

The paintings from the Vincent Melzac collection exhibited in the New Headquarters Building represent a period in American art centered in Washington D.C. between 1958 to 1962, that has since come to be known as the Washington Color School. As an art style, it was both related to the New York-based Abstract Expressionism, which dominated American modernism throughout much of the 1950s, and was a reaction against it. Abstract Expressionism itself may be viewed as an expressly American manifestation of the modern "romantic" spirit in art, which historically is defined as the aesthetic expression of oneself. With its focus on color as content, the Washington Color School in many ways acted as a transition from the highly subjective and gestural, apparently undisciplined paintings of the Abstract Expressionists to the various art styles of the 1960s, such as Minimalism and Op Art, which allowed color and color relationships to be the very subject of the painting.

Art styles can be set in radical directions for any number of reasons, from philosophical to scientific or political. The representational, objectified art that has come to be identified with Western art values was, in the 19th and 20th centuries, challenged and affected by among other things:

- o the industrial revolution, which created a middle class that not only changed the nature of art patronage but also the subject matter of

3000 PRINCEVILLE RD.  
 PRINCEVILLE, N.C. 28566

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 ARTS AND CULTURE DIVISION

art, from grandiose depictions to mundane moments in contemporary time and place;

- o scientific and technological developments: in the 19th century, it was the invention of photography, initially viewed as a threat to painting, that eventually liberated the painter from the traditional role of recorder to one of explorer; in the 1950s, the development of the synthetic acrylic paints opened new possibilities to painters; advances in the science of optics, which enabled even lay people such as artists to study the physical passage of light across a surface; and, related to the latter,

- o the philosophical examination of light and color, which fascinated even Aristotle, for whom color was "flawed light...between divine radiance and stygian darkness," to the late-19th century mystical and occult movements and their attendant claims of color as symbol, and including the 18th century English philosopher Edmund Burke, whose statement, "greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime," influenced mid-20th century American modernists to search for the sublime in large canvases filled with color;

- o and finally, in the specific case of post-World War II American modernism, the philosophical and political reaction against the ideologies of the 1930s that were viewed as morally and philosophically bankrupt following the devastation of the war, a reaction that was manifest in the European-bred philosophy of Existentialism, which turned away from fixed ideas, patterns, or standards. This formed in large part the intellectual matrix of Abstract Expressionism, evident in its frantic and often violent gestures and compressed space, and it also influenced the Washington Color School inasmuch as it was something the Washington painters rejected in

favor of a greater openness and clarity of design, stronger structures, a lyrical attitude toward color, and a slower, more deliberate technique of staining the canvas rather than brushing the paint onto the surface.

"Staining" had its origins in the work of Jackson Pollock, one of Abstract Expressionism's best known exponents. New York painter Helen Frankenthaler saw a 1951 Pollock painting in which he used enamel on raw, unprimed canvas, resulting in a color that actually penetrated the fabric and not just lay upon the surface. Frankenthaler in turn introduced Washington painters Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis to staining in 1953, who saw this as a means to achieve in their paintings a greater color intensity -- which is naturally diminished with the prerequisite priming or underpainting, and also as a means to dispense with the more traditional spatial effects in painting, such as perspective. The development of the synthetic acrylic paint gave them this desired color intensity: unlike oils, acrylic can be used safely on an unprimed canvas (oils without primer on a canvas would rot the canvas fiber), and acrylic is easily thinned with water to a consistency that makes it easy to direct the paint across the canvas. And, unlike oil, which cannot penetrate the fabric of the primed canvas, acrylics dry quickly and form a water-resistant but highly flexible bond with the material, becoming identified with the raw cotton surface, conveying a sense of color as somehow disembodied and more purely optical, a color that opens and expands the picture plane. In their search for the "sublime," the modernists followed Burke's advice and employed canvases "great of dimension" with large, simple areas of "soakstained" color, close in value, that inundate the eye. Along with the large size, which some

critics interpret as being evocative of the vast American landscape, and the stained planes of color, the artists suppressed all literal references, further emphasizing the integrity of the flatness of the picture plane.

This purging of the personal, the literary, the representational, and the spatial from art reinforces an "art for art's sake" aesthetic. Modernist art of the 1950s and 1960s stresses the purely pictorial aspects of picture-making, not the more traditional and familiar Western narrative values. Interestingly, in so doing, modernist art has actually, however inadvertently, revived art historical interest in certain long-forgotten Old Masters whose work similarly may be viewed in terms of abstract spatial and color relationships.

Modernist art of the 1950s and 1960s complements the modern architectural design of our two headquarters buildings and also complements the technological theme of artwork in other space in this building in particular. The art is either owned by the Agency or loaned by the Melzacs, longtime friends of the Agency.