



(b)(3)  
(b)(6)

The draft you gave me [~~the drafts~~ <sup>useless</sup> A, B, and C] was focused on the Washington School of Color. I worked on it cheerfully enough while I visualized it referring to the old familiar exhibit of big, bland canvases. After I saw the new exhibit, I was paralyzed: the draft doesn't match, can't be edited (it's like visiting Rome with a Paris guidebook).

Yesterday I decided to go ahead and have fun with it, but even so, it won't do. The final brochure needs:

1. To fit the exhibit.
2. A title (maybe just "the paintings in NHB")
3. An opening paragraph saying what exactly we are talking about.

The exhibit itself needs the usual little cards with the artist's name, the title of the painting, the date, and maybe whether it is Melzac or Agency.

So here is my version of the useless brochure, for your eyes only . . . .

## THE WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF COLOR

A carefree rendition  
of a text that seems not to connect  
with the current exhibit

[Many of?] the paintings that hang near the escalators in the New Headquarters Building are from the collection of modern art belonging to \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ Melzac, longtime friends of the Agency.<sup>1</sup> They represent several<sup>2</sup> American artistic styles of the years after World War II.

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<sup>1</sup> This assumes that all the pictures in the exhibit are Melzac loans, though not necessarily all Washington School of Color. This sentence is from original page 1. Original page 3 concludes with "The art [which art, exactly?] is either owned by the Agency or lent by the Melzacs," which conflicts with the statement here that all are Melzac.

<sup>2</sup> I've put in "several" because I understand there is at least one Pollock. The original says "represent a period in American art centered in Washington DC between 1958 and 1962." Aside: It bothers me a little to dignify something that lasted a mere four years (58-62) with the name of "school."

The three [or whatever] largest canvases, part of the collection that formerly hung as a group in the \_\_\_ corridor along the OHB courtyard, represent a painting style centered in Washington, D.C., between 1958 and 1962. It has since come to be known as the Washington Color School.

This style is part of the post—World War II American Modernism that found expression in large canvases filled with color and non-representational shapes. Its lineage goes farther back, however, to the 19th century, when painters, especially in France, began to turn away from the style of previous centuries.<sup>3</sup> That shift<sup>^</sup> away from literal representation of landscapes, people, or religious or historical scenes—came in response to the many changes that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, including:

- A rising middle class. These people preferred familiar, everyday scenes to the grand and heroic.
- New technologies. Painters at first viewed the invention of photography as a threat; but gradually some decided that it could relieve them of the chore of recording people and events and began to take on the role of explorers and researchers: what is art? how do color and shape affect the human eye and heart?
- Advances in science. The science of optics spurred the

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<sup>3</sup> The above two sentences come from version B, substituted for the version C ideas that I have attached at the end of this paper.

artists to study the effects of the physical passage of light across a surface. This examination of light and color led American Modernists into many experiments—more or less pleasing to the public according to the artist's skill and taste, but all inspired by a combined scientific and esthetic impulse. After World War II, the development of synthetic acrylic paints made it even easier to work on a large scale and with brilliant color.

Another recent influence was the response of American Modernists to Existentialism, born in Europe after World War II as a reaction against pre-war ideas, patterns, and standards. Existentialism was the intellectual matrix of Abstract Expressionism,<sup>4</sup> evident in its frantic and often violent gestures [patterns?] and its compressed space.<sup>5</sup> [The artists of the Washington School deliberately rejected that style; they experimented instead with openness and clarity of design, simplicity and strength of structure,<sup>6</sup> and a lyrical<sup>7</sup> attitude toward color. They also developed a ~~slower, more deliberate~~<sup>8</sup> technique of "staining" the canvas (rather than laying paint on

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<sup>4</sup> Does our exhibit contain any examples of Abstract Expressionism?

<sup>5</sup> Does "compressed space" mean small canvasses, or busy patterns all over the surface?

<sup>6</sup> "Structures"? How are those different from design? Pattern? Shapes?

<sup>7</sup> Oh dear, I sound like a philistine! What's "lyrical" in the graphic arts? Is it soft, sensitive, subtle?

<sup>8</sup> Deliberate. This means painstaking, harder work? Slower. I had the idea (above) stuck in my mind that acrylic made things easier.

the surface with a brush).

"Staining" originated in the work of Jackson Pollock, one of the best known abstract expressionists.<sup>9</sup> In 1951 he first used enamel on raw, unprimed canvas, creating a color that penetrated the fabric instead of lying upon the surface. Washington painters Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis<sup>10</sup> soon adopted this technique, which satisfied their desire for intensity of color.<sup>11</sup> Acrylic colors also ~~as well as enamel~~ gave <sup>more intense</sup> ~~an increased~~ color <sup>than oils</sup> ~~intensity~~. They can be used safely on an unprimed canvas, soaking into the raw cotton surface; the viewer sees both the color and the basic fabric, giving a transparency that, in the view of some critics, opens and expands the picture plane.<sup>12</sup>

Someone cited a statement by the 18th-century English philosopher Burke that "greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime," and with this philosophical encouragement, plus the ease of covering large areas with

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<sup>9</sup> Do we have a Jackson Pollock in our exhibit?

<sup>10</sup> Why do we begin naming names? These gentlemen are strangers to me. Do we have a Noland or a Louis in our exhibit? Were some of those old big canvases done by these men?

<sup>11</sup> I propose dropping the clause "which is naturally diminished by the priming or underpainting needed in classical oil techniques." Is that true? Seems to me I remember lots of intense color in regular oil paintings.

<sup>12</sup> In this sentence I have dropped the phrase "conveying a sense of color as somehow disembodied and more purely optical," because I do not understand it. Does it mean that we see the texture of the cotton fabric as well as seeing the color? Everything we see is optical. Did the writer mean plain sensory without intellectual content?

*I put the word "transparency" into the text to help here —*

enamel and acrylic color, the modernists<sup>13</sup> began to make huge canvasses flooded with large, simple areas of color, close in value.<sup>14</sup> Some critics interpreted these expansive creations as being evocative of the vast American landscape.

In addition, the artists<sup>15</sup> suppressed all the traditional narrative and representational aspects of painting and deliberately rejected the traditional effects of space (perspective)—further emphasizing the flatness of the picture plane.<sup>16</sup>

By thus purging their canvases of all intellectual content, leaving nothing but the strictly optical aspects of painting (the color and shape), the artists strove for a pure "art for art's sake." [This following is JR's invention] These big, serene areas of color and shape are an artist's version of the ideal behind the true scientist: a search for essential truth without mental or emotional bias, a respect for the nature of the materials, a study of "seeing" as abstract as mathematics.

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<sup>13</sup> Are we talking of 1) all modernists, 2) all since World War II (including Pollock, et al), or more specifically 3) of the Washington School of Color—or maybe 4) only of Noland and Louis (the most recently mentioned painters) . . . ?

<sup>14</sup> Here I have dropped "that inundate the eye." I wonder if our agency engineers know what "close in value" means? [without great contrasts of light and dark]

<sup>15</sup> See question in footnote 13; which artists do we mean? [It seems here as if we are talking exclusively of the big canvasses that used to hang together near the courtyard. I get the impression that they are by Noland and Louis.]

<sup>16</sup> I've omitted "the integrity of" [emphasizing the integrity of the flatness of the picture plane]. You may want it back in.