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Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience

Stephen Polcari

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A major revisionist study of the art and artists who participated in what is now regarded as the first American style of international consequence. Based on examinations of new archival material and many unknown paintings, this study relates Abstract Expressionism to the actual historical circumstances, as well as intellectual and cultural milieu, of America from the 1930s to the 1950s. Stephen Polcari reverses the traditional perspective of Abstract Expressionism as an abstract art inspired by issues of the postwar period. Examining its roots in the art of the 1930s and 1940s, he contends that Abstract Expressionism emerges as a public art that actively engaged in the social, economic, and political crises of the 1930s, and, more significantly, the experience of World War II. Polcari provides an account of the contemporary artistic, intellectual and cultural history to establish a macro-history of human beings under the pressures of war, fear, torment, and hope. Within this context, he convincingly presents Abstract Expressionism as a mode of modern, metaphysical 'history' painting that uses the forms and devices of modern art to come to terms with the brutality of contemporary history.

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