Pioneers of Abstract Art
American Abstract Artists, 1936–1996
Pioneers of Abstract Art
American Abstract Artists, 1936–1996

September 20 to October 17, 1996
This exhibition celebrates the sixtieth anniversary of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group and its contribution to the development of abstract art in the United States. Formed in 1936, the AAA combated the negative attitudes toward American abstract art in the 1930s and 1940s and provided a tradition of geometric abstraction that has continued to the end of the twentieth century.

With work by founding members as well as current participants, the exhibition pays homage to the long history of the American Abstract Artists. The founding members are represented by a portfolio of lithographs, created to document the group’s first exhibition in 1937 at the Squibb Gallery in New York City. A selection of works by present members of the group is also included in the exhibition, affirming that the American Abstract Artists continue as advocates of abstract art in 1996.

The Mishkin Gallery is grateful to the current members of the American Abstract Artists for their participation in the exhibition. Beatrice Reis, president of the AAA, has been particularly helpful throughout the planning of the exhibition. I would also like to thank R. Blacher and D. Bradley for lending the 1937 portfolio of prints, which documents the work of thirty of the thirty-nine founding members. Harriet and Martin Diamond have generously provided documents and photographs from the 1937 for the exhibition. Credit should be given to the Diamondb, who opened a gallery in 1973, as well as to Joan Wadburn (Wadburn Gallery) for bringing the work of the American Abstract Artists to public attention during the 1970s. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sid Deutsch, Marilyn Pearl, and the Schlesinger-Bolsane Gallery also exhibited abstract works from the 1930s. Today, the work of American Abstract Artists from the 1930s and 1940s is often featured at Snyder Fine Art and the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

I would like to emphasize the importance of the scholarship of Susan Carol Larsen, who was one of the first art historians to perceive the significance of the contribution of the American Abstract Artists. During the 1970s, a time of renewed interest in the AAA, she was an inspiration to my own research in this area, both as a friend and as a colleague. Her dissertation, The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact Upon American Art, completed in 1975, documented the AAA and remains the most thorough study of this group.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the encouragement and support of Baruch College President Matthew Goldstein and Provost Lois Cronholm. Their commitment to providing cultural programs at Baruch College has been essential to the success of the Mishkin Gallery. In addition, I would like to thank Diane Harrigan, editor, and Tricia Laughlin, curatorial assistant, for their help with the production of this catalog.

Sandra Kraskin
Director, Sidney Mishkin Gallery

Contents

2 Preface and Acknowledgments

5 American Abstract Artists: Pioneers of Abstract Art by Sandra Kraskin

28 Plates of work by current members of the American Abstract Artists

46 Catalog of the Exhibition
In observing its sixtieth anniversary, the American Abstract Artists group celebrates its historic role as an avant-garde force in the 1930s and 1940s and its significant contribution to the development of abstract art in the United States. Formed in 1936, this group is one of the few artists' organizations that has survived from the Depression period to the end of the twentieth century.

In the 1930s, the most innovative American artists were learning the lessons of the European modernists, like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Piet Mondrian. Many of these American artists had studied at the Art Students League or with the German émigré Hans Hofmann at his school of fine arts, and many had worked together on the public art projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (Federal Art Project, WPA/FAP). The camaraderie and creative exchange fostered by the WPA/FAP continued in the artists' studios, providing an opportunity for ongoing dialogue. Exploring numerous possibilities and combining a broad range of abstract forms, these artists gradually translated European modernism into their own abstract language. Plagued by critical opposition and lack of support from museums and galleries, the founding members of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group established a forum for abstract art.

With philosophic and aesthetic debate, as well as exhibitions, publications, and public protest, AAA members combatted the negative attitudes toward abstraction that prevailed and prepared the way for the acceptance of abstract art in America after World War II. Although their vanguard role was eclipsed by the rise of Abstract Expressionism after the war, their influence became again apparent in the 1960s and 1970s, with the development of hard-edge painting and minimal art. From this perspective, the American Abstract Artists can be viewed as pioneers of abstract art in America, contributing to a tradition that has dominated the art of the twentieth century.

American Abstract Artists and the Critics

The dilemma of American abstract artists in the 1930s was conveyed dramatically by the art critics who repeatedly criticized or dismissed American abstract art. The most influential critic in New York discounted American abstract art on the grounds that it was too derivative of European sources and therefore "un-American." As an organization, the AAA personified the struggling abstract art movement, becoming an easy target for much of the hostile criticism. Yet, despite the negative attitudes toward American abstract art, the coverage of AAA exhibitions was extensive. Five New York newspapers—the New York Times, the New York Herald Tribune, the New York World Telegram, the New York Post, and the New York Sun—often published articles about the AAA exhibitions as did the art magazines of the period.

One of the most biting critics of American abstract art was Edward Alden Jewell, art critic for the New York Times. A critic for the Times since 1928, Jewell became its senior art critic in 1936. Because of his prestige and
influence of the New York Times and because of the broad audience he reached, Jewell's reviews carried enormous weight. Originally a novelist, Jewell preferred traditional figurative painting styles, particularly the work of "studio painters," such as Henry Varnum Poor, Eugene Speicher, Luigi Lucioni, and Alexander Brook. He also favored American scene painters, regionalists, and social realists.

In a review of Cubism and Abstract Art, a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936, Jewell expressed his general frustration with all abstract art.

But we, the anxious, the harassed spectators—we who go about trying so hard to understand abstraction as presented to us in terms of color and line and plastic form—are we uniquely at fault when failure crown our efforts? No, I am inclined to think that the artists themselves should be asked to shoulder their just share of the blame. Too often they who ought to be bearers of light, have walked in darkness or flown in such a fog as would keep any sensible aviator on the ground.

Here, Jewell tried to gain the readers' sympathy by rhetorically positioning himself with them. His moralistic tone and desire to assign blame exemplified the conservative cultural climate of America during the Depression years, as art was expected to depict and validate the American people and way of life rather than challenge and perplex, as abstraction did with its ambiguous forms and lack of narrative.

Despite his obvious bias, Jewell frequently covered the AAA exhibitions, and thus, ironically, his column functioned as a forum for the discussion of issues raised by abstract art. In his review of the first AAA exhibition in 1937, Jewell established a mocking tone that would characterize nearly all of his writings on the group's exhibitions:

Into the wide open spaces in the thirty-third floor of the Squibb Building, thirty-nine American abstract artists have ventured, each of them bringing examples of his own special ingenuity, each arguing in some degree his endorsement as a raconteur of tales from over yonder on the Rive Gauche.
that have begun to assume, by this time, a shy patina of age. What they have put on display at the Squibb makes a colorful, an often resounding mass demonstration of decorative design.1

In this passage, Jewell articulated two criticisms that were frequently leveled against American abstract art. By referring to the abstract artists as "raconteurs" of tales from over yonder on the Rive Gauche, he depicted the Americans as naive imitators of the styles of the European avant-garde, exemplified by the Parisian "Left Bank," and he dismissed American abstraction as "decorative design.

In another review of the first exhibition, Jewell proposed that since Americans could only hope to imitate the great achievements of the "academy" of European modernism, the role of abstract art be limited to the decorative function of mural painting. "Abstract work of this sort can often make very effective architectural embellishment. It is decorative.2" By writing of the decorative design of the paintings in both reviews, Jewell implied that the work was inferior to serious art, due to its lack of symbolic or narrative content. Jewell, like other conservative critics, viewed the elimination of a clear subject matter as a grave departure from the American pictorial tradition.

In a review of the 1939 AAA exhibition at the Riverside Museum, Jewell made no attempt to hide his hostility to abstract art. He concluded that "when they do not perhaps exactly exalt, they make their little decorative dibgats turn the very neatest of hand springs." Four days later, Jewell wrote an article sarcastically titled "Our Annual Non-Objective Field Day" in response to an essay by AAA member George L. K. Morris, which had appeared in the 1939 exhibition catalog.

Answering Morris's concern about the critical opposition to American abstract art, Jewell wrote that his "own attitude toward this problem has all along been ... one of cordial interest in what has been accomplished here and in what abstract artists aspire to achieve ... my interest has sometimes warred to admiration kindled in the presence of abstract designs that, being of a superior quality, arrive at handsome decorative results." Jewell's condescending tone and insincere compliments are not convincing enough to indicate a real change of attitude from his earlier dismissal of AAA members' work as "little decorative dibgats."

These excerpts from Jewell's writing provide a characteristic representation of the intense debate between American abstract artists and their critics. Although most of the critics writing about abstract art in the 1930s described the works in "formal" terms—discussing elements of composition and color—many of them, like Jewell, embellished their reviews with sarcastic language to achieve an entertaining rather than objective effect.

Jerome Klein, art reviewer for the New York Post, was another of these antagonistic critics. Klein titled his review of the 1938 American Abstract Artists exhibition "Plenty of Duds Found in Abstract Art Show." Pondering the impact of the exhibition, he queried, in a mocking tone, "And what is the result? A series of light pops, a bit of sizzle here, a fizzle there and plenty of duds." His scorn went beyond the artwork to include the artists themselves as well as the philosophy of the movement. "These are the artists who are above imitating nature. But too many of them are not above imitating other artists in the most slavish manner." He concluded, "However sincere their pretensions, they are certainly not substantiated by the bulk of this work. Which is generally shallow in design, rarely more than superficial decoration." Klein's advice to the viewer revealed his open hostility: "Very well, poke among the droppings of modern art, pick yourself a dry bone and suck on it. See what you get."2

To defend abstract art against these and other detractors, AAA member George L. K. Morris wrote for AAA publications and for individual artists. He also discussed abstract art in Partisan Review, where he published numerous articles, including "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," an intelligent, clearly illustrated essay on the creation and development of abstract painting. His sketch of a wine glass in seven different styles, beginning with the academic and ending with the abstract, presented a clear visual image of the development of modern art.3 Morris, in his role of advocate, performed an important educational function, explaining, clarifying, and defending abstract art. However, the fact that Morris was himself an abstract artist and a member of the AAA undercut his position as an advocate.

Lacking effective critical support and encountering bias and hostility throughout the 1930s, abstract artists had to struggle to win acceptance for their work. The AAA functioned as a strong hold of defense and a forum...
for debate for those proponents of abstract art. It also provided opportunities for the American Abstract Artists to exhibit their work at a time when there were few other possibilities.

Museum Exhibitions

Museum exhibitions that featured abstract art were rare in New York City prior to 1930. Many of the AAA members had been too young to have seen the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art (better known as the Armory Show). But, in 1926, an international exhibition sponsored by the Société Anonyme at the Brooklyn Museum gave young painters the chance to study the work of Pablo Picasso and other European modernists.

A more permanent study center for young artists appeared on the scene a year later, in 1927, when Albert Gallatin opened his Gallery of Living Art in a New York University building on Washington Square. This gallery provided the first opportunity for young artists in New York to study modern painting and sculpture on a regular basis. An early supporter of abstract art, Gallatin acquired and exhibited many examples of European as well as American modernism. In 1936, at the same time that he purchased Picassos Three Musicians and installed it at his Gallery of Living Art, a group of young painters and sculptors were meeting to discuss the formation of the American Abstract Artists. That such an organization was needed to promote American abstract art was only too apparent from museum exhibition choices.

Unlike Gallatin, who organized exhibitions that included emerging American abstract artists and purchased their work for his own collection, most museum directors and curators considered European modernism the only legitimate abstract art. They believed that American abstract art had been a development of the 1920s and was no longer an important style. The Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929, was a sharing source of frustration for many abstract artists in New York. Rather than supporting the emerging avant-garde art produced by young American abstract artists, the museum mounted exhibitions that reflected an obvious bias toward European abstraction. In 1936, the museum showcased European abstract art with the major exhibition Cubism and Abstract Art. The exclusion of American artists from this landmark exhibition was indicative of the museum community's lack of interest in American abstraction. AAA member Ilja Bolotowsky later recalled the group's frustration with the Museum of Modern Art and its director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., during this period:

...the Modern Museum would not show us—but was showing the work of Eugene Speicher, a society portrait painter and also the work of George Luks, who was a very nice fellow, a retired prize fighter and not such a bad painter for a prize fighter. But still it was all realism—second and fourth rate—and yet, they never had any wall space for us. And so we felt that the Modern Museum was not serving its purpose. They also gave an awful lot of space to Benson and Curry and Wood....

The Museum of Modern Art's policy of featuring European abstract art while simultaneously endorsing regionalism, or American scene painting, helped to entrench the commonly held notion that abstraction was foreign to the American experience.
Formation of the AAA

In this atmosphere, with attitudes generally opposed to abstract art, nine artists met early in 1936 at Ibram Lassaw's studio to discuss the possibilities for a group exhibition of American abstract art. These artists—Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Byron Browne, Burgerne Daller, Balcomb Greene, Gertrude Greene, Harry Holtzman, Ibram Lassaw, George McNeil, and Albert Swinden—formed the nucleus of the American Abstract Artists group. In November 1936, these artists and some twenty others gathered at Harry Holtzman's studio for the first official meeting of the AAA.

During the turbulent months in which the identity of the AAA was being formed, there were conflicts and disagreements among the members over the mission of the organization as well as strong personality clashes. At the first meeting, Holtzman proposed that the group form a co-operative and a workshop school for the exchange of ideas rather than merely function as an exhibition society. The well-known émigré artist Arshile Gorky supported this proposal and proceeded to dominate the rest of the meeting. Gorky suggested an assignment for the next meeting: each member should paint a still life of an electric light bulb, a piece of string, and one other object—black, white, and red. The result would then form the basis for discussion.

Gorky came to the following meeting empty-handed yet controlled the discussion of the paintings that some of the others had produced. His opinion that few of the members were ready to show their work offended many. His next suggestion offended still others: that the group first support one strong personality in order to achieve some success for abstract art and then pave the way for other artists. Werner Drewes challenged Gorky, accusing him of self-promotion. Gorky, undaunted, admitted that this could well be the case.

Although many of the early members admired Gorky and were not inspired by his theatrics, the majority

The Whitney Museum of American Art, which opened in 1931, confirmed this judgment. Although the Whitney Museum featured only American art and included a few abstract artists in its permanent collection, as major exhibitions during the thirties reflected an overwhelming endorsement of American realism.

Rosalind Bengelsdorf

Untitled. American Abstract Artists Portfolio, 1937

Lithograph, 9 1/8 x 12

Collection of R. Blacher and D. Bradley

Werner Drewes

American Abstract Artists Portfolio, 1937

Lithograph, 9 1/8 x 12

Collection of R. Blacher and D. Bradley
remained committed to the idea that the purpose of the organization should be to facilitate group exhibitions. It was not long, therefore, before Gorky's leadership was challenged, and the members returned to their original goal, which was to organize an exhibition of abstract art. Having threatened to leave the group several times, Gorky finally walked out; accompanying him was Willem de Kooning, who left in support of his friend. Neither Gorky nor de Kooning returned to become members, but the group continued to meet. In January 1937, they published an official prospectus, and, in April 1937, the American Abstract Artists rented the Squibb Gallery at 743 Fifth Avenue in New York City for their first exhibition. Even with the mission of the group established, there was much controversy and discussion about how the American Abstract Artists would define abstract art. Some members, like Rosalind Bengel, felt that nature was the source of all abstractions; others, like Bazi Bolotowsky and Balcomb Greene, advocated “pure abstraction” with no reference whatsoever to the natural world. Bolotowsky described the long discussions over this essential issue:

Since its very beginnings, before it was formally organized, the AAA members had wanted to write a “definitive” definition of abstract art. There were hours and hours of discussions. We could never agree. There were those who felt it was artificial. We all knew many definitions. Many more were made up. But we never achieved one that would satisfy all the different and opposing opinions.19

Although the members agreed that abstract art was a viable expression that should be promoted despite the absence of support from museums and critics, they had difficulty defining the term “abstraction.” In the introduction to the catalog for their 1938 exhibition, they emphasized that the group “place[d] a liberal interpretation upon the word ‘abstraction.’”20

Differences of opinion regarding the definition of abstract art affected AAA members outside the boundaries of their own group as well. The artists invited to show at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (established in 1939, ten years after the opening of the Museum of Modern Art) were those whose work fit Director Hilla Rebay’s particular definition of “non-objective.” Sponsored by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the museum featured the work of European artists, particularly Vasily Kandinsky, but exhibited the work of numerous young American artists as well. Nevertheless, some of the AAA members were so adamantly opposed to Rebay’s interpretation of “abstract” painting that they voiced their objections in a letter to Art Front:

...we cannot accept with approbation the opinions which Baroness Rebay seems to have that abstract art has "no meaning," that it is the "prophet of spiritual life," something "unspeakable"; that abstractions are "worlds of their own" achieved as their creators "turn away from contemplation of earth."21

Despite their disagreement with her philosophy, Rebay remained a much needed source of support for many abstract artists. In the 1940s, she provided financial assistance on behalf of the foundation to artists working in a non-objective style. She also employed artists at the museum as guards, maintenance personnel, preparators, secretaries, and lecturers. Several AAA members received assistance from Rebay and exhibited at this museum, which would later be called the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
Challenging the Opponents of American Abstract Art

As early as 1937, Carl Holty, the president of the AAA, had written to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to suggest that the Museum of Modern Art host the group’s annual exhibition in 1938. Rejected by Barr on several occasions, the group became increasingly angry with the museum’s exhibition program. Members of the AAA questioned why the Museum of Modern Art did not exhibit American art that was truly modern. Art in Our Time, a 1939 exhibition at the museum, featured accepted masters of nineteenth-century American art, such as Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent, along with European modernists, such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. In 1940, an exhibition of Italian Renaissance paintings titled Italian Masters was paired with an exhibition titled Modern Masters. These “modern” masters were, in fact, late-nineteenth-century artists.

Finally, when AAA members discovered that the Museum of Modern Art planned to open an exhibition of drawings and cartoons produced for the newspaper PM, they decided to protest with a public demonstration. On April 15, 1940, the group picketed the museum and passed out pamphlets designed by Ad Reinhardt, which queried “How Modern Is the Museum of Modern Art?” George L. K. Morris described the day of picketing:

Many people thought the American Abstract Artists (group) was picketing a show of Italian Renaissance paintings, which were sent to the United States because of the war. What they really were angry about was the show of drawings from the newspaper PM; Marshall Peld, a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, wanted them shown. American Abstract Artists felt that if the Museum of Modern Art had space for newspaper sketches, it certainly wasn’t true that they had no space for abstract American art.22

Two months later, in June 1940, Reinhardt helped write a twelve-page pamphlet that criticized prominent art critics. This pamphlet, titled The Art Critics—How Do They Serve the Public? What Do They Say? How Much Do They Know? Let’s Look at the Record!

Reinhardt, who joined the AAA in 1939 and remained an influential member until 1952, was an active participant in the group’s demonstrations and political actions. He used his typographic skills and sarcastic wit to advance the AAA’s battle against the hostile critics and dismissive curators. In retrospect, Reinhardt can be considered one of the most important of the young American painters to join the group. Although he was later associated with the Abstract Expressionists, Reinhardt continued to produce work that reflected the AAA’s commitment to geometric abstraction, which distinguished his paintings from those of the more gestural Abstract Expressionists. Like many of the early members of the AAA, Reinhardt also functioned as an important link between the abstract art of the 1930s and the geometric abstract and minimal art forms of the 1960s and 1970s, testifying to the strength and continuity of the abstract tradition in American art.
The War Years: the AAA Develops on International Focus

The rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in the thirties and the subsequent outbreak of World War II in 1939 had a dramatic impact on American art. As political imperatives focused attention on international events, the New York art world was transformed by the influx of artists forced to escape Hitler's Europe. Approximately 700 artists and 380 architects arrived in the U.S. between 1933 and 1944. The presence of many prominent European abstract artists in the U.S. bolstered the confidence of American abstract artists and made it more difficult for critics to dismiss their work.

Among the earliest of the artist-immigrants to arrive were those escaping Nazi Germany: Hans Hofmann, one of the most influential of these artists, settled in the United States in 1932. Hofmann taught painting briefly at the Art Students League in New York and then, in 1933, established his own school, where many American artists were introduced to European modernism. Hofmann's lessons emphasized the spatial dynamics of cubism and a bold use of color, inspired by Matisse. Although Hofmann never joined the AAA, many of his students were active members of the group and thus brought the "Hofmann School" of abstraction into the debate over how to define American abstract art. Like Hofmann, his students generally supported the position that nature is the source of abstract art.

Many artist-immigrants who settled in New York became influential members of the American Abstract Artists. Josef Albers, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Fritz Glarner, Hans Richter, Fernand Léger, and Piet Mondrian all became members during the war years. Ilya Bolotowsky recalled that "it was very inspiring to have the masters present." Mondrian's work, especially, exerted a significant influence on members of the AAA group. Ilya Bolotowsky, Harry Holtzman, and Charmion von Wiegand all developed individual styles that incorporated the principles of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism. This increasing tendency toward geometric abstraction opened the AAA artists to even more negative criticism, such as Jerome Klein's comments in this 1940 review.

American Abstract Artists, the national organization of adherents to squares, circles and unchecked flourishes, are holding down two of the large galleries at 215 West 57th. St. for their fourth annual exhibition. Although the American Abstract Artists group had been formed to unite "American" abstractionists and to promote "American" abstract art, philosophically the group had no problem with including Europeans when they arrived in the United States. Several of the founding members had been immigrants to America as recently as the 1920s, including Ilya Bolotowsky, George Cariollon, and Ibram Lassaw. Other AAA members, although born in America, had developed close ties with Europe. Albert Gallatin, with Jean Helion as a guide, had been visiting the studios of Picasso, Braque, Léger, Arp, Matisse, Miró, and Mondrian since the early 1930s and had been purchasing work directly from these artists. George L.K. Morris had accompanied Gallatin on some of these studio visits, and Harry Holtzman had helped to bring Mondrian to the United States in 1940. In his essay for the 1939 AAA yearbook, Morris wrote that "it is hoped that some day the field can be broadened so as to transcend nationalistic barriers." The AAA yearbook began in 1943 but was not published until after the war, in 1946, presented seven essays, four of which were written by the immigrant-artists Moholy-Nagy, Léger, Mondrian, and Albers. Clearly, the character of the AAA was affected by the contributions of European artists in the early forties.

Despite the energy generated by this influx of new members, most of whom were respected European abstract artists, the AAA lost some of its vitality during the war years. Ironically, at the climate for abstract art improved and opportunities for abstract artists increased, the importance of the AAA declined. Instead of gaining in prestige, it was needed less by many of its members. Attendance figures for the sixth and seventh American Abstract Artists annual exhibitions (March 1942 and March–April 1943) reflected the fading impact of the group and the greater competition from new galleries exhibiting contemporary abstract art. Alice Trumbull Mason's letter to the membership of the AAA on May 23, 1944, noted: "It has become apparent that as public interest in abstract art has increased the members have shown less and less interest in furthering the
The Origins of Abstract Expressionism

The annual exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists group were the most important occasions of those years as far as advanced art in New York was concerned. To these exhibitions the subsequent sophistication of New York painting owed a great deal.

—Clement Greenberg

Although the activities of the AAA from 1936 to 1942 forged the way for the acceptance of abstract art, few of its members achieved success in the 1940s or 1950s. Yet, the importance of the AAA as an avant-garde force in the late 1930s and the early 1940s, and as a precursor of Abstract Expressionism, was belatedly acknowledged by Clement Greenberg, champion of the new movement. Thus, the importance of the AAA was both validated and undermined by the rise of Abstract Expressionism.

As early as 1939, critics unsympathetic to the strict geometric style of many AAA members were calling for a more expressive form of abstract art. In a review of the 1939 AAA annual exhibition, New Yorker art critic Robert Coates articulated a prescription for what would become the new avant-garde movement:

It’s the mood of the show, and the tendencies it illustrates, that bothered me...the trend of the group is toward the purest of "pure" abstraction, in which all recognizable symbols are abandoned in favor of strict geometric form. It seems to me...in the development of symbols, and the exploration of their capacity to express emotion, that the true field of abstract painting lies...I can’t help feeling that the American abstractionists need...to develop some such set of symbols, equally native in atmosphere, to serve as a point of departure.

(italics added for emphasis)

Coates felt that symbolic forms could best express an American identity and signal American art’s independence from European styles, such as Neo-plasticism and suprematism. (Coates later coined the term “Abstract Expressionism,” in 1946, to describe this avant-garde movement, which emerged after World War II.)

In another regard, the Abstract Expressionists had important advantages that the pioneers of the AAA lacked: support from critics, galleries, and museums. Clement Greenberg, a powerful critical voice and an early advocate of Abstract Expressionism, provided the impetus necessary to override the persistent negative attitudes toward abstract art. As late as 1949, Emily Genauer, art critic for the New York World Telegram, had described Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist painting as “a mop of tangled hair.” Nevertheless, by the mid-forties, abstract art had been accepted and, in

Albert Swindens
Untitled, American Abstract Artists Portfolio, 1937
Lithograph, 12 x 9 1/2
Collection of R. Blacher and D. Bradley
the postwar period, became synonymous with America's new avant-garde. Greenberg's endorsement of the Abstract Expressionists was essential to this success.

In 1942, Peggy Guggenheim established Art of This Century, a gallery that became an important site for the exhibition and promotion of abstract art. Guggenheim created a café-like environment at her gallery, which quickly became a meeting place for artists and a center for avant-garde activities and exhibitions. Facilitating contact with European émigré artists, especially André Breton and the surrealists, the gallery provided an environment that accelerated assimilation, modification, and adaptation of surrealist theories by numerous young American artists.

Even though the events at Art of This Century overshadowed the activities of the AAA, Guggenheim did not exclude its members from her coterie. At the opening of the gallery, she had worn one earring by abstract artist Alexander Calder and one by surrealist Yves Tanguy to symbolize her impartiality with respect to both movements. Several AAA members were included in Exhibition of College at her gallery in 1943. Bolotowsky, Reinhardt, and Morris, among others, exhibited along with well-known Europeans, including Marcel Duchamp. Thus, for a few years in the early forties, abstract art and surrealism coexisted as avant-garde forces in New York.

Lacking the drama, credence, and connections of a Peggy Guggenheim, it is not surprising that artists' organizations like the AAA were unable to achieve comparable success with their exhibitions. With its dynamic, theatrical environment, Art of This Century attracted the media and critics. Guggenheim's own collection of abstract and surrealist art, which was featured at the opening exhibition, lent prestige to the gallery. Her contacts with established European artists as well as American critics and museum curators helped to validate the American artists she exhibited.

The extent of Guggenheim's influence was demonstrated by the shift in attitude at the Museum of Modern Art. The letters of protest and the picketing by AAA members had had little effect on Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s policies at the museum. However, only four years later, through the influence of Guggenheim, Barr recommended the purchase of Jackson Pollock's painting *The She-Wolf.* The inclusion of Pollock's work in the museum's permanent collection signaled an official acceptance of American abstract art.

The emergence of the Eighth Street Artist's Club, or The Club, was another factor that diminished the importance of the AAA. As the war ended, The Club became the spiritual successor of the AAA. Although the American Abstract Artists continued to exhibit as a group, the formation of The Club rallied a larger group of artists and supplanted the AAA as a forum for abstract art. Phillip Pavia, one of the founders of The Club, recalled the early meetings that led to its official formation in 1949.

Just before the war ended a lot of us who had not served in the army would meet in the Waldorf Cafeteria. At that time there were about seven or eight artists who met there quite regularly every night. First on the list was Landes Lewin, then Aristo Kaldis. The others were Franz Kline, Bill de Kooning, and myself. Later there were others but we were the regulars. Once in a while Gorky would come into the Waldorf. Jackson Pollock would come in drunk or sober and give us a big ranting speech. This was the first stage of the Waldorf in the war years when it was bleak and quiet. Right after the war came the big change... 1946 was the big year. It was quite noticeable, our little table at the Waldorf started to get
bigger and bigger. ... The whole breadth of avant-garde really started after the war when the refugees went home and we were on our own. We opened our club.36

Earlier, at a crucial historical moment, the AAA had provided a focus for the debate about abstract art, which was central to the identity and the cultural politics of the American avant-garde. However, by 1949, the Club was fully formed and new issues were being raised and debated.

In her 1975 dissertation, Susan Carol Larsen documented the avant-garde role of the AAA group and its importance to the development of American art. She concluded that its activities—the annual exhibitions and publications as well as the camaraderie and dialogue that were fostered—could be considered the first phase of the New York School:

From 1936 to 1942 the AAA members engaged in a spirited dialogue with the press, the public, the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, helping to effect a gradual transformation of attitude, but achieving little of immediate benefit to themselves. The New York art world of 1942 was, however, a more open-minded one with regard to the future of abstract art in the United States, and it was upon this foundation that the later phases of the New York School would be built. As the New York School gained momentum and confidence, the AAA was swept aside and its contributions virtually forgotten, but a close examination of the origins of major American abstractionists of the later forties reveals their own genesis in the mid-1930s and substantial contact with the activities, exhibitions, and membership of the American Abstract Artists.37

Larsen’s study gave new significance to the AAA, demonstrating clearly that this previously unrecognized group was, in fact, a forerunner of Abstract Expressionism.

The Continuing Presence of the American Abstract Artists

Throughout the 1950s, as Abstract Expressionism continued to dominate the American avant-garde, the AAA maintained its role as an advocate for abstract art and provided a refuge for artists who were not involved with the Abstract Expressionist movement. In the 1960s, the emergence of hard-edge painting and, later, minimal art marked a renewed interest in geometric forms by avant-garde artists. This shift toward geometric abstraction occurred internationally but held special significance for American art. The American Abstract Artists could then be viewed as innovators, providing a tradition of geometric abstraction for American art that spanned from the 1930s, when they were dismissed as imitators of European modernism, up to the present.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, throughout the fluctuations of late modern and postmodern styles, the American Abstract Artists group has continued to exhibit and to attract the participation of some of the major proponents of abstract art. Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Dorthea Rockburne, and Brice Marden are just a few of the most prominent members who have helped to continue the vital tradition of the American Abstract Artists.

In the last two decades, art historians have begun to reevaluate the importance of the American abstract art of the 1930s. Larsen’s dissertation on the AAA demonstrated the group’s avant-garde role and provided the background for other revisionist studies. As a result of this scholarly interest, founding members of the AAA have been featured prominently in museum exhibitions in New York City and around the country.38

To commemorate the group’s fiftieth year, AAA members produced a series of forty-four lithographs. With this portfolio of prints, the group continued a tradition established in 1937, when the founding members created a portfolio of thirty lithographs for the AAA’s first exhibition. The fiftieth anniversary portfolio is included in the permanent collections of several major museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Tate Gallery in London.

In 1996, as the group celebrated its sixtieth anniversary with exhibitions and publications,39 the organization’s crucial role in the development of American art is undeniable. The exhibition at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery brings together the historic 1937 portfolio of prints along with the fiftieth anniversary portfolio and a selection of recent works by current members. These works of the past and the present are a visual testament to the enduring strength of the American Abstract Artists group and to the continuing role of abstract art in America.

Sandra Kraskin
Director, Sidney Mishkin Gallery
Notes


10. Ibid., 226-28.

11. Ibid., 235-36.


19. Ibid., 393.

20. Ibid., 398.


29. Larsen, 454.


32. Ibid., 230-31.

33. Ibid., 304.

34. Ibid., 304.

35. Ibid., 304.

36. Ibid., 304.

37. Ibid., 304.

38. Ibid., 304.

39. Ibid., 304.

40. Ibid., 304.

41. Ibid., 304.

42. Ibid., 304.

43. Ibid., 304.

44. Ibid., 304.

45. Ibid., 304.

46. Ibid., 304.

47. Ibid., 304.

48. Ibid., 304.

49. Ibid., 304.

50. Ibid., 304.

51. Ibid., 304.

52. Ibid., 304.

53. Ibid., 304.

54. Ibid., 304.

55. Ibid., 304.

56. Ibid., 304.

57. Ibid., 304.

58. Ibid., 304.
Marvin Rowen
"Unfolded," 1986–87
Stainless and mild steel, 74" x 15 3/4" x 13"
Courtesy of the artist

Kenneth Bushnell
"E.D.C. ABC XX," n.d.
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 27"
Courtesy of the artist

Will Barnett
"Door Image," 1960
Copper plate: 15 3/4" x 9 9/16"
Private collection

Marvin Rowen
"Unfolded," 1986–87
Stainless and mild steel, 74" x 15 3/4" x 13"
Courtesy of the artist

Kenneth Bushnell
"E.D.C. ABC XX," n.d.
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 27"
Courtesy of the artist

Will Barnett
"Door Image," 1960
Copper plate: 15 3/4" x 9 9/16"
Private collection
Ruth Eckstein
Alpha V, 1992
Woodcut with collage, 26" x 21"
Courtesy of the artist

Helen Gilbert
Lanai, 1993
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24" x 23"
Courtesy of the artist

Vito Giacalone
Detail of Diptych (Autobiography), 1995
Acrylic, charcoal, and collage on paper, 22" x 17"
Courtesy of the artist

Robert Goodnough
Canvas Montage #1, 1981
Collage, 16" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist
John Goodyear
Dog and Its Abstraction, 1996
Acrylic on canvas and wood, 14" x 14" x 3"
Courtesy of the artist

Mary Henry
Wealthy House, 1996
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

James Greer
Memorial—Tibor De Nagy 1996
Mixed media collage on canvas, 13" x 9"
Courtesy of the artist

Clinton Hill
Step Up, 1996
Oil on wood, 26" x 21"
Courtesy of the artist
Ward Jackson
Ladder Series: Overlay, 1992-96
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

James Jarecki
One Never Knows, 1994
Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

Martha Keller
Post Op, 1995
Oil, alkyl, zinc, and graphite on linen, 36 3/4" x 39 1/4"
Courtesy of the artist
Jane Legemann
Pies, 1996
Oil on canvas, 39" x 28"
Courtesy of the artist

Vincent Longo
Unraveled, 1996
Acrylic on wood, 30" x 26"
Courtesy of the artist

Katinka Mann
Yellow Blue, n.d.
Photo-construction, 20" x 24" x 10"
Courtesy of the artist
Judith Murray
Gesko, 1994
Oil on linen, 38" x 30"
Collection of Rob Yasuda

Peter Pinchbeck
Cyme, 1996
Oil on canvas, 24" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

Jean Webster Price
Barcelona Curves, 1996
Wood and acrylic, 24" x 24" x 14"
Courtesy of the artist
Raevel Rubinovitch

Thrones for the Gods, Suite C-4, 1993–95
Panel on tinted Nepal paper, 32" x 20"
Courtesy of the artist

Beatrice Riese

Before Gutenberg, 1993
Gouache on paper, 14 1/8" x 27"
Courtesy of the artist

Leo Rabkin

Memory Board, 1996
Gesso on canvas over wood frame, 30" x 30" x 3"
Courtesy of the artist

Ce Rover

Hampton Facsmile, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 16" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist
Irene Rousseau
Asynchronous Symmetry, 1995
Mixed media construction and acrylic paint, 22" x 24" x 4"
Courtesy of the artist

James Soonwright
Quartet, 1992
Metal and electronic components, 12" x 24" x 18"
Courtesy of the artist

Louis Silvestri
Hall of the Mountain King, 1995
Mixed media and collage, 36" x 26"
Courtesy of the artist

Helen Soreff
Distilled, 1991
Acrylic flush on canvas, 14" x 28"
Courtesy of the artist
Jason Stewart
*Figure Eight*, 1996
Pigment and oil stick on paper, 30" x 22"
Courtesy of the artist

Richard Stone
*South 60*, 1996
Acrylic on canvas, 22" x 24"
Collection of Richard F. Novic and Barbara Novic

Peter Stread
Detail of *Vermeul* Topology - Blue on Light Ochre, 1990
Acrylic and basswood, 54" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist
### Selected Works by Current AAA members

**Martin Ball**  
"Undated, 1994"  
Oil on canvas-board, 30" x 24"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Will Barnet**  
"Dark Image, 1990"  
Copper plate, 15 1/2" x 9 1/2"  
*Private collection*

**Powil Booth**  
"Steph of Hand," 1996  
Oil on canvas, 24" x 24"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Nanot Betens**  
"Solar Diagrams"  
Watercolor, gold, color pencil, and graphite on paper, 34" x 20"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Marvin Brown**  
"Undated, 1986-87"  
Stainless steel and mild steel, 74" x 15", x 13"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Kenneth Boshnack**  
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 27"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Jean Cohen**  
"Midnight Sun," 1994  
Oil on canvas, 64" x 32"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Ruth Eckstein**  
"Alpha Y," 1992  
Woodcut with collage, 20" x 21"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Vito DiGiacomo**  
"DipTH (Autobiography)," 1995  
Acrylic, enamel, and collage on paper, 22" x 17"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Helen Gilbert**  
"Luna," 1993  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24" x 23"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Robert Goodnough**  
"Carnas Montage #1," 1981  
Collage, 16" x 24"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**John Goodyear**  
"Dog and Its Abstraction," 1996  
Acrylic on canvas and wood, 24" x 14" x 3"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**James Green**  
"Memorial," 1996  
Mixed media collage on canvas, 13" x 9"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Mary Henry**  
"Verkaerte Nacht," 1996  
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Clinton Hill**  
"Step Up," 1996  
Oil on wood, 20" x 21"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Wendy Jackson**  
"Ladder Series Overlap," 1992-96  
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**James Jurczyk**  
"One Never Knows," 1994  
Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 28"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Martha Keller**  
"Psi 56," 1995  
Oil, acrylic, and graphite on linen, 34 1/2" x 39 1/2"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Jane Logemann**  
"Pax," 1996  
Oil on canvas, 39" x 28"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Vincent Longo**  
"Undated, 1996"  
Acrylic on wood, 30" x 26"  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Katinka Mann**  
"Yellow Blue," n.d.  
*Photo construction, 20" x 24" x 10"*  
*Courtesy of the artist*

**Judith Murray**  
"Consert," 1994  
Oil on linen, 28" x 30"  
*Collection of Bob Yasuda*
Peter Finchbeck
Gyre, 1996
Oil on canvas, 24" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

Joan Webster Price
Banalogue Caves, 1986
Wood and acrylic, 24" x 24" x 16"
Courtesy of the artist

Raquel Rabinovich
Themes for the Gods, Suite 1-4, 1993-95
Pastel on tinted Nepalese paper, 25" x 20"
Courtesy of the artist

Leo Rabin
Memory Board, 1996
Oil on canvas over wire frame, 30" x 30" x 3"
Courtesy of the artist

Beatrice Riess
Before Gutenberg, 1993
Gouache on paper, 14 1/4" x 27"
Courtesy of the artist

C.R. Ross
Hampton Poemate, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 10" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

Irene Roussos
Anomalies: Symmetry, 1995
Mixed wood construction and acrylic paint. 22" x 24" x 4"
Courtesy of the artist

James Siewert
Quartet, 1992
Metal and electronic components, 12" x 24" x 18"
Courtesy of the artist

Louis Silverstein
Hall of the Mountain King, 1995
Mixed media and collage, 36" x 23"
Courtesy of the artist

Helen Soreff
Unsect, 1993
Acrylic flake on canvas, 14" x 28"
Courtesy of the artist

Jason Stewart
Figure Eight, 1996
Figment and oil stick on paper, 30" x 22"
Courtesy of the artist

Richard Stone
South 60, 1996
Acrylic on canvas, 22" x 24"
Collection of Richard R. Stone and Barbara Stone

Petr Strevel
Vertical Triptych—Blue on Light Ochre, 1990
Acrylic and basswood, 54" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

Dimensions are in order of height, width, and depth.

Photograph Credits

Douglas Bal: page 60
Regina Cherry: page 41
Courtesy of Harry and Lewis Diamond: pages 6, 7, 8, 12
Ronald Diamond: page 29
Erna Erweck: page 40
William E. G. Hains: page 30
Robert Mahon: page 32
Larry Wheelock: page 26
Zondran/Premiere, New York: pages 4, 9, 16, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16,
17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24.