

Mark Making

Workshop

What is mark making?

Mark making is the fundamental act of leaving a trace or gesture on a surface. The outcome is always affected by the tool and the substrate. Marks are expressive, symbolic, and conceptual.

Mark-making often involves an intuitive approach, focusing on feeling the energy of the moment, rather than strict planning. There is an element of detachment in the mark making process.

Mark-making often goes beyond mere representation; it can express emotion, energy, and importantly the physical process of creating the mark. Marks are mostly abstract, not figurative. The illustrators' unique marks tell the story of their hand, head, and heart.

Key attributes of mark making

- **Builds a unique artistic voice:** An illustrator's distinct and consistent mark-making style can become as recognisable as their signature. It can set the illustrator apart from others.
- **Creates movement and energy:** Gestural or energetic marks, such as expressive scribbles or rapid brushstrokes, can suggest movement and a sense of life or movement in a drawing.
- **Develops technical skill:** For both new and experienced illustrators, exercises in mark-making can help refine technical skills and build confidence with a range of tools and media, from pencils and ink to digital brushes and bespoke mark making tools.

The cave paintings at Lascaux (c.20,000 BCE)



Early mark making

Lascaux is famous for its Paleolithic cave paintings. Found in a complex of caves in the Dordogne region of southwestern France. They are revered because of their exceptional quality, size, sophistication and antiquity. Estimated to be up to 20,000 years old, the paintings consist primarily of large animals, once native to the region. What is less reported are the handprints that were also discovered.

(bradshawfoundation.com)



Bone-spray pipes

The handprints are a notable feature of the cave art at Lascaux, (although less celebrated). They were created using stenciling (negative hands) or by directly applying paint to the hand (positive hands). These prints, some of which feature missing fingers, were likely made with paint derived from natural pigments like clay and charcoal, possibly using tools like bone-spray pipes for the stenciling of the images.

The significance and purpose of these handprints remain a mystery, with theories suggesting they represent communication, rituals, or even early forms of identification.

Van Gogh's
rhythmic and
emotionally
charged
brushstrokes



The Starry Night

The Starry Night was painted in June 1889, it depicts the view from the east-facing window of his asylum room at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, just before sunrise, with the addition of an imaginary village.

Van Gogh (1853 – 1890) assigned an emotional language to night and nature that took them far from their actual appearances. Dominated by vivid blues and yellows applied with highly gestural verve and immediacy, *The Starry Night* also demonstrates how inseparable van Gogh's vision was from the new procedures of painting he had devised, in which color and paint describe a world outside the artwork whilst retaining their own status as, colour and paint.

(moma.org)

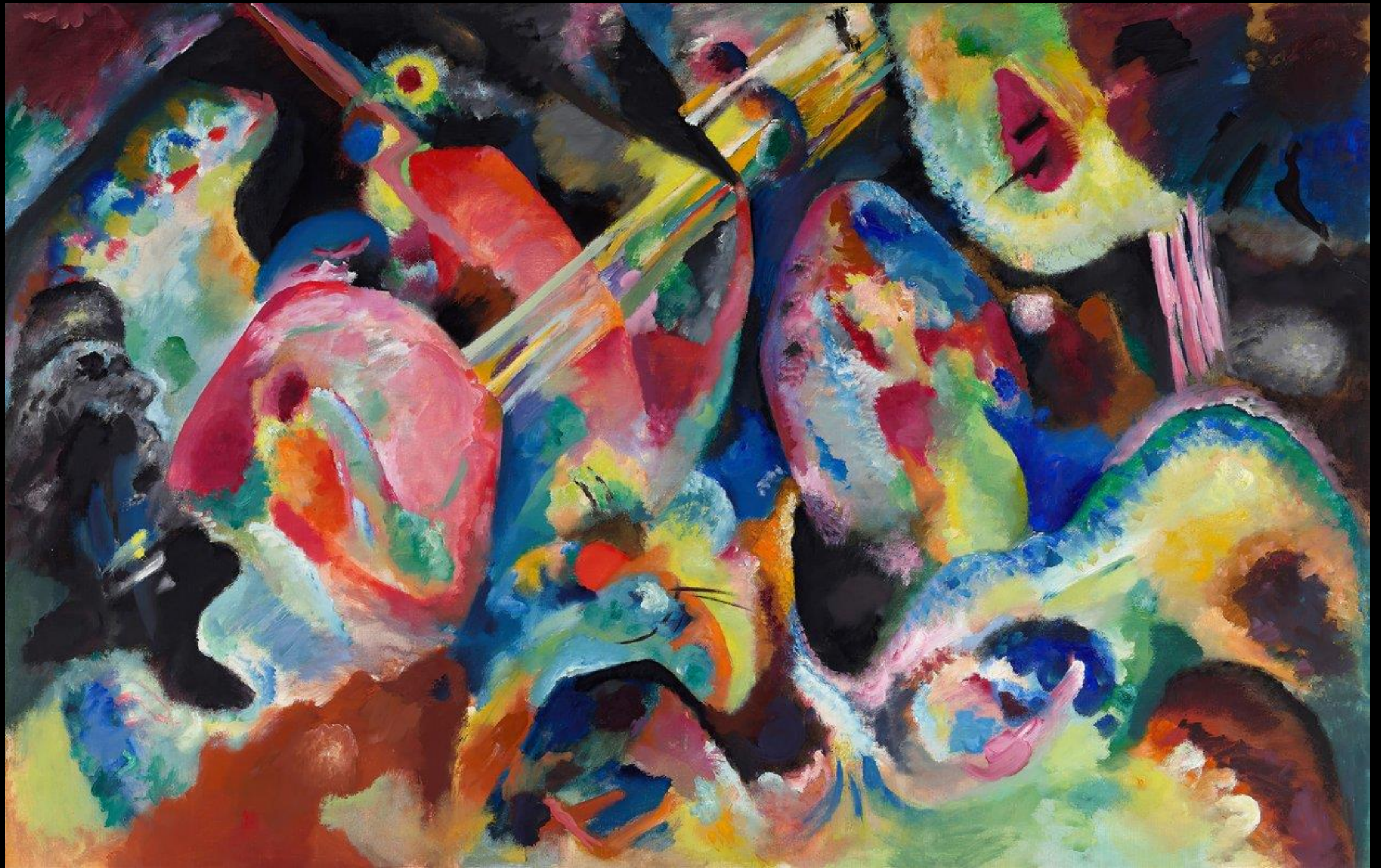
Some of Van Goghs mark making techniques

- Distinct, stand-alone marks that are typically separate rather than blended, allowing each line to stand out.
- An emphasis on texture and motion to convey a sense of movement.
- Varied line types to represent different elements
- Short dashes, longer strokes, variation of angles, curved lines and zigzags.
- Expressive and gestural marks that are expressive and convey a sense of energy and emotion.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944)

For Kandinsky, mark making was not decoration, but a fundamental element of abstract art, a means of conveying profound emotional and spiritual truths through a unique visual vocabulary. ([springer.com](https://www.springer.com))

He used mark making to express abstract emotional and spiritual concepts, associating different lines and shapes with different feelings. He employed a wide range of marks, including sharp, pointed lines for anger, and soft pale curves for calmness, and his work featured a dynamic interplay of lines, textures, and patterns. His use of mark making was deeply connected to his synesthetic experience of music, which he translated into visual forms on canvas ([bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk))



Synesthetic experience of music

Wassily Kandinsky experienced music synesthetically, perceiving specific musical notes as colors and shapes, a condition known as chromesthesia. He expressed this multi-sensory experience by developing abstract paintings that visually represented the sounds and emotions evoked by music, aiming to create a visual 'symphony' of colors. Kandinsky believed that music, being non-material, could more directly express the soul, inspiring him to link colors, notes, and artistic compositions in his non-representational works.

(denverartmuseum.org)



Kandinsky's approach to mark making

Kandinsky's mark making was a direct translation of his inner feelings and spiritual perceptions. He believed that abstract shapes could convey emotions without the need for representational imagery.

His early inspiration came from listening to music and seeing how it made him feel, which he then translated into visual forms. For him, music and painting were interconnected, with colors and lines having their own sounds and feelings.

Kandinsky utilized a diverse range of marks, from bold geometric shapes to delicate, flowing lines, to create a complex visual language. (bbc.co.uk)

Cy Twombly (1928 – 2011)

Cy Twombly's mark making involved energetic, gestural scribbles, lines, and words that bridged drawing, painting and writing.

Influenced by automatic writing, he attempted to create a unique visual language rooted in history, myth, and personal experience.

His process was physical, often involving jabbing, scratching, and scraping, with his marks conveying vitality and life rather, than explicit information or narrative.

His work blended the visceral energy of *Abstract Expressionism* with the intellectual rigor of classical art, creating a distinctive style that subverted traditional forms into abstract glyphs. (nytimes.com)



STATE OF TEXAS
COUNTY OF DALLAS
I, the undersigned, Clerk of the County of Dallas, Texas, do hereby certify that the within and foregoing is a true and correct copy of the original as the same appears from the records of said County.

WITNESSETH my hand and seal of office this 1st day of January, 1900.

CLERK OF COUNTY OF DALLAS, TEXAS



Key aspects of Twombly's mark making

Twombly used a gestural and energetic style, renouncing traditional paintbrushes for a more immediate, physical connection to the canvas. He incorporated elements of writing such as letters, words, and script-like forms into his paintings as abstract elements rather than clear communication.

His process was influenced by Surrealist automatism, allowing the unconscious to surface through scribbling and letting false moves become true ones, reflecting a belief in the vital energy of the mark.

A physical act of drawing and writing

Twombly built up surfaces by layering paint, ink, and crayon, sometimes scratching back into the paint to reveal what was underneath, creating a sense of history within the artwork. His marks often alluded to classical antiquity, mythology, and literature.

A core aim was to create marks imbued with life and vitality, exploring the physical act of drawing and writing as a sensory experience. To do so he used a wide range of tools, including oil-based house paint, wax crayons, and even brushes attached to sticks, to create a diverse range of textures and forms.

(artforum.com)

Context and influences

Twombly built on the gestural freedom of the Abstract Expressionists but pushed the concept further, subverting traditional forms and creating his own unique language of abstract marks. After moving to Italy his deep engagement with the classical world heavily influenced his subject matter within his abstract compositions.

His early work as an Army cryptologist influenced his development of a personal, symbolic language of marks and glyphs and his sketchbooks were a crucial space for developing his mark-making, containing a mix of abstract forms, jottings, and ideas that informed his larger works. (metmuseum.org)



Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five* (1947)

Being the earliest and most renowned of his drip paintings, this work marked Jackson Pollock's (1912 – 1956) artistic emergence. Splattering paint onto canvas, he incorporated unconventional elements like money and cigarette butts, distinguishing his style. This unique approach, separating color from line, revolutionized traditional painting, influencing generations of artists.

The artwork conveys a frenzied performance through color. Renowned for its intense hues, it evokes both grief and tranquility, reminiscent of *The Tempest*. Pollock's skillful use of color deflects attention from the catastrophic shipwreck described in Shakespeare's play. (singular.com)



Abstract Expressionism

Jackson Pollock's mark-making involved placing canvases on the floor and dripping, pouring, and splashing paint onto them using sticks, basters (pipettes), or brushes to create his characteristic 'drip paintings' or 'action paintings'.

His technique, like Cy Twombly, was influenced by surrealist automatism, and focused on the physical and emotional act of creating, allowing lines to become autonomous and the artist to express inner forces directly onto the canvas in a trance-like, improvisatory manner. Automatism refers to creating art without conscious thought and accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process. (tate.org)

Mark making workshop

Let's start with some quick mark-making exercises
responding to simple prompts ...

(put your name on your paper and make sure you
save and/or record all of your results)

heavy as stone

fast as lightning

really angry

dead calm

Exploration

We'll spend more time on the following exercises ...

Tool experimentation

Use sticks, shells, straws found objects, collected objects and unconventional mark making tools to make some experimental marks.

Chance versus control

Create one half of chaos, one half of order

Gesture and Body

Use your physicality to make large sweeping movements

Audible to visual

Let the music guide your marks

Final thoughts for discussion

Has your approach to image making now become more natural?

If so, which of these marks felt natural, and which felt challenging?

How did your tools affect outcome?

Can complex emotions or stories be evoked through abstract marks?

For the next 2 weeks (15th and 22nd October)

We are splitting up into two groups for the next two weeks.

Group 1 will be doing **Riso Printing** (with Mo) - **Print Room AE101A**

Group 2 will be doing **Cyanotype** (with Tash) - **Studio AD402.**

The following week we will swap activities.

For the **Riso Workshop** you need to bring some of your sketchbooks, images, photos, and any preferred drawing implements (pencil case).

For the **Cyanotype workshop** you need to bring some/all of the results from your mark making workshop (these could also be as photographs).

Group 1

ELIZABETH

GRACE

JANET

SEREN

TAYAH-MAY

THEO

MATEUS

OLIVIA

ERIN CAITLIN

EDEN

JAZ

TOBY W

Group 2

SOPHIE

JOSIE

TOBY

CASPEN

ROMI

MICHEAL

GWENLLIAN

REBECCA

ELIZA

HUNNY

MATTHEW