

The New York School vs. the School of Paris:  
Who Really Made the Most Important Art After World War II?

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Abstract

American historians of modern art routinely assume that after World War II New York replaced Paris as the center of the western art world. An analysis of the illustrations in French textbooks shows that French art scholars disagree: they rate Jean Dubuffet as the most important painter of the era, ahead of Jackson Pollock, and they consider Yves Klein's anthropometries of 1960 as the greatest contribution of a single year, in front of Andy Warhol's innovations in Pop Art. Yet the French texts also show that the French artists' practices and conceptions of art paralleled those of the Americans. Thus while French and American scholars disagree over the relative importance of their nations' artists, there is no disagreement that the most important art of the 1950s was produced by experimental seekers, and that of the '60s by conceptual finders.

### Keywords

Abstract Expressionism, Tachisme, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme

The idea that judgments of aesthetic merit can be affected by the nationality of the observer would not come as a great surprise to even casual followers of international figure skating competitions. Even more narrowly, that French and American judgments can differ considerably is witnessed by the relative esteem of film critics from the two countries for Jerry Lewis movies, or of their wine experts for California vintages. This investigation tests for national differences between these countries in a very different aesthetic domain, that of modern painting after World War II. The issue considered here is an intriguing one: is the canon of modern art significantly different in different countries, or is there an international consensus on the relative merit of modern artists?

#### The Triumph of American Painting?

In 1983, an art historian named Serge Guilbaut (1983, 1) began his book on the history of Abstract Expressionism with the declaration that “After the Second World War, the art world witnessed the birth and development of an American avant-garde, which in the space of a few years succeeded in shifting the cultural center of the West from Paris to New York.”

The proposition stated by Guilbaut was hardly a new one. Perhaps its earliest and most dramatic announcement had been made by the American critic Clement Greenberg. In 1946, writing in *The Nation*, Greenberg (1986, 87) had confidently and conventionally asserted that “The School of Paris remains still the creative fountainhead of modern art, and its every move is decisive for advanced artists everywhere.” Just two years later, however, Greenberg (1986, 215) had emphatically changed his mind. In an article in *Partisan Review* titled “The Decline of Cubism,” he proclaimed the fall of Paris and the rise of New York:

If artists as great as Picasso, Braque, and Léger have declined so grievously, it can only be because the general social premises that

used to guarantee their functioning have disappeared in Europe. And when one sees, on the other hand, how much the level of American art has risen in the last five years, with the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith - and also when one realizes how consistently John Marin has maintained a high standard, whatever the narrowness of his art - then the conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power.

Although Greenberg's claim initially shocked many people, this position gained currency over time. In 1955, when William Seitz (1955, 406, 444-45) completed his Princeton dissertation on Abstract Expressionism, the first large-scale academic study of the new movement, he would conclude that "It was with a sense of the importance of what was taking place in American art during the postwar decade that this study of its values was undertaken." In discussing the issues of influence and priority, Seitz noted that:

The topic of American influence on European style is a touchy one, and statements concerning it should not be made without careful study. On the basis of the present evidence we do know, however, that the uniting features of the style which can now be found in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and even Japan ... were well established here, due to the war situation, two years earlier [than in France].

In 1970, Irving Sandler gave his history of Abstract Expressionism the title *The Triumph of American Painting*. This view of the era had by then become commonplace among American art scholars, and it has remained their standard and virtually unquestioned judgment to the present.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Greenberg, Seitz, and Sandler, Serge Guilbaut is French. His concurrence with the belief of the American scholars in the dominance of postwar American art might therefore be taken to indicate that there is no dispute along national lines over this proposition. This

conclusion might be too hasty, however. Guilbaut is an unusual Frenchman, having studied at an American university, and taught at a Canadian one; perhaps his views are not representative of French scholars in general. American historian Anna Chave (1989, 199) suggests as much:

The reality that the center of the art market moved to New York after World War II has never been open to question, but the notion that the New York School artists precipitated that move by proving themselves the most path-breaking or originative and influential artists of their time has never had the currency among European critics that it has with their American counterparts.

A recent example of the attitude to which Chave refers was given by Bernard Blistène, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of France's Musée national d'art moderne, on the occasion of a joint exhibition of French and American art in 1998:

No one can deny that Paris and New York were the two centers of art directly after the [second world] war, even if New York has tried to proclaim itself the sole art capital of that time ... So, the choice of some key works by Antonin Artaud, Henri Michaux, Fautrier, Wols - without speaking, of course, of a younger generation - must now be considered by the American audience in a discussion of postwar art (Blistène and Dennison 1998, 102-03).

The preeminence of American art in the decades after World War II is simply assumed by American art scholars. The comments of Chave and Blistène raise the possibility that this assumption is not shared by French scholars. Yet Chave's remark is a casual comment presented without documentation, while Blistène's might simply be a politically correct statement by a highly placed employee of the French government. Do French and American art scholars really disagree on the relative merits of the New York School and the Ecole de Paris? The interest of the question is heightened by the universality of the assumption of American preeminence among American scholars. If an assumption this uncontroversial in the United States is in fact not accepted in France, it would make a powerful statement about potential national differences

in the assessment of modern art.

This study will present systematic quantitative evidence aimed at answering this question. As in a series of earlier studies that have measured the consensus of art scholars on the relative importance of particular painters, and paintings, the study will be based on the tabulation of illustrations in published surveys of art history.<sup>2</sup> In order to compare the views of French and American art scholars, two separate inventories of illustrations of the work of a selected group of artists will be made, one drawn from books by French scholars, the other using books by Americans.

### The Artists and the Evidence

The goal in choosing the artists to be studied here was to select the most important painters who lived and worked in the United States and France in the decades after World War II. The selection of the American artists was based on an earlier study. That study used a survey of textbook illustrations to rank the 35 leading painters born during 1900-40 who worked in the United States (Galenson 2002c). This study will consider the 15 of those painters who were found to have the largest number of illustrations; they are listed in Table 1. Eleven were born in the US, while four were immigrants who spent their adult lives in the US.<sup>3</sup>

The French painters were selected by using four French textbooks on the history of modern art published since 1982.<sup>4</sup> The first step was to list all artists who had at least one work illustrated in at least three of these books. The eleven artists on this list who were born in France between 1900 and 1940 were placed in the sample, as were another five artists on the list who were born elsewhere but spent most of their careers in France. In addition, the requirement of being born in 1900 or after was relaxed to include three other distinguished French artists who

were born during 1896-99. The resulting sample of 19 artists is listed in Table 2.

While the definition of an American or French artist is necessarily somewhat subjective, the goal of this study is to consider the most important artists who worked in New York and Paris during the two generations following World War II. Rather than possibly excluding important artists on the narrow grounds of national origin, the intent here was to err, if at all, on the side of inclusiveness, in recognition of the powerful pull of New York and Paris on artists from many nations during the decades after World War II. Artists are consequently classified not simply by place of birth, but by where they made their professional contributions.

The evidence for this study was drawn from textbooks, or other illustrated surveys of art history, including reference works and monographs. The books were divided into two groups: those written by Americans, and those by French authors.<sup>5</sup> Apart from being the product of American or French authors, the only other requirements for the books were that they had to be published after 1980, and that they had to cover all of the relevant history of art. Thus specific artists might or might not have their work reproduced in a given book, according to the judgment of the author, but the key selection criterion was that no artist in the sample for this study could be excluded from a book on the basis of the time period, place, or type of art treated by the book.

A total of 23 books by Americans, and 29 books by French authors, were found that satisfied these criteria.<sup>6</sup> The data set for this study was created by listing every reproduction of every work of art shown in these two sets of books by all of the 34 artists in the sample.

### Cross-Cultural Canon Comparisons

The most basic summary measure of scholars' judgments of the importance of the artists

is presented in Tables 3 and 4, which rank the artists by the total number of illustrations of their work contained in the American and French textbooks, respectively. The two tables show a striking contrast.

The American ranking of Table 3 is dominated by American artists. Americans hold the top 7 positions; Jean Dubuffet, tied for 8<sup>th</sup>, is the only French artist ranked in the top 10. Only one other French artist is ranked above any of the Americans, as Yves Klein ranks 15<sup>th</sup>. The other 17 French artists hold the lowest 17 positions in the ranking. Four of these fail to have a single illustration in the American textbooks.

In contrast, a French artist holds the top position in the French ranking of Table 4, as Dubuffet leads Jackson Pollock by a narrow margin, and Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Johns by a wider one. Klein ranks 6<sup>th</sup>, and Pierre Soulages 7<sup>th</sup>, giving French artists 3 of the highest 7 positions. French artists furthermore hold 10 of the top 20 positions. French artists do rank in 5 of the lowest 7 positions, but the American Philip Guston holds the very lowest ranking.

French artists thus fare dramatically better in the judgments of French scholars than in those of Americans. In view of this, it is not surprising that French scholars also hold the individual works of French artists in higher esteem than do their American counterparts. For the same artists, Tables 5 and 6 rank individual works according to the total number of illustrations of them that appear in the American and French books, respectively.

The American ranking of Table 5 is dominated by American paintings. No French painting is ranked among the top 19, and only 3 French paintings are ranked in the highest 29. In this ranking, each of 5 Americans has as many paintings listed as do all the French artists



combined, and Jasper Johns by himself has more paintings than do all the French artists.

The French ranking of Table 6 yields very different results. Yves Klein's *Monochrome (IKB3)* ties Barnett Newman's *Adam* for the third position. And another painting by Klein is joined by works by Arman, Dubuffet, Fautrier, Hantai, and Raysse in a 13-way tie for the fifth position, so that no less than 7 works by French artists rank among the total of 17 listed in the table. The two ranked paintings by Klein give him as many works in Table 6 as any artist in the sample, and his total is equaled only by two Americans, Johns and Rauschenberg.

One other interesting measure of the importance of artists' contributions is the number of illustrations that appear in the textbooks that represent works done by an artist in a single year. This measure can capture the significance of important and sudden innovations that are not embodied in a single painting, but instead appear in a group of works, perhaps created for a single exhibition.<sup>7</sup> Using this measure, Tables 7 and 8 rank the most productive single years of the artists in the sample again as judged by the American and French texts, respectively.

Americans again dominate the ranking of Table 7. Andy Warhol is ranked first, for his early contributions to Pop Art in 1962. Americans hold the top 7 positions in the table, and 12 of the top 13. Of the total of 29 individual years ranked, only 3 represent French artists.

The French ranking of Table 8 presents a very different assessment. The single most important year, by a wide margin, is judged to be Yves Klein's work of 1960. A second French entry in the top 10 positions is for Martial Raysse's work of 1963, which ties for fifth place. In total, French scholars judge that 11 of the most important 25 individual years of artistic contributions by sample members are attributable to French artists.

#### Age and Achievement: Generational Differences

Table 8 includes intriguing evidence on artists' ages. If we examine the French entries, this tabulation of important years represents a very wide range of ages. Thus Martial Raysse's entry in the table is for work he did at just 27, whereas one of Jean Dubuffet's 3 entries is for work he did at the advanced age of 83. The difference of 56 years is obviously dramatic, but a comparison of just two entries might have no substantive significance. The possibility that it might not be due to chance, however, is suggested by a further comparison. The 11 French entries in Table 8 are associated with 7 different artists. Four of these artists - Dubuffet, Fautrier, Soulages, and de Staël - were born before 1920. Their mean age at the time of their entries in Table 8 was 46. The other three artists - Arman, Klein, and Raysse - were born after 1920. Their mean age at the time of their entries in Table 8 was just 31.

This difference for the French artists is particularly suggestive because of its parallel to the results of an earlier study of the leading American artists of this period. That study found that there was a marked difference in the timing of the careers of the major American painters born before and after 1920, as the artists born prior to 1920 tended to produce their most important work substantially later in their careers than was the case for their successors (Galenson 2002c).

The earlier study was based on the analysis of textbooks published in English. Interestingly, the evidence of the French textbooks surveyed for the present study both confirms the earlier results for the American artists and extends them to the French artists. Thus Table 9 shows the ages of artists in the year (or years, in case of ties) from which the French books reproduced the largest number of their works. The table is restricted to artists who had at least one year with a minimum of 3 illustrations. The median age of the American artists born before

1920 in their best years was 47.5, well above the median age of 32 for the Americans born after 1920. Similarly, the median age of the earlier French artists in their best years, of 44 years, was well above the median age of 33 for their successors.

The earlier study found that the later generation of Americans not only made their major contributions at younger ages than did their predecessors, but also that they made them more suddenly, within shorter periods of time. The French textbooks provide evidence that this relationship also holds for the French artists. Thus whereas Table 5 showed that French scholars considered Dubuffet's overall contribution to be greater than that of any other French artist in the sample, Table 8 showed that the same evidence revealed that four other French artists ranked ahead of Dubuffet in the importance of individual years of their careers. Three of these four - including Klein, who ranked first in Table 8 - were born after 1920. Table 10 provides additional evidence for all the French artists, presenting the share of each artist's total illustrations in the French texts accounted for by his single best year. The mean of this value for the 7 artists of the younger generation, of 48%, is double the mean of 24% for the older generation. The lowest value in the sample occurs for Dubuffet, for whom no more than 10% of his total illustrations are of works done in a single year, while the highest values occur for Klein and Raysse, for whom more than 70% of their total illustrations represent work done in just one year.

#### Experimental and Conceptual Innovators

The differing career patterns of the American artists appeared to have been a result of a difference in the way they produced their major contributions. Pollock, de Kooning, and the other Abstract Expressionists innovated experimentally, using a process of trial and error. Their

innovations took long periods to develop, and emerged gradually over time. In contrast Johns, Warhol, and their contemporaries innovated conceptually, by incorporating new ideas into their work. Their innovations emerged suddenly, usually early in their artistic careers.<sup>8</sup>

The same explanation appears to account for the differing career patterns of the French artists. Interestingly, the same timing emerges for the leading French artists, as the major artists born before 1920 generally worked experimentally, while the major artists born after that date innovated conceptually.

Jean Dubuffet emerges from this study as the most important French artist of the birth cohorts considered: as seen in Tables 3 and 4, the American art scholars place him clearly above the other French artists, and the French scholars also place him above all the Americans of his time. American respect for Dubuffet's work is not a recent phenomenon: in 1946 Clement Greenberg (1986, 90) stated his opinion that "Dubuffet seems the most original painter to have come out of the School of Paris since Miró," and in 1968 William Rubin of New York's Museum of Modern Art declared that Dubuffet was "in my estimation the only major painter to emerge in Europe after World War II" (Franzke 1981, 12-13). American painters had also long been familiar with Dubuffet's work, from a series of exhibits of his paintings at Pierre Matisse's New York gallery beginning in 1947. In 1951, for example, Jackson Pollock reported to a friend that, to his surprise, "I was really excited about Dubuffet's [recent] show" (Friedman 1995, 171).

The principal source of Dubuffet's art lay in what he named Art Brut (Raw Art). He was inspired by the art of the self-taught or untrained - predominantly the art of the mentally ill, but also children's drawings, the graffiti of Paris' slums, and the cave paintings of Lascaux. He admired this art for its simplicity, its power, and its expressiveness, and he sought to match these

qualities in his own work. He rejected cultural refinement and traditional concepts of artistic beauty, and his goal was to create art that represented the viewpoint of the common man.

Dubuffet's art was figurative, with recognizable subjects presented as two-dimensional outlines; he once wrote that his intent was to "seek ingenious ways to flatten objects on the surface" (Messer 1973, 24). He devoted considerable effort to devising new technical procedures, including the use of accidental effects, that would help him eliminate traditional values from his art. He chose objects that were banal and mundane, and he drew them crudely, often with exaggeration. He consistently looked for unconventional materials that he could use to produce unconventional images. When he used oil paint he often thickened it with sand or glue, to give his works a rough surface, and at times he instead used tar, plaster, asphalt, and even mud. During the 1950s he made one series of collages composed entirely of butterfly wings, and another of dried leaves, tree bark, flowers, and roots; he also made sculptures of crumpled newspapers, lumps of coal, sponges, and other found objects. In telling a friend of the collages made with botanical elements, Dubuffet wrote that "They aim also (like all my work, I believe) to provide a slight upset in the mind in recourse to the absurd and delirious" (Franzke 1981, 133).

Dubuffet studied art as a young man, but abandoned it because of his dislike for existing values. After working as a wine merchant for nearly two decades he returned to art in 1942, at the age of 41. His methods were those of an experimental artist, as he proceeded by trial and error, without preconceived results. During the 1950s, for example, he produced works he called assemblages by cutting up and reassembling painted surfaces. He wrote about these later:

This assemblage technique, so rich in unexpected effects, and with the possibilities it offers of very quickly changing the

effects obtained through modifying the disposition of the haphazard pieces scattered on a table, and thus of making numerous experiments, seemed to me an incomparable laboratory and an efficacious means of invention. This said, I admit that I am often satisfied with imperfect realizations, in a hurry to go on to other experiments, and so put off to a later date developing them with greater application.

It is true that what I have just said about these assemblages in ink applies equally to most of my paintings (perhaps all of them), for they are usually done in the same spirit of research and experimentation, with the idea of developing them more carefully later. This I often fail to do, impatient as I am to go on to other experiments. Besides, I really believe that the hasty and unfinished character of a painting adds to the pleasure it gives me, and I seldom feel that the effects I have sketched need a more meticulous execution.

He later returned to the point to emphasize that his concern was more with the development of processes for making paintings than with actually producing finished results:

Whatever the relative success of these Tableaux d'Assemblages looked at from the point of view of realization, I can say with complete assurance that for anyone who might consider this method as at least a factor of improvisation and experimentation, as a spur to imagination, as a gymnastic exercise to free painting from inherited conventions and inhibiting prejudices, as a stimulant to inventiveness in every domain (subject, composition, drawing, coloring) or at least as a preliminary means toward the realization of future paintings that would not even resort to this method - it is extremely exciting and fruitful (Selz 1962, 105-06, 121).

Dubuffet produced an enormous amount of art between 1942 and his death in 1985. He is not known particularly for any individual masterpiece, or for the work of any single period; the critic John Russell (1999, 286) observed of his situation in the late 1950s that “the level of his work to date was uncommonly even,” and the evidence of the textbooks suggests that this assessment can be extended further. Thus Table 11 shows that no less than 25 different years of his career are represented in the French texts, including 1984, the last full year of his life, when

he was 83. As noted above, there are no pronounced peaks in Dubuffet's career, as no single year accounts for more than one-tenth of his total illustrations, and Table 11 shows that over a career span of 40 years there is no period of more than 3 years that is not represented by any illustrations.

Dubuffet worked independently, he did not found a school or movement, and he did not have a group of direct followers. He is not recognized primarily for any one specific contribution, but his materials, techniques, and images influenced a variety of younger artists. Thus artists as diverse as Anthony Caro, David Hockney, Claes Oldenburg, and Cy Twombly have all specifically acknowledged debts to Dubuffet's work.<sup>9</sup> More generally, Dubuffet's rejection of beauty in art and his use of crude materials have been credited with helping to create the conditions for Pop Art and other movements of the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

After Dubuffet, the most highly placed French artist of the older generation in the French rankings is Pierre Soulages. His art was a type of gestural abstraction often referred to as Tachisme, from the French word for blot or splash, or more broadly as Art Informel (art without form). Soulages' black-and-white paintings are often compared to those of Franz Kline, and Soulages' accounts of his work closely resemble the experimental attitudes of the American Abstract Expressionists. Thus he spoke of the uncertainty of his goals, and how he learned in the course of working:

What I do tells me what I am seeking, but at the time I discover it only vaguely or partially. A retrospective exhibition, in leading me to examine the past, is always an experience that helps me to see more clearly what I have pursued.

He painted by instinct:

Often I decide to do something, to intervene in a certain way and I

don't know why, and I don't seek to know why. It's obvious to me that I have to do that, but I don't study it.

For Soulages the process of making a painting was one of discovery:

It's a kind of dialogue between what I think is being born on the canvas, and what I feel, and step by step, I advance and it transforms itself and develops, becomes clearer and more intense in a way that interests me or not. Sometimes it surprises me; those aren't the worst times, when I lose my way and another appears, unexpectedly.

The decision that one of his paintings was finished was made on visual grounds, over a period of time:

When I see that I can't add much without changing everything, I stop and consider that the picture is finished for the moment, that for now it should remain as it is. Then I turn the picture to the wall and I don't look at it for several days, several weeks, sometimes several months. And then when I look at it again, if it still seems to accomplish something, if it seems alive, then it can leave the studio (Kuthy 1999, 22-4).

Soulages' birthdate of 1919 placed him at the end of the cohort of experimental artists, and in consequence his most influential work was done in the 1950s, the last decade dominated by that cohort before the conceptual revolutions of the 1960s. Yet the continuing evolution of his work thereafter accounts for the fact that the textbooks also contain illustrations of work he did through the 1960s, '70s, '80s, and even the '90s, when he had passed the age of 70.

Yves Klein is the second highest-ranked French artist overall in both the American and French rankings of Tables 3 and 4. That Klein could make a substantial contribution in spite of his premature death in 1962, at the age of just 32, is a direct consequence of his conceptual approach to art. This approach is reflected in both sets of textbooks, for the American authors judge Klein's work of 1960 to constitute the most important contribution made in a single year



by any French artist in this sample, while the French texts go farther, judging it the greatest contribution of a single year by any artist in the sample.

All of Klein's work was motivated by his fascination with the void. His trademark monochrome paintings were intended to avoid technical and aesthetic concerns and lead viewers to what the critic Pierre Restany called a meditative "moment of truth" (Charlet 2000, 58-64). Most of the monochromes were made in the ultramarine blue that Klein patented in 1960 under the name IKB, or International Klein Blue. His choice of blue was prompted by its lack of association with the material or tangible: "blue, at the very most, recalls the sea and sky, which are the most abstract aspects of tangible and visible nature (Stich 1994, 78).

Klein initially became known for his monochromes. Yet although the monochromes are recognized by the textbooks, they are not presented as his primary achievement. In both sets of books, the majority of illustrations for his peak year of 1960 are of a different series of works, which he introduced in that year. Klein had long dreamt of flying, and in 1960 he arrived at a new means of producing images of weightless human bodies in space. Under his direction, nude models would apply IKB to their bodies, then press themselves against large sheets of paper tacked to the wall or spread on the floor. These paintings were initially made before audiences - first in front of friends at Klein's apartment, then a few weeks later at a Paris art gallery, before 100 invited guests. At the first of these sessions, Pierre Restany gave the works the name Klein subsequently adopted, calling them anthropometries (Weitmeier 2001, 51-55). For Klein, the use of "living brushes" that recorded images under his direction allowed him to create visual representations of human energy that were more natural and universal than any product of an artist's hand: "By maintaining myself at a specific and obligatory distance from the surface to be

painted, I am able to resolve the problem of detachment” (Klein 1961). The desirability of this detachment followed from Klein’s belief that the essence of art was immaterial, and consequently that the artist should conceive works of art but not produce physical objects: “True ‘painters and poets’ don’t paint and don’t write poems” (Charlet 2000, 170).

The eventual importance of the anthropometries stemmed not only from their visual images of levitating figures, but also from the manner, and the initial setting, of their execution. Since Klein was not directly involved in the application of paint to the paper on which the models made their imprints, the anthropometries were an early example of the concept of the executive artist that would later be used extensively by Warhol, Stella, and other artists of the ‘60s. And the public production of the first anthropometries made them an early instance of performance art, which also rose to great prominence later in the decade.

The significance of Klein’s work of 1960 thus stems from his role as one of the conceptual innovators who ushered in the decade of the ‘60s , that would come to be dominated by conceptual art.<sup>11</sup> The sudden and discrete nature of his contribution is indicated by the timing of the textbook treatments: of Klein’s total of 29 illustrations in the French texts, only 2 are of work done before 1960, and only 6 are from the two years of his life that remained after 1960, while 21 date from that single peak year.

The one other French artist whose work of a single year places him within the top 10 positions in the French ranking of Table 8 is Martial Raysse, for his work of 1963. Since Raysse was just 27 in that year - the only artist with a younger entry in the table is Jasper Johns - it is not surprising that his art was conceptual.

Raysse was among the founding members of a French group (that also included Klein)

that established itself in 1960 under the name of Nouveau Réalistes (New Realists). Raysse's work at the time consisted primarily of sculptures assembled from consumer goods purchased at variety stores: he presented these objects just as he bought them because he felt they expressed modern society (Semin 1992, 36-38). During the next few years, Raysse's work moved closed to American Pop art, and Raysse settled in the US in 1962 (Britt 1999, 353). His paintings of 1963 typically used photographic images of beautiful women, transformed by the use of gaudy colors, with artificial flowers and other objects attached to the canvas, to produce images that were often considered a variant of American Pop art.

Raysse's artistic career has continued to the present, but his work after 1963 receives little attention from the textbooks: the French books follow the 8 illustrations of his work of 1963 with only 2 more, from the mid-'60s. The texts therefore imply that - like other minor Pop artists of the early '60s who are not included in this study - Raysse made a single significant conceptual contribution at an early age.

### Conclusion

This comparison of American and French assessments of the relative importance of the two countries' leading painters of the two generations after World War II does hold some surprises for Americans, though perhaps not for French scholars. Whereas Americans have a simple view of this competition, the French view is more complex.

American scholars clearly subscribe to a belief in the superiority of the American artists. By the metric of illustrations in textbooks written by Americans, all the leading artists of both generations were Americans, as Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko of the first generation, and Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol, and Stella of the second, all rank ahead of any French artist.

Dubuffet follows this group, and is the only French artist to rank ahead of more than 2 Americans; 17 of the 19 French artists rank below all the 15 Americans in the sample.

French textbooks present a more complicated ranking. The French authors concede that the major movements of the '50s and '60s were led by Americans: thus Pollock's Abstract Expressionism places him above any of France's Tachistes, Warhol's Pop Art places him above any of the Nouveau Réalistes, and Johns and Rauschenberg rank above any French artists of the '60s for their role in the transition to the conceptual art of that decade. But the French don't concede that the other Americans in these movements dominated French artists, as Soulages ranks above de Kooning, Rothko, and the other Abstract Expressionists, and Klein stands above Stella, Lichtenstein, and the other Americans of the '60s. And perhaps most striking of all is the French scholars' ranking of Dubuffet as the most important artist in this entire sample - only narrowly ahead of Pollock, but well above all the other Americans.

Dubuffet's position as an important artist is unusual in the history of modern art, for he did not work closely with other artists, and he was not a member of a larger movement. Nonetheless, he was a transitional figure who broke with the French fine art tradition, and his work foreshadowed, even if it did not directly inspire, many of the radical artistic developments of the '60s. Although American art scholars have long respected Dubuffet, most would probably be surprised at the consensus of French scholars revealed here, which places him above Pollock, Johns, Warhol, and the other Americans of his time as the key figure of these cohorts.

A few simple quantitative measures emphasize the disagreements between American and French scholars. This survey of French texts found that 4 Americans and 2 French painters were represented by an average of at least one illustration per book. In contrast, in the American texts

12 Americans and only one French artist had an average of one or more illustrations per book. Similarly, French texts included an average of at least one-half illustration per book for 10 Americans, and 10 French artists; American texts gave this number to 15 Americans, and only 3 French artists. Perhaps most telling of all is a single comparison. The 34 artists in the sample considered here collected a total of 671 illustrations in the American texts, and 610 in the French texts. In the American texts, 552 of these illustrations, or 82%, were of work by Americans, whereas in the French texts only 312, or 51%, were of the work of Americans. The American texts' ratio of American to French illustrations was thus a remarkable 4.6:1, while this ratio for the illustrations in the French texts was just 1.05:1.<sup>12</sup>

These comparisons leave little doubt that there is a sharp contrast in French and American perceptions of the relative importance of the two countries' leading artists of the decades after World War II. As in most disagreements of this kind, this difference of opinion cannot be definitively attributed to the parochialism of either countries' experts. Yet in trying to make a preliminary assessment of where the greater blame might fall, it is relevant to note that American scholars clearly accept the dominance of French over American artists earlier in the modern period.<sup>13</sup> What seems likely in taking stock of the post-World War II era is that French scholars continue to find it difficult to accept the sudden loss of French leadership in modern art following a century of unquestioned hegemony, and that the results of the present study reveal their wishful thinking. This analysis of their narratives may therefore indicate the persistence of the state of mind the Australian/American critic Robert Hughes (1992, 16) perceived when he wrote of "Paris at the end of the fifties, when the French were busy persuading themselves that Soulages, Poliakoff, Hartung, and Mathieu and other artists formed a generation that could

eventually step into the shoes of the patriarchs of the Paris School.” Thus even today French scholars are perhaps unable to concede what an English critic recently stated: “American artists have dominated the world for 50 years ... [T]he American art of the 1940s and 1950s ... would never have made the impact it did unless it really was better than what was happening in Europe” (Jones 2002). Even the apparently magnanimous Guilbaut, a Frenchman who is able to make this concession, could not resist titling his 1983 study *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

Yet beyond the measurement and comparison of scholars’ judgments of the relative importance of the leading French and American artists of the ‘50s and 60s, this study has revealed the similarity of the artists’ careers across national boundaries. Thus both the French and American artists born before 1920 tended to produce their best work later in their careers than did artists of both nationalities of the next generation. The similarity of these career patterns was in turn due to common approaches and conceptions of art, as both in France and the US the leading artists of the 1950s were experimental innovators, whereas in both countries the leading artists of the next generation were conceptual innovators. Just as convergence of prices reflects the integration of a market for commodities, the convergence of career patterns observed here reflects the convergence of a market for ideas. In the decades after World War II, artists in France and the US were influenced by the same artistic traditions, and shared the same artistic conceptions and methods. While French and American scholars may disagree over the relative merit of their nations’ artists, there is no disagreement that the most important art of the ‘50s was produced by experimental seekers, and that of the ‘60s by conceptual finders.<sup>14</sup>

#### Footnotes

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1. E.g. see Wheeler (1992, 25) and Fineberg (1999, 41).
2. E.g. see Galenson (2002a, 2002d).
3. The one painter excluded from the leading 15 listed in Galenson (2002c), Table 2, for the purposes of this study was David Hockney. He is the only artist in that group who has significantly divided his career between his native country and the US.
4. One of these books was Dagen (1998). For the other three see Appendix 2.
5. As for artists, the national identification of authors was not based simply on nativity. Long-time residents of the US, like Robert Hughes, were considered American for the purposes of this study.
6. These are listed in Appendixes 1 and 2.
7. Earlier in the modern era, the dominance of large group exhibitions in the art world had given painters a strong incentive to embody their innovations in impressive individual works that could attract attention even when hung among large numbers of paintings by many different painters. By the time considered in this study, however, one-man shows in private galleries had become the principal format for exhibitions, and the incentive for artists was consequently to produce a group of paintings that would together make up an impressive show. The measure of Tables 7 and 8 recognizes this incentive. For discussion of the change in exhibition formats and its impact on artists' practices, see Galenson (2002b).
8. For additional discussion of experimental and conceptual innovation, see Galenson (2001, Chap. 5).
9. Sylvester (1997, 289); Livingstone (1996, 24-25); Madoff (1997, 140, 144); Varnedoe (1994, 15).
10. E.g. see Hamilton (1974, 525); Bowness (1972, 170); Dempsey (2002, 176).
11. The rankings of Tables 7 and 8 demonstrate that art historians consider Klein's work to have been influential in contemporary art. Yet in 1967 critic John Canaday (1969, 84-87) reacted to a Klein retrospective by denouncing his art as "stuntsmanship" that consisted of no more than "a series of tricks," and the exhibition itself as an "exaltation of nonsense." These accusations of artistic insincerity and incompetence have become increasingly common charges against conceptual innovators since Marcel Duchamp, but they date back farther, at least to the conceptual innovations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

centuries; Galenson (2001, Chap 8).

12. If we drop four French artists to equalize the number of artists by country, the ratio of illustrations of American to French artists in the French texts rises only to 1.15:1.
13. Thus, for example, a comparison of two earlier studies of textbook illustrations shows that the American James A. M. Whistler fares hardly better relative to the great French painters of his day in texts published in English than in those published in French. In a survey of texts in English, Whistler had 21% as many illustrations as Cézanne, 22% as many as Manet, and 23% as many as Monet (Galenson 2002a, Table 2). In a comparable survey of texts in French, Whistler had 19% as many illustrations as Cézanne, 24% as many as Manet, and 21% as many as Monet (Galenson 2002d, Table 2). The agreement of the two sets of scholars on Whistler's importance relative to the French masters is clear.
14. For a discussion of the generational predominance of experimental and conceptual innovation in modern art, see Galenson (2001, Chaps. 8-9).