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Geometric Abstraction in America

Donald Bartlett Doe

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

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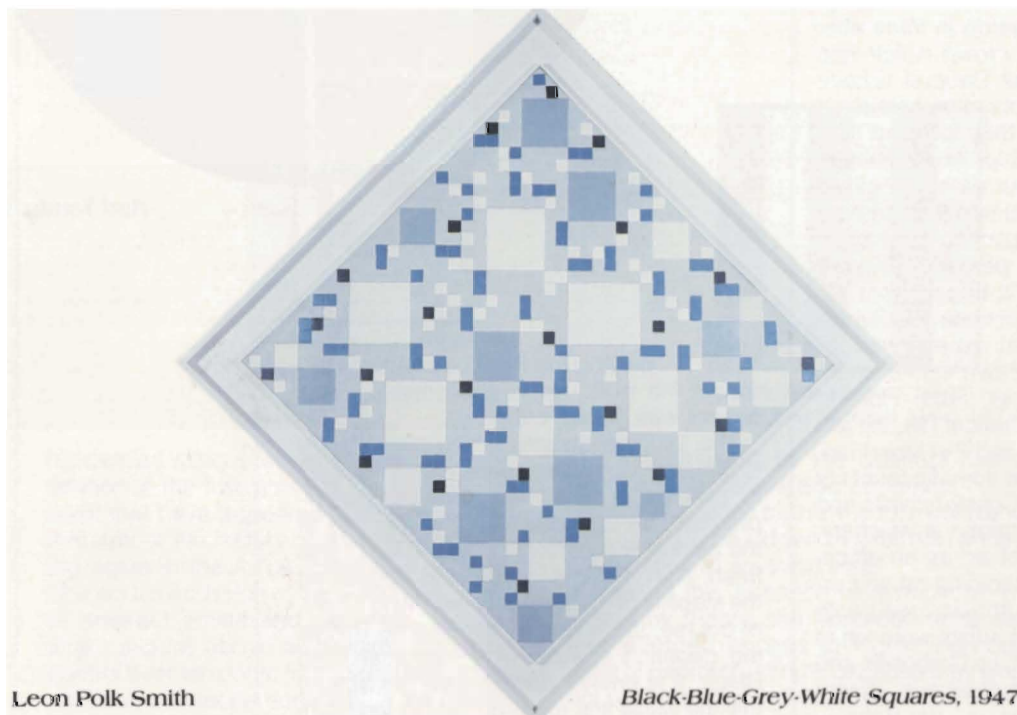
RESOURCE/RESERVOIR

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION

Resource/Reservoir is part of Sheldon's ongoing *Resource Exhibition Series*. *Resource/Reservoir* explores various aspects of the Gallery's permanent collection. The *Resources Series* is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and a grant from Cliff's Notes.

A portion of the Gallery's general operating funds for the fiscal year has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency that offers general operating support to the nation's museums.



Leon Polk Smith

Black-Blue-Grey-White Squares, 1947

Geometric Abstraction in America

Precisionism and Regionalism were the dominant styles of the late Twenties and early Thirties; the isolationist and chauvinistic attitudes which encouraged conservative imagery of the American Scene generated scorn for Modernist art. Sounding very like the critics who derided the Armory Show of 1913, Thomas Craven (for example), writing in the *New York American* in 1936 about A. E. Gallatin's purchase of Picasso's *Three Musicians* for his Museum of Living Art, set a standard for vituperation:

Rallying around a fallen idol, the vested interests, collectors, nuts and professional esthetes have joined hands in a last desperate campaign to restore the tarnished majesty of Picasso, a king without a kingdom, a ruler with few loyal syncophants and courtiers but with few subjects in the ranks of genuine artists . . .

Such "courtiers," Craven went on to claim,

were "exponents of Bohemian infantilism" who wrote "volumes of pseudo-philosophic drivel on the advantages of cubes and cones."¹

In the same month—November—that Craven was composing these views, the avant garde in New York was organizing itself, meeting to discuss the formation of a school and forum which would allow them to develop and discuss their artistic aims.² The artists were divided among themselves. One group, led by such artists as Arshile Gorky and Willem deKooning, were deeply influenced by Surrealism—however indebted they were to the Cubist tradition. The other was strongly influenced by the ideas and the art of the De Stijl group, principally Mondrian, as well as the Constructivists and Suprematists. The profound separation be-

tween the emerging traditions of Surrealism and geometric abstraction precluded the formation of a single curriculum. There were no serious obstacles to a joint exhibition, however, and several additional meetings generated, in April of 1937, the first American Abstract Artists exhibition. Not every artist joined the A.A.A.—Davis and Gorky refused to participate, for example—but the size of the exhibition grew steadily. By 1946, in a Whitney Museum exhibition catalogue, Lloyd Goodrich could accurately observe that “about the middle 1930’s began a new trend toward abstraction, particularly among the younger artists, until today it is one of the dominant tendencies in our art.”³

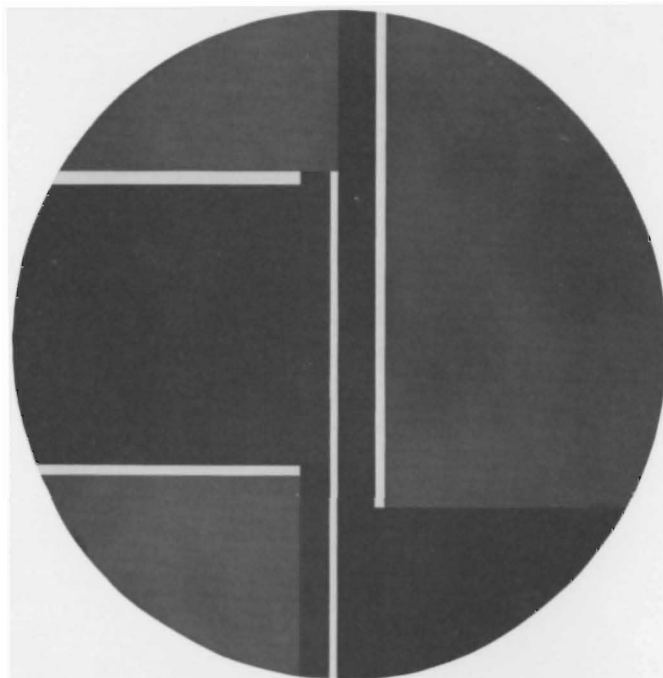
Fundamental to this development was the gathering of the avant garde in Paris after World War I. The Dada crowd which had held forth riotously at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich had dispersed, but many had come to Paris. There, in 1924, they followed their spokesman and party whip, Andre Breton, into the new camp of Surrealism. Picasso and Georges Braque resumed their careers in Paris. So too did the second generation of Cubists, among them perhaps the most influential being Ferdinand Léger. From Soviet Russia, where the license for Suprematists and Constructivist experimentation had been abruptly withdrawn, came Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner. From Holland came the rigorously theoretical De Stijl artists, Theo Van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian.

Generally (although the specific tenets of faith were different), the Constructivists and the De Stijl artists entertained a visionary, even religious concept of art as an efficacious force in society, imagining art and architecture which fused Utopian ideals with technology. In this, these artists were kin to the great French architect, Le Corbusier, and to the masters from the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Le Corbusier, like his Bauhaus colleagues, was possessed by a dream of a transformed Paris. Had he had his way, the center of Paris would have been bladed from the earth. “My dream,” Corbusier declared, “is to see the Place de Concorde empty once more, silent and lonely . . . these green parks with their relics are in some sort cemeteries, carefully tended. . . . In this way the past becomes no longer dangerous to life, but finds instead its true place within it.”⁴

The Bauhaus architects were perhaps less violent in their antipathy to the past, but were equally committed to a streamlined architecture of glass supported by a three-dimensional grid of structural steel. Such, they believed, would help create a techno-urban man, uplifted by his light-filled, rationally proportioned living spaces devoid of embellishment.

The prospect of a Utopian environment touched, in all, a wide range of artists. Léger complained that, for the 1937 Paris Exposition, “I suggested *Paris Completely White*; I asked for 300,000 unemployed to clean and scrub the facades. Create a white and luminous city,—in the evening the Eiffel



Ilya Bolotowsky

Red Tondo, 1967-68

Tower . . . playing the most powerful projectors in the world upon the streets . . . my project was thrown out.”⁵

The Utopian dreams which could billow to preposterous scale were rooted in an urge to overwhelm what had certainly been—promised to be—disaster. The memory of the astounding carnage of World War I was fresh. A world-wide depression threatened the stability of the western world. And finally, of course, there was by the middle Thirties the daunting spectre of a maniacal Third Reich. It is neither coincidental nor absurd that the visual arts explored the hidden realm of dreams, or offered the dream of a world rationally balanced in art which was structured by clean geometric shapes and precise planes of primary colors.

The theories of De Stijl and Constructivist artists—and to a lesser extent, the Suprematists—were available to an international audience through a number of publications established in the period. In 1926, *Cahiers d'Art* was founded and became a journal read widely in advanced art circles in Europe and the United States. In 1930, a group of artists committed to the clarity and social efficacy of abstraction based upon geometry formed *Cercle et Carre* (Circle and Square). Although this organization lasted only a year, it generated in the following year the highly influential group *Abstraction-Création Non-Figuratif*, which published a journal of the same name. In its pages, as Susan Larsen has noted,

Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism emerged as a potent, uncompromising vision, highly admired and emulated in varying degrees by artists working abroad including . . . America's Charles Biederman, Burgoyne Diller, and Harry Holtzman. *Abstraction-Creation* became a forum in which the complex evolution of abstract art in Europe could be clearly seen.⁶

In New York during the Twenties and Thirties, drawing upon all of this, the presence of modern art expanded enormously. During the Twenties, three public collections of contemporary art were established; in the next decade were founded two more.

The first was the Société Anonyme, established by the American collector, Katherine Dreier and Marcel Duchamp (with Joseph Stella and Man Ray). The Société Anonyme was dedicated to presenting a series of exhibitions which explored developments in contemporary art. Group shows of Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism were among those designed, in Dreier's phrase, to "stimulate the imaginative and inventive attitude in the United States."⁷ In 1926, November 10, until the new year, the Société Anonyme presented a major exhibition of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, surveying art not only from Paris, but from Germany and Russia as well.

Dreier's collection came to include an extraordinary range of geometric abstraction. By 1931, she owned three works by Mondrian, the Constructivists El Lissitzki, Gabo and Pevsner, Liubov Popova, and others. From the Bauhaus came not only Lazlo Moholy-Nagy but such relatively little known artists as Ivo Pannaggi, an Italian Futurist who joined the Bauhaus. Diller, Holtzman, Patrick Henry Bruce, and other, far less widely known Americans, were also a part of her collection.

A. E. Gallatin, like Dreier, established a museum out of his ambitions as a collector, founding the Gallery of Living Art in 1927. Given that title because he purchased works by living artists, Gallatin, by the middle Thirties, had also built a collection which surveyed contemporary modernist art with special strengths in geometric abstraction. A Synthetic Cubist painter himself, Gallatin's collection was more precisely focused than that of Dreier, offering a survey of the tradition which begins with Cézanne and moves through Cubism to Constructivism and De Stijl.

The Museum of Modern Art opened two years later, in 1929. This institution was founded upon two very substantial collections: that of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Lillie Bliss. From the outset, MoMA held an exceptional survey of Post Impressionism and early Cubism. In 1935, when Mrs. Rockefeller gave MoMA's distinguished director, Alfred Barr, his first money for new acquisitions (\$1,000.00), he purchased, among other works, two Suprematist oil paintings by Kazimir Malevich.

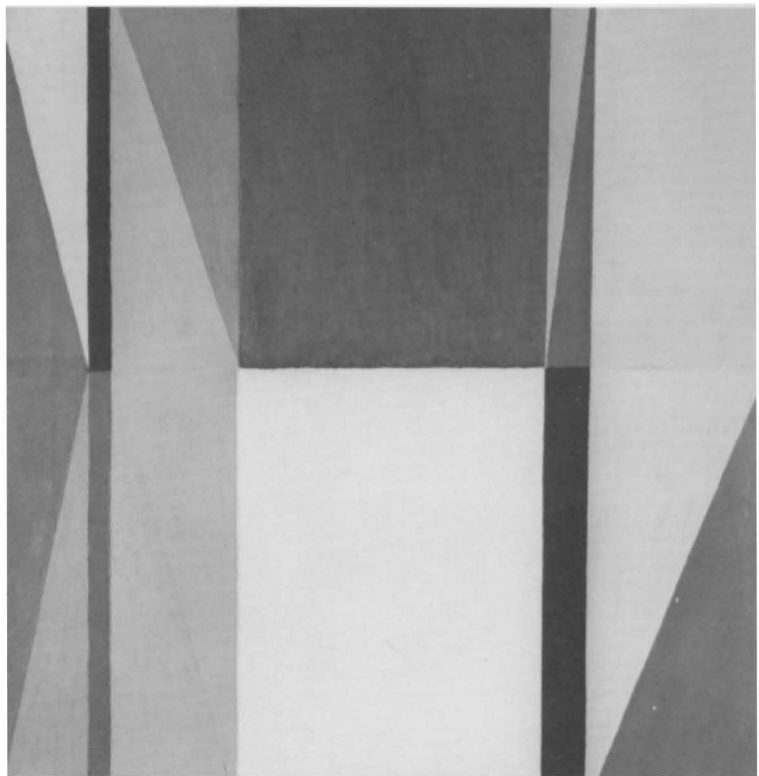
Like Dreier, both Gallatin and Barr organized major exhibitions of contemporary art. Barr, however, held to the view that the rise of Precisionism and Regionalism was not a retreat toward realism, but proof that the real demiurge in American painting was a love for the concrete, actual fact. Hence, in his scholarly exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art" of 1936, Barr included no American abstract artists. Gallatin, whose collection Barr unsuccessfully attempted to acquire for MoMA in 1941, was of a very different mind.

In the same April in which "Cubism and Abstract Art" was installed at MoMA, Gallatin opened an exhibition of five American artists: Charles Biederman, Alexander Calder, John Ferren, George L. K. Morris, and Charles Shaw.

Although they were not the only collectors in New York, Barr, Dreier, and Gallatin were the most important importers of European art and ideas during the late Twenties and early Thirties. They not only generated influential collections, but also produced informative, sometimes exemplary exhibitions. Dreier sustained a lengthy correspondence with a number of European painters, among them Pannaggi, Moholy-Nagy, and Gabo. She supported Louis Lozowick's publication of *Modern Russian Art*, and became thoroughly conversant with the ideas of the seminal artists, Gabo and Mondrian.

It is their ideas, perhaps, that Dreier found most compatible with her own. She believed Mondrian to be one of the most important artists of this century and declared him to be, with Rembrandt and Van Gogh, among the most important artists in the history of Dutch art. In the 1950 catalogue of the Société Anonyme, Dreier sought to summarize his ideas: "Mondrian came to the philosophical conclusion that ALL IS SPACE," she wrote with her usual enthusiasm for the upper case. "To create unity art has to follow not nature's aspects, but what nature really is. Art has to determine Space as well as form, and to create the equivalent of these two factors."⁸

In Dreier's abstract language, we find an echo of Mondrian's often dazingly elusive prose—and an oblique reference to the bal-



Alice Trumbull Mason

The Barbary Hedge, 1955

ances at work in Mondrian's mature style. In those works, line, space, and color play against each other in delicate equipoise.

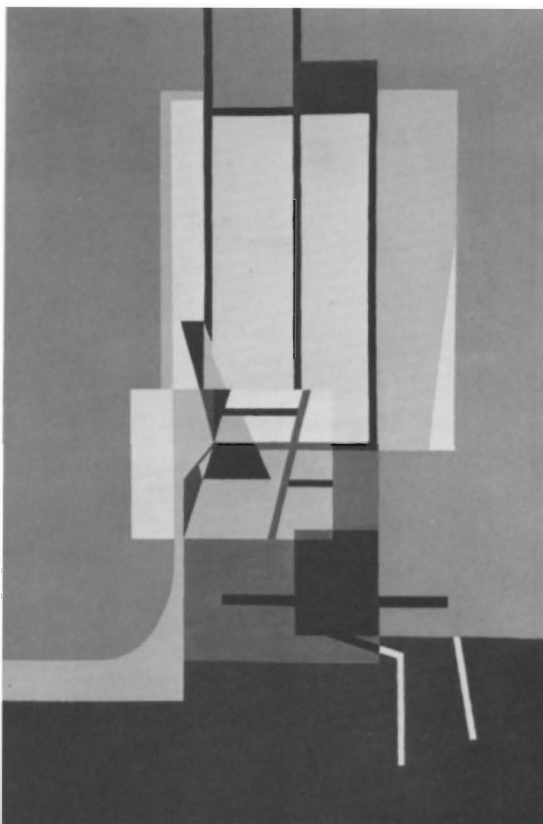
It is to Mondrian's rigorous use of the right angle, geometric shapes limited to the rectangle and square, and primary colors plus black and white that most of the artists represented in the Sheldon's collection of geometric abstraction are, directly or indirectly, most deeply indebted.

Some of the artists in the Sheldon's collection were close students of his work. Burgoyne Diller was perhaps the first American artist to be profoundly influenced by the Dutch master. Swiss born Fritz Glarner, unlike Diller, became a close friend of Mondrian's after his move to New York in 1940. Glarner's mature work, a superb example of which is illustrated here, employs Mondrian's colors—with the addition of gray—and the carefully structured character of his paintings. Glarner's planes of color have a calculated wedge shape, however, and are not utterly flat as are Mondrian's, but weave at slight angles into shallow depth. Balcombe Green, Alice Trumbull Mason, and Ilya Bolotowski—to name three remarkably different artists in the Sheldon's holdings of geometric abstraction—fuse aspects of Mondrian's style with other sources, most notably Synthetic Cubism. Leon Polk Smith's work from 1947, also illustrated, is also profoundly indebted to Mondrian—although the Oklahoma-born painter abandons a strict reliance upon primary colors and the expansive use of white found in Mondrian to generate a subtly pulsing rhythmic structure of several shades of blues as well as black and gray.

Given the definitive achievement of Mondrian, the variety found in the use of his essential vocabulary by American painters seems remarkable. In Mondrian's art, however, it appears that his unique approach to geometric form was carefully consistent with his complex ideas. "In plastic art," he wrote, "the reciprocal action of determined forms and determined space establishes the objective expression of reality. This action constitutes the dynamic movement that expresses intrinsic life. The objective representation evokes a universal emotion, indescribable and therefore constant."⁹

Quite plainly, the precision of Mondrian's language is really being employed to convey articles of the artist's own faith. But he insisted that the "culture of neo-plastic art" could present intuitive truth. "A cultivation of instinctive faculties," he also insisted, "produces human degeneration; a cultivation of intuitive capacities creates human progress."¹⁰

Human progress was quite precisely what Mondrian had in mind. He was not alone. As Mondrian strove to present "pure reality" through his austere, abstract art, Malevich was, in the succinct words of Magdalena Dabrowski, "influenced by a view of the world as a synthesis of forces . . . This view rejected the existence of matter in terms of stable objects and saw the world as an immense abstract field of forces and their re-



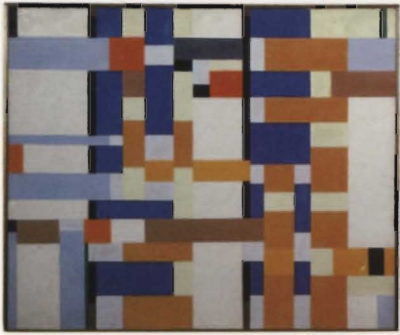
Balcomb Greene *Monument to Light*, 1942

lationships."¹¹ The floating white shape on the white space of Malevich's Suprematist canvas, in these terms, has a clear symbolic meaning. Naum Gabo's Constructivist imagery, both three and two dimensional, made up of planes actually or seemingly suspended in space, reflects closely related views. In his "Realistic Manifesto" of 1920, he declared,

The plumb-line in our hand, eyes as precise as a ruler, in a spirit as taut as a compass, we construct our work as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits.¹²

While American artists were familiar with these ideas (for, in addition to the activities of Dreier, Barr, and Gallatin, many abstract painters of the period traveled to Europe; Léger, Moholy-Nagy, Gabo, and Mondrian all traveled to, if they did not in fact move to, the United States), their own remarks have what can be called a more pragmatic focus. Albert Swinden, in the American Abstract Artist's exhibition catalogue, observed, ". . . the abstract method may be understood as a direct concern with the extension of principles used by all significant artists of the past."¹³ That is, all art reflects the same essential principles of composition. In the same catalogue, George L. K. Morris asserted, "The bare expressiveness of shape and position of shape must be pondered anew; the weight of color, the direction of line and angle can be restudied until the roots of primary tactile reaction shall be perceived again."¹⁴

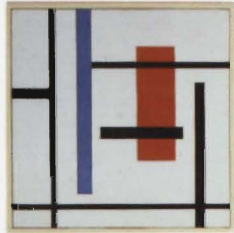
In the same spirit, Alice Mason wrote, "Wonder is in the work again as it was in primitive . . . art. The abstract painter builds



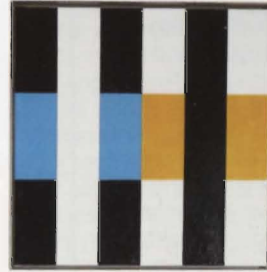
Albert Swinden Abstraction, 1940



Josef Albers
Study for Homage to
the Square, Early Diary,
1954



Burgoyne Diller
Third Theme Abstraction,
1940-45



Frederick Hammersley
And You Scratch Mine, 1972

his canvas without representation . . . but in relation to the fullest use of the elements of paint that have appeared from time to time throughout the history of art."¹⁵ Morris, writing again in the A.A.A. catalogue of 1946, offered a discussion of the working process of abstract artists and asserted, "An abstract picture above all requires complete control over tensions, form-directions, mass relations, and tactile surfaces . . . the greater the simplicity the more intense becomes the requisite control."¹⁶

These observations would seem characteristic: they do not lead toward a discussion of abstract art as a means through which universal laws can be perceived, nor do they argue that abstract art is the means by which the human race can evolve toward a higher, Utopian state. Instead, American painters evidently directed their remarks toward justifying abstract art as 1) exposing the principles behind all art, 2) as exploring the fundamental continuity of abstract art with the history of art, and 3) asserting that abstract art was as difficult to create—"requiring exquisite control"—as representational art. In New York, in short, American artists found abstract art a legitimate end in itself and offered arguments to justify its existence.

Because American artists were free of the restrictions imposed by the canons of De Stijl and other European movements, they were not necessarily restricted to the use of right angles or specific shapes in specific, symbolic colors. Their primary obligation was to restore "wonder" and to develop "complete control" over the possibilities of com-

position provided by the abstract use of geometry. As Morris also remarked, ". . . it is on quality alone that any work must stand, with a right to be judged by itself and without any relation to anything else."¹⁷

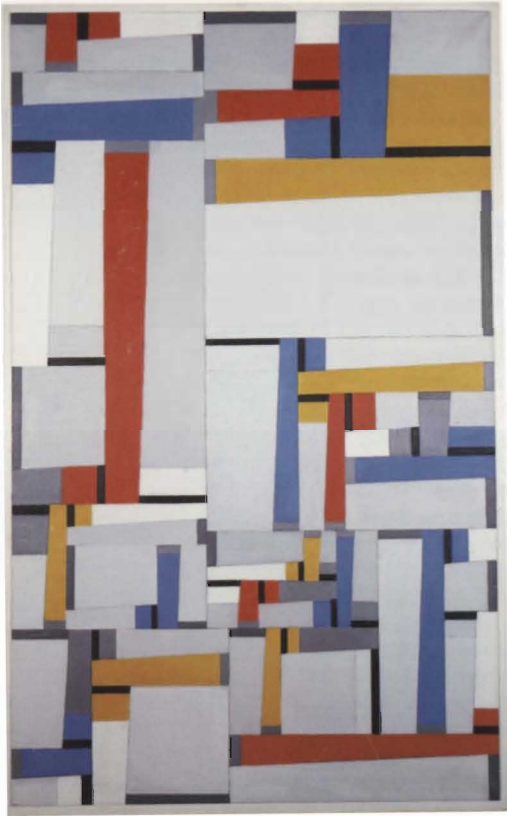
Beyond this absence of restrictions imposed by theory, the American artist was also afforded access to highly individual uses of geometry simply because they were not part of a closely knit movement. Further, the political climate in the United States was always quite different than that in which Mondrian, Gabo, Corbusier, and the Bauhaus group shaped their views. In America, few dreamt of an Utopia created by an austere, rational architecture. Few, evidently, argued that an abstract geometric art could encourage humanity to evolve toward a higher state.

For these reasons and more, geometric abstraction could flourish in New York as a highly varied venture. By the late 1940's, however, Abstract Expressionism, rooted in Surrealism, displaced geometric art from the cutting edge of the avant garde. Even so, Charles Biederman and the west coast artists Frederick Hammersley, Karl Benjamin, and John McLaughlin produced an impressive body of work. Joseph Albers continued his career begun at the Bauhaus—and influenced a number of important American painters. Especially in his *Polish Village Series*, Frank Stella examined anew the possibilities of abstract geometry; so too have such very different artists as Dorothea Rockbourne and Al Held. In all, the tradition imported by Drier, Barr, and Gallatin plainly endures.

Donald Bartlett Doe

Footnotes:

1. Cited in John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983, p. 25.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 36
3. "Pioneers of Modern Art in America," Exhibition Catalogue, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, p. 17.
4. Cited in Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982, p. 188.



Fritz Glarner *Relational Painting #89*, 1961

Select Checklist

Albers, Josef, *Study for Homage to the Square, Early Diary*, 1954
oil on masonite, 38.1 x 38.1 cm / 15 x 15"
Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Collection

Benjamin, Karl Stanley, *Large Planes*, 1957
o/c, 101.6 x 127 cm / 40 x 50"
Nebraska Art Association, gift of Frank Woods Estate

Barletta, Joel, *Blue Diamond/Series #3*, 1974
o/c, 90.8 x 90.8 cm / 35¾ x 35¾"
University Collection, gift of Stanley Kelly

Biederman, Charles, #35, *Oranans*, 1971-73
painted aluminum,
109.3 x 86.3 x 24.1 cm / 43¼ x 34 x 9½"
Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Collection

Bolotowsky, Ilya, *Red Tondo*, 1967-68
o/c, diameter 121.9 cm / 47"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Diller, Burgoyne, *Third Theme Abstraction*, 1940-45
o/c, 50.3 x 50.3 cm / 20⅞ x 20⅞"
Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

Greene, Balcomb, *Monument to Light*, 1942
o/c, 127 x 86.3 cm / 50 x 34"
Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Collection

Glarner, Fritz, *Relational Painting #89*, 1961
o/c, 195.6 x 118.7 cm / 77 x 46¾"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Hammersley, Frederick, *And You Scratch Mine*, 1972
oil on linen, 61 x 61 cm / 24 x 24"
Nebraska Art Association, with aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts

McLaughlin, John, #1, 1965
o/c, 152.4 x 121.9 cm / 60 x 48"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Loew, Michael, *Ophelia*, 1963
o/c, 182.9 x 203.2 cm / 72 x 80"
University Collection, gift of the Artist through the Ford Foundation

Mason, Alice Trumbull, *The Barbary Hedge*, 1955, o/c, 61.6 x 57.2 cm / 24¼" x 22½"
Nebraska Art Association 1974

Trinity #10, 1969
o/c, 41.3 x 45.7 cm / 16¼ x 18"
Nebraska Art Association, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolf Kahn

Nicholson, Ben, *Two Forms, Version Three*, c. 1940-42
o/c covered panel, 45.8 x 45.1 cm / 18 x 17¾"
Nebraska Art Association, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick S. Seacrest

Pasmore, Victor, *Transparent Relief Construction in White, Black and Indian Red*, 1960-61
perspex, wood and formica,
60.6 x 61.5 cm / 23⅞ x 24 ¼"
University Collection, Bequest of Bertha Schaefer

Rosser, Warren, *Avebury Axis III*, 1980
encaustic on canvas and wood,
218.4 x 159.6 cm / 86 x 63"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Scarlett, Rolph, *Untitled #58*, c. 1940
gouache/pencil on paper glued on paper, 18.7 x 19.4 cm / 7⅜ x 7⅝"
University of Nebraska, James E. M. and Helen Thomson Collection

Untitled #49, c. 1940
gouache/pencil on board,
20 x 19.7 cm / 7⅞ x 7¾"
University of Nebraska, James E. M. and Helen Thomson Collection

Simpson, David, *4 Square—Pedro*, 1980
acrylic on canvas,
203.2 x 203.2 cm / 80 x 80"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Smith, Leon Polk, *Black-Blue-White Squares*, 1947
o/c, top left-bottom right, 86.4 cm, top right-bottom left, 85.7 cm / 34 x 33¾"
Nebraska Art Association, gift of Olga N. Sheldon, Peter Kiewit Foundation and Nelle Cochrane Woods Fund

Red-Violet Diamond, 1980
o/c, 304.8 x 304.8 cm / 120 x 120"
Nebraska Art Association, gift of the Artist

Stella, Frank, *Cieszowa II*, 1973
mixed media: felt, corrugated cardboard, chipboard, paper compress board, masonite and wood,
243.8 x 227.3 x 10.7 cm / 96 x 89½ x 4¼"
Nebraska Art Association

Swinden, Albert, *Abstraction*, 1940
o/c, 76.2 x 91.4 cm / 30 x 36"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Von Wiegand, Charmion, *Evolution*, 1949-50
o/c, 76.2 x 101.6 cm / 30 x 40"
University of Nebraska, F. M. Hall Collection

Footnotes continued

5. "Modern Architecture and Color," George L. K. Morris, trans., in *American Abstract Artists*, New York: Ran Press, 1946, unpagued.
6. Lane and Larsen, p. 16.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
8. *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University*, A Catalogue Raisonné; Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter, Elise K. Kenney, co-eds, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 479.
9. "A New Realism," in *American Abstract Artists*, 1946, unpagued.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "Malevich-Mondrian: Geometric form as the expression of the absolute," *Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art BULLETIN*, October, 1982, p. 26.
12. Cited in *The Société Anonyme . . . at Yale*, p. 286.
13. "On Simplification," in *American Abstract Artists*, New York: privately printed, 1938, unpagued.
14. "The Quest for an Abstract Tradition," *Ibid.*
15. "Concerning Plastic Significance," *Ibid.*
16. "Aspects of Picture Making," *American Abstract Artists*, 1946, unpagued.
17. "The Quest," *Ibid.*