Learning to Look: Navigating the Mysteries of the Art World

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Weekly Themes

• Week 1: Who am I? A Closer Look at the Art of Portraiture
• Week 2: The Changing Nature of Landscape Art
• Week 3: Whose History is it Anyway?
• Week 4: Hidden Meanings in Still Life
• Week 5: Photographs – Capturing the Moment
• Week 6: “My kid could do that!” The Perils of Abstraction
Abstract definition (Merriam Webster dictionary): Having only intrinsic form with little or no attempt at pictorial representation or narrative content.

Abstract (according to A. Dempsey’s Modern Art): Art that does not try to represent objects as they appear in the world. Also called non-objective art.
“We stand at the threshold of an altogether new art, an art with forms which mean or represent nothing, recall nothing, yet which can stimulate our souls.”

August Endell, 1898 (As quoted in Amy Dempsey’s Modern Art)
Some thoughts from Picasso:

“There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality.”

“The world today doesn’t make sense, so why should I paint pictures that do?”

“Critics, mathematicians scientists and busybodies want to classify everything, marking the boundaries and limits...in art, there is room for all possibilities.”
“Abstraction allows man to see with his mind what he cannot see physically with his eyes...Abstract art enables the artist to perceive beyond the tangible, to extract the infinite out of the finite. It is the emancipation of the mind. It is an exploration into unknown areas.”

Arshile Gorky
“Since the financial rewards of painting are so few, it might well be asked why anyone should devote his life to art. The answer is simple; the true artist cannot help himself.”


“In Canada an artist has to be a financial genius merely to stay alive.”

A.Y. Jackson quoting the Artist William Brymner in the Conclusion of *A Painter’s Country*
The Stirrings of Modernism: Whistler’s *Nocturne*, 1877 (Detroit) and his libel trial vs. Art critic John Ruskin in 1878

Ruskin’s Barrister: "The labour of two days, is that for which you asked two hundred guineas?"
Whistler: "No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime."
Reminder – a painting owned by Ruskin:

The Slave Ship, J.M.W. Turner, 1840 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)
Portrait of John Ruskin, and Self-portrait of Whistler c. 1872 (Detroit Institute of Fine Arts)
POST-IMPRESSIONISM (c. 1895-1910): Cezanne’s Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine, c. 1887 (Courtauld Institute, UK)
Cezanne’s *Les Grandes Baigneuses* (The Bathers), c. 1898-1905 (first exhibited 1906), Philadelphia Museum of Art
Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907 (MOMA, NY)
Picasso and African art

“The greatest artistic emotion I have felt was when I was suddenly struck by the sublime beauty of the sculptures carved by anonymous artists in Africa. Passionately religious, yet rigorously logical, these works are the most powerful and most beautiful things ever produced by the human imagination.” Picasso

Right: Anthropomorphic mask by a Dan artist, Côte d’Ivoire, Africa, in collection of Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris
Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912 (Musée Picasso), and *The Small Table*, 1919 (NGC)
More Cubism...

Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, Pablo Picasso, 1910

The Mechanic, Fernand Léger, 1920 (NGC)
EXPRESSIONISM (c. 1905-20): Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II), Wassily Kandinsky, 1912 (Met, NY)
Where the Eggs and the Good Roast Come From, Paul Klee, 1921 (Met)

Upcoming show at the National Gallery: Nov. 16th opening
Two more examples of Paul Klee’s work in upcoming NGC exhibition (ends March 2019)
DADA (1916-22) Marcel Duchamp

*Readymades* by Marcel Duchamp, 1915-17 (authorized reproductions 1964) NGC

*Fountain* 1917, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz
Marcel Duchamp and his brothers (and dog), c. 1913
The Armory Show (1913): first large exhibition of modern art in North America (poster, and cartoon by Sloan “A slight attack of third dementia brought on by excessive study of the much-talked of cubist pictures in the International Exhibition at New York” )
Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* #2, 1912 (Philadelphia)
Matisse’s *Blue Nude: Souvenir de Biskra*, 1907 (Baltimore)
Henri Matisse in NGC: Henriette II (Large Head), 1927
Nude on a Yellow Sofa, 1926 (both NGC)
VORTICISM (1914- c. 1918) and Cubist-inspired sculpture

Rock drill, Jacob Epstein, 1913-16 (NGC)

The Return of the Prodigal Son, Ossip Zadkine, 1953, cast in 1957 (NGC)
Zadkine’s *The Destroyed City*, 1947 (Rotterdam, ND)
Picasso’s Guernica, 1937 (Museo Reina Sophia, Madrid)
SUPREMATISM (1913-c. 1920) and CONSTRUCTIVISM (1913-c. 1930):
Black Square, Kasimir Malevich, 1923 (The Russian Museum) / El Lissitzky’s Proun 8 Stellungen (Positions), c. 1923 (NGC)
DE STIJL (1917 – C.1924) – Piet Mondrian

Composition No. 12 with Blue, 1936-42 (NGC)

Victory Boogie Woogie, 1942-44
Mondrian in his Paris Studio (1923) and Mondrian dresses by Yves St. Laurent shown w. a Mondrian painting, 1966
American PRECISIONISM (1920’S): Charles Demuth’s My Egypt, 1927 (Whitney Mus., NY), and I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, 1928 (Met, NY)
Early Sunday Morning, Edward Hopper, 1930 (Whitney, NY)
From Landscape to Abstraction: Lawren Harris

North Shore Lake Superior, 1926 (NGC)  Abstraction, 1936 (NGC)
Pilgrimage, Jock Macdonald, 1937 / Alleluiah, Bertram Brooker, 1929 (both NGC)
ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM (c.1945-1960)
No. 16, Mark Rothko, 1957 / 1949-G, Clyfford Still, 1949 (both NGC)
The Way I, Barnett Newman, 1951 / Charred Beloved II, Arshile Gorky, 1946 (both oil on canvas, in NGC)
Jackson Pollock (1912-56): *No. 29, 1950 October* (NGC) and “Action painting” in his studio
“Energy and motion made visible – memories arrested in space.” Jackson Pollock
Details of materials: black and aluminum enamel point, expanded steel beads, coloured glass, and pebbles on glass
"I went to the Seattle Art Museum with my mother for the first time when I was 14. I saw this Jackson Pollock drip painting with aluminum paint, tar, gravel and all that stuff. I was absolutely outraged, disturbed. It was so far removed from what I thought art was. However, within 2 or 3 days, I was dripping paint all over my old paintings. In a way I've been chasing that experience ever since." Chuck Close
EXISTENTIAL ART (c.1945-c.1960): Francis Bacon’s Study for Portrait #1, 1956 / Alberto Giacometti’s Portrait of Diego, 1954 (NGC)
Cyprian Sculpture, Jean Arp, 1951 / Angst, Paul Klee, 1934 (both NGC)
Cyprian Sculpture, Jean Arp, 1951 (NGC)
ORGANIC ABSTRACTION: Reclining Woman, Henry Moore, 1930 (NGC)
Henry Moore (1898-1986) and “Chacmool” sculpture (pre-Colombian, from Chichen Itza, Mexico, now in Paris)
Henry Moore Collection at Art Gallery of Ontario
A Quiet Revolution: LES AUTOMATISTES (1946-60)
Automatisme 1:47/Sous le vent de l’île, Paul-Emile Borduas, 1947 (NGC)
3 + 4 + 1, by Paul-Émile Borduas, 1956 (oil on canvas)

“It’s painted light...I want to give to each of my paintings the quality of light which suits it...this light is created by the relief that projects a natural half-tint...”
Pavane, by Jean Paul Riopelle, 1954 (oil on canvas, NGC)
LES NOUVEAUX PLASTICIENS (formed 1959, Montréal)
Poly-relational, Guido Molinari, 1958 (NGC)
Asparagus, Claude Tousignant, 1955 (NGC) and detail
PAINTERS ELEVEN (1952-60)

Hero I, William Ronald, (NGC)

August, Morning Reflections, Kazuo Nakamura, 1961 (NGC)
Alexandra Luke: "Painting should not stop with the already discovered beauty but continue searching." Untitled, 1951 / Enduro Take Off, Tom Hodgson, 1958 (NGC)
Summer, No. 3, Jack Bush, 1956 / Animated Item, Oscar Cahén, c. 1955 (both NGC)
REGINA FIVE: Painting No. 11, Ronald Bloore, 1965
Flat Blue, Flat White, Stove Enamel, Art McKay, 1960
Related Colour Forms, B.C. Binning, 1957 / Grey Square, Kenneth Lochhead, 1963 (both NGC)
Josef Albers (1888-1976)

Homage to the Square, 1965 (oil on masonite)  
Homage to the Square: Stepped Foliage, 1963 (NGC)
Wrestling, 1977, Mural in Sydney, Australia, and photo of Albers with his painting
Art in Architecture: Barnett Newman and Sol Lewitt
Barnett Newman (1905-70): *Voice of Fire, 1967* (acrylic on canvas) and detail
Voice of Fire up close:
The Yellow Edge, Newman, 1968 (NGC)
Wagon 1, David Smith, 1963-64 (NGC)
Pop Art, NGC, Photo of Rosenquist from *LIFE* mag., 1962
Painting for the American Negro, James Rosenquist, 1962-63
NGC Collection (jamesrosenquiststudio.com)
Canadians of Confederation...

Confedspread, Joyce Wieland, 1967 (NGC)  
Walking Woman, Michael Snow, 1967 (NGC)
Optical profusions...

Lower St. Lawrence, Marcel Barbeau, 1964

Chromatic Accelerator, Claude Tousignant, 1967
MINIMALISM: Donald Judd (Untitled, 1978 – rear wall) and Dan Flavin (on right), both NGC
Dan Flavin in NGC: Icon IV (the pure land) (to David John Flavin 1933-1962), 1962 (reconstructed 1969) / the nominal three (to William of Ockham), 1963
Stella’s Firuzabad (Variation) 1 (seen from the side)
Ste. Madeleine (Beaded Map), David Garneau, 2006
Details of Garneau’s ‘Beaded Map’ (NGC):
Roaring forty, minimalist sculpture by Carl Andre, 1968 (Netherlands)
Carl Andre floor sculpture (49 copper squares)
Murder Mystery...? Ana Mendieta and Carl Andre
Sobey Award Winner Jeneen Frei Njootli’s *wind sucked in through bared teeth*, 2017 (Grease print, steel plates)
Details of wind sucked in through bared teeth
I can’t make you those mitts because there is a hole in my heart and my hands hurt (brother vadzaih), Jeneen Frei Njootli and Stanley Grafton Njootli, 2018
Two Circles, Micah Lexier, 2016, Bay Adelaide Centre, Toronto. ‘Solid’ (facing Adelaide St.) & ‘Outline’ (facing Temperance St.)
Previous photos, and one on left by Tom Arban. Photo on right by Craig White (article sourced from urbantoronto.ca)
Details of Lexier’s walls in “Two Circles”
Thank you for your patience, perspicacity, unique perspectives and your participation!