

# Small Abstractions

August–December 2020

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Exploring the long arc of abstract art made during the twentieth century, *Small Abstractions: Selections from Sheldon's Permanent Collection* highlights a great strength of the museum's holdings and explores moments when color, line, geometry, and gesture—not figural form—serve as the subject of painting. Often associated with large canvases and dynamic brushwork, abstract art in America, as seen in this installation, took on many forms, including instances where artists chose deliberately to work on a smaller scale.

These artists include the synchromists, such as Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell, who embraced the nuances of color to create form and content before World War I. Members of the American Abstract Artists (AAA), which included Esphyr Slobodkina, Burgoyne Diller, Alice Trumbull Mason, Ad Reinhardt, and Josef Albers, aimed to promote hard-edged geometric paintings in America through exhibitions, publications, and lectures during the second quarter of the century. Responding to the horrors of World War II, Perle Fine and Nicolas Carone joined other artists at The Club, a famous organization of abstract expressionist artists that met in New York and became the center of the city's artistic and intellectual currents.

In addition to highlighting these exchanges of ideas and collaborative efforts to formulate an abstract visual vocabulary, this installation, through a purposeful inclusion of small-scale paintings, suggests a highly personalized and intimate viewing experience. It creates a close encounter with the art and allows for the viewer's gaze to linger over the surface of the paintings, asking questions about the materials used and the forms depicted. In doing so, *Small Abstractions* highlights the rhythms and geometries that this group of artists employed to formulate their own interpretation of non-figural, or abstract, art.

Exhibition support is provided by Dillon Foundation, Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and Sheldon Art Association.



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Josef Albers  
*Study for Homage to the Square, Early Diary*



Hadieh Shafie  
*Cadmium Yellow, Naphthol Red and Ultramarine Blue in 1/1*



Ad Reinhardt  
*No. 2*



Thomas Nozkowski  
*Untitled (7-89)*



Morgan Russell  
*Synchromy No. 2, To Light (from Synchromy in Blue-Violet Quartet)*



Esphyr Slobodkina  
*Untitled #34*



Lorser Feitelson  
*Black Lines on Red Field*



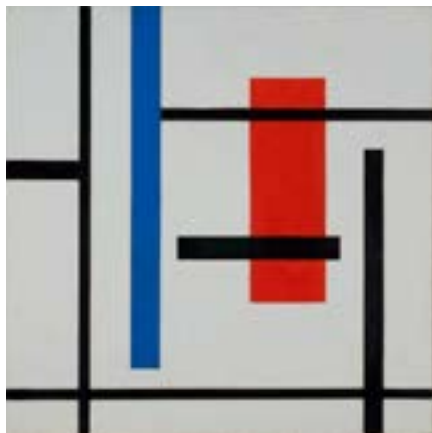
Alice Trumbull Mason  
*The Barberry Hedge*



Al Held  
*Composition*



Alma Thomas  
*Winter Pool*



Burgoyne Diller  
*Untitled (Second Theme)*



Stanton Macdonald-Wright  
*Dragon Forms*



Polly Apfelbaum  
*Seeing Spots*



Nicolas Carone  
*Untitled (Rome 1950)*

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Alice Trumbull Mason  
*Trinity #10*

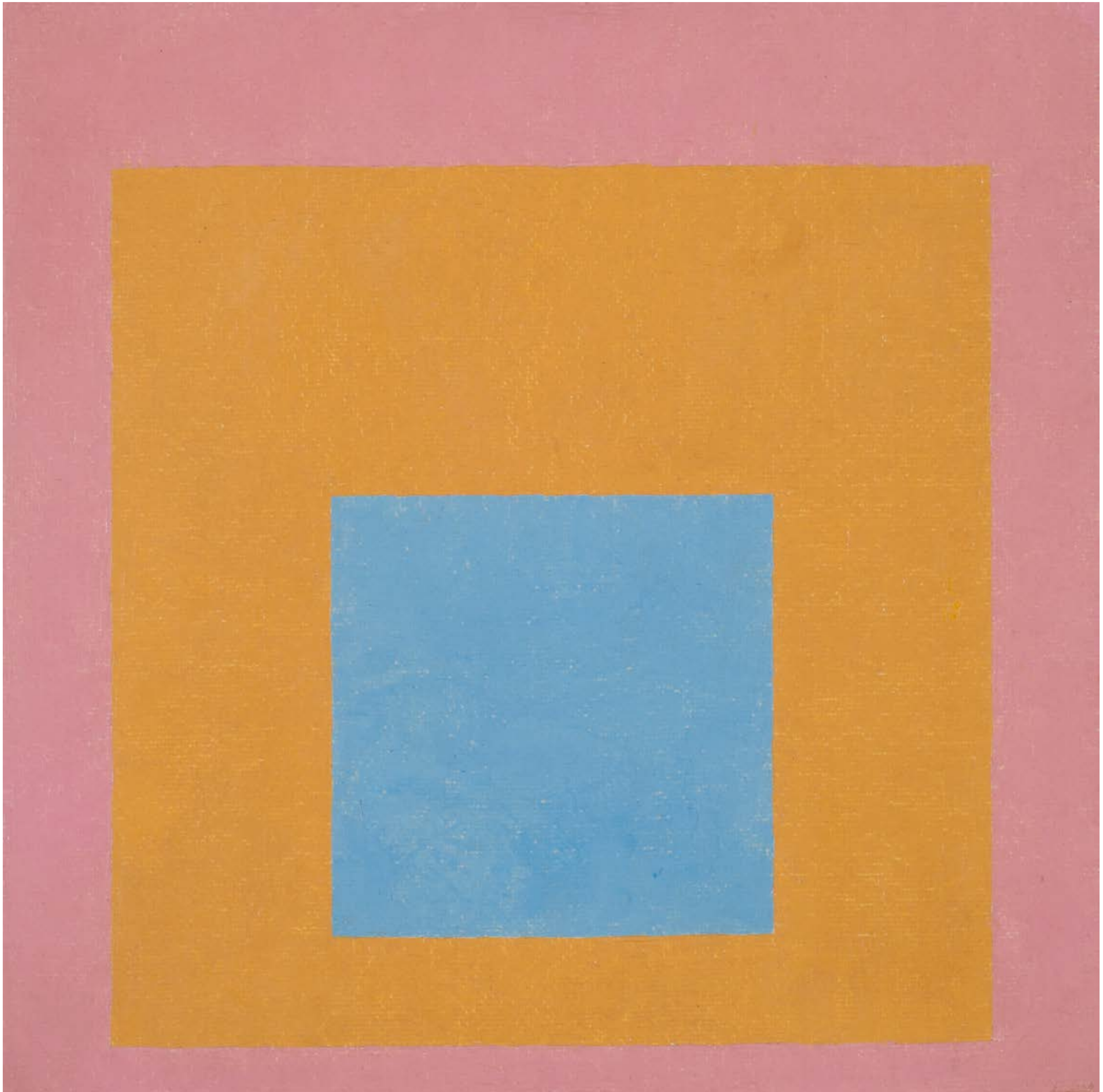


Perle Fine  
*Spinning Figure*



Felrath Hines  
*Over The Edge*





Josef Albers

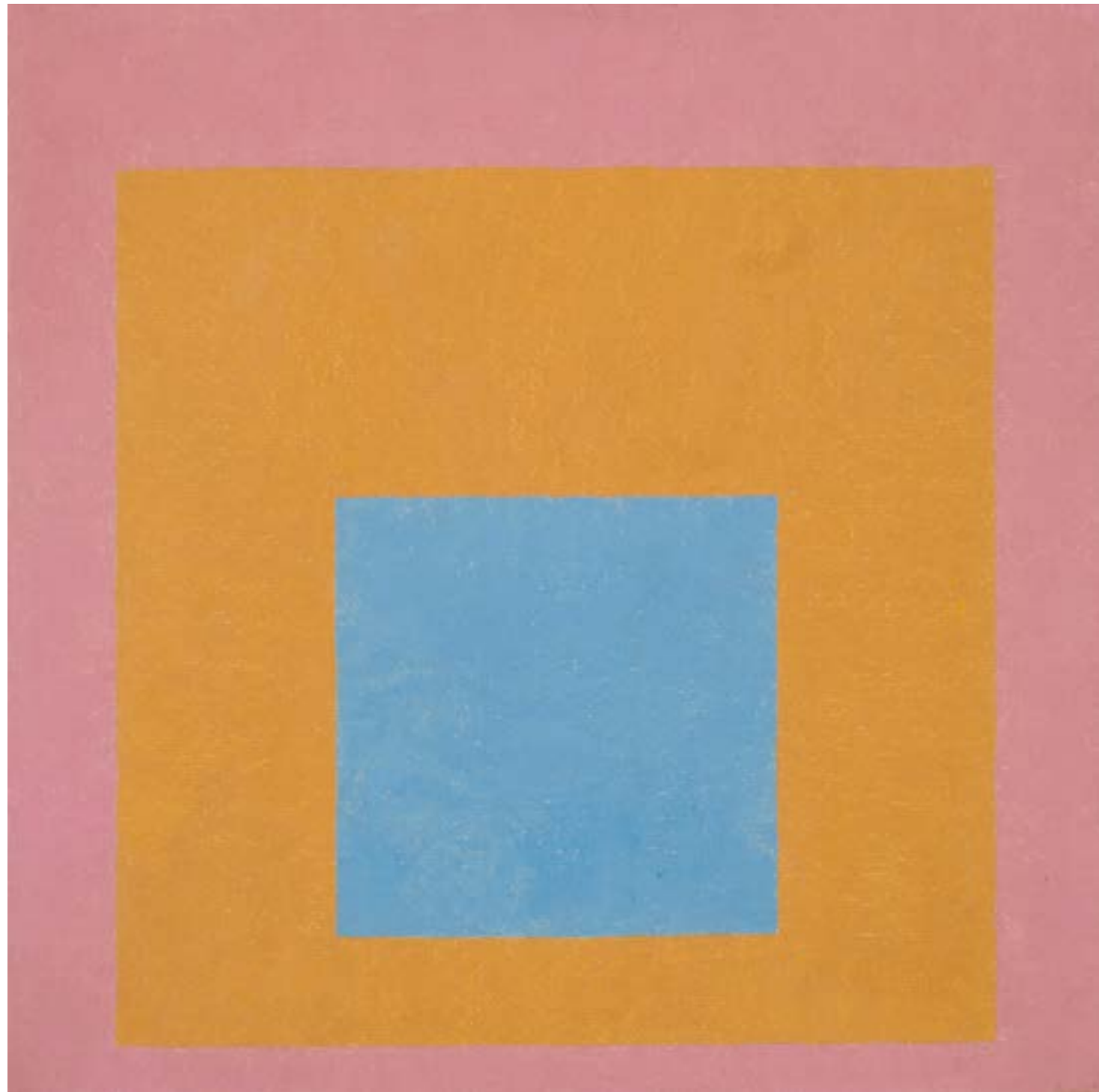
Bottrop, Germany 1888–New Haven, CT 1976

***Study for Homage to the Square, Early Diary***

Oil on Masonite, 1954

Sheldon Museum of Art, Nebraska Art Association,  
Thomas C. Woods Memorial

Acquired 1963



Josef Albers

***Study for Homage to the Square, Early Diary***

One of the founding members of the American Abstract Artists, Josef Albers was best known for using the precise form of a square to investigate the interplay of colors. He was interested in how the boundaries between these solid planes of colors, like the ochre and pink in this painting, could almost dissolve when viewed from a distance. The results of these explorations were later published in 1963 in Albers's treatise *Interaction of Color*.





Ad Reinhardt

Buffalo, NY 1913–New York, NY 1967

**No. 2**

Watercolor on paper, 1949

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R.  
and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust

Acquired 1952

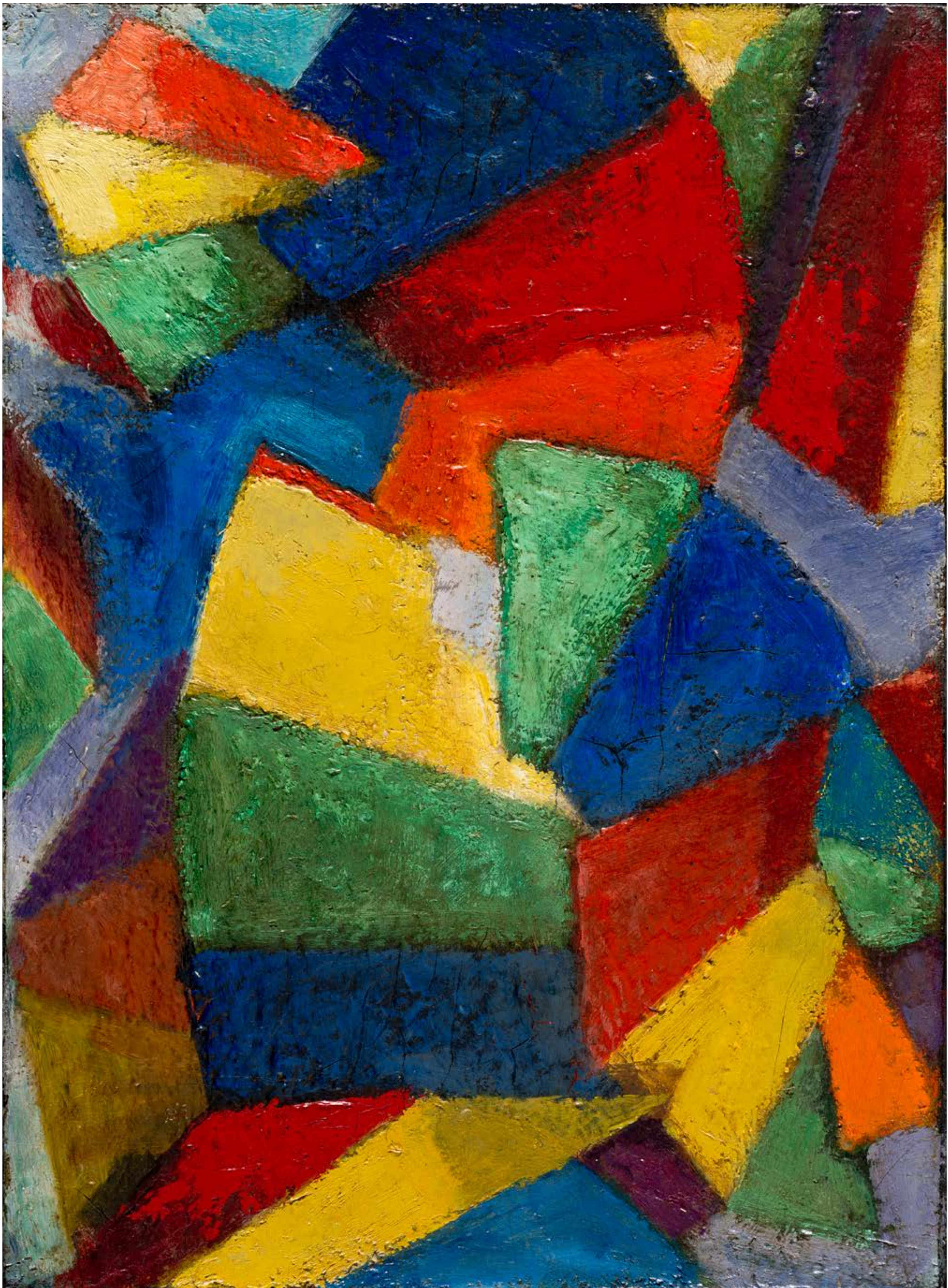




Ad Reinhardt  
**No. 2**

With its animated lines, gestural handling of watercolor, and vivid colors, *No. 2* differs from the monochromatic paintings for which Ad Reinhardt is known. He joined the American Abstract Artists in 1937, a year after the association's formation, and taught alongside Burgoyne Diller, whose work is seen at right, at Brooklyn College. The two artists' interests in creating balance and rhythm in their compositions are evident, despite their vastly different approaches to abstraction.





Morgan Russell

New York, NY 1886–Broomall, PA 1953

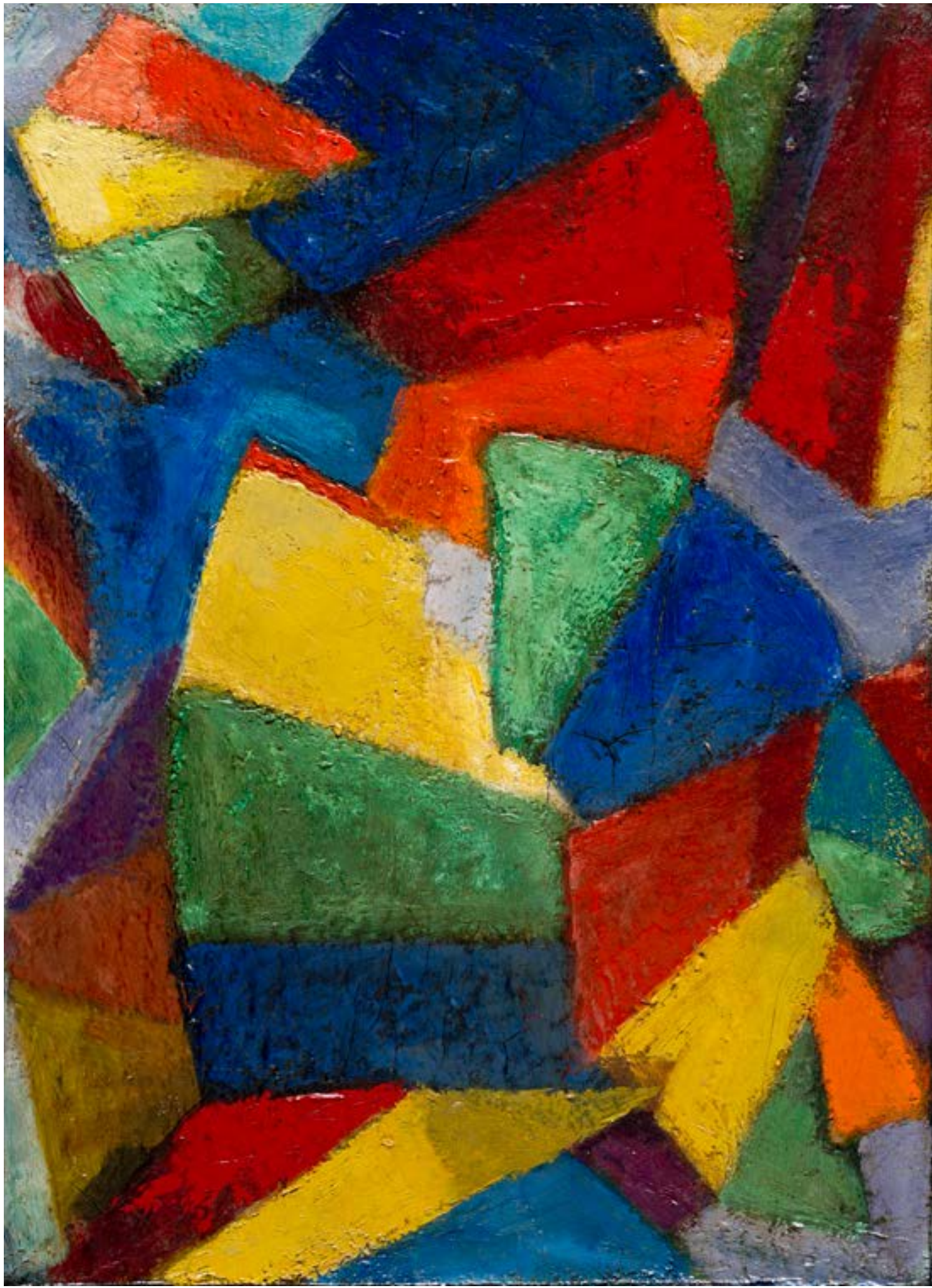
***Synchrony No. 2, To Light (from Synchrony in Blue-Violet Quartet)***

Oil on canvas mounted on board, 1912

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift of the Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Collection and Charitable Trust, Alexander Liberman, Olga N. Sheldon, Lester A. Danielson, and Bertha Schaefer by exchange

Acquired 1999



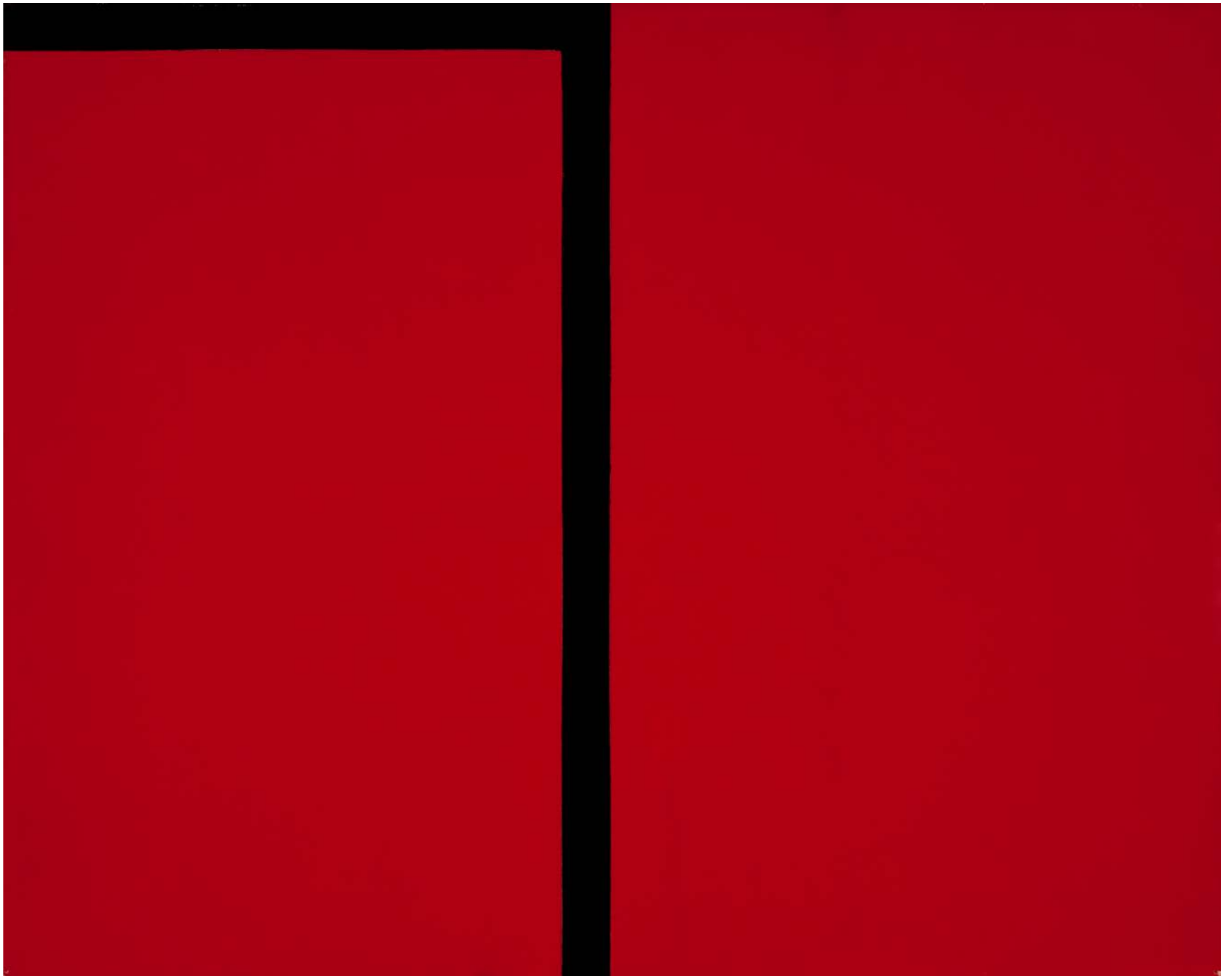


Morgan Russell

***Synchromy No. 2, To Light***  
**(from *Synchromy in Blue-Violet Quartet*)**

Along with Stanton Macdonald-Wright, whose painting is also on view in this installation, Morgan Russell was one of the inventors of synchromism, a style of painting where color serves as the basis for form and content. Russell also drew inspiration from symphonic musical scores, creating abstract paintings where bold fields of color rhythmically intersect with one another.





Lorser Feitelson  
Savannah, GA 1898–Los Angeles, CA 1978

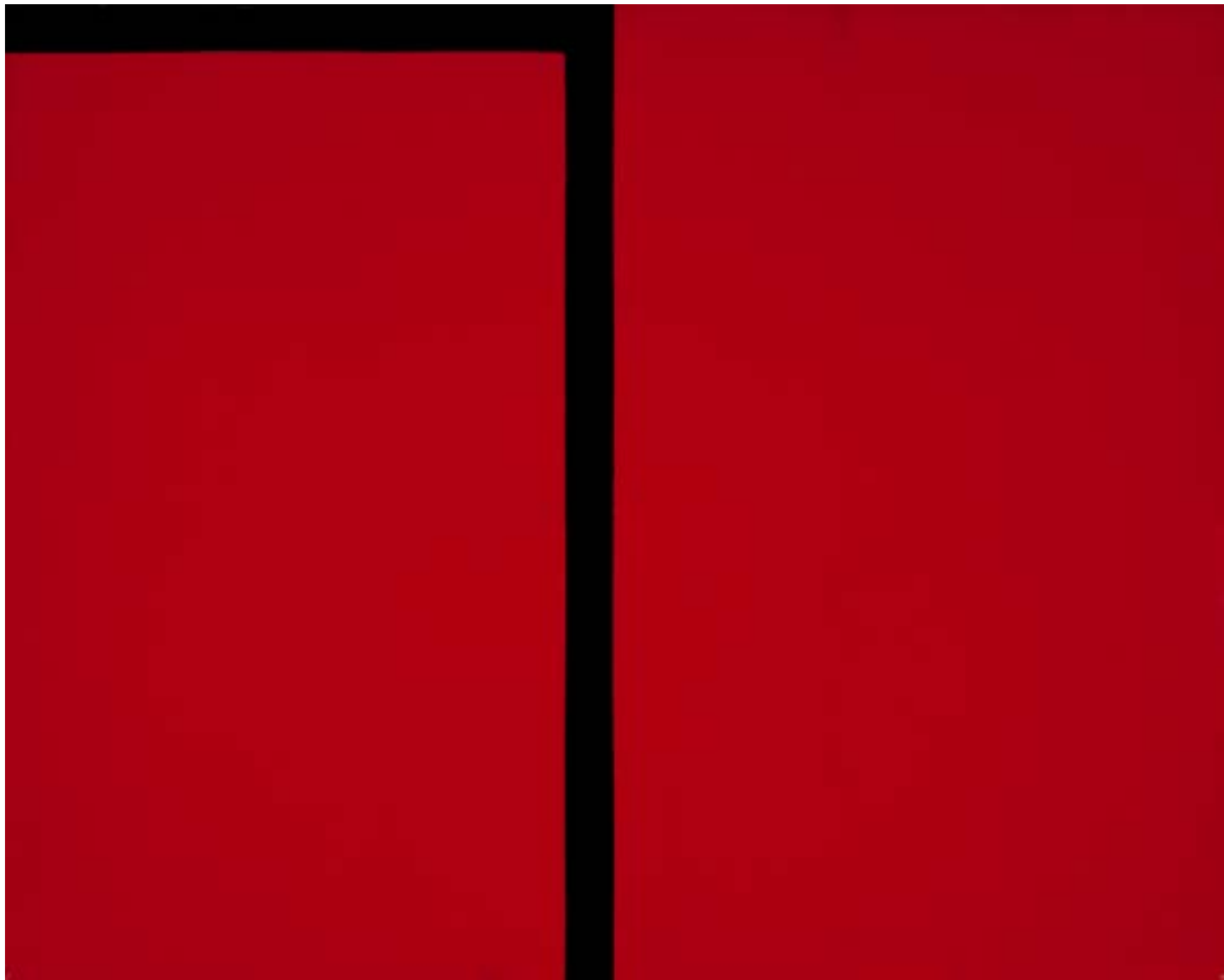
***Black Lines on Red Field***

Oil on canvas on board, circa 1949–1950

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift to the Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Collection from the Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundberg Feitelson Arts Foundation

Acquired 1987





Lorser Feitelson  
***Black Lines on Red Field***

Working in Los Angeles, Lorser Feitelson experimented with creating canvases in a style that became known as hard-edge painting. While abstract expressionists in New York explored the implications of energetic and gestural brushstrokes, he instead used large and flat forms that denied pictorial depth in a way that blurred the distinction between the background and the pictorial form, a relationship that is only clarified by the title of this canvas.

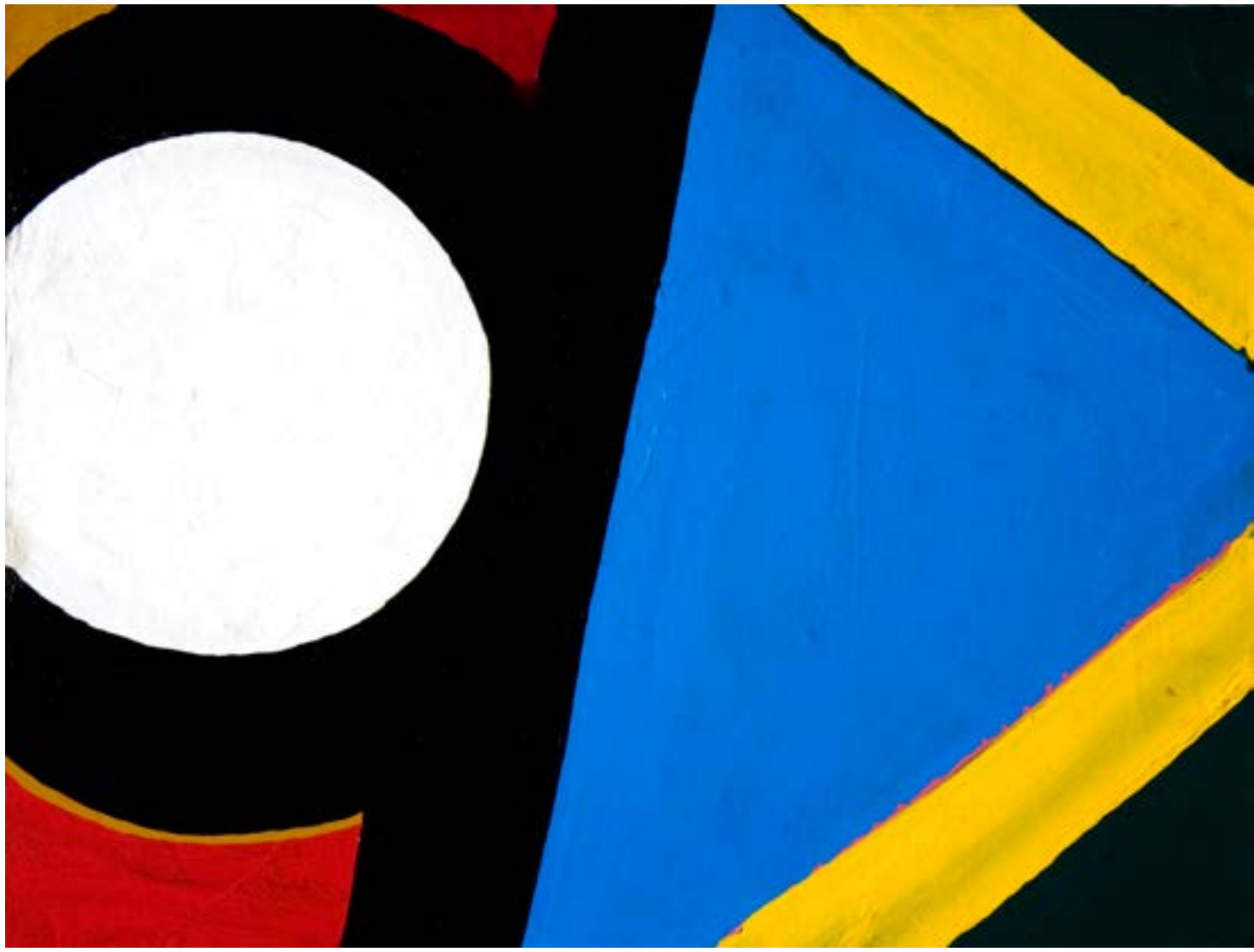




Al Held  
New York, NY 1928–Todi, Italy 2005

**Composition**  
Oil on board, circa 1962–1965  
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift  
of Mrs. Harriet Wiener  
Acquired 1968



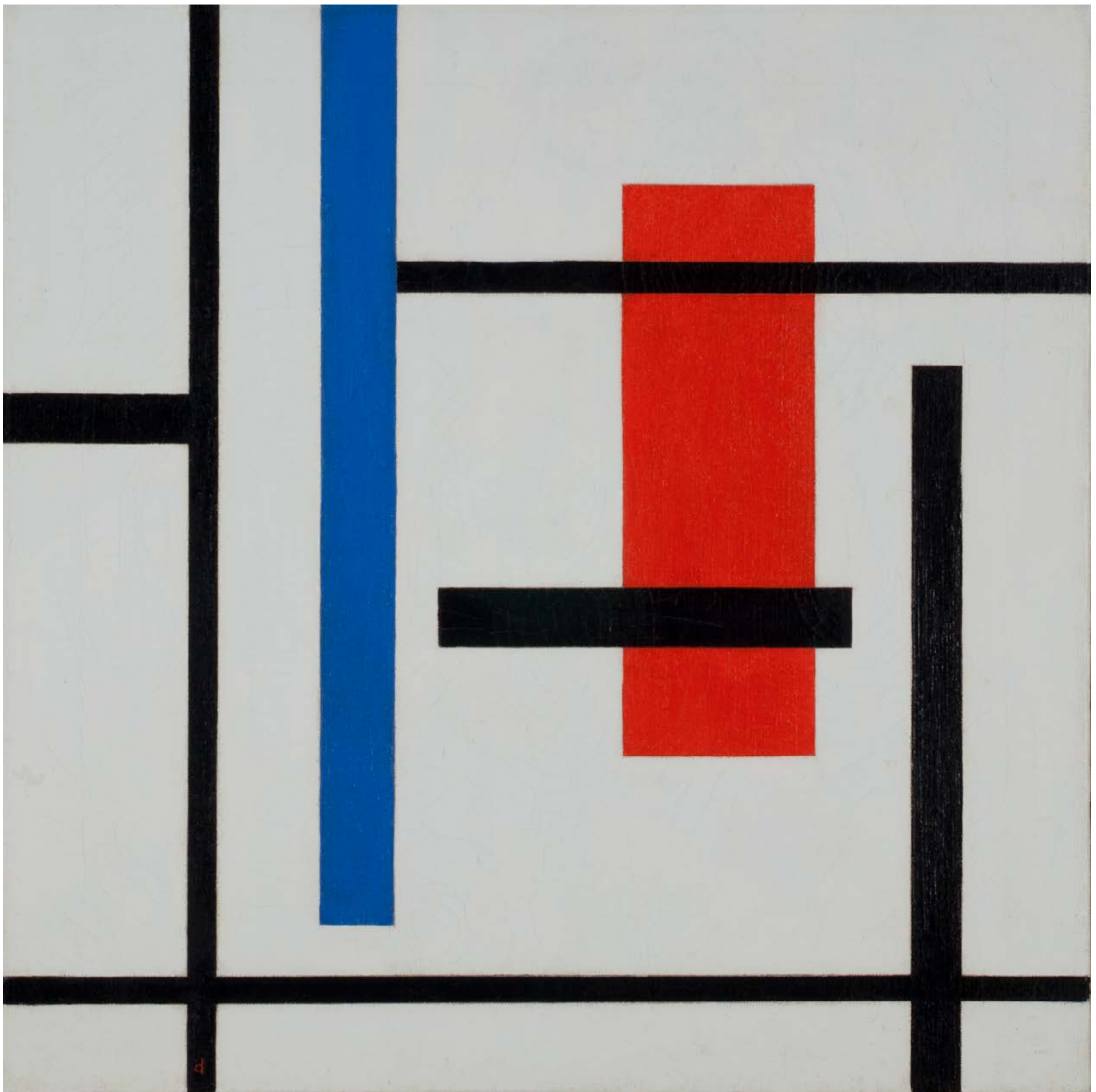


Al Held

*Composition*

Considered a second-generation abstract expressionist, Al Held was mentored by painters such as Franz Kline and Mark Rothko during the 1950s. Yet, in the following decade, Held moved decisively away from that style’s dynamism and exuberance and towards geometric form. When compared with the abstract geometry of Alice Trumbull Mason and Lorser Feitelson seen nearby, Held’s *Composition* seemingly denies the flatness of the canvas through his painterly layering of colors, demonstrated in the built-up streaks of green and pink peeking out from beneath the bold strokes of yellow at right.



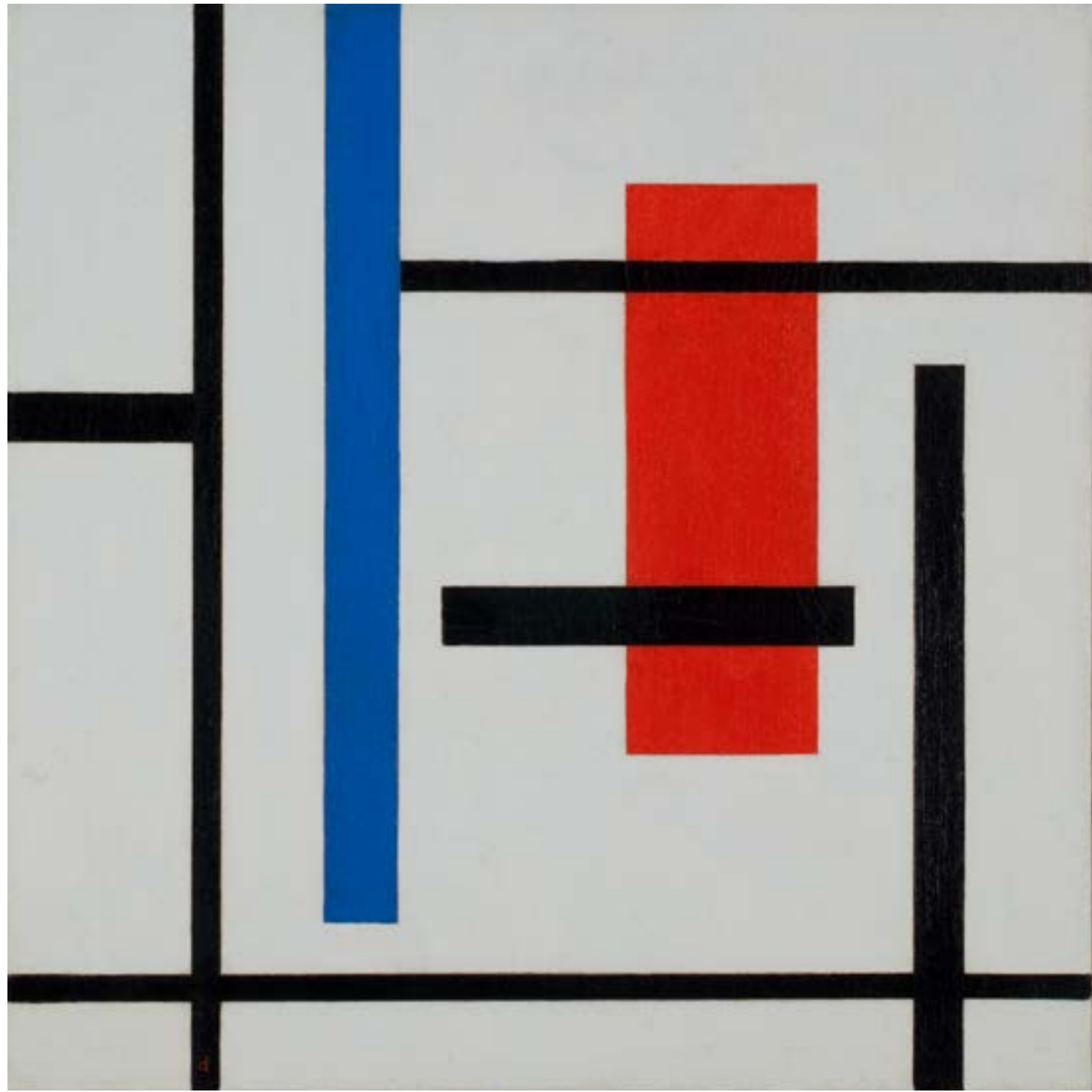


Burgoyne Diller  
New York, NY 1906–New York, NY 1965

***Untitled (Second Theme)***  
Oil on canvas, circa 1940–1945

Sheldon Museum of Art, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle  
Cochrane Woods Memorial  
Acquired 1981





Burgoyne Diller  
*Untitled (Second Theme)*

Another one of the founding members of the American Abstract Artists, Burgoyne Diller's abstraction takes its cues from the asymmetrical geometry of Piet Mondrian's neo-plastic paintings. Diller combined primary colors with a grid and strong vertical forms. This highlights the flat and rectilinear nature of the canvas, while striking a balance in the composition between stability and dynamism.





Polly Apfelbaum  
Born Abington, PA 1955

***Seeing Spots***

Iris print on synthetic velvet, 1999

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Robert  
E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund,  
through the University of Nebraska Foundation

Acquired 2005





Polly Apfelbaum  
*Seeing Spots*

By printing a random pattern of dots on a piece of synthetic velvet, Polly Apfelbaum draws on Josef Albers’s treatise *Interaction of Color* to inform her color palette, while subverting the traditional practice of making art by using a kitschy material as support. With the texture of the velvet playing an integral part in the work, *Seeing Spots* also allows for associations with clothing, craft, and domesticity, encouraging conversations beyond those that traditional abstract paintings usually create.





Hadieh Shafie  
born Tehran, Iran 1969

***Cadmium Yellow, Naphthol Red and Ultramarine Blue in 1/1***  
Ink, acrylic and paper with printed and handwritten Farsi text, 2013

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Robert  
E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund,  
through the University of Nebraska Foundation

Acquired 2013





Thomas Nozkowski  
Teaneck, NJ 1944–New York, NY 2019

***Untitled (7-89)***

Oil on linen on panel, 1996

Sheldon Museum of Art, Nebraska Art Association Collection

Acquired 2006





Thomas Nozkowski  
*Untitled (7-89)*

After years of making large abstract paintings, Thomas Nozkowski deliberately rejected working in what he considered that “macho scale” with its “imperialist implications.” Instead, he turned his attention to smaller paintings, taking his imagery from everyday life. He then abstracted and meticulously painted his subject onto linen support with tiny brushes, which at their largest measure  $\frac{5}{32}$  of an inch in diameter.





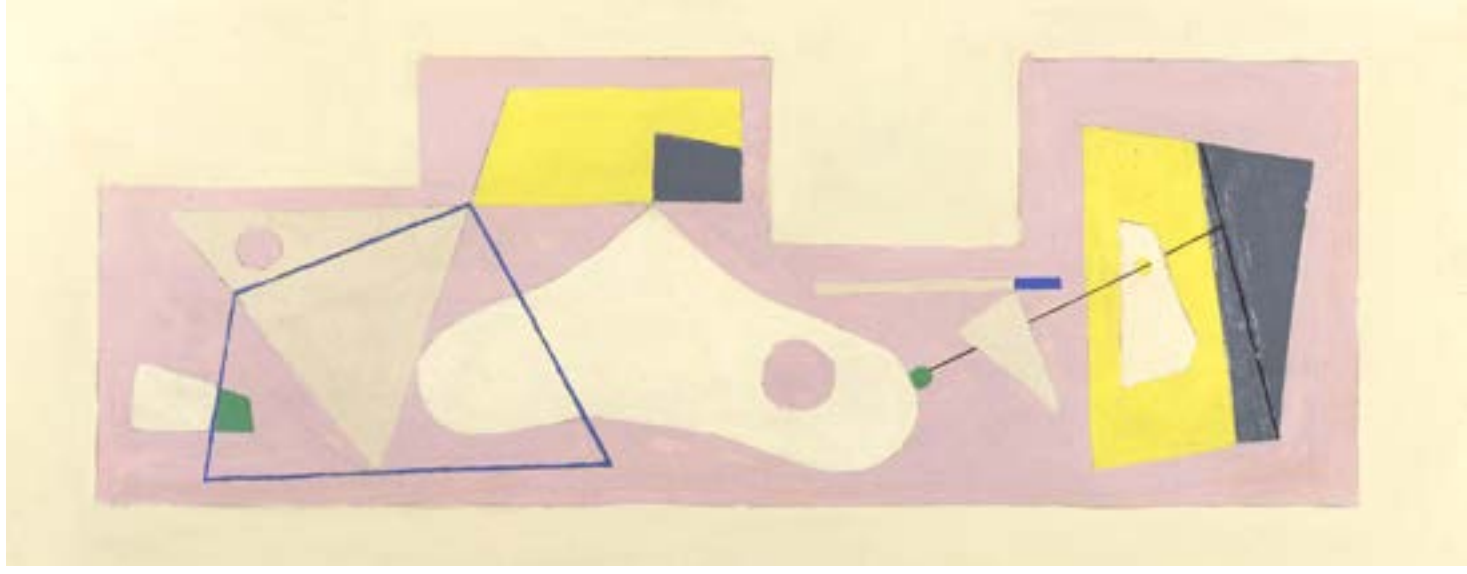
Esphyr Slobodkina  
Chelyabinsk, Russia 1908–Glen Head, NY 2002

***Untitled #34***  
Oil on Masonite, 1936–1938

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Robert  
E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund,  
through the University of Nebraska Foundation

Acquired 2011v





Esphyr Slobodkina  
*Untitled #34*

Although she is now best remembered as a children’s picture book author and illustrator, Esphyr Slobodkina was also a prolific painter. She played an important role in the development of abstraction in the United States as one of the founding members of American Abstract Artists (AAA) in 1936. In this preparatory sketch for a Works Progress Administration mural, however, Slobodkina moved away from the hard-edged geometric forms favored by AAA painters in order to explore more biomorphic shapes.





Alice Trumbull Mason  
Litchfield, CT 1904–New York, NY 1971

***The Barberry Hedge***

Oil on canvas, 1955

Sheldon Museum of Art, Nebraska Art Association Collection

Acquired 1974

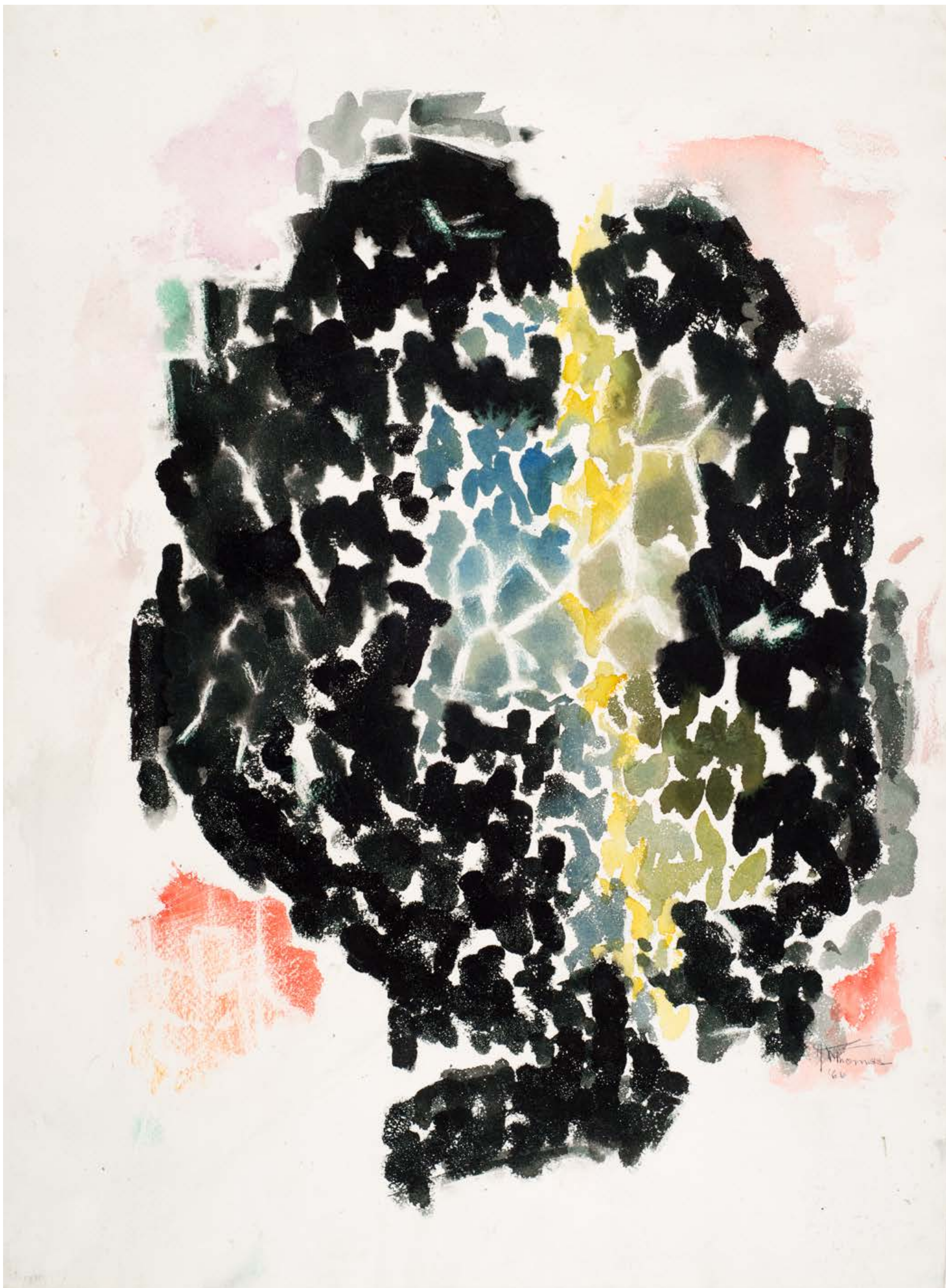




Alice Trumbull Mason  
***The Barberry Hedge***

Another founding member of American Abstract Artists in the late 1930s, Alice Trumbull Mason continued using hard-edged geometric forms and the large, flat planes of color that had been popular with the group through the 1950s and 1960s, even though such abstraction was considered old-fashioned compared to abstract expressionism.





Alma Thomas

Columbus, GA 1891–Washington, DC 1978

***Winter Pool***

Watercolor and acrylic on paper, 1966

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Olga N.  
Sheldon Acquisition Trust

Acquired 2013



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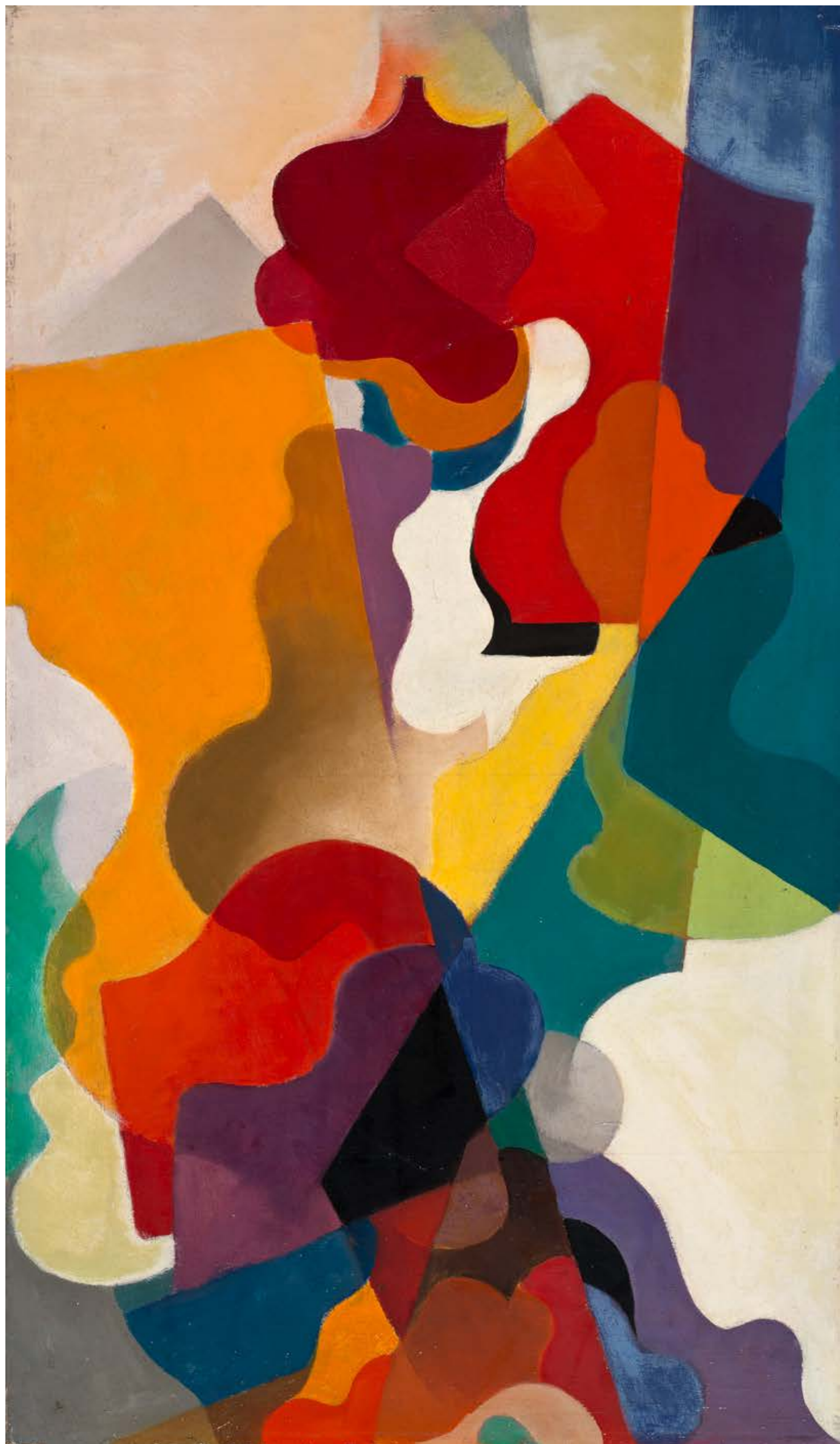




Alma Thomas  
***Winter Pool***

During the 1960s, when she was in her 70s, Alma Thomas created her own abstract vocabulary in response to the abstract expressionist currents in New York. Depicting the gardens around her home or Washington, DC's public parks, Thomas arranged dabs of color, as seen in *Winter Pool*, in irregular patterns and exploited the white of the paper support to convey the flickering and shimmering interplay of light reflected on a body of water.





Stanton Macdonald-Wright  
Charlottesville, VA 1890–Los Angeles, CA 1973

***Dragon Forms***  
Oil on panel, 1926

Sheldon Museum of Art, Nebraska Art Association, Bequest of  
Herbert Schmidt, Centennial Committee, the Art of Politics, and  
Joseph Chowning

Acquired 1988





Stanton Macdonald-Wright  
***Dragon Forms***

In addition to using color to express form and content, synchromists like Stanton Macdonald-Wright concluded that flat planes of color could also be two-dimensional abstractions of three-dimensional sculptures. In *Dragon Forms*, Macdonald-Wright's juxtaposition of angular and rounded shapes suggests the serpentine silhouettes of these mythical creatures and also foreshadows his later interest in Asian art and philosophy.





Nicolas Carone  
New York, NY 1917–Hudson, NY 2010

***Untitled (Rome 1950)***

Oil on canvas, 1950

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift of  
Harold Diamond

Acquired 1974

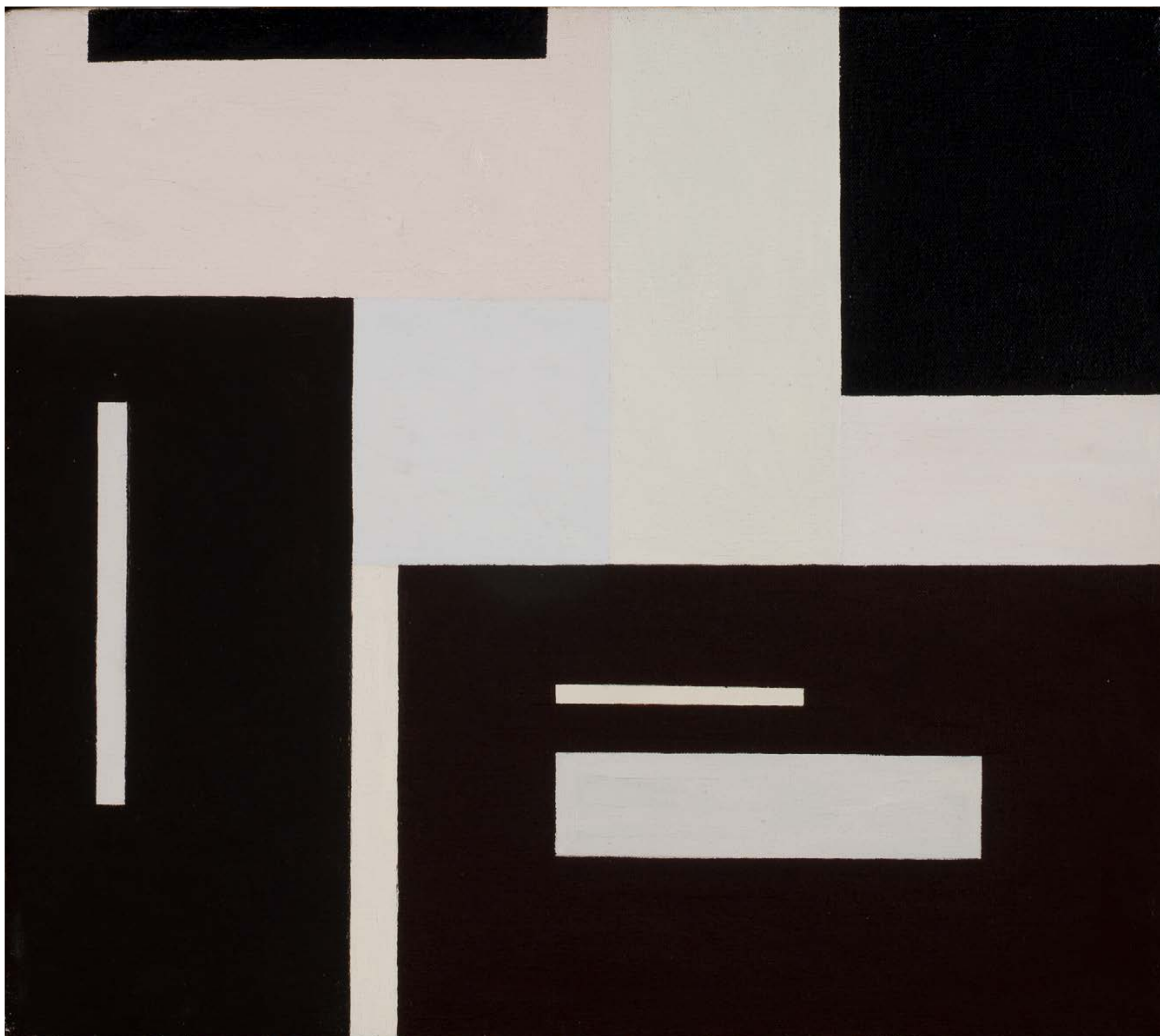




Nicolas Carone  
*Untitled (Rome 1950)*

By subtly layering colors and using expressive brushwork to depict biomorphic forms, Nicolas Carone honed his abstraction while spending time in Italy during the late 1940s and befriending Jackson Pollock. When Carone returned to New York City, his paintings were included in the famous Ninth Street Show, an exhibition of the city’s most cutting-edge abstract paintings organized by members of The Club, a group of early abstract expressionist painters that included Perle Fine, whose work is also on view in this installation.





Alice Trumbull Mason

Litchfield, CT 1904–New York, NY 1971

***Trinity #10***

Oil on canvas, 1969

Sheldon Museum of Art, Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolf Kahn

Acquired 1974





Perle Fine  
Boston, MA 1905–East Hampton, NY 1988

***Spinning Figure***  
Oil on canvas, 1949

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R.  
and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust

Acquired 2017





In *Spinning Figure*, Perle Fine reduced the human form to abstracted facets of color and energetic lines. Such dynamism reveals her understanding of abstract expressionism, which she was familiar with from her visits to The Club, a legendary artists' forum on Eighth Street in New York City, where the most prominent practitioners of abstract expressionism met to share their ideas about the burgeoning artistic movement.

Perle Fine  
*Spinning Figure*





Felrath Hines

Indianapolis, IN 1913–Silver Spring, MD 1993

***Over The Edge***

Oil on linen, 1983

Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift of  
Dorothy C. Fisher, wife of the artist

Acquired 2011





Felrath Hines  
*Over The Edge*

By the 1980s, artists began to seek more varied sources of subjects for their paintings, yielding eclectic results. However, Felrath Hines maintained a strict adherence to geometric abstraction through exploring the subtle interplay of shades of white.