



Jennifer Karch Verzè 1992-2022

**ABSTRACT ART  
IN AMERICA  
1945-1980**

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# **ABSTRACT ART IN AMERICA 1945-1980**

**(WITH A SPECIAL  
LOOK AT ART IN ITALY)**

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This essay was first written in 1992, when I was working at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Palazzo Forti, in Verona, Italy. In 2020 I found it cleaning up my Art Archives, typed on an old fashioned computer and I decided to rewrite and revise it as I write, in 2022. I hope it brings knowledge and fascination to this art movement as it did to me, years ago.

1992- 2020 - 2022

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## **THE ARTISTS:**

Max Ernst Roberto Matta, Salvador Dali, André Breton and  
André Masson  
Josef Albers  
Hans Hofmann  
Johannes Itten  
Ashille Gorky  
Jackson Pollock  
Tancredi and Emilio Vedova  
Franz Kline  
Willem de Kooning  
Mark Rothko  
Adolf Gottlieb  
Robert Motherwell

Ad Reinhardt  
Ellsworth Kelly  
Morris Louis  
Barnett Newman  
Jack Bush  
Kenneth Noland  
Helen Frankenthaler  
Frank Stella  
Jules Olitski  
Richard Serra  
Kurt Switters  
Carl André, Robert Morris  
Sol Le Witt and Donald Judd  
Schoonoven, Morellet, Uncini e Camino



# PROLOGUE

When the world war ended in 1945, it formed a convenient dividing line for the art historians, since in this case, the line coincided with a genuine crisis in the development of twentieth-century painting and sculpture. It was at about this time that the visual arts embarked on a new road which resulted partially from changes due to the war itself. The art world could not survive untouched by such a mammoth event as a world war. In fact, in countries like Italy, where Germans had invaded, modern artists had great difficulty in surviving. Meanwhile, at the same time, the United States was established as one of the two world powers and the richer and more powerful of the two.

From the 1930's onward, the artistic life of America, especially New York, had been enriched by wave upon waves immigrants, in flight from the terror of the war and Nazi invasion. Included in the waves were many European avant-garde artists who found the United States a very hospitable place to further their activities. These new arrivals integrated more easily than they would have in these countries, since the population of the United States was itself an amalgamation of all the European Nations.

## CHAPTER 1

# ARTISTIC STYLES

## After 1945



**A**rtistic styles of visual arts after 1945 have been a series of frequent and changing “isms” and movements which have succeeded each other rather quickly.

### THE ART MOVEMENTS:

- Abstract Expressionism, Post-Painterly Abstraction  
Colour- Field Painting, Minimal Art, Assemblage, Pop Art, OP Art, Kinetic Art, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Super Realism, Neo-expressionism, Figurative Art , Return to abstraction.

### THE ITALIAN ART MOVEMENTS:

The rapidity and diversity of the changes is even apparent in European countries such as Italy, which have had a dramatic and significant development of post-war art with:

- Abstract Art, Spazialismo, Informale, Pop Art, Arte Povera  
- di Germano Celente, Transavanguardia - di Achille Bonita Oliva...and once again a return to Abstraction



The swiftness of the changes which have overcome the international art world has tended however to conceal certain facts. One is that all these movements represent a re-evaluation and re-shifting of ideas already known and discussed before the Second World War. Though the art world has fluctuated from the extremely and almost desperately personal to the coolly impersonal or “depersonalisation”, the terms of conflict were already established previously. These contemporary stylistic changes differ, however, from the pre-war movements in that they develop and exaggerate the borrowed form, while playing down the content. The concept of aesthetic order - of an art which appeals primarily to the senses without invoking ideas, symbols or description is closely tied to the main objectives of the abstract movement in modern art. Much of contemporary painting can be understood as an effort to develop a language which is purely visual, communicating qualities which belong to the work of line, light, shape, texture and colours alone.

**Dore Ashton** (New York 1928 - 2017) says, “*I maggiori artisti del movimento artistico astratto avevano seriamente mediato i due principali temi di ispirazione, il subconscio e le masse*”.

There has always been a dual struggle for primacy and leadership in the art world between the United States and Europe, in the twentieth century. For many years, the two rival artistic centres were New York and Paris, especially during the late 1940's and the 1950's with the rise of **Abstract Expressionism**, which was the first American raid

on the European artistic stronghold. By triumphing throughout Europe, **Abstract Expressionism** became the beneficiary of economic power in the states and Europe itself. Europeans were impressed with American vitality, the New American purchasing power and the importance of American opinion. Ultimately, the smaller art centres of Europe - Milan, Brussels, Zurich, London - were more profoundly affected than Paris.

**Filiberto Menna** (Salerno 1926 - Rome 1988) describes:

*“Anche in Italia le nuove ricerche non oggettive, muovono da una situazione coincidente con gli inizi degli anni sessanta. Ancora una volta, i termini di riferimento sono rappresentati dalla tradizione astratta europea e italiane in particolare tra le due guerre, e dalla più vicine esperienze informali, e i cui confronti gli artisti assumono un’atteggiamento di contrapposizione piuttosto radicale, anche se la presenza di alcuni maestri continua a incidere, sia pure per vie sotterranee e sinuose, sulle nuove ricerche.”*



## CHAPTER 2

# ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

1945-1960

**Abstract Expressionism**, the first of the great post-war art movements which dominated the international art scene from 1946-1960, had its roots in surrealism, the most important movement of the period immediately before the war. The movement reintroduced the huge canvases of Baroque and Neo-classical vintage: some canvases reached dimensions of up to 8 meters. Dissatisfied with the utopian orientation of such European abstract art, which seemed irrelevant in the face of World War II, The Abstract Expressionists searched for new ways to affirm value and meaning in human existence. This led them to **Surrealism**, when the artists allowed the subconscious to express itself, which is a Surrealist idea, by the creation of involuntary shapes and dribbles of paint. They also found an affinity for the Surrealist notion of a universal collective unconscious that united all humanity.

After the outbreak of war, the Surrealists movement with **Max Ernst**, **Roberto Matta** (1911 Chile - 2002 Italy), **Salvador Dali** (1904-1989 Spain), **André Breton** (1896- 1966

France) and **André Masson** (1896 - 1987 France) moved “en masse” to New York. Peggy Guggenheim, then married to **Max Ernst** (1891 Germany- 1976 Paris) provided the group with a center for their artistic activities and opened The Art of This Century Gallery in 1942, che became a center for the School of New York Abstract Expressionists. It provided a fresh and challenging territory for their intellectual and cultural activities and they thrived in this new environment. American art counted little for this avant-garde Europeans, even though a few distinguished immigrants such as **Josef Albers** (1888 Germany - 1976 United States), thanks to his educational activities in the Bauhaus and **Hans Hofmann** (1880 Germany - 1966 United States), were significant in the change in American art. Albers taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina and the publication of his *“Interaction of Colour”* in 1963 was fundamental for the development of colour theory. Hofmann also taught at the Arts Students League in New York and at his own schools on 8th street and in Provincetown, Mass. Hofmann’s work, in which he used dribbles and free patterns of explosive force influenced many young painters. **Dore Ashton** says,

*“La teorie di astrazione che alle fine vennero distillate nel moto “push and pull”, per mezzo della quale egli adottino ai suoi studenti della moderna teoria della composizione.”*

As a means to achieve universal communication, many Abstract Expressionists eliminated specific, identifiable forms from their imagery. Instead, they produced images what emphasised both he nature of painting which was defined primarily pur pure colours and the process of its creation. **Filiberto Menna** states,

*“I fattori protagonisti del procedimento pittorico diventano la struttura del quadro e il colore”.*

The most important link between European Surrealism and what was to follow was **Ashille Gorky**, (Armenia 1904 - United States 1948) an Armenian who arrived in American in 1920. Far less European was the work of **Jackson Pollock** (1912 Wyoming - 1956 New York), who fell under the influence of the Surrealists and Diego Rivera, but by 1947, when he abandoned the use of brushes, he broke through with a style he is best known for: free, informal abstraction. This was based on the techniques of dripping and smearing paint onto the canvas which was tacked to the floor, commonly called “**Action Painting**”, which was dependent on its effectiveness upon the communication of the artists brushing gestures. By emphasising the process itself, the artist was able to express and thereby celebrate the very activity of painting. Only by letting the act of painting be automatic, spontaneous and unpremeditated, could the artist approach the universal unconsciousness that resides in all humanity. **Luca Venturi** says,

*“Nello Action Painting, la tela si presenta come un campo aperto all'azione dell'artista, non come spazio sul quale riprodurre analizzare o esprimere dati reali o immaginari.”*

This gestural painting had influence on some Italian painters after Pollocks's paintings we exhibited as part of Peggy Guggenheim's Collection at the Venice Biennale of 1948 and the following year and in Florence and Milan. The

possible influence of Pollock on such artists such as **Tancredi** (1927 Feltre - 1964 Rome) **and Emilio Vedova** (1919 Venice - 2006 Venice) has been much discussed, but one thing is for certain, “**gesture**” and surface calligraphy became the key components of all artists work.

**Abstract Expressionism** (hereby known as AE) has been called a “Heroic Art” and in a sense it is - both for its daring attempt to express at once chaos and order, destruction and creativity and for its affirmation of a vital, human spirit in the face of annihilation and loss of meaning. **Harold Rosenberg**, the chief theorist of AE in the The Tradition of the New describes the movement as gesture on the canvas:

*“a gesture of liberation from Value - political, aesthetic, moral.”*

This energetic gesture is typified by Pollock, **Franz Kline** (1910 Pennsylvania - 1962 New York) **and Willem de Kooning** (1904 Rotterdam - 1997 New York US).

The other type of AE, typified by **Mark Rothko** ( 1903, Latvia - 1970 NY, United States) is a more purely abstract, **tranquil, lyrical** with the use of fuzzy and muddled edges. As a painter, Rothko endeavoured to employ colour as if it were a **mystical light** which can surround the viewer and engulf his vision. He applied the pigment to the canvas by staining it, hence we have no awareness of it as a brushed-on substance - it seems to be an integral part of the canvas which radiates a coloured light. It appears Rothko was seeking a way of changing the viewer’s mode of consciousness through colour, an objective unlike that of

Kandinsky, who sought to communicate emotions, while an artist like **Adolf Gottlieb** (1903 New York - 1974 New York) looked to communicate an idea through form and colour.

**Ernest Feldman** describes Rothko as wanting painting to “*seize the consciousness, to get behind man’s thought and feeling.*” All these artists exhibited at the Art of This Century Gallery owned by Peggy Guggenheim in New York, along with **Robert Motherwell** (1915 Washington-1991 Massachusetts) and Hans Hoffmann.

The enormous success of Abstract Expressionism was to have important consequences for painting and sculpture on both sides of the Atlantic. Many artists living in Paris and elsewhere were attracted to the possibilities inherent in AE. They favoured its painterly approach, physicality and automatic qualities, as well as its speed and energy. Single artists received success, such as Pollock who achieved great fame in both Europe and America in the years after his first European showing in Italy in 1948 and after his death by car crash in 1956.

Yet, the effect of this new American art on Europe was not altogether good. Europe somehow misunderstood the context of the art and tried to make use of criteria which no longer existed. **Edward Lucie-Smith** (1933 Jamaica born English writer) states that the initial enthusiasm in Europe was based on a misapprehension of methods of composing picture space. Yet the success of Abstract Expressionism was crucial, for the liberation of gesture had already begun and had only long term effects.



## CHAPTER 3

# POST-PAINTERLY ABSTRACTION

One style of painting held its own after the wake of AE - “**hard-edge painting**”, “**colour-field**” or “**Post-Painterly Abstraction**”. This “reductionist” type of painting had deep roots in the European art of the 1930s and 30s and stemmed from the AE example. For minimal and colour-field painters, the inherited times that this art was against were: emotional expression, symbol making, social comment and deliberate disclosure of the self through visual imagery. This art reacted against styles allied to history, literature, politics, psychology and religion.

**Hard-Edge** can be defined as forms with definite, **clear boundaries**, instead of fuzzy or gestural ones. The hues are flat and are contained to areas and zones of colour, instead of forms - thus “**colour-field**”.

*“Ciò che colpisce nel segno è l'abbandono qualsiasi pennellata e la monotonia stessa con cui si esprime il fatto pittorico”,* explains **Giorgio Cortenova** (1944 Como - 2013 Arco) in Empirica.

Important to the development of this type of painting was the study and effects of **optical illusion** and ways in which colours act upon one another. (Previous studies of Albers, **Johannes Itten** (1888 - 1967 Switzerland ) and Hofmann were very crucial to this type of painting). However, the difference between “hard-edge” and “Post-Painterly Abstraction” is precisely not the hardness of the edge of colour, but the quality of the colour.

**Ad Reinhardt** (1913-1967 United States), not a Post-Painterly Abstractionist in the strictest sense, moved from an orchestration of colours towards black. The black phase of his art is so black that it must be studied very closely to see the components of light and surface. Reinhardt wanted to take painting to a total regression, where the tactile sense was taken away to enhance the mirror image of the concept. His goal was to create paintings which would be something while closely approaching nothing. “*Aveva condotto la pittura allo “zero”, as **Giorgio Cortenova** calls it, opening the discourse on art and its reflection. He said in Art Press of 1973,*

*“L’arte pura ha il suo proprio pensiero, la sua propria storia e la sua propria tradizione, la sua proprio ragione, la sua propria disciplina. Ha la sua proprio integrità, ma non è integrazione di qualcos’altro in qualcos’altro”.*

Reinhardt was the most explicit prophet of “Cold and Minimal Painting” of the 1970s.

A painter with a much more conventional, but still very American attitude towards composition was **Ellsworth Kelly** (1923 -2015 New York), whose work consists of flat fields of

colour, rigidly divided from each other by large forms which seem not big enough to occupy the entire canvas. **Filiberto Menna** describes Kelly's work in Cronaca as ...

*"non si preoccupa della "texture" degli oggetti, ma della loro massa, delle linee di demarcazione che separano un oggetto da un altro e un oggetto dalla sua stessa ombra."*

Fascination with aesthetic doctrine and not pictorial means is crucial here and the painters of this movement have been concerned to rid themselves of all but a narrow range of strictly pictorial considerations. They tend to suppress figure-ground relationships created through overlapping, colour value differentials and perspective devices and most particularly, they eschew the "handwriting" of the painter, as in Abstract Expressionism. It's almost as if they desired to do away with the art of the past, which is akin to Futurist ideals.

The originators of **Post-Painterly Abstraction** are **Morris Louis** (Baltimore 1912 -Washington 1962) and **Barnett Newman** (New York 1905 -1970), who both used **thinned painted** which gives a "flat" look to the canvas. This is because colour-field painting is flexible enough to permit variations: it employs techniques such as staining unprimed canvas, applying pigment with a squeegee, (**Jack Bush** Toronto, Canada 1909-1977 used the same technique) splatter device, paint roller or airbrush. The various methods provide a wide variety of **depth, transparency and interpenetrative illusion**, yet the brush look, the drawn line is consistently avoided.

By 1950, while **Abstract Expressionism** was at the height of its success, Newman wanted to articulate the surface of the painting as a “field” rather than as a composition, which is considerably more advanced than Pollock. This particular effect of colour divided in bands on the surface represented a new phase in American Art - ‘cold’ passionless painting. HIs often very large canvases executed from the 1940s onwards, many from 6 to 9 feet high, consist of a single strong colour, modified only by changes of direction in brushstrokes, or by diving the canvas by one or more vertical streaks.

Morris Louis on the other hand, uses the surface of the canvas to stain, not to paint. The bright pure colour becomes an integral part of the material - the colour lives in the work. His artistic story has now become part of art history folklore and is inserted in the creative history as a plausible point of reference. Not a New Yorker by birth, Morris Louis was deeply influenced by a significant trip he made to New York in April 1973 with **Kenneth Noland** (1924 North Carolina - Maine 2010) to visit the art critic **Clement Greenberg** (New York 1909-1994). He was particularly impressed by a painting by **Helen Frankenthaler** (New York 1928 -Connecticut 2011) “Mountains and Sea” of 1952 where the images move in fast emigration on the canvas, freeing by all perspective vanishing points and continuing their ideal road even beyond the canvas support. After months of experimentation, by 1954 he had arrived at a new type of painting, using a particular staining technique with a new type of paint - acrylic.

The sense of drawing no longer existed and as Greenberg stated in **Barbara Rose's** "American art since 1900":

*"Louis...leaves the pigment almost everywhere thin enough and no matter how many different veils of it are superimposed...the fabric being soaked in the paint rather than merely covered with it, it becomes paint in itself, colour in itself like dyed cloth"-*

In the spring and summer of 1961, Louis painted a series of works called "*Unfurleds*" - irregular parallel rivulets of colour in wing-shaped diagonals at the edges of large areas of canvas left largely unpainted. Preceding these works was his final period in which he painted a series of striped paintings of different thicknesses close together and at some distance from the edges. **Edward Lucie Smith** describes them as :

*"Inertia, strict parallelism and the constructive impulse were all the characteristics Louis shared with other post-painterly abstractionists".*

Kenneth Noland belongs to a later stage of the development of this new kind of abstract painting, since he was a slower painter to make his breakthrough. Like Louis, he adopted the staining technique and painted in series using a single motif until he utilized every possibility. His most important motif was the target shape- concentric rings which belongs to the later 1950's and early 1960s. This particular motif was used as a means of concentrating the effect of colour and as **Michael Fried** notes,

*"Fulfill the same function as the coloured field in Newman's large pictures around 1950".*

In 1962, Noland began a series which used the "Chevron" motif, which was the signal for a growing awareness of the identity of the canvas as an object, an idea which was to take further shape in the following years with Frank Stella. The framing edge began to have importance, which it had lost considerable since Pollock's treatment of edges. Exploring and experimenting with the chevron motif, his canvases grew longer and narrower until the colour was reduced to its simplest relationship and all pretenses of composition was abandoned. The way the colour is applied had nothing painterly or gestural about it - it became anonymous.

In 1964, **Filiberto Menna** described both Noland and Louis's work as :

*"I quali pur accogliendo più di un suggerimento dalla nuova spazialità Pollockiana, tendono anch'essi ad un'arte meno conciato e drammatica, e anziché 'agire' con violenza all'interno del capo pittorico, sembrano mirare a un risultato diverso, a trasformare, cioè la superficie del quadro in una presenza oggettiva, in grado però di agitare sullo spettatore mediate la forza dinamica del colore."*

**Frank Stella's** work is often grouped with Louis's and Noland's but his work is more structuralist than post-painterly. *"His concern is not so much with colour as with painting-as-object, existing in its own right, "* describes Edward Lucie-Smith.

He executed a series of striped paintings, first on canvas and then with aluminium and copper paint on shaped supports. These made the paintings not only objects to hang on the wall, but things which activated the whole wall surface and in fact, the shaped canvas became a device for announcing the freedom of painting from the constraints of walls - of architecture. It developed into a retinal space and this is where this type of pictorial experience is designed to begin and to end, and as Frank Stella comments:

*"My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object."*

Besides Reinhardt and Louis, **Jules Olitski** (1922 Ukraine - 2007, New York, United States) had considerable influence in Italy. In the so-called "New York School", that took over the testimony of the Paris School, Olitski is one of the stars of the 1960s, and the others are obviously Louis, Kelly, Noland and Stella.

**Cortenova** explains in 1975:

*"il procedimento della pittura, il lavoro di tavolozza che egli recupera a livello di presenza effettiva sulla tela, non tralasciando nulla a monte del quadro, ha risvegliato l'attenzione delle più giovani generazioni italiane".*

Jules Olitski experimented with what is essentially a critique of abstract expressionism. He covered huge areas of canvas with a staining and blowtorch technique and then to contrast the subtle colours he put on thick, luscious brushwork

on the edges. The paradox of Olitski's work is the hugeness of their scale compared with the limitation of content - it's as if the pictures hint at an aesthetic position in order to deny it.

It is interesting to note that while both Abstract Expressionism and **Pop Art** had considerable triumph in Europe, post-painterly abstraction was not so on early as successful in making an impact on the European art scene. One must take into consideration the dominance of post-painterly abstraction in New York and yet the apparent neglect of the American influence in Europe. However then American ideas gained considerable footed in Britain and significa but not so obviously transferred, in Italy.

*L'arte Americana non ha certo sostituito quella europea, ma ne rappresenta, casomai, la condanna che l'Europa ha detto al proprio passato.*



## CHAPTER 4

# MINIMAL ART

Reacting to the highly personal art of the Abstract Expressionists, a group of artists began during the 1960s to create an art based on elemental forms. Having no meaning outside themselves and yet exuding an undeniable presence, these forms were reduced both in complexity and colour to their barest essentials. The work of the so-called **Minimalists** is generally **large, simple, serene** and **passive**. This art seeks to shed everything extraneous to the aesthetic process and perhaps most of that process itself. **Clement Greenberg**, the leading critic of the 1960s, said in the catalogue on the "American Sculpture of the 60's" held in Los Angeles in 1967: *"The Minimalists appear to have realised finally that the far-out in itself has to be far-out as that as an end in itself and that this means the furthest out and nothing short of that...the most original and further-out art in the past hundred years always arrived looking as though it has parted company with everything previously known as art. In other words, the furthest out usually lay on the borderline between art and non-art."*

The environment in its simplest and most basic form is represented by **Richard Serra's** (1938 - San Francisco) steel plates placed did was to notify the space so that there was no longer any position from which it could be experienced as a

totality. The question of environment was not something new in the 1970s, it went back much further to early modernism and the “Merzbanten” created by German Dadaist **Kurt Schwitters** (1887 Germany - 1948 UK), from 1920 onwards.

Minimal art involved the activity of a whole school of artists among them **Carl André** (1935 - United States) **Robert Morris** (1931-2018 United States), structuralist **Sol Le Witt** (1928-2007 United States) and **Donald Judd** (1928 - 1994 United States) and in European climate **Jan Schoonhoven** (1914-1994 Holland), **Francois Morellet** (1926-2016 France) and **Giuseppe Uncini** (1929 - 2008 Italy). The minimal artist does not really wish to express himself or some meaning as traditional art does, but to express a sense of **ordering and reduction of forms** - an anti-art. Colour, light, transparency, order - these are the materials of the sculpture of the late 60s and early 70s. In **Minimal Art**, an object is often created throughout the re-edition of a single shape or form such as Sol Le Witt, who tries to employ his forms of emotional and historical debris. Robert Morris confirms in Art Forum:

*“L’oggetto stesso non è diventato meno importante. E’ semplicemente inventato meno auto-importante.”*

**Giorgio Cortenova** says in Empirica:

*“...la riduzione al “significato” è in relazione con l’esperienza diretta, sia del “campo” risultato serio dal rifiuto del razionalismo storico europeo, si deve bandire che in Europa esso è stato raggiunto da una drastica introduzione all’interno di quello stesso razionalismo”.*

Such premises were for the Minimalists a precise and fascinating vocabulary. But what stands out in their work is the enormous capacity for concentration, within the implacable subtraction to which they subject form.

Then you just go on and on and on.....the art world never stops.



## ***THE REFERENCES:***

Dore Ashton

Filiberto Menna

Luca Venturi

Harold Rosenberg

Edward Lucie-Smith

Giorgio Cortenova

Clement Greenberg

Barbara Rose

Michael Freid





## **The Biography\_ Jennifer Karch Verzè**

Born in Canada but lives in Verona, Italy, Jennifer is an Art Curator who started out in Toronto as an Art Educator and Public Affairs Officer of an important Art Gallery. After her Bachelor of Fine Arts, she moved to Italy to pursue her career in Art Education and her studies of Art History and as an international curator. She worked the most important museum and Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art for over 20 years organising blockbuster exhibitions and starting the education department that saw thousands of visitors. Just imagine, the exhibition of Kandinsky had over 54,000 students in only 6 weeks. This was the beginning of Museum Education studies and it all started here. Exhibitions of the calibre of Magritte, Surrealism, Van Gogh, Dada, Munch, Modigliani, German Expressionism, Klee to cite only a few. After political vicissitudes, Jennifer went on to teach Art and Art History at the International School where she developed a brand new program in English of interactive art and art history. During this period, she was approached by the Imago Mundi Foundation and curated 6 collections of art for Luciano Benetton Collection travelling the world collecting art, writing catalogues and meeting artists in their studios. She has continued to curate exhibitions when she has time, such as *Vite in Viaggio*, a national photographic competition for two years that hosted photographers from all over Italy on then theme of Travel. In the meantime, she walks, hikes, bikes, practices yoga and visits museums and exhibitions and visits her sons who live in Amsterdam and Munich.