

# Book shows how changes in political climate after World War II influenced today's art, how radical art turned into the mainstream

By Ken DiMaggio  
Staff Reporter

"Well - gee Wally - if they call this scribbling and stuff art - then why can't I do it?"  
"I don't know, Beave. I guess it's because you're just a dumb little kid."  
"Yeah Wally, I guess you're right."

## Book Review

For the masses, art in this society seldom goes beyond a "Leave It to Beaver" understanding.

For the critics and intellectuals who only see art as an isolated apolitical object, they understand it even less than Theodore Cleaver.

In his book, "How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art," Serge Guilbaut takes the first American school of painting to achieve international prominence - Abstract Expressionism - and documents how the violent drippings and impasto of Jackson Pollack and Willem De Kooning became icons in the Cold War political warfare of the 1950s.

In developing his thesis, Guilbaut reveals some interesting things about the American character.

By World War II, the middle class began to cultivate an interest in art. You could buy an original Rembrandt or Rubens in Macy's New York department store. Just like a car, sofa, or radio, you could buy an original master for only one-third of the price down, and pay the rest on credit, which of course included a service charge.

Not to be outdone, Gimbels sold their own Rembrandts, and that was how the "war of the Rembrandts" was begun. Gimbels offered Rembrandt's "Portrait of an Old Man," for \$6,894, while Macy's sold the same artist's "Portrait of a Child" for what could only be a true department store price of \$9,999.

But Guilbaut shows a darker side to

post-war American life.

Faced with the task of countering Soviet influence after World War II, the United States had to impress Europe with its superior culture. The Hollywood movie was one weapon in America's cultural arsenal. But because France had a pre-war quota still limiting the number of American films into its country, it was now forced into dropping this quota in order to receive American aid. The Blume-Byrnes accord, signed in 1946, forced the French to limit the number of their own films being shown in order to show more American films.

High culture was something else. Paris was still considered the art capital of the world. Paris was also influenced by and respectful of the Communists, who played a heroic role in the resistance.

Jackson Pollack was the perfect artist to embody the new American art that would steal the crown from Paris and transplant it to New York. Pollack was both abstract and emotional. As an artist who shunned pictorial image there was little danger of political icon or symbol sneaking into his work. And the wild and violent emotions displayed by him in his frenzied drippings and impasto, focused on the individual caught in a hysterical, shaman-like dance. The social panorama that was displayed in earlier American canvases by Benton and Soyer was traded for the myth and ritual of Pollack, De Kooning and Rothko. Painting became a celebration of the individual in the uncertain Atomic age. And this philosophy fit with the aims of post-war U.S. foreign policy. And the success of Pollack in 1948 was, as Guilbaut writes, perfectly timed when America began to cultivate an image of the individual free from a totalitarian society.

"Without really wanting to, the avant-garde lined up behind the ideology that had only recently become dominant. What the avant-garde did not realize was that the post-war world had caught up with their radical war-



time political stance. . . By 1948 their once disturbing vision could be integrated into the new anti-Communist rhetoric. . ."

Today it is hard to find evidence of an American art that is socially conscious and committed. There are exceptions, such as feminist art, but such movements rarely enter the mainstream unless they have been watered down. An establishment press could accept an angry Negro writer by the name of Lee Roi Jones, but not the cool Marxist writer he became as Amiri Baraka. Success in the American art world is, as Guilbaut points out, based on the depoliticalization of the artist, not the political awareness of the artist.

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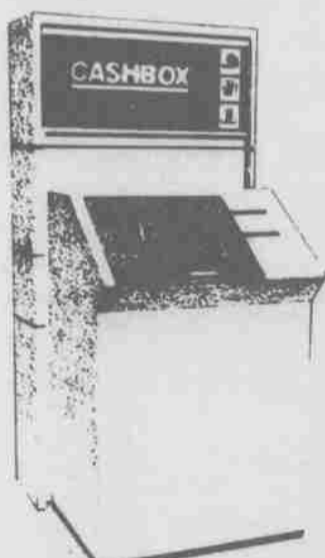
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