1-1-1998

The Art of Abstraction

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs

Part of the Art and Design Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/65

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sheldon Museum of Art at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The Art of Abstraction

Selections from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden

University of Nebraska-Lincoln
The Eleventh Annual Sheldon Statewide Exhibition 1997-98
Josef Albers
1888-1976
STUDY FOR
HOMAGE TO THE
SQUARE, EARLY
DIARY
1954, oil on
masonite
15 x 15 in.
NAA-Thomas C.
Woods Memorial
1963.N-151

Interacting areas of contrasting flat colors based on the simplest pictorial scheme demonstrate Albers’s fascination with the qualities of light and color. During the last twenty-five years of his life, he painted a series of more than a thousand works entitled “Homage to the Square,” employing the same format of nested quadrangles with the color of the shapes as the only changing element. Albers referred to the series as “platters to receive color.”

Ben Benn
1884-1983
STILL LIFE WITH
PINEAPPLE
1947, oil on
masonite
15 x 12 in.
NAA-Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Frederick S.
Seabrest
1979.N-514

The impact of Cubism is evident in this work, despite the artist’s refusal to align himself with new developments in the art world earlier in this century. Abstracted forms defined by color express Benn’s painterly sensibility, indicating his observation and response to a world comprised of areas of color and shadow. An emigre from Russia at age ten, Benn spent the rest of his life in New York. Throughout his long career (he lived for ninety-nine years) he painted the traditional motifs of still life, landscape and portraiture, as well as the figure.

Harry Bowden
1907-1965
ABSTRACT
c.1934, casein on
paper
10 7/8 x 8 3/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection

Californian Harry Bowden has been described as an artist out of the mainstream, a rather isolated figure who avoided the limelight despite his participation with a community of leading modernist artists in New York in the 1930s and 40s. Bowden’s unpretentious small painting is typical of his early exploration of a wide range of abstract themes. Simply titled Abstract, this work reflects his skill in using line and nonpatterned shapes with muted warm and cool colors.

James Brooks
1906-1992
U-1951
1951, oil on canvas
37 3/4 x 25 3/4 in.
NAA-Thomas C.
Woods Acquisition
Fund
1962.N-139

Nothing in James Brooks’s early career as an acclaimed social realist painter and WPA muralist could have predicted his eventual shift to abstract expressionism following World War II. Challenging himself to “learn how to paint again,” he entered a phase of radical transition into a personalized and spontaneous contemporary idiom. U-1951 is composed of suspended shapes and forms articulating space in a complex yet unified rhythmic image.

Patrick Henry Bruce
1881-1936
FORMS
c.1918-19, oil and
graphite on canvas
23 1/2 x 28 3/4 in.
UNL-Howard S.
Wilson Memorial
1966.U-510

Carefully composed of neatly rendered hard-edged shapes and flat planes positioned in ambiguous space, Forms suggests a still-life composition or pieces of a strange puzzle awaiting completion on a tabletop. This work, made near the end of a sustained sequence of similar paintings, is indicative of the artist’s preoccupation with manipulating forms in space and the recurring problems of perspective.

Arthur B. Carles
1882-1952
LANDSCAPE -
GARDEN IN
FRANCE
1908-10, oil on
canvas
21 1/2 x 18 in.
UNL-Howard S.
Wilson Memorial
1965.U-461

Vibrant color is this artist’s trademark—form, movement and space structured with color, sensuously applied to enliven the surface of his canvas. Trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Carles gravitated to France where he absorbed all that was new on the art scene. Landscape - Garden in France, 1908-1910, painted in the garden at Voulangis, a small village near Paris, captures the color and light of the countryside as derived by Carles’s visual experience of a specific place.
THE ART OF ABSTRACTION

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is pleased to present The Art of Abstraction, the eleventh annual Sheldon Statewide exhibition. Sheldon Statewide is a unique collaboration between the Sheldon Gallery, the Nebraska Art Association—a nonprofit volunteer membership organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska—and the efforts and cooperation of the many Nebraska communities that serve as exhibition venues. After a decade of activity, in which it has participated in the outreach mission of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, this highly successful touring program has collaborated with the Nebraska Department of Education and the Getty Education Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles through the Prairie Visions teacher education program. This exhibition marks the beginning of what will certainly be another decade of successful educational programming in the arts.

The mission of the Sheldon Gallery is the collection, exhibition, and interpretation of 19th-20th-century American art and the Gallery has achieved a national reputation for these holdings that also includes one of the most important campus-wide sculpture collections in the country. Important to the Gallery’s mission, therefore, is a focus on abstraction as one of the most significant developments in 20th-century American art. And although the Sheldon Gallery has included selected abstract works in past Sheldon Statewide exhibitions, The Art of Abstraction represents the first comprehensive survey of abstract art in the Sheldon Statewide series. It seems appropriate, as we approach the 21st century, that perhaps the major aesthetic development of this century is presented to a wider viewing audience. And the 1997-98 Sheldon Statewide, initiating a new decade of activity, is an ideal occasion to survey the major artistic accomplishments of the 20th century.

The Art of Abstraction reveals the staggering diversity and aesthetic richness of abstract art in the U.S. throughout this century. From Arthur B. Carles’s colorfully expressionistic landscape of 1908-10 to Mary Beth Fogarty’s naturalistic collage of 1983, these selections trace the development of abstraction for nearly one-hundred years. Not only are nine decades represented in this exhibition of twenty works, but the many visual languages that abstraction spawned are featured as well, providing a rare opportunity to experience, in one exhibition, a comprehensive survey of the development of abstract art in the United States.

For example, the highly calculated and conceptualized study of color relationships in Joseph Albers’s Study for Homage to the Square, Early Diary, 1954 is complemented by the expressionistic and lyrical color splashes of Sam Francis’s Untitled (Abstraction), 1971. And the Cubist-inspired nonrepresentational composition of Patrick Henry Bruce is counterbalanced by an example of the abstracted landscape compositions of Arthur G. Dove. Also featured in the exhibition is an important abstract landscape, painted in 1930 by Augustus Vincent Tack, who was commissioned to paint the first mural for the Nebraska State Capitol.

Far from being an irrelevant activity, the history and development of abstract art has participated in, and responded to, the most important scientific, social, and political developments of the 20th century. Since the invention of photography in the 19th century, the modern artist has felt liberated from the burden of objectively reproducing the natural world, thus allowing the pursuit of his or her subjective experience. Stimulated as well as challenged by the scientific discoveries of Albert Einstein, and others, that the observable world is made up of a reality that is beyond our simple perception, the modern artist has sought to make visible and aesthetic this “unseen” reality. In addition, these developments in science have encouraged many artists to pursue confidently the compositional and aesthetic problems that relate specifically to painting, thus revealing the visual arts to be a world unto themselves.

Sheldon Statewide succeeds in large part due to the continuing support of the Nebraska Art Association, James and Rhonda Sea- crest, the local sponsors who support the exhibition in their respective communities, and the many volunteer docents at each venue. Their appreciation of both the immediate and long-range goals of Sheldon Statewide is especially meaningful, and their generosity has enabled tens of thousands of fellow citizens to encounter works of art of the highest quality. As we move toward the new millennium, our society’s focus has turned increasingly to education and the important role visual literacy plays in the learning process. Along with this growing concern is the recognition of the need to revitalize collaborations between private and public sectors, between institutions of higher education and their local and regional communities. Sheldon Statewide continues to be on the cutting edge of establishing such lasting collaborations between the University of Nebraska and its local and statewide constituency through the nationally recognized collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden.

Dr. Daniel A. Siedell, Curator

Augustus Vincent Tack
1870-1949
UNTITLED
(ABSTRACTION)
c.1930. oil on canvas
laid down on
gessoed masonite
36 1/2 x 31 1/2 in.
NAA-Anonymous
Loan
1989.L-3-89

Marguerite Zorach
1887-1968
PROVINCETOWN,
SUNSET AND
MOONRISE
1916. oil on canvas
20 x 24 1/4 in.
NAA-Nelle Cochrane
Woods Memorial
1968.N-229

Abstract mysticism and technical innovation are blended in Tack’s mature expressions of harmonious color defined in arcebesque designs based on natural forms. The majestic Rocky Mountains, first seen by the artist in 1920, inspired his imagery. In contrast to his abstract paintings, the murals executed by Tack for the Governor’s suite of the Nebraska state capitol are composed of formal, flat figures in archaic dress.

Exciting new experiments in art taking place in Paris during the early years of this century influenced young California artist Marguerite (Thompson) Zorach. Her abstract landscape, Provincetown, Sunset and Moonrise, painted about ten years later near a coastal village in Massachusetts, reflects the influence of Cubism. The artist uses flattened, fragmented forms and muted color to alter the reality of nature. An intriguing comparison in abstract styles can be made with this painting and another in the exhibition, Landscape - Garden in France, by Arthur B. Carles.
The curvilinear form of *Construction #12* was cut from a flat sheet of stainless steel, then hammered and beaten into shape with the use of heat. Final polishing has given the sculpture a brilliant exterior surface. Describing his work the artist says, "What I make represents nothing but itself." However, his life is dominated by a passion to make perfect forms in space, to create a formal beauty that gives an optimum visual pleasure to the onlooker.

As a child, Mary Beth Fogarty cherished her freedom to roam the woods of the eastern Nebraska farm where she was reared. As an adult, she found inspiration in "the beauty of the lush banks and multilayered forms" of the Niobrara River when producing this untitled collage/paper construction. Multiple layers of torn paper, partially embossed and thickly painted in metallic hues, appear to float in enclosed space. Fogarty writes, "I'm striving to create an architecture for the human spirit."

Acrylic paint has been dripped and brushed on paper to weave this abstract composition. Pure color in no discernible form interacts with void spaces to achieve movement in the painting. As a young military veteran, native Californian Sam Francis began painting during a long recuperation from a serious illness. His work implies an awareness of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings interpreted with Francis's innate sense of balance, grace and lyricism.

Granite and steel, materials as different as night and day, are combined in this sculpture to achieve a balance between natural and industrial materials and methods. A gracefully curving arc of hand-finished stainless steel partially encloses jagged, irregular stone in a juxtaposition that complements and contrasts. With this work, Huntington pays homage to David Smith (1906-65), one of the great masters of American sculpture.
Stanton Macdonald-Wright and fellow American, Morgan Russell, invented the term Synchromism, meaning “with color,” in Europe prior to World War I. Searching for pure form and a method of liberating color from subject matter, Macdonald-Wright composed paintings of complex color harmonies and abstract shapes. Vibrantly colored works, such as *Dragon Forms*, express his fascination with the relationship between painting and music, color and tone.

Alfred Maurer’s career represents adventurous experimentation with the development of Modernism in American art. Near the end of his life Maurer began a powerfully painted series of heads reflecting the influence of Cubism. *Father and Son* shows the artist’s use of flat pattern with strong vertical and diagonal lines to create movement, energy and tension. Maurer’s difficult relationship with his father, who rejected him as well as his work, is reflected in this abstract painting.

Artistic critic and collector George L.K. Morris was committed to the advancement of a national identity in abstract art. From his status within the New York art community he served as liaison between the European avant-garde and the abstract art movement in this country in the 1930s and 40s. Morris was one of the first artists to look at Native American imagery as a source for inspiration. *Indian Hunter #1* reflects this interest and his devotion to modernist principles, as well as the order, precision and structure that characterize his work.

Canadian-born Rolph Scarlett began his career as a jewelry designer, then became fascinated with the nonobjective art he saw in New York. Experiments with brilliant color in abstract compositions brought immediate acclaim. *Untitled #49*, an example of geometric abstraction, was painted around 1940 when the artist was a chief lecturer at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, a stage set designer for Radio City Music Hall, and was exhibiting his paintings in New York and Paris.

The abstract forms of this work on paper, rendered in pastel and graphite, actually represent parts of machines used to manufacture cotton stockings. The disks seem to float in some indescribable space, disembodied in their color and illuminated from within. Appearing as a contradiction to Schamberg’s training in architecture and mechanical drawing, his soft, delicate pastels lack specific technical qualities.

Frank Stella’s composition is a precise geometric, or “hard edge,” abstraction in which each color is sharply defined and separate from the other colors, and each form has specific boundaries. The artist also was concerned with the relationship of shapes to the space on the paper. Part of the “Eccentric Polygon Series,” this work was produced with a lithographic printmaking technique based on the premise that oil and water do not mix.
The Art of Abstraction
1997-98 Sheldon Statewide Program Schedule

Chadron  September 12-October 3, 1997, Memorial Hall Main Gallery
Local Sponsor: Chadron State College

North Platte  October 5-October 31, 1997, The Mall
Local Sponsors: First Federal Lincoln; Herberger’s Department Store; Joe Dye Ford, Lincoln, Mercury; North Platte Telegraph; Ross Perry’s Crossroads Dodge; United Nebraska Bank; Western Nebraska National Bank

Grand Island  November 1-December 5, 1997, Grand Island Public Library

Holdrege  December 7, 1997-January 3, 1998, Phelps County Museum
Local Sponsors: Dr. & Mrs. Stuart Embury; Dr. & Mrs. Wayne Quincy; Dr. & Mrs. Doak Doolittle; First National Bank of Holdrege; Holdrege School Foundation; National Art Honor Society, Holdrege Chapter

Aurora  January 4-January 31, 1998, Plainsman Museum
Local Sponsor: Hamilton Community Foundation, Inc.

McCook  February 1-February 27, 1998, Museum of the High Plains
Local Sponsor: McCook Arts Council

Beatrice  March 1-March 27, 1998, Gage County Historical Museum
Local Sponsor: Beatrice National Bank & Trust

Columbus  March 29-May 1, 1998, Columbus Art Gallery
Local Sponsors: Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus Area Arts Council, Columbus Public Schools Foundation

Fremont  May 2-May 29, 1998, Fremont Area Art Association
Local Sponsor: Fremont Area Art Association

Nebraska City  May 31-June 26, 1998, Morton-James Public Library
Local Sponsor: Steinhart Foundation

Cozad  June 28-July 24, 1998, Robert Henri Museum and Historical Walkway
Local Sponsors: Cozad Area Arts Council, Monroe Auto Equipment

Local Sponsor: First National Bank of York

Sheldon Statewide is sponsored in part by the Nebraska Art Association and through a generous donation by James and Rhonda Seacrest. The Nebraska Arts Council, a state agency, has supported all the year’s programs of the Nebraska Art Association through its matching grants program funded by the Nebraska Legislature and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is one of only 750 out of more than 8,000 museums nationwide accredited by the American Association of Museums.