

## CURATORS' CHOICE

# Hidden Gems of American Abstraction

Welcome to my third annual Curator's Choice issue, where I ask museum experts around the country to help identify entry points into overheated markets. This year's topic: mid-century American abstraction, from 1930-65.

Mid-century was a heady time in American art. As many of the avant-garde—from Surrealist painters to Bauhaus architects—fled war-torn Europe, the epicenter of the art world shifted from Paris to New York. With Europe's modern masters in their midst, American artists began exploring not only the frontiers of form, but endeavored to picture worlds beyond what the eye can see—realms of pure sensation, the unconscious mind and the human spirit.

Big, prime-time abstractions by New York School luminaries have been fetching heroic prices of late. A luminous color field picture by Rothko made a record-breaking \$22.4 million at Christie's in November. An elegantly composed David Smith sculpture of stainless steel boxes and columns earned \$23.8 million the next night at Sotheby's. And a Jackson Pollock drip painting reportedly sold privately to hedge funder Steven Cohen for a whopping \$52 million.

Move over, van Gogh and Picasso. These guys are ready for their close up.

But there was a rich, vibrant world of mid-century abstraction that extended far beyond the work of today's Abstract Expressionist (Ab Ex) market stars. The impulse was blossoming not only in New York, but in places like the desert Southwest and California. In talking to curators, I've learned about artists ranging from a sculptor who started making art in a Japanese internment camp to an artist who married abstraction with Civil Rights themes. In the following pages, you'll find a wealth of expert picks for hidden gems and underrated artists lurking in some of the country's top museum collections.

## SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Susan Davidson  
Curator

**HIDDEN GEM:** Charles Seliger, *Winterscape*, 1948-49

Charles Seliger was a completely self-taught artist who was the youngest painter ever to show at Peggy Guggenheim's influential Art of This Century museum/gallery (in 1945). He had his first museum retrospective in 1949, at the de Young in San Francisco. He's always been fascinated by the inner structure of plants, insects and other natural phenomena; his paintings are incredibly detailed, almost microscopic abstractions filled with organic, biomorphic forms. I find his '40s work to be the most interesting. Of the 26 Seligers we have in the collection, there's one called *Winterscape*. Despite its small size (10 x 12 inches), there's something very monolithic about it. The paint application, in bold hues of green, purple and orange, is very slick, very precise. It's hard to see evidence of the artist's hand. He still paints today—on a smaller scale.

**RETAIL PRICE RANGE:** \$15,000 to \$150,000