



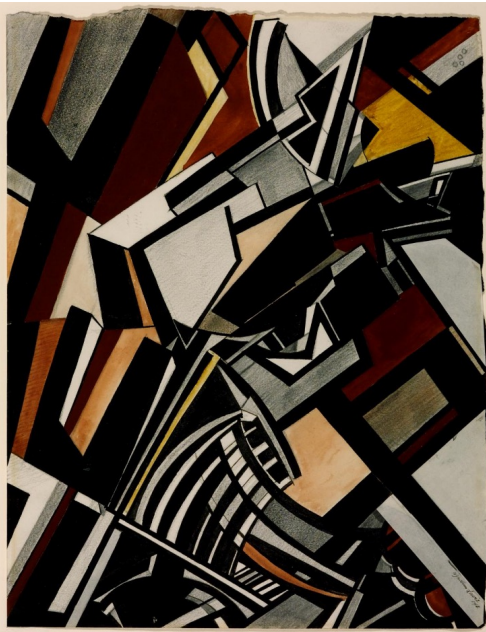
- **A few years ago Jonathan Jones wrote in the Guardian newspaper “*In Britain, abstract art is rarely the public’s cup of tea*” (Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2019)**
- **I therefore have a challenge today and I will gently introduce you to some of the concepts behind abstract art. Although my focus is British art I will introduce art from other countries when it helps explain the development of abstract art and I have selected work to illustrate the wide range of abstract art and where possible works that can be seen in London.**

NOTES

- **What do we mean by ‘abstract art’?** Abstraction, geometric shapes, colour. Is Henry Moore’s work abstract or abstracted from the body?
 - See BBC abstract art, Matthew Collins
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/abstract-art-timeline-colour-and-shape/zmhy6v4>
 - See Tate <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/brief-history-abstract-art->

[turner-mondrian-and-more](#)

- See Tate <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/pompeii/abstraction-decoration>



Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *Composition*, 1913, 34.3 × 26.7 cm, Tate

ABSTRACT ART IN BRITAIN

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Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *Composition*, 1913, 34.3 × 26.7 cm, Tate

- I should perhaps start by explaining what I mean by 'abstract art'. Think of the meaning of the word 'abstraction', the removal of extraneous parts. If we start with the idea of art representing reality accurately then we can abstract parts of our interpretation of reality by removing or changing it. We could turn a tree trunk into a cylinder, or the green leaves into diamonds.
- This work by Wyndham Lewis is a very early example of abstraction. It may appear entirely abstract but we can see architectural forms of the modern city and some people see a dancing couple with the woman on the right bending backwards. Abstract art that is entirely free of any connection with reality is known as concrete art.
- Abstraction is also associated with formal analysis. Visual analysis of a representational painting can be about the subject, the symbolism, the meaning and so on but all

these are missing from abstract art so we are left with formal properties such as colour, composition, line and shape.

NOTES

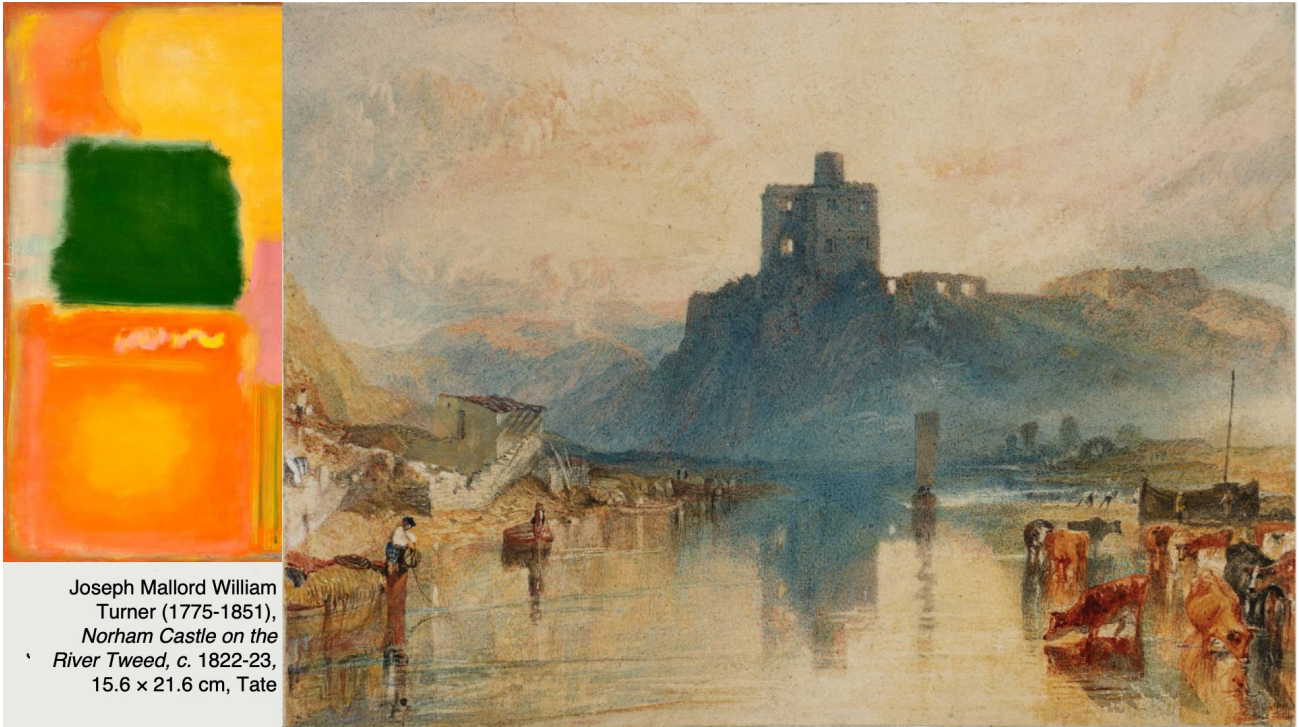
"The term was introduced by artist Theo van Doesburg in his 1930 *Manifesto of Concrete Art*. The manifesto was published in the first and only issue of the magazine *Art Concret*. He stated that there was nothing more concrete or more real than a line, a colour, or a plane (a flat area of colour)." (Tate Art Terms)



Tiled exterior of the Friday Mosque of Herat, Afghanistan

Tiled exterior of the Friday Mosque of Herat, Afghanistan

- **This raises the question of what is the difference, if any, between decorative art and what is called fine art? We might start by thinking that decorative art always involves repetition, like wallpaper, but we quickly realise this is not true and it becomes clear that the two forms of art overlap.**
- **Decorative art has a long tradition and one well known example is Islamic art which often is non-representational. This is the great mosque in Herat, Afghanistan, which started to be built in 1200 CE but was given its present appearance in the 20th century.**
- **We shall also see that many European abstract artists were trying to represent a higher reality and their work has a spiritual intent through colour, composition and balance.**
- **But let us start with an early painting that some think hints at abstraction ...**



Joseph Mallord William
Turner (1775-1851),
*Norham Castle on the
River Tweed*, c. 1822-23,
15.6 x 21.6 cm, Tate

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, c. 1845, Tate

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), *Norham Castle on the River Tweed*, c. 1822-23, 15.6 x 21.6 cm, Tate

Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *No. 16/No. 12 (Mauve Intersection)*, 1949, 135.6 x 163.2 cm, sold by Christie's 13 May 2019 for \$5,382,500

- This is *Norham Castle, Sunrise* and it is an example of Turner's late work. This is the style he painted in from about 1835 to his last exhibition in 1850. The cold, ghostly blue of the castle contrasts with the fireball of the glowing sun and the soft browns of the riverbanks. An umber cow appears ethereal and suspended between air and water until we realise that we are looking at its reflection in the river.
- Over the years Turner produced more than fifteen version of Norham Castle and this is the last and greatest. It was reported by a fellow coach traveller that in 1831 he doffed

his cap at the Castle as he passed by and when asked he said he associated it with his success as an artist. Over the years he radically simplified his composition. (CLICK) He painted his first picture of Norham Castle nearly fifty years before, in 1797 when he was just 22.(CLICK)

- This work was never seen by the public and it is possible it was never finished and never intended for exhibition—we shall never know. Some see it is an early example of a modernist work years ahead of its time and others as simply an unfinished painting. Another explanation is that it was part of an experiment to see if he could sell this idyllic, sketchy landscape paintings that he called ‘elevated pastoral’.
- It was first shown in 1906 over fifty years after his death at an exhibition at the Tate that marked the rediscovery of Turner. Edward Lear reported that his late paintings were seen as the wreck of a great mind although, to Lear, they were ‘the glorious setting of a glorious sun.’
- I am reminded of a story told by the great abstract impressionist Mark Rothko (CLICK). When he first saw this painting in New York in 1966 he joked, “*This man Turner, he learnt a lot from me.*” With this thought in mind you can start to see what could be elements from the natural world in this work by Rothko. Remember, ten years earlier, in the 1930s, he was painting naturalistic landscapes, street scenes and portraits. When Rothko bequeathed his nine paintings to the Tate it was with the proviso that they be hung in a dimmed room next to Turner's paintings. When Tate Modern opened in 2000 they were moved there but in the last few months they have been moved back next door to Turner's work at

Tate Britain. Unfortunately this has reduced the size of the Turner Gallery and many of my favourite works are no longer on display. (CLICK)

NOTES

- This beautiful scene suggests that towards the end of his life not all his paintings had a bleak message. However, some would disagree. Today we look at the countryside as a place where nothing much happens full of beautiful scenery. Turner though always saw the bloody background, the hungry workers and the bloody battles. Norham Castle was the scene of more bloody battles than any other on the Scottish border and it changed hands many times. It is an imposing, dark medieval castle that dates to 1121 and was built to protect Northumberland from the Scots. The light has been described as corpse-like and that Turner saw the sun as a cruel and terrible God.
- The interesting thing is that Turner leaves it up to us how we interpret it. You can see it either way, as an idyllic sunrise in a beautiful setting or as the scene of many terrible and bloody battles.
- Tate display caption, 'Turner first saw Norham, bordering Scotland on the river Tweed in Northumberland, in 1797. He was at the limits of his trip to northern England, when he also visited Buttermere, seen in the painting of nearly fifty years earlier shown nearby. After that first visit he made watercolours showing the ruin at sunrise, and visits in 1801 and 1831 resulted in further views. Here, finally, is one of a series of unfinished, unexhibited paintings reworking his monochrome Liber Studiorum landscape prints. Pure colours rather than contrasting tones express the blazing light as the historic building and landscape merge.'

- Turner first visited Norham Castle in 1797 at the age of 22 and he liked to explain that his first picture of the castle was the work that launched his career. Norham Castle was to become a favourite subject always from the Scottish side of the river looking towards England across the Tweed.

REFERENCES

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-norham-castle-sunrise-n01981>

James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903),
Nocturne in Black and Gold, c.1872-77,
60.3 × 46.6 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts



James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, c. 1872-77, 60.3 × 46.6 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

- **Another painting that was seen to prefigure abstract painting is this work by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold* (c. 1872-77).**
- **It gave rise to one of the central artistic controversy of the Victorian period, known as the Whistler v. Ruskin trial. The trial tells us a lot about how the Victorians regarded art and the nature of the changes Whistler helped bring about.**
- **It was exhibited in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, the year it opened and John Ruskin reviewed the work on display. He praised his friend Burne-Jones but savagely attacked Whistler, writing**
 - *"For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay [founder of the Grosvenor Gallery] ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. **I have***

seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

- At the trial the judge had great trouble making out what this portrayed as it was expected that an artist should reproduce elements of reality accurately. In fact, accuracy of representation was regarded as one of the marks of a good artist along with imagination. Therefore, Ruskin's claim that he simply flung a pot of paint at the canvas was a serious criticism of his claim to be an artist.
- Whistler asked the jury not to consider it as a traditional painting, but as an artistic arrangement although he insisted that the painting was a representation of the fireworks from the Cremorne Gardens. In other words, in modern parlance, he was saying it was semi-abstract and should be evaluated on formal grounds, its balance, colour and composition.
- During the trial the opposing lawyer asked if it was a picture of Cremorne Gardens to which Whistler replied, ***"If it were a view of Cremorne, it would certainly bring about nothing but disappointment on the part of the beholders"***. He did not wish it to be seen as simply a photographic representation. (CLICK) It did not help his case that at one point during the trial it was displayed upside down, like this. Of course, to modern eyes this is a technique that can be used with any painting to draw attention to its formal properties (CLICK).

NOTES

- Whistler arrived in Paris in 1855, aged 21, and moved to

London in 1859 which he adopted as his home.

- In 1866 Whistler decided to travel to Valparaiso, Chile to fight the Spanish. Scholars have puzzle over his motivation. Whistler stated he was asked by some South Americans as a 'West Point' man and he was very proud of his military training but, unlike his brother, he had never fought. He may have thought this the opportunity to display his military prowess as a swashbuckling Southern gentleman (even though he was born in New England). Whatever the reason Whistler's painted his first three night paintings while he was there. He later, thanks to the suggestion of his patron Frederick Leyland he re-titled them 'nocturnes'.
- On his return him contributed *Symphony in White, No. 3* but critics in England and France were not sympathetic and between 1868 and 1870 he showed only a single painting at the Royal Academy and none in France. He experimented with classical nudes in drapes but criticised himself for his lack of formal training in the life class. He had lost his sense of artistic direction. He was short of money, despised the English and began a major family crisis by arguing with his brother-in-law and pushing him through a plate glass window. In 1869 his half-brother George died.
- In 1871 he painted his ailing mother, *Arrangement on Grey and Black, No. 1* (colloquially called *Whistler's Mother*) and this to have been a turning point. At the same time he was rejecting Realism for Aestheticism and he chose to go out on the Thames at night with Walter Greaves (1846-1930) and paint his nocturnes. Greaves was a neighbour who was a boat builder and waterman and his father had been the boatman for J. M. W. Turner.
- Whistler painted several more nocturnes over the next ten years, many of the River Thames and of Cremorne Gardens,

a pleasure park famous for its frequent fireworks displays, which presented a novel challenge to paint. In his maritime nocturnes, Whistler used paint he had thinned with copal, turpentine and linseed oil, creating what he called a 'sauce', which he applied in thin, transparent layers, wiping it away until he was satisfied. To this ground he applied lightly flicked colour to suggest ships, lights, and shore line. Some of the Thames paintings also show compositional and thematic similarities with the Japanese prints of Hiroshige.

- Whistler was short and slim with a curling moustache and he often wore a monocle and dressed like a dandy. He was self-confident, arrogant and selfish and enjoyed shocking his friends. He had a biting wit and on one occasion, young Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) attended one of Whistler's dinners, and hearing his host make some brilliant remark, apparently said, "I wish I'd said that", to which Whistler riposted, "You will, Oscar, you will!" In fact, Wilde did repeat in public many witticisms created by Whistler.

THE WHISTLER V. RUSKIN TRIAL

- This painting gave rise to one of the central artistic controversy of the Victorian period, known as the Whistler v. Ruskin trial. The trial tells us a lot about how the Victorians regarded art and the nature of the changes Whistler helped bring about.
- It was exhibited in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, the year it opened. John Ruskin reviewed Whistler's work in his publication *Fors Clavigera* on July 2, 1877. Ruskin praised Burne-Jones, while he attacked Whistler:
- For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay [founder of the Grosvenor Gallery] ought not to have admitted works into the

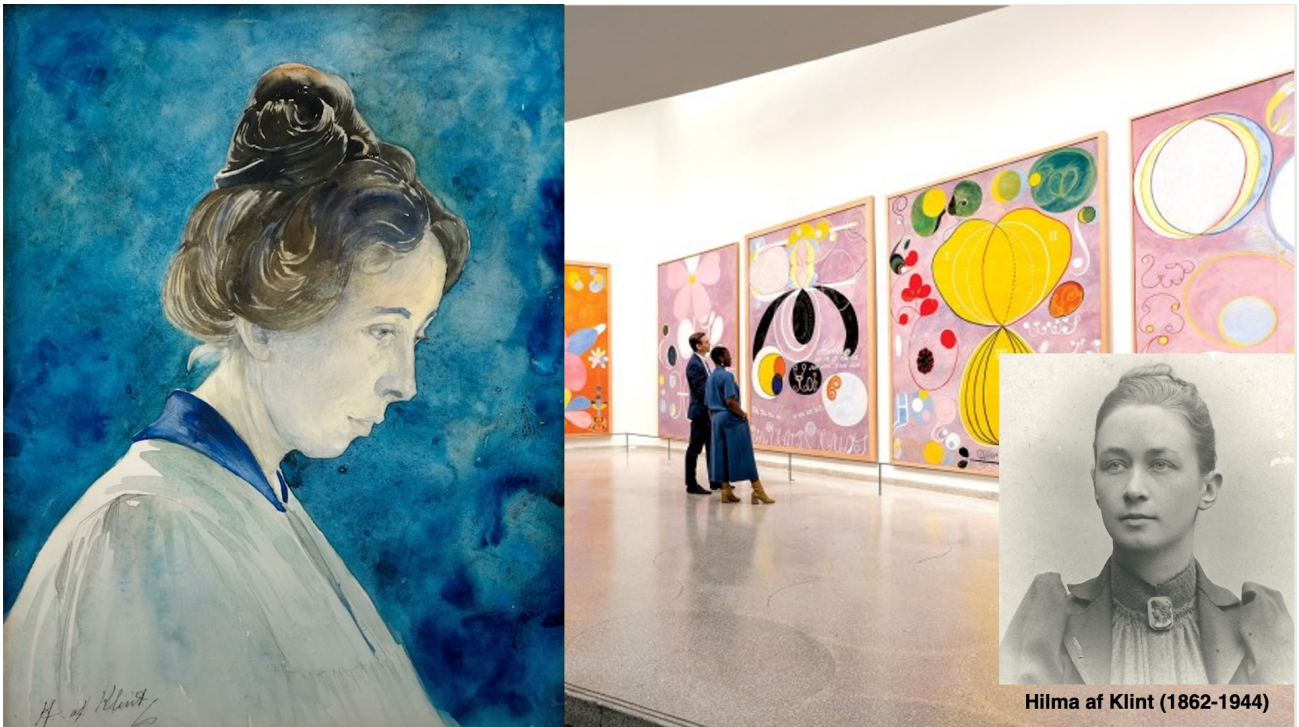
gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.

- Critics by convention did not criticise paintings as they knew the artist had to make a living. If they did not like a painting they ignored it or made a critical comment alongside some positive points.
- Whistler, seeing the attack in the newspaper, replied to his friend George Boughton, "It is the most debased style of criticism I have had thrown at me yet." He then went to his solicitor and drew up a writ for libel which was served to Ruskin. Whistler hoped to recover £1,000 plus the costs of the action. The case came to trial the following year after delays caused by Ruskin's bouts of mental illness, while Whistler's financial condition continued to deteriorate. It was heard at the Queen's Bench of the High Court on November 25 and 26 of 1878.
- Although, we do not have a transcript of the Whistler v. Ruskin trial sufficient reports were published to enable it to be reconstructed.
 - When asked about another painting, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge* (1872-1875), 'Are those figures on the top of the bridge intended for people?'
 - Whistler replied 'They are just what you like.'
- When the judge asked if it was a barge beneath the bridge,
 - Whistler replied 'Yes, I am very much flattered at your seeing that. The picture is simply a representation of moonlight. My whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour.'

- Whistler stressed the colour rather than a harmony of form and the form is suppressed by the overall similarity in tone and hue; with the exception of the gold dots the painting is a wash of blue, in places a thin wash that allows the canvas to show. Whistler mixed large quantities of the predominant tone that he called his 'sauce', and although he started on an easel, he often had to throw the canvas on the floor to stop the sauce running off. The sky and water were rendered by 'great sweeps of the brush of exactly the right tone.'

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_in_Black_and_Gold –
The Falling Rocket](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_in_Black_and_Gold_-_The_Falling_Rocket)



Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), recent exhibition of her work at the Guggenheim 2018-19

Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), *Self-portrait*

- We jump roughly another 25 years and we find the first truly abstract artist in the modern sense. Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) was a Swedish artist who, like many other artists such as Mondrian and Kandinsky, was a believer in Theosophy and who followed a spiritual way of life.
- I should, perhaps, spent a minute describing Theosophy as it will crop up a number of times later. In 1875 a Russian émigré in New York called Helena Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society. It was not described as a religion but it claimed it would replace all existing religions. She claimed she had met a secret brotherhood of Masters who practice an ancient religion that was once followed across the world. Theosophy takes elements of Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions and proposes a single, divine Absolute and it believes in rebirth according to the laws of

karma, spiritual cause and effect, and it promotes universal brotherhood.

- **Hilma af Klint began producing bright, radically abstract works in 1906, years before the artists we will look at later, Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and others would take similar strides to rid their own artwork of representational content.**
- **This is an exhibition of her work at the Guggenheim Museum in 2018-19. Prior to painting these abstract works she painted landscapes and portraits like this *Self-portrait* (Click).**
- **She believed her images contained spiritual truths and the colours conveyed meaning, yellow was male, blue female and green the unity of the two. She wrote notebooks codifying the meanings of her images. Single letters referred to concepts and she was creating a library of ideas.**
- **She rarely exhibited the works and stipulated that her works not be shown until 20 years after her death. Did she believe the public was not ready and that her works would be better understood in the distant future? We don't know. She even made sketches of an open, spiral building to house her work, much like the Guggenheim, which was not commissioned from Frank Lloyd Wright until 1943.**

NOTES

- **The first true abstract artist is now considered to be Hilma af Klint. She was a Swedish artist and mystic whose abstract work predates the first purely abstract compositions by Kandinsky.**

- She was the daughter of a naval commander and spent her summers in the family manor house on an island in a lake. This brought her in close contact with nature and formed her association with natural forms.
- Of course, much decorative art is abstract and has been applied to objects for thousands of years. The distinction between decorative art and fine art narrowed with the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement. It was inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris and some advocates maintained there is no meaningful difference between the fine and decorative arts.
- Hilma af Klint was interested in mathematics and botany and entered the Swedish Royal Academy of Fine Arts when she was 20. Afterwards she was allocated a scholarship to open a studio in central Stockholm and she acquired a reputation for her landscapes, botanical drawings and portraits.
- In 1880 her younger sister died and she became increasingly absorbed with spiritism and later Theosophy, a philosophy and spiritual way of life developed by Madame Blavatsky. There was a search for new forms in art at the beginning of the twentieth century and such well-known artists as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevitch and the French Nabis (including Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard) were all interested in similar spiritual matters including Theosophy. However, Klint was not in contact with these artists and developed her own approach to abstract art in isolation and before these artists.
- There were five women artists, known as The Five, who were interested in the spiritual and the paranormal and regularly organised séances. Inspired by the group Klint developed a form of experimental automatic drawing, later used by the Surrealists, as early as 1896. She wrote in her

notebook:

- *"The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brush stroke."*
- In 1906, after 20 years of artistic works, and at the age of 44, Hilma af Klint painted her first series of abstract paintings.
- The paintings often depict symmetrical dualities, or reciprocities: up and down, in and out, earthly and esoteric, male and female, good and evil. The colour choice throughout is metaphorical: blue stands for the female spirit, yellow for the male one, and pink or red for physical and spiritual love.
- In 1908 she met Rudolf Steiner, a famous Austrian philosopher and claimed clairvoyant. He left unimpressed and told her the paintings were inappropriate for a theosophist. This so devastated her she stopped painting for four years. Steiner had taken photographs of her work and we know he met Wassily Kandinsky the same year. Kandinsky had not yet started to paint abstract works and it is possible he saw the photographs.
- Later in life, Klint destroyed all her correspondence but left a collection of 1,200 paintings and 125 diaries to her nephew vice-admiral Erik af Klint when she died in 1944. She specified in her will that her work should be kept secret for 20 years and her work was forgotten. In 1970 her paintings were offered as a gift to Moderna Museet in Stockholm but declined and so a foundation was created and in the 1980s her work was introduced to an international audience by an art historian. Moderna Museet now has a room permanently

allocated to displaying her work in rotation.

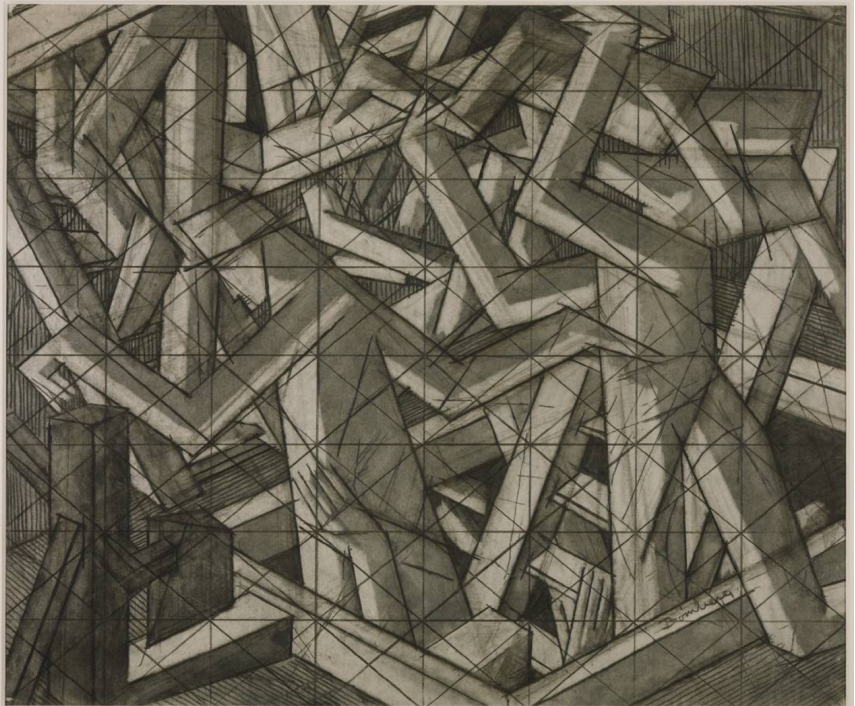
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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/22/hilma-af-klints-visionary-paintings>

David Bomberg (1890–1957), Study for 'In the Hold', c.1914, charcoal on paper, 54.8 x 65.4 cm, Tate



David Bomberg (1890-1957), *In The Hold*, c. 1913-14, 196.2 × 231.1 cm, Tate

David Bomberg (1890–1957), Study for 'In the Hold', c.1914, charcoal on paper, 54.8 x 65.4 cm, Tate

- Turning to an early abstract work by a British artist. This is David Bomberg's *In the Hold*. He was searching for a new artistic form a new way to express himself. He has abstracted the forms to almost a completely abstract pattern but if we examine a study drawing in the Tate we can suddenly see the figures and the ladder down to the hold of the ship.
- *In the Hold* is based on a scene of dockers working in the hold of a ship. A ladder, seen in the lower right of the picture, connects the hold with the deck above. In the centre left one of the dockers can be seen, wearing a hat. Bomberg has left visible the squaring-up grid, used to enlarge accurately the preliminary drawing. He has then used this geometrical framework to dissolve the subject of

the picture into dynamic angular facets. Bomberg was aware of the militancy of the dockworkers which was much publicised at the time.

- Bomberg was searching for a visual language to express his view of the modern urban environment. He wrote: *'the new life should find its expression in a new art, which has been stimulated by new perceptions. I want to translate the life of a great city, its motion, its machinery, into an art that shall not be photographic, but expressive'*.

NOTES

- C.R.W. Nevinson, David Bomberg, Dora Carrington, Mark Gertler, Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer - six of the most important and distinctive British artists of early twentieth century - had all been students together at the Slade School of Art in London. They formed part of what their drawing teacher, Henry Tonks, described as the school's last 'crisis of brilliance'. For young British artists working in the years immediately before the Great War it was an exciting and demanding time as various Modernist movements fought for precedence: Primitivism, Futurism, Cubism, Vorticism and Expressionism.

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<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-in-the-hold-t00913>



David Bomberg (1890-1957), *The Mud Bath*, 1914

- This is *The Mud Bath* again by David Bomberg. Bathing figures were a traditional way of depicting the nude, but here Bomberg brings the subject into the modern era by basing the scene on steam baths used by the local Jewish population near Bomberg's home in east London. He has reduced the human figure to a series of geometric shapes, a process he described as 'searching for an intenser expression ... where I use Naturalistic Form I have stripped it of all irrelevant matter.'
- Bomberg (1890-1957) was born in Birmingham, the son of a Jewish, Polish, immigrant leather worker. He was apprentice to a lithographer and attended evening classes given by Walter Sickert. Like many artists he was motivated by Roger Fry's 1910 exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* and he entered the Slade with the help of a scholarship. He became a forceful member of the avant garde and on leaving the Slade exhibited six works in Brighton.
- The year he painted this, 1914, was Bomberg's best year

as he exhibited five works including *In the Hold* and he broke away from Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist group. He also held his first one-man show and this painting, *The Mud Bath*, literally stopped the traffic when it was hung outside the Chenil Gallery in Chelsea. However, his work started to displease his patrons with his cubist style and choice of subject and he started to go out of favour.

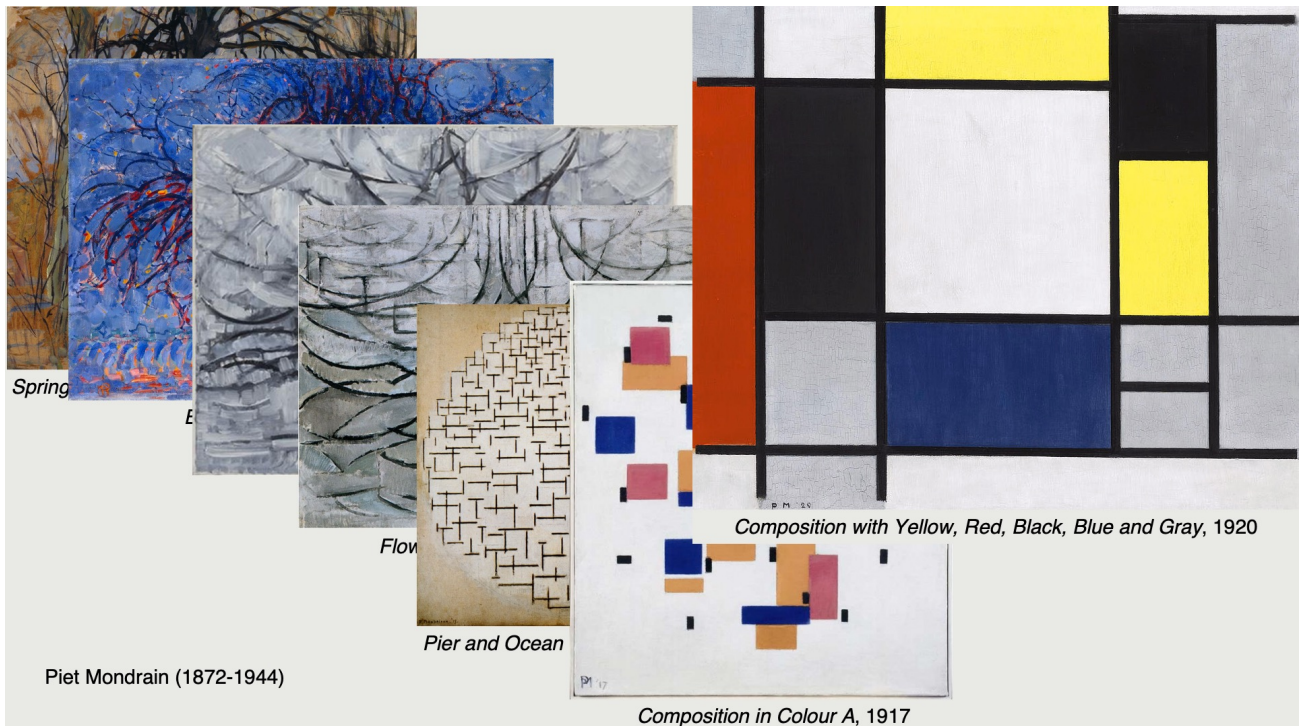
BIO:BOMBERG

- **David Bomberg** (1890-1957) was born in Birmingham, the son of a **Jewish Polish immigrant leather worker**. He was apprentice to a lithographer and attended **evening classes** given by **Walter Sickert**. Motivated by Roger Fry's 1910 exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* he entered the **Slade with the help of a scholarship**. He was a **forceful member** of the avant garde and on leaving the Slade exhibited six works in Brighton.
- **1914** was Bomberg's **best year** as exhibited five works including *In the Hold* broke away from **Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist group**, held his **first one-man show** and his *The Mud Bath* literally **stopped the traffic** when it was hung outside the Chenil Gallery, Chelsea. However, his work started to **displease his patrons** with his **cubist style** and choice of subject, such as painting Arab villages for the Zionist Organisation.
- He **enlisted in the Army** and was sent to the front line which inhibited his painting. After the war he **rejected** machine-age **abstraction** and turned to a more traditional style and to landscape painting. **He travelled to Palestine and then Spain** but on his return **his one-man show in 1932** (the year he painted *Lilian*) **was not as well received**.

- He **joined the Communist Party** and **visited Russia** but by 1939 he was a **neglected** artist and was initially **rejected** by the War Artists' Advisory Committee. He received **one commission** which inspired some of his finest work but only three drawings were accepted. He was continually **rejected** during WWII and only Borough Polytechnic accepted him as a **teacher**. Although his classes were small he became a **legendary teacher** and his students included **Frank Auerbach** and **Leon Kossoff**. Some of **finest landscapes** were inspired by visits to Cornwall and Cyprus. He tried to establish a school in Malaga, Spain but fell ill and was transferred to Gibraltar and then England where he died at St Thomas's Hospital in 1957.

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Piet Mondrian (1872–1944):

Spring Sun (Lentezon): castle ruin Brederode, c. late 1909 - early 1910, 62 x 72 cm, Dallas Museum of Art

Evening: Red Tree (Avond; De rode boom), 1908–10, 70 × 99 cm, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Gray Tree, 1911

Flowering Apple Tree, 1912, 78.5 x 107.5 cm, Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

Pier and Ocean (Composition No. 10), 1915, State Museum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo

Composition with Colours A, 1917, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray, 1920

- In order to create a more rounded picture of the development of abstract art I would like to mention the three artists who are conventionally considered the

founders. All three developed their ideas at roughly the same time but I will start with Piet Mondrian as he abstracted his work step-by-step over a number of years. However, don't think that it was a calculated progression, it just looks that way with hindsight. Each step was hard won and was driven by emotion. This was a person who left his good job and his fiancée when he was 39 to go to Paris to become an artist. He loved jazz and was an ardent dancer.

- The first work is *Spring Sun* produced in 1909-10. It's largely representational and is typical of the landscapes he produced at this time. He wrote "*the emotion of beauty is always hindered by [the] particular appearance of an 'object'; the object must therefore be abstracted from any figurative representation*". So he was clearly searching for a way to remove the particular appearance to arrive at the inner beauty of a scene.
- (CLICK) In 1908 he became interested in Theosophy, like Hilma af Klint. *Evening: Red Tree* is still clearly representational but he has abstracted the colours and has switch to using the primary colours.
- (CLICK) 1911 was when he gave up his successful career and moved to Paris to become an artist. He painted *Gray Tree* which follows in the theme of *Red Tree* but he takes the abstraction of form further. He was influenced by Cubism but has assimilated it into his own form of representation.
- (CLICK) *Flowering Apple Tree* of 1912 is when he worked with thinner paints and brought out the underlying structure. It was in 1912 that he started to combine his theosophical ideas with his painting

style.

- (CLICK) In 1915, *Pier and Ocean* marks a major step in Mondrian's path toward pure abstraction. Here he has eliminated diagonal and curved lines as well as colour; the only true reference to nature is found within the title and the horizontal lines that allude to the horizon and the verticals that evoke the pilings of the pier.
- (CLICK) In 1917, *Composition with Colours A*. Mondrian, together with Bart van der Leek and Theo van Doesburg, establish the De Stijl ('The Style', pronounced 'duh sh-style' movement. Their aim was to create a new kind of art, for a new and better world. In his work, Mondriaan seeks a balance between lines and colours and strives for an abstraction that evokes a universal and timeless image.
- (CLICK) 1920, *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray*, Mondrian thought that we are all evolving to a higher state and his paintings would light a path that would help people achieve this state. Unlike Kazimir Malevich, who thought abstract art would bring political reform, Mondrian believed his art would bring about spiritual reform and his abstract paintings were his mission to help save the world. He firmly believed that art would replace religion and that his paintings would become beacons, lighting the path to a higher state of being. So these are not cold, calculated paintings but deeply spiritual and emotional.
- On a final point, one important aspect of abstract is that it is formally balanced, that is the component

parts work harmoniously together. However, this does not mean they are balanced like a pair of scales. Mondrian saw equal balance as static so he aimed for contrast, energy and confrontation. When you look at a Mondrian you should feel that the elements are not quite equally balanced but are competing and dynamic.

NOTES

- **1909-10, Spring Sun.** Pieter Cornelis 'Piet' Mondriaan (after 1906 Mondrian, 1872–1944) was a Dutch painter who contributed to the De Stijl (1917-1928/31, pronounced 'duh style') art movement founded by Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931). Mondrian evolved a non-representational style which he termed Neoplasticism (or De Stijl). He was an artist of great integrity who wrote, 'the emotion of beauty is always hindered by particular appearance of an 'object'; the object must therefore be abstracted from any figurative representation.
- **1908-10, *Evening: Red Tree*.** Mondrian's art was intimately related to his spiritual and philosophical studies. In 1908, he became interested in the theosophical movement launched by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in the late 19th century, and in 1909 he joined the Dutch branch of the Theosophical Society. One of Mondrian's earliest paintings, this was the first in which he implemented his colour palette of red, blue and yellow, the three primary colours. It was still a clearly representational form of a tree. As a budding artist, Mondrian began painting simple pastoral landscapes of his home country, and these paintings evolved from those beginning artistic ideas. In the abstraction of the colour of the tree and the simple design, Mondrian's aesthetic style is already present in this simple landscape.

- **1911, *Gray Tree*.** In 1911, at the age of 39, Mondrian gave up his career, left his fiancée and moved to Paris. He changed the double 'aa' in his name to a single 'a' to fit in better with the French artists. He met other artists and was keen to assimilate Cubism but he wanted to take it further. *The Gray Tree* is one of the first paintings in which Mondrian applied to a natural subject the principles of cubist composition that he was in the process of assimilating and working out in his own way. At the same time, it is a continuation of the series on the tree theme, which began with the studies for the *Red Tree* of 1908. Although four years elapsed between the *Red Tree* and the *Gray Tree*, it would be a mistake not to see them as two links in a single chain of development.
- **1912, *Flowering Apple Tree*.** As compared with the only slightly earlier *Gray Tree*, the *Flowering Apple Tree* is far less painterly in surface treatment. In the earlier work, telling strokes and accents defined the form; here a thinly applied layer of paint is the means by which the structure of the whole is brought out. *Flowering Apple Tree*, probably done in the spring of 1912, was shown in October and November of that year at the second exhibition of the Moderne Kunstkring in Amsterdam. In 1913 Mondrian began to fuse his painting with his spiritual studies. In 1914 he was visiting his home in the Netherlands when war broke out and he was forced until 1918 when he returned to Paris. He stayed in Paris until 1938 when advancing fascism forced him to London and from there to Manhattan where he stayed until his death.
- **1915, *Pier and Ocean*** marks a definitive step in Mondrian's path toward pure abstraction. Here he has eliminated diagonal and curved lines as well as colour; the only true reference to nature is found within the title and the horizontal

lines that allude to the horizon and the verticals that evoke the pilings of the pier. The rhythms created by the alternating lines and their varying lengths presages Mondrian's mature dynamic, depicting an asymmetrical balance as well as the pulse of the ocean waves. Reviewing this work, Theo van Doesburg wrote: "Spiritually, this work is more important than the others. It conveys the impression of peace; the stillness of the soul." Mondrian had begun to translate what he saw as the underlying ordered patterns of nature into a pure abstract language. "Vertical and horizontal lines are the expression of two opposing forces; they exist everywhere and dominate everything; their reciprocal action constitutes 'life'. I recognised that the equilibrium of any particular aspect of nature rests on the equivalence of its opposites." 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art', Piet Mondrian (1937)

- **1917, *Composition with Colours A***. Mondriaan, together with Bart van der Leek and Theo van Doesburg, establish the De Stijl movement in 1917. They aim to create a new kind of art, for a new and better world. In his work, Mondriaan seeks a balance between lines and colours and strives for an abstraction that evokes a universal and timeless image. *Composition in Colour A* is a study towards that 'pure, neo-plasticism'. The colours in this work are a muted version of the primary colours: dark rose red, deep blue and dark ochre. The clearly delineated coloured areas are linked in all possible ways, together with one or more black line fragments. Sometimes they are placed side-by-side, sometimes overlapping, with no obvious system. The result is that the different elements appear to float in an indefinable space. The white is not a neutral background, but a living component of the painting. It is just as much a form as the surfaces and lines. *Composition in colour A* still consists of rhythmically arranged coloured areas, but in the

years that follow, Mondriaan does away with any suggestion of movement and depth in his paintings and uses only red, yellow and blue.

- **1920, Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray**, Mondrian thought that we are all evolving to a higher state and his paintings would light a path that would help people achieve this state. Unlike Kazimir Malevich, who thought abstract art would bring political reform, Mondrian believed his art would bring about spiritual reform and his abstract paintings were his mission to help save the world.

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Wassily Kandinsky, *Cossacks*, 1910-11

- The second artist is Wassily Kandinsky whose early work was also representational and he was also influenced by the spiritual philosophy called Theosophy.
- Theosophy teaches that creation is a geometric progression starting with a single point and ever expanding out from that. Kandinsky wrote a book called *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910). In which he wrote, “*Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul*”.
- His work gradually became more abstract and within a few years (by 1915) any reference to material objects had gone.
- In this painting although at first glance it appears abstract we can see the cossacks on the right with what appears to be a building behind them. There is a rainbow in the centre with what could be bayonets either side.

- **As he said Kandinsky's aim was to produce object-free, spiritually deep pictures that suggested feelings and emotions like music.**



Wassily Kandinsky
(1866-1944),
Composition 7,
1913, Tretyakov
Gallery, Moscow

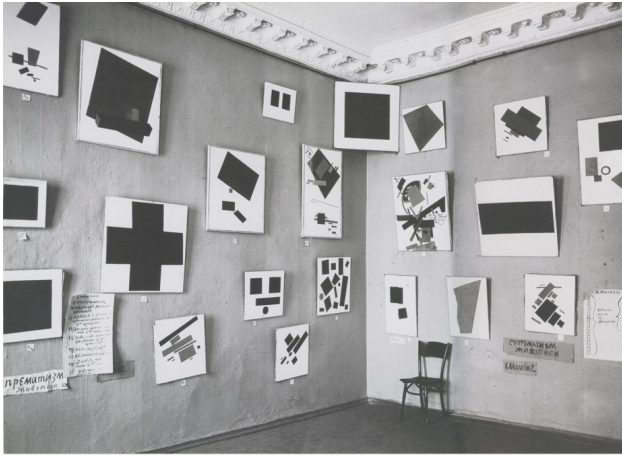
Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944, aged 77), *Composition 7*, 1913, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

- **This was two years later and we see how his art became increasingly abstracted. According to Kandinsky, this is the most complex piece he ever painted.**
- **Kandinsky was born in Moscow, his father was a tea merchant and his great-grandmother a princess. He studied law and economics and became a Professor of Law. He did not begin painting until he was 30, in 1896. He studied in Munich and did not return to Russia until 1914.**
- **From 1918 to 1921, Kandinsky was involved in the cultural politics of Russia and collaborated in art education and museum reform. He painted little during this period, but devoted his time to artistic teaching, with a program based on form and colour analysis; he also helped organize the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow of which he was the first director.**
- **His spiritual, expressionistic view of art was ultimately rejected by the radical members of the Institute as too**

individualistic and bourgeois. In 1921, Kandinsky left Russia to go to Germany to teach at the Bauhaus until it was closed by the Nazis in 1933 when he moved to France and eventually became a French citizen.

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Suprematist works by Malevich at the [0.10 Exhibition](#), Petrograd, 1915



Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), *Black Square*, 1915, oil on linen, 79.5 × 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935, aged 56), *Black Square*, 1915, oil on linen, 79.5 × 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

- The third artist regarded as a founder of abstract art is Kazimir Malevich. He was also on a spiritual quest and sought to reduce art to its most basic forms so that he could built a new, revolutionary art.
- He wrote "*The appearances of natural objects are in themselves meaningless; the essential thing is feeling - in itself and completely independent of the context in which it has been evoked.*"
- And "*Only when the habit of one's consciousness to see in paintings bits of nature, madonnas and shameless nudes... has disappeared, shall we see a pure painting.*"
- This is his first exhibition of the new art he created which he called Suprematism, by which he meant the supremacy of pure feeling over representation. The most famous work is the black square hung in the corner of the room where in Russia a religious icon is normally hung. He wrote, "*In*

1913, trying desperately to liberate art from the ballast of the representational world, I sought refuge in the form of the square." He said the black square is pure feeling and the white field the void beyond this feeling.

- **By the way, you will notice cracks in the image I am showing. These were not present in the original but developed over time.**

REFERENCES

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Pablo Ruiz Picasso (25 October 1881 – 8 April 1973)

Pablo Ruiz Picasso (25 October 1881 – 8 April 1973)

Study for a Torso, aged 11

Science and Charity, 1897, aged 15

Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper, 1913

- One artist that many think of as abstract is Pablo Picasso who moved towards abstraction in 1913 but he never went purely abstract and rejected Concrete Art. He said "*there is no abstract art*".
- These three images show his journey towards abstraction at which point he stopped.
- The *Study for a Torso* he produced when he was 11, *Science and Charity* when he was 15. In 1913 when he was 32 he entered into the second phase of Cubism. The first phase is called Analytical Cubism when he broke objects into fragments and this second phase is called Synthetic Cubism which was all about flattening the image.
- In this work *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and*

Newspaper the oval edge drawn at the bottom right is the rounded edge of a table. The abstracted forms of a guitar, glass and a bottle of brandy are cut from coloured paper and stuck on the background paper. 'Vieux' (old) is written on the bottle. Two pieces cut from *Le Figaro* are stuck at right angles on the canvas. Fragments of two embroidery transfer motifs extend the shapes towards the edge of the arrangement. The guitar and table appear to be seen from above but the bottle and glass are shown from the side. The background was originally light blue but the colour has faded.

NOTES

- Cubism was developed by Picasso and George Braque in their Paris studio from about 1908 onwards. The movement can be divided into two phases. During the first phase, called Analytical Cubism (see Visual Aids), the artists fragmented objects into their elements and then painted those elements from various angles. This work was produced during the second phase [1912-14] which is called Synthetic Cubism. They created works of art by sticking objects they found or cut from other materials onto paper. This type of collage has been used for centuries in folk art, for example, quilt making or creating a mosaic. Re-using discarded objects, such as newspaper cuttings and bottle tops, places the 'trash' in a new context that reveals unexpected qualities and new meanings as in the El Anatsui we have just seen.
- Picasso selected newspapers cuttings with a variety of stories from war to minor news items and in this way, he represented the enormous range of stories we are presented with each day. In addition, Picasso said that by using a newspaper cutting to represent another object forced them to be re-evaluated and it added to the strangeness we all feel

about what is happening in the world. It was this strangeness Picasso wanted the viewer to think about because he thought the world was becoming a 'very strange' and 'not exactly reassuring' place.

- The lack of meaning. As we scan the piece and try to assemble the intended meaning we might ask many questions. Is this a bottle? Is this a table edge? It is not clear as the work is disjointed and it is that feeling of dissatisfaction and alienation that we also associate with the fast moving, disconnected modern world. The work requires no specialist knowledge of fine art or Greek mythology. It is open to everyone and everyone is equally challenged and this challenge mirrors the way we all feel about coping with the modern world.

NOTES

- Picasso first began to make collages in 1912. The use of cut paper and clippings from newspapers seemed a natural extension of his earlier experiments with stencilled lettering. Whereas his earlier cubist works had involved deconstructing objects into their component parts, works like this one sought to construct a unified composition from abstracted fragments of the objects depicted. The newspaper in this work may have been chosen for its faded colour, since it was already nearly thirty years old when Picasso used it.
- Picasso and Braque's use of the modern paper collage was picked up and used by art movements across Europe including futurism, surrealism and pop art. Brandon Taylor wrote, 'cubist papier collé ... would become international modernism's most elegant and fertile style'.
- Marc, also called pomace brandy or eau-de-vie is made from

the distillation of the fermented remains of pressed grapes after removing the grape juice. It is made in many areas of France and other countries.

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Vanessa Bell (1879-1961), *Abstract Painting*, 1914



Vanessa Bell (1879-1961), *Helen Dudley*, c. 1915

Vanessa Bell (1879-1961), *Abstract Painting*, 1914

Vanessa Bell (1879-1961), *Helen Dudley*, c. 1915

- **Returning to Britain there was another very early abstract artist—Vanessa Bell (sister of Virginia Woolf).**
- **There are no indications of which way up to hang this painting by Vanessa Bell but the direction of the brushstrokes and the slightly thicker paint towards the end of the rectangular forms were used to decide this orientation by Tate.**
- **It is one of only four abstract works that Bell painted around 1914. She is experimenting with abstraction and the theory of significant form described by her husband Clive Bell and her close friend Roger Fry (with whom she had an affair). This is the idea that the form of an artwork or forms within an artwork can be expressive, even if largely or completely divorced from a recognisable reality.**
- **In 1989 her son Quentin Bell challenged her about giving up**

abstract art, '*Why, I asked Vanessa, did you give it up?*'. He recorded that '*roughly speaking her answer was because, having done it, there seemed nothing else to do ... and then one discovered that one was, after all, in love with nature*'.

- Some commentators see this as a turning point in her art as the grace of the forms, the elements of proportion and spatial design informed all her later work even though it was realistic, for example, her portrait of Helen Dudley the following year shows.

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Jessica Dismorr, *Abstract Composition*, c. 1915



Jessica Dismorr (1885-1939), *Abstract Composition*, c. 1915, 41.3 x 50.8 cm, Tate, purchased 1968

- **Another early abstract artist was Jessica Dismorr one of only two female members of the Vorticist movement (with Helen Saunders) and an active member of most of the avant garde groups in London between 1912 and 1937.**
- **Vorticism was an art movement that flourished in England from 1912 to 1915. It was founded by Wyndham Lewis and named by Ezra Pound and it intended to relate art to industrialisation. It opposed sentimentality and extolled the energy of the machine and it promoted a cult of violence. Its aim was to represent the energy and vitality of the modern world using what Lewis called "a new living abstraction". It has been described as the British form of Italian Futurism.**
- **Dismorr came from a wealthy family and studied art at the Slade in 1902-3 before studying in Paris. During World War I she worked as a nurse in France and after the war suffered**

a mental breakdown. Her early work was exhibited in London and Paris and although she was productive a lot of her early work is now lost.

- In 1920s she was a member of the prestigious Seven and Five Society when she produced representational works including portraits and between 1927 and 1934 she exhibited with the London Group which included Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. Dismorr continued painting in the late 1930s when most of her work was completely abstract. She committed suicide five days before Britain declared war on Germany in 1939 partly it is believed because of her poor mental health.**
- The fact that she has disappeared from art history is partly because she was a women and partly because her suicide just before the Second World War prevented and major retrospective exhibition. Her radical art has been largely overlooked.**

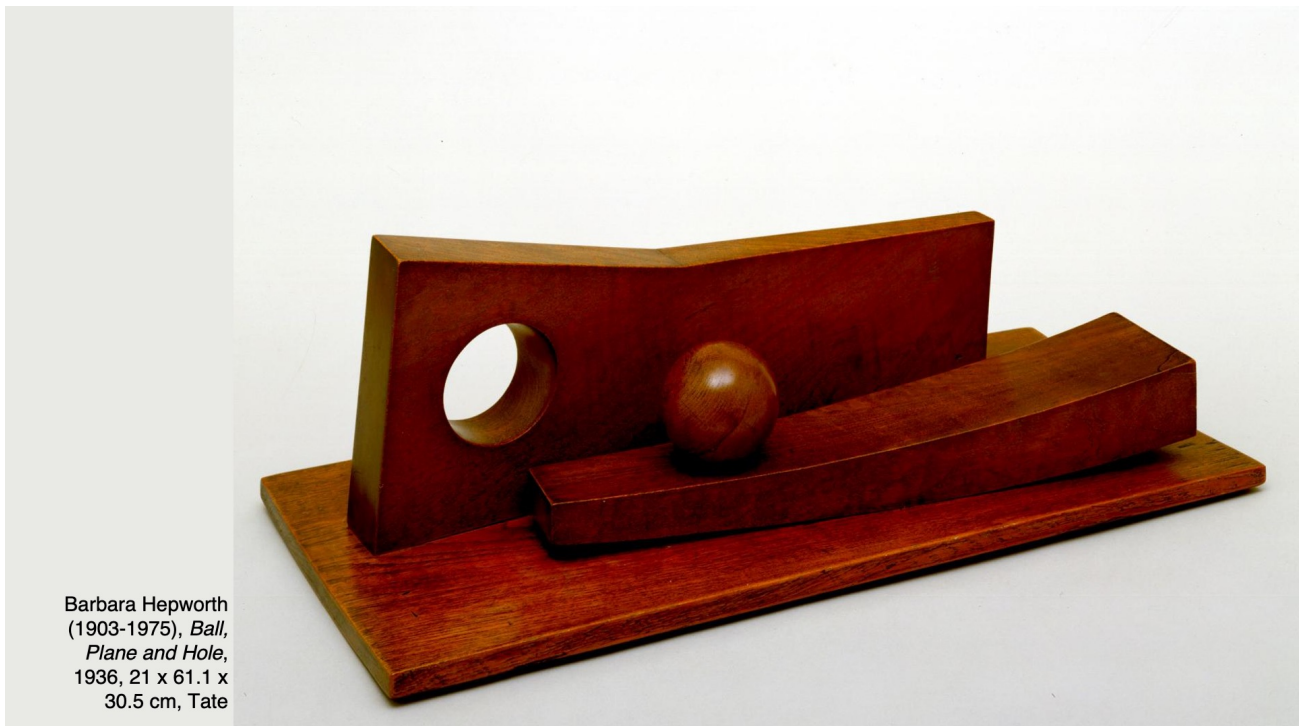
NOTES

- Vorticism has been described as a British form of Futurism. Futurism was invented, and predominantly based, in Italy, led by the charismatic poet Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti (1876-1944). The group was at its most influential and active between 1909 and 1914 but was re-started by Marinetti after the end of the First World War. This revival attracted new artists and became known as second generation Futurism.**
- Jessica Dismorr was a member of almost all the active avant garde groups in London between 1912 and 1937. She met Wyndham Lewis in 1913 and signed the Vorticist manifesto in 1914. She was one of only two female members of the group, the other was Helen Saunders.**

- Vorticism was a largely male group based on London that appealed to Jessica Dismorr as it opened up male spaces and her engagement with masculine spaces "countered effects of 'Prettiiness' that suggested feminine weakness and inferior artistry".
- Prior to joining the group she had studied with the artist J. D. Fergusson and made repeated trips to France where she created representational works. Between 1914 and 1920 she translated these works with their flat decorative shapes into non-figurative works such as *Abstract Composition*. In 1920s she was a member of the prestigious Seven and Five Society when she produced representational works including portraits. However, in the 1930s she returned to abstraction.

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Barbara Hepworth
(1903-1975), *Ball,
Plane and Hole*,
1936, 21 x 61.1 x
30.5 cm, Tate

Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), *Ball, Plane and Hole*, 1936, 21 x 61.1 x 30.5 cm, Tate

- **Barbara Hepworth's early work was highly involved with abstraction along with fellow sculptor Henry Moore and Hepworth was the first to work with pierced forms in 1932.**
- **In 1931 she met the abstract painter Ben Nicholson and divorced her first husband the sculptor John Skeaping later that year. Although Nicholson remained married she had triplets by him in 1934. In 1933 they had travelled to France and met the leading sculptors of the day including Pablo Picasso and Constantin Brâncusi. That year she co-founded Unit One with Nicholson and Paul Nash with the aim of uniting Surrealism with abstraction.**
- **This sculpture draws attention to the relationship between solid material and empty space by suggesting the passage of the ball through the plane to leave a hole. The movement is implied here by the placing of wedge, ball and hole. The natural warmth of wood offsets the purity and simplicity of**

Hepworth's forms. It is one of a group of works that use complementary forms, each solid structure being contrasted with another that is smaller, larger, rounder or straighter than itself.

NOTES

- The other important area in the development of modern British art is sculpture. In particular, the work of Jacob Epstein, who we shall see next, Henry Moore and this artist, Barbara Hepworth.
- Hepworth's early work was representational but in 1931 she met the abstract painter Ben Nicholson. By 1936, when this work was produced she had divorced her husband [John Skeaping] and given birth to triplets with Nicholson. They were also by then producing completely abstract work like this one, titled Ball, Plane and Hole.
- It illustrates an important new feature, the hole. Henry Moore called 1932 'The Year of the Hole'. The previous year Hepworth, his old friend and rival, made her first pierced form. The hole she carved became the most important formal features of much of her and Moore's later work. Hepworth said, 'I felt the most intense pleasure in piercing the stone in order to make an abstract form and space; quite a different sensation from that doing it for the purpose of realism'. Some critics have suggested that the hole and ball have sexual associations while others have pointed out the associations with 'the playful quality of children's toys'. There is also a feminist reading of the work. Hepworth believed that art should be gender free, either the thing is good or it isn't.
- Many critics take for granted that objects are positive, underpin the world and are associated with energy and masculinity but that space, the 'hole', is negative and

associated with femininity. Modern science teaches us that hard, physical objects are forms of energy whose location is subject to uncertainty. Objects dissolve into patterns of energy and black holes become the subject of modern cosmology. Another critic [Jeanette Winterson, Tate] describes the hole as a form of focused energy, 'the still point of the turning world'. Another analysis is from Hepworth herself, who wrote [in the 1950s], 'Sculpture to me is primitive, religious, passionate and magical -- always affirmative.'

- Critics often defend her in relation to her gender, something they would never do for a male artist. For example, one critic [Adrian Stokes], a friend of Hepworth, criticised her for lacking Moore's 'tumult', in order to contrast her with Moore he admired her serenity and the way her works 'evade disputations of power or of antagonism'.
- When war broke out in 1939 she and Nicholson moved down to St. Ives in Cornwall. She fell in love with Cornwall and stayed there the rest of her life and her work became less austere reflecting the new elements such as the rugged landscape and the ancient standing stones.

NOTES ON BARBARA HEPWORTH (1903-1975), BALL, PLANE AND HOLE, 1936, 21 x 61.1 x 30.5 cm

- Tate display caption, 'The title of this sculpture draws attention to the relationship between solid material and empty space, and to the implied passage of the ball through a plane to leave a hole. The movement is implied here by the placing of wedge, ball and hole. The natural warmth of wood offsets the purity and simplicity of Hepworth's forms. As Hepworth's friend, the physicist JD Bernal suggested, it is one of a group of works that 'bring out the theme of

complementary forms, each solid structure being contrasted sharply with a hollow smaller, or larger, than itself.'

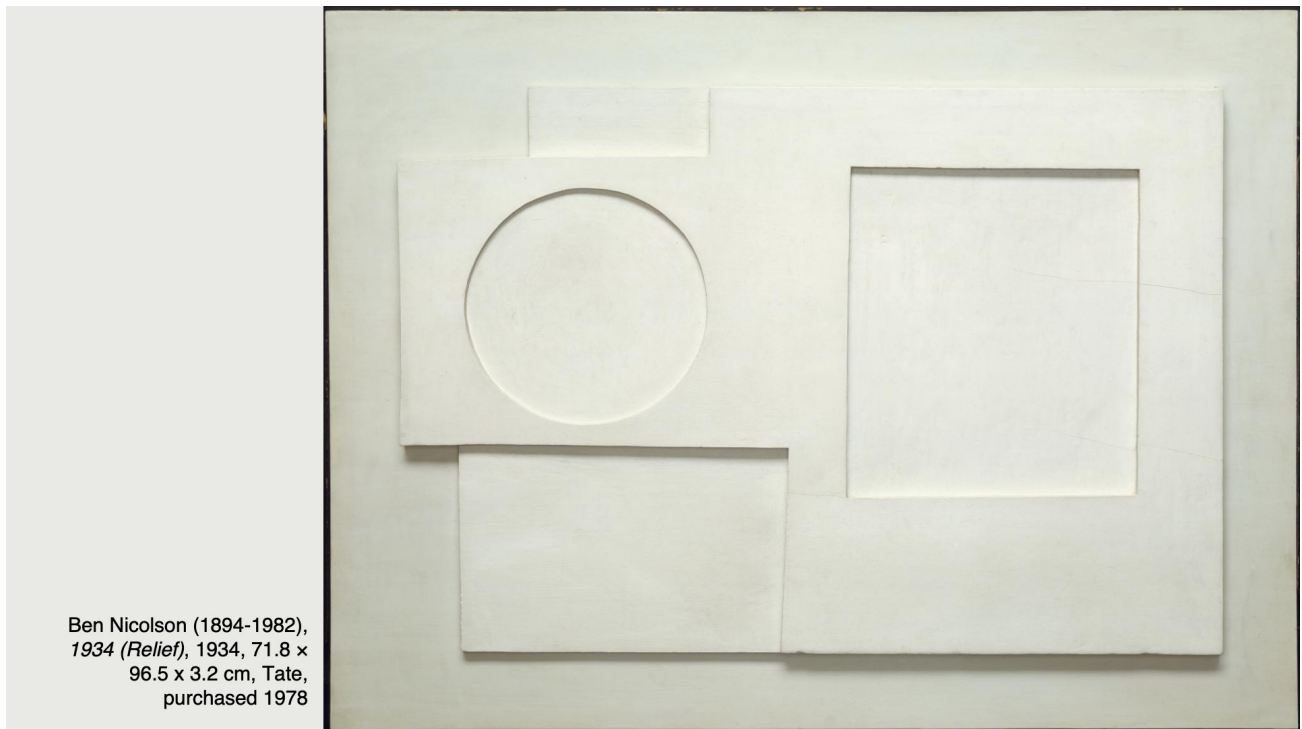
- Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) is an English artist and sculptor and one of the few internationally significant women artists in the early and mid-twentieth century. She was born in Yorkshire to a middle-class family and won a scholarship to study at Leeds School of Art (1920-21) where she met fellow student Henry Moore (1898-1986). There was a friendly rivalry and Hepworth was the first to sculpt the pierced figures that became the hallmark of both of their works. She won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art (1921-24). She travelled to Italy on another scholarship and married John Skeaping in Florence. They had a son, Paul, in 1929. She became associated with the 'new movement', direct carving, abstraction and precise forms and she joined the London Group and the 7 & 5 Society. In 1931, Hepworth met Ben Nicholson who was then married. He joined her on a holiday to Happisburgh, Norfolk. She divorced Skeaping in March 1933, gave birth to triplets with Nicholson in 1934 and married him in 1938. They visited the Parisian studios of Jean Arp, Constantin Brâncuși, Piet Mondrian, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso and joined Abstraction-Création, and were major figures in Paul Nash's Unit One group. Hepworth's first 'holed' sculpture, Pierced Form, was carved in 1932 and exhibited in 1934. She revealed her move to abstraction in 1932 and 1934 epitomised by the pioneering piercing of the block and experiments in collage, photograms and prints.
- 'At the still point of the turning world' is a line in T. S. Eliot's poem 'Burnt Norton' one of the The Four Quartets.

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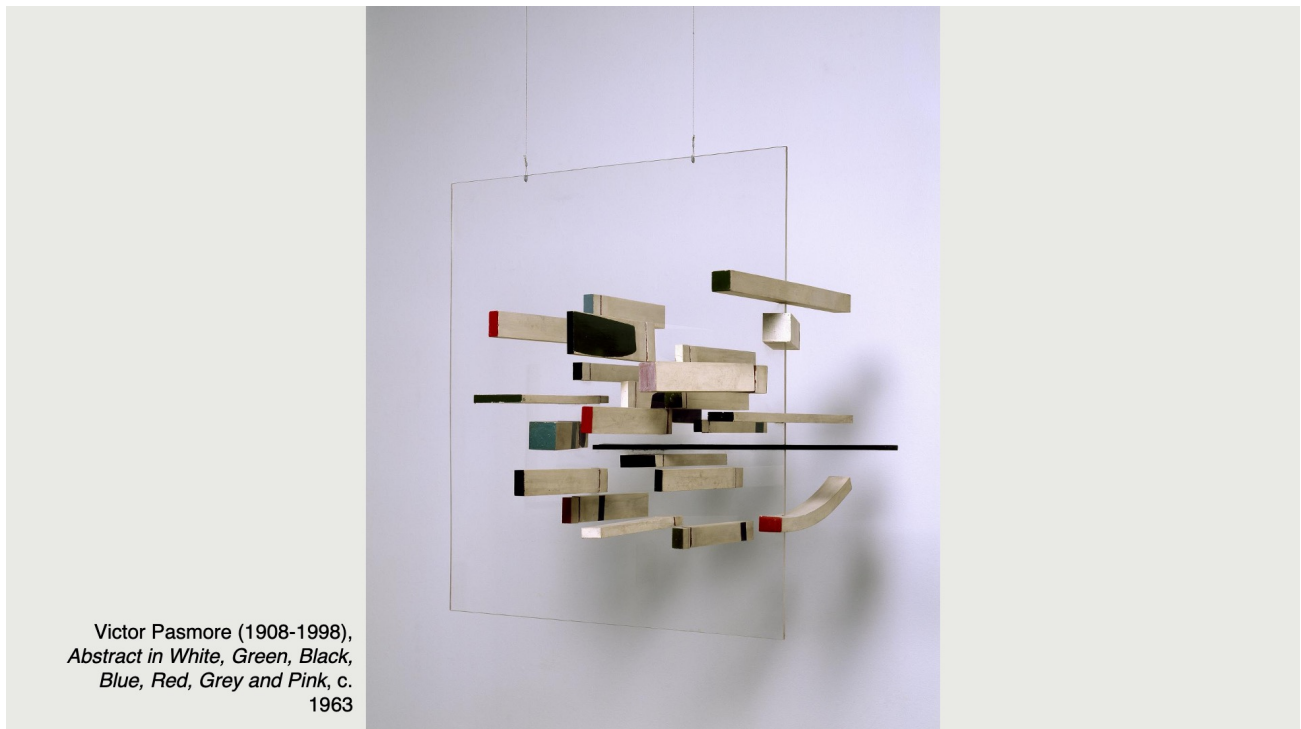


Ben Nicholson (1894-1982), 1934 (*Relief*), 1934, oil on carved mahogany panel, 71.8 x 96.5 x 3.2 cm, Tate, purchased 1978

- **Ben Nicholson was married to a rich woman and was not inclined to divorce and lose his income but they eventually divorced and he married Hepworth in 1938. The following year at the outbreak of the war they moved to St. Ives where they set up a studio. They divorced in 1951 and she remained in St. Ives until her death in a studio fire in 1975.**
- **Nicholson was interested in the way that paintings can represent space and in the 1930s made shallow reliefs that gave different areas different depths and defined actual space. In his most radical works he reduced the colours to just white or grey to give a sense of purity. His first all white relief was made in March 1934. These works were related to modern ideas about living and modern architecture in which natural light and formal simplicity were major concerns. He believed that abstract art should be enjoyed by the general public.**

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Victor Pasmore (1908-1998), *Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink*, c. 1963

- **Victor Pasmore is difficult to pigeonhole. He seemed straightforward but was described as very eccentric and his verbal descriptions of his art people found very difficult to understand. He was an important figure in British art but virtually unknown internationally.**
- **Pasmore started as one of the most talented figurative painters of his generation. In the 1930s he briefly experimented with abstract painting but was dissatisfied and from 1947 he pioneered abstract art in Britain. The art historian Herbert Read described his abstract art as ‘The most revolutionary event in post-war British art’.**
- **After the Second World War Pasmore taught at Camberwell School of Art and in 1951 he contributed to the Festival of Britain. In the late 1950s the art course he developed while teaching at Durham became the basis for higher art education across the UK. He later began to combine**

sculpture and architecture and he represented Britain at the 1961 Venice Biennale.

- **This work consists of 23 wooden blocks apparently passing through a Perspex sheet. The blocks are arranged asymmetrically, and most are rectangular, but one is curved. The blocks are painted white and their ends are painted in one of the colours mentioned in the title. One long thin wooden strip is painted black and runs horizontally across the sheet just below the centre of the Perspex.**
- Pasmore made many such works between 1951 and 1966. Most were made to hang on the wall, but this is one of a small group made to be seen from all sides. The title conforms to a formula he often used at this time with 'Abstract in' followed by the colours used. There is a consistency in his figurative and abstract art based on geometry and the golden mean.
- **He explained that he worked in relief because abstract works stress their own status as objects whereas representational works refer to other objects. Two-dimensional abstract works can only suggest a third dimension through illusion. Abstract art, like this one, are actually three-dimensional; they are fully fledged objects in space.**
- He is now little known internationally as he is difficult to pigeon-hole into a single role or style. When Pasmore looked back on his career he said that he felt he had witnessed the 'revolution of Painting ... (when) the naturalist painter has been forced to start completely again'.

NOTES

- Edwin John Victor Pasmore (1908-1998) was a British artist

and architect who pioneered abstract art in Britain in the 1940s and 50s. He was born in Surrey and with the death of his father when he was 19 he was forced to take an administrative job while he studied art part-time. He painted in a figurative manner in the style of Turner and Whistler and he was one of the most talented figurative painters of his generation. In the 1930s, he helped found the Euston Road School which emphasized working directly from nature and he was inspired by the work of Walter Sickert. In the Second World War, he was a conscientious objector. He was initially refused and was called up but refused to obey orders and was court martialled and imprisoned. This enabled him to appeal and he was then exempt from military duty. From 1943-49 he taught at Camberwell School of Art and he promoted abstract art. From 1947 he pioneered abstract art in Britain, and he brought about a revival of interest in Constructivism. He was influenced by Ben Nicholson and Herbert Read described his new style as 'The most revolutionary event in post-war British art'. In 1950 he was commissioned to design a mural for a bus depot in Kingston-upon-Thames and in 1951 he contributed a mural to the Festival of Britain. From 1954-61 he developed an art course at Durham inspired by the basic course of the Bauhaus. He began to synthesize sculpture and architecture and his 'Apollo Pavilion' in Peterlee, County Durham proved controversial. He represented Britain at the 1961 Venice Biennale and became a trustee of the Tate.

- He met Kenneth Clark who was the most important collector of modern art in Britain. He saw Passmore's inherent talent. Clark helped him become a full-time painter and he was associated with the Euston Road School. A collection of artists who wanted to paint the real world as they found it without their personality introducing. They often used the

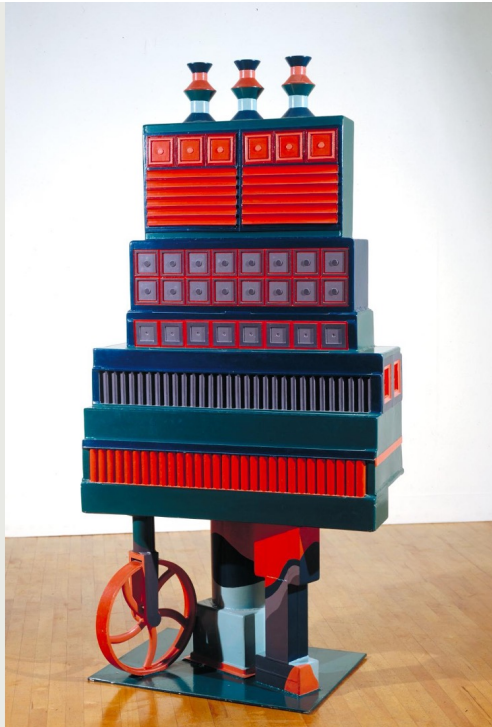
golden section and Passmore would apply this to his work. A friend said that he discovered late in life he had been using the wrong ratio all his life. This did not upset him and it is typical of Passmore to add a slight twist to an accepted formula, a touch of whimsy.

- In the 1950s and 60s his work was often assembled rather than moulded or carved which broke with the tradition established by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

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Eduardo Paolozzi *The City of the Circle and the Square*, 1963 and 1966



Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005), *The City of the Circle and the Square*, 1963 and 1966, 210.8 × 102.2 × 66.7 cm, Tate, purchased 1964

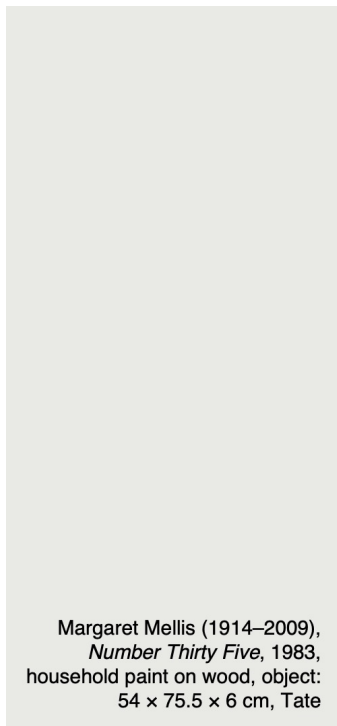
- This painted aluminium sculpture is by the Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi. It is one of eight tower sculptures he made at this time. Each section was cast in aluminium from plywood and wax prototypes he made at Juby's welding workshop in Ipswich.
- Paolozzi had just returned from working as visiting professor in Hamburg where his work was assembled from discarded parts he found in breaker's yards. On his return to England he started to work with objects he made using industrial processes. He said that "These works are a kind of commentary on Germany—for example, they remind me of German town halls."
- One critic wrote, "Germany for Paolozzi meant the superb engineering, the functional architecture and the world described by Fritz Lang in the 1929 film *Metropolis*, one of

the sculptor's favourite films"

- **The sculpture is also reminiscent of jukeboxes, computers and the rows of dials in power stations. It could be seen as a parody of an automated age in the form of an inert and functionless machine.**
- It is not known why the sculpture bears two dates but it suggests he reworked it at the later date.

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Margaret Mellis (1914–2009),
Number Thirty Five, 1983,
household paint on wood, object:
54 × 75.5 × 6 cm, Tate



Margaret Mellis (1914–2009), *Number Thirty Five*, 1983,
household paint on wood, object: 54 × 75.5 × 6 cm, Tate,
purchased 1987

- Mellis trained as an artist in Edinburgh and Paris and during World War II she joined the avant garde community of artists living and working in St. Ives. These artists included Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, who lived briefly with Mellis and her husband Adrian Stokes in 1939.
- This work comprises pieces of driftwood, including mahogany, pine and plywood, which she collected from the beach at Southwold, where she moved in 1976. Southwold is next to Walberswick in Suffolk where another artistic community developed with artists such as Philip Wilson Steer and Charles Rennie Macintosh.
- Some of the pieces of wood were already painted when found, others were painted by the artist. She refers to her walk on the beach as a hunt and the driftwood collected as her trophies. She believes she made about thirty five of

these driftwood works of which this was the last and she thought the best.

NOTES

- The pieces were numbered as she could not think of titles initially. Later she found the numbers impossible to remember and started giving them titles.
- The artist stated the title should not have a hyphen.

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Frank Bowling (b. 1934), *Spreadout Ron Kitaj*, 1984–6, acrylic paint, oil paint, acrylic gel, damar, beeswax, chalk, metallic pigments, acrylic foam, shells and plastic toys on canvas, 228.5 × 286 cm, Tate



Frank Bowling (b. 1934), *Spreadout Ron Kitaj*, 1984–6, acrylic paint, oil paint, acrylic gel, damar, beeswax, chalk, metallic pigments, acrylic foam, shells and plastic toys on canvas, 228.5 × 286 cm, Tate, purchased 1987

- **Frank Bowling was born in Guyana in the West Indies but moved to London when he was 19 in the 1950s. After completing his National Service in the Royal Air Force he studied at Chelsea School of Art and then won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art where he studied alongside David Hockney, R. B. Kitaj and Allen Jones. In 1962, Bowling was expected to win the gold medal but in 1960 he had married the Registrar of the College at a time when relationships were banned between staff and students so he was relegated to silver and David Hockney was awarded the gold medal.**
- **He moved to New York in the mid-1960s and found a freedom in abstract art working alongside artists such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. He**

spoke about his move to abstract art a process of "unlearning". His early work was figurative but by the mid-70s it had become almost entirely abstract.

- **He now travels between London and New York, was the first black artist to be elected a Royal Academician and in 2020 he was knighted for services to art.**
- This work uses a wide variety of materials to decorate the surface including costume jewellery, Christmas glitter, plastic toys and oyster shells. However, it is not a collage as they cannot be seen as they are deeply imbedded under the acrylic paint. The circle and the lines you see are made from acrylic foam glued to the canvas before he began. After preparing the canvas on a wall he transferred it to the floor and added elements and poured paint onto the surface allowing him to create controlled accidents and unexpected effects. He has spoken of his love for the material structure of paint and of the energy trapped in the layers of paint he works on.
- **Some critics see in his work the tropical landscapes of Guyana, the experience of nature in general and the surface sheen and detail suggest organic matter in a state of decay but Bowling has always avoided discussing any personal meaning. However, in a letter to the Tate (1986) he says the title was inspired by an encouraging letter he had received from Kitaj the same day he was also inspired by a West Indian song he heard on a car radio. He considered calling it *Homage to RBK* but the word 'Spreadout' was what he shouted to his team when he played football to encourage them and he thought it more appropriate.**

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Bridget Riley (b. 1931), *Evoë 3*, 2003

Bridget Riley (b. 1931), *Evoë 3*, 2003, Tate

- **The curved shapes recall the outline of leaves or petals, and the sense of movement conveyed in the painting suggests the cadences of ocean waves. Riley has spoken about her great love of nature and although the forms in *Evoë 3* (pronounced 'eevo') are not directly representational, they suggest shapes and rhythms familiar from the natural world.** In its clear, bright palette and sense of joyous movement, the painting evokes the work of Henri Matisse (1869-1954) particularly his dancing figures and his late cut-outs.
- **Riley said, ‘the only way anyone can enter my painting is by looking; there’s no theory in them ... The very habit-ridden public, and I’m not blaming them, want something that looks like a painting.’**
- **As a student she was such a good figure painter that she won a place at Goldsmiths College, but she rejected ‘the direct depiction of people, which I had loved and enjoyed ...**

to find out about this new world’.

- Bridget Riley’s studio is on an upper floor of a west London terrace house where she lives and works. She gets out of bed and goes straight to the studio every day. Riley has lived alone for decades, never married, has no children. She works on her own but since the 1960s, assistants have painted Riley’s works from her preparatory notes and studies.
- **Riley always thought of this painting as a festive revelry or bacchanalian cry. The title is a shout of joy at the festivals of Bacchus. She wrote that ‘When I had finished Evoë and was thinking about its title I toyed with the idea of calling it “Bacchanal without Nymphs” ... But then I remembered, just in time, that I am after all supposed to be an abstract artist’.**

NOTES

- Bridget Louise Riley (born 24 April 1931 in Norwood, London) is an English painter who is one of the foremost exponents of Op art. She spent her early years in Cornwall, and studied in London at Goldsmiths College and the Royal College of Art. She first drew critical attention with the black-and-white paintings she made from 1961, and her international breakthrough came four years later in The Responsive Eye at MoMA, New York, which celebrated the Op art movement.
- In 1966 Riley began her explorations of colour and form through stripes or bands across the canvas, and more recently shorter units cut by vertical, diagonal or curved lines. Her reputation was further enhanced at the 1968 Venice Biennale when she became the first woman – and the first contemporary British painter – to win the

International Prize for painting.

- Although Riley's work is consistently abstract, it is founded in natural experience. As she has written: 'The eye should feel caressed and soothed, experience frictions and ruptures, glide and drift.'
- Her range of work may be considered narrow, but she quoted Stravinsky who said, 'The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit.'
- She currently lives and works in London, Cornwall and the Vaucluse in France.

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Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963),
Untitled (Floor), 1994-5



Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963), *Untitled (Floor)*, 1994-5, Tate

- This final work is *Untitled (Floor)* by Rachel Whiteread. It looks completely abstract but it is actually purely representational. It is a cast of the area underneath the floorboards of a house.
- It consists of fourteen rectangular blocks, which are all made from polyester resin and arranged flat on the floor in two even columns of seven. The work was made by taking a cast of a wooden floor, so that the surface of each slab features a wood-grain pattern, and the sections are installed to loosely replicate the layout of the cast floor.
- In fact, she had to cheat to make the cast. She created a fictional floor in her studio and made a plaster cast of the interior between the joists. She then made moulds from the casts and slowly filled them with resin. Very slowly, she found she could not add more than 1 mm of resin a day without losing the translucency.
- This is the first work that Whiteread used resin and it opens

up the interior space of her sculpture and enables it to interact with light. Although dark, brooding and secretive it is transformed into emerald with flashes of gold when the sunlight hits it. It looks hard and unforgiving but also gives the illusion of movement and water when lit by the sun.

- Why did she produce it? For many artists an abstract artwork is purely aesthetic, it has no meaning but Whiteread has said she is transforming people's emotional and social investment in their houses and furniture into sculptural forms. However, rather than show people she shows the absence of people, the structures that embed the repeated actions of people. She records the marks left by people, the spaces used by people. She makes the absent present.**
- I hope you enjoyed that tour through abstract art and that your enjoyment of it will be increased then next time you visit a gallery.**

NOTES

- Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) was born in Ilford, Essex and studied at Brighton Polytechnic and the Slade. She lives with the sculptor Marcus Taylor and they have two sons.**
- Whiteread employs casting methods using plaster, rubber and resin which are typically used as part of the process of making sculptures rather than in the finished work. She makes sculptures of the spaces within, around and under everyday objects from baths and sinks to houses, so called 'negative spaces'. This draws our attention to the forgotten spaces around and within our everyday world and fixes them in time as public monuments. The spaces around objects are normally occupied by human beings and so the solidified**

spaces become symbols for our human presence while refusing us entry. By removing the object and refusing its function the shapes express absence and loss. Her early work was personal and biographical but her later works have become universal and their titles have become straightforward, down-to-earth and descriptive. For Whiteread her sculptures are metaphors for neglect of people and their environment in Thatcher's Britain (Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister, 1979-90, John Major was Prime Minister from 1990 to 1997, followed by Tony Blair from 1997 to 2007).

- Whiteread was the first woman to win the Turner Prize in November 1993 for House (destroyed 1994, see Visual Aids) a life-sized replica of the interior of a condemned terraced house in Bow in London's East End. This work was made when Whiteread was living in London and she had to invent the casting process which involved slowly pouring an inch of resin into a mould every twenty-four hours. The resin was pigmented using coloured dye and each block has a number drilled in the side which is not visible when they are assembled for display.
- Whiteread's House took two years to plan and was made by spraying liquid concrete into the building's empty shell before its external walls were removed. House was completed on 25 October 1993 and demolished eleven weeks later on 11 January 1994. House won the Turner Prize in 1994 and also the K Foundation award of £40,000 for the worst work of art of the year. K Foundation threatened to burn the money unless it was accepted so she gave some of the money to Shelter and the rest was allocated to young artists based on a competitive submission. K Foundation burned £1 million the following year.

- The cast presents the reverse of the original object, a floor. We are conscious of the loss of what is normally a stable object on which we depend but rarely think about, the floor. You have to engage in a process of imaginary recreation which brings the original object to life.
- She echoes some of the concerns of Minimalism. *Untitled (Floor)* for example, reminds us of Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII*. However, Andre works with industrial objects while Whiteread records the marks left by people, like fingerprints of their use of the object or surface. This abstract series of blocks records on its surface the everyday wear and tear of an ordinary room with its three-piece suite and television set and the footfall of people living their lives. She makes the absent present.
- Each of the 14 slabs weighs 200 kg so the work weighs 2.8 tonnes.

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NEXT WEEK - ART MEETS SCIENCE

Next week I look at 250 years of scientific development through the eyes of artists. Don't worry no knowledge of science is required and you will see artists like Wright of Derby, Turner and Lowry.