

ABSTRACTION - CREATION, ART NON-FIGURATIF

ABSTRACTION - CREATION, ART NON-FIGURATIF, an exhibition of approximately 55 works including prints augmented by drawings, a photograph, and sculpture, is on view through December 4 in the third-floor Sachs Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition, directed by Howardena Pindell, Associate Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, is drawn from the Museum Collection, consisting of work done in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s by members of the Abstraction - Création, Art Non-Figuratif group, an international organization based in Paris during the 1930s that also published a periodical by the same name. Included are works by Albers, Calder, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, Taeuber-Arp, and Vordemberge-Gildewart.

In 1930 or early '31, a group of artists concerned with aspects of abstraction including Théo van Doesburg, leader of Art Concret, put forth a proposal for an international union of abstract artists. Abstraction - Création, Art Non-Figuratif was founded February 15, 1931, and between 1932 and 1936 published five issues of their annual periodical, which was used as a means of attracting new members. Artists were invited to submit photographs with accompanying statements, some choosing to offer earlier work from the 1920s, as well as images of current work. The group also held a series of exhibitions showing members work on a rotating basis.

An editorial appearing in the first issue of Abstraction - Création stated that artists whose work contained recognizable images were not invited to join. "Their common interest in abstraction was built on further synthesizing elements investigated by the Cubists," explains Ms. Pindell. "Greater emphasis was placed on planes of color and geometric forms."

The works in the exhibition were selected, where possible, to show the kind of image chosen by the artist to represent his or her visual concepts in

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the periodical. Although most of the works in this exhibition were executed in the 1930s, when Abstraction - Création was formally in existence, examples from the decades immediately preceding and following have been included if they are representative of the artist's style during this period, reflecting both the diversity and the unity of the Abstractionists and the geometrizing Créationist. Massive emigration of European artists to the United States during and following World War II insured the emergence of the principles of European abstraction through the work of American artists.

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition program is made possible in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency whose funds are recommended by the Governor and appropriated by the State Legislature.

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ABSTRACTION-CREATION, ART NON-FIGURATIF

Wall text

In 1930 or 1931, a group of artists gathered outside Paris in the Meudon studio of Théo van Doesburg to put forth a proposal for an international union of abstract artists. On February 15, 1931, Abstraction-Création, Art Non-Figuratif was founded, and between 1932 and 1936 published five issues of a periodical by the same name. Although van Doesburg died in Switzerland soon after, artists sympathetic to his ideas of geometric abstraction (including former members of Art Concret and Cercle et Carré) made up the core of the new organization, along with others less concerned with the geometric aspects of abstraction.

Art Concret, led by van Doesburg until his death, and Cercle et Carré, founded by Michel Seuphor and Joaquín Torres-García, were active in Paris in 1930-31 and 1929-30, respectively. Many artists who became allied with Abstraction-Création had participated in a Cercle et Carré exhibition in April 1930 at Galerie 23, including Jean Arp, Willi Baumeister, Carl Buchheister, László Moholy-Nagy, Antoine Pevsner, Kurt Schwitters, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Paris, then more than ever a center for foreign-born artists, had attracted Wassily Kandinsky from Russia and Piet Mondrian from Holland. They, too, were members of the group. Although Russian Constructivists Lissitzky, Malevich, and Tatlin were invited to join, they did not respond to the offer.

In the first issue of Abstraction-Création, an editorial stated that artists whose work contained recognizable images were not invited to join. This excluded such artists as Giacometti, who was close to several of its members and who had been present at some of the earliest meetings.

He did not, however, wish to give up working directly from the model. (Although they professed to be a strictly non-figurative group, Calder held one of his amusing circus performances containing recognizable figurative images during an Abstraction-Création exhibition at the Porte de Versailles in 1931.)

Members of the association who lived in or near Paris held informal meetings at the Café Voltaire on the Seine and the Café Voltaire at the Place de l'Odéon, the Closerie des Lilas, and in one another's studios. Not all were active for the full duration of the group; Héliou, for example, participated from 1931 until 1934, but the British artist Ben Nicholson appears to have joined the group in 1933 and dropped out in 1935, the year before its demise.

As well as editing and publishing their periodical annually, the group held a series of exhibitions showing members' work on a rotating basis on the ground floor of a building at 44, avenue de Wagram, where Picasso also lived. According to Seuphor, Picasso visited the exhibitions, staying "for many hours at a time."

The periodical, another vehicle for "exhibiting" members' work, was used as a means of attracting new members. Artists were invited to submit photographs with accompanying statements. Some chose to offer earlier work from the 1920s, as well as images of current work. The prints and drawings in this exhibition, all from the Museum's collections, were selected, where possible, to reflect the kind of image chosen by the artist to represent his or her visual concepts in the periodical. The five issues of the periodical, bound in one volume, appear in the case near the end of

the exhibition with a list of the contributors, as well as a geographical breakdown of the group's membership.

A number of Abstraction-Création members were formerly associated with polemical groups that also disseminated their ideas by means of a magazine: Arp, Taeuber-Arp, and Schwitters had been associated with Dada publications; Stazewski and Strzeminski, the Polish Constructivists, had been associated with BLOK; van Doesburg had edited and Vantongerloo and Vordemberge-Gildewart were represented in De Stijl. Teachers at the Bauhaus Albers, Kandinsky, and Moholy-Nagy had been associated with a variety of publications.

Their common interest in abstraction was built on further synthesizing elements investigated by the Cubists. Greater emphasis was placed on planes of color and geometrizing forms. In addition, positive and negative spaces were energized, thus heightening the tension across the picture plane, as reflected in the work of artists who favored Mondrian's use of primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and the format of the 90° angle, or even van Doesburg's heretical 45° angle.

While some members of Abstraction-Création were drawn to the sparseness and mathematical sensibility of De Stijl or Neo-Plasticism, others, such as Jacques Villon, preferred to abstract forms from nature, simultaneously attempting to move away from realistic, illusionistic, atmospheric space and perspective, freeing the centrally placed image in favor of an overall enlivening of the surface.

Selected primarily from the Museum's print collection and augmented by drawings, a photograph and sculpture, the works in this exhibition are

drawn from the 1930s when, Abstraction-Création was still formally in existence. Works from the decades immediately preceding and following have been included where they reflect the artist's style during this period. Both the diversity and the unity of the Abstractionists and the geometrizing Creationists are reflected here. There are biomorphic, microcosmic abstractions by Kandinsky as well as works with Surrealist overtones by Seligmann.

Although the artists were united by a formal common denominator, many also shared a bond of close friendship; for example: van Doesburg, Arp, and Taeuber-Arp worked together on the interior decoration of the Café l'Aubette in Strasbourg. The decades of crossed paths and social realignments perhaps accounts for the group's optimistic unification under a common principle to establish order out of the chaos that existed in both the political and artistic spheres.

"The current great revolutionary tendencies in art are tendancies towards order, an order of movement and action... After the destruction (Cubism), we have the joy of watching and taking part in the reconstruction of a new world: ordered, clear, healthy, generous, optimistic and dynamic"

(Sonia Delaunay, Abstraction-Création..., issue no. 1 [1932], p.8).

European members of Abstraction-Création were scattered in the late 1930s and early 1940s throughout Europe and the Americas by the war. Schwitters moved to Norway and from Norway to England after Norway was invaded; his Merzbau in Hanover, illustrated in the periodical, was destroyed by

bombs. Freundlich died in a concentration camp.

In spite of the upheaval, Taeuber-Arp, Arp, César Domela, and the American George L.K. Morris founded the periodical Plastique (1937) under a New York - Paris axis letterhead.

The year 1936 marked the last year of the organization and the final issue of its periodical, but it also witnessed the formation of the American Abstract Artists, which published a series of annuals in 1938, 1939, and 1946. Included in its membership were former members of Abstraction-Création, Harry Holtzman and Morris. (According to Héliou, he had proselytized the concepts of Abstraction-Création during his first visit to the United States in 1932, when he invited Gorky to be a member.) Héliou's return to the United States in 1937; Moholy-Nagy's opening of the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937; Mondrian's and Gabo's arrival as refugees in the 1940s; and Albers' immigration to teach at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, after the closing of the Bauhaus by Hitler in 1933, insured the transformation and rebirth of the principles of European abstraction, which were to flourish with new vitality in the work of American artists.

Howardena Pindell