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The Art of Abstraction

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The Art of Abstraction



Augustus Vincent Tack, UNTITLED (ABSTRACTION), c.1930

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."

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 emigré 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.

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

Harry Bowden
1907-1965
ABSTRACT
c.1934, casein on
paper
10 7/8 x 8 3/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1992.H-2992



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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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 Seacrest, 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



Abstract mysticism and technical innovation are blended in Tack's mature expressions of harmonious color defined in arabesque 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.



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

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.

Jose de Rivera
1904-1985
CONSTRUCTION
#12
1955, stainless steel
11 1/2 x 13 1/4 x
13 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1958.H-526



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.



Arthur G. Dove
1880-1946
FROM TREES
1937, oil and
tempera on canvas
15 x 21 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1955.H-395

From Trees, an interplay of nature imagery and abstract design, was painted when Arthur Dove lived in the lush, rolling countryside of the Finger Lakes region in New York state. Hinting at the subject, the artist uses irregular forms bounded by curving contours. Warm, earthy colors, communicating the recognizability of the subject, appear in gradations of hue, value and intensity. Dove was concerned with the mood and the vital forces of nature. The forms and themes in his paintings direct the viewer to an aspect of life beyond the picture frame.

Mary Beth Fogarty
1943-
UNTITLED
(ABSTRACTION)
1983, collage: paper
construction
22 x 21 in.
UNL-5th Governor's
Arts Award to the
Sheldon Film
Theater
1983.U-3408



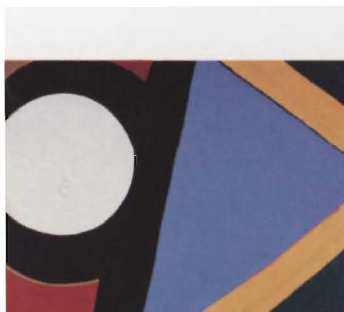
As a child, Mary Beth Fogarty cherished her freedom to roam the woods of the eastern Nebraska farm where she was reared. As an adult, she found inspiration in "the beauty of the lush banks and multilayered forms" of the Niobrara River when producing this untitled collage/paper construction. Multiple 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."



Sam Francis
1923-1994
UNTITLED
(ABSTRACTION)
1971, acrylic on
paper
17 3/8 x 21 5/8 in.
UNL-Olga N.
Sheldon
Acquisition Trust
1986.U-4000

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.

Al Held
1928-
COMPOSITION
c.1962-65, oil on
board
18 1/4 x 24 3/16 in.
UNL-Gift of Mrs.
Harriet Wiener
1968.U-646



Hard-edged geometric shapes on a flat picture plane reflect the artist's early interest in stark, forceful abstraction. Work of this style established Held's career, ensuring frequent exhibitions of his work and a faculty position at the Yale University School of Art. His work continued to evolve through large paintings of interlacing geometric volumes in black and white, to a reintroduction of color articulating form. Al Held said, "My ambition is to reinvent the whole abstract language. Not just reinvent it, but broaden it so it becomes a vast, rich language."



Jim Huntington
1941-
DECATUR (FOR
DAVID SMITH)
1981, granite, stain-
less steel
24 x 18 x 10 in.
UNL-Gift of M. Lee
Fatherree and Leah
Levy
1993.U-4539

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
1890-1973
DRAGON FORMS
1926, oil on panel
26 1/4 x 15 1/4 in.
NAA-Bequest of
Herbert Schmidt,
Centennial
Committee, the Art
of Politics, and Mr.
Joseph Chowning
1988.N-685



Alfred Maurer
1868-1932
FATHER AND SON
c.1930, oil on
canvasboard
21 1/2 x 18 in.
UNL-Bequest of
Bertha Schaefer
1971.U-800

Stanton Macdonald-Wright and fellow American, Morgan Russell, invented the term Synchronism, 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.

George L.K. Morris
1905-1975
INDIANS
HUNTING #1
1934, oil on board,
painted wood veneer
sight: 16 x
19 7/8 in.
UNL-Olga N.
Sheldon Acquisition
Trust
1991.U-4318



Rolph Scarlett
1889-1984
UNTITLED #49
c.1940, gouache,
graphite on board
7 7/8 x 7 3/4 in.
UNL-James E.M.
and Helen Thomson
Acquisition Trust
1982.U-3188

Artist, 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.

Morton Livingstor
Schamberg
1881-1918
COMPOSITION
c.1916, pastel and
graphite on paper
7 5/8 x 6 in.
NAA-Gift of Jane and
Carl H. Rohman
1989.N-694



Frank Stella
1936-
MOULTONVILLE
1974, color
lithograph
22 1/4 x 17 1/4 in.
UNL-Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Herbert A.
Belkin
1982.U-3167

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 indefinable 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**
Local Sponsors: Home Federal Savings & Loan; Grand Island Public
School District; C.A.R.P., Community Arts Resource Personnel, Inc.
- 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
- York** **September 7-September 30, 1998, First National Bank of York**
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.