

The Most Brilliant Stir-Fry: multiculturalism and tradition in American music and painting

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1. The European casserole and the American stir-fry

In 1995, the American-born travel writer, Bill Bryson, wrote *Notes from a Small Island*. It was his valediction to Great Britain; a portrait of the country in which he had resided for almost all of his adult life. As an American writing about Britain, he felt the need to provide some preliminary statement of what he took to be the American experience of life, before going on to explore what mattered to Britons, and to provide a picture of their culture from an American's perspective. He writes as follows:

To an American the whole purpose of living, the one constant confirmation of continued existence, is to cram as much sensual pleasure as possible into one's mouth more or less continuously. Gratification, instant and lavish, is a birthright.

So it is in the experience of eating that he thinks an outsider can best come to understand the American experience.

American habits of eating and drinking seem to have been central to outsiders' perceptions of American life—and its threats—in the twentieth century. When the Marshall Plan for the American-funded economic recovery of Europe, after the Second World War, required free trade throughout Europe, the celebrated French actor, director, and producer, Louis Jouvet, was among those who cried out against the abolition of protection for the French film industry from the onslaught of Hollywood blockbusters. He was reported, in *Le Monde*, as describing the effect that American films would have in France under the Marshall Plan, if there were no protectionist clause for the French film industry:

These accords jeopardize the very existence of dramatic art. The change in French taste may well be irremediable and fatal. Used to the wines of Burgundy and Bordeaux, our stomachs will now have to adjust to Coca-Cola. For a Frenchman this amounts to renouncing his citizenship.

In between the publication of *Notes From a Small Island*, in 1995, and its adaptation for television, in 1998, the British conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, wrote and presented a seven-part television series, *Leaving Home*, which first aired in 1996, and which introduced the great orchestral music of the twentieth century. The fifth episode

of the series focused on American music. Introducing the phenomenon of American art, Rattle explained,

“If European art was a very long marinated casserole, then American art is the fastest, most brilliant stir-fry.”

The remark might seem enigmatic. But the claim about the relationship between European and American art is elucidated in a comment he makes about American music:

“It’s tempting to think of American classical music as just one rugged individualist after another. In truth it’s essentially a dialogue between different cultures thrown together at great speed.”

Rattle has one American composer, Charles Ives, firmly in his mind when he makes these remarks, although he believes that the dialogue between different cultures, which is a hallmark of Ives’s music, is also to be found in the music of the American composers who follow him. So Rattle’s remark about the casserole and the stir-fry might be understood as a claim about American art in general, or a claim about one art form in particular—music—or a claim about a specific artist/musician—Charles Ives—or a claim about a particular work by him.

I propose to consider Rattle’s claim about American art as the fastest, most brilliant stir-fry, first, as it applies to the music of Charles Ives; and, secondly, as it might apply to the paintings of the abstract expressionists, before finally assessing the claim.

2. American art as *American* achievement and *artistic* achievement

What makes an American tennis player a great tennis player? What makes him or her a great American? Need there be any connexion between Pete Sampras’s status as an American and as a tennis player?

I well remember a friend who is learned both in cultural and sporting matters once rhapsodising about watching Roger Federer playing tennis. Apparently, Federer’s technique on the court is not only effective in winning games, sets, and matches, but is also particularly graceful. I am told that, although none of the current crop of American tennis players is as aesthetically pleasing to behold as the great Swiss player, the beautiful serve, forehand, and backhand of Sampras meant that, in his day, he was as graceful to behold as Federer is today.

There is no doubt that Sampras was a great tennis player. It seems that he was also a graceful tennis player. And he was certainly an American tennis player. We might agree that a particular tennis player is great, and that he is graceful, but that his being graceful is merely incidental to his achievement as a tennis player: his being graceful does not contribute to his achievement as a tennis player. The same might be said of his nationality: it is merely incidental to his achievement as a tennis player; his nationality doesn’t contribute to his achievement as a tennis player. So a great tennis player might be American and/or graceful. But being American is just as incidental to being a great tennis player as being graceful is.

The situation is a bit more complicated when we consider a great American artist. We can ask what makes him or her a great American, or what makes him or her a great artist. But we can also ask whether there is any connexion between

Charles Ives or Mark Rothko's status as an American and as an artist. It seems that being American might have a significance for one's achievement as an artist that it does not have for one's achievement as a tennis player.

This should not surprise us. The claim that a particular artist is graceful in his or her painting directly contributes to his or her achievement as a painter. So why should not his or her American nationality also contribute to his or her achievement as a painter?

When we say that an American tennis player is a great tennis player, there is no need to ask whether his or her being American contributes to his or her being a great tennis player. But when it comes to American artists, the situation is more complicated, because that artist's nationality can contribute to what he does as an artist, in a way that a sportsman's nationality does not contribute to what he does. For any American work of art, we can ask three questions:

- What makes this American art an *artistic* achievement?
- What makes this American art an *American* achievement?
- Is there any connexion between the work being an *American* achievement and its being an *artistic* achievement?
(or, Is being American only incidental to the artistic achievement, as it is to the sporting achievement?)

What do we mean by *American art*?

- Art made in the United States of America?
- Art made by a citizen of the USA (wherever residing)?
- Art that is *about* America?
- Art that has some distinctively American quality?
- Art that is in some way connected with the broader American experience or the American tradition?

It is worth observing that we cannot ask some of these questions so readily about American sporting achievement. When a sporting activity takes on such qualities, it sometimes moves into the realm of art: e.g. archery and ritual fishing in Japan.

So what I propose to do first is to consider the music of Charles Ives, and ask the following three questions:

- What is the *artistic* achievement of Ives's music?
- What is the *American* achievement of Ives's music?
- Are the *artistic* achievement and the *American* achievement connected?

I shall then turn to the paintings of the abstract expressionists, and ask the same questions:

- What is the *artistic* achievement of abstract expressionist painting?
- What is the *American* achievement of abstract expressionist painting?
- Are the *artistic* achievement and the *American* achievement connected?

We can then return to Rattle's claim about American art being the fastest, most brilliant stir-fry, and consider whether it really captures the essence of great American art.

3. Ives and his *artistic* achievement

Charles Ives was born in Danbury, Connecticut, in 1874. He was educated at Yale, before moving to New York, where he spent his professional career as an insurance

broker. But it is Ives the musician, not Ives the businessman, that is remembered to posterity. As an amateur composer, Ives wrote a significant amount of music for small and large ensembles comprising marching band and orchestral instruments, pipe organ, and vocalists. However, it is neither the volume nor the variety of his compositions that is particularly remarkable. Sir Simon Rattle observes, in *Leaving Home*, that

“When you look a Charles Ives score you can see immediately that it is not ordered in any way—it’s messy. It’s music written by a truly original ear, an innocent ear of enormous intelligence.”

To appreciate his significance as a composer is to understand what is so original, innocent, and intelligent about his music. This requires us to grasp something of the significance of the European musical tradition both on the Continent and in the New World at the time Ives was writing.

Classical music in Europe had been dominated for centuries by the Western tonal tradition. The rules of harmony had been developed primarily by German composers. They were concerned with how one can combine a number of different notes simultaneously, in an agreeable way, to form a chord, and how one can create a succession of chords in a way that gives rise to a sense of tonality. As Rattle explains, Western music’s preoccupation with tonality comes from a sense that a piece of music is a journey, in which one begins with a certain tonal centre and, after venturing into other chords and tonalities, returns home to the original tonality.

The journey taken in a piece of music became increasingly complicated in the nineteenth century, when the music of Wagner became so highly chromatic that the sense of ‘home’ or tonality seems on the verge of breaking down. So that, in the twentieth century, Arnold Schoenberg began to write atonal music, in which there is no sense of ‘home’ or tonality at all. It is tempting to see this as a rejection or abandonment of the Western tonal tradition. However, that is not how Schoenberg saw it. He maintained that what he was doing was a development of the tradition in German music, not a break with that tradition.

Schoenberg represents one way in which modernist composers, in the twentieth century, conceived of themselves doing something new and different which was a development of the Western tonal tradition. However, other European composers felt that they could not work within this tradition. Instead of drawing on the classical music tradition which had been dominated by German composers, they looked to the folk music traditions of the countries in which they lived. In their compositions, Kodály drew on his native Hungarian music, as Janáček did his native Czech music, whilst Bartók roamed more widely across Eastern Europe, collecting folk music not only in his native Hungary, but in other countries, most notably, Romania.

So European composers could draw on two traditions. They could extend the Western tonal tradition, even to the extent of turning it on its head with atonal music. Or they could instead turn to the folk music traditions of the various countries, and compose classical music that drew on their native folk music. During the nineteenth century, most American composers were working within the Western tonal tradition dominated by German music. The Americans did not have a folk music tradition to which they could turn. It was in this context that Ives began writing music that was radical. It was radical because it did not seek to develop either the Western tonal tradition, of which the German composers were the custodians, or a folk music

tradition. Ives's music is radical because tradition did not hold the significance that it held for so many other composers of his age.

There is much that is remarkable about Ives's music, including his experiments with micro-tones and polyrhythms. However, one feature that deserves comment is the way in which he makes use of the different kinds of music that he finds around him. In his compositions, we find references to all sorts of music that he heard growing up in a small New England town, as a university student at Yale, and then when he lived and worked as a businessman in New York. We hear songs from New England, Gospel hymns, 'plantation' songs, ragtime, Brahms and Wagner, bawdy fraternity songs, and the patriotic tunes of marching bands, and national anthems.

But what is also significant is the way he uses these different types of music. He does not make new arrangements of old tunes that he has heard. Nor does he write pastiche—pieces of music that try to imitate other historical or cultural styles of music. Rather, he incorporates them into his own original music. So, in two songs for baritone and piano, written during the First World War, we hear scraps of a dozen patriotic songs in his quick march, *They are There!*, including *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, *The Star-Spangled Banner* and *Reveille*, and in his dirge for the war dead, *In Flanders Fields*, a bitter fanfare that contains sardonic references to *Columbia*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *God Save the King*, the *Marseillaise*. But he has made them his own.

Virginia Woolf famously introduced the 'stream of consciousness' in her novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, published in 1925, and Ives's music is something of a musical stream of consciousness. His music reveals something of the way that these tunes and different forms of music-making have entered his consciousness, and become part of him. These little songs merely hint at what he achieved on a far grander scale in his orchestral music. We find this musical variety present in his early works, such as the Second Symphony (1900-02) and the Piano Sonata (1902-10), where Ives establishes intimate relationships between seemingly disparate types of music, and with striking musical juxtapositions in his overtly American symphonic music, such as *Fourth of July* (1911-13) and *Decoration Day* (1912), in which he reminisces about the cacophony of sounds he heard on such occasions.

Whereas Schoenberg saw himself as creating new music that demonstrated a new direction in which the European tradition could move by developing and extending that tradition, Ives does not seem interested in developing the tradition. Rather, he seems interested in exploring what he can make by using the different kinds of music that he hears around him in America. It is for this reason that we can understand his music as a stir-fry that brings together ingredients from different musical cultures, rather than as a long marinated casserole that makes new music that continues the long tradition of European music.

4. Ives and his *American* achievement

Given that Ives's music exhibits the influence of different forms of music that were to be found in America, and given that his use of these different types of music is an important part of what makes his music so important artistically, we must now ask whether the artistic achievement of Ives's music is also an American achievement.

America has, of course, been associated with the idea of a 'melting pot' for centuries. The 'melting pot' is a metaphor for cultural assimilation, in which immigrants come to adopt a shared American culture. It is contrasted with the much later idea of 'multiculturalism', in which cultural diversity is to be celebrated, rather than eradicated. That distinction involves an evaluation about whether cultural diversity is desirable or

undesirable. I am interested in multiculturalism in a descriptive—rather than evaluative—sense: a situation in which different cultures co-exist (for better or worse).

Ives's compositions are inspired by the musical multiculturalism that he heard in America. In this way they capture something distinctively American. In Europe, different countries had their own distinctive 'national' music. There was no single music that was shared by all Americans. So the combining of these different types of music came to embody what was distinctive about the American experience of music.

In Ives's compositions, we hear these different forms of music-making. But more than that, we hear something of the way he experienced them. They form part of the musical stream of consciousness that is present in his music. This is not just a journalist's report of what he heard. It is an expression of how these different kinds of music have affected him, and had a formative influence in his development. So his music is, in an important way, concerned with the American experience—or at least the New England and Manhattan experiences.

We now have reason to appreciate why Ives's music is both an important artistic achievement and an American achievement. But there is something more that we can say. These two achievements are related in a special way. It was the musical multiculturalism that was both a distinctive feature of the American experience, and the inspiration that enabled the composer to break away from the cultural tradition of Europe. So, in this case, we can claim that the American achievement and the artistic achievement are one and the same thing: what makes the music distinctively American is also what makes the music artistically significant.

This is very different from the case of the great American tennis player. Although Sampras's success might have been both an American achievement and a sporting achievement, these are not one and the same thing: there is no sense in which his sporting achievement lay in his being American, playing tennis in America, or in his reflecting on American tennis-playing. Nationality is not relevant to sporting achievement in the way that it sometimes is to cultural achievement.

Rattle has an explanation for why there is something distinctive about cultural achievement in America: the multiculturalism of America influences cultural pursuits in a distinctive way. American multiculturalism becomes a substitute for the cultural tradition in Europe. And so he claims that American culture is a 'stir-fry', whereas European culture is a 'casserole': in America, cultural achievement is an embodiment of the experience of multiple cultures co-existing, whereas, in Europe, cultural achievement is an embodiment of the experience of an evolving cultural tradition across successive generations.

It is not difficult to see how musical fusion runs throughout American classical music. Scott Joplin's ragtime brings together a fusion of the African additive rhythms and European formal principles of music. George Gershwin integrates jazz and other musical traditions in *Rhapsody in Blue*, and this was a major feature of the early music of Aaron Copeland, who continued to experiment with the sounds he heard in America, notably jazz, and folk music, but also cowboy songs, in *Billy the Kid*. The reconciliation between different types of music features significantly in Leonard Bernstein's *Westside Story*, and Rattle even sees connections between Ives and John Cage. So one can see why Rattle's claim about American classical music as a 'stir-fry' might be thought to apply to a range of composers in the twentieth century.

But Rattle seems to claim that it is not only true of Ives's music and of all American music, but of American art in general. Does this hold? Abstract expressionism in American painting provides a case study where it does not seem to hold.

5. Abstract expressionism and its *artistic* achievement

Abstract expressionism is a term that was applied to a group of painters working in New York in the middle of the twentieth century. Whether they formed a 'school' or a 'movement' is contentious, as was the very name given to them. However, between them, these American artists produced paintings of a kind not previously known, and which were received to great acclaim. So we can test Rattle's thesis by asking:

- What was the artistic achievement of the abstract expressionists?
- Was this also an American achievement?

We can then determine whether they turned their back on the European tradition to embrace something distinctly American, as Rattle maintains that Ives did.

Abstract expressionism entered a political world dominated by the experience of two world wars within three decades, and the threat of nuclear war in the imminent future. It entered a cultural and artistic world that had been dominated by the School of Paris, until this was decimated by war. Paris had seen the rise of cubism, an approach to painting, in which the artist analyses objects, breaks them up and then reassembles them in an abstracted form, which allows the objects to be represented from multiple viewpoints—rather than a single viewpoint—in order to present the object in a broader context. The approach was anticipated by Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, although there is some dispute as to whether Picasso or Braque was the central figure of the movement in its early years. However, this was not the only force at work. Kandinsky and Miró led the abstract painters, who renounced any attempt at depicting objects; and the expressionists, who drew inspiration from Edvard Munch, whose celebrated, *The Scream*, of 1893, exemplified the desire to depict objects in the world not with an eye for accuracy, but with the aim of distorting objects in order to facilitate expression to intense emotions. Each of these rejected social realism, which aimed to record the life of ordinary people as they actually lived, and which had taken root in America, as exemplified by Grant Wood's iconic *American Gothic*, of 1930. In Russia, social realism spawned Stalin's Soviet-sanctioned Socialist realism, from 1934, which sought to glorify workers and their plight for emancipation. Abstract expressionism was a reaction against social realism, but it would be a mistake to think that it was simply a conjunction of abstract painting and expressionism.

There is only one painting with which any discussion of abstract expressionism can commence in Australia: *Blue Poles*. *Blue Poles* was painted by Jackson Pollock in 1952, and is representative of his 'drip paintings'. It was acquired by the National Gallery of Australia in 1973. As the Gallery was not authorised to make acquisitions over one million dollars, the approval of the Prime Minister of the day, Gough Whitlam was required. He approved the purchase, and this precipitated vigorous debate both about abstract expressionism in painting, and about the financial probity of Whitlam's government. The enduring appeal of the work (and its significant increase in financial value), have been evinced by his admirers, as proof of Whitlam's cultural foresight.

Blue Poles is representative of one of the two approaches to painting that is associated with Abstract Expressionism. 'Drip painting', 'gestural abstraction', and 'action painting' are all ways of describing the approach to painting exemplified by *Blue Poles*. Such an approach involves dripping, pouring, splattering, or smearing paint onto a canvas: what matters is that the paint is applied spontaneously, rather than being applied in a careful and considered manner. The other approach is the 'colour-field painting' of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, in which colour is spread across or stained on large portions of the canvas, with the intention that the colour should not

be freed from serving as a vehicle for depiction, and become an object of contemplation in its own right.

Two art critics are associated with Abstract Expressionism as closely as any artist is: Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. It was Rosenberg who coined the first label for the work of these painters—'action painting'—a label that did not stick, however, and which was subsequently rebranded as 'abstract expressionism'. But 'action painting' does capture something important about what these artists were doing. The canvas becomes an 'arena' in which to act. It is the physical activity of applying paint to canvas that is now to be celebrated and appreciated. The act of painting is what matters, not what the painter is able to use the paint to depict or express. This was a complete break with previous attitudes to painting. For the first time, the act of applying paint to canvas was an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

Such an approach to abstract expressionism emphasises the activity of painting. It is curious that, whilst an art critic was advocating the centrality of what the artists do when they paint, several artists, led by Barnett Newman, emphasised the contemplative nature of their paintings. For Newman, what mattered about his paintings was the opportunity that they afforded to contemplate the sublime. Newman saw a long tradition of sublime art as well as beautiful art. His art aimed at contemplating the sublime. However, what was radical about his art was that it removed the imagery of figures and objects found in traditional art, which gave expression to the sublime through mythology, such as the myth of creation. Finally, Newman believed, art could access the sublime without relying upon myth:

"We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western painting."

However one looks at it, abstract expressionism was an important moment in art history. From Rosenberg's perspective, what mattered was that the action of painting became an object of contemplation for its own sake. From Newman's perspective, what mattered was that these paintings offered an experience of that which matters most to humanity without depending upon the crutch of myth and representation.

Whether one agrees with Rosenberg or Newman about the significance of abstract expressionism, what is significant is that neither comment addresses whether the achievement has anything to do with America. So we can make a claim about the artistic achievement of abstract expressionism without making any reference to the fact that the abstract expressionists were working in America.

6. Abstract expressionism and its *American* achievement

In what sense, if any, was the artistic achievement of the Abstract Expressionists an American achievement? Rattle's suggestion that Ives's music was an American achievement involved the claim that Ives drew on American multiculturalism rather than the European cultural tradition. So this was both a matter of the composer

identifying with America rather than Europe, and with multiculturalism rather than tradition. Let us consider whether the same can be said of the Abstract Expressionists.

Newman seems to be in no doubt that the Abstract Expressionists were doing something new in America; something that could not have been achieved in Europe. In an influential essay, "The Sublime is Now", published in 1948, he wrote:

I believe that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it. . .

So Newman is emphatic that the artistic achievement of the colour-field painters was only possible when they ceased to be concerned with European culture. He maintains that, in making images, the colour-field painters were creating images the meaning of which was "self-evident", and which did not require an appreciation of art history, because they have renounced the "devices of Western European painting":

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. . . The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.

Rothko, on the other hand, did not seem to share Newman's belief that what the colour-field painters were doing in America was discontinuous with the European cultural tradition. Numerous of his remarks suggest that he saw his work as developing a tradition of painting in which Michaelangelo and J. M. W. Turner worked.

In 1958, Rothko received a commission from the beverage manufacturers, Joseph Seagram and Sons, to paint a series of murals to decorate the dining room of a fashionable restaurant planned for the company's new building on Park Avenue. Rothko set to work on a series of his colour-field paintings, which were intended to offer the viewer the meditative experience of the sublime that his paintings aspired to at this time.

Whilst working on the commission, he visited Italy, where he saw Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, in Florence. He felt that Michelangelo had achieved, in the vestibule of the library, the experience that he was aiming for in the room surrounded by the Seagram Murals, remarking that the "room had exactly the feeling that I wanted...it gives the visitor the feeling of being caught in a room with the doors and windows walled-in shut." He subsequently concluded that such a feeling was inconsistent with the atmosphere of a fashionable restaurant, and decided to withdraw from the commission. As the murals had already been painted, he selected three galleries in America, England, and Japan, to which they would be given. One of these was the Tate gallery in London.

A principal reason for giving the Seagram Murals to the Tate was that the Tate possessed Turner's bequest, and Rothko felt a particular kinship with Turner. At an exhibition that included some of the Tate's Turners, in New York, in 1966, Rothko remarked, whilst standing in front of one of the paintings, that Turner "learned a lot from me". What this shows us is that Rothko felt that his Seagram murals were continuous with the artistic tradition in which Michelangelo and Turner worked. He did not see himself as doing something that was a break with that tradition.

So the evidence is not conclusive as to whether the colour-field painters conceived of themselves as working within the European tradition, albeit relocated in

America, or as having broken from that tradition: Newman suggests a break; whereas Rothko suggests continuity.

In the case of Ives's music, the point of showing that he breaks with the European cultural tradition and turns to the musical multiculturalism of New York is not merely intended to establish his relationship with Europe, but to show that he was doing something distinctively American. Rattle wants to claim that Ives was not simply writing music in America—he was writing American music; music that was intrinsically American because it grew out of the musical multiculturalism that Ives heard in New York. So we need to ask whether the paintings of Newman and Rothko were American in the sense that Ives's music was American. This is not resolved simply by the fact that they were painting in America. Nor is it resolved by determining whether or not they continued to paint within the European tradition in America. It depends upon whether there is something essentially American about their painting, in the way that there is about Ives's music.

In an influential essay, "The Fall of Paris", published in 1940, Rosenberg argued that Paris had ceased to be the international centre of art, and that New York had assumed the mantle. However, Rosenberg was not merely saying that New York was the international centre of art, in the sense that more artists were working there than in any other part of the world. He also believed that New York was the centre of international art (as well as being the international centre of art).

For Rosenberg, the School of Paris, to which the School of New York was the successor, created international art. 'International art' can be distinguished from 'national art' and 'universal art'. National art gives expression to the experience of a particular nation: the School of Paris did not create 'French art', in the sense that it was an expression of what it was to be French. Nor did it create 'universal art', which aims at capturing all the claims of present-day life for all people everywhere. It was 'international' in the sense that it addressed an international culture, that was accessible to all, rather than being limited to the concerns or preoccupations of some national group. It was something that could be shared beyond national boundaries. Rosenberg's claim, in "The Fall of Paris", is that New York became the new centre for international art, at the time of the Second World War, and that the abstract expressionist paintings of the School of New York are international art—works that speak to international culture.

If the art that was being created by the 'School of New York' was international art, then there was nothing distinctively national about it. In other words, there was nothing particularly *American* about the art that was being created by the abstract expressionists. Rosenberg's claim, that the abstract expressionists were creating international art rather than American art, could be compatible with Newman's claim that the abstract expressionists, in America, had abandoned the European tradition of painting. Or it could be consistent with Rothko's claim that his project, in painting, was a development of the European tradition. In either case, if Rosenberg is correct, whether or not Newman and Rothko developed or broke away from the European tradition of painting, there was nothing distinctively American about what they were doing, in the way that Rattle thinks there is something distinctively American about the music that Ives was composing.

Rosenberg was a leading advocate of abstract expressionism in its heyday. However, in recent years, some revisionist historians have suggested that the abstract expressionists were not creating international art, but art that was intimately connected with the American experience.

Finally, Serge Guilbaut has advanced a revisionist history of the abstract expressionists that links their work with the American experience of the Cold War era. He demonstrates how these avant-garde painters, whose politics was so at odds with the prevailing mood of the country, came to be identified as expressions of the freedom and individualism that were regarded as the central values of American life during the Cold War:

Avant-garde culture in general and Pollock's painting in particular infused into the liberal revival the vitality that it needed.

Avant-garde artists, now politically "neutral" individualists, articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized, and coopted by politicians, with the result that artist rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology. The new painting was made in the image of the new America, powerful and internationalist but anxious about the Communist threat. By the end of 1948 this new America was able to recognize itself in avant-garde painting because it had been indirectly responsible for the elaboration of the new style.

The new liberalism identified with this art . . . because the values expressed through the works were especially important to liberals during the Cold War period. Among these values were individualism and the willingness to take risks, central elements in the creative system of the avant-garde and warrants of its complete freedom of expression. . . The brutality of the modern world can wear down the individual. Against this brutality the artist was supposed to be a shining example of the individual will to set against the dull uniformity of totalitarian society.

The individualism evident in abstract expressionist painting enabled avant-garde painters to stake out a unique stronghold on the artistic front. The avant-garde tailored for itself a coherent, recognizable, and salable image that fairly accurately reflected the aims and aspirations of the new liberal America, a powerful force on the international scene. It was possible to combine political and artistic images because both artists and politicians were willing, consciously or unconsciously, to overlook large chunks of their respective ideologies in order to enlist the other group as an ally. . .

It is ironic but not contradictory that in a society politically stuck in a position to the right of center, in which political repression weighed as heavily as it did in the United States, abstract expressionism was for many the expression of freedom: the freedom to create controversial works of art, the freedom symbolized by action painting, by the unbridled expressionism of artists completely without fetters. . .

Freedom was the symbol most actively and vigorously promoted by the new liberalism in the Cold War period. Expressionism stood for the difference between a free society and a totalitarian one. Art was able to package the virtues of liberal society and lay down a challenge to its enemies: it aroused polemic without courting danger. And so Pollock too was transformed into a symbol, a symbol of man, free but frail; his work came to stand for modern anxiety. . . *

Assuming that abstract expressionism was an artistic achievement. Is it also an American achievement? Guilbaut's interpretation of the history of abstract expressionism during the Cold War renders abstract expressionism an American achievement as well as an artistic achievement because of its connexion with the

* Guilbaut, S., *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, transl. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 200-01.

American experience. On Rosenberg's analysis, however, the abstract expressionists create international art which is no more American than the art of the School of Paris.

So it seems that we could go either way on whether it is an American achievement as well as an artistic achievement. Assuming that it is an American achievement, what is the link between 'American achievement' and 'artistic achievement'? Is there the relevant nexus that makes the American achievement also the artistic achievement, as there is in the case of Ives's music? It seems that there is: 'action painting' was an artistic achievement, and it was identified with the freedom that was central to American life. So the artistic achievement was also the American achievement.

7. American art: stir-fry or casserole?

And so we return to that hoary old chestnut of whether American art is ultimately a stir-fry or a casserole. More specifically, we are concerned with what makes great American art not just American or artistic, but something distinctively 'American art'? This question, and Rattle's answer to it, can be unpacked into a number of other questions:

- Is there such a thing as 'American art-making'?
- Is there 'American art-making' that is related to the institution of art in a non-trivial way?
- Is there 'American art-making' that is related to the American experience in a non-trivial way?
- Is there a nexus between the American achievement and the artistic achievement?
- Is this captured by Rattle's claim?

Rattle demonstrates the artistic achievement of Ives's music. He can also show us why this music is concerned with a central feature of the American experience (or at least the urban experience of New York), where different subcultures live cheek-by-jowl. The way that Ives juxtaposes different kinds of music in a single piece of music was a significant musical achievement. This was of major significance in the history of orchestral music, because it showed that a composer could create new music, not through his relationship with the great tradition of orchestral music, but by turning his back on that tradition, and instead engaging with the diversity of music that he heard around him. It is also an achievement that arises out of Ives's experience of living in America, and is an expression of this. So his music can legitimately be claimed to be an *American* achievement as well as an *artistic* achievement, because it truly engages with, and captures something of, the American experience.

This is an *artistic* achievement as much as it is an *American* achievement. However, it is also an achievement as *American art*. This is because there is a special nexus between the *American* achievement of the work, and the *artistic* achievement: the American achievement *is* the artistic achievement. The artistic achievement is not merely incidental to the American achievement (in the way that the tennis player's American achievement might be incidental to his sporting achievement.) The same feature of the music is both the *American* and the *artistic* achievement. So there is a nexus between the *American* and the *artistic* achievements, and thus it can be said to constitute great American art.

But Rattle might be making a broader claim. It is this nexus between Ives's artistic and American achievements that leads Rattle to claim that "American classical

music . . . [is] essentially a dialogue between different cultures thrown together at great speed.” And it is Americans’ concern with this juxtaposition of multicultural material in art, rather than a concern with the development of the artistic tradition, that leads Rattle to claim that “If European art was a very long marinated casserole, then American art is the fastest, most brilliant stir-fry.” The stir-fry is an artistic creation that is achieved through the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements, whereas the casserole is artistic achievement that is achieved through gradual development of tradition. Rattle wants us to believe that American art is art that is concerned with juxtaposing multicultural elements and not fundamentally concerned with the development of a pre-existing cultural tradition.

That certainly seems to be true of the achievement of the music of Charles Ives as American art. Possibly, it is also true of the achievement of the American composers who followed him. But it does not seem to be true of all of the arts in America.

The paintings of the abstract expressionists were also a major artistic achievement. And there is reason to believe, at least on Guilbaut’s reading, that what they were doing constituted an *American* achievement as well as an *artistic* achievement. So we can ask of them:

- What was their artistic achievement?
- Was it a renunciation of tradition (as Rattle suggests Ives’s was)?
- If so, did they embrace multiculturalism as an artistic alternative to tradition?
- What was their American achievement?
- Was it concerned with American multiculturalism, or with some other aspect of the American experience?

It looks like the abstract expressionists, at least according to Rothko, were not indifferent to tradition in the way that Ives was, and they did not adopt multiculturalism as an alternative to the cultural tradition of Europe. So we might conclude that the abstract expressionists were responding to the American experience, but not in the way that Ives was: they were not concerned with American multiculturalism, but with freedom during the cold war.

So I don’t think that we can say that all American art is a fast, brilliant stir-fry rather than a very long marinated casserole. That certainly seems to be true of Charles Ives, and perhaps of subsequent American composers, but not of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and the abstract expressionists, and probably not of a good many other American artists.

But Rattle does pick up on something very important about American art: the nexus between *American* achievement and *artistic* achievement. In the music of Charles Ives, the interest in multiculturalism that replaces a preoccupation with a cultural tradition is both an artistic achievement and an American achievement. It is this nexus that justifies the claim that his music constitutes a major achievement in American art. But this does not mean that the essence of American art lies in abandoning the European cultural tradition. The abstract expressionists offer us an example of a way in which distinctively American circumstances can allow for a development of the European tradition which constituted a major artistic achievement.

What the music of Charles Ives and the paintings of Mark Rothko have in common is the fact that each constitutes both a major artistic achievement and an important American achievement, and, in each case, the American achievement *is* the artistic achievement, rather than being incidental to it.

It is a commonplace to say that the twentieth century was the American century. American achievement led the way in all fields of endeavour. However, it seems unlikely that scientific, industrial, or commercial achievement of Americans will be an achievement of American science, American industry, or American commerce, any more than the sporting achievement of American tennis players constitutes a distinctive 'American tennis-playing'. American art stands alone here.* The nexus between the American achievement and the artistic achievement of some artists in America has resulted in the distinctive achievement of American art. This nexus can be found both in art that remains concerned with the European cultural tradition, and in art that abandons such concern in favour of a concern with American multiculturalism.

So we should expect to find the fastest, most brilliant stir-fries and long-marinated casseroles appearing side by side on menus in all the best American restaurants. After all, this varied fare contributes to the sensual pleasure that the American seeks to cram into his mouth more or less continuously as constant confirmation of continued existence. Musical stir-fries and painterly casseroles feed the gratification, instant and lavish, that is the American birthright.

* However, we do well that Jackson Pollock seemed to take a quite different view, claiming, "The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd. . . The basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country."