalin mandated socialist realism as the only acceptable art form, "aimed at convincing the viewer of the blessings of Socialism and the eternal wisdom of the communist party."⁶ Soviet realism was filled with monumental laborers with determined expressions, soldiers marching in perfect formation, and Stalin himself pictured with a divine authority(fig. 1).⁷ As Serge Fauchereau sternly documents, artists like Aleksandr

³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (Penguin Press, New York, 2005), 319.

⁴ Harry S. Truman, "Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey: The Truman Doctrine," (March 12, 1947, Harry S. Truman Library & Museum).

⁵ Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 2.

⁶ Joes Segal, *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 62.

⁷ Sotheby's, "Alexander Mikhailovich Gerasimov," accessed May 14, 2026, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/russian-pictures-2/stalin-and-voroshilov-in-the-kremlin>.

Gerasimov devoted themselves to painting the image of a unified country while artists with less talent produced “sycophantic naturalism,”⁸ works made entirely from political obedience. With a clear subject and story to tell, Socialist realism gave no room for the viewer to feel anything other than what the painting intended. Pushing ideas such as classless societies and devotion to class conflict through their art, the Soviets had no intention of keeping it within their own borders, eventually sending representatives abroad to portray a successful image of the nation.

The Soviet cultural campaign reached its peak in 1949, when the Waldorf Conference was organized by the Communist Information Bureau in New York.⁹ 800 literary and artist figures gathered to critique American foreign policy, with Soviet composer Dimitri Shostakovich cheekily claiming that a “small clique of hatemongers” was preparing for global war, while American composer Aaron Copland declared that American government policy would “lead inevitably into a third world war.”¹⁰ By critiquing American policy, Copland aligned with Soviets’ disapproval of American intervention in Europe. It seemed that the Soviets had successfully brought American artists together to amplify Soviet beliefs. Crucially, this was also the first Soviet-sponsored cultural conference to convene in a Western country. As a result, American government officials realized that the USSR was not only making propaganda for its own people but was actively campaigning in the West. For example, State Department official Raymond Murphy urgently warned that the Soviets stood a “better than even chance” of persuading ordinary people to follow their (narrative) “by constant repetition.”¹¹ Becoming alarmed by the Soviet Union’s push on cultural diplomacy, the United States Government

⁸ Serge Fauchereau, “Moscow–Paris–Havana–Mexico,” in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* ed. Jérôme Bazin, (Central European University Press, 2016), 31.

⁹ Center for the Study of Intelligence, Origins of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1949-1950 Vol 38, No.5

<https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/archives/vol-38-no-5/origins-of-the-congress-for-cultural-freedom-1949-1950/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

“recognized that many left-wing intellectuals in Europe disconcertingly associated the United States not so much with freedom and democracy as with imperialism, racism, base materialism and a serious lack of culture.”¹² The American government realized they needed to counter this narrative and abstract expressionism opened up a way.

While the Second World War had left Europe devastated, America was beginning its rise of power.¹³ As Parisian artists fled into New York, they were met with a culture shift that paved the way for new artistic creation. Stanley William Hayter, an English modern artist mentor who established his "Atelier 17" in Paris in 1927, fled from Paris and opened a studio at the New School for Social Research.¹⁴ Famous for his talent and mentorship in modern art, he laid down the groundwork for the innovative avant-garde in America. On a walk in the Central Park Zoo, Hayter's student Andre Masson, creatively noted how “the caymans [to his left] made a noise which no other language could express and [to his right,] giraffes danced to this noise...Pure emotion, signifying nothing, relating to nothing, violent – American.”¹⁵ He reflected on how these experiences had a psychological effect on his painting and that “Pictures such as *Printemps Indien* and *Lens Gens de Mais* could never have been painted in Europe.”¹⁶ Through implementing traditional modernist techniques with newfound bursts of emotion, he was one of the pioneers of abstract expressionism. The subjects in his works became indistinguishable from each other, sometimes merging with the background itself, losing their purpose as central figures. More notably, his first American work, *Rape or Rapt* (fig. 2),¹⁷ as described by historian Charles

¹² Segal, *Art and Politics*, 73.

¹³ Evelyn Toynnton, *Jackson Pollock*. (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2012), 1.

¹⁴ Charles Darwent, *Surrealists in New York: Atelier 17 and the Birth of Abstract Expressionism* (Thames and Hudson, 2023), 38.

¹⁵ Ibid, 65.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mutual Art, “André Masson,” accessed May 14, 2026, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Rapt/2A0824C2D7132841>.

Darwent, had “...no top, bottom, vertical or horizontal and, figure and ground are conflated.”¹⁸

Art no longer needed a linear or rational storyline. Rather, the new environment of New York pushed the limits of what art could be within the artists’ mind, encouraging them to experiment and embrace the unpredictable.

Abstract Expressionist artists were motivated by emotional instinct, rather than political beliefs, but the movement’s vague style made it hard not to interpret. Jackson Pollock, another one of Hayter’s students in New York, described his process as one of total immersion. Working with liquid paint, he explained that he felt “closer to the painting,” able to “walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting.” Known as Jack the Dripper for his unusual painting technique of hanging a bucket of liquid paint over a canvas and “dripping” the paint out through a small opening in the bucket(fig. 3),¹⁹ his works were as pure as pure could get. Having the freedom of being anywhere he wanted while working gave him a deeper immersion into the painting itself. He emphasized that “when I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I’m doing,” noting that only after reflecting on his art did he understand what he created.²⁰ This shows how Pollock was concerned only with the natural process of painting and not what message it sent. When asked about his unconventional technique in an interview with William Wright, Pollock explained how he was “able to be more free and to have greater freedom and move about the canvas with greater ease.”²¹ His answer was framed around the idea of having individual liberty in the creative process of painting and this individualism in his art was unprecedented in other styles. From his statements, it is clear that Pollock did not care at all

¹⁸ Darwent, *Surrealists*, 67.

¹⁹ Buffalo AKG Art Museum, “Jackson Pollock,” accessed May 14, 2026, <https://buffaloakg.org/artworks/k19567-convergence>.

²⁰ Jackson Pollock, “Personal Statement,” in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, ed. David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 357.

²¹ William Wright and Jackson Pollock, “Interview with Pollock,” in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 360.

about the preciseness of his strokes or the overall order of his paintings; he was loose and in a positive sense, careless. This spontaneous approach to art was unprecedented and gave Pollock a unique role as a painter.

This role was held by many in the movement as well. Rosenberg deliberately noted that these painters “were not really seeking to arrive at art, but rather to discover their own identities through the unmediated and more or less controlled acts by which they put paint to canvas.”²² As chaotic and random they may seem, these paintings left a deep impression on many viewers. Aside from the critics, reporter Frederick Laws noted in the *Manchester Guardian* how during his visit, “[he has] never seen so many young gallery-goers sitting down in a silent daze.”²³ Much to his shock, the public was so absorbed in the paintings that not a single sound was heard. This suggests a majority of the viewers were deeply impacted by Pollock’s paintings. Interestingly, the chaotic nature of Pollock’s pieces worked in harmony and gave the viewer a sense of calmness. Even the president of the Museum of Modern Art in New York at the time, Alfred Barr Jr., openly noted that “[these painters’] following increases, largely because the paintings themselves have a sensuous, emotional, aesthetic and at times almost mystical power which works and can be overwhelming.”²⁴ The effect of these paintings on the viewer was no doubt strong. They moved people, transcending beyond language and nationality, creating an emotional bond between the viewer and the art.

It was this shared visceral power that turned this art movement into a political weapon. Historian Max Kozloff keenly observed that “the switching of the art capital of the West from Paris to New York coincided with the recognition that the United States was the most powerful

²² Shapiro, *Abstract Expressionism*, 383.

²³ Frederick Laws, “Manchester Guardian,” (Manchester, February 27th, 1959), in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 107.

²⁴ Alfred H Barr, “The New American Painting,” in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 98.

country in the world,” and that a salient characteristic of both abstract expressionism and American society was “freedom itself.”²⁵ American artists, aware that they were free to paint as they pleased in contrast to Russian counterparts who were forced to paint in a government-controlled style, could be viewed as working with “a grave sense of mission”.²⁶ It seemed that the international recognition of Abstract Expressionism gave the United States a power of cultural independence.

In the late 1950s, abstract expressionism was being recognized internationally as something uniquely American, marking a significant shift in the United States's global image. Italian critic Marco Valsecchi, while writing for the *Il Giorno* in 1958 wrote that even though “American art derives from European art and is still sensitive to his cultural echoes,” acknowledging familiar parts of the movement, “...its character is so well defined, the images are so abundant and so permeated by the fantasy and motivations of American ideals, that one must admit it has by now the look of independence, decisively recognizable.”²⁷ Describing the idea of freedom, Valsecchi notes how America has matured from Europe culturally.

Yet what seemed like a natural growth of American culture was really the product of a secret government campaign. Abstract expressionism was useful to the American government because it did not appear to be useful in the political sense. Noting how that would be an advantage, Historian Joes Segal writes, “The State Department and the USIA used modern art exactly because of its alleged non-political character to make a political statement. This art form was presented in Western Europe as the very symbol of American freedom and democracy.”²⁸ It was the ability to overcome rational thought that attracted abstract expressionism to American

²⁵ Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation*, (Hudson Hills, 2009), 173.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Marco Valsecchi, “Il Giorno,” (Milan June 10 1958) in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 102.

²⁸ Segal, *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda*, 77.

strategists. Whereas European viewers may have ignored an explicitly pro-American exhibition, in front of a Pollock canvas, they would have felt the subtle emotions of genuine freedom and expression without knowing the exhibition had any political implications at all. In 1958, a reporter in the Netherlands expanded on the idea of chaos, describing Pollock's work as "a map in which areas of chaos are charted." The combination of "angry, confused lines [were] gradually acquiring order with the latter eloquently expressed by color." And in this self-organizing mess, "the tension contain[ed] an element of relaxation."²⁹ In comparison to a political speech that could be argued with, the sensation felt in front of a Pollock work was undeniable.

Around the same time across the globe, Mercedes Molleda, a reporter from Barcelona, vividly described how upon entering the exhibition, "a strange sensation like that of magnetic tension surrounds you, as though the expression concentrated in the canvases would spring from them."³⁰ Similar to Rosenberg's statement from earlier, Molleda addresses the vitality of the colorfully whipped strokes by emphasizing the feeling of eustress she felt from observing. With support from the USIA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA) organized two traveling exhibitions that were dedicated to Abstract Expressionism, one of them a solo exhibition of Pollock's work.³¹ It is crucial to note that he had already died in 1955, due to a car accident, meaning that Pollock had no voice in this decision of showing his art abroad and would not know how his art would be used in the political context. Porter McCray, reporting on the 1958 MOMA traveling exhibition, enthusiastically confirmed the uniqueness of this movement. She recognized that a "new unique and indigenous kind of painting has appeared, one whose influence can be clearly seen in the works of artists in Europe as well as in many other parts of

²⁹ Unsigned, "Nieuw Rotterdamse Courant," Rotterdam, (November 15, 1958) in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 104.

³⁰ Mercedes Molleda, "Revista," (Barcelona, August 30, 1958), in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 103.

³¹ *Ibid*, 75.

the world.”³² Now, abstract expressionism was gaining global recognition culturally as American art. This style was hard to miss in works by artists inspired by such exhibitions. In response to this notion, painters were being placed under similar titles as well. For example, Pollock, as pictured by artist Budd Hopkins, “...was the great American Painter.”³³ In his dreams, Pollock appeared as a cowboy who drank everyday and talked hard; he was *The American*. Interestingly enough, although he was sold as the ultimate symbol of American freedom abroad, he had actually attended a Communist workshop by Mexican muralist Alfaro Siqueiros a decade earlier. It didn’t matter where each artist stood on the political spectrum as long as their work could be interpreted as free and democratic.

To ensure this image of freedom in the movement stuck, a government agency had secretly funded these exhibitions. If they openly funded cultural programs, that would have countered the message that American artistic and intellectual life was not controlled, in contrast to the Soviets. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), founded in 1947 and authorized vaguely to carry out “such other functions and duties” as national security required, identified culture as one of its most powerful weapons.³⁴ Unable to work with Congress (due to several Congressmen declaring that “abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm,”³⁵) cultural strategists turned to the agency for support. Established in 1950 in West Berlin by the CIA, The Congress for Cultural Freedom was one of the “more daring and effective Cold War covert operations.”³⁶ The Congress published literary journals, hosted international conferences, and the core reason of its actions, worked to show Western intellectuals that communism was “a deadly

³² Porter McCray, in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 101.

³³ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The CIA and The World of Arts and Letters: The Cultural Cold War* (New Press, New York, 2000), 254.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 252.

³⁶ Center for the Study of Intelligence.

foe of art and thought.”³⁷ Over the next seventeen years, the CIA would funnel tens of millions of dollars through the Congress into private foundations and philanthropic organizations to make it seem as if the government's money was the contributions of private citizens.³⁸

Not surprisingly, MOMA's trustees maintained close ties to CIA operatives and in 1956, William Armistead Moale Burden, a descendant of the Vanderbilts, became the museum's president. Trustee Roberta Culp Hobby was one of several people who allowed their family foundations to be funded through the CIA, maintaining the image that the money supporting abstract expressionism's international tour came from private philanthropy, rather than our own government.³⁹ This was the government's strategy for cultural dominance. By appearing as if private citizens rather than the government were supporting American art abroad, the CIA ensured that the message of freedom wasn't contradicted by federal facilitation. Although it slipped in 1967 that the Congress was sponsored by the CIA, it "ultimately helped to negate Communism's appeal to artists and intellectuals, undermining at the same time the Communist pose of moral superiority.”⁴⁰

With global cultural and political influence, abstract expressionism stands as one of the most complex art movements to-date. The aftermath of World War II, a devastating conflict that shattered the cultural foundations of the modern world, brought together European artists in New York. What began as several struggling artists splashing paint onto a canvas in a tight studio then became an object utilized for global diplomacy. The artists painted with pure instinct, indifferent to politics, concerned only with the freedom in moving around a canvas and letting the paint decide its own path. They had no intention of creating a message for politics, but rather a

³⁷ Center for the Study of Intelligence.

³⁸ Saunders, *The CIA and The World of Arts and Letters*, 2.

³⁹ Ibid, 129.

⁴⁰ Saunders, *The CIA and The World of Arts and Letters*, 130.

statement for themselves spiritually. Yet, the CIA covertly sold it to the world under the guise of philanthropy. Recognizing that the raw energy from these canvases perfectly encompassed the idea of American freedom, the agency funneled millions of dollars through private foundations to ensure that spectators abroad would be moved against the restricting narratives of the Soviet Union. However, the avant garde art movement's political power would not last. As the Soviet Union began destalinization, more Soviet artists were able to freely express themselves in their painting, blurring the contrast between free American expression and controlled Soviet realism.⁴¹ In America, the rise of pop art dissolved the image of pure, instinctual, and spontaneous individual freedom of the art movement and replaced it with commercial irony.⁴² Even so, we cannot deny the influence abstract expressionism had during the hard times of the Cold War. It was a genuine expression of emotion that the government recognized and spread into the world. Ultimately, due to its encouragement of free artistic expression and its political repurposing by the CIA, abstract expressionism, one of America's strongest messages for liberty abroad, was created.

⁴¹ Ibid, 78.

⁴² Ibid, 79.

Appendix

Figure 1



Figure 1: *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938) by Aleksandr Gerasimov⁴³

⁴³ Sotheby's, "Alexander Mikhailovich Gerasimov," accessed May 14, 2026, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/russian-pictures-2/stalin-and-voroshilov-in-the-kremlin>.

Figure 2

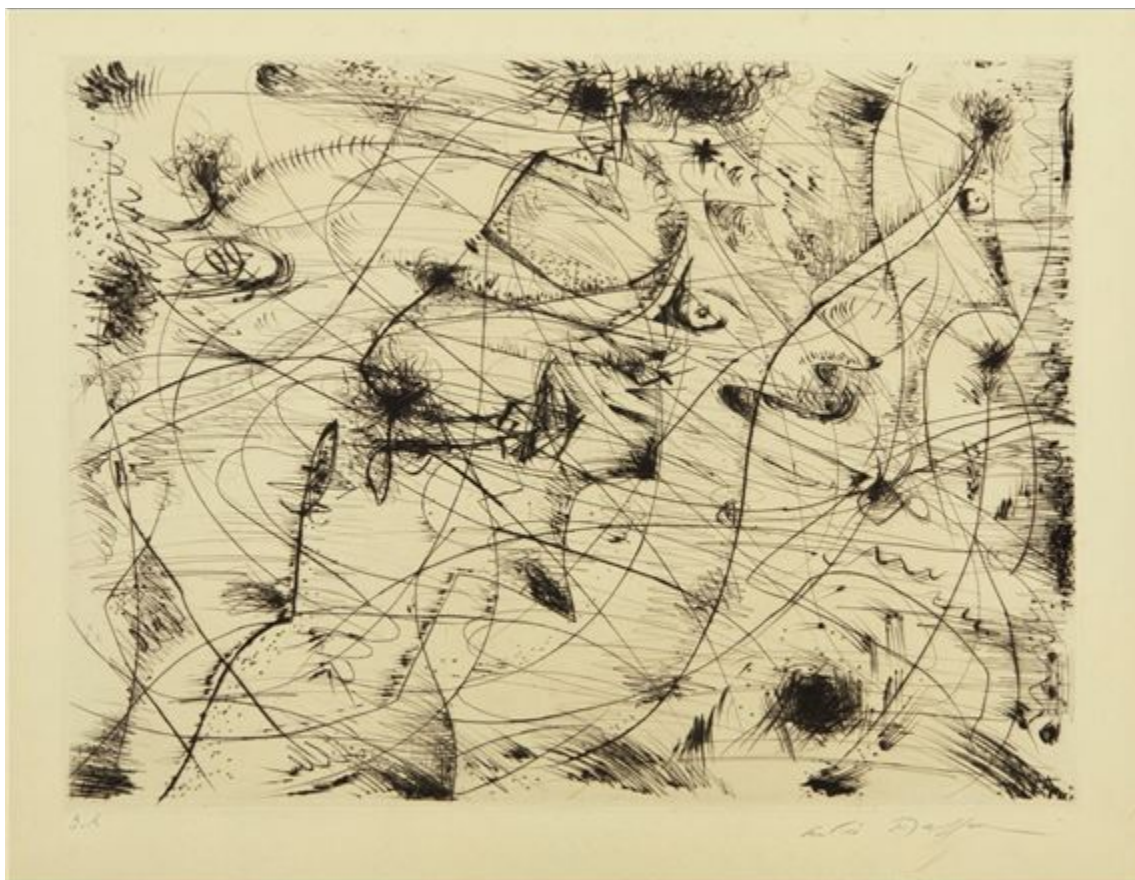


Figure 2: *Rapt* (1941) by André Masson⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Mutual Art, "André Masson," accessed May 14, 2026, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Rapt/2A0824C2D7132841>.

Figure 3

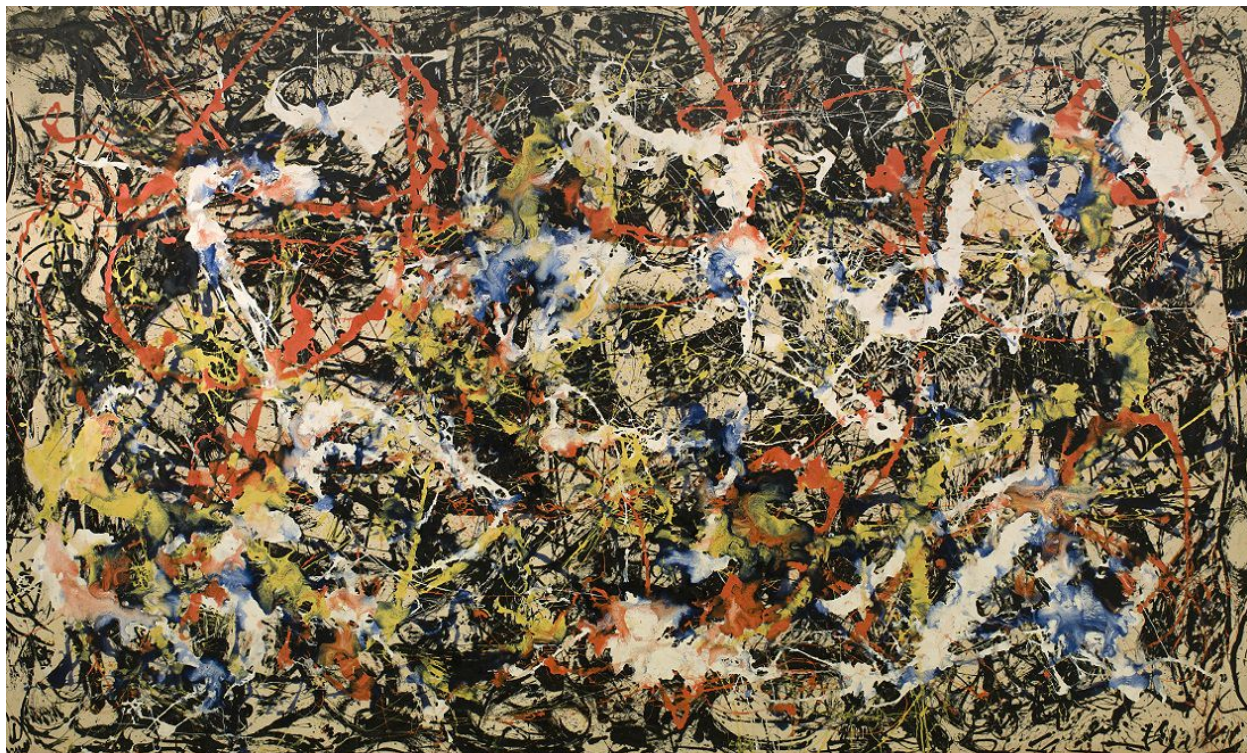


Figure 3: *Convergence* (1952) by Jackson Pollock⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Buffalo AKG Art Museum, "Jackson Pollock," accessed May 14, 2026, <https://buffaloakg.org/artworks/k19567-convergence>.

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