

Barnett Newman

Barnett Newman was an American artist. He is seen as one of the major figures in abstract expressionism and one of the foremost of the color field painters.

Newman was born in New York City, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. He studied philosophy at the City College of New York and worked in his father's business manufacturing clothing. From the 1930s he made paintings, said to be in an expressionist style, but eventually destroyed all these works.

In the 1940s he first worked in a surrealist mode before developing his mature style. This is characterised by areas of color separated by thin vertical lines, or "zips" as Newman called them. In the first works featuring zips, the color fields are variegated, but later the colors are pure and flat. Newman himself thought that he reached his fully mature style with the Onement series (from 1948).

The zip remained a constant feature of Newman's work throughout his life. In some paintings of the 1950s, such as *The Wild*, which is eight feet tall by one and a half inches wide, the zip is all there is to the work. Newman also made a few sculptures which are essentially three-dimensional zips.

Although Newman's paintings appear to be purely abstract, and many of them were originally untitled, the names he later gave them hinted at specific subjects being addressed, often with a Jewish theme. Two paintings from the early 1950s, for example, are called *Adam and Eve* (see *Adam and Eve*), and there is also *Uriel* (1954) and *Abraham* (1949), a very dark painting, which as well as being the name of a biblical patriarch, was also the name of Newman's father, who had died in 1947.

The *Stations of the Cross* series of black and white paintings (1958-64), begun shortly after Newman had recovered from a heart attack, is usually regarded as the peak of his achievement. The series is subtitled "Lema sabachthani" - "why have you forsaken me" - words spoken by Christ on the cross. Newman saw these words as having universal significance in his own time. The series has also been seen as a memorial to the victims of the holocaust.

Newman's late works, such as the *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* series, use vibrant, pure colors, often on very large canvases - *Anna's Light* (1968), named in memory of his mother who had died in 1965, is his largest work, twenty-eight feet wide by nine feet tall. Newman also worked on shaped canvases late in life, with *Chartres* (1969), for example, being triangular, and returned to sculpture, making a small number of sleek pieces in steel. These later works are executed in acrylic paint rather than the oil paint of earlier pieces. Of his sculptures, *Broken Obelisk* is the most monumental and perhaps best-known, depicting an inverted obelisk whose point balances on the apex of a pyramid.

Newman also made a series of lithographs, the *18 Cantos* (1963-64) which, according to Newman, are meant to be evocative of music. He also made a small number of etchings.

Newman is generally classified as an abstract expressionist on account of his working in New York City in the 1950s, associating with other artists of the group and developing an abstract style which owed little or nothing to European art. However, his rejection of the expressive brushwork employed by other abstract expressionists such as Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, and his use of hard-edged areas of flat color, can be seen as a precursor to post painterly abstraction and the minimalist works of artists such as Frank Stella.

Newman was unappreciated as an artist for much of his life, being overlooked in favour of more colorful characters such as Jackson Pollock. The influential critic Clement Greenberg wrote enthusiastically about him, but it was not until the end of his life that he began to be taken really seriously. He was, however, an important influence on many younger painters.

Newman died in New York City of a heart attack in 1970.

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