

Clyfford Still: Triumph and Tragedy in the Life of an Artist

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Art is a method of creation, and it is a form of expression as well as a way to free oneself from the agony of life. Artists commonly express emotions, as well as inspire themselves with the environment around them, to create the pieces that they are known for. There is much triumph and tragedy in the life of an artist, and often, the tragedy is involved in their legacy. Such was the fate for Abstract Expressionist, Clyfford Still, who through his interviews and his paintings, had expressed much triumph and tragedy in his life. He is known for his unique signature style in abstract expression. It consists of rough shapes with a natural tone expressed alongside the appropriate colors. Through escaping the bandwagon of modern art in the late 1940s, Still became a legendary figure in history, inspiring and creating a new world for those abstract expressionist artists. In 1961, Still having become very critical of the art world, went into isolation, resulting in a pause of his triumphant reputation. His paintings represent the good and the bad of his life, such as the conditions on the farm. After five years of alienating himself, he continued to become an inspiring artist in Abstract Expressionism, whose paintings have become famous and are displayed in many places such as the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, Colorado.

Still grew up on a farm in Washington, and from there pursued a career outside of the farming field. He went to school in New York, but left, only to attend school at Spokane University in Washington, graduating in 1933. That fall he began teaching at what is now Washington State University, obtaining a Fine Arts Degree in the process. He was married and had two daughters at the time, but then went through a divorce and subsequently married one of his ex-students from Washington State University. His way of painting was different from many others, as he used rough shapes and flashes of color, to stand out. He also portrayed

unusual qualities in man and objects, including one where the men have very long and monstrous like arms, and another where vehicles are stuck in hay. Many would say he was at war with the art society causing him to go into isolation. He insisted art should be enjoyed in a natural environment such as at home and not on display. He did, however, write a will stating that his paintings are allowed to be displayed and sold, as long as specific agreements in his will are adhered to. His second wife respected her husband's wishes, even after death, and denied hundreds of businesses the right to display his paintings.

Still became very successful in his work, becoming one of the most inspiring artists in abstract expressionism. The connection he had to art and other artists shared “a sense of apocalyptic extremes” with other Abstract Expressionists (Anfam, Clyfford Still Art). The way he did this was by showing how he pitted himself against radicalism, including his own. He commonly centers his paintings around the past, and how he grew up, which is evident through paintings such as PH-77, showing how he worked on the farm being “bloody to the elbows shucking wheat,” (Anfam). His father had not made life easy, abusing Still to get things through his head. He grew up in very harsh conditions, with a low paying job, and desperately wanted to stray away from his family tradition of working on the farms. He succeeded in turning a destructive lifestyle into a representation of his life, through art. One of his pieces, PH-80, portrays starving people, something that farmers such as Still, had been subjected to in times of harsh conditions of soil and winter storms (Still). The painting represents Still truly embracing the horror of the farms, and the suffering he went through. The suffering was a large result of World War II, which had caused an incline in depression, especially economically. The war would cause labor shortages on the farms, and as food production was forced to increase with the

growing number of starving citizens, the farmers were subjected to more work than their bodies could handle. An escape was needed, and Still's escape was art. He also wanted art to be "his instrument" (Albright) and in a way it was, because he could do so much with just a brush and paint. He was the conductor in the world of art and colors. To him, "art is a force of life, not death" meaning that it is supposed to create life, create images of what the painter is trying to portray, even when it is an abstract painting. The purpose is to have the audience wonder and question, but also to understand and nod. To him, art was a well-grouped family, a family that worked in harmony which shouldn't be displayed on a wall just for the public entertainment. Even if the painting showed a lot of death and sadness, it is supposed to present a paradox of living death, one that the audience can feel in their soul.

As Still's stories were told on the canvas of the world, artists would admire and learn more about who he was, even getting together with many well-known artists. Mark Rothko was "influenced" by Still's painting as well as his thinkings (Kuh). Still encouraged Rothko to find his way in the art world, he connected with Rothko in more than just an idol to an admirer. He connected to people such as William Blake, who believed the truth would be "gained by others" and who went "against the grain" of what was the norm of establishments and the social stream (Anfam). But despite his influence in the art community, critics attempted to downplay his work. Museum directors found him strange that he refused to sell them many of his art because he'd "rather have them burned or destroyed" than have them put up where the public could see it. He saw museums as an outrage to the true artist's masterpiece, and that seemed to give him some trouble financially (Sanders). Still valued his art, and would risk being attacked

“verbally” to protect his art from the conformity of society. “He was at war with the art world,” (Townsend) and he went into isolation for five years, refusing to show anyone his art, even his friends.

Still had begun his life on the farms in hardships, only to pursue the career of an artist, and after a while, would face more hardships trying to be true to himself, allowing the tragedy and triumph of his artistic life to blossom into view. Still passed away in 1980, at the age of 75, with a will predicting his art would one day receive the praise it should. After he died, his work was sold to some museums by his wife, where communities would witness his work as “a profound and moving experience” (Bower). Previously, he had graciously donated 28 of his paintings to the Denver Art Museum, because he saw it as an opportunity to tell the world the truth about what is happening, and what he had experienced on the farms from World War II, as well as because of the promise that his artwork would be preserved and appreciated, instead of overlooked as another piece of art. But when he died, his wife had refused hundreds of offers to have it on display, until 30 years after his death, Still’s premonition described in the will, and his ultimate wish, had come true. It was declared in 2004 by the City of Denver, Colorado, that Still’s wife had chosen them to receive the Clyfford Still Estate.

Clyfford Still is well known for his influence in the Abstract Expressionist movement and his actions towards the corrupt media and businesspeople. He showed a lot of courage, as well as feeling and emotion in his art, being courageous enough to relive his past life and experiences through art. He endured a lot of misery, and after leaving the path of his family, he experienced hatred from the business people. Today, abstract expressionism has kept its familiarity to the movements concepts and ideas. It has provided an equal representation of emotions, and

imagination. The vibrant colors and the textured images, combined with the vigorous and expressive brushstrokes, represent expression in its exciting environment. The artists that have embraced this art, and those that are currently embracing it, also welcome the term “action painting,” which provides context for the spontaneous and dramatic strokes from the brush that have been employed to the canvas. Abstract expression was a movement that had inspired many to be creative, wild, and imaginative, after the effects of World War II. Clyfford Still was a very dedicated artist, dedicated to present his work as more than a painting, but a story. His whole life was full of tragedy and triumph, and his inspiration came from what he experienced and from what he observed. Still was telling a story to people; the triumph and tragedy in his life became one that will be marked on the canvas, forever.

Appendix A:



(No description of the art as been found)

Still, Clyfford. PH-80, 1935. Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 59 7/8 inches (122.6 x 152.1 cm). Clyfford

Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Appendix B:



(No description of the art as been found)

Clyfford Still, PH-77, 1936. Oil on canvas, 43 3/4 x 56 5/8 inches (111.3 x 143.8 cm). Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Work Cited

Primary Source

Albright, Thomas. 'Art Is a Force for Life, Not Death': Clyfford Still on the Power of Painting, in 1976 -." Edited by Thomas Albright, *ARTnews*, ARTnews, 4 Dec. 2015, www.artnews.com/2015/12/05/art-is-a-force-for-life-not-death-clyfford-still-on-the-power-of-painting-in-1976/.

Annotation: The article explains some of the legends that have been created around Clyfford Still, as well as his view on art and his own paintings. Clyfford Still had been interviewed, and in that interview he talks about how he does not put titles on his pieces and why, how he had to reject those who wanted to have his paintings, but generously gifted 28 of his paintings to a Museum in San Francisco. This is relevant to my thesis as it explains how Clyfford Still felt about his art, and how others felt about him. It explains how he felt about his paintings, making his gift of 28 of them special.

Anfam, David. *Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead*. Yale University Press, 2002.

This is a writing by David Anfam, and it gives some direct quotes from Clyfford Still, explaining what art, his paintings mean to him, and what he planned to accomplish with them. One of the quotes talks about how he finds his own revelation through the life and death of the art he created. He didn't wish to waste his time with painting, he wanted to surpass it instead.

Harberg, Bailey. "Happy Father's Day." *Still Life*, Clyfford Still Museum's Website, 15 June, 2012.

This article elaborates on Still's relationship with the painting PH-77, 1936, in where he explains how when he worked on the farm included being 'bloody at the elbows, shucking wheat.' He was anxious to escape the family tradition of working on the farm, where this passion resulted in him being an artist. How tragedy turned to triumph, and how hard an artist's life was before the art came to him, will be how I will use this source.

Sanders, Jaquin. "One Man Against the World." San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, 8 Feb. 1970.

This is a newspaper article written during the time that Clyfford Still was 65, with direct quotes from Still placed in the paper. It described how Still felt about his art, and about the people associated with art such as Museum Directors and art lovers. I will be using this to dig deeper into who Clyfford Still was, and what he was perceived as by others, and how he perceived others.

Kuth, Katherine. *Clyfford Still: Art's Angry Man*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006.

This is a book written by a woman who knew Still when he was still alive. I'm using this as a source because she had been friends with Still, and knew one of his closest friends, Mark Rothko, who was a famous artist himself. This book also explains how the author and Mark saw Still, showing the tragedy in friendship that had occurred between Rothko and Still.

Still, Clyfford. PH-80, 1935. Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 59 7/8 inches (122.6 x 152.1 cm). Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

This is a painting called PH-80, and to myself it represents people who seem to be farm workers, due to the choice of fashion such as overalls and what seems to be a tractor on the side. Due to Still's lack of titles, the meaning of the paintings is purely up to the viewer. What I see, are starving people, seen by what looks like a bony body, with a tone of depression surrounding the image. It shows the expressionist personality in the paintings and in Still himself. This will also be visualized, Appendix A.

Still, Clyfford. PH-77, 1936. Oil on canvas, 43 3/4 x 56 5/8 inches (111.3 x 143.8 cm). Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

This is going to be used as a visual representation of another one of Still's art works. It will be a reference to the "Happy Father's Day" article, previously cited above. It is labeled as Appendix B.

Secondary Sources

Albright, Thomas. "Clyfford Still: 'Seeking the Vastness and Depth of a Beethoven Sonata or a Sophocles Drama.'" *Artnews* 79 (September 1980): 159-60.

In this article, Thomas Albright explains how he believes that Still was inspired by artists who create art similar to himself. He explains that there were artists such as Joseph Turner, who freed themselves from the norms of time, to be able to have a transcendent freedom. This will be used to show how Still affected other artists.

Anfam, David. "Clyfford Still's Artistic Influences: William Blake – Clyfford Still Museum." *Art Collection – Clyfford Still Museum*, Clyfford Still Museum, 17 Jan. 2018, clyffordstillmuseum.org/clyfford-stills-artistic-influences-william-blake/.

In this article, David Anfam explains how although Clyfford Still had a personality in which his art is inspired by objects and animals, not necessarily people, Still did in fact look up to William Blake. William Blake went against the norms of his society, and what he saw as the rules and establishments of his culture. Both Still and Blake thought that the truth should be believed on the inside, and not absorbed from others as their own, from the outside. That people should understand the truth, and create their own opinions without the manipulation of others, which was what Still's artistic vision was based off of.

Anfam, David. "Still's Journey." *Clyfford Still: The Artists Museum*, by Dean Sobel and David Anfam with Forwards by Sandra Still Campbell and Diane Still Knox (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 67.

In this excerpt of David Anfam writing, he talks about how Clyfford Still created many paintings of the natural events such as hard snowfall and hard rain. He had been able to become an

expressionist artist by expressing how he felt, what he saw, and painting his experiences from there. This gave Still an advantage at creating paintings that felt real, because they were real, showing how much of an influence of expressionism he had in art, in history.

Bower, Amanda. "Denver's Coup: An Art Museum Devoted to America's Forgotten Master."

Time, Time Inc., 3 Nov. 2011,

content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2098661,00.html.

This is an article written in 2016, about how the Denver Art Museum received paintings created by Clyfford Still. It is being used to show the opinions of other people on Still, and how Denver received the paintings, as Still was not very connected with Still when it came to spending time there. It will also give information on what Still had presumably thought about Museums, explaining why he rarely gave his paintings to them.

Townsend, J. Benjamin. Gallery Notes, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Vol. 24 summer 1961 pp.

9-14.

This comes from an interviewer who had spoken to Clyfford Still himself. The interviewer, Benjamin Townsend, paraphrases how Clyfford Still would rather risk being attacked verbally and mentally, then allowing people to use his art work for granted and to exploit his artwork for their own gain. This is important for my research, as it shows the personality and the attitude Still had towards his art. Unlike what others thought, Still has not become at war with the artworld, he had simply disagreed with their method of exploitation, causing a 5 year isolation from the public. The tragedy of his life is being described through information life this. The

reason why I am using this as a secondary source, is because I'm using what has been paraphrased by Benjamin Townsend aren't direct quotes, and therefore I feel that I should rather use paraphrasing as a secondary source than a first.