



The American Avant-Garde 1904-1920

Curriculum Unit 87.04.08
by Sandra Willard

I. INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN ABSTRACTIONISTS

This paper examines the difference between the American and European avant-garde artists from 1900 to the 1920's. Typically European art of this period has received much attention, while the concurrent American art little. In recent years there has been a reevaluation of the significance of early American modernists and the recognition of the eminence of artists like Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, and others of this period is established. The overwhelming amount of material written about the influence of European artists such as Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse and Braque on modern art had placed concurrent American artists as peripheral figures in the history of art. The art work of early American abstractionists are viewed today as forming a unique and separate place in the history of art.

The Cubists stunned the art world with paintings emphasizing the formal elements of art: composition, the arrangement of geometric shapes, movement, color and pattern. However, their American counterparts adopted a less obvious form of abstraction. Instead of obliterating the image as a reference to a recognizable object, they retained the object and enhanced its qualities by concentrating on the emotional sensations it aroused.

The art work of early American modernists are important as unique reflections of the history of art in America and as a significant influence on the avant-garde expressionist artists of the 1950's. I will use the works of John Marin 1870-1953, Marsden Hartley 1877-1943, Arthur Dove 1880-1946, Charles Demuth 1883-1935, Charles Sheeler 1883-1965 and Georgia O'Keeffe 1887-1986 to show that in their various ways they all perpetuated a uniquely American trait—that of taking reality and transforming it into abstraction without altogether losing the original subject on which the abstraction was based.

Because the American modernists chose a less obvious form of abstraction, their art work is distinct from the early European Cubists and this paper is an investigation of how and why that difference exists. Since there is a noticeable difference between the art of both continents it becomes interesting to speculate about why that difference exists.

“If you want to know why a certain kind of thing happened in a certain kind of case, you must begin by asking, ‘What did you expect?’ You must consider what the normal kind. Only then, if the thing that happened in this case was exceptional, should you try to explain it by appeal to exceptional conditions.” (R. G. Collingwood, *An*

Why didn't the modern art movement in Europe with its headquarters in Paris simply spread to America in its original form? The American artists who either visited or lived in Paris at the time of the Fauves, the Cubists and Futurists were aware of the latest avant-garde developments and knew the artists who represented the latest movements. You would expect to see American versions of Cubism or Futurism, art works that were made up of fragmented or intersecting planes, a multiplicity of view points, the flattening of the picture plane, the dynamics of forces pushing and pulling against one another. According to this expectation, the art history books ought to be filled with reproductions of the works of famous American Cubists, Fauves and Futurists. But American artists like Marin, Dove, Hartley and others who lived in Paris at the time of the explosion of modern art responded to the European avant-garde in a very different manner.

To them the new art they saw in Paris around 1904-14 represented possibilities of new and undreamed-of liberties that could be taken with the painted image. It was the freedom of expression released from representational imagery inherent in European avant-garde art that attracted them rather than the styles that that freedom engendered.

What does American art from the period in question look like? I dislike making generalizations that encompass all of the work of the American modernists, but there are a sufficient number of similarities amongst that body of work to justify the attempt.

Like the Cubists, the American modernists abandoned the principles of natural perspective, scale, proportion and rendering with shade and shadow. They adopted the cubist treatment of the canvas surface as an area in which all parts played an important role in the overall composition. The American artist, Charles Sheeler describes the moment of recognition for him that paintings were not simply a matter of an object against a background, an understanding that came to all the American artists when they saw the work of the Cubists.

“Now we began to realize that forms could be placed with consideration for their relationship to all the other forms in a picture, not merely to those adjacent. We began to understand that a picture could be assembled arbitrarily with a concern for design and that the result could be outside time, place, or momentary considerations.” (Charles Sheeler).

The works of the American artists are primarily composed of simple large shapes and undulating curves which express a feeling of power and energy. The images depicted are usually recognizable and no attempt is made to disguise them or fragment them. The images are intact and dominate the surface in an almost frontal attack position, where as Cubist works are like an orchestration of faceted shapes. The Cubists freed the American artists from the realistic rendering of objects but the American artists took from that freedom not the destruction or fragmentation of the image but rather only the underlying principles of abstraction. With that in mind, they could then dispense with the inhibiting constraint of realistic art and heighten the expressive aspect of their work.

Titles in American art work are an important link between the heightened sensation of experience through the use of abstraction and the message to the viewer of just what sensation was experienced. No matter how non-objective a work of art might look, its title revealed the meaning. For instance, you might look at an early painting by Arthur Dove and think it entirely without ties to the world of appearance simply a composition of shapes with saw toothed edges arranged in rows of diminishing size. Then upon reading the title, “Team of Horses”, you discover the work should be understood as a visual translation of the power and energy of the team and the sensation of plowing a field. The repetitive motion of the plow blades, the cultivated rows

receding into the distance and each pull of the team turning the soil under the blades invites one to participate in the experience. What you learn is that this is not a picture of a team of horses in the field. The announcement given by the artist that you should be prepared for an unexpected experience when looking at this picture is the fact that it is an abstraction and not a realistic picture. This is what is meant by saying that abstraction enhances the emotive power of painting for Americans of this time. Unlike the Europeans who had reduced the world of phenomena to interesting patterns, there was a dialogue between the artist and his subject, a communication in which the viewer was expected to participate. The Americans found new ways to communicate their experiences to give the viewer a picture of what and how they as artists saw the world.

“I’ll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprized into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers” (Georgia O’Keeffe).

The thread that connects American artists to each other is their depiction of nature: not what it looks like outside the window, but the emotional involvement with the forces of nature.

“Yes I could paint a cyclone . . . I would show the repetition and convolutions of the rage of the tempest. I would paint the wind, not a landscape chastized by the cyclone.” (Arthur Dove).

“There is nothing that so sets all things at peace with me as a communion with Nature.”(Marsden Hartley).

The biggest difference, however which resulted in the divergent paths of European and American art was the way in which abstraction was used. Abstraction in American art allowed for concentration, distillation and enhancement of objects and depicted them as felt experiences. The Europeans on the other hand, concentrated on abstraction based on formal properties of art: composition, shape, form and color.

How did the Americans use abstraction in this way? A particular scene—rolling hills, broad expanses, the shape of a mountain top—would become the catalyst of the painting and in that painting the rolling or undulating feeling of the hills was exaggerated, simplified and became the prime focus of the work. Or the space that attracted the artist was rendered as felt experience, or the shape of a mountain became a calligraphic line full of movement and tension. Since the tie of nature was the underlying subject of the work and what they wanted to communicate to the viewer, they needed to retain a partial resemblance to the actual scene in order to speak to the viewer, to say, “See—this is what caught my attention and now I want you to see it too—not as what it looks like—Farmer Brown’s field—but see it instead as sinuous shapes melting into and transforming into other shapes”. This is a felt experience that the artist wanted to capture on canvas. The Cubist might look at the same field, see the same interesting conformation of hills and in a more rational manner transform Farmer Brown’s field into a composition of cones, spheres, and cylinders.

The divergent ways of using abstraction resulted in very different expectations when looking at the art work of both continents. In an American work one doesn’t look for a painting of Farmer Brown out in his field even though the field and the plow might be present in the work. It is the expressive quality of the work that is important: it is what it reveals about nature that is the focus. At the same time, one shouldn’t try to unscramble a cubist portrait of Monsieur Kahnweiler, for instance in the hopes of discovering what he was like. What he felt and thought, or how he behaved is incidental to the main purpose of the portrait, which is the contemplation of shapes and planes and the working out of color harmonies or theories.

“The plastic virtues: purity, unity, and truth, keep nature in subjugation.” (Guillaume Apollinaire, *Aesthetic Meditations* , 1913)

II. THE STUDENT AND THE AMERICAN VISION

Abstraction in art is achieved by simplification of form or shape, the fusion of background and foreground as an integrated pattern, the emphasis of the picture plane and the arbitrary use of color and perspective. One of the reasons why modern artists are interested and influenced by children's art is that children are natural abstractionists. By the time children become adolescents they usually dispense with world. Because of the restrictions that realism imposes and the inability of most students to draw with the skill of an adult, the interest in art flags. The re-introduction of the values and methods of abstraction are looked upon as being 'kid stuff' and it becomes the teacher's task to convince the students that abstract art as practiced by 'grown-ups' is worthy of their consideration.

What this unit will try to do is give some simple exercises in abstraction and to interest students in the history of not only American artists but in the history and ideology of this country. The connection to and translation of nature into an affair of the heart and spirit is not exactly a universal trait. Throughout America's history the link to nature as a spiritual guide has always been strong. Consequently trying through abstraction to capture the essential force and dynamics of nature will be an exercise in art and American culture.

III. THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF AMERICAN ART

The conditions that explain the difference between avant-garde art in America and Europe are imbedded in their respective cultural histories. The attitude toward social, political and artistic freedom, the differing attitudes towards nature, the selection of subject matter and treatment of subject matter, the recording of the artist's sensibilities in any given work of art, are all a reflection of their cultural differences.

I want to concentrate primarily on the different attitudes towards nature. But in order to do so, something must be said about how the Americans and Europeans viewed their separate worlds around the turn of the century. The world of Europe and the world of America were separate and distinct entities. Although it is true that Americans traveled to Europe to soak up culture, they couldn't appreciate at first hand the experience of being European. The American modernists couldn't absorb the reasons behind the modern art movement; they could only be impressed with the breath of freedom that the new art held out for them.

"American artists were to use these striking new forms for a number of years, they still use them. The mistake has been that they have often adopted the means by which the French were attempting to cut a difficult knot without the perception of the strands of which it was composed—without a similar antecedent experience."
(Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*).

While Europe was struggling with worn out values which had led to turmoil and revolution, pessimism and nihilism, America was enjoying a period of idealistic progressivism. Reformers of all sort were abroad in the land.

"Little as these people had in common, they were alike in seeing the nation, not as a place where everybody went his own way regardless of the plight of others, but as a place where people had a common destiny, where their fortunes were interlocked, and where wise planning, wise statesmanship could devise new instruments of satisfaction for all men." (Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change, America Transforms 1900-1950.*)

The period from 1900 to America's entry into WW I was a time of reform. Active work in the social services became a more organized and respected calling. The Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation

was formed and began to pour money into worthy causes. Henry Ford was designing a motor car that the lower middle classes could afford. John Muir the conservationist was crusading for the preservation of America's natural resources. It was also a time of turmoil, but progressive turmoil. Women suffragettes were demanding the vote. The Socialist party was activity organizing unions and strikes for better working conditions, workmen's compensation and higher wages.

America was optimistic. Problems that needed to be addressed were attended to, voices that were raised were listened to, if something wasn't working right it could be fixed. In a nation of tinkerers anything could be mended and patched up. There was no need to throw it all away and throw up one's hands in despair. Europe was going through similar eruptions of the status quo but the artistic and intellectual community turned their faces away, overwhelmed by the problems they saw before them.

America has had a history of change, and for many change meant better. The westward movement consisted of people packing up to start life over again, somewhere else, somewhere west, somewhere better. America was more flexible, less anxious about change. Goethe recognized one of the virtues of America when in a poem to America he congratulated this country for being free of the weight of history and tradition.

America, you're better off than
Our Continent, the old.
You have no castles which are fallen
No basalt to behold.
You're not disturbed within your inmost being
Right up till today's daily life
By useless remembering
And unrewarding strife.
Use well the present and good luck to you
And when your children begin writing poetry
Let them guard well in all they do
Against Knight-Robber-and Ghost Story.
(1827)

And Chateaubriand had the same reaction to the new country when he said, "Nothing is old in America but the trees, children of the soil, and liberty, the mother of all human society; these are worth as much as monuments and forebears."

This air of progressivism, change, new social freedoms and the desire to make the nation a better place to live gave modern American artists the impetus and encouragement to pursue a change for the better in art. They were attempting to improve methods of communicating the values of nature, to reveal its deeper meaning by trying to paint the essence of force and power.

" . . . an immanent world spirit flows through nature's forms, and that the creative artist, by his interaction with that spirit, also contributes to spiritual energy in the world." (Hopkins, *Spires of Form, A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory*)

In Europe there was no sense of trying to 'fix up the old jalopy' to keep it running. The machine was felt to be beyond repair. To the intelligencia their world had come to an end and the only thing left to do was to destroy it utterly. In art that meant destroying the old traditional style of painting and with it all that was expected or understood to be painting: realism, perspective, the illusion of three dimension, the moral tone and sentiment embodied in a work of art. Modern artists set about the task of denying the world they knew.

"The artist deforms an object not in order to reveal it but to deny the normal and to disappoint expectations."

"A first and key determination of such art is its negativity. It is anti-: anti-religion, anti-morality, anti-nature, and in the end even anti-artThe world and its values were rejected for the sake of freedom. Art became a weapon in the struggle against realityTo cast off this burden (reality) the artist tries to convince himself and others that the world is not worth having and has no rightful claim on man." (Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art*).

The first line of Apollinaire's *Aesthetic Meditations*, the cubist manifesto, reads "The plastic virtues: purity, unity, and truth, keep nature in subjection." Nature is viewed in a curiously Victorian manner. It keeps man in bondage by delighting the senses, allowing man the false impression that he can control it. It intrigues man with its mystery. Nature is unstable, the present is fugitive, time is fleeting. Nature " . . . strives to imprison us in that fatal order of things limiting us to the merely animal" and "The time has come for us to be the masters," stated Apollinaire. And the way to subjugate nature in Apollinaire's view, is to substitute pure geometric forms, forms that do not naturally occur in nature. Abstraction, the reduction of nature into "cone, sphere, and cylinder" (Cezanne), is the weapon to use against nature. Nature has become the euphemism for all that's ailing in Europe.

The American artists, however, had a romantic view of nature. They were still very much influenced by the works of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

"The knowledge of nature is most permanent clouds and grass are older antiquities than pyramids or Athens; then they are most perfect" (Emerson, *Journals*, 111, 284).

Nature is an expanse of fleeting climates and unstable elements, but there is a wonderful permanency within that instability. Nature's spiritual grandeur lies in its unrevealed mystery. Man is part of the "fatal order of things' and he glories in it.

"If artistic creation gives the effect of flowing rather than freezing, of moving rather than standing still, it is proof that the artist has caught, not so much by imitation as by identity of inspiration, this energetic power which

represents Nature's creative ability."

" . . . an immanent world spirit flows through nature's forms, and that the creative artist, by his interaction with that spirit, also contributes to spiritual energy in the world" (Vivian Hopkins, *Spires of Form, Aesthetic Theories of Emerson*).

The dichotomy between the two views of nature is so obvious that the point needn't be labored any further. What that difference represents to my mind however, is the reason why the art work of Europe and America before WWI looks so different from one another.

Today many of the perceptions and statements of the Cubists about the world have entered into the American language and culture as well and art now shares an international language.

MARIN

(figure available in print form)

15 *Woolworth Building, No. 31* (1912)

John Marin 1870-1953

Born in Rutherford, New Jersey. Went to Paris 1905. Sketching trips to Italy, Belgium and Holland. Associated with Arthur B. Carles, Max Weber, Alfred Mauer in Paris, 1905-1910. Met Stieglitz 1909, first exhibit at gallery "291" 1910. First paintings indicative of his future style inspired by Tyrol Alps in Italy.

"Seems to me the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms—Sky, Sea, Mountain, Plain—and those things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these, to be a part of these in sympathy. . . ."

Artists on Art from the XIV to the XX Century, compl. and ed. by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves.

HARTLEY

(figure available in print form)

Plate 14 *Painting No. 48, Berlin, 1913* (cat. no. 19)

The Brooklyn Museum; The Dick S. Ramsay Fund

Marsden Hartley 1877-1943

Born in Lewiston, Maine. 1909 first showed at Stieglitz gallery "291". Went abroad 1912. Influenced by Albert Pinkham Ryder, Cezanne and Picasso. 1914-15 in Germany start of WWI, influenced by Kandinsky and German expressionists. Paintings filled with German military symbols. Franz Marc invited him to exhibit in Der Blaue Reiter group 1915. Returned to live in Europe 1921 to 1930s.

". . . I do not admire the irrationality of the imaginative life. I have made the complete return to nature, and nature is, as we all know, primarily an intellectual idea. I am satisfied that painting also is, like nature an intellectual idea, and that the laws of nature as presented to the mind through the eye—and the eye is the painter's first and last vehicle—are the means of transport to the real mode of thought: the only legitimate source of aesthetic experience for the intelligent painter." 1928

Artists on Art from the XIV to the XX Century , compl. and ed. by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves.

DOVE

(figure available in print form)

Team of Horses . 1911. Pastel on linen, 18-1/2" x 21-1/2". Mary B. Holt, M.D., Bay Shore, New York

Arthur G. Dove 1880-1946

Born in Canadaique, N.Y. First Paris trip, 1908. Influenced by the fauves. First exhibition at Stieglitz gallery "291", 1910. Between 1911-1914, painted first abstractions indicative of his own future style.

"A few principles existed in all good art" "The choice of a simple motif. This same law held in nature, a few forms and a few colors sufficed for the creation of an object. The first step was to choose from nature a motif in color and with that motif to paint from nature, the forms still being objective." The second step was to apply this same principle to form, the actual dependence upon the object (representation) disappearing, and the means of expression becoming partly subjective."

Dove letter to Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionists*, 1914, Appendix, *Arthur Dove* , by Barbara Haskell.

DEMUTH

(figure available in print form)

15. *End of the Parade* : Coatesville, Pa. (The Milltown), 1920

A poem by William Carlos Williams inspired by the painting "End of the Parade"

The sentence undulates

raising no song—

It is too old, the

words of it are falling

apart. Only percussion

strokes continue

with weakening

emphasis what was once

cadenced melody

full of sweet breath

Charles Demuth 1883-1935

Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. First Trip to Paris, 1907, again in 1912-1914. First exhibit in New York, 1915.

Demuth's depiction of "those precious flowers known as smokestacks."

Betsy Fahlman, Pennsylvania Modern: *Charles Demuth of Lancaster* .

SHEELER

(figure available in print form)

11 Church Street “El.” 1922. Oil on canvas, 15-1/2 x 18-1/2 inches.

Charles Sheeler 1883-1965

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Several trips to Europe between 1904 and 1909. Early works have a strong Cezanne influence. Took up photography 1912.

“I venture to define art as the perception through our sensibilities, more or less guided by intellect, of universal order and its expression in terms more directly appealing to some particular phase of our sensibilities . . .” “One-, two-, and three-dimensional space, color, light and dark, dynamic power, gravitation or magnetic forces, the frictional resistance of surfaces and their absorptive qualities, all qualities capable of visual communication, are material for the plastic artist, and he is free to use as many or as few as the moment concern him. To oppose or relate these so as to communicate his sensations of some particular manifestations of cosmic order—this I believe to be the business of the artist.”

Artists on Art from the XIV to the XX Century , compl. and ed. by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves.

O’KEEFFE

(figure available in print form)

From the Plains, 1919, oil on canvas, 27-7/8” x 23-5/8”

Georgia O’Keeffe 1887-1986

Born in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. First important works 1915, a series of abstractions in charcoal of natural forms. First solo show at the Stieglitz gallery, 1917. She admired and was partially influenced by the work of Arthur Dove.

“There are people who have made me see shapes—and others I thought of a great deal, even people I have loved, who made me see nothing. I have painted portraits that to me are almost photographic. I remember hesitating to show the paintings, they looked so real to me. But they have passed into the world as abstractions—no one seeing what they are.”

Georgia O’Keeffe by Georgia O’Keeffe, Studio Book, Viking Press.

LESSONS

For grades 7-8 and high school level.

There will be two types of lessons to carry out with the students. One will be a series of field trips in order to study nature and the other will contain plans to create abstract paintings from nature and still lifes set up in the studio room.

NATURE WALKS

These walks needn't be elaborate. A walk around the school grounds will suffice. The important point is to make the students aware of the variety of shapes and forms large and small that occur in nature. Also, to use Arthur Dove's methods, to categorize the various natural objects picked up or viewed into "a few simple shapes and forms". In other words first concentrate on the infinite variety and detail of objects found in nature and then move to their basic forms—a move from realism to the abstract. Try to get the students to participate by having them decide whether this or that object is more or less triangular or round or forms a spiral or is flat or spherical. Some of the smaller objects may later be used in still life arrangements in the studio.

STUDIO ART WORK

A working definition of abstract art:

Abstract art emphasizes the arrangement of color, shape and line instead of emphasizing skill in realistic representation of objects.

Abstraction is achieved by:

Simplification

Fusion of foreground and background

Emphasis of the picture plane

Arbitrary use of color

Arbitrary use of perspective

LESSON ONE

Working from a still life set up in the studio, have the students help in deciding what sort of objects to use, collecting objects for the still life arrangement, and setting it up in a permanent position. Keep in mind a variety of shape, color and texture. Ask the students to paint as realistic a painting of the still life as possible, a painting that contains.

Well drawn well observed objects

Shadows, light and dark areas on objects

Matched colors to colors of objects

Differentiation of foreground and background

Have students maintain a fixed position. This practice in realism will help the student to observe the objects

more intensely so that later he or she will be able to “play” with the objects abstractly.

LESSON TWO

SIMPLIFICATION

Using the same still life or a new arrangement discuss with the students the shape of the objects and their most characteristic feature (the one or two features that if removed would make the object totally unrecognizable) and the various objects color and texture. Use examples of Dove, O’Keeffe, Sheeler.

Start another painting emphasizing:

Observation of still life as a collection of simple shapes

Leave out details

Leave out attempts at 3-dimensional illusion

The painting will still look representational but this will be the first move towards abstraction.

LESSON THREE

FUSION OF FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND

Using a still life set up, point out to the students the spaces between objects in the still life.

Start another painting emphasizing the shape of spaces. By bringing the background areas into the foreground, this will flatten the picture plane. Use examples of the work of Hartley and Demuth.

LESSON FOUR

EMPHASIS OF THE PICTURE PLANE

Using a still life, discuss the various ways to draw attention to the surface of the picture plane with paint and texture.

Brushwork

Palette knife

Stiff cardboard

Sponges

Dry brush work

Juxtaposing wet colors

Have students start another still life using paint and texture. Remind them to keep in mind and use or build on techniques learned in previous lessons.

LESSON FIVE

ARBITRARY USE OF COLOR:

Discuss first, using a still life arrangement, the natural color of the objects and the effect one color can have on its neighbor and the color of its shadows light and dark areas.

Start a series of paintings that:

Exaggerate the natural colors of objects

Break tonal colors into separate dashes (pointilism or impressionism)

Choose two or three colors from the still life and use those for the whole painting

Choose any color or color scheme

LESSON SIX

ARBITRARY USE OF PERSPECTIVE:

Draw a series of views of a still life arrangement from above the set up, at an acute angle, and from below. Use examples of Sheeler's paintings of interiors to point out how he uses a multiplicity of viewing points in a single work.

Finally, after all these exercises, have the students focus on one or more of the ways to abstract from objects and let them do some creative abstractions on their own.

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