

American Abstraction

An exhibition of abstracts from 1930 to 1945 will be on display at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York

On show now

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

100 Eleventh Avenue @ 19th
New York, NY 10011
t: (212) 247-0082
www.michaelrosenfeldart.com

By John O'Hern

American Abstract Artists (AAA) was formed in New York City in 1936 “to promote and foster understanding of abstract and nonobjective art.”

The Transcendental Painting Group (TPG) was formed in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1938 “to defend, validate and promote abstract art.” They meet in the exhibition *American Abstraction, 1930-1945* at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York.

“While both groups valued abstract painting as a ‘purer’ form of art,” the gallery explains, “there were also significant differences between them. The AAA was a large, national organization organized around a generous interpretation of ‘abstract art,’ and it encouraged members to join smaller artist groups oriented around more specific sets of concerns.”

AAA was founded by Josef Albers, Burgoyne A. Diller, Werner Drewes, Carl Robert Holty, Ibram Lassaw, and Charles Green Shaw. It later attracted Jackson Pollock, Alfonso A. Ossorio, Claire McCarthy Falkenstein, and Louise Bourgeois.

TPG sought “to widen the horizon of art” and “to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design to the imaginative



Emil James Bisttram (1895-1976), *Oversoul*, ca. 1941. Oil on Masonite with artist's frame, 39¼ x 30 x 1½ in., framed, signed.

realms that are idealistic and spiritual.” The group had a more regional makeup and was short lived compared to AAA. The gallery notes, “TPG members were interested in theosophy and drew inspiration from Buddhism,

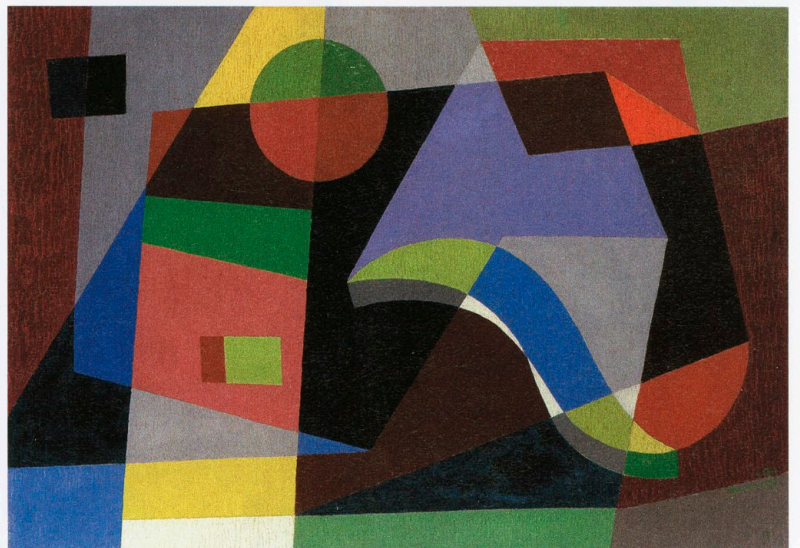
and like many abstract artists, they were influenced by neoplasticism as well as Wassily Kandinsky's theories of color and the spiritual...At a time when a sense of urgency and crisis prevailed in art from the United States



Charles Biederman (1906-2004), #39, 1935. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36½ in., signed and dated.



Theodore J. Roszak (1907-1981), *Untitled [MR37]*, ca. 1937. Oil on Masonite, 48 x 48 in.



Werner Drewes (1899-1985), *Contradiction*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 22 x 32 in., signed and dated.



and Europe, the TPG unearthed a language that spoke of the spirit and soul, emphasizing hope and affirming vitality.”

The group was founded by Emil James Bisttram and Raymond Jonson and included, among others, Florence Miller Pierce, Stuart Walker, and Agnes Lawrence Pelton.

Bisttram (1895–1976) wrote, “Through self-discipline and contemplation, tolerance and vision he [the artist] will become the synthesizer of the reality of religion and the truth of science.” His paintings are based on dynamic symmetry, a proportioning system developed by Jay Edward Hambidge who said he had rediscovered a system used by the ancients.

Oversoul, circa 1941, is an example of Bisttram’s synthesis of religion and science. When he moved to New Mexico he had already absorbed the ideas of representation and abstraction. Both became animated by his exposure to Native American spirituality in Taos.

Frederick I. Kann (1886–1965) was a founding member of AAA. Born in what was then Czechoslovakia, he became a U.S. citizen but moved to Paris in 1928 and remained there until returning to New York in 1936. While in Paris he joined the Abstraction-Creation group, an informal group of abstract artists opposed to the dominance of Surrealism. In 1934 he exhibited with the group along with Delaunay, Gorky, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, and Mondrian, among others. The writer Henry Miller lived in Kann’s apartment when he was in Paris. He wrote about Kann in *Tropic of Cancer*. “He seemed to think I was ripe to move on to another plane, “a higher



Top: Raymond Jonson (1891–1982), *Variations on a Rhythm – C*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 35¾ x 31¾ in., with artist’s original painted frame.

Left: John Millard Ferren (1905–1970), *Untitled [MR16]*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 25⅝ x 31⅞ in., signed and dated.



Agnes Lawrence Pelton (1881-1961),
Ascent (aka Liberation), 1946. Oil on canvas,
32 x 21 in. Images courtesy Michael
Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

plane,” as he put it. I was ready to move on to any plane he designated, provided that one didn’t eat less or drink less. He chewed my head off about the ‘threadsoul,’ the ‘causal body,’ ‘ablation,’ the Upanishads, Plotinus, Krishnamurti, ‘the Karmic vestiture of the soul,’ ‘the nirvanic consciousness,’ all that flapdoodle which blows out of the East like a breath from the plague.”

Miller also commented more positively on Kann’s art: “There is a great deal of mystification in Kann’s abstract paintings, a curious blending of the mathematical and the introspective,” echoing Bistram’s own philosophy and that of the Transcendental Painting Group. ■

Frederick I. Kann (1886-1965),
Construction, 1928-35. Painted wood
construction, 43¹/₁₆ x 28 x 19 in.

