After World War II, the USA became the dominant power in the West, replacing Europe and proclaiming itself the defender of individual freedom and the market economy, as opposed to the Soviet Bloc. Having been through a major identity crisis in the 1930s, caused by the general acceleration of social, technological and political processes, avant-garde art rather unexpectedly began to reactivate within the parameters of the new American order. The autonomy of abstract art could be seen as an expression of the values of the free world, while its emphasis on visual basics chimed neatly with the proliferation of mass media and advertising.

The ideological driving force behind the USA’s entry into World War II in 1941 would also be a determining factor in the fact that its avant-garde art, which up to that point had been somewhat periphery to and dependent on European currents, would grow into a movement of universal ambition; one that, in only a few years, would be a real threat to take Paris’ supremacy. The awareness of an individual, socially committed voice had grown strong during the years of the New Deal through public works programs under Roosevelt’s administration and the politicisation of the art world driven by the Communist Party and the Cultural Front. At the same time, the avant-garde scene in New York had, since the late 1930s, become enriched by the presence of both European artists fleeing fascism and Mexican muralists who provided a living role model for young artists just beginning their careers.

The influence of Trotsky, who been in exile in Mexico since 1938, and Stalin’s invasion of Finland in 1939 caused a group of young artists living in New York to embrace abstraction as the only language able to contain their aspirations for complete autonomy and creative freedom, which they saw as being under attack from totalitarianism. As the critic Clement Greenberg put it, in order to be free, art had to find its own independent development through rejecting any kind of figurative reference and working within its own specific medium: colour and physical two-dimensionality in the case of painting.

Individual freedom of expression was writ large in American culture during the Cold War, spread across the Western world under the direction of the CIA. On the other hand, the presentation of a visual experience free of any material or social constraint was a marked contrast to the negativity and opaqueness so vigorously defended in Europe, and chimed strongly with the expanding dynamics of the new mass culture of advertising and Hollywood cinema. The cinema of Alfred Hitchcock is a clear example of the voyeuristic, paranoid components implicit in this approach.

The American artist tried to overcome the limitations set by the bourgeois format of easel-painting and to emphasise a totemic presence in the work that could absorb the viewer’s visual and psychological attention. This was done in two complementary ways; one way was for the artist to highlight his physical activity on the canvas through the use of powerful brushstrokes, which the critic Harold Rosenberg referred to as “action painting”, such as can be seen in the works of Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), Franz Kline (1910–1962), and the Spanish painter, residing in New York, José Guerrero (1914–1991). The other way was through the placement of huge fields of colour in basic patterns, such as the work of Mark Rothko (1903–1970). Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), Clyfford Still (1904–1980) and Morris Louis (1912–1962), who were trying to create immediate, intense communication with the viewer in purely visual terms. What unites these two methods is their exploration of the basic
principles of the experience, which was to be a driving force behind a large part of the later American avant-garde.

Despite painting’s supremacy as the arena par excellence for American abstraction, sculpture, through the work of David Smith (1906–1965), took on an unexpected role as both catalyst and connecting bridge in the critical redefinition of the art object and how it relates to the space and the viewer, which would be developed by Minimal Art and Pop Art in the following decades. In his Tanktotems, Smith moved away from the model of the drawing in space by Julio González (1876–1942), which had been his starting point, by directly incorporating industrial processes and seemingly paying scant attention to composition. For Smith, the works’ verticality has nothing to do with the classic European statue with its anthropometric references, but refers rather to the totem poles of the native American cultures, whose presence reveals that mysterious, unknowable other to which the new avant-garde art in America was trying to give form.

**Bibliography**

