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Abstract Art in America

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In the United States, as in the rest of the Western cultural world, abstract art loosely embraces many degrees of near-abstractness and abstraction. However, this large field is polar and most works can be related either to the quasi-geometric tradition stemming from Cézanne, Cubism, and De Stijl; or to a descent in the biomorphic line from Gauguin, Fauvism, and Expressionism. Neither tradition commanded a wide public in America prior to the New York Armory Show of 1913, although painters such as John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Max Weber, in touch with contemporary trends in Paris, took long steps towards abstraction.

These and other artists - including Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, Gaston Lachaise, Charles Demuth and Lionel Feininger - associated with art galleries directed by the experimental photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, represented the avant-garde in departure from academic painting, but they remained distant from the ultimate non-figurative work of the Neo-Plasticists and Constructivists, only occasionally coming closer to the organic forms of Wassily Kandinsky and Jean Arp.

After the revolutionary Armory Show, the main currents of American art did not carry promise of a major trend toward further abstraction; although the Synchronists, launched by the Americans, S. MacDonald Wright and Morgan Russel, in Paris about 1915, were influential for a time and produced reverberations still echoing in California through the later work of Wright, resident there, and in the "flux paintings" of Knud Merrill.

During the depression years following 1929, anecdotal or documentary regionalism and social-consciousness predominated. In the '30's, Government support of artists, through the Works Progress Administration, while liberal in its terms, inevitably encouraged thematic works popularly considered suitable in murals, easel paintings, and sculptures designed for public buildings. Yet WPA indirectly contributed in preparing a national background of awareness about art by supplying paintings and sculpture to remote parts of the country and establishing local community art centers, the single most important step in the progressive decentralization of American art. More directly responsible for the encouragement and diffusion of abstract and non-figurative art have been powerful private institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (N.Y.), eclectic in its patronage; and the Museum of Non-Objective Paintings (N.Y.), which houses a vast collection of paintings by Kandinsky, Klee, Bauer, Xeron, and others. Even more important are the Chicago Institute of Design, heir to Bauhaus experimentalism through the work of Moholi Nagy and Walter Gropius; and related schools like the Department of Design of Brooklyn College, headed by the non-objective painter, Robert Wolff.

Further important stimulus to the abstract and non-figurative movement was provided during the War years and the years following by the extended visits to America of Mondrian, Arp, Mirò, Gabo, Hayter, and many others.

Among the best-known American painters who have hewn long and closely to abstraction are Stuart Davis and G.L.K. Morris; both artists usually stop short of the non-figurative, retaining realistic suggestions within an abstract framework. In abstract sculpture, Alexander Calder, who is also well-

known in Europe, has held a unique and leading position for the past twenty years. First influenced by Mondrian and Gabo, he early abandoned geometric shapes for biomorphic metal constructions and free-swinging mobiles, his creations, which have had world-wide influences on sculpture. 1. Rice Pereira's non-objective work in constructions, which combine elements of both painting and sculpture according to Neo-Plastic principles, should also be mentioned.

Greatest support for the Neo-Plastic tradition has come from Harry Holtmann, as painter and influential teacher.

Within the last few years, a number of painters, sometimes called "abstract expressionists", who have developed directly out of the formal tradition of Dada-surrealism and Klee, have come to prominence; they include Pollock, De Kooning, Baziotes, Stamos, Rothko, Motherwell, Tobey, Kees, Gorky, and Hofmann. Among sculptors following similar trends, the best-known include Noguchi, Hare, Smith, Lipton, Roszak, Grippe, Bourgeois, and Ferber.

Abstract art, scarcely known in America before 1913, has become one of the dominant forces within the multiform activity that constitutes contemporary American painting and sculptures. A random sampling of recent reports on art exhibitions held in various sections of the country points up the popular nation-wide acceptance of abstract art:

Seattle Honors Abstractions

Abstraction has just about taken over the 36th Annual of North-west artists at the Seattle Art Museum. Of the 108 paintings and 17 sculptures by artists of Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho and Alaska, the Museum's curator, Kenneth Callahan, writes: "This dominance of the abstract tendency among the awards characterizes the exhibition as a whole, indicating that contemporary artists of this region draw from the same sources as artists in all parts of America and are responding to what seems to be the current national directional trend toward the more abstract". (The Art Digest, N.Y., Oct. 1950, p. 12)

The Progressive Midwest:

...successful exhibition at the Illinois State Fair, Springfield... a show that was so progressive the exhibition's director... felt obliged to note in the ...catalogue that: "It may seem to some that the exhibition lacks a proportionate number of conservative or traditional pictures"... Top prize won by Richard Koppe's abstract construction of wire against a painted background, Black Wires..." (Art News, N.Y., Sept. 1950, p. 52)

San Francisco

Abstraction and advance-guard free-form non-objective paintings are still in the ascendancy at the 69th Annual Oil and sculpture Exhibition and at the San Francisco Museum of Art. (Art News, N.Y., April 1950, p. 50)

The importance of non figurative art in America received official confirmation last year when it was included in an attack by nationalistic members of Congress on "un-American" (i.e. international) styles in painting and sculpture. A rebuttal of these polemics was published in a statement issued jointly by the Institute of Contemporary Art of Boston and the New York Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. A less destructive indication of the value now given to non-representational painting was seen in the American section of the Venice Biennale, this year: of the seven painters shown., two Marin and Gatch - represented leanings toward abstraction and three - Gorky, DeKooning, Pollock, - exemplified the most vital non-figurative trend in America today. The phenomenal development of the United States as the most important market in the world for art in general, has in particular favored the varieties of non-representational painting and sculpture

summed up in the category: abstract. This development cannot be explained only in terms of the wealth of the country; popular interest in art and the choice of professional training in painting and sculpture by thousands of Army veterans studying under the G. I. Bill of Rights suggest that interest in and the practice of a free creative activity have a mounting attraction in an atmosphere of stereotype and standardization. If art as a whole offers the individual one of the rare chances in contemporary society to create as an individual, then abstract art, especially, gives the artists a freedom within that freedom.