

National Memory, Primitive Emotion, and Gender Metaphor: Tracing the Origins of Barnett Newman's Creative Ideology

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Abstract. Barnett Newman, in his return to the origins of art history and creative history, expressed the experiences and emotions of the Jewish people to interpret their close connection with post-Holocaust memory. His exploration reveals the national narratives and cultural meanings embedded within abstract forms. Primitive art, as well as the experiences of early humans in relation to the external world, formed an essential part of Newman's creative philosophy, conveying a transcendental perception resonant with primitive emotion. Furthermore, Newman's works embody the complexity of gender identity and the tension between self-cognition and bodily experience. His paintings challenge traditional viewer perceptions, open up pluralistic dialogues, and offer distinctive insights into gender metaphors. Centering on Newman's artistic practice and theoretical reflections, this paper elucidates the sources of his creative ideology, interprets the artist's intentions, and provides a glimpse into the modern individual's search for and construction of self-awareness and modern identity amid tragic circumstances.

Keywords: Barnett Newman, Abstract Expressionism, New York School, Modernism, Jewish Culture

1. Introduction

Abstract Expressionist artists expressed their concern for modern identity, spirit, and destiny through artistic creation and participation in art movements. Among them, Barnett Newman viewed the examination of the subject as a path toward the transcendental and the sublime. Grounded in the practice of color-field painting, Newman explored the essence of visual abstraction and the expression of the spiritual, the psychological, and the unconscious. As he once remarked, "It was impossible at that time to paint the kind of painting that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello. ... So that we actually began, so to speak, from scratch, as if painting were not only dead but had never existed." [1] In *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (1972), Dore Ashton discussed Newman's proposition, noting that it "partook of the submerged American tradition of anarchism that considered the only true grounds for true liberty 'disconnection, disunion, individuality.'" [2] By rejecting the European tradition of imitation, Newman regarded aesthetic experience as a medium for self-reflection and the functioning of consciousness. His works convey a quest for the eternal and the mysterious—an exploration of shared human perception and experience. Newman's inquiry into the modern subject and identity reveals a profound sense of anxiety and disorientation shaped by the conditions of his era. Tracing the origins of his creative ideology allows

for a deeper understanding of the intentions underlying modern abstract painting and a more nuanced comprehension of the self and modern identity within modern culture.

2. Manuscript preparation

In the 1930s and thereafter, the rise of fascism and the outbreak of war brought a number of European artists to the United States, together with the ideas and practices of European modernism. Meanwhile, America's mainstream society—seeking to shape a new socio-cultural and ideological identity—called for the emergence of a new artistic form. For artists tormented by the ravages of war, individual experience awakened a metaphysical concern with subjectivity and emotional experience. At the same time, there was a growing need for subtle modes of expression that could convey both radical political sentiment and deeply personal sensibilities—revealing anxiety, fear, and vulnerability. The evolution and self-renewal of modern art thus propelled artistic form toward abstraction, communicating attitude and emotion through broadly nontraditional and nonrepresentational means.

2.1. National memory: the search for identity and the echo of history

The Holocaust—the Nazi extermination of millions of Jews—constitutes a foundational narrative of Jewish identity, indelibly inscribed in the history of the Jewish people and exerting a profound, irreplaceable influence upon them. The trauma of that past left an indelible mark, and the existential crises and instability they faced gave rise to a deep sense of insecurity, compelling Jewish intellectuals in America to confront their identity and its particularity. As Harold Rosenberg observed, identity had become “an important theme in contemporary Jewish life,” and Jewish artists experienced it “in an especially deep and immediate way.” [3] This issue was not confined to Jewish experience—it was a universal condition of the twentieth century. Identity, as an abstract construct, seeks to rationalize the confusion of personality and the emergence of contingency into something recognizable. Yet the history of the Holocaust exists beyond the limits of both language and visual representation. Jewish artists thus had to search for ways to bear witness to their collective history and emotional legacy—reflecting upon and reconstructing an ever-elusive sense of self.

At this juncture, numerous art critics turned their attention to Jewish artists, discussing the formation of postwar Jewish cultural phenomena and their role in shaping American modernism. In *Is There a Jewish Art?* (1966), Rosenberg remarked: “Is there a Jewish art? First they build a Jewish Museum, then they ask, is there a Jewish art?” [3] The early Jewish inclination toward abstraction stemmed partly from adherence to the Second Commandment's prohibition of graven images. Coupled with the historical adversity of the Jewish people, this nurtured a heightened awareness of identity. War, persecution, and displacement forced Jewish culture into dialogue and fusion with multiple traditions, fostering a preference for nonfigurative forms of expression that naturally extended into artistic practice. Clement Greenberg noted, “There is a Jewish bias towards the abstract, the tendency to conceptualize as much as possible, and there is a certain *Schwarmerei*, a state ... at the sensuous and sentimental data which others take for granted.” [4] Through abstraction, the dominance of traditional narrative art was challenged, and Jews—predisposed to conceptualization—found fertile ground in the modern art world.

The Jewish people's statelessness and suffering compelled them to wander across lands, breaking with conventional norms of geography and history. Exile and persecution left them oscillating between confusion and anxiety, yet endowed them with both intellect and sensitivity. They sustained the tradition of Jewish intellectualism while engaging deeply with American modern life. For Newman, who bore the dual identity of Jew and American, his art represented the intersection of subjectivity, emotion, and modernism. His paintings served as mediators of empathy—frames of reference for the diasporic Jewish experience in America. Newman's adoption of modernist strategies

of artistic production constituted an exploration of Jewish identity and spatial consciousness. The vast emotional intensity conveyed by his color fields, the vertical “zips,” and his evocative titles together embody resonance and metaphor, constructing a system of memory and emotion that reflects humanity’s confrontation with catastrophe—infused with cultural, national, and religious complexity.

Avram Kampf observed, “If there were a Jewish art, Newman’s work would be regarded as its most authentic and classic expression.” [5] Newman’s canvases, with their large color expanses bisected by vertical lines, present an ambiguous mode of expression. His works dissolve representational logic and erase formal imagery, breaking the traditional gaze of European figurative painting. References are stripped away; language and image become impoverished amid disorientation and alienation. As Newman declared, “The Second World War had revealed the face of terror. For him, what remained was a specter of tragedy that had to be torn to shreds if life was to flourish once again.” [6] His paintings thus allude to the grand narrative of a tormented Jewish nation, legitimizing collective trauma through a universalized conception of visual abstraction. In confronting war, disaster, and existential peril, the Jewish people faced the challenge of representing the unrepresentable—acts of violence that defied ethics and civilization, and the realities of alienation, cultural rupture, and epistemic fear. Through the appropriation of religious meaning and the generalization of religious experience, they sought to confront inner loss and reveal the coexistence of identity and difference, reflecting on the finitude of human subjectivity in an unstable and uncertain world without losing the self.

In Newman’s zip paintings, the vertical band marks a threshold between chaos and order, alluding to the body’s physical absence and the spirit’s detachment—fragmenting the unity of being while projecting a powerful visual and conceptual language. The zip, as an immediately perceptible figure, becomes both a material conduit and a spiritual medium of communication between the artwork and the viewer. It transforms the silent, passive “Other” into an interlocutor capable of dialogue with the self. Within the seemingly bounded framework of history, society, and national identity, the zip stands as a metaphor for absolute wholeness—a symbol of continuity and coherence, possessing unity and self-sufficiency. Through this, viewers are prompted to confront the emotions of terror and suffering, to search for and reflect upon their own position. The zip thus symbolizes a universal posture that transcends Jewish identity—a will to reclaim humanity’s spiritual center. Under this impulse of identity and transcendence, Newman’s art expresses and seeks to dissolve the fear and alienation haunting modern existence, alluding to a world yearning for reconstruction.

2.2. Primitive emotion: from ancient civilization to modern expression

The primitive impulse of the spirit, the conceptual faculty of intellect, and the metaphysical comprehension of reality together constitute the fundamental ways humans experience the external world. The primitive person’s simple, direct, and sensuous cognition of the surrounding environment created a new interpretive framework for the modern age, projecting the modern self into the discourse of early humanity—a discourse formed and consolidated outside the systems of modern society, pointing toward an authentic and genuine mode of expression. Both personal and collective memory provide the raw material for the reception of information and the production of meaning, shaping not only perception but cognition itself. Newman’s engagement with themes of nothingness, origins, and transcendental emotion reveals both a spiritual and a primordial sensibility. As Serge Guilbaut observed, Newman sought to create a space where “the new Western subject could be constructed out of the juxtaposition of anarchistic beliefs and Northwest Coast Indian identity,” thereby “legitimate[ed] his own opposition to the social system in which he lived.” [7] In excavating the spiritual dimensions of collective memory, the act of perceiving an object replays—within the mind—the process of symbolic transformation, an experience that, for Newman, might rescue modern humanity from existential crisis.

Newman visited numerous collections of African, Northwest Coast Native American, and pre-Columbian artifacts, as well as prehistoric earth mounds of the Southwest and Midwest, gaining rich insights from these archaeological remains. He also organized, at Betty Parsons' New Gallery, an exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian painting that introduced the art of Indigenous peoples living along the Pacific coast of Canada and southern Alaska. Newman believed that understanding primitive art was a prerequisite for appreciating modern art, for in primitive creation the making and use of abstract symbols were central. He wrote: "The New York art public found that these arts held for them a personal message. They were no longer the historical curiosities of a forgotten people, the crude expression of a primitive, undeveloped people. Rather, they were the sublime creation of highly sophisticated artists with the same doubts, the same wonderings, and the same searching for salvation—that same indomitable courage which activates men of spirit today. Here indeed was the expression and preoccupation with the problems of our own spirit." [6] Michael Leja has analyzed that, for Newman, there existed a profound continuity between "modern man" and his so-called "primitive predecessors," both of whom were acutely aware of overwhelming forces and the immediacy of fear. The void ruptured by Newman's "zip" evokes the primitive's terror before an unnameable and uncontrollable power, mirroring the postwar Jewish anxiety over identity and existence. In facing the complexity of the external world, primitive humanity experienced confusion and incomprehension—the very condition that modern art revisits. Both assume that primal spiritual impulse operates as a modern psychic function, projected onto a temporally and spatially distant Other, thus legitimizing self-reflection on society while ensuring the safety and possibility of interpretation.

Although the habits of one's environment shape thought and behavior, modern art is not a mere replication or imitation of primitive models—it creates its own symbols within a contemporary context. In *Painting and Prose / Frankenstein*, Newman wrote that the defining feature of modern painting lies in its attention to its primitive function: painting as one of humanity's essential means of expression, transforming primal energy into modern language and constructing a field of sensation through primitive perception. In the introduction to the 1946 catalog of the Northwest Coast Indian Painting Exhibition, Newman stated that modern American abstract artists employed a purely abstract formal language, infusing it with intellectual and emotional content. They did not imitate primitive symbols but were "creating a living myth for us in our own time." [8] The experiences of primitive peoples—formed before industrial society—arose from a closer contact with nature and a more immediate contemplation of spiritual power. Their art profoundly influenced the work in abstract, pure form and symbolic language. In his 1947 article "*The First Man Was an Artist*," written for *The Tiger's Eye* published by the Betty Parsons Gallery, Newman explored the identity of "the first man" and asserted that "the aesthetic act always precedes the social one." This notion stemmed from his enduring concern with humanity's eternal philosophical question of what it is. The artist, for Newman, is both a creator and an originator of intellectual discourse—an identity marked by its very rootlessness. Similarly, Newman's works convey a sense of calm and compassion—a relational and emotional authorization rather than confrontation. He stripped away irrelevant subjects, avoiding overt conflict or opposition, and instead sought to create a potent, resonant symbol capable of concentrating meaning and idea. His goal was to unify rather than fragment the work, producing an expression both universal and shared among humankind.

In this sense, the forms of Abstract Expressionism can be read as an aesthetic response to the anxiety of individuality, defining artistic creation as the original act of "the first man." Through dark, somber tones or delicately modulated hues, with splattered pigment, scraped palette knives, masking tape, and traces of spray guns, Newman captured intuitive emotion—a self-reflective search for humanity's primal intention. In the interplay between paint and form within composition, abstraction reveals itself as both method and meaning. Across his series, Newman sought coherence and wholeness, ensuring that his works would not be read merely as subjective projections meant to

provoke. His paintings thus form the threshold between one state and another—the very edge of transition. They reaffirm the notion of the boundary, inviting the viewer to experience the delicate interplay between rationality and irrationality, order and chaos, reason and emotion—a continual negotiation that lies at the heart of both primitive impulse and modern expression.

2.3. Gender metaphor: social gender and cultural reflection

In postwar American painting, the discourse surrounding Jewish masculinity was pervaded by anxiety, fear, and prejudice. During Clement Greenberg's critical engagement with Abstract Expressionism, the movement gradually evolved into an aesthetic ideology marked by whiteness, national character, and masculine dominance—a framework that articulated a universal, transhistorical conception of the body. Through dissolving gender antagonism and the conflicts it engendered, Newman emphasized formal structure and rational order, expressing an unconscious energy, passion, and uncompromising individuality imbued with traditional masculine heroism. His signature “zip” functions as the emblem of this force. As Jewish studies scholar Paula Hyman observed, “Struggling to gain respect and power for themselves as men in a far from open larger society, male Jews defined an identity that not only distinguished them from women but also displaced their own anxieties upon women.”[9] Such anxieties and uncertainties—stemming from the violent, irrational, and uncontrollable impulses of masculine unconsciousness—had to be mediated and resolved by the conscious, rational dimension of the traditional male subject.

Newman, however, appeared to reject rigid binary conceptions of gender. He occupied an indeterminate historical position, transforming the torn, castrated, and alienated body into a symbolic form—one that projected a disciplined, masculine stance. As *New York Times* critic Stuart Preston noted, Newman deliberately restrained excessive personal emotion in his painting, employing reason as an instrument to convey ideas that were more contemplative and persuasive. Yet Newman's ambivalence toward his own corporeality and self-perception gives his work a psychological depth: the visual content of his paintings evokes the limits of human perception and compels introspection. The transcendent symbolism in Newman's work, and its invocation of the body, often conveys anxiety and unease. Some scholars have interpreted these gestures as expressions of historical bias and irony toward Jewish men during that period, linking them to the Jewish ritual of circumcision—a practice widely regarded in American society as distinctively Jewish, symbolizing separation or removal. This association metaphorically inscribed Jewish masculinity as physically incomplete, wounded, or feminized. Eric Kline Silverman has remarked that “While biblical circumcision surely celebrates male procreation, the ritual also asserts the primacy of the female body, and thereby dramatizes the paradox of biblical, and subsequent Jewish, manhood.” [10] Through the symbolic deformation of the body, Newman revealed the complex meanings of gender identity within society, expressing the inner contradictions and struggles between self-awareness and bodily experience. The rationality, order, and calculated precision embedded in his works not only deepen their intellectual and aesthetic appeal but also guide viewers to examine gender from a detached, objective perspective. Newman's allusion to circumcision—though possibly tinged with historical irony—nonetheless reflects his sustained engagement with identity and cultural tradition. His concern is neither purely critical nor dismissive; rather, it represents an attempt to expose, through art, the layered emotions and intricate meanings contained within such practices.

Michael Leja has argued that Newman's work lacks the deliberate contradiction or instability characteristic of Abstract Expressionist process, and thus fails to evoke effective metaphors of self or identity—making interpretation challenging. Serge Guilbaut, however, emphasized the tension between masculine and feminine energies in Newman's practice. He noted, “Domination is what Newman was against, but he was not against power per se. Through the verticality of the bar, he hoped to empower ‘Man’ to stand up. These paintings were successful in producing a picture able to

speak directly to the spectator without the help of a third person, and successful also in giving, as Barnett Newman said, a ‘place to the beholder.’” [7] Newman envisioned his paintings and sculptures as landmarks—points of orientation through which the viewer could locate themselves. In this sense, his work reflects the complexity of gendered identity: through artistic creation, he sought to dissolve the boundaries of traditional gender roles and endow “Man” with renewed significance. Newman’s art, therefore, transcends formal experimentation with color and structure; it constitutes a profound meditation on the conditions of human existence. His works challenge conventional notions of gender, power, and identity, inviting viewers into an open, pluralistic dialogue. Newman’s artistic practice thus becomes an exploration of gender metaphor—one that moves beyond binary opposition to engage the broader spectrum of human experience.

3. Conclusion

Before the modern audience, the artist must mobilize a range of cultural, institutional, political, and social mediating symbols to construct a shared identity that transcends definitions of race, class, and gender. Modern abstract painting responds to this intermediary condition—addressing both physical and spiritual trauma encountered in modernity and incorporating these experiences into the conceptual and interpretive framework of art. Within this process, a specific position is assigned not only to the artist but also to the viewer, who becomes a participant in constructing modern collective memory and, in turn, reactivates a cycle of renewed trauma. The sources of Newman’s creative ideology thus point to his deep concern with questions of nation and identity, as well as his sustained interest in primitive art.

The experiences of the Jewish people and the symbolic use of religious narratives have produced an echo of trauma within human history and memory. Through the visual rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, Newman offered an artistic redemption that confronted suffering, confusion, and inner estrangement. His paintings articulate a highly integrated system of metaphors and symbols for post-Holocaust memory—both a metaphysical exploration of religion and spirituality and a profound interpretation of art freed from purely formalist and fantastical constraints. In his artistic and theoretical discourse, Newman simultaneously revealed the traumatic history of the Jewish nation, the tragedy and terror of primitive humanity, and the latent presence of mythic creation. Ancient art, for him, contained the same instincts and desires expressed in modern art. By emphasizing the primitive and the unconscious, Newman demonstrated the genesis of modern human discourse and the construction of a subjectivity rich in meaning. Moreover, the representation of Jewish masculinity in postwar American painting was multifaceted and complex. Newman’s work broke through traditional gender distinctions, employing metamorphic symbols to articulate a renewed conception of manhood. By integrating rational elements into his creative process, he fostered reflection on gender while addressing the tensions surrounding identity formation, anxiety displacement, and the controversies embedded in ritual and custom. Overall, Newman’s artistic practice transcended the binary oppositions of gender, evolving into a profound exploration of gender metaphor that engaged the broader spectrum of human experience. His art reflects the complexity and plurality of gendered identity, offering a deeply humanistic vision that unites memory, spirit, and form within the language of abstraction.

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