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# From Particles to Planets: Exploring the Physical in Art

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# FROM PARTICLES TO PLANETS

## EXPLORING THE PHYSICAL IN ART



2008-2009 22<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL SHELDON STATEWIDE EXHIBITION  
SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Front: Marguerite Zorach, *Provincetown, Sunrise and Moonset*, 1916, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 1/4"

NMAA-Nate Cochran Woods Memorial

# FROM THE EARTH TO PLANETS THE PHYSICAL AND THE IDEAL IN ART

Our physical reality—its span, depth and breadth; from microcosm to macrocosm, from particle to planet—may be experienced through the eye of the artist as we contemplate a work of art.

It is clear that the physical is a primary element of art, but that statement does not encompass the multitude of ways the physical may be expressed. From antiquity, artists have used their art to encapsulate and express the world, or to change, invent and portray the physical to express their view of reality.

Line, form, color, texture and composition produce a visual experience of a subject that delineates and explicates the physical. The image created is ordered or disordered; harmonious or dissonant but inherent in art is a message from the artist's mind communicated physically.

Early artists recognized the storytelling capacity of art and used religious and secular narratives in art. Later artists realized that a comprehensive story was not essential and artists began to express more personal and limited narratives in their work. Gradually art moved away from

realism, and new movements and styles emerged such as Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. Artists' choice of subjects and themes broadened permitting compositions to convey an artist's frame of mind. The changes transformed art from a limited vocabulary of one language to a wide range of voices and possibilities in communication and personal expression.

The study of art considers the viewer's perspective too. The viewer sees the artwork, but does she or he know what the artist wants to convey? What is the artist actually portraying? How does the viewer react to the image and what feeling is being expressed? What is the viewer's interpretation of the image? There are always two perceptions and understandings of art, the artist's and the viewer's.

Though subjectivity is inherent in art, it is also true that no other kind of relic or text from the past can offer such a direct record or testimony about the world. Art is often more accessible, precise, and powerful than literature. But, it is not solely documentary evidence; the expressive and imaginative content of art moves the



Earl Horter, *French Landscape*, 1924  
oil on panel, 20 x 24"  
MHA - FPM Hall Collection



Thelma Lorie Christenson, *Landscape*, undated  
oil on canvas, 18 3/4 x 24 1/2"  
MHA - Gift of Lawrence Reger in memory of the artist

viewer beyond the physical record to the artist's experience of the physical. Noted author Marcel Proust said, "Only by art can we get outside ourselves, instead of seeing only one world, our own, we see it under multiple forms."

Marguerite Zorach created landscapes reflecting both reality and her imagination. Soon after visiting the 1913 Armory Show in Paris, she began to experiment with scenes that were simplified and flattened in the Cubist manner but also continued in her personal style of emphasizing deep and vivid colors in her art. In *Provincetown, Sunrise and Moonset* the ocean waves separate and balance the land and sky. The moon and sun compete in an abstract sky and the land is broken into fragmented geometric shapes, lines and angles.<sup>1</sup>

Another artist influenced by Cubism was Earl Horter. Essentially a self-taught artist, he worked as an art instructor and art director in an advertising firm. The fractured, angular and flattened shapes placed randomly over the canvas of *French Landscape* are Cubist and abstract. The muted and indistinct color use increases the inorganic sense of the physical.<sup>2</sup>

Thelma Christenson's approach to the physical in *Landscape* is abstract and minimalist. Using blocks of color, she defines the land and sky and reframes the image by shaping the top and sides of her

work to conform to her dimensions. The organic colors contrast with the inorganic shapes in the landscape, and in a drab sky hangs a distorted sun, weakly illuminating the scene. Muted grays increase the somber mood in a terrain void of figures.

Harry Sternberg worked in various media, achieving a national reputation as a painter, graphic artist, author, and filmmaker as well as a teacher. Over his long life, his art shifted from realism to Abstract Expressionism in a manner mirroring the transitions of the larger art world. *Other World*, painted late in his life, is an abstract expressionistic collage of earthen-toned oils and gold, silver and copper foils. Metallic clouds hover above a rough mountainous terrain bathed in unearthly orange light. Sternberg went to the mountains to escape the pressures of city life and renew his creativity and spirituality; this piece is a spiritual landscape—Sternberg's other world.

In *Drifted Sand and Snow* by Dwight Kirsch, the colors and style give Nebraska snow and sand an impressionistic, abstract appearance. After graduating from the University of Nebraska, Kirsch studied with Robert Henri in New York City. He returned to Nebraska and developed into a Regionalist painter who believed art should be an extension of the environment. In 1924, he became an art instructor at the University of Nebraska and later the University's gallery director and chairman



Dwight Kirsch, *Drifted Sand and Snow*, 1940  
watercolor on paper, 22 1/4 x 30 1/4"  
NAA-Gift of the artist in memory of Ruby Kelly Kirsch



Robert Henri, *Light in the Woods*, 1918  
pastel on paper, 12 1/2 x 20"  
UNI-Howard S. Wilson-Memorial

of the Nebraska Art Association. His art purchases for the NAA became the foundation of the Sheldon Museum of Art collection.<sup>3</sup>

Kirsch's art instructor, Robert Henri, was one of the great personalities in the history of American art. He championed a liberal attitude in art and believed in giving free rein to artist's creative instincts. His expressionistic and confident lines and use of color in *Light in the Woods* reflect his thinking. His philosophies are attributed to his upbringing in 19th century American West and his family's difficulties and changes in fortune. In Henri's youth, his family lived in Cozad, Nebraska, a town founded by Henri's father, John Jackson Cozad. The family fled the town after a confrontation between Henri's father and a local rancher ended in the rancher's death. Each family member assumed a different surname after this incident.<sup>4</sup>

In *Bather Wiping His Foot*, William Horace Littlefield deploys light, shadows, and colors to delineate the planes and textures of the physical. Littlefield preferred the color and visual impact of Impressionism, saying that he considered the old masters lacking in naturalistic effect.<sup>5</sup> Like Littlefield, Manuel Neri seeks to capture an animated form in his untitled bronze sculptures of women acrobats. Although molded with an abstract rough exterior, and a physical shape without details, Neri's figures eloquently



Howard Norton Cook, *Battery, Morning (The City)*, 1952  
pastel on paper, 16 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 24 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"  
UPL-GA of anonymous donor

communicate the dynamism and spontaneity of the human body.

Working first as an illustrator, Howard Cook eventually became a master printmaker creating outstanding examples in all types of prints. He then turned to murals, pastel drawings, watercolors, oils and collages creating works described as having honesty, vigor, and freshness of vision.<sup>6</sup> Gradually his style changed again and his later works became increasingly abstract. In *Battery, Morning (The City)*, the buildings of New York City are sketched in pastels, some barely defined, as they recede into the darkening sky. The towering structures dominate the scene, overshadowing the land and the city's residents.



David A. Melby, *Cornfield*, 1973  
oil on canvas, 30 x 38"  
NAA - Nebraska Art Association Collection

In contrast to the urban image by Cook, David Melby expresses himself through rural landscapes. A painter in oils, Melby lives on a farm near Leavenworth, Kansas. His work depicts an inner landscape of poetic space, rather than a specific place. Melby prefers "...to paint without a preconception about the outcome of the painting, letting the work evolve and become by the combining of observed and idealized forms, imagination and intuition."<sup>7</sup> A quiet moment of serenity is captured in *Cornfield*, the crop is radiant in the evening light, and the clouds reflect a blush from the setting sun.

In *Window* by William Lyberis, the glowing light draws the viewer out of the indistinct room, into

the soft and dreamlike garden. Lyberis's brushwork and color use reveals an Impressionistic harmony of colors, tones and light. Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1931, Lyberis graduated from the University of Nebraska where he learned art fundamentals. He believed painting could not be taught, and that artists must learn their craft through observation and study. Lyberis continued his art education by visiting European art museums where he studied the painting techniques of the masters.

Animals fascinate another Midwesterner: Robert Weaver of Palmyra, Nebraska, frequently depicts birds in his work. He often befriends wounded birds, nursing them back to health. The *Study of a Crippled Pigeon* illustrates Weaver's concern for the details and aspects of a bird's injuries and creates an authentic record of that experience. John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, a collection of 435 prints, remains arguably a standard against which bird artists are measured. Audubon began his final work, *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, in 1840, traveling west from St. Louis and making stops in Nebraska and other locations gathering specimens for his book on mammals. Audubon's hand-colored lithograph, *American Elk* is from this work published posthumously in 1851.<sup>8</sup>

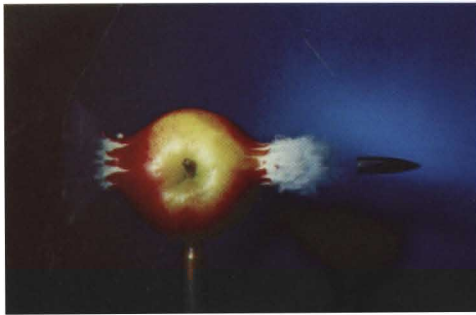
Born in Wichita, Kansas, and a graduate of the University of Kansas, Thomas Coleman was a printmaker and art instructor at the University of





Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942  
gelatin silver print, 15 7/16 x 19 7/16"

184A-GA of Lawrence Roger in memory of PMA (Betsy Lott) (20) Davis



Harold Edgerton, *.30 Bullet Piercing an Apple*, 1964  
dye transfer photograph, 16 1/8 x 20 1/4"

1918-GA of the Harold and Esther Edgerton Family Foundation

Nebraska-Lincoln from 1963-1971. He created prints that demonstrated his superb technical ability and unique style in printmaking. In *Room* his optimistic outlook and enthusiasm for family life is revealed by his loving portrayal of a cluttered lively nursery.

For Ansel Adams, "...the visualization of a photograph involves the intuitive search for meaning, shape, form and texture...the creative artist is constantly roving the worlds without, and creating new worlds within." He believed that the photographer's objective is not to duplicate visual reality but to use the medium to express a visualized inner image, making photography an investigation of both the outer and inner worlds. He invented a zone method to control tonality; with exacting attention to detail, Adams employed his tonal methodology to become an unequalled technical master of the black and white print.<sup>9</sup> *The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming* demonstrates his virtuosity with tone and is a powerful statement of the grandeur and vast rugged territory of the American West.

A Nebraskan who made an outstanding contribution to photography was Harold Edgerton of Aurora. As a teenager, he learned photography from an uncle and he built a darkroom in his home. His interest in electricity led him to major

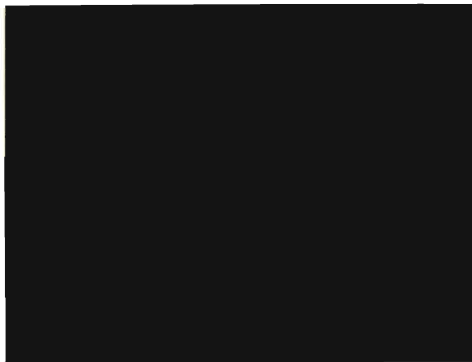
in electrical engineering at the University of Nebraska. After receiving his graduate degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he began working with the stroboscope. Synchronizing strobe flashes with the motion of an object, he invented ultra-high-speed and stop-action photography in 1931.<sup>10</sup> The human eye now could see what it had never seen before. Among his astonishing photographs is *.30 Bullet Piercing an Apple*.

John Spence of Lincoln, Nebraska, uses photography as an ordering device where the boundaries of the frame organize space and objects. His photographs document the physical landscape but he takes pictures to create a visual image of his emotional response to a place.<sup>11</sup> *West of Denton, Seward, County, NE, April 10, 1988* speaks eloquently of the expansive Nebraska terrain, the looming clouds and the human presence symbolized by the grain silos. The microcosmic buildings stand as strong sentinels on the hilltop, but also appear vulnerable in the overwhelming macrocosm of the environment.

Another photographer who strives to provoke an emotional response is John Pfahl. His first major series was entitled *Altered Landscapes* (1974-1978). From this collection, *Blue Grid* presents an image that the casual viewer might assume was altered after it was taken, but in fact, the grid was



John Spence, *West of Denton, Seward County, NE, April 10, 1988*  
Cibachrome print, 20 x 24"  
UNI-F11-Pfah Collection



John Pfahl, *Blue Grid, Pembroke, New York* (from the *Altered Landscapes* portfolio), 1977  
dye transfer photograph, 7 3/4 x 10 1/4"  
UNI-GA of Lawrence Hans

placed on the ground before exposure. The drying earth cracks into unique organic shapes; Pfahl's grid overlay expresses the human effect on the world, dividing it into artificial shapes, transforming the natural into an unnatural state.

A central figure in the Pop Art movement, Andy Warhol is generally acknowledged as one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. A friend once suggested to him, that he paint the things he loved the most.<sup>12</sup> Taking this literally, he painted *Campbell's Soup* for his first major exhibition. *Vegetarian Vegetable (The Alphabet Soup)*, (From the *Campbell's Soup II Series*) is a screen-print of this iconic piece. His images of famous Americans and American products directly confronted the question of what is art. He called his studio "The Factory" and switched from painting to silkscreen prints so that his art could be mass-produced. His artwork quickly became controversial as well as popular and he is known worldwide for his avant-garde works in many genres.

Charles Rain was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. His early education took place in Lincoln, Nebraska, and later he studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. Originally working in the abstract, Rain became a realist after studying European art and adopting the techniques of old masters. His transitions to Surrealism and to Magic Realism followed. The Magic Realist movement originated in the



Andy Warhol, *Vegetarian Vegetable (The Alphabet Soup)*  
(from the *Campbell's Soup II Series*), 1969  
color screen print, 34 1/4 x 22 1/4"

USA—Gift of Clark H. and Jane Rozman through the University of Nebraska Foundation

1940s and incorporated meticulous attention to detail and the traditions of European trompe l'oeil painting in portraiture, still life and landscape painting with the fantasy or magic of Surrealism.



Charles Rain, *Architectural Still Life*, 1978  
oil on panel, 17 x 18"  
UNL-Request of the artist

*Architectural Still Life* is a mysterious composition of ancient ruins, juxtaposed with gigantic vegetables. Of his work Rain said, "My craft thereby is the means by which I show others my world, my special view of things."<sup>13</sup>

Similar to Magical Realism, Super-realism is a genre in art that attempts to mystify the viewer. It originated in the late 1960s and 70s and gained popularity in the United States and Western Europe. *Green House Interior* by Robert Therien is an example of this style also called Photo Realism. Therien's intention is to capture the mystical and luminous through fragmented designs that

present the viewer with a scene that reinforces the random and references the abstract.<sup>14</sup> Born in Omaha, Therien is a Professor of Art at Midland Lutheran College, in Fremont, Nebraska.

Art provides infinite perspectives and visions of the physical, permitting viewers to see unlimited worlds. We need not be confined to a single narrow worldview but can experience boundless time and places, as many worlds and universes as there are artists. Without art, we would be unaware of this vast array of physical expressions, possibilities and depictions of all that is, from microcosm to macrocosm, from factual to fantasy, from particle to planet. Sheldon Statewide 2008-09 offers a glimpse into the artistic experience and expression of the physical.

Susan J. Soriente, Assistant Statewide Coordinator

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Marguerite Zorach, *Marguerite Zorach: The Early Years, 1908-1920* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973).
- <sup>2</sup> "Earl Horter," <<http://www.askart.com/AskART/artists/biography.aspx?artist=20330>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearny, Nebr., Gallery Guide, 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Sheldon Museum of Art Statewide Gallery Guide, 1998-99.
- <sup>5</sup> "William Horace Littlefield," <<http://www.askart.com/AskART/artists/biography.aspx?artist=103820>>.
- <sup>6</sup> Owings-Dewey Fine Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico; Howard Cook Biography
- <sup>7</sup> "David Melby: Artist Statement," <<http://www.louisvilleartgallery.com/dmelby.htm>>.
- <sup>8</sup> "John James Audubon" <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_James\\_Audubon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_James_Audubon)>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1985).
- <sup>10</sup> "Harold E. 'Doc' Edgerton, High-speed stroboscopic photography," 1999, <<http://web.mit.edu/invent/iow/edgerton.html>>.
- <sup>11</sup> "John Spence: Artist Statement," <<http://www.modernartsmidwest.com/collection/JohnSpence/>>.
- <sup>12</sup> John Rublowsky, "Andy Warhol," *Pop Art* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965).
- <sup>13</sup> Erin Maree Connal, "Charles Rain: Magic Realist," <[http://www.sullivangoss.com/charles\\_Rain/](http://www.sullivangoss.com/charles_Rain/)>.
- <sup>14</sup> "Robert Therien," 2005, <<http://monet.unk.edu/mona/contemp/therien/therien.html>>.

Ansel Adams  
*The Tetons and the Snake River,*  
*Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942*  
gelatin silver print, 15 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 19 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub>"

NAA—Gift of Lawrence Reger in memory of Mrs. Ellery Lothrop Davis



John James Audubon  
*American Elk, 1845*  
lithograph with hand-coloring, 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 24"

UNL—Gift of Harold W. Anderson



Thelma Lorie Christenson  
*Landscape, undated*  
oil on canvas, 18 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 24 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"

NAA—Gift of Lawrence Reger in memory of the artist



Thomas P. Coleman  
*Room, 1970*  
mezzotint, 20 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 17 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub>"

NAA—Gift of Lawrence Reger in memory of the artist



Howard Norton Cook  
*Battery, Morning (The City), 1952*  
pastel on paper, 16 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 24 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"

UNL—Gift of anonymous donors



Harold Edgerton  
*.30 Bullet Piercing an Apple, 1964*  
dye transfer photograph, 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

UNL—Gift of the Harold and Esther Edgerton Family Foundation



Robert Henri  
*Light in the Woods, 1918*  
pastel on paper, 12 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 20"

UNL—Howard S. Wilson Memorial



Earl(e) Horter  
*French Landscape, 1924*  
oil on panel, 20 × 24"

UNL—FM, Hall Collection



Dwight Kirsch  
*Drifted Sand and Snow*, 1940  
watercolor on paper, 22 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 30 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
NAA—Gift of the artist in memory of Truby Kelly Kirsch



William Horace Littlefield  
*Bather Wiping His Foot*, 1928  
oil on canvas, 27 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
UNL—Gift of William Alexander



William Lyberis  
*Window*, undated  
oil on canvas, 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 39 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"  
UNL—Gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon



David A. Melby  
*Cornfield*, 1973  
oil on canvas, 30 x 38"  
NAA—Nebraska Art Association Collection



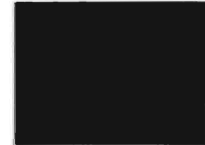
Manuel Neri  
*Untitled (Kneeling Female Figure)*, 1975  
cast bronze, 9 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 6 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 4 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"  
UNL—Gift of Paule Anglim



Manuel Neri  
*Untitled (Female Figure)*, 1975  
cast bronze, 5 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 14 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 6 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"  
UNL—Gift of Paule Anglim



John Pfahl  
*Blue Grid, Pembroke, New York*  
(from the *Altered Landscapes portfolio*), 1977  
dye transfer photograph, 7 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 10 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"  
UNL—Gift of Lawrence Marx



Charles Rain  
*Architectural Still Life*, 1978  
oil on panel, 17 x 18"  
UNL—Bequest of the artist



John Spence  
*West of Denton, Seward County, NE, April 10, 1988*  
Cibachrome print, 20 x 24"  
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Harry Sternberg  
*Other World*, undated  
oil and metal foils on board, 37 1/2 x 23 1/4"  
UNL-Howard S. Wilson Memorial



Robert Therien, Jr.  
*Greenhouse Interior*, 1976  
oil on canvas, 54 1/8 x 46 1/4"  
NAA-Nebraska Art Association Collection



Andy Warhol  
*Vegetarian Vegetable (The Alphabet Soup)*  
(from the *Campbell's Soup II Series*), 1969  
color screen print, 34 3/4 x 22 3/4"

UNL-Gift of Carl H. and Jane Rohman through the University of Nebraska Foundation



Robert Weaver  
*Study of a Crippled Pigeon*, 1971  
etching, 23 x 19 1/2"  
UNL-Thomas P. Coleman Memorial



Marguerite Zorach  
*Provincetown, Sunrise and Moonset*, 1916  
oil on canvas, 20 x 24 1/4"  
NAA-Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial



## FROM PARTICLES TO PLANETS

EXPLORING THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE

2008-2009 EXHIBITION DATES BY LOCATION

**August 29–September 28, 2008**

Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* Chadron State College

**October 1–November 2, 2008**

McKinley Education Center, North Platte, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* Nebraskaland National Bank,

Mike Jacobson, President/CEO

**November 5–December 5, 2008**

Museum of the High Plains, McCook, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* McCook Arts Council

**January 6–February 8, 2009**

Cornerstone Bank, York, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* Cornerstone Bank

**February 10–March 8, 2009**

Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* Robert C. and Linda Labenz,

Columbus Bank and Trust Co.

**March 10–April 12, 2009**

Morton James Public Library; Nebraska City, Nebr.

**April 14–May 14, 2009**

Edith Abbott Library, Grand Island, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* Grand Island Public Schools, Home Federal

Bank, Moonshell Arts and Humanities Council

**May 16–June 16, 2009**

Edgerton Explorit Center, Aurora, Nebr.

*Sponsor:* Hamilton County Tourism

*Dates are subject to slight modification.*

*From Particles to Planets* is organized by Sheldon Statewide, an outreach program of the Sheldon Museum of Art, Sheldon Art Association and the University of Nebraska--Lincoln. This exhibition is made possible by the generous support of Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska, the Nebraska Arts Council, James and Rhonda Seacrest, and Lonnie Pierson Dunbier.

