

## Modern art on trial

"It isn't lifelike."

Even the most realistic work of art is just a visual illusion. Just consider what a strange thing it is to try to create the illusion of a three-dimensional scene by putting paint on a flat surface. Now that photos, film, T.V. and video can do the job so well, shouldn't painting be concerned with a different sort of reality?

"Anyone can do it."

Many people judge a work of art by the apparent technical skill of the artist. They look for features such as "correct" perspective and subtle shading, which create the illusion of three dimensions. But isn't evidence of an original mind just as important? In fact, many modern artists have felt that over-emphasizing technique can stifle the imagination.

"I can't understand it."

There is never just one interpretation of a work of art. Your own personal response is as valid as a critic's, especially if you look carefully and think about what you see. Finding out about the artist and the context in which the work was produced can also help you to get more out of it.

## ● Jackson Pollock's Yellow Islands

This painting is typical of the kind of art that is sharply criticized. It isn't remotely realistic, yet it has a number of striking characteristics:

1. The rhythmic pattern across the picture surface can conjure up different emotions in the viewer, just as music evokes different moods in the listener\*.
2. The boldness and density of the marks on the canvas show the energy with which the artist has painted it.
3. Unlike most traditional works of art, it doesn't pretend to be anything other than a painting.



**Jackson Pollock: Yellow Islands.** 1952. 143.5 x 185.4cm (56in x 6ft 1in). Tate Gallery, London, England

4. Some people think it inspires the viewer to look beyond the world of recognizable objects, to a more spiritual or imaginative plane.

### How he did it

Pollock was one of the first Action painters (see page 52). Instead of painting at an easel, he laid his canvas on the floor, then poured and dripped paint on to it. For this painting, he then stood the canvas upright, added more black paint, and let it run down the picture.

**Jackson Pollock at work on an action painting.**



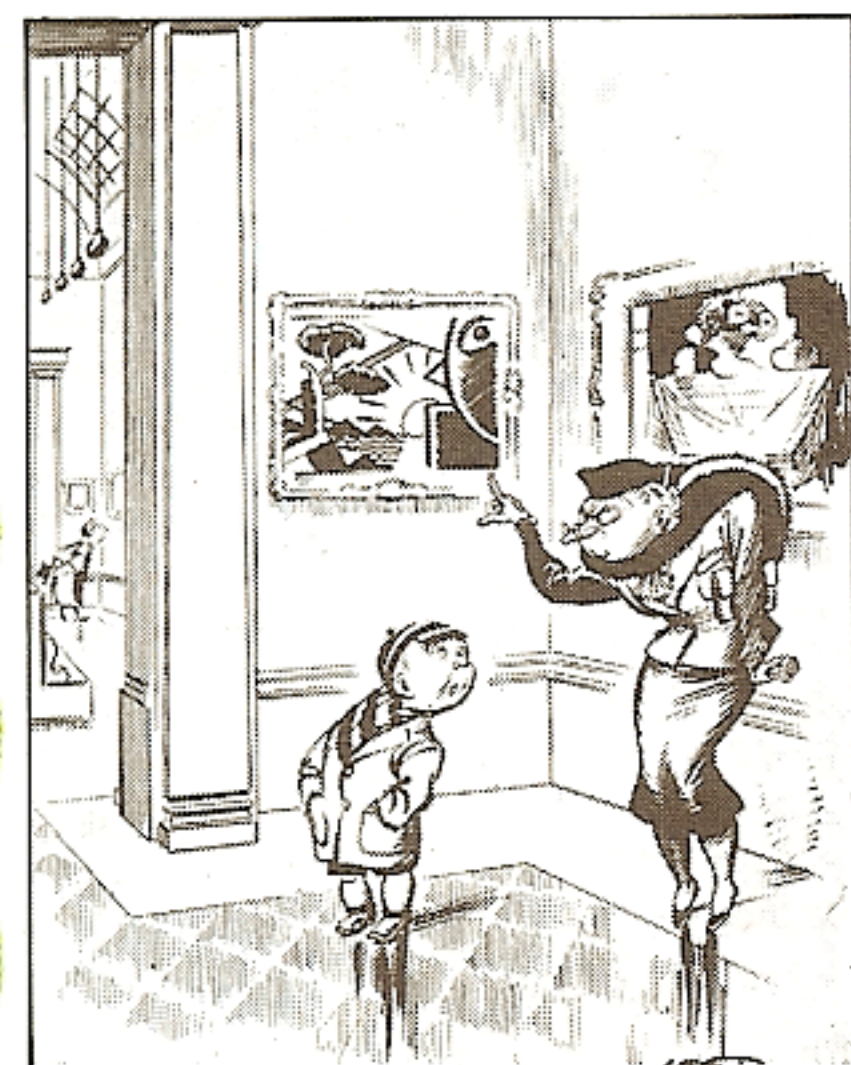
**His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction.**

New Yorker, 26 Dec. 1953 (Peter Arno c1953).

## ● The childish streak

When people say of a work of art "A five-year-old could do it", they usually mean it as criticism. Yet, the artist might well be pleased. Many have admired the spontaneity and intensity of art done by children,

**London Laughs: Modern Rooms, Tate Gallery, "Willy! Did you do that?"**



Evening News, Associated Newspapers Group Ltd. c1936 (Lee)

the insane, or people in primitive societies (such as parts of Africa or medieval Europe). A number have tried to emulate such qualities in their work. One of the best-known modern artists, Henri Matisse, said: "We must see all of life as if we were children."

\* Many modern artists, Gauguin (see page 30) and Kandinsky (see page 31), for example, have believed that art, like music, should communicate on an intuitive level.