

Picturing the Future

American Modernism

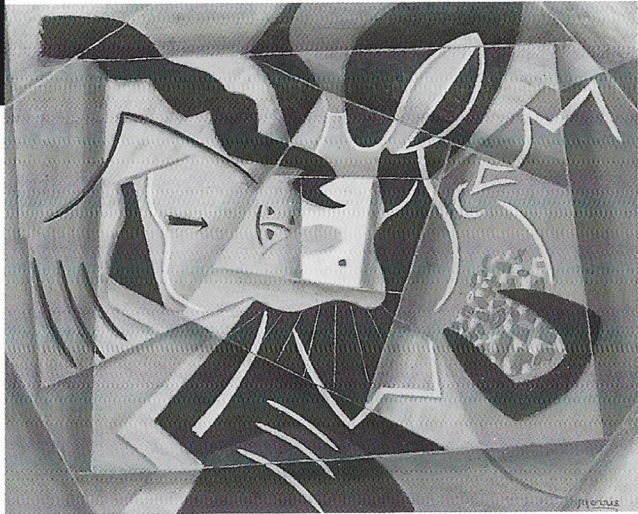
from the
Lois Q. Spreckels
Collection

Stanford University Museum of Art

As the quotation from the artist Balcomb Greene suggests, throughout the course of this century, several generations of American modernists turned to abstraction for a new pictorial language.¹ Some, such as Greene, embraced abstraction without hesitation; others, such as Louis Schanker, approached it more tentatively, keeping their imagery grounded in nature. Inspired by European masters like Picasso, Mondrian, Léger, and Kandinsky, the American artists represented in the collection of Lois Q. Spreckels (despite the diversity of their origins) participated in the history of abstract art in America. The variety of their disparate approaches and the history of their differing affiliations reflect the many options available to American modernists who responded to their European counterparts and created new visual forms.

Early in the twentieth century the efforts of Alfred Stieglitz and the important Armory Show of 1913 promoted awareness of European and American modernism. Stieglitz's gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York was a meeting place for the avant-garde. By 1915 Stieglitz had sponsored exhibitions of several members of the first generation of abstract artists included in this collection, such as Oscar Bluemner, Arthur Dove, and Alfred H. Maurer. Although none of the works in this show dates from this early phase, the watercolors by Dove, *Woodpile*, and Bluemner, *Orion*, typify the artists' lyrical, romantic views of nature and their limited uses of abstraction. Maurer's gouache, *Portrait of a Girl*, one of his many representations of this subject from the period, owes a debt to Matisse, whom Maurer admired. Like many of the artists in the Stieglitz circle, Dove, Bluemner, and Maurer traveled to Europe at the beginning of the century, and both Bluemner and Maurer participated in the epoch-making Armory Show in 1913, the exhibition generally credited with introducing European modernism to America.

The impetus begun by Stieglitz's gallery and the Armory Show continued into the 1920s, a decade that witnessed the founding in New York of several significant organizations devoted to modern art. These included the Société Anonyme established in 1920 by Katherine S. Dreier and Marcel Duchamp; the Gallery of Living Art begun by Albert E. Gallatin in 1927; the



Museum of Modern Art started by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and others in 1929; and the Whitney Museum created by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1930. In 1920 in Washington, D.C., Duncan Phillips founded the Phillips Memorial Gallery, the first museum of modern art in America. However, despite the efforts of some of these innovative institutions, general support for American abstract art was not strong. The Société Anonyme and the Museum of Modern Art focused on European artists, and the Whitney Museum concentrated on realists and regionalists. While individual artists such as John Graham, Lee Gatch, and Karl Knaths found patronage from Phillips, and paintings by Knaths, George L. K. Morris, and Esphyr Slobodkina were collected and exhibited by Gallatin, there was no consistent outlet or exclusive support for American abstract artists.

By the 1930s another wave of American abstract artists had matured. Nearly all of this younger generation had been born between 1900 and 1915, and, like their older colleagues, most had traveled in Europe, some had met the great European masters such as Kandinsky and Mondrian, and many (whether native-born or naturalized citizens) had studied formally in art schools in New York or Europe. In addition, many of these abstract artists knew each other from their activities sponsored by the government under New Deal art programs such as the Public Works of Art Project (1933–34) and the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (1935–43).

Two exhibitions in the mid-1930s catalyzed American abstract artists. In 1935 the Whitney organized *Abstract Painting in America*, a show that featured over one hundred works, some by these younger abstract artists. The following year the Museum of Modern Art, under the leadership of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., presented *Cubism and Abstract Art*, an exhibition that, following Barr's Eurocentric bias, virtually ignored any American contributors. After a series of meetings in 1936 convened by the neglected artists, the group American Abstract Artists (AAA) was founded in January 1937. Frequent spokesperson for the group, Balcomb Greene (who had formerly studied philosophy and psychology) wrote, "Our purpose is to unite abstract artists living in the United States, to bring before the public their individual works, and in every possible way foster public appreciation for this direction in painting and sculpture."² The AAA had its first exhibition of works by twenty-nine members at the Squibb Building at 745 Fifth Avenue in New York in April 1937; the show attracted some 1,500 visitors during its two-week run.

The majority of artists in the collection of Lois Q. Spreckels—including Ilya Bolotowsky, Werner Drewes, Balcomb Greene, Hananiah Harari, Carl Holty, George L. K. Morris, Irene Rice Pereira, Louis Schanker, and Esphyr Slobodkina—were members of the AAA, and although some of their works in this exhibition pre- or postdate their activity in the group, their styles reflect the varieties of abstraction promoted by the organization. Some artists most readily assimilated cubist experiments. Schanker's impressive painting, *Nude with Cello*, with its overlapping planes and multiple viewpoints, pays homage to synthetic cubism and the work of Léger. Bolotowsky's sedate canvas, *Still Life*, suggests the influence of Picasso and Braque, while the stark black outlines compartmentalizing its space foreshadow the artist's preoccupation with pure abstraction and Mondrian's grid. The buoyant, biomorphic forms in Slobodkina's delightful picture, *Mondrian's Favorite*, evoke the work of Arp and Klee, while its painted surface of intersecting and overlapping planes recalls collage and her work in textile design. (It is even possible that the title, *Mondrian's Favorite*, refers to the Dutchman's preference for this playful painting, a canvas he might have known from his participation in AAA shows after he moved to New York in 1940.) Finally, the unique work of George L. K. Morris, another

spokesperson and leader of the AAA, is represented here in *Agony in the Garden*. This picture, with its spatial dislocations, also looks back to Picasso and Léger, two of the modern masters whom the well-educated and wealthy Morris knew and admired.

In addition to the inspiration of cubist painters from Paris, several AAA members, including Drewes and Pereira, were influenced by artists active in the German Bauhaus. Drewes had actually studied with Kandinsky and Feininger at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and he knew Klee and Albers. The floating forms and references to landscape in *Icarus* are reminiscent of Kandinsky's later works. Of all the AAA members, Irene Rice Pereira adhered to Bauhaus principles most faithfully. Her teaching in the mid-1930s at New York's Design Laboratory (another WPA-sponsored project) mirrored the curriculum of the Bauhaus. In this exhibition Pereira's painting, *Wind Phoenix*, fabricated from glass and Masonite, illustrates her search for innovative expression using modern materials and technology. Finally, *White Bars* by Balcomb Greene, with its planar, architectonic geometry, indicates the extent to which the pure abstraction and reductivist elements of constructivism were employed by AAA members in their quest for a new visual syntax.



Alfred H. Maurer
Portrait of a Girl, ca. 1926–27

Some of the AAA members also found support from Baroness Hilla Rebay. Since 1929 Rebay had been Solomon R. Guggenheim's artistic adviser, and in 1939 she opened the institution named Art of Tomorrow, the Museum of Non-objective Painting. While Rebay turned her attention toward the spiritual aspects of non-objective painting, favoring compositions by central European modernists such as Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, and Rudolf Bauer, she also recognized some AAA members including Bolotowsky, Drewes, Greene, Pereira, and Slobodkina, whose works were represented in the Museum of Non-objective Painting by the early 1940s. Among her closest associates was the Canadian-born artist Rolph Scarlett, whose untitled painting epitomizes Rebay's focus. *Untitled* suggests a vast universe inhabited day and night by floating and intersecting triangles, rectangles, circles, and squares.

The works of Karl Knaths, Lee Gatch, and Karl Zerbe are included in this exhibition to underscore the tendency toward abstraction pervasive in America. Knaths worked independently in Provincetown, Massachusetts, outside of the New York art scene. His picture, *Gray Horse*, recalls the color experiments and subject matter of Kandinsky some six decades earlier. Lee Gatch lived in New Jersey. His painting, *Pacific Rhythm*, inspired by the West Coast, owes a debt to synthetic cubism and collage, as does the work of the painter Karl Zerbe, who was teaching in Florida when he created *New Orleans Signs #3*. Neither Gatch nor Zerbe had strong ties to official art organizations. Each practiced a form of abstraction inspired by currents from abroad but American in subject.

Milton Avery's painting, *Pink Jacket*, is in some ways similar to Maurer's much earlier gouache. Both are half-length images of women rendered in monochromatic colors, and set in shallow space. It is interesting that in the 1930s the independent artist Avery was friends with the young painters who later became known as the abstract expressionists. Avery's compositions with their vibrant color and simplified abstract forms secured him a prominent place in modern American art.

The eclectic works represented in the collection of Lois Q. Spreckels display a remarkable range of styles. These paintings reflect the many options available to American artists in the first half of the century. It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that American abstraction was a hybrid or "melting pot," wherein a variety of influences and individuals of different origins came together to create an open-ended and lively dialogue in the visual arts.

Louis Schanker
Nude with Cello, 1933



HILARIE FABERMAN

Robert M. and Ruth L. Halperin
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

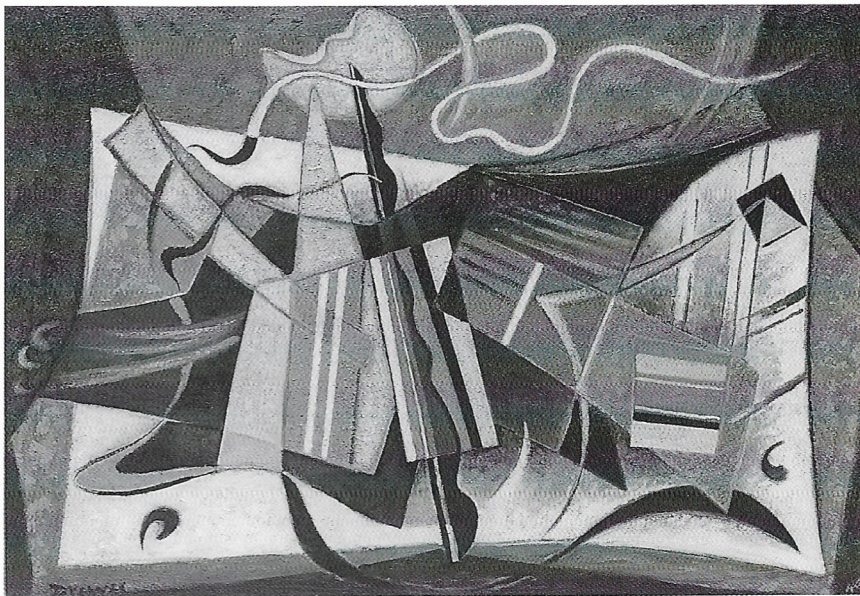
Acknowledgments

Over the last decade a number of exhibitions have focused on the rich and complex history of abstract art in America. From the Armory Show in 1913 to the period of World War II and later, several generations of American artists—inspired by the modernist experiments of their European colleagues—investigated a variety of innovative approaches to abstraction. This exhibition of selections from the collection of longtime museum supporter Lois Q. Spreckels illustrates the diverse currents and styles that make up this fascinating chapter in American art. The Stanford University Museum of Art is extremely grateful to Lois Q. Spreckels for sharing her fine collection with our university and community audiences. We are delighted to join her in recognizing these important artists and the significance of their work in the development of painting in this century.

THOMAS K. SELIGMAN

John and Jill Freidenrich Director

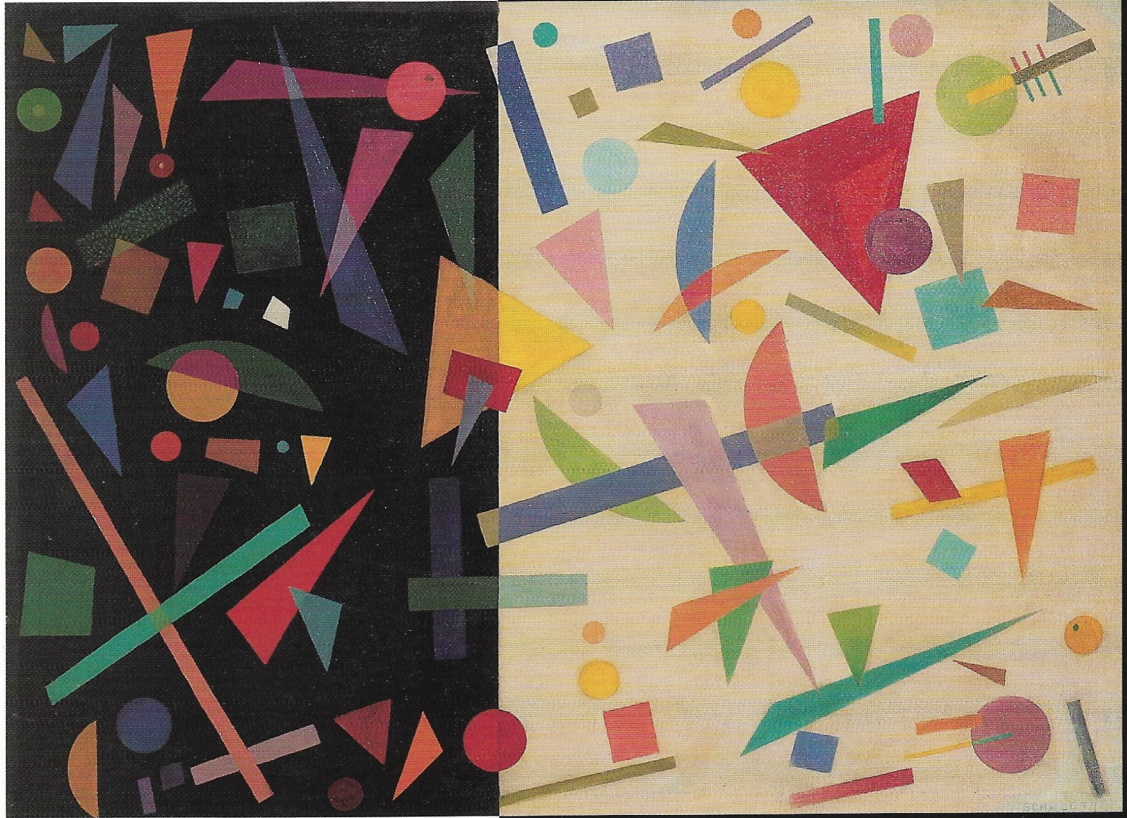
Werner Drewes
Icarus, 1949



¹ "Abstract Art at the Modern Museum," *Art Front* 2 (April 1936): 8, quoted in Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *American Abstraction 1930–1945: The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, for the National Museum of American Art, 1989), 91. Mecklenburg's text and the following exhibition catalogues provide detailed background on the development of abstract art in America: Debra Bricker Balken, *Albert Eugene Gallatin and His Circle* (Coral Gables, Fla.: The Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, 1986); John R. Lane and Susan Larsen, eds., *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America 1927–1944* (Pittsburgh, Pa.:

Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, in Association with Harry N. Abrams, 1983); Susan E. Strickler and Elaine D. Gustafson, *The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s, Selections from the Penny and Elton Yasuna Collection* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1991); and Thomas Tritschler, *American Abstract Artists* (Albuquerque: University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, 1977).

² "Organization," *American Abstract Artists Annual 1939*, quoted in Lane and Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, 162.



Rolph Scarlett
Untitled, ca. 1937–38

Checklist

Milton Avery

(United States, 1885–1965)
Pink Jacket, 1962
 Oil on board, 16 x 12 in.

Oscar Bluemner

(Germany 1867–1937 United States)
Orion, 1936
 Watercolor on paper, 3 1/2 x 4 3/4 in.

Ilya Bolotowsky

(Russia 1907–1981 United States)
Still Life, ca. 1934
 Oil on canvas, 18 x 22 in.

Arthur Dove

(United States, 1880–1946)
Woodpile, 1938
 Watercolor on paper, 5 x 7 in.

Werner Drewes

(Germany 1899–1985 United States)
Icarus, 1949
 Oil on canvas, 28 x 40 in.

Lee Gatch

(United States, 1902–1968)
Pacific Rhythm, 1967
 Natural stone and mixed media, 23 1/2 x 35 in.

John Graham

(Russia 1886–1961 England)
Still Life, ca. 1925
 Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 18 3/8 in.

Balcomb Greene

(United States, 1904–1990)
White Bars, 1937–72
 Oil on canvas, 24 1/4 x 36 1/2 in.

Hananiah Harari

(United States, b. 1912)
Green and Pink, 1942
 Oil and sand on canvas, 20 1/4 x 26 1/4 in.

Carl Holty

(Germany 1900–1973 United States)
Bathers, 1948
 Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.

Karl Knaths

(United States, 1891–1971)
Gray Horse, 1968
 Oil on canvas, 30 x 50 in.

Alfred H. Maurer

(United States, 1868–1932)
Portrait of a Girl, ca. 1926–27
 Gouache on paper, 21 1/2 x 17 3/4 in.

George L. K. Morris

(United States, 1905–1975)
Agony in the Garden, 1956
 Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in.

Irene Rice Pereira

(United States 1902–1971 Spain)
Wind Phoenix, 1952
 Oil on glass and Masonite, 20 x 22 1/2 in.

Rolph Scarlett

(Canada 1889–1984 United States)
Untitled, ca. 1937–38
 Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 48 1/8 in.

Louis Schanker

(United States, 1903–1981)
Nude with Cello, 1933
 Oil on canvas, 54 x 36 in.

Esphyr Slobodkina

(Russia, b. 1908)
Mondrian's Favorite, 1939
 Oil on Masonite, 31 1/2 x 24 in.

Karl Zerbe

(Germany 1903–1972 United States)
New Orleans Signs #3, 1956
 Polymer tempera and collage on
 Masonite, 17 3/4 x 30 1/4 in.

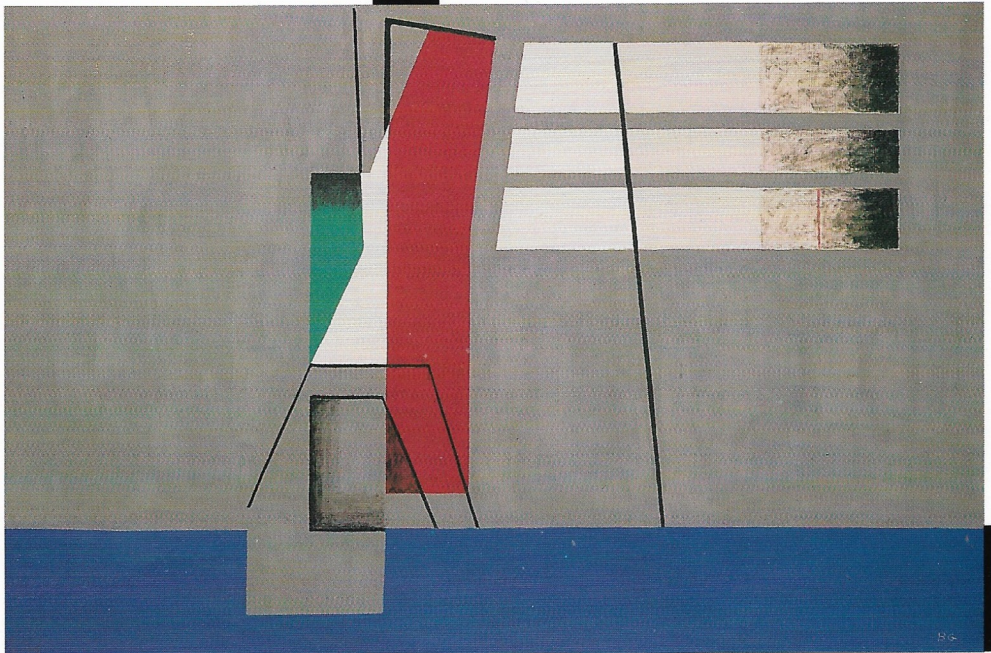
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The point in abstractionism, actually, is that the function of art and the means of achieving this function have been for the first time made inseparable.

—Balcomb Greene



Balcomb Greene
White Bars, 1937–72