



**ADVOCATES OF ABSTRACTION
THE A.A.A. 1936 - 1943**

Our subjective vision and experience make it impossible to be happy. But we can escape the tragical oppression through a clear vision of true reality, which exists, but which is veiled. If we cannot free ourselves, we can free our vision.

Piet Mondrian
Plastic Art and Pure Plastic
Art (1931)

On the morning of March 4, 1933, Richard Whitney climbed the rostrum and announced the closing of the Stock Exchange. During the thirties millions of Americans suffered the consequences of the Depression. Many feared that the United States would have to face the reality of a permanent class of unemployed. In Europe, fascism was on the rise. Jews were beaten in the streets of Germany. Spain was in the throes of a bloody civil war.

It was in the midst of such political, economic and moral turmoil that a few American artists sought harmony on canvas by continuing the tradition of abstraction through the exploration of pure form. Their search for equilibrium, for a balance of tensions, for a purer form of expression, was met with harsh criticism from members of the established art world, who could only view the abstract artists' works as socially irresponsible. Non-representational art was often ignored by the prominent museums, galleries and collectors because they equated the absence of recognizable subject matter with a lack of meaning. European abstraction was defended by a few who recognized its art historical value, but American abstraction was felt to lack European originality and technique. It was considered irrelevant at a time when representational painting was valued for its social commentary and patriotic inspiration. Abstract art works were viewed as a decadent indulgence in the personal world of the artist.

Despite this opposition, some American artists were dedicated to the pursuit of abstraction as a universal cultural language. In order to exhibit their works and promote their ideas, several abstract artists working in New York found it necessary to band together. Initially, it was difficult for abstract artists to meet; they were isolated from each other by the refusal of museums, patrons and the press to acknowledge their individual accomplishments. Among the first to organize was a group of artists working on the Mural Division of the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Projects. Burgoyne Diller, head of the Mural Division, used his administrative power to fight for the recognition of abstraction. He attempted to assemble talented abstract artists to do murals for public buildings, and gained the approval of his superiors because murals were regarded as "architectural decoration". In 1936, Mural Division artists Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron Browne, Balcomb Greene, Carl Holty, George McNeil, Ibram Lassaw and Rosalind Bengelsdorf, among others, organized a showing of their abstract works at The Municipal Art Gallery, a non-commercial space provided by the WPA/FAP.

Although Diller was responsible for the first contacts among many of the artists, other groups were focusing on the issue of abstraction. One such group, including John Ferren, George L. K. Morris and Charles Shaw, was associated with Albert Gallatin's Museum of Living Art at New York University. Gallatin, an artist and international collector, was important to abstract artists in New York because his museum provided them one of few opportunities to become familiar with the work of European abstractionists. Another group, consisting of several artists studying with Hans Hofmann at his school on West 9th Street, was also interested in abstraction.

JOHN FERREN	1905-1975	IBRAH LASSAW	1913-
<u>Composition</u>	1936	<u>Intersecting Rectangles</u>	1940
Oil on canvas	29" X 39½"	Steel Sculpture	27" X 19" X 19"
Courtesy of AM Sachs Gallery		Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery	
<u>Lyric Abstract</u>	1936	ALICE TRUMBULL MASON	1904-1971
Oil on board	22" X 36"	<u>Forms Evoked</u>	1940
Courtesy of AM Sachs Gallery		Oil on panel	16½" X 21½"
		Courtesy of Washburn Gallery	
<u>Untitled</u>	1938	<u>Free White Spacing</u>	1939
Pastel	18½" X 25"	Oil on linen	22" X 27¼"
Courtesy of AM Sachs Gallery		Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art	
		Gift of Emily and Wolf Kahn	
ALBERT E. GALLATIN	1881-1952	GEORGE McNEIL	1909-
<u>Kennilworth Castle - Aerial View</u>	1937	<u>Study for Williamsburg mural</u>	1938
Oil on canvas	16" X 20"	Tempera on Gesso	13¼" X 31½"
Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery		Lent by the artist	
BALCOMB GREENE	1904-	GEORGE L. K. MORRIS	1905-
<u>Green Diagonals</u>	late 1930's	<u>Concretion</u>	1938
Oil on canvas	32" X 48"	Oil on canvas and birchbark	20" X 14"
Courtesy of Forum Gallery		Courtesy of Hirschl and Adler	
<u>Space</u>	1936	<u>Nautical Composition</u>	1937-42
Oil on canvas	20" X 35"	Oil on canvas	51" X 35"
Courtesy of Forum Gallery		Whitney Museum of American Art	
GERTRUDE GREENE	1904-1956	<u>Northern Landscape</u>	1933
<u>Construction in Blue</u>	1937	Gouache	12 5/8" X 16"
Painted wood relief	48" X 32"	Courtesy of Hirschl and Adler	
construction on composition board			
Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery			
<u>Construction in Gray</u>	1939	LASZLO MOHOLY-NAGY	1895-1946
Painted wood relief	54" X 38½"	<u>Space Modulator</u>	1938-40
construction on composition board		Oil on canvas	47" X 47"
Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery		Whitney Museum of American Art	
		Gift of Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy	
<u>Space Construction</u>	1940	I. RICE PEREIRA	1907-1971
Painted wood relief	42½" X 33¼"	<u>The Diagonal</u>	1938
construction on composition board		Oil on canvas	34" X 28"
Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery		Courtesy of Galerie Internationale	
<u>White Anxiety</u>	1943-44	<u>Six Black Squares</u>	1937
Painted wood relief	41 3/4" X	Oil on canvas	24" X 30"
construction on composition board		Courtesy of Galerie Internationale	
Courtesy of The Museum of	32 7/8"		
Modern Art			

It was not until the Museum of Modern Art presented the exhibition, Cubism and Abstract Art, in 1936, which excluded American artists, that a central issue was created around which the various groups of American abstractionists could rally. Harry Holtzman, Diller's assistant on the Mural Division, attempted to organize young American abstractionists to protest the museum's position. At his studio in November 1936, the artists decided to establish a cooperative exhibiting group. In January 1937 they began to meet weekly at Albert Swinden's studio on West 13th Street to discuss the formal organization of the group, officially named the American Abstract Artists. The founding members were Byron Browne, Rosalind Bengelsdorf (soon to become Mrs. Byron Browne), Gertrude and Balcomb Greene, Harry Holtzman, George McNeil, Albert Swinden, Ibram Lassaw and Burgoyne Diller. On January 29, 1937, the AAA published its first pamphlet, General Prospectus, which stated the group's three major objectives: to show their work to the public, to foster public appreciation for abstraction, to enable artists to see each other's work.

The first show of the AAA opened at the Squibb Gallery on April 3, 1937 and showings have continued annually to the present date. In addition to exhibiting regularly, the group actively opposed the policies of the major New York museums which failed to recognize current abstraction in America. In 1940, the AAA picketed the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of drawings produced for the newspaper, PM. The same year, at the group's annual exhibition, they distributed a pamphlet, "The Critics...", attacking the press's hostility toward abstraction.

When the group was first formed, the members were generally young and especially impressed by the glamorous image of the European art world conveyed in Cahier d'Art, a leading French art journal. In 1936, most of the future members of the AAA were still students, many in Hofmann's school. Hofmann himself was a European immigrant, like many other prominent artists, having fled the political and social upheaval in Europe in the early 1930's. He brought to his classes a synthesis of highcolor dynamism (his personal reinterpretation of Kandinsky and the Fauvist use of color) and cubist spacial techniques (derived from Picasso and Braque).

The most influential artist for the AAA, even before his immigration to the United States, was Piet Mondrian. He was admired for his distillation of abstract painting into two elements: pure color (black, white, red, blue, and yellow) and pure line (straight lines), unified in a simple but rigid structure. The extreme simplicity and austerity of Mondrian's treatment of color and composition provided a stylistic paragon for many of the AAA.

The common denominator of Hofmann's and Mondrian's work was a commitment to non-figurative art, which became the basis for admission to the AAA. While this requirement presupposed a certain general orientation on the part of the artists in terms of their artistic philosophy, it was not intended to dictate a specific style of expression. Indeed, the work of the AAA in the 1930's embraced a wide variety of styles. The artists were quick to defend the originality of their work, while acknowledging its roots in European abstraction.

Despite the resentment they felt toward the museums which were accepting European abstraction while deriding its American counterpart, the members of the AAA were strongly influenced by the European works seen in the major abstract shows at MOMA and the Museum of Non-Objective Art, which opened in New York in 1939 (later to become the Guggenheim). Among the European abstractionists most admired were Piet Mondrian, Fernand Leger, Jean Arp, Joan Miro, George Braque, and Pablo Picasso. Many Europeans were invited to join the AAA upon their arrival

in the United States; some who accepted were Mondrian, Leger, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers, a member of the Bauhaus.

All members of the AAA were united in their advocacy of the importance and future viability of abstract art. George L. K. Morris spoke to his colleagues in an article "To The American Abstract Artists" (Partisan Review, March 1938):

And you must not overlook an opposition that will oppose you on political grounds that will satirize you as "escapists" who work in a vacuum. They will find in your work no visible connection with the causes of social justice, adding that illustrative propaganda is a natural function of art, that much past culture was essentially propagandistic. Surely this reasoning does not delve very far into esthetic processes....

The derogatory charges of European imitation that you will face present a purely modern and journalistic brand of criticism. In no other period was the artist expected to appear, fully armed as by spontaneous combustion.

World events affected the pace and direction of artistic life in America during the 1940's as they had in previous decades. America's involvement in World War II sent many American Abstract Artists, among them Bolotowsky, McNeil, and Giorgio Cavallon, off to the front and to defense plants; 1943 was the peak year for the draft. In early 1944 Piet Mondrian died. By this time, the AAA had achieved some of the goals outlined in its General Prospectus; most artists in New York were familiar with American abstraction, and abstract artists were finding it easier to exhibit their work. As individuals and as an organizational group, the American Abstract Artists contributed significantly to the development of abstract art in America.

WORKS

JOSEF ALBERS	1888-1976	ROSALIND BENGELSDORF BROWNE	1916-
<u>Ascension</u>	1942	<u>Compotier II</u>	1938
Lithograph (30/30)	43.8 cm X 20.6cm	Tempera on paper	13" X 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Whitney Museum of American Art		Lent by the artist	
Gift of Philip Morris Incorporated			
ILYA BOLOTOWSKY	1907-	<u>Mural Sketch for Central</u>	1938
<u>Blue Diamond</u>	1940-41	<u>Nurses Home--Welfare Island</u>	
Oil on canvas	21" X 21"	Tempera on board	5 5/8" X
Courtesy of Washburn Gallery		Lent by the artist	16 1/2"
BYRON BROWNE	1907-1961	<u>Still Life</u>	1936
<u>Still Life Study</u>	1936	Tempera on paper	12" X 8 3/4"
Oil on canvas	47" X 36"	Lent by the artist	
Courtesy of Washburn Gallery			
<u>Variation on Still Life</u>	1935-36	<u>Two Preliminary Sketches</u>	1937-38
Oil on canvas	61" X 40"	<u>for Mural</u>	
Whitney Museum of American Art		Tempera on paper	9" X 9 3/4"
		Lent by the artist	

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| <u>GERTRUDE GREENE</u> | 1904-1956 | <u>Northern Landscape</u> | 1933 |
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| construction on composition board | | | |
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AD REINHARDT	1913-1967	VACLAV VYTLACIL	1892-
<u>Collage</u>	1937-42	<u>Construction</u>	. 1937
Collage	8 $\frac{1}{4}$ " X 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ "	Mixed media	52" X 24"
Courtesy of Truman Gallery		Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery	
	1937-42		
<u>Collage</u>	1937-42	JEAN XCERON	1890-1967
Collage	3 $\frac{1}{4}$ " X 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	<u>#239A</u>	1937
Courtesy of Truman Gallery		Oil on canvas	
		Courtesy of Washburn Gallery	
<u>Collage</u>	1937-42		
Collage	5" X 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	16 Lithographs from the American Abstract	
Courtesy of Truman Gallery		Artists Exhibition, April 3-17, 1937	
		Paper	8" X 10"
CHARLES SHAW	1892-1974	Lent by Ron Mehlman	
<u>Plastic Polygon</u>	1938	Contains lithographs by the following	
Construction	38" X 23"	artists:	
Courtesy of Washburn Gallery		ILYA BOLOTOWSKY	
		A. N. CHRISTIE	
DAVID SMITH	1906-1965	GIORGIO CAVALLON	
<u>Head as a Still Life</u>	1942	BALCOMB GREENE	
Cast Aluminum	13 5/8" X 8" X	GERTRUDE GREENE	
Estate of David Smith	3 3/4"	PAUL KELPE	
Courtesy of M. Knoedler and Company, Inc.		M. KENNEDY	
		IBRAM LASSAW	
<u>Reclining Figure</u>	1936	ALICE MASON	
Iron	5" X 17" X 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	GEORGE McNEIL	
Estate of David Smith		GEORGE L. K. MORRIS	
Courtesy of M. Knoedler and Company, Inc.		RALPH M. ROSENBORG	
		CHARLES G. SHAW	
ALBERT SWINDEN	1901-1961	ESPHYR SLOBODKINA	
<u>Introspection of Space</u>	No date	FREDERICK J. WHITEMAN	
Oil on canvas	30" X 40"	W. M. ZOGBAUM	
Whitney Museum of American Art			
Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild Fund			

This show has been organized by five Helena Rubinstein Fellows of the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program: Heather Kurzbauer, Yale University; Rosa Lindenburg, Universiteit van Amsterdam; Joanne Loper, Manhattanville College; Lisa Phillips, the CUNY Graduate Center; Pamela Rorke, Swarthmore College; under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Whitney's Education Department.

The Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art, located in the Uris Building at 55 Water Street, is supported by the business community of Lower Manhattan and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is open and free to the public, Monday through Friday, 11-3 p.m.

AD REINHARDT 1913-1967
Collage 1937-42
Collage 8¼" X 10¼"
Courtesy of Truman Gallery

Collage 1937-42
Collage 3½" X 4½"
Courtesy of Truman Gallery

Collage 1937-42
Collage 5" X 7½"
Courtesy of Truman Gallery

CHARLES SHAW 1892-1974
Plastic Polygon 1938
Construction 38" X 23"
Courtesy of Washburn Gallery

DAVID SMITH 1906-1965
Head as a Still Life 1942
Cast Aluminum 13 5/8" X 8" X
Estate of David Smith 3 3/4"
Courtesy of M. Knoedler and Company, Inc.

Reclining Figure 1936
Iron 5" X 17" X 4½"
Estate of David Smith
Courtesy of M. Knoedler and Company, Inc.

ALBERT SWINDEN 1901-1961
Introspection of Space No date
Oil on canvas 30" X 40"
Whitney Museum of American Art
Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild Fund

VACLAV VYTLACIL 1892-
Construction 1937
Mixed media 52" X 24"
Courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery

JEAN XCERON 1890-1967
#239A 1937
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Washburn Gallery

16 Lithographs from the American Abstract
Artists Exhibition, April 3-17, 1937
Paper 8" X 10"
Lent by Ron Mehlman
Contains lithographs by the following
artists:

ILYA BOLOTOWSKY
A. N. CHRISTIE
GIORGIO CAVALLON
BALCOMB GREENE
GERTRUDE GREENE
PAUL KELPE
M. KENNEDY
IBRAM LASSAW
ALICE MASON
GEORGE McNEIL
GEORGE L. K. MORRIS
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