

The Washington and New York Schools of Color

The Washington School of Color, represented by many of the paintings in the New Headquarters Building, belongs to a period in American modernism immediately following World War II; its lineage can be traced, however, to 19th century Europe, especially France. During that period, art was set in a radically different direction, in part due to:

- the industrial revolution, which created a middle class that not only changed the nature of art patronage but also changed the subject matter of art from grandiose depictions to mundane moments in contemporary time and place,

- scientific and technological developments, at a time when the science of optics examined the passage of light and its impact on the human eye. Although photography had initially been seen as a threat to painting, artists during this period came to see it as a liberating force, freeing ~~the~~ them from the traditional role of recorder to one of explorer,

- philosophy, reaching from Aristotle, for whom color was "flawed light, a tragic necessity between divine radiance and stygian darkness" to the late 19th century mystical and occult movements, who claimed that colors were symbols. Artists began to examine the myth and art of past cultures--including non-European ones.

- the development of Freudian and Jungian psychology, which examined the dream world state and the production of new, biomorphic images--a major factor in the development of Surrealism.

The Washington School of Color was art with an agenda! This was not, however, a new concept--in the 17th century, the powerful Dutch mercantile class sponsored oil paintings to espouse the tenets of the Reformation. The work was in stark contrast to the elaborate and emotional frescos in Italian churches, which were promoting the cause of the counter-Reformation.

It is important to view the works of the Washington School of Color relative to those of the New York School, represented by "gesture" or "action" painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem deKooning. Artists in the New York School, known as the Abstract Expressionists, used large, simple areas of color that inundate the eye. They had been influenced by Edmund Burke, an 18th century English philosopher whose passages on the nature of the sublime led them to seek "the effect of infinity".

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an agenda?*

Both groups, enveloping the philosophy of Existentialism, were reacting against the ideologies of the 1930s, which were seen as morally and philosophically bankrupt after the devastation of World War I. These artists avoided fixed ideas, patterns, or standards. The American art vanguard of the 1940s moved decidedly toward a highly subjective and personal art, exploring for ways to uncover fresh images.

An understanding of optics led to an awareness that the artists' sought-after sense of boundlessness was further intensified when the areas of color were close in value, evenly painted, and not delineated—continuing an uninterrupted progression into the field of color. To further augment the sensation of an enveloping color, the color field painters worked on an ever-large scale. Some art critics maintain that the grand scale is actually evocative of the vast American landscape. The paintings impress one as possessing the qualities not so much of things but of impulses and excited movements that emerge and change before our eyes.

The younger artists who emerged in the 1950s moved somewhat away from the current of Abstract Expressionism, moving toward more openness of design and image and toward a clarity that distinguished them from the compressed space and the frantic brush expression of the action painters. The artists began to espouse an "art for art's sake", trying to purge art of representation and illusion. The appearance of flatness on the canvas was important. They developed a technique called soakstain, in which diluted paint was spilled onto an unprimed canvas and allowed to soak into the weave to reinforce the two-dimensional appearance of the surface and expunge the pictorial field of any suggestion of spatial illusion.

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In describing Modernist paintings, critic Clement Greenberg notes that the viewer is first aware of the flatness of the pictures, before being aware of what the flatness contains. In maintaining the integrity of the flat plane, Modernist artists ruthlessly imposed on themselves a very specific set of limiting conditions; they dispensed with concepts that had earlier been considered essential to the making and experiencing of art. Their art inadvertently tested all theories about art, and in doing so, revived an interest in the purely pictorial aspects of picture making. Modernist art has been partially credited with the revival of interest in the Old Masters, whose reputations had, over the centuries, fallen by the wayside.

Modernist art 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, who have been longtime friends of the Agency.