

I think the best of paintings on N152 (#5-9). *years reflection and Dapple are*  
great, "brilliant" is OK. *Numbler 6-7 are a drag.*

Approved for Release: 2021/01/29 C06797577

Possible Brochure

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

The paintings in CIA Headquarters were given or lent to the Agency from the American abstract art collection of Vincent Melzac, a Washington businessman and friend of several early CIA directors. An art lover who could not afford old masters, Melzac collected paintings by young local artists (once buying a whole room full from a man who needed money to pursue new ideas). The Agency's pictures from the Melzac collection span the whole of the remarkably creative period called "Washington color painting."

*General Study*

Before photography, painters aspired to realism, and their great achievements were in perspective and modeling—the use of light and dark to create an illusion of three dimensions. When photography preempted that field, many artists abandoned realism to concentrate on the "essence of painting." It has always been recognized that some paintings are better than others and a few are great; and since ancient Greece, artists have tried to analyze (apart from intellectual content) the relationships of shapes and colors that make a picture succeed or fail. Now they began studying the science of optics and the psychology of visual perception; testing their theories in the laboratory (on canvas), they produced the now familiar works of impressionism and cubism.

The artistic hiatus of World War II was followed by a creative explosion in all the arts—painting, music, and literature. All were notable for a deliberate rejection, deserved or not, of old forms and an insistent self-expression (the artists called themselves abstract expressionists). Scorning realism, which they called "illusion," they focused on

themselves—their personalities and states of mind—and on the materials and processes of painting. Working over their canvases in many layers of color, they emphasized the action of painting, the manual gesture in the streaks, angles, and intensity of their brushwork. Abstract expressionist paintings in Headquarters include Bluhm's *Passing Waterfall* and *French - 75* and Mehring's *Brilliant* and *Whirling*, (on NHB 2). [That style is still alive and well, as in the 1989 paintings *Calligraphy* and *Rain Forest* (NHB 3) by Epstein.]

*I could live without the Epstein's - but they are sort of typical*

*as an example of abstract expressionism*

*Washington Color School*

In Washington in the late 1950s some of Vincent Melzac's artist friends tired of the expressionist approach and started trying deliberately to remove themselves (their personalities and even their painting technique) from their work. Focusing on color as having its own kind of meaning—"the irrational, often emotional, effect of color"—they tried to avoid lines and shapes that anyone could interpret as images. To remove the hand of the artist they used transparent washes, sometimes actually poured, to stain the canvas in unpredictable ways. Experimenting with optical effects—"what the eye can touch"—they reached for space and light with floating lines and pools of color.

Mehring's *Diagonal* (NHB 2) and Downing's *Concentric Squares* (NHB 3) are examples of the Washington artists' "transparent" style, and their all-over "space" paintings include Mehring's two large canvases *Orange and Gray* (OHB main corridor) and Downing's *Dapple* and Thomas's *Mars Reflection* (NHB 2). These quintessentially "color school" works depend for their impact not on photographic representation or conceptual meaning but on face-to-face encounter with simple color and texture. They are more about how color vibrates in the eye (*Dapple*) than

*Diagonal is the best illustration of transparent washes, but it's dark.*

about how it occupies the surface of the canvas (*Rain Forest*).

Continuing to study color as content, some of the Washington artists moved on to test simplified formats—ribbons or circles of intense color; examples are Davis's *Black Rhythm* and Mehring's *Reverse Edge* (on NHB 3) and Downing's *Center Grid* (on NHB 2). Downing went further, into the geometrically shaped canvases and flat colors illustrated in *Fold II* (NHB 1). By the mid-1960s most of the Washington group had switched to intellectualized painting, firm edges, and opaque pigment—but critics now agree that their transparent or all-over works were their finest.

If you want a shape example fold it. most interest

While Washington was exploring color in this way, some young New York painters turned in the 1960s from abstract expressionism to the stylized realism of pop art. With its rambunctious images drawn from the everyday world (soup cans, comic strips), this was welcomed by the public as more understandable than abstract art. The Agency's one example of pop art is *Arrows* (OHB 1) by Neuman.

Pop Art  
2-1  
our Harris  
and suggest  
this painting  
for dropping

do not  
use a  
picture:  
Arrows

The Washington Color School no longer exists, but some of its paintings are among the best of the twentieth century. Vincent Melzac said he felt fortunate to have lived in Washington and been the friend of some of the most brilliant painters of the 1950s and 1960s. "I found satisfaction simply in their struggle to create good work—whether they managed to or not—and I have always enjoyed sharing the works of art that I have discovered."