INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI®

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

NOTE TO USERS

Copyrighted materials in this document have not been filmed at the request of the author. They are available for consultation in the author's university library.

Plates 11-14, 23-24, 28, 37-38, 48, 53, 55, 57, 68, 79-90, 92-93, 96-98, 101, 103-106, 111, 114, 117, 126, 141, 148, and 151

This reproduction is the best copy available.

UMI ®

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

A

THE ART AND LIFE OF RAYMOND JONSON (1891-1982):

CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART

Volume I

by

Herbert R. Hartel, Jr.

A dissertation submitted to the Doctoral Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2002

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

UMI Number: 3037404

Copyright 2002 by
Hartel, Herbert R., Jr.

All rights reserved.

UMI®

UMI Microform 3037404
Copyright 2002 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

©2002

Herbert R. Hartel, Jr.

All rights reserved

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Doctoral Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

April 18, 2001
Date

Dr. Marlene Park
Chair of Examining Committee

October 23, 2001
Date

Dr. Sally Webster
Executive Officer (Acting)

18 April 2001
Date

Dr. Rose-Carol Washton Long
2nd reader

18 april 2001.
Date

Dr. Katherine Manthorne
3rd reader

Date

Dr. Dean A. Porter
4th reader

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Abstract

THE ART AND LIFE OF RAYMOND JONSON (1891-1982):

CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART

by

Herbert R. Hartel, Jr.

Advisor: Professor Marlene Park

Raymond Jonson was one of the first modernist painters in the Southwest. He pursued abstraction gradually and his artistic goal was to visualize the spiritual in paintings in which line, shape, color, texture, and space are used independently of depicting the natural world. Jonson is one of many American artists who resisted Regionalism and Social Realism between the World Wars.

Jonson grew up in the West in a poor, devoutly Baptist family. He went to Chicago in 1910 to study art and quickly became one of the most outspoken members of the Midwestern avant-garde. He knew Bror J. O. Nordfeldt, Birger Sandzén, Albert Bloch, and Nicholas Roerich and was involved with Cor Ardens and the Chicago Salon des Refusés. He was the artist for Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theatre and a leader in the simple-stage movement in theater. Jonson moved to New Mexico in 1924 to escape the problems of urban life. He taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, where today the Jonson Gallery houses many of his works.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In the 1910s and 1920s Jonson painted portraits and landscapes influenced by Impressionism, Symbolism, and Cubism. Jonson's exposure to modern art, the simple stage movement, and the Western landscape influenced him at this time. After painting landscapes for fifteen years, Jonson created abstract paintings of numerals, alphabet letters, plant forms, colors, skyscrapers, and other subjects in the 1930s. This phase was transitional; Jonson was searching for a personally effective means of painting abstractly.

By the late 1930s, Jonson's work became totally non-representational and he began using watercolor, tempera and the airbrush. In 1938, he, Agnes Pelton, Emil Bisttram, Lawren Harris, Dane Rudhyar and others established the Transcendental Painting Group to further the cause of the spiritual in art. After World War II, Jonson's painting became much larger and in 1958 he started using acrylic paints.

In analyzing the spiritual in Jonson's paintings the author examines Kandinsky's, Mondrian's, and Jonson's own theories, the works of Kandinsky, László Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, and various American abstractionists, the new media and techniques Jonson used, and, occasionally, various alternative, modern mystical and spiritual belief-systems.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Volume I

Acknowledgements....vii

List of Illustrations....xiv

Introduction: The Importance of Raymond Jonson in American Abstract Art....1

Chapter One: Jonson's Artistic Genesis and the Years in Chicago....19

Chapter Two: The Relocation to New Mexico and the Abstract Landscape Paintings and Compositions....86

Chapter Three: The Abstract, Thematic and Series Paintings of 1929 to 1936 and the Transition to Subjects Other Than Landscapes....161

Chapter Four: On the Road to "Absolute" Painting, 1929-1937, and the Origins of the Transcendental Painting Group....217

Chapter Five: The Techniques, Theory and Sources of Jonson's Absolute Painting....262

Chapter Six: Jonson's Absolute Painting, 1938–1950....304

Chapter Seven: The Founding of the Jonson Gallery and Jonson's Late Work, 1951-1978....370

Bibliography....406

Volume II

Illustrations....438

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people were extremely helpful to me during the six years that it took to complete this dissertation. Without their support, guidance, advice and encouragement, this dissertation would never have been completed. Their contributions varied, but all were helpful and appreciated, and I want to sincerely thank each and every one of them. Of course, it is impossible to mention everyone, and I apologize if anyone has been omitted.

First of all, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. My dissertation advisor Dr. Marlene Park, Professor Emerita of John Jay College and the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, patiently read every draft of every chapter, offering extremely beneficial criticism and direction at every stage of the development of this project. Her guidance fine-tuned my methodology and my ability to support and sustain my argument throughout the entire study. I also want to thank her for widening my horizons in her course on American Art of the 1930s, where I was reintroduced to Jonson (I had read about him briefly in *ARTnews* a few years earlier) and first learned about the Transcendental Painting Group. I am one of many doctoral students who have benefitted from her enthusiasm for modern art in America and the encouragement she has given to emerging scholars in this field.

Dr. Rose-Carol Washton Long, Professor at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, served as the second reader of my dissertation, and in that capacity she offered thoughtful, helpful criticism of my dissertation that reinforced that provided by my advisor and broadened my horizons even further as I examined the connections between European

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and American abstraction. Her suggestions concerning the importance of Hilla Rebay in American abstract art in the 1930s were particularly important to my analysis of Jonson's theories. I also want to thank her for her enlightening course, Pioneers of Abstraction. This was one of the first courses I took in the Ph.D. Program in Art History at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. I was still working on my M.A. at Queens College at the time, and her course taught me so much about what abstract art means and how it should be analyzed. Her dissertation workshop was extremely helpful in preparing a thorough, intelligent proposal which earned the approval of the Executive Committee of the Ph.D. Program in Art History with considerable ease.

Dr. Katherine Manthorne, Professor at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, served as third reader of my dissertation. She did so most graciously, having agreed to do so with very little notice. She offered many useful suggestions which further broadened my perspective and include issues which I will explore in the future. I would like to thank Dr. Dean A. Porter, Director Emeritus of the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame, for serving as the fourth reader of my dissertation. He helped to widen the scope with which my dissertation has been scrutinized. His own expertise in early New Mexican art provided additional insight of great value to the project. William Agee, Professor at Hunter College of the City University encouraged me to investigate Jonson when I was auditing his seminar on American modernism. This was around the time I was taking the dissertation workshop and searching for workable topics. Even though I was not taking his course for credit, the opportunity to present Jonson in a lecture to fellow graduate students early in my research was inspiring and helpful in helping to give my project a sense of direction early on. Dr. Jack D. Flam, Distinguished Professor

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

at Brooklyn College and the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, has provided much encouragement over the years, and he would have served on my dissertation committee if problems in scheduling had not made it impossible for him to do so. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of several other professors who, although not directly involved in my dissertation, taught me so much about art and how it may be studied and understood that their presence in my own scholarship cannot be overlooked. Among them are James Saslow, H. Barbara Weinberg, William Gerdts, Ellen Davis, Maurice Cotter, William W. Clark, Leonard Slatkes, Patricia Mainardi, Gail Levin, Anna Chave, and the late Nic Madormo.

Although any art history dissertation would involve the help of numerous museum professionals, my study of Jonson necessitates acknowledging the enormous support given to me by the staff of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. I would like to thank the staff at the Jonson Gallery, both past and present. In providing access to records available nowhere else, in pulling original works out of the vaults for me to examine, in doing the necessary searching, filing and errand-running needed to fill my numerous orders of slides and prints, and for answering more questions than I could ever begin to count, they have been extraordinary helpful, supportive, and generous with their time and energy. First and foremost, I would like to thank Tiska Blankenship, former Director of the Jonson Gallery, for all the help and time she has given me these past several years. I would like to thank Scott Williams, former Assistant Director of the Jonson Gallery, for many favors, especially his willingness to pull any work I wanted to see out of the vaults upon request. He always did it cheerfully, enthusiastically, and promptly. Upon Tiska's departure, Cindy Leyba, Assistant Director of the Jonson Gallery, proved extremely helpful and supportive as well. She was instrumental in filling several orders of slides and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

prints and in answering numerous questions as they came up. Others who were helpful include Chip Ware, the current Director of the Jonson Gallery, and gallery assistants Jayson Hoyt, Kimberly Cleveland, Leah Cluff, and Loisia Watson.

One individual who proved incredibly supportive and informative was the artist and TPG-member Ed Garman, who knew Jonson well for many years and who wrote the first book-length study of his life and work. Ed is living history, and is remarkable for bringing insightful erudition to the practice of abstract and non-representational painting that attempts to visualize and convey the spiritual. He has always been willing to share his knowledge, memories, opinions and eyewitness accounts. Our correspondence and conversions over the last four years have provided wonderful insight into Jonson's art, personality and life that noone else could offer. The time, energy and encouragement he has given me is greatly appreciated.

Another individual who provided enormous help over the years is my fellow student in the Ph.D. Program in Art History at the Graduate School, Dr. Ruth Pasquine. Ruth and I were concurrently researching our respective dissertations, topics which closely paralleled one another. As she worked on Emil Bisttram, I was working on Jonson. Our numerous telephone and e-mail communications over the past few years have been a generous source of useful information. Ruth's expertise on dynamic symmetry and Jay Hambidge, Bisttram's teaching activities, and his early activities and studies before he settled in New Mexico in the early 1930s were of great help to me. She shared this information with me freely and generously as she was writing her dissertation. She also provided me with a copy of her transcription of Dane Rudhyar's unpublished treatise, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," written shortly after the Transcendental Painting Group was founded. This manuscript, otherwise available only in handwritten pages in Syracuse, was of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

enormous benefit to my interpretation of Jonson's work. Numerous fellow students in the Ph.D. Program in Art History at the Graduate School of the City University of New York have been supportive and helpful by sharing their specialized knowledge and opinions, by bringing useful information to my attention, giving advice, and the like. Among them are Maggie Stenz, Janay Wong, Thalia Vrachopoulos, Mary Abell, Stacy Epstein and Alan Moore.

Numerous museum curators, registrars, librarians and other staff as well as various other institutions and scholars were of great help. Among them were Anne Brose, Kelly A. Johannes, Joann Moser, and Richard Sorensen of the Smithsonian American Art Museum; Adrienne Sturbois and Anne Eichelberg of the Portland Art Museum (Oregon); Brandon Ruud, Larry Mensching, and Janet Farber of the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha; Ellen Landis of the Albuquerque Art Museum; Joe Traugott and Joan Tafoya of the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe; Kerry Dixon and Jennifer Small of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Nancy Malloy, formerly of the New York City branch of the Archives of American Art; John Rexine of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University; Jean Nattinger of the Museum of Art at the University of Oregon in Eugene; Mark Pascale of the Art Institute of Chicago; Ilene Fort of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Ann Butler of the archives of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Michael Zakian of the Frederick R. Weissman Museum at Pepperdine University; Teresa Ebie and Scott A. Wright of the Roswell Museum; Sue Ellen Jeffers and Meredith D. Sutton of the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin; Eleanor Jones Harvey of the Dallas Museum of Art; Lori Iliff and Jane Comstock of the Denver Art Museum; Tom Riedel of the University of Wyoming; Elaine D. Gustafson of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts; Alyson B. Stanfield of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma in Norman; David Witt of the Harwood Foundation

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in Taos, Jane J. Posey of the Amon Carter Museum; Daniel Entin of the Nicolas Roerich Museum; Jay Krueger of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and Joel S. Dryer of the Illinois Historical Art Project. Vivian Endicott Barnett was very helpful by providing information concerning Kandinsky and Klee and their use of sprayed, airbrushed paint during their years at the Bauhaus. F. W. James was also helpful by providing information on the history of the airbrush. I would like to thank Susan Kilgore for sharing her memories of Jonson from the years of her childhood spent in Albuquerque in and near the campus of the University of New Mexico.

Numerous gallery owners and their staff provided considerable help. Martin and Harriet Diamond, who knew Jonson personally, were particularly helpful and supportive. They were early admirers and promoters of Jonson's work, and shared much useful information with me. Among the many others who were helpful were Bruce Weber and Sarah Richardson of Berry-Hill Galleries; Aaron Payne and Nathaniel Owings of Owings-Dewey Galleries; Peter Eller of Peter Eller Gallery; Kenneth R. Canfield of Canfield Galleries; Jim Becker of U.S. Bank; Gary Snyder of Snyder Fine Arts; Jennifer Reil of Cline Fine Arts; Warren Adelson, formerly of Coe Kerr Gallery; Lisa Peters of Spanierman Galleries; Valerie Carberry of Adams Fine Art, and Jay Rosenbaum of Jay Rosenbaum Fine Arts in Taos.

I would like to thank the many collectors who were most helpful by showing me their works, providing prints and photographs of them or allowing me to photograph the works they own, for giving me permission to reproduce their works in this dissertation, for expressing their thoughts on Jonson's work, and for sharing their own memories and recollections of Jonson (if they knew him) and how they became interested in his work. These include Lee and Beth Ehrenworth, Brigitte Schapiro, John Rise, Virginia Mullen, Georgia De Havenon, Addison King, Gil and Nancy

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Waldman, Jean Pigozzi, Lewis Chesler, Herman Schwartzman, Harrison Eddins, Donald Graham, Herbert Weinstein, George Simson, Kurt Kubie, and Frank Elkin.

Certain people at the Graduate School of the City University of New York were very helpful as well. I would like to thank Lauren Frederick-Bowen, Administrative Assistant of the Ph.D. Program in Art History, and Sandylene Wakefield, College Assistant, for helping with bureaucratic matters and answering questions too numerous to count. The executive committee and subcommittee for awards of the Ph.D. Program in Art History at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York were very supportive of my research, having awarded me the Kristie Jayne Fellowship and the John Rewald Fellowship. Both awards provided helpful financial assistance when it came to the cross-country trips that this dissertation necessitated. I am most grateful to executive officers and acting executive officers both past and present, including Professors Rose-Carol Washton Long, Patricia Mainardi, Sally Webster, and Rosemarie Bletter. I would also like to thank Judy Waldman, Dissertation Assistant, for help with all the complicated technical matters involved with depositing the dissertation.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their encouragement and support. I would like to thank my father for always having confidence in me. I would like to thank my mother for instilling in me a love for all things beautiful and a desire to learn more about them, for making me realize that there is more to life than just the mundane, tangible facts of everyday experience. To understand Jonson's painting is to deal with the issue of the immaterial values in life. My mother would have appreciated this irony. Unfortunately, she did not live to see my research completed. Without these ideals, my appreciation of Jonson's art would not have been possible. This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to her.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

LIST OF PLATES

All reproductions are referred to in the text, the list of illustrations, and the captions as "Plates." The plates are found in volume II. Unless otherwise indicated, all works are by Raymond Jonson. Works in the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, which belong to its Reserved Retrospective Collection, are identified by the acronym "RRC." The RRC consists of those works which are in the permanent collection of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. The Open Collection consists of those works in Jonson's estate which the University of New Mexico owns but which it has the freedom and right to sell. Information on each work is given in the following order: artist (if other than Jonson), title, date, media, dimensions (height before width) and the owner and location of the work if known. For those works which have been entitled by medium-number-year, information concerning date and medium is included in the titles of the works which are printed in italics. Owners who desire to remain anonymous are identified as "private collection."

Plate 1 — Sketch for the stage set for the Chicago Little Theatre's 1915 production of *The Trojan Woman*, 1915, gouache on paper, 13-1/2 x 24", RRC.

Plate 2 — Photograph of the Chicago Little Theatre's 1913 production of *The Trojan Woman*, showing the stage set designed by Bror J. O. Nordfeldt. Photograph in the Van Volkenberg-Browne Collection, University of Michigan.

Plate 3 — Sketch for the stage set for the Chicago Little Theatre's 1917 production of *Diedre of the Sorrows*, Act 2 (the forest scene), 1917, gouache on paper, 11-1/2" x 19", RRC.

Plate 4 — Sketch for the stage set for the Chicago Little Theatre's production of Cloyd Head's *Grotesques*, 1915, gouache on paper, 13-1/2" x 18-1/2", RRC.

Plate 5 — Photograph of a performance of *Grotesques* as produced by the Chicago Little Theatre in 1915.

Plate 6 — *Field Museum–Chicago*, 1912, oil on canvas, 28" x 33", RRC.

Plate 7 — *Figure Study–Girl*, 1913, oil on canvas, 38" x 34", RRC.

Plate 8 — *The Lady–Mary Williams*, 1918, oil on canvas, 48" x 38", RRC.

Plate 9 — *Miriam Kiper–A Characterization*, 1918, oil on canvas, 42" x 38", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 10 *Violet Light (Portrait of Vera)*, 1918, oil on canvas, 44" x 33", RRC.

Plate 11 Bror J. O. Nordfeldt, *Floyd Dell*, 1913, oil on canvas, collection of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

Plate 12 Birger Sandzén, *Grand Canyon*, c. 1915, oil on canvas, 18" x 12", collection of Federated Women's Club, Mulvane, Kansas.

Plate 13 Sandzén, *Above the Timberline*, 1917, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.

Plate 14 Sandzén, *Twilight*, 1924, oil on canvas, 19-1/2" x 23-1/2", collection of Millesgården, Lidingö, Sweden.

Plate 15 *Sketch–California Hills*, 1915, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", RRC.

Plate 16 *The Rhythm of the Wind*, 1917, oil on canvas, 42" x 45", private collection, Albuquerque.

Plate 17 *The Sentinel*, 1917, oil on canvas, 45" x 42", RRC.

Plate 18 *Light*, 1917, oil on canvas, 45" x 42", Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.

Plate 19 *The Decree*, 1918, oil on canvas, 35" x 41", RRC.

Plate 20 *The Power of God*, 1918, oil on canvas, 35" x 41", RRC.

Plate 21 *First Morning*, 1920, oil on canvas, 38" x 48", private collection, Charleston, West Virginia.

Plate 22 *Life*, 1921, oil on canvas, 45" x 42", RRC.

Plate 23 Nicholas Roerich, *Battle of the Heavens*, 1911, tempera on board, 26" x 37-3/8", State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Plate 24 Roerich, *Cry of the Serpent*, 1913, tempera on wood panel, 33-1/16" x 38-9/16", History-Art Museum, Pskov, Russia.

Plate 25 *Winter (Seasons Series)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 35" x 45", RRC.

Plate 26 *Arroyo (1)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", RRC.

Plate 27 *Arroyo (2)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", Smithsonian American Art

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Museum, Washington, D.C.

Plate 28 Picasso, *The Reservoir at Horta*, summer 1909, oil on canvas, 23-3/4" x 19 3/4", private collection.

Plate 29 Jonson's diary, entry dated January 9, 1923, p. 357, featuring geometric diagrams probably derived from Jay Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6215.

Plate 30 Jonson's diary, entry dated January 9, 1923, p. 358, featuring geometric diagrams probably derived from Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6215.

Plate 31 Jonson's diary, entry dated January 9, 1923, p. 361, featuring geometric diagram probably derived from Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6217.

Plate 32 Sketch for *Earth Rhythms No. 3*, showing geometric framework probably derived from Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Jonson's diary, entry dated July 6, 1923, p. 389, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6230.

Plate 33 Diagram of the subdivision of the root two rectangle by Jay Hambidge, from *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*, p. 42.

Plate 34 *Earth Rhythms No. 3*, 1923, oil on canvas, 32" x 40", RRC.

Plate 35 *Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods)*, 1925, oil on canvas, 46" x 38", Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Plate 36 *Composition Five–Wind*, 1925, oil on canvas, 33" x 44", Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

Plate 37 Giacomo Balla, *Street Lamp*, 1909, oil on canvas, 68-3/4" x 45-1/4", Museum of Modern Art, New York City

Plate 38 Balla, *Swifts: Paths of Movement + Dynamic Sequences*, 1913, oil on canvas, 38-1/8" x 47-1/4", Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Plate 39 *Earth Rhythms No. 6*, 1925, oil on canvas, 37" x 40", RRC.

Plate 40 *Earth Rhythms No. 9*, 1926, oil on canvas, 45" x 52", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 41 *Spring (Seasons Series)*, 1926, oil on canvas, 41" x 28", RRC.

Plate 42 *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, 1927, oil on canvas, 48" x 38", RRC.

Plate 43 *Grand Canyon Trilogy: First Movement*, 1928, oil on canvas, 45" x 56", RRC.

Plate 44 *Grand Canyon Trilogy: Third Movement*, 1928, oil on canvas, 45" x 56", RRC.

Plate 45 *Grand Canyon Trilogy: Second Movement*, 1928, oil on canvas, 67-1/2" x 52-1/2" X 9", RRC.

Plate 46 *Abstract Four*, 1929, oil on canvas, 24" x 15", private collection, Los Angeles.

Plate 47 *Composition Nine–Flame*, 1929, oil on canvas, 38-1/2" x 26-1/2" (irregular shape), collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Spiro, New York City.

Plate 48 Charles Demuth, *Incense in a New Church*, 1921, oil on canvas, 26" x 20-1/8", Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.

Plate 49 *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke*, 1929, oil on canvas, 70" x 50", RRC.

Plate 50 *Composition Ten-Music*, 1929, oil on canvas, 50" x 33", private collection, New York City.

Plate 51 *Growth Variant No. VI*, 1930, oil on canvas, 33" x 38, RRC.

Plate 52 *Growth Variant No. VII*, 1931, oil on canvas, 35" x 30" (irregular), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Plate 53 Arthur Dove, *Plant Forms*, c.1912, pastel on canvas, 17-1/4" x 23-7/8", Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City.

Plate 54 *Variations on a Rhythm–B*, 1931, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Plate 55 Demuth, *The Figure Five in Gold*, 1928, oil on board, 35-1/2 x 30", Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Plate 56 *Variations on a Rhythm–H*, 1931, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 57 *Variations on a Rhythm-E*, 1933, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", U.S. Bank, Minneapolis.

Plate 58 *Variations on a Rhythm–R*, 1933, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", private collection, Albuquerque.

Plate 59 *Abstraction in Red*, 1932, oil on canvas, 24" x 20", RRC.

Plate 60 *New York*, 1931, pen-and-ink on paper, 12-1/2" x 7-1/2", RRC.

Plate 61 *Time Cycle: Morning*, 1930, oil on canvas, 33" x 38", RRC.

Plate 62 *Time Cycle: Noon*, 1930, oil on canvas, 36" x 38", RRC.

Plate 63 *Time Cycle: Night*, 1930, oil on canvas, 33" x 38", RRC.

Plate 64 *City Perspectives (First Version)*, 1933, oil on canvas, 48" x 38", Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

Plate 65 *Chemistry*, from *A Cycle of Science*, 1934, oil on canvas, 80" x 37", RRC.

Plate 66 *Space Abstraction (a Construction)*, 1929, oil and mixed-media, 31" x 22", RRC.

Plate 67 *Variation I*, 1929, oil on canvas, 6" x 6", private collection, Portland, Oregon.

Plate 68 Wassily Kandinsky, *In Blue*, 1925, oil on canvas, 31-1/2" x 43-4/16", Kunstsammlung Nordheim-Westfalen, Dusseldorf.

Plate 69 Untitled sketch, 1921, ink on paper, 8-1/2" x 11," private collection, San Diego.

Plate 70 *Southwest Arrangement*, 1933, oil on canvas, 45" x 20", RRC.

Plate 71 *Ascending Circle*, 1933, graphite on paper, 19" x 13", RRC.

Plate 72 *Arabesque No. 1*, 1933, watercolor on paper, 19" x 13", RRC.

Plate 73 *Dramatic Figuration*, 1935, oil on canvas, 32" x 24", RRC.

Plate 74 *Spiral Trilogy I (Left)*, 1936, oil and canvas, 31" x 27", RRC.

Plate 75 *Spiral Trilogy II (Center)*, 1936, oil on canvas, 27" x 31", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 76 *Spiral Trilogy III (Right)*, 1936, oil on canvas with airbrushed water-based paint, 31" x 27", RRC.

Plate 77 *Interlocked Forms in Space*, 1937, oil on canvas, 22" x 31", collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Spiro, New York City.

Plate 78 *Cosmic Theme No. 3*, 1937, oil on canvas, 28" x 40", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Plate 79 Frantisek Kupka, *The First Step*, 1910, oil on canvas, 32-3/4" x 51", Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Plate 80 Kandinsky, *Emotions*, 1928, watercolor and gouache on paper, 18-7/8" x 12-3/16", private collection.

Plate 81 Kandinsky, *Out of Cool Depths*, 1928, watercolor, 19-1/16" x 12-11/16", Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.

Plate 82 Kandinsky, *Into the Dark*, 1928, watercolor on paper, 18-7/8" x 12-1/2", Hilla Rebay Foundation, Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

Plate 83 Kandinsky, Figure 13 from *Point and Line to Plane* [reproduced in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994): 569]

Plate 84 Kandinsky, *Circles within a Circle*, 1926, oil on canvas, 38-3/4 x 37-5/8", Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Plate 85 Kandinsky, *Arch and Point*, 1923, watercolor, ink and pencil on paper, 18-5/16" x 16-9/16", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

Plate 86 Kandinsky, *Composition 8*, 1923, oil on canvas, 55-1/8" x 79-1/8", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

Plate 87 Kandinsky, *Towards Green*, 1928, watercolor, 19-5/8" x 9-3/4", private collection, Switzerland.

Plate 88 *Chromatic Contrasts No. 6*, 1937, oil on canvas, 28" x 40", private collection.

Plate 89 Paul Klee, *Abstraction with Reference to a Flowering Tree*, 1925, oil on cardboard, 15-1/8" x 15-3/8", private collection, Switzerland.

Plate 90 Kandinsky, *Square*, 1927, oil on canvas, 28-3/4" x 23-5/8", current location

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unknown.

Plate 91 *Oil No. 1–1938*, 24" x 35", private collection, New York City.

Plate 92 László Moholy-Nagy, *Composition A II*, 1924, oil on canvas, 45-1/4" x 53-3/4", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

Plate 93 Moholy-Nagy, *The Great Aluminum Picture (AL II)*, 1926, oil on aluminum, 31-1/2" x 38-3/8", private collection, Zurich.

Plate 94 *Casein Tempera No. 3–1938*, 24" x 16", RRC.

Plate 95 *Casein Tempera No. 4–1938*, 34" x 20", collection of Georgia de Havenon, New York City.

Plate 96 Moholy-Nagy, *LIS.*, 1922, oil on canvas, 51-9/16" x 39-3/8", Kunsthaus, Zurich.

Plate 97 Moholy-Nagy, *Q 1 Suprematistic*, 1923, oil on canvas, 37-1/2" x 37-1/2", Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Plate 98 *Watercolor No. 8–1938*, 32" x 22", Albuquerque Art Museum.

Plate 99 *Watercolor No. 9–1938*, 32" x 22", RRC.

Plate 100 *Watercolor No. 16–1938*, 26-1/2" x 20", private collection.

Plate 101 Kandinsky, *Thirteen Rectangles*, 1930, oil on cardboard, 27-3/8" x 23-7/16", Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre George Pompidou, Paris.

Plate 102 *Watercolor No. 19–1938*, 20" x 28", private collection, New York City.

Plate 103 Kandinsky, *Several Circles*, 1926, oil on canvas, 55-1/4" x 55-3/8", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Plate 104 *Oil and Tempera No. 1–1939*, 19" x 26", U.S. Bank, Minneapolis.

Plate 105 *Watercolor No. 22–1939*, 28" x 20", Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.

Plate 106 Agnes Pelton, *Future*, 1941, oil on canvas, 30" x 26", The Buck Collection, Laguna Hills, CA.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 107 Lawren Stewart Harris, *Abstract Painting 95*, c. 1937, oil on canvas, 56" x 46", collection of Georgia de Havenon, New York City.

Plate 108 *Watercolor No. 23–1939*, 20" x 26", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Plate 109 *Life Cycle: Birth (Left) / Casein Tempera No. 2–1940*, 1940, oil on canvas, 36" x 42", RRC.

Plate 110 *Watercolor No. 1–1940*, 22" x 35", private collection.

Plate 111 Clyfford Still, *Untitled (PH–282)*, 1943, oil on canvas, 35-1/2" x 30-1/2", Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Plate 112 *Watercolor No. 17–1940*, 35" x 22", RRC.

Plate 113 *Watercolor No. 12–1940 (Peace During Activity)*, 27" x 19", RRC.

Plate 114 *Oil No. 7–1945 (Peace)*, 50" x 37", Fred R. Jones, Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma at Norman.

Plate 115 *Esoteric Trilogy–Left (Watercolor No. 24–1940)*, 26" x 22", RRC.

Plate 116 Helena Blavatsky's foldout diagrams of Hindu cosmogony and Chaldeo-Jewish cosmogony, from *Theology*, volume 2 of *Isis Unveiled*, n.p., 1877. [reproduced in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 65.]

Plate 117 *Watercolor No. 20–1941*, 27" x 23", private collection.

Plate 118 *Esoteric Trilogy–Center (Watercolor No. 25–1940)*, 22" x 29", RRC.

Plate 119 *Esoteric Trilogy–Right (Watercolor No. 26–1940)*, 26" x 22", RRC.

Plate 120 *Casein Tempera No. 6–1941*, 31" x 24", RRC.

Plate 121 *Watercolor No. 6–1942*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Plate 122 *Watercolor No. 12–1942*, 30" x 22", RRC.

Plate 123 *Oil No. 12–1942*, 45" x 35", RRC.

Plate 124 *Watercolor No. 6–1943*, 27" x 19", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Indianapolis.

Plate 125 *Watercolor No. 9–1943*, 35" x 22", Sunwest Bank, Albuquerque.

Plate 126 *Watercolor No. 14–1943*, 19" x 27", Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

Plate 127 Emil Bisttram, *Pulsation*, c. 1941, oil on canvas, 45" x 60", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Plate 128 *Trilogy–Dissonance (Left) / Chromatic Contrasts No. 8 / (Watercolor No. 10 – 1943*, 22" X 30", RRC.

Plate 129 *Chromatic Contrasts No. 19 (Watercolor No. 32–1944)*, 30" x 22", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Plate 130 *Dynamics No. 1 (Oil No. 7–1944)*, 28" x 40", RRC.

Plate 131 *Dynamics No. 2 (Oil No. 1–1945)*, 40" x 40", RRC.

Plate 132 *Dynamics No. 3 (Oil No. 2–1945)*, 28" x 40", RRC.

Plate 133 *Pictographic Composition No. 1 (Oil No. 7–1946)*, 35" x 24", RRC.

Plate 134 *Pictographic Composition No. 7 (Oil No. 17–1946)*, 28" x 36", RRC.

Plate 135 *Pictographic Composition No. 9 (Oil No. 19–1946)*, 28" x 24", RRC.

Plate 136 *Pictographic Composition No. 15 (Oil No. 6 –1947)*, 26" x 24", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Plate 137 *Pictographic Composition No. 16 (Oil No. 7–1947)*, 26" X 24", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Plate 138 *Variations on a Linear Theme One (Watercolor No. 15–1948)*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Plate 139 *Variations on a Linear Theme Two (Watercolor No. 16–1948)*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Plate 140 *Variations on a Linear Theme Three (Watercolor No. 17–1948)*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 141 Kandinsky, *Colorful Sticks*, 1928, oil on cardboard, 16-13/16" x 12-7/8", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

Plate 142 *Oil No. 6–1952*, 38" x 48", RRC.

Plate 143 *Oil No. 6–1956*, 37" x 25", RRC.

Plate 144 *Polymer No. 16–1959*, 30" x 24", RRC.

Plate 145 *Oil No. 11–1956*, 36" x 21", private collection, Portland, Oregon.

Plate 146 *Polymer No. 29–1959*, 57" x 45", RRC.

Plate 147 *Polymer No. 24–1962*, 27" x 19", RRC.

Plate 148 Adolph Gottlieb, *Orb*, 1964, oil on canvas, 7' 6" x 5', Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas.

Plate 149 *Polymer No. 12–1961*, 45" x 36", private collection, San Diego.

Plate 150 *Light–A Trilogy (Center) / (Polymer No. 11–1966)*, 42" x 33", RRC.

Plate 151 Barnett Newman, *Onement*, 1950, oil on canvas, 27" x 16", Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Plate 152 *Polymer No. 19–1969*, 47-1/4" diameter, RRC.

Plate 153 *Polymer No. 39–1970*, 48" x 39", RRC.

Plate 154 *Polymer No. 22–1970*, 48" x 33", RRC.

Plate 155 *Polymer No. 18–1973*, 48" x 33", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

INTRODUCTION:

THE IMPORTANCE OF RAYMOND JONSON (1891-1982)

IN AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART

Raymond Jonson (pronounced *JOAN*-sen) was always an unassuming maverick, the American modernist who took the road less traveled. His fierce independence, self-reliant individuality, unwavering dedication to the cause of modern art, and uninhibited creativity made him not only a great abstract painter but a truly American one. Jonson was contemporary to the first modernist artists in the United States, to such pioneering abstract painters in America as Arthur Dove, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Stuart Davis. Yet as scholarship of early-twentieth century American painting has blossomed over the past thirty years, Jonson has remained relatively obscure in this newly constructed history of modern art in America. In the study of modern art in America, Jonson is a curiosity, but one who has received only passing acknowledgment from scholars. It is the purpose of this dissertation to correct this situation, to analyze and document the life and art of a highly capable, enormously imaginative, and genuinely inspired American abstract painter.

Jonson is a quintessentially American abstract painter and yet he is so different from his better-known contemporaries in American painting of the early-twentieth century. It is the goal of this dissertation to achieve a better understanding of Jonson's life and art by revealing how and why he was so quintessential and yet so different. It is this apparent paradox, which really is not a paradox after all, that inspired this study of him. Jonson was

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a complex man and artist who defied traditions, rejected expectations and ignored popular tastes, and who was frequently overlooked and disregarded as a result. Jonson evolved in relative isolation from the major art centers of the United States. He moved to New Mexico from Chicago in 1924, and visited America's largest cities only occasionally, briefly, and irregularly after his relocation to the Southwest. Compared to his better-known contemporaries, he spent little time in urban America. He could have lived in the largest cities in America, where he would have had more access to critics and collectors, yet he chose not to, finding the tranquility and solace of the Southwest more important emotionally and artistically. Unlike most of his American contemporaries, Jonson never went to Europe. He wanted to and on several occasions planned to go, but his financial problems always prevented him from doing so. Jonson's development was gradual, erratic and driven by personal necessity with a stubborn resistance to the tastes and trends that were currently in favor at any given moment. This non-conformity testifies to Jonson's staunch adherence to his ideals. His stylistic maturation came late and after a long, protracted struggle with many sources, influences and ideas that originated in early modernist painting. Jonson long felt enormous frustration because, to paraphrase what he often exclaimed, he felt and believed that he had something to express in his paintings, but for many years he could not find the means with which to convey whatever that was. Achieving a more complete understanding of such a lesser-known American modernist will help scholars appreciate the true richness of this important and complex era in the visual arts in America.

Jonson's abstract painting is part of a widespread but largely overlooked and under-appreciated development in American modernist art between the late 1920s and the end of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

World War II, a period in which most American painting was representational and dealt with issues of national identity, character and culture. The period from shortly before the Great Depression to the end of World War II gave rise to various realistic styles now referred to as American Scene Painting, Regionalism and Social Realism. In these diverse representational styles, everyday activities, places, and people in America were depicted by such well-known American painters as Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, Jacob Lawrence, and others. The very different development in question here, which includes Jonson, involved numerous artists who painted in non-representational ways that have been collectively understood as geometric, linear, and smooth-finished, as opposed to the biomorphic, curvilinear, gestural and expressive styles of painting that were more common in Europe and the United States before World War I and then after World War II. These inter-World War American abstractionists have usually been thought of as following in the tradition of Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, the Constructivists, and the artist-teachers of the Bauhaus, rather than in the tradition of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee before their years at the Bauhaus, other members of the Blaue Reiter, or those artists associated with Orphism such as Robert Delaunay and Frantisek Kupka.[1] Among these American artists, besides Jonson, were Burgoyne Diller, Ilya Bolotowsky, Jean Xceron,

---

[1]John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983): 10-12. Lane asserts that geometric abstraction dominated American abstract art of the 1930s because the dominant European influences were from such immigrant artists as Mondrian, Josef Albers and Jean Hélion. He adds that biomorphic abstraction became more popular among American abstractionists, including the artists who would be part of Abstract Expressionism in the late-1940s, because new influences from Europe such as Max Ernst, Matta and so on were more prevalent after World War II.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Agnes Pelton, Emil Bisttram, Irene Rice Pereira, Albert Gallatin, Vaclav Vyclacil, and others. They have remained relatively obscure and until recently have received little attention by scholars.

Jonson's thoroughly declared sense of purpose as a painter of non-representational imagery and his explanation of his own work as a response to the global crises of the 1930s and 1940s indicates that the abstractionists in America between the World Wars were not necessarily creating cold, unemotional, cerebral designs intended to be understood only as purely formalist experiments and achievements. Although Jonson's sense of purpose does not speak on behalf of all the abstractionists active in America at this time, it is an example of the social, political and philosophical meanings that informed and inspired at least some of the abstract painting in America between the World Wars.

Chapter One of this dissertation examines Jonson's youth in the rural West and Chicago. Jonson was an outspoken member of the avant-garde in Chicago for most of the fourteen years during which he lived there. He was intimately involved in some of the most determined efforts by the younger, more stylistically radical and innovative artists in the Midwest to challenge the hegemony of the older, more conservative artists who worked in highly realistic styles. Jonson was a leader in designing stage sets, costumes, posters and effects of lighting in the simple-stage movement in early-twentieth century American theater. He was the resident artist for the Chicago Little Theatre for nearly all of the five years of its existence.[2] In his lifetime, Jonson was better-known, received more acclaim, and was

---

[2]During and after its existence the Chicago Little Theatre was always referred to in written and printed sources with the word "theater" spelled "theatre." Therefore, in this dissertation this spelling will be maintained. When the word "theater" is used to identify or

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

considered more innovative in theater design than he ever was in his first love, painting. Jonson's fourteen years in Chicago exposed him to much of early modernist art in Europe and America and it was in Chicago that he received his formal education in the visual arts. In the 1910s, most of Jonson's artistic production consisted of stage sets, posters, flyers, costume designs and other artwork for the Chicago Little Theatre and occasionally for other theater companies of the day. At the same time, Jonson painted a small number of cityscapes and numerous portraits that reflect the stylistic innovations of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and various Post-Impressionist styles.

Although painting abstractly and with the firm conviction that such art was about the spiritual places Jonson in the long tradition of abstract art from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, Jonson's stylistic development, the sources and influences that effected his art, and the artists and works he is known to have been familiar with and admired, make him a complex, difficult artist to comprehend. Although Kandinsky was the one artist whose works and ideas Jonson most admired, Jonson's essays and lectures on the history of early modern art acknowledge the contributions of many different movements, styles and people, including the Impressionists, Paul Cézanne, George Seurat, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, and Cubism, as well as Kandinsky and other pioneering abstract painters. Jonson's understanding of the history of early modern art, as explained in numerous writings, is discussed in Chapter One. Jonson's paintings before the mid-1930s may be associated with such early modernist styles and movements as Impressionism, Symbolism,

---

refer specifically to the Chicago Little Theatre the word will be spelled as "theatre." At all other times and in all other uses the word will be spelled as "theater."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and Cubism, yet it is rare that a specific work by a major early modernist can be linked stylistically to any given work by Jonson. Therefore, in studying Jonson's development, it is always necessary to remember that he was an intuitive, creative and imaginative painter who selected, omitted, manipulated and transformed many sources in complicated ways, creating something very new and personal from what he saw.

Chapter Two explains why Jonson relocated to the Southwest and analyzes how his painting transformed greatly at that time, largely but not entirely as a result of his exposure to the rural, mountainous West. Jonson was one of the pioneers of abstract painting in the Southwestern United States. When he moved to New Mexico in 1924, he was one of the first modernists to do so. Numerous better-known American painters of the early-twentieth century such as Robert Henri, Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Stuart Davis had already visited the Southwest before Jonson moved there, and many of them were impressed by the beauty of the landscape and the unique flavor of the indigenous cultures. But before Jonson, virtually every painter who settled permanently in New Mexico painted the local landscape and people in highly representational styles. Jonson moved to New Mexico about five years before the state's most famous painter, Georgia O'Keeffe, ever visited the region. Although Jonson and O'Keeffe came to know one another and Jonson admired her work, they were never close friends and there are few stylistic connections.[3] This makes Jonson's place in Southwestern modernist painting all the more intriguing, for he found abundant inspiration for his work in the Southwest long before O'Keeffe became associated with the region. Beginning in the mid-1910s and continuing through the 1920s, Jonson painted many

[3]Ed Garman to the author, April 24, 2001.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

landscapes, mostly of the Southwest, and these paintings are remarkable for their startling combination of Symbolist subjects and color with Cubist handling of form and space. At the same time, Jonson began to paint abstractions that dealt with natural forms and phenomena as well as emotional conditions and states of mind.

From 1929 to the mid-1930s, Jonson explored a wide variety of subjects other than landscapes, including numerals, alphabet letters, plant life, colors, skyscrapers, the cosmos, and the natural sciences. These paintings are vividly colored and even more abstract than his earlier work. Although they resist convenient and obvious stylistic classification, these non-landscape, thematically based series done from 1929 to around 1936 are related to a widespread aesthetic tendency in American modernist painting of the time, a tendency that art historian Wanda Corn has described and labeled "billboard cubism."[4] All of these developments in Jonson's work were part of a slow, gradual, erratic search for meaningful, effective self-expression and, eventually, visualizing the spiritual in art, of creating visually compelling and spiritually effective abstract painting. These non-landscape, thematically organized paintings are examined in Chapter Three.

By the start of World War II, Jonson was at long last sufficiently comfortable with non-representational imagery to explore it exclusively. Throughout his career, he strove to visualize and express the spiritual in ways that would be meaningful in the modern world.

---

[4]Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: American Art and Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 201-213. Corn describes "billboard cubism" as a distinctly American variation of Cubist and Futurist stylistic features modified by the emerging and evolving imagery of mass media advertising and packaging of industrially-produced commodities. Corn identifies this American stylistic trend as characteristic of much modernist painting in the United States between the World Wars, including the work of Charles Demuth, Gerald Murphy, and Stuart Davis.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

By the late-1930s he had discovered that the best way to achieve this was through purely non-representational painting. The complex transition to the completely non-representational in a small number of works done from 1929 to 1937 is the subject of Chapter Four. This chapter also explores Jonson's theories concerning abstract art as explained in numerous writings of the 1930s and 1940s. In 1938, Jonson and several other abstract painters from New Mexico and California, including Agnes Pelton, Lawren Harris, Emil Bisttram, and Florence Miller Pierce, formed the short-lived Transcendental Painting Group, an organization that sought to promote abstract art as a viable means of artistic creation during the global crises of the 1930s and 1940s. Jonson's role in the formation of the Group and his concept of its purpose are also explained in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five examines the technical, stylistic and theoretical foundations for Jonson's totally non-representational art. From the late 1930s until he ceased painting forty years later, Jonson's work was almost always entirely non-representational. This chapter examines why and how Jonson's painting became completely non-representational in the mid to late-1930s. Before the mid-1930s, Jonson painted exclusively in oil on canvas. In 1938 he began working in watercolor and tempera as well as oil, and he started to use the airbrush with water-based media to create his paintings. Kandinsky's influence did not become apparent in Jonson's work until the mid-1930s, and when it did appear, the influence was from Kandinsky's geometric, Bauhaus-era paintings rather than the Russian painter's earlier, more vigorously and loosely executed, Blaue Reiter paintings. Jonson's painting became totally non-representational after his visit to Chicago in late 1937, during which he became familiar with the Chicago Bauhaus and friendly with László Moholy-Nagy, who had painted

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

highly geometric, mechanical-looking abstractions more than ten years earlier.

Although Jonson continued to produce many paintings in oil on canvas in the late 1930s and 1940s, his airbrushed watercolors of these years are perhaps his most successful, evocative, and beautiful works. Jonson's stylistic development at this time and the means by which he conveyed the spiritual in his paintings from this period are analyzed in Chapter Six. In order to understand how Jonson's paintings convey the spiritual, the works and theories of Kandinsky, occasionally the theories of Mondrian, Jonson's own theories on abstract art, and the works of some of his contemporaries and acquaintances will be considered.

In the years after World War II, when abstraction received new-found attention and legitimacy, especially among the artists associated with the New York School, Jonson found his own way through the new trends and developments in abstract painting as he continued to live and work in New Mexico. Jonson's late work, the most unexplored and virtually unknown aspect of his art, is the subject of Chapter Seven. The spontaneous, gestural painting of the Abstract Expressionists did not seem to satisfy Jonson as much as the more geometric, linear, smooth-surfaced abstract painting of the 1960s did. In the late 1950s, Jonson began to experiment with acrylics, and by 1961 he painted with them exclusively. Jonson proved truly responsive to the abstraction of the 1960s, and a new-found spirit of creativity and enthusiasm is seen in much of his work from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, when he was near the end of his career.

Jonson devoted much of his life to teaching art. He taught at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts on an irregular basis for most of the years during which he lived in Chicago. He

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

founded his own summer art school in Santa Fe soon after he moved to New Mexico, but low enrollment led him to close it after two years. He then taught at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque for twenty years, from 1934 until 1954, on a varying full-time and part-time basis. In 1948, Jonson and the University of New Mexico worked together to create the Jonson Gallery. The Jonson Gallery served as Jonson's home and studio for the rest of his life and has continued to function as an exhibition space for Jonson's work, the work of the art students at the University of New Mexico, and other artists from the Southwest, especially those whose work is involved with the spiritual. The Jonson Gallery is a most fitting tribute to an artist who had such a long and prolific career. From the start of his career in 1910 until he ceased working in 1978, four years before his death, he produced over 2,000 paintings and drawings, and even a handful of prints. The Jonson Gallery houses hundreds of the artist's works, the largest portion of his oeurve in any single location. It has become a shrine to abstract art and the embodiment of the ideals that motivated and inspired Jonson for his entire career. It is enduring testimony to all that Jonson hoped his work would achieve. The establishment of the Jonson Gallery and the goals and ideals that inspired it are discussed in Chapter Seven.

The scholarship on Jonson prior to this dissertation has been minimal and in some cases fraught with methodological and factual problems. Ed Garman's 1976 monograph *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* is by far the most thorough and detailed study of Jonson prior to this dissertation. It suffers from being somewhat incomplete and disorganized, from a lack of art-historical methodology and critical detachment. Garman was an abstract painter and not an art historian, and he was a close friend of Jonson for over forty years and a fellow

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

member of the Transcendental Painting Group. Hence he was part of the history about which he was writing, and did not have the objectivity or methodology expected in an art-historical study. This not withstanding, Garman's book is of seminal value to my work, for it brought together much information about the artist and his work and, unlike so much art-historical literature, it benefitted from the author's personal insights and connections with the artist. Elizabeth McCauley's essay in the catalogue to the 1980 exhibition *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years*, held at the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, was the next major study of Jonson. It provides a more coherent chronological narrative of the first half of Jonson's life than that found in Garman's book, but it is still very incomplete and offers even less analysis of Jonson's development than Garman's book. Fortunately, both Garman's and McCauley's books have proven reliable with the facts concerning Jonson's life and work. Sharyn Udall's chapter on Jonson in her 1984 book *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1913-1935* is an insightful formal analysis of Jonson's early work, but it is limited to formal analysis and only covers the first half of his long career. The period of time Udall covers in this book ends at the time when Jonson embraced totally non-representational painting. Udall's book, as one might expect of any survey of such a broad period and region, omits or overlooks numerous important early works, many of which were dispersed and unlocated when the book was written.

Since these three publications, the curatorial staff at the Jonson Gallery has produced short essays on various aspects of Jonson's life and work for brochures that have accompanied some of the exhibits they have curated, including *Poetry of the Theatre: Raymond Jonson and the Chicago Little Theatre Years, 1912-1917* in 1994, *Raymond*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson: Abstract Landscapes, 1922-1947 in 1988, *Symbolizing New Mexico: Native Iconographic Influences in Raymond Jonson's Painting, Raymond Jonson, Cityscapes* in1989, *Raymond Jonson: A Modernist View of Landscape: Chromatic Contrasts* in 1996, and *Raymond Jonson: Geometric Form in the Pursuit of a Unifying Principle* in 1990. In these short essays, Jonson Gallery curators MaLin Wilson, Joe Traugott, Tiska Blankenship and others have written about various important aspects of Jonson's life and artistic development. Unfortunately, the small-scale of these publications have limited their scholarly usefulness. Nicolai Cikovsky's essay in *Raymond Jonson (1891-1982): Pioneer Modernist of New Mexico* is a brief but sometimes observant summary of Jonson's early career written to accompany an exhibit held at Berry-Hill Gallery in New York City in 1986. The exhibit remains the most ambitious attempt since Jonson's death to bring his work to the attention of an audience outside of the Southwest.

The one aspect of Jonson's career to receive the most study is his work for the Chicago Little Theatre. Theater historian Arthur Feinsod has written at length about Jonson's involvement with the Chicago Little Theatre in the previously mentioned catalogue to the exhibition *The Poetry of the Theatre* and in his 1992 book *The Simple Stage*, the most thorough and recent study of the simple stage movement in the United States. However, Feinsod's study of Jonson centers around his work for the Chicago Little Theatre, and does not say much about how the artist's early theater design influenced his painting and, perhaps, how his painting influenced his stage sets. Chapter One of my dissertation takes an opposite approach. It analyzes how Jonson's theater design influenced his painting.

Jonson has been included in recent surveys of abstract art in America between the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

World Wars. His reputation has grown enough so that he merits inclusion in a period that remains poorly and incompletely understood. Susan Larsen and John R. Lane discuss Jonson briefly in the catalogue to the exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America: 1927-1944*. This book remains the most thorough overview of abstract art in America from the Great Depression to World War II. Jonson has also been discussed briefly in the catalogues of exhibitions of some of the largest and best collections of American abstract art between the World Wars, including *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930-1945. The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s: Selections from the Penny and Elton Yasuna Collection*, both held in 1991, and *American Abstract Art of the 1930s and 1940s: The J. Donald Nichols Collection* of 1999. Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz summarize Jonson's stylistic development and relationship to Kandinsky in a perceptive but brief manner in *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950*, of 1992. Jonson's interest in Native American arts and cultures is discussed in W. Jackson Rushing's *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism*, of 1996. Unfortunately, Rushing's book discusses Jonson superficially and with limited understanding. There are also some questionable facts about Jonson in this book.

Jonson has been included in the handful of studies of the Transcendental Painting Group. Robert C. Hay's 1980 master's thesis "Dane Rudhyar and the Transcendental Painting Group, 1938-1941" was the first study of the Transcendental Painting Group of any depth or scholarly focus. It was followed by the 1982 exhibit *The Transcendental Painting Group: New Mexico, 1938-1941*, which provided a wealth of reproductions but little study

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the artists and the evolution of the group. Although limited in scope and depth because it included so many diverse artists, Levin's and Lorenz's *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950* provides an informative overview of the Transcendental Painting Group and its members. The most recent and detailed study of the Transcendental Painting Group is *Vision and Spirit: The Transcendental Painting Group*, which contains an updated bibliography and detailed chronology and has highly informative essays by Garman and Blankenship. Even though he was included in all of the above studies, a more thorough, detailed, methodologically sound and carefully documented study of Jonson's entire life and body of work was still needed.

A number of resources have been of enormous value to this dissertation. The most extensively used resource in this dissertation is the Raymond Jonson Papers at the Archives of American Art. They are rich in letters, diaries, sketches, essays, lecture notes and exhibition catalogues. Most of these materials were microfilmed (reels RJ 1 to RJ 10) by the Archives of American Art in 1965. Some additional materials were microfilmed separately in 1971 (reel 76) and some as part of the New Deal Art archives (real NDA 14).[5] Among the important letters in the Raymond Jonson Papers are Jonson's letters to his mother and letters exchanged between Jonson and his younger brother Arthur Johnson from 1925 to 1964.[6] The

---

[5]Since the Raymond Jonson Papers are referenced so frequently in this dissertation, each reference to them will appear in the following abbreviated format: "RJ 1" to "RJ 10" or "76" or "NDA 14" followed by a colon followed by the frame number. For example "RJ 1: 350," will be understood to mean "Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, reel RJ 1, frame number 350."

[6]In citing letters sent to or received from relatives, Jonson's mother Josephine Johnson will be referred to as Jonson's mother and his brother Arthur Johnson will be referred to as Arthur. This is done to avoid confusion in referring to numerous people whose

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson Papers also include letters exchanged between Jonson and his close friend the philosopher Charles W. Morris, letters between Jonson and artist-friends including Bror J. O. Nordfeldt, Birger Sandzén, Albert Bloch, Agnes Pelton, Emil Bisttram, Ed Garman, and Josef Albers, letters between Jonson and Maurice Browne, founder of the Chicago Little Theatre, letters between Jonson and art historian and theater critic Sheldon Cheney, and letters between Jonson and many dealers, curators and students. It contains the extensive diaries Jonson kept from 1917 to 1926.[7] These handwritten pages from bound notebooks contain innumerable reminiscences, observations, comments about artists, artworks, and the artist's own theories, opinions, and experiences, his intentions and explanations for creating numerous important early works, preparatory sketches for many of these works, and detailed notes about the materials he used and the results of experiments of color mixtures, paint application techniques, and how these works endured exposure to light and other destructive

---

surname is Johnson.

[7]Jonson kept a diary for nine years, starting in late December of 1917 and continuing until 1926. The diaries consist of three bound books with pages numbered consecutively from one book to the other and on both sides of each sheet of paper, even though Jonson sometimes wrote and drew only on side of a sheet of paper. The diary is over 400 pages long. In his first diary entry, dated December 31, 1917, he explained the purpose and function of the diary he was starting and which he intended to keep indefinitely:

> In six hours it will be the new year–1918. I shall endeavor to keep a diary with the help of Vera, my beloved wife and companion. We shall endeavor to put down the incidents of value and those things which are interesting. It shall also be a sort of record of days [sic] work and play. I hope also it may be a sort of memorandum of facts and knowledge gained each day especially in regard to the work–I should say play–for Art is play at the same time it is work–not play as recreation but as joy and pleasure. May God so bless us that it shall be possible to record some activity each day toward constructive growth. [Jonson's diary, December 31, 1917, p. 1, RJ 8: 6040.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

environmental factors.

Jonson maintained extensive and detailed records of his artistic production throughout his career and this information, covering the years 1910 to 1964, is also part of the Raymond Jonson Papers. This typed record of Jonson's life's work is called the "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson." The Catalogue lists works in chronological order and, starting in 1938, chronologically within media. Media and size are always given. The last-known owners of works are indicated. Works that belong to the permanent collection of the Jonson Gallery are also indicated as belonging to this collection, which is referred to as the "Reserved Retrospective Collection," or abbreviated with the acronym "RRC." The Raymond Jonson Papers also include Jonson's scrapbook of newspaper and magazine articles, which contains many published reviews of exhibits of his work and his surviving copies of catalogues and brochures of exhibits of his work. Finally, the microfilms also contain the typed texts to various lectures Jonson prepared on the history of modern art, the development and meaning of his work, his theories of abstract art, and even his positions on various social, political and cultural issues.

A second resource of enormous value to my dissertation is the Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque and its various curators and assistants, especially the former director, Tiska Blankenship. The Jonson Gallery houses many of Jonson's most important and best works, the original documents that constitute the Raymond Jonson Papers at the Archives of American Art, many other papers not included in the microfilms, and Jonson's personal effects and family memorabilia. Among the documents not included in the microfilmed Raymond Jonson Papers that were of great importance to this dissertation

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

are the portion of the "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson" from 1965 until the artist stopped painting in 1978 as well as updated information on the provenance of earlier works, Jonson's letters to Vera written during his 1931-1932 trip to Chicago and New York City, late letters written to and received from various people, including friends and family, Garman, and Ilya Bolotowsky, an extensive collection of photographs of many of Jonson's works, including lesser-known and now unlocated works that have never been reproduced in print, Jonson's collection of art history monographs and exhibition catalogues.

A number of non-literary or unpublished sources of information have proven of great value to this dissertation. The most important of these is the abstract painter Ed Garman, one of the last living members of the Transcendental Painting Group, who knew Jonson well for forty years and whose 1976 book is the foundation upon which my study has been built. Over the past few years, Garman's willingness to discuss abstract art and Jonson in particular has added considerably to what he has written about Jonson, and it has immensely enriched my understanding and appreciation of Jonson as a person and as a painter.

In studying Jonson, as with studying the work of any abstract or non-representational painter, the usage and meaning of certain terms relevant to the study of modern art should be clarified. The term "abstract" is used in this dissertation in its broadest, most common sense, as referring to art that does not represent or illustrate the natural, observable world but which use lines, shapes, colors, textures and other aspects of visual design independently of any descriptive function or recognizable subjects.[8] The term "abstract" has sometimes been

---

[8]Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980): 1-12, 156-158.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

used more narrowly, to refer to the simplification and reduction of real, natural forms to their basic but still recognizable essences.[9] Essentially, the term "abstract" is used here as fairly synonymous with the more specific but less popular term "non-representational." The term "non-objective," which was once commonly used by scholars and casual viewers of art alike, is not used here because of its potentially confusing and misleading connotations and implications, which are rooted in the problematic early translations of the German *gegenstandlos*, which means "without object."[10] The term "abstracted" is often used in this dissertation to refer to Jonson's practice in the first half of his career of creating paintings that are based on or derived from the observable, natural world, but which are not intended to recreate it with believable, convincing, visually accurate imagery.[11] Jonson used the terms "abstract" and "abstracted" in these ways. He also used the term "non-objective" as it has traditionally been used. By the late 1930s, he came to use the term "absolute" to refer to his own totally non-representational painting. Jonson's terminology will be explained at length in Chapter Four, in connection to the important developments in his theories of abstract art and his perspective of early modern art, which evolved considerably in the 1930s and 1940s.

---

[9]Judi Freeman, "Abstraction," in "Glossary of Spiritual and Related Terms," in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* (New York and Los Angeles: Abbeville Press and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986): 367; Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996): 1.

[10]Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Non-objective," in Nancy Spector, ed., *Guggenheim Museum Collection: A to Z* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2nd rev. ed., 2001): 256.

[11]Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*: 8-9; Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990): 7.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER ONE:

JONSON'S ARTISTIC GENESIS AND THE YEARS IN CHICAGO

Raymond Jonson was born Carl Raymond Johnson on July 18, 1891, in Chariton, Iowa, on the farm of his maternal grandparents.[1] He was the eldest of six children born to the Reverend Gustav Johnson and Josephine Abrahamson Johnson, both Swedish immigrants. Gustav was a Baptist minister who had emigrated to the United States from Sweden shortly after the Civil War. Upon coming to the United States, Gustav changed his surname from Jonsson to the more common, English-sounding Johnson.[2] His son Raymond also experienced changes in his name early in life. From an early age, probably in his teens if not earlier, Jonson was known by his middle name Raymond. In the years he lived in Chicago his name is occasionally given in printed sources as "C. Raymond Johnson." By 1920 he had given up any reference to his given first name, Carl. It is not clear why he was always known by his middle name, but the most obvious and basic reason is that Jonson simply preferred the name Raymond to the name Carl.[3] In 1920 Jonson changed the spelling and pronunciation of his surname to "Jonson" [pronounced JOAN-sen].[4] He made this

---

[1]Ed Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976): 7

[2]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 173.

[3]Garman to the author, March 23, 1998. Garman believes it was a simple matter of personal preference.

[4]Jonson's surname is commonly mispronounced "Johnson." He actually pronounced it "JOAN-sen." This pronunciation has been verified by Garman, Tiska Blankenship of the Jonson Gallery, and art dealer Martin Diamond.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

change because he wanted a surname that was more distinctive than the highly common "Johnson," but which was also as close as possible to his original surname and recognizably Scandinavian. He explained his reasoning for the change of surname in a letter to his mother written in September 1920:

> Do you remember my threatening to change my last name? We [he and his wife Vera White Jonson] still talk of it. But I don't exactly like the idea of changing it entirely. Still, Johnson is so common. There are about 5,000 listed in the Chicago telephone book. That means about 15000 in Chicago alone. We thought of keeping the name but spelling it differently. We like Jonson but Vera wondered if that is Swedish, do you know if it is? Which do you think the best: Jonson, Jonnson, Jonsson. I think this a good idea and hope Jonson will go for Swedish. What do you say?[5]

Gustav Johnson's service to the Baptist church involved much traveling and frequent relocation. As a result, Jonson grew up literally all over the far West–not only in Iowa but also in Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, Minnesota, and Kansas. Jonson was taught to read and write by his mother; he did not attend school until 1899, when the family was living in Colorado Springs. The family finally settled permanently in Portland, Oregon, in 1902.[6] Jonson lived in Portland throughout his teenage years. In Portland, he earned money by delivering papers for three local newspapers, *The Oregonian*, *The Journal*, and *The Telegram*, sometimes working for two or even three of these publications at the same time.[7] He attended Portland's Montavilla Grammar School and Lincoln High School, graduating

---

[5]Jonson to his mother Josephine Johnson, September 26, 1920, RJ 1: 85.

[6]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 173

[7]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 9.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

from the latter in 1909.[8]

When Jonson was a child, his family was quite poor. The Johnsons' chronic lack of money had a strong, formative impact on Raymond early in life. Arthur Johnson once summarized the family's life at this time as follows:

> We never had any. [money] We were poor but proud–even proud of it. At least I was. This weird pride in being poor is one of my strangest memories of my childhood.... . Raymond, too, must have gone through some comparable experience because he has rarely resented the lack of money except when, in specific instances, it has interfered with his work.... .[9]

This financial impoverishment forced Jonson to take on adult responsibilities early in his life and therefore deprived him of much of the time for fun and play one would expect of childhood. Helen Manning, a Chicago journalist, wrote in an article on Jonson published in 1923 that "the traditionally limited ministerial income [of a constantly traveling Baptist minister in the Far West] put the young artist 'on his own' early in life."[10] Jonson's wife Vera once explained that Jonson had "no conception of play, for all his childhood was serious and full of duty" and that "because of the practical side of him, all the little and necessary things, such as writing letters, packing exhibits, hanging the shows in the museums, selling materials, looking after the house, etc. simply HAVE to be done, and done

---

[8]Helen C. Manning, "Portland Artist Praised by Many Eastern Critics," *The Oregon Sunday Journal*, December 2, 1923, p. 4, Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6481.

[9]Arthur Johnson to Garman, October 13, 1959, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 8-9.

[10]Helen C. Manning, "Portland Artist Praised by Many Eastern Critics," *The Oregon Sunday Journal*, December 2, 1923, p. 4, Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6481.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

meticulously, but these things so constantly irritate him.... ."[11]

Religion, in particular Christianity and the Baptist faith in which he was raised, had a profound influence on Jonson and his painting. Having been raised in a very pious family with a father who was a Baptist minister, this is not surprising. Once again, Arthur's written statements have provided helpful insight into this second formative aspect of Jonson's childhood:

> No one can know Raymond for long and not feel the impact that religion–and I use the word in its broadest meaning–has had on his character and life. Indeed, without stretching the meaning of words too much, one could say his whole life has been a religious activity.
>
> The foundation is the hard rock of the Baptist faith of our parents. If you know anything about Baptist doctrines you know that to them religion comes as an individual, personal "experience." Many are called but few are chosen. Raymond was both called and chosen.... . The whole mystical background of religion is part of Raymond's background. The "experience" is something he has known. It has affected his work.[12]

Jonson claimed to have had five religious, virtually mystical experiences in his life, all at critical times in his artistic development.[13] The first two seem to have been particularly

---

[11]Vera Jonson in an undated letter [probably written in early 1931] to Charles W. Morris, Jr., RJ 3: 2177. Capitalization is Vera's.

[12]Arthur to Garman, October 13, 1959, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 11.

[13]Jonson, lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, pp. 5-6, RJ 8: 6329; Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 10-11; Sharyn Rohlfsen Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1910-1935* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985): 106; Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1992): 91. Garman and Marianne Lorenz in "Kandinsky and Regional America," a chapter in *Theme and Improvisation*, mention and discuss only the first two experiences. Udall incorrectly states that Jonson had several visionary experiences in 1929. She does not refer to any of his other mystical experiences. Jonson discussed all five mystical experiences at length in the 1949 lecture.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

visionary, the next three less so. The first occurred in 1902, when Jonson was in his early teens and living in Portland. This experience was overtly religious and permanently directed Jonson's life toward a profound, all-consuming concern for the spiritual aspect of human existence. Jonson once explained this experience as follows:

> Portland, Oregon, 1902.
> Without any warning while alone one day in our home when I was about 11 years old I had the feeling that God in person appeared to me and informed me I was ready to be converted to Jesus and join the church. I was convinced and experienced what I suppose was an hour or so of religious ecstasy. When the family returned I tried to explain what had happened but they considered me too young to know these things. But I insisted I knew and there was only one thing to do and do immediately--baptize me into the church. I succeeded in this. But the church failed me. Some 8 or 9 years later I realized the particular church [the Baptist faith in which he was raised] was narrow minded, [sic] bigoted and hypocritical to such an extent I turned against it in disgust. Realize I now am saying I turned against that church, not my original experience.[14]

The second spiritual experience occurred in 1911, when Jonson was living in Chicago. Jonson credited this one with leading him to pursue a career as an artist. It is probably the event that led Jonson to connect art with spiritual experience and feeling. He explained this second visionary experience with the following statement:

---

[14]Jonson, lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, pp. 5-6, RJ 8: 6329. The Chili Club was an informal group of about twelve men who lived in Santa Fe and had shared interests in culture, the arts, politics and other matters. They met monthly for dinner, conversation and more formal discussions and lectures on various topics of mutual interest. Jonson gave several lectures at the Club's meetings. The group was originally called the Axis Club. During World War II the group changed its name to the Chile Club in order to avoid any suspicions of connections to what become known as the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy and Japan. ["Axis Club Members May Take Ride Over Famous Chili Line," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Wednesday, November 22, 1939, n.p. and "Axis Club Is Now Chili Club," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Wednesday, January 21, 1942, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6638 and 6712, respectively.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Chicago, 1911.
> Sometime in 1911 after I left home and set out for further art training I had another spiritual experience–this time pertaining to art. As a result I came to the conclusion that my life was to be dedicated to art. How this was to be accomplished I had not the slightest idea, but I knew it had to be and that all would in time work out. During the next few years a radical change in my whole life took place and I came through it a different individual. From that time on it has been a constant aim to develop and create independently and honestly.[15]

The next three experiences occurred in 1922, 1929 and 1938. In describing and explaining them, Jonson made it clear that each one had a profound impact on the direction his art took. They will be discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Five as they coincide with later developments in Jonson's art.

Jonson's steadfast devotion to making art that conveyed and expressed spiritual, mystical and religious experiences and states of mind began early in his life and continued without hesitation or regret until the end of his career. In a letter to his mother written in December, 1910, Jonson wrote: "I went to S.S. [Sunday School] and church today–Y. [young] peoples [sic] too. I am getting pretty religious. It goes with art. That's my policy."[16] It would remain his policy for the rest of his life. Jonson's second spiritual experience occurred around the same time (in the same year) that he grew disenchanted with the Baptist faith in which he was raised. For most of his adult life, it is unlikely Jonson would have considered himself a Christian, and even more unlikely that he would have considered himself an adherent to the Baptist faith or any other Christian denomination. The exact

---

[15]Jonson, lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, p. 6, RJ 8: 6329.

[16]Jonson to his mother, December 5, 1910, RJ 1: 5.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

circumstances that led to his disenchantment with the Baptist faith will probably never be known. Ed Garman has said that Jonson abandoned traditional, mainstream religious beliefs and practices early in his life because he believed that as a result of his "early experience with 'sectarianism,' religion had 'somehow betrayed him,'" but Jonson always believed his art was "a 'sacred' affair and had a 'sacred value.'"[17] Jonson maintained a faith in God and a belief in the existence of the Divine and the spiritual, but only in the most general and vague terms. He seems to have stated this most succinctly when he wrote in his diary in 1921 that "when I think of God, in the abstract of course, I feel right."[18] He explained his religious views more thoroughly and clearly years later, when he wrote to the wife of Sheldon Cheney, the early historian of modern art and theater who was a close friend:

> Man is wonderfully made and that God is in us and not some superior being outside of us. I believe that through the abstract and non-objective we will be able to state at least a portion of what life means. Through the comprehension of it we may reach a higher state of being. I.....prefer the rhythms that flow into and through matter picking up essences and spiritual feelings.... .[19]

The closest Jonson came to declaring his painting to be spiritual and religious in purpose and content was when he stated that it was a means by which the spiritual was conveyed to humanity, that he was the conduit by which the spiritual forces and powers of life could be brought to others. He wrote in 1942: "I consider myself as having been the vehicle for its

---

[17]Garman to the author, March 23, 1998.

[18]Jonson's diary, August 7, 1921, p. 276, RJ 8: 6178.

[19]Jonson to Mrs. Sheldon Cheney, March 31, 1938, RJ 2: 1476.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

[spirituality, the Divine, hope, and peace] tranference [sic] into visual form. When it is finished it is not I but the forms that count. They are the design for a new faith."[20]

Jonson asserted that the spirituality of his painting was different from that of Wassily Kandinsky and his friend the Russian Symbolist painter and spiritualist Nicholas Roerich in that he did not practice or follow Theosophy or any other types of alternative, modern spiritualism and mysticism, nor Christianity or any other long-established religious beliefs. He said: "That is one reason why I have no religion–no theory of philosophy–no social status–no political membership and no esoteric convictions. To paint is enough for if that painting is great enough it must surmount all these."[21] However, Jonson was not hostile to spiritualism and mysticism; he apparently devoted some time to studying them and considered some branches of them, in particular Theosophy, to be of significance and value. In a 1941 lecture entitled "Psychic Phenomena," Jonson discussed not only clairvoyance, telepathy, and magic, but spiritualism that he felt was more genuine and meaningful. He said:

> I make no personal claims toward being psychic or at all an occultist nor possessing the key to their mysteries. But I have found the subject most fascinating and I cannot but grant the field an attentive ear and mind.
> It seems there is a vast difference between the philosophy, ideals and methods of the true occult as promulgated by Theosophy, which is based on Ancient Wisdom, [sic] and the isms that pertain to the psychic.[22]

---

[20]Jonson to Arthur, February 19, 1942, RJ 1: 614.

[21]Jonson to Arthur, April 23, 1933, RJ 1: 416.

[22]Jonson, "Psychic Phenomena," lecture given to the Axis Group in Santa Fe on June 17, 1941, p. 1, RJ 8: 6291.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson's youth was rural, Western, migratory, staunchly Protestant, and financially impoverished. Such origins would hardly seem conducive to a career in the visual arts. Yet, Jonson's interest in art and his desire for a career in the visual arts developed when he was a teenager living in Portland. Jonson's brother Arthur has again been able to provide some insight as to why this happened. As a boy, Arthur has said, Jonson was intrigued by newspaper editorial cartoons and magazine illustrations:

> I'm not sure at just what age he [Raymond] had decided to be an artist but he had made the decision before he knew that there really were people who were just that and nothing but that. I remember his excited study of pictures in magazines, real hand-drawn pictures and in his earliest teens he was making judgements as to which were good and which were not. I remember him, when I was 6 or 7, exclaiming in much the same style that I heard from him 20 or so years later over a drawing that pleased him.[23]

In spite of their poverty and distance from urban life before moving to Portland, the Johnson family managed to nurture an interest in the arts. In addition to Raymond's career in theater design and painting, Arthur was a novelist, poet, singer, and musician.[24] Their sister Ruth was an art critic in California for local newspapers.[25] Once again, Arthur has provided insight into the Johnsons' family life. When Raymond and his siblings were children, the family came to own a large landscape painting, about which Arthur wrote:

> Father rented a house, bought furniture and dishes and *an oil painting*.... It belonged to the Hudson River School, more or less.... It was

---

[23]Arthur to Garman, October 13, 1959, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 9.

[24]Arthur's various artistic pursuits and interests are described extensively in many of the letters he wrote to Jonson. See reels RJ 1 and 2 of the Raymond Jonson Papers.

[25]Jonson to Arthur, March 11, 1931, RJ 1: 370. In this letter Jonson comments on Esther's review of an exhibition of works by Giorgio de Chirico.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> a painting in a tremendous gold frame–a huge thing that followed us from house to house.
>
> I want you to try to imagine the situation–here is a man of God, his promised salary is minuscule, he has six children, the eldest around 11, in a new world....and in all the worry and trouble and penny-pinching of getting a start, a veritable original work of art was apparently considered an appropriate object to acquire.[26]

Jonson's employment with the local newspapers in Portland as a delivery boy apparently led to a brief position in the art department of one of them.[27] It has been said that Jonson first declared his intention of becoming an artist by going to the school of the Portland Art Association and declaring his desire to become an artist in the presence of the instructors.[28]

Jonson received his earliest training in the visual arts at the Portland Art Association School of Art, which he attended for a year in 1909 to 1910. He was the first student to register for classes at the then-newly opened institution.[29] At the Portland Art Association School he took courses in drawing, color, and design, and had the opportunity to draw from nude models. One of Jonson's teachers at the school was Kate Cameron Simmons, a painter

---

[26]Arthur to Garman, October 13, 1959, quoted in Garman, *Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 8. Italics is the author's.

[27]Ruby Black, "Colors Amaze Beholder of Jonson's Work, Shown Here," *The Wisconsin State Journal*, Wed., July 12, 1922, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6451. The article briefly states that Jonson worked on the art staff of a Portland newspaper when he was young and living in Portland, but gives no additional details.

[28]Helen C. Manning, "Portland Artist Praised by Many Eastern Critics," *The Oregon Sunday Journal*, December 2, 1913, p. 4, Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6481. Manning writes: "He supposedly 'made his first declaration of profession' when as a teenager he boarded a street car for town one day and knocked at the door of the school of the Portland Art Association. He told the instructors in charge that he intended to be an artist."

[29]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 9, 173.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

who had studied at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and with Arthur Wesley Dow at Teachers' College at Columbia University.[30] Thus Jonson's earliest art training may have combined traditional instruction in materials and methods with an awareness of such recent trends as the non-mimetic styles of Gauguin and the Symbolists, and Chinese and Japanese painting and prints, all of which Dow is known to have taught to his numerous students.[31]

Jonson moved to Chicago in August of 1910, at the age of nineteen, to continue his training at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts.[32] He lived in Chicago until 1924. He started at the Academy in September of 1910 and remained there until 1912, completing two years of comprehensive study in the rudiments of the visual arts. During these two years at the Academy, Jonson received a thorough and mostly traditional training in composition, color theory, anatomy, drawing from the nude model, oil painting, and commercial design and illustration. His instructors at the Academy included Henry Frederick Wentz (a graduate of the Art Students League), Wellington J. Reynolds, and B. J. O. Nordfeldt. Jonson enjoyed his study at the Chicago Academy when he first began there, and he felt he was learning a great deal. He indicated this in a letter to his parents written in December of 1910: "School is wonderful [sic] It's funny that I hadn't realized before how awfully much there is to learn. Not only Art [sic] but to be an Artist [sic] one should know an awful lot. I hope to; that's what makes it so great. I think it's great. I enjoy it. I am glad I came because I feel I am

---

[30]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 9-10.

[31]The most recent and thorough study of Dow's art and teaching is Nancy E. Green, et al., *Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922): His Art and His Influence* (New York: Spanierman Gallery, 1999).

[32]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 13.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

learning so much."[33] He also took courses at the Art Institute of Chicago at the same time.

During the years Jonson lived in Chicago, he earned an income in several ways. One of these was by working for the Chicago Little Theatre designing and making stage sets, costumes, posters, brochures, and tickets, and directing the lighting and managing the stage during performances. Jonson worked for the Chicago Little Theatre from March of 1913 until it closed permanently in the fall of 1917 due to financial problems, except for periodic intervals during which the Theatre ceased activities due to chronic lack of money.[34] He earned additional income through other artistic endeavors and commercial work. He did some portraits, many of which were commissioned works. He taught various art courses at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts from 1917 to 1923, although not continuously. He even did occasional commercial projects, creating advertisements and illustrations, especially before he became associated with the Chicago Little Theatre.[35]

In 1916, in the middle of the years during which he lived in Chicago, Jonson met Vera White, an amateur musician who worked for the Chicago Little Theatre as a secretary. Jonson and Vera were married on December 25, 1916.[36] Born on October 16, 1879, Vera

---

[33]Jonson to his mother, December 11, 1910, RJ 1: 5. Capitalization is Jonson's.

[34]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 25; Elizabeth McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980): 6.

[35]McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years*: 6.

[36]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 175; McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years*: 9; Jonson to his mother, September 11, 1916, RJ 1: 58-59. In this 1916 letter, Jonson announced his relationship with Vera to his family.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

was more than eleven years older than Jonson.[37] They had no children and remained together until Vera's death in 1965. They had a happy but somewhat complicated relationship. As will be discussed later in this dissertation, Jonson is known to have been sexually attracted to at least two other women after he and Vera married. However, Jonson loved Vera dearly and considered her vital to his artistic achievements and successes. Over the years, she proved to be staunchly dedicated to supporting Jonson's career.

Jonson entered the Chicago Academy planning to train for a career as a commercial artist. He soon abandoned this career path as he discovered that such art did not suit him, and that he wanted to be an artist who worked for personal satisfaction and self-expression. As he wrote to his mother on December 1, 1910, only three months after starting at the Academy: "Tell Papa his boy, if he ever amounts to anything, will not be a cartoonist but an artist. Cartooning is my weakest point and I see nothing in it. Ah! Art! real [sic] art for me. I pray for help and am reading solid books."[38] Jonson's displeasure and disinterest in commercial art quickly became firm and absolute, and there would be no turning back from his intention of becoming an artist. The commercial orientation of the Chicago Academy did not suit Jonson's artistic aspirations, but he resolved to complete his program of study:

> I came here to do cartooning. Two months killed it.
> This is more of a commercial and cartoon school than art, but it was killed.
> I said I was going to stick two years and you see I am doing it and greater, for art's sake. You know it's in our youth we are made or unmade. Question, how should one be made? I will take music as it will be more easily understood. Why does the student of music study the classics and not

---

[37]Records in the Jonson Gallery provided by assistant director Cindy Leyba via e-mail, July 3, 2000.

[38]Jonson to his mother, November 25, 1910, RJ 1: 5.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> ragtime? You know one who begins by playing ragtime has trouble when it comes to classic music. Well, why is it not that way with everything? I believe it is. The slogan of the artist is, "Commercial kills the painter." In a way it does but I believe it can be overcome.[39]

The need to earn a living and use his artistic skills for this purpose became a disturbing internal conflict for Jonson. These feelings persisted as Jonson continued to produce commercial art and teach the subject in order to earn an income while living in Chicago. During the years Jonson lived in Chicago and for the first several years he lived in New Mexico, Jonson's need to compromise his artistic integrity for the sake of earning money and the distraction from his painting caused by this employment proved very disturbing to him. He developed a fierce criticism, even disdain, for capitalism and the greed and moral corruption he felt it nourished. As early as 1912 he indicated that his political views were socialist, anti-bourgeoisie and anti-capitalist when he wrote to his mother that he was a "staunch progressive" and said that "I cast my first vote straight."[40] He seemed to have meant that he voted first and foremost for candidates sponsored by the Progressive Party. He would hold such views for the rest of his life. The most extreme indication of his politics may be his support for the Socialist Party's presidential candidate of 1932; apparently he was not satisfied with or persuaded by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as a plan for ending the Great Depression.[41]

---

[39]Jonson to his mother, April 21, 1912, RJ 1: 16.

[40]Jonson to his mother, November 10, 1912, RJ 1: 22.

[41]Jonson to his mother, December 24, 1932, RJ 1: 152.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson voiced his most scathing attacks on capitalism in his diaries. Perhaps he considered these views so personal and even unpopular with many relatives and friends that he felt it was for the best to keep them private. These anti-capitalist sentiments became acute in 1918. On January 27, 1918, he wrote:

> I suppose we [he and his wife Vera] are doomed to poverty and suffering for I can't do what he [Taylor, an acquaintance from the Chicago Little Theatre] suggests furthermore I don't believe in it. Business–Business! Talk–cleverness–Beat the other fellow to it. But what has that to do with the creation of a color composition or in other words a work of art. That is what I am interested in![42]

On June 24 of the same year, he wrote:

> The curse of teaching has hit me in the casing of my brain. I don't mind teaching that which I know and especially believe–but a lot of junk like cartoon commercial drawing landscape gardening applied and industrial design monkey business technique transparent rendering of watercolor and a few more far from me things rules my quiet sober conscious.... . Art–that blessed thing–what crimes are committed in your name–Why? because [sic] man will do anything for money because he will do anything for power because he will do anything for that babbling praise of a misty brained mob.[43]

On the following September 1, he wrote: "May God help them [other artists] and may he help me–now and after–if I am a victim of the horrible machine–power–which stands secure on a foundation of dollars–everyones [sic] dollars–who is the boss of this world anyhow and who shall say–'Do my bidding!'"[44] In a 1921 letter to Arthur, Jonson succinctly explained his view of the importance but sinister ramifications of money and how money and art (at least his own art) must always be separate: "I recognize that money is the world's means of

---

[42]Jonson's diary, January 27, 1918, p. 16, RJ 8: 6051.

[43]Jonson's diary, June 24, 1918, pp. 45-46, RJ 8: 6065.

[44]Jonson's diary, September 1, 1918, p. 60, RJ 8: 6072.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

exchange and at the same instant I recognize that it has nothing to do with art. It is unpleasant to lower one's pictures to the status of a medium of exchange, but that has nothing to do with the painting of them. Besides, I have nothing to do with the dollars in connection with them."[45]

Jonson emphatically and undeniably renounced commercial art and the support it provided to capitalist enterprise when he wrote in his diary on February 24, 1919, saying "I hereby condemn for me at least–all commercial, so-called industrial and applied art–for me all wrong.... ."[46] This ultimate declaration was inspired by Jonson's disgust for an assignment in corporate design that he was called upon to teach at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. This assignment was to design a company logo to be placed on the side of a delivery truck, and it prompted him to quit his teaching position. To make his point all the more clear, Jonson pasted a copy of the typed assignment into his diary, as something of a reminder or even as justification for his radical decision to quit his teaching position and explain his viewpoint. This rejection of capitalism, and along with it but to a lesser extent industrialization and technology, is at the heart of the self-fulfilling spiritual quest that is central to Jonson's art. These anti-capitalist views later helped fuel his displeasure with modern urban life and his desire to move to the rural, quieter, more spacious West.

Living in Chicago made it possible for Jonson to view and carefully study countless works of art from many different periods in history and regions of the world, and to keep himself aware of the latest developments in avant-garde art. Jonson took advantage of the

---

[45]Jonson to Arthur, January 3, 1921, RJ 1: 86.

[46]Jonson's diary, February 24, 1919, p. 100, RJ 8: 6094.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

cultural and artistic opportunities afforded him by living in a large, prosperous, lively city. He once characterized his own habits of viewing works of art while living in Chicago by writing "[there are] all kinds of exhibits and believe me I am taking them in."[47] Jonson's earliest exposure to actual works of art of great importance and quality was at the Art Institute of Chicago. Jonson visited the Art Institute often, as early as January of 1911 if not before. In a letter to his mother dated January 10, 1911, Jonson commented that he had been studying contemporary works of art at the Art Institute, and he described the experience as "simply great."[48] His study of paintings in the Art Institute must have been extensive and detailed, although little is known about what works and artists interested him the most. He is known to have made copies of paintings he saw at the Art Institute, although which works he copied remains mostly unknown, and apparently none of these copies have survived.[49] The Art Institute was a profound early influence on his development as a painter, as he acknowledged in 1912: "In a way, the Art Institute is a treasure to me. Ah, if you could only hear the music I hear there Sunday afternoons you would not wonder that I am (in a way) hypnotized."[50] He explained this further in another letter to his mother written in 1913:

> I enclose as a novelty a few impressions I received last Tuesday. I sat in a wonderful room and wrote what you read. I sat surrounded by flowers and art.

---

[47]Jonson to his mother, November 10, 1912, RJ 1: 22.

[48] Jonson to his mother, January 10, 1911, RJ 1: 6.

[49]Jonson to his mother, October 29, 1912, RJ 1: 21. He mentions making a copy of a painting entitled *Song of the Lark.*

[50]Jonson to his mother, January 29, 1912, RJ 1: 14.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Wonder of all wonders–today I happened to drop in at the Institute and here I am seated surrounded by art and flowers for the Flowers Show opened to-day. [sic] And the band is playing. Here are three arts in harmony: painting, nature, and music.[51]

These comments are Jonson's first references to synaesthesia, a concept underlying the beginnings of abstraction in the early-twentieth century. Jonson probably gave voice to the idea of synaesthesia without any knowledge of the term and the theory behind it.

Jonson's first influential source of information and inspiration in modernist art came in 1911, two years before the Armory Show, in the person of the Swedish-born painter Bror Julius Olsonn Nordfeldt.[52] Nordfeldt moved to the United States with his family and settled in Chicago in 1891, when he was thirteen years old. As a young artist, he made several trips to Europe to study. He toured Europe from 1900 to 1903 and again from 1907 to 1910. During his second visit to Europe he visited Paris and perhaps other regions of France, and Italy and Germany.[53] He returned to Chicago and the Jackson Park art colony and his teaching position at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts in 1911. His years in Europe had left him extremely well versed in the latest developments in modernist art in Europe. Once again

---

[51]Jonson to his mother, April 8, 1913, RJ 1: 27.

[52]The most recent and detailed studies of Nordfeldt are Sam Hunter, *B. J. O. Nordfeldt: An American Expressionist* (Chattanooga, TN: Jones Printing Co., 1984), Van Deren Coke, *Nordfeldt the Painter.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972) and *B. J. O. Nordfeldt: The Lambertville Years.* (Trenton, NJ: New Jersey State Museum, 1981), Paul Kruty, "Mirrors of a 'Post-Impressionist' Era: B.J.O. Nordfeldt's Chicago Portraits." *Arts* 61.5 (January 1987): 27-33, and Fiona Donovan. *Woodblock Prints of B. J. O. Nordfeldt: A Catalogue Raisonné.* (Minneapolis: University Art Museum, University of Minnesota, 1991).

[53]Sam Hunter, *B. J. O. Nordfeldt: An American Expressionist* (Chattanooga, TN: Jones Printing Co., 1984): 81.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

back in Chicago, Nordfeldt soon became involved with the artists who lived, worked, and socialized in the Jackson Park art community. As both a painter and printmaker, Nordfeldt's work of the first decade of the twentieth century shows the influence of the most recent developments in the European avant-garde.

Jonson met Nordfeldt when the latter taught at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts in 1911.[54] Jonson described his admiration for Nordfeldt in a number of letters to his mother written at the time he was a student at the Academy. In the first letter, dated October 25, 1911, he discussed Nordfeldt as he wrote about his activities at the Academy: "Anyhow, the composition class is great. A Mr. Olson Nordfeldt instructs and he is a painter. We do oil compositions, of course. I paint during the afternoons and do illustration in the evenings; all mediums."[55] Two months later, on the last day of 1911, Jonson described his own artistic inclinations in a letter to his mother by stating "I favor impressionism to realistic art, so I paint that way sometimes."[56] It is around this time that he painted *Field Museum, Chicago*, one of his earliest independent efforts at painting outside of the classroom and one of the first that shows his embrace of Impressionist subjects, color and techniques. At this time, under Nordfeldt's influence and guidance, Jonson was gradually converting to modernist modes of visual expression. The process was indeed very gradual, for Jonson would not clearly emerge as a modernist, abstract artist for another ten years. In another letter to his mother, written in November 1912, he provided an expanded explanation of Nordfeldt's influence

---

[54]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 15.

[55]Jonson to his mother, October 25, 1911, RJ 1: 12.

[56]Jonson to his mother, December 31, 1911, RJ 1: 14.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and importance to him: "Nordie, as we call him, strikes me as the most prominent amongst us. He is [J. Blanding] Sloan's and my strongest influence.... . He has just had an exhibit at one of the best art galleries in the city and he put us all to thinking. He is called a 'Post Impressionist.' We call it 'Expressionism' and it seems to be the core of art."[57] Nordfeldt quickly became a good friend as well as a mentor. Jonson, and some of his closest artist-friends in Chicago such as J. Blanding Sloan, would soon acquire a studio in the Jackson Park area, thereby becoming Nordfeldt's neighbors as well as his students and friends.[58] The proximity of their studios further cemented their friendship and strengthened Nordfeldt's influence on Jonson.

The Jackson Park art colony was a major force for modernist art in Chicago and it seems to have been a warm and supportive social environment that promoted the exchange of ideas about the latest developments in European modernist art.[59] A November 1912 article in *The Chicago Record-Herald*, written by Mary O'Connor Newell, described the close-knit and productive artistic community of the Jackson Park art colony:

> You take the L. C., loved of the South Side Commuter, and you go to Fifty-seventh street. Coming downstairs from the platform, you face eastward toward the rusty white magnificence of the Field Museum and the gray majesty of Lake Michigan.... . For on either side of the street on which you stand is a row of what appear to be deserted store buildings, glass-fronted, one story in height, gingerbread work along the top, such as are often left behind in the moraine of some town boom out west.... . Limp draperies

---

[57]Jonson to his mother, November 18, 1912, RJ 1: 22.

[58]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 174.

[59]The most thorough and recent study of early modern art in Chicago is Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> across the glass fronts of most of the stores shut the interiors away from view. You approach more closely and read the small cards tacked on the doors. Where upon you discover yourself to be in Chicago's little Parnassus, or on it, so you choose.
>
> From the willow-girt embankment of the L. C., the stores run around in an L on either side of Fifty-seventh street to Stony Island Avenue, half a block to the east. About a dozen of the studios face inward upon Fifty-seventh street. The others, around the corner on Stony Island Avenue, look across Jackson Park. Or would, if the window drapings would let them.[60]

Newell continued by naming the various artists who lived in the colony and describing in the most basic terms what kind of art they made, where in the colony they lived, and their social and artistic interaction:

> In Fifty-seventh street Charles Francis Browne, Charles Abel Corwin, Moshiem Craig, painters, have studios. Also, Anita De Campi, illustrator, and Florence M. Hondershot, art photographer, not forgetting the dwellers in 'The Little Studio,' Sloan, Erickson and Johnson, students who wouldn't be working half so hard, possibly, even in the artistic environment of all Paris, as they are doing in the Jackson Park art colony.
>
> Bror J. Nordfeldt, painter and etcher, has a studio at the corner on the south side of Stony Island Avenue. Mary Randolph, sculptor, works next door. Her neighbors are the Meyers, Datus R., and his clever wife, who was Miss Alice Clark, a painter, and Baby Richard Meyers [sic], who must simply not be left out. The last studio to the south is that of Ralph M. Pearson, etcher.
>
> On the other corner....Lou Wall Moore, sculptor, dancer and stage costumer, brings us again up to the artistic level. Her north neighbor is Mrs. Margaret Allen, dramatic reader, and at present prominently identified with the Little Theatre company.[61]

Newell cited Nordfeldt as a leading figure in the Jackson Park art colony when she wrote:

> There's Nordfeldt. By right we should begin with Nordfeldt, eager, tense, critical, absorbed in the perfecting of his own genius, contemptuous of [illegible], critical of contemporaries. He was one of the first, if not the first,

---

[60]Mary O'Connor Newell, "Chicago's Little Parnassus," *The Chicago Record-Herald*, November 10, 1912, "Women's Section," n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6372.

[61]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> to discover the studios as artistic possibilities. He came some eight years ago and located. Lately he has returned again. You will find him working in a room of pure white calsomine and yellow silk. At least, he was working in such a setting the day I peeped in, making a primary color scheme picture of a young Chicago girl, while in a corner his etcher's press stood neglected and his gentle little wife dispensed tea and low-toned conversation.[62]

Living near one another in the Jackson Park area permitted Jonson and Nordfeldt to have a close and uninhibited relationship when it came to matters of teaching, advising and criticizing the younger artist's work. In the 1950s Jonson reminisced about the closeness of their friendship and Nordfeldt's influence. He wrote:

> We set up our studio [in the Jackson Park area] and associated with Nordfeldt as much as we could. He was, of course, busy painting. We saw a great deal of Nordy. He would drop in on us often.
>
> One morning he came in. It was rather late in the morning. We were painting and we had a model. An old woman was posing for us. Nordy said, "I guess I'll stay here awhile and see what you boys are doing. I'll sit back here in the corner."
>
> He would say something like this: "The red you're putting there doesn't go with the yellow, it's too light or it's too dark. Now what do you think? Try it and see if you think it's right." So I would try it. Then he would say, "It looks all wrong to me. Try it the other way and then see what you think." So the other would be tried.
>
> There would be this type of discussion, back and forth, trial and error.
>
> On another occasion he came by, probably the next day and he said, "I'm disappointed in what you are doing. Has anyone around here got some canvas, some brushes, some paint I could use and I'll show you how it's to be done." So we fixed him up and he went to work and he painted the old lady very spontaneously and very quickly and went home. I still have the painting.
>
> I've forgotten how long that went on but it went on for quite some time. You must remember that I was completely in sympathy with what Nordy said. Nordy knew what he was talking about in every respect.

---

[62]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> His influence was a very strong thing. How good it was I don't know. The stimulation and the experience were good. This very naturally would bring one close to the person giving such stimulation and I felt it was wonderful to have such an association.[63]

When Nordfeldt left Chicago to return to Europe once again in April 1913, Jonson wrote to his mother: "Mr. Nordfeldt leaves for Europe to-morrow. [sic] Good by [sic] friend, teacher, and source of influence."[64] Jonson and Nordfeldt would remain friends until Nordfeldt's death in 1955. Years later, Jonson once again explained the profound influence that Nordfeldt had on him during his first few years in Chicago, explaining how he had introduced him to the artistic developments of the European avant-garde at the turn of the century. He wrote:

> Nord was a spark that thrilled some of us but especially me. I moved in across the street from the Nordfeldts in 1912. To me he was the most knowing painter in town. [Chicago] He was a painter who gave the impression that he knew what he was talking about and that it was correct. I still remember how impressed I was in seeing his expressive hands in action..... He was disgusted with the Chicago painters and their painting and let us know it. Where he got his then radical ideas I did not know though at this time he had already been to Europe and had encountered what was going on there..... To describe his painting is somewhat difficult for there were several varieties. Some were done rather impressionistically, in method rather than color. Some were rather sketchy and done very rapidly usually in full color often using the knife broadside as well as the point. Some were strong portrait characterizations. We called it expressionism and that it probably was. At that period the term "post-impressionist" was applied to all the younger (radical) painters around Chicago. It must have been in 1913 that he left for Europe. That brought to an end that happy world of painting under the critical eye of B. J. O. Nordfeldt.[65]

---

[63]Raymond Jonson in a statement written in 1956 to Garman, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 21.

[64]Jonson to his mother, April 28, 1913, RJ 1: 29.

[65]Jonson to Van Deren Coke, March 18, 1965, RJ 9: 6368.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson viewed the Armory Show on March 24, 1913, the day it opened in Chicago.[66] His eagerness to see this exhibition is suggested by his early date of attendance, which further indicates that the latest developments in art were of great interest to him. The Armory Show's sweeping view of recent European art, with significant works from the mid-nineteenth century French Realism of Courbet and Manet through the Impressionism of Degas and Monet to Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, and the Cubists, must have been for Jonson what it was for so many of his American contemporaries: a profound eye-opener, a rude awakening to the latest developments in painting and sculpture. He wrote the following response to it in a letter to his mother:

> Today the big International exhibit opened with a reception. Of course I was there. And such an exhibit. You must have heard about it–the Cubists, Futurists, Extremists, etc. Well, it's some exhibit. Some of it's good and some is rotten, if there is such a distinction. There are no rules in art, so the sanest way is to say that each man may so paint as to express himself or to express a sensation or experience. In other words, to show or express the way one feels things. Many of the things appear crudities beyond endurance but I won't say what I think because I haven't studied the stuff long enough.
>
> Believe me, there is some movement in art. Something surely is going to happen.[67]

Jonson's comments about modern art at this early time, speaking of it as both "good" and "rotten" but even doubting that there is such a distinction, demonstrate that he was clearly very intrigued by modern art, but not sure as to its purpose, meaning, or artistic validity. This doubt would soon be eradicated, and Jonson would become a staunch advocate of modern styles and principles long before he emerged as a modernist painter in his own right. His

---

[66]McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years*: 5-6.

[67]Jonson to his mother, March 24, 1913, RJ 1: 26.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

summation of the importance of the Armory Show was that artists could now make paintings that freely express their temperament, ideas, and views of the world, and their experiences of the physical reality around them, which he called "sensations." A month later he referred to sensations again when he wrote: "Sensations–how great a thing to have. It's worth more than all the superficial supposed somethings in the world."[68] Only weeks after his comments on the avant-garde art on view at the Armory Show, he wrote another letter to his mother in which he stated that he strongly supported modern art: "Darn jokes and knocks on the new art! One, the art, is serious and the other, well it isn't worth talking about. Art is as broad as space so who knows what's what?"[69] He remained uncertain as to his personal direction as an artist for many years to follow, but at this early date he was already receptive to modern art's spirit of freedom and creativity, and he would soon accept many of its basic concepts and goals. In a letter of 1916 to Arthur in which he discussed Arthur's recent paintings, he said: "Now the 'War' is really very good. You see, there we have the requisites for a good picture, a composition–color and form. As the forms are not realistic or naturalistic, it is accepted as pure design, or as symbolic of a mood. Go for it!"[70] These comments leave no doubt that early in his career, Jonson accepted and approved of the non-mimetic imagery, self-expression, and personal and emotional revelation basic to modern art. As early as 1917, Jonson discussed the character and purpose of his own paintings in decidedly modernist terms when he said:

---

[68]Jonson to his mother, April 28, 1913, RJ 1: 29.

[69]Jonson to his mother, April 8, 1913, RJ 1: 27.

[70]Jonson to Arthur, July 26, 1916, RJ 1: 57.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> A good number [of Jonson's own paintings] are subjects treated as design and a few, which are probably the most interesting, are pure decoration. My idea in painting is that the canvas is a thing within itself. Whatever is put on it should relate to the balance of the picture and whole needs have no relation to nature. Nature in itself is a complete thing impossible of repetition with paint or canvas. A work of art is a personal creation as a result of observation applied in terms of the medium used. My present idea is that art in painting should be the creation of significant form by line and color.[71]

Such comments as these indicate an understanding and appreciation early in his career for Impressionism, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, the Fauves and the Expressionists.

Although Jonson embraced modern art at the start of his artistic career, his years in Chicago were full of artistic frustration and uncertainty as to the direction and purpose of his art. Jonson concluded that although he had mastered the technical matters of painting and drawing, he had not yet discovered his own sense of purpose and direction as an artist. At the start of his career, in the 1910s, self-expression seemed to be his artistic goal. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the mastery of abstraction, of creating totally non-representational imagery through a long, slow process of working through all kinds of representational, figurative content, was his goal. It was not until the late 1930s that Jonson finally realized his ultimate sense of purpose, which was to visualize the spiritual in art. Jonson's frustration in the first half of his career was frequent and sometimes became psychologically disturbing. This is evident in many of his writings, especially his comments in his diaries. In 1918 these feelings are clearly revealed when Jonson wrote the following in his diary: "Day before yesterday I scraped the portrait all off--no good. It was rotten. I swore I'd start over and do it right. Yesterday I started I worked hard and was so dissatisfied that I've given it up. I

---

[71]Jonson quoted in "Artist Gives Lecture Here," *Madison Democrat*, March 4, 1917, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6380.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

don't seem to be able to get what I want. I wonder if I know what I want! At present everything seems so hopeless–I hate portraits as portraits anyhow. I don't like illustration in painting."[72] A month later he wrote in his diary: "I don't like my style–in my drawings? I don't like anything I do. I am going to work so damn hard that I will like it.... . I have to work and still I am dissatisfied if I do–I am dissatisfied if I don't work–What am I to do?"[73] In the summer of 1919, Jonson indicated that he was psychologically compelled to draw and paint, to perfect his craft and his artistic goals: "My weakness lies in the fact that I cannot be calm. I must always be working or I am somewhat sad. I should be content with a few absolutely satisfying results.... . I believe in making many studies and sketches but they usually make me unhappy."[74] In 1920, while he was at the MacDowell art colony, he wrote to his mother about his recent work and the challenges he was facing in trying to better understand his own artistic purpose and direction:

> I am working on many things. At present the rocks and ocean material has the upper hand. I work slowly. I seem to be groping for something and I cannot lay my finger on it. There is revolution in my mind. What will come of it I do not know. At times it is very hard and at other times very wonderful. It is growth. Now the point is, if I do get along with it, it is fine. The usual tendency is to find a path and stick to it. I say, travel that path but gather all that grows along its side, and not go blindly on painting the same sort of things over and over in very much the same way. So I am trying to find the particular way for the particular thing. Perhaps I am not clear. Any how, it all amounts to the fact that I am a student in my own little private school.[75]

---

[72]Jonson's diary, January 11, 1918, p. 7, RJ 8: 6046

[73]Jonson's diary, February 4, 1918, p. 21, RJ 8: 6053

[74]Jonson's diary, August 10, 1919, p. 122, RJ 8: 6105.

[75]Jonson to his mother, June 8, 1920, RJ 1: 82.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

While working on a 1921 painting, Jonson commented: "It seems I simply can not get beyond a mental picture of such a composition. A sketch and it becomes trite or just a story or composition. It seems small and narrows the limitation of my own means of expression. There seems to be something greater even than humanity in painting."[76] He implicitly criticized his own work for being figurative, narrative, and symbolic, rather than more formalist and abstract. After concluding a painting of 1922 was a failure, Jonson wrote: "A composition of the City–Fine start–Rotten finish–so the mess goes to the scrap heap. Much good paint–All my time–gone–gone to where most things should go. Now I shall start all over again–Fresh. The composition did not please me. The colour was bad–the form–well there wasn't any."[77] Later in 1922, he condemned his first attempt at a painting on the subject of spring with the following diary entry: "For about two weeks I've been working on composition Spring. Began it some time ago. Have worked sincerely on it and have in sincerity and disgust destroyed it all entirely. All–wrong–Sweet!"[78] Jonson's frustration is also indicated in written comments in which he attempted to explain the meanings of several other works from these years. This will become evident later in this dissertation, as these works are discussed at length.

Jonson devoted much of his time during the years he lived in Chicago to studying modern art. Around 1918 he became intensely interested in the historical and theoretical foundations of modern art. This interest is indicated by specific, detailed comments about

---

[76]Jonson's diary, February 7, 1921, p. 276, RJ 8: 6178

[77]Jonson's diary, February 12, 1922, p. 315, RJ 8: 6195

[78]Jonson's diary, April 25, 1922, p. 339, RJ 8: 6207.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

what he had been reading, which he recorded in his diary. This interest in the history and theory of modern art seems to have begun in 1918. Jonson read Théodore Duret's *Manet and the French Impressionists* in 1918, and he found this early introduction to modern art "very interesting and illuminating."[79] He also read Willard Huntington Wright's *Modern Painting*, which he found intellectually engrossing but complicated, as he wrote in his diary:

> I've been trying to comprehend William H. Wrights [sic] analysis of Cezanne [sic] and Modern Art. It is indeed befuddling. To begin with his vocabulary is so complex.... . Also his general attitude is so bravado that one begins to doubt the absolute sincerity of the contents. Many good things are said tho [sic]–but one has to read thru [sic] so much unnecessary stuff that it becomes trying.... . Cezanne [sic] seems to be his ideal. But I fear he makes him a scientist and art a science. With that I must disagree. To be sure there are many scientific things concerned with painting but I do not believe the creation of a work of art is accomplished by science–it seems to me to be the ultimate creation by feeling–involving the functioning of the will toward form and color. I really agree with him mostly–it is the way he does it that is confusing. I say to hell with rules and theories. Each for himself–but I also think one can get much from what has gone before.[80]

Jonson may have read Arthur Jerome Eddy's survey of modern art, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* of 1914, but there is no evidence that he did. Considering that Eddy lived in Chicago, was an avid collector of early modern art, and that Jonson saw his collection in person in 1919 and 1921, this lack of documentary evidence is surprising.

---

[79]Jonson's diary, January 3, 1918, p. 4, RJ 8: 6044. The book Jonson was referring to in his diary is Théodore Duret's *Manet and the French Impressionists: Pissarro–Claude Monet–Sisley–Renoir–Berthe Morisot–Cezanne–Guillaumin* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1910). Duret's book was written in French and published in France in 1878. It was later translated into English and German. The English translation was published in Great Britain and the United States in 1910. Some sources shorten the title.

[80]Jonson's diary, January 6, 1918, p. 5, RJ 8: 6045. The survey of modern art to which Jonson is referring is Willard Huntington Wright's *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1915).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

As discussed earlier, shortly after viewing the Armory Show Jonson came to be in agreement with the basic premises of modernist art, that its purposes and goals were personal expression and uninhibited creativity through the exaggeration, simplification and distortion of nature and the use of totally non-mimetic imagery. At the start of his career, Jonson understood that art could convey one's emotions, experiences, and opinions and that it need not reproduce nature with optical verisimilitude. Over the years, by the mid-1930s if not earlier, Jonson came to believe that the purpose of art from all periods and regions was to visualize the fundamental, spiritual truths of human existence. He concluded that the less representational styles of modern art were the most appropriate means of achieving this in the early-twentieth century. He wrote:

> The basic intention of Modern Art [sic] is the same as that of all great periods of art.... . If any difference lies between Modern Art [sic] and other periods it must be because of different human vibrations through different interpretations of those rhythms and those structures that make up our concept of the universe. Therefore the major difference lies in the appearance of the forms used to express those deeper rhythms of life. Art forms have varied greatly throughout the history of man and each great period of art presents the spiritual, the aesthetic and the emotional set-up of the age in which it appears.... . These varied forms are necessary vehicles for the understanding of the particular period. Therefore the 20th Century [sic] artists are entirely justified in presenting us with new art forms to express our age. How can they do otherwise? Certainly the art forms of another age would not suffice.[81]

Jonson believed that the entire history of the visual arts could be thought of as consisting of two parallel trends of development, which he classified and labeled as "creative art" and "imitative art." "Creative art" was to depict the spiritual and underlying order and

---

[81] Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," lecture given to the Rotary Club of Albuquerque and the Kiwanis Club of Santa Fe in April 1936, p.1, RJ 9: 6333.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

purpose of things in life, a trend he described as "those attitudes and works which stand as symbols of this fundamental order, with the emphasis placed on expressiveness through emotional creativeness. These are the works that move us because of this fundamental emotional order.... ."[82] "Imitative art" was to depict the natural world with optical accuracy, which Jonson described as "those attitudes and works which rely on stating a fact or suggesting a situation. The result is very often some ulterior emphasis and we have imitation of objects, pictorial stories and adaptations from styles of other periods."[83] As far as Jonson was concerned, it was from the first trend that "we get great art," and examples of this trend that he gave included Archaic Greek sculpture, proto-Renaissance Italian painting, African sculpture, and the various styles of Post-Impressionism.[84] His choice of examples indicates his personal preference for art that was expressive rather than realistic, conceptual rather than perceptual, and spiritual rather than materialistic. He believed that art that was expressive and spiritual could still depict the outer appearances and likenesses of the natural world, but that it must not preoccupy itself so much with the optical recreation of nature as to exclude these inner, higher truths.

Jonson's understanding of the history of early modernist art was based on a rather linear development in Europe from Cézanne and Gauguin to, respectively, Cubism and Kandinsky. He summarized the important contribution of Cézanne in the following comment:

---

[82]Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," pp.1-2, RJ 9: 6333.

[83]Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," p.3, RJ 9: 6334.

[84]Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," p.2, RJ 9: 6333.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Probably the main item that makes him great is the fact that he discovered or invented a new form in paint expression. He opened up an entire new path. Modern painting resulted from it.... . What he did probably constitutes one if not the greatest personal characteristics in painting so far. It is difficult to make it clear with a few words. But he is considered the great pioneer in painting.... .[85]

Jonson believed that Cézanne, Gauguin, and to a lesser extent van Gogh and Seurat, were responsible for modern art, for moving away from the optically accurate imitation of things in the natural, physical world. He once wrote:

> If we needed a proof of the unimportance of the subject we have one here. [in Cézanne] Its importance is for the artist only in that through his choice of subjects he finds his particular means of creating expressive or significant form. Three contemporaries of Cezanne [sic] stand out as excellent examples of this idea; namely Gauguin, VanGogh [sic] and Seurat. To a considerable extent they can be called the fathers of our present movement, usually called modern.[86]

He believed that Cézanne and Gauguin were the two artists most responsible for creating the non-mimetic, self-expressive styles that had come to dominate painting since the end of the nineteenth century. He credited Cézanne with providing a "structural treatment of nature" and achieving "color construction of natural form," but noted that he was still dependent on physical, tangible nature.[87] He concluded that Gauguin was "not dependent on natural appearance but used it more as symbol," that in his paintings "color [is] used for rhythmic and spiritual purpose," that he practiced a style of "Synthetic symbolism," and that his

---

[85]Jonson to Arthur, December 5, 1929, RJ 1: 339-340.

[86]Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," p. 4, RJ 9: 6334.

[87]Jonson, "The Non-Objective in Painting," lecture given to the Art Club of Albuquerque on October 20, 1936, p. 2, RJ 9: 6337.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

painting method had "religious feeling."[88] He believed that Gauguin and van Gogh were two of the greatest painters in conveying the spiritual in life in their paintings. He wrote:

> These magnificent paintings such as Van Gogh and Gauguin on occasions where a potency of expression reaches such a height that the observer can experience an emotional uplift that seems to pertain to things beyond the physical, and presents the spirit of God within the object. I recall a painting of a kitchen chair by Van Gogh that has this potency. [He gives no other examples of works by van Gogh and no examples of any works by Gauguin][89]

Although Jonson seems to have considered Cézanne and Gauguin the most innovative in style, he admired van Gogh for his artistic passion: "Van Gogh is in many ways the most intense painter that has lived. There is a spiritual quality to his work that rings true and goes very deep. He did not leave the element for development that Cezanne [sic] did. But his work stands as a distinctive expression."[90] Interestingly, Jonson had little to say about Matisse, the pioneering modernist painter who would usually be seen as the first great painter to learn and combine from the styles of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Seurat, his immediate predecessors. However, it appears Jonson did not think highly of Matisse's art and that he seems to have not thought that Matisse made that great a contribution to the development of early modernist painting. Matisse is never mentioned in his written lectures on the origins and development of early modern art.

Jonson was also a student of theories of perception, pictorial design, and color. His research and study included the ideas of some of the most important theorists for early

---

[88]Ibid.

[89]Jonson, lecture given to the Chile Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, pp. 4-5, RJ 9: 6328-6329.

[90]Jonson to Arthur, December 5, 1929. RJ 1: 339-340.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

modern artists. He was familiar with the ideas of Ogden Rood and read his *Modern Chromatics* in 1918.[91] He once wrote that "I am reading Rood['s] theory of light and color–terribly scientific–so I wonder. It is good [to] study this and [it] may help a little."[92] It would seem likely that Jonson was familiar with the theories of Eugene Chevreul, but to date no references to Chevreul's theories have been found in any of Jonson's surviving letters, lectures, and diaries. Although Jonson was probably very familiar with various major theories of color, he seems to have never completely adopted one in favor of all the others. He once said: "There are many color theories. I use none of them."[93] However, his development in the mid-1910s of a painting technique similar to pointillism suggests he was familiar with Chevreul's theory of how adjacent hues could combine into subtly shaded and colored forms.

Of all the pioneers of modern art, the one whose works and theories were most influential for Jonson was Wassily Kandinsky. Jonson became interested in Kandinsky's paintings and theories in the summer of 1921, although he was certainly familiar with them several years earlier. He would have seen Kandinsky's *The Garden of Love* of 1912 in the Armory Show (it was the only work by Kandinsky in that exhibit).[94] In his letter to his mother describing the Armory Show, Jonson mentioned having seen works by the

---

[91]McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years*: 8.

[92]Jonson's diary, January 16, 1918, p. 9, RJ 8: 6047.

[93]Jonson, "Abstract and Non-Representative Painting," lecture given at the University of New Mexico on November 4, 1954, p. 4, RJ 9: 6355.

[94]Levin, *Theme and Improvisation*: 91.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Extremists." The term "Extremists" was used in New York City newspapers during and shortly after the Armory Show to identify the style of Kandinsky, so Jonson's use of the term suggests he was aware of Kandinsky's earliest abstract painting when he saw the Armory Show and that he had read about the exhibition while it was still in New York City (either in Chicago newspapers or perhaps newspapers from New York City).[95] However, the absence of any other written comments about Kandinsky for the next several years suggests Jonson paid only passing attention to Kandinsky at the time. Considering the enormous quantity and diversity of works in the Armory Show, it should not be surprising when it is discovered that an artist forgot or overlooked a particular artist or work in that enormous exhibition. It is likely that during the next several years Jonson read and heard about Kandinsky from any number of sources–newspapers, art periodicals such as *Camera Work*, and other artists.

Jonson would have seen several paintings by Kandinsky in the collection of Arthur J. Eddy. He saw the Eddy collection, apparently for the first time, in March of 1919. However, his commentary in his diary on the Eddy collection after this visit makes reference only to two paintings by Albert Bloch.[96] If he read Eddy's *Cubism and Post-Impressionists* he would have found Kandinsky placed in high regard within the development of early modernism and would have seen reproductions of Kandinsky's *Murnau Village Street*,

---

[95]Ibid.

[96]Jonson's diary, March 14, 1919, p. 2, RJ 8: 6095. In this diary entry, Jonson wrote that he saw Eddy's collection the previous Sunday. He described the collection as "great," and was thrilled at "what a stimulus [it was] to see such work." He was particularly impressed by two paintings by Albert Bloch. One of them was entitled *Summer Night*, while the title of the second work he could not recall at the time.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Landscape with Two Poplars, *Improvisation 29*, and *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*.[97] Jonson viewed the Eddy collection again in late July of 1921. This time Kandinsky had a far greater impact on him, since he wrote about Kandinsky's work in his diary on July 31, 1921, shortly after visiting Eddy's collection:

> It is a strain to experience such intenseness. Bloch and Kandinsky are the two who impressed me the most. Bloch is a master. He is most powerful–and emotional–so great that I get a rather uncomfortable feeling afterwards. I don't like to say this but it is the truth–all his things I have seen are fine–some positively great. The 'Summer Night' I feel is about the greatest work of art I have ever seen. I wish I were capable of discribing [sic] it. When I see such work I feel that is the great attitude. So many of us feel that but are unable to realize.... . Emotionally his work is supreme. Techinally [sic] it is flawless. What more can one ask for. In conception he is individual and therefore unique. And so we have two great artists–Bloch and Roerich! Kandinsky I comprehend, admire but am not disturbed. I feel it is difficult to enter his world–that if one could it would be a great experience. I find it hard to do so under the conditions of their present envirement [sic]. Sooner or later we must all accept his attitude.[98]

Although at the time Jonson may have understood and enjoyed Bloch's work more, it would be Kandinsky who would have the greater influence on him in the years to come. Jonson read Kandinsky's *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* in early August of 1921, nine years after it was published but only several days after the visit to the Eddy collection during which he became seriously interested in Kandinsky. He wrote about his initial response to this major, early treatise on non-representational art in his diary on August 4, 1921:

> I have spent the last two entire days reading and digesting Kandinsky's "The Art of Spiritual Harmony." It is the greatest book concerning art I have ever read.... . One cannot, if he be wise, but accept and believe the truth he put forth. It is a task to take in the significance of it all. I believe we must sooner

---

[97]Levin, *Theme and Improvisation:* 91.

[98]Jonson's diary, July 31, 1921, p. 269, RJ 8: 6176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> or later know him to be right, at least in theory..... Of course one works for emancipation from material. To be able to live and actually work in the spiritual is of course a great ideal and one to hope and work for.[99]

Jonson's comments about *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* indicate that he found this treatise very persuasive and that reading it greatly increased his appreciation and understanding of Kandinsky's painting and theories. The slowness with which Jonson came to admire Kandinsky can be explained by Jonson's gradual, independent, and methodical process of developing his own style through careful study and assimilation of the results of his predecessors, which he synthesized into a distinctive style that was entirely his own.[100] Jonson's admiration for Kandinsky was profound and enduring. It grew as the years passed. Jonson revealed this when he wrote in the early 1930s:

> Last winter the Art Institute in Chicago hung a memorial collection from Mrs. Eddy. It is permanent and includes two very fine and wonderful Kandinsky works. He is one of if not the foremost worker in the abstract and I think his work is most amazingly wonderful. So it is a great thing to have an exhibition in N.Y. of his work. I regret missing it. If I could buy a modern work and had my choice of all I would, I believe, choose a Kandinsky. That is what I think of it.[101]

Jonson's praise for Kandinsky's *Improvisation with Green Center* of 1912, written in the mid-1930s, is further evidence of Kandinsky's importance to Jonson:

> [It] is I believe the single greatest work in the exhibit!!! And it opens the door for a new approach in the medium. If there is such a thing as a spiritual structure and it becomes recognized it will even so be years before most will recognize the terrific impact and significance of such a pure statement of

---

[99]Jonson's diary, August 4, 1921, p. 275, RJ 8: 6178.

[100]Levin, *Theme and Improvisation*: 92.

[101]Jonson to Arthur, December 6, 1932, RJ 1: 401. The Mrs. Eddy referred to in this letter is the widow of Arthur Jerome Eddy.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> rhythmic color and invisible concrete form as expressed through such an orderly ecstasy. It is from this that we will proceed.[102]

Jonson saw Kandinsky as the culmination of the trend toward completely non-representational imagery that began with Cézanne and Gauguin. He believed that Kandinsky's non-representational painting grew out of the Synthetism of Gauguin. He thought that the Cubists had developed their own approach to abstraction at around the same time from Cézanne's passage. He defined Cubism as

> a realization that through analysis of the planal [sic] construction of objects it [was] possible to dissect [sic] them and emotionally present them before the consciousness as potential materials for the construction of form. The result was that the majority of cubistic [sic] works are really planal [sic] constructions of objects in a different order. So that instead of retaining the object clearly it became somewhat confused in a mass of planes almost arbitrarily arranged.[103]

He criticized Cubism when he said that "the fallacy of cubism might be that the object insisted upon showing itself under the most astonishing conditions imaginable."[104] For Jonson, the theories and paintings of Kandinsky constituted an alternative to the abstraction of Cubism, an alternative Jonson clearly preferred. According to Jonson, Kandinsky was the central figure in a progression away from the photographic depiction of the physical world that was parallel to but extremely different from Cubism. He explained this when he wrote:

> In contrast to this phase, [Cubism as practiced by Picasso and Braque] simultaneously Kandinsky a Russian working in Germany projected areas of

---

[102]Jonson to Vera, October 10, 1931, quoted in MaLin Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico, 1989): n.p.

[103]Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," p. 6, RJ 9: 6335.

[104]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> a totally non-objective nature–not developed from the object but purely arbitrary and drawn from some storehouse of the sub-conscious. The Non-objective [sic] results because of the idealistic concept of the force, essence and rhythm of matter and spirit.... . The non-objective in art is that item which deals not with objects but with shapes, rhythms, forces and forms.... . For our present purposes we can well consider these two–Cubism and the later works of Kandinsky (from 1910 to the present) as two opposites and yet paralled [sic] aspects of the introduction of this element as a visual item and the primary subject matter of the composition.[105]

At the same time that Jonson was becoming extremely interested in the origins and development of early modern painting, his sense of artistic purpose and his aesthetic sensibilities were profoundly and permanently influenced by his involvement with the little theater movement of the early-twentieth century. Jonson earned most of his income for five of the fourteen years he lived in Chicago by working for the Chicago Little Theatre, where he was employed from March 1913 until the fall of 1917. The Chicago Little Theatre was one of the most prominent and influential theater companies in the development of the simple stage theater movement in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The simple stage movement was a rejection of the lavishly furnished and richly illustrated stage sets and the highly detailed costumes that attempted to recreate the natural world and everyday life with the utmost accuracy and detail.[106] This well-established practice of stage set and costume design was a tradition that had dominated theater in Western civilization since the Renaissance, and which by the beginning of the twentieth century came to be seen by many as stale and excessive. This rejection of traditional theater design and the use of limited

---

[105]Jonson, "An Aspect of Modern Painting," pp. 6-7, RJ 1: 6335-6336.

[106]Arthur Feinsod, *The Simple Stage: Its Origins in the American Theatre* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992): 29-33. Feinsod's book is the most current and thorough study of the simple stage theater movement in the United States.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

numbers of simple visual components that reinforced the drama of the narrative and the dialogue was typical of the little theater productions. Theaters involved with the simple stage movement produced many plays from Ancient Greece to the present. The little theater companies also produced new plays written intentionally for the simple stage style, although there were not many of these. Several little theater companies, each following the basic aesthetic principles of the simple stage movement, were founded between 1910 and 1915 in Boston, New York, Provincetown, Chicago, and elsewhere. Due to the limited financial resources of the little theaters and the lack of public interest and enthusiasm, most of the companies closed before 1920. However, the movement had a lasting impact on mainstream theater. The simple stage aesthetic is a mode of artistic expression that paralleled the essentialist, reductivist aesthetic of early abstract painting.

The Chicago Little Theatre was founded in 1912 by Maurice Browne, a poet from England, and his wife Ellen van Volkenberg, an actress who had previously done performances of satire and imitations without any stage sets and props. It was one of the earliest simple stage theaters in the United States, it had considerable influence nationally, and adhered to the aesthetic principles of the simple stage aesthetic more closely and consistently than virtually any other simple stage theater company of the time. Browne staunchly advocated the minimalist design characteristic of the simple stage movement. His concept of the simple stage was influenced by the Irish Players, whom he saw perform in Chicago in 1911, by Edward Gordon Craig's book *An Art of the Theater*, and by the theatrical productions of Adolphe Appia, Emile Delacroze, and Alexander von Salzmann. Browne read Craig's book, which he considered his "Bible," and from it probably developed

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the use of simple scenic elements and moveable screens. Delacroze's system of eurhythmics influenced Browne's approach to the movements and gestures of the actors in his simple stage productions. In 1914 Browne went to Europe, where he saw productions in the simple stage style by Appia, Delacroze, and Salzmann.[107]

It is not certain how Jonson came to work for the Chicago Little Theatre, but the connection was certainly made through friends and neighbors in the Jackson Park art colony. In a letter to his mother written on March 30, 1913, Jonson explained how he got his job with the Chicago Little Theatre:

> I think I have a good position. And glory of it all, it is not commercial. Through Mrs. Lou Wall Moore [a sculptress who lived and worked in the Jackson Park art colony] and Bess [who remains unknown], I get in with the 'Little Theater Co.' You know what it is, don't you? A new idea, so to speak, in dramatic art. I believe it harmonizes with modern or the new art. I feel it's a rare opportunity to get in with these people for it will mean a chance to learn and at the same time paint for it will not take all my time.
>
> My job is that of all around handy man, management of scenes and lights, dressing rooms, suping [sic], etc. I'll get $10.00 a week..... .
>
> Goodbye commercial worry!!! Is this God's will? It must be.[108]

Maurice Browne remembered how Jonson came to work for his theater company with a very different account of the events and reasons involved. He wrote the following account of how Jonson came to join the company in his auto-biographical book *Too Late to Lament:*

> Raymond Jonson had been sent to us soon after the theatre opened by Bror Nordfeldt, the painter, when we were desperately seeking a young Hercules who would masterfully unite in himself stage-designer, stage-

---

[107]Feinsod, *The Simple Stage*: 78-79.

[108]Jonson to his mother, March 30, 1913, RJ 1: 27. Lou Wall Moore is briefly mentioned in the newspaper article "Chicago's Little Parnassus," which was discussed and quoted earlier in this chapter.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> manager, stage-carpenter, scene-painter, scene-shifter, electrician and, on occasion, actor. "Jonson" said Nordfeldt, "wants to become a painter; he is about twenty. He came to me as a student a few months ago, knowing nothing and thinking that he knew everything. He is immensely lovable; and I believe that he has genius."[109]

Browne came to rely heavily on Jonson for many things both technical and aesthetic, and Jonson came to play an essential role in the productions of Browne's company. By January of 1917, he had become art director for the Chicago Little Theatre, and was no longer doing simple manual chores.[110] In the nearly five years Jonson spent with the Chicago Little Theatre, he designed the stage sets, costumes, brochures, posters, ticket stubs and coordinated the lighting for all but one of the 43 plays the company produced from the day he joined it.[111] The Chicago Little Theatre's productions of Euripides' *Medea* and *The Trojan Women* were very popular and widely seen. The company produced *The Trojan Women* in 1913 and 1915. Nordfeldt designed the stage set for the 1913 production, while the 1915 one was done by Jonson. The 1915 revival included a national tour to promote peace as war raged in Europe, and this gave Jonson the opportunity to tour much of the United States. The Chicago Little Theatre produced *Medea* in 1914 and 1917, both with designs by Jonson. The Chicago Little Theatre, with designs by Jonson, also produced such

---

[109]Maurice Browne, in *Too Late to Lament*, p. 122, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 25-26.

[110]Jonson to his mother, January 10, 1917, RJ 1: 62.

[111]Arthur Feinsod, *Poetry of the Theatre: Raymond Jonson and the Chicago Little Theatre Years, 1912-1917* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico, 1993): n.p. The one play Jonson did not work on was Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, the costumes and stage sets for which were designed by J. Blanding Sloan, because Jonson was away from Chicago accompanying a traveling exhibit of his paintings.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

plays as George Bernard Shaw's *The Philanderer* in 1914 and 1917 and his *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in 1916, Leonid Andreyev's *The Pretty Sabine Women* in 1915, Maurice Browne's *King of the Jews* in 1916, John Hankin's *The Charity That Began at Home* in 1916, Albert Synge's *The Dierdre of the Sorrows* in 1917, and Cloyd Head's *The Grotesques* in 1915.[112] After the Chicago Little Theatre closed permanently, Jonson would occasionally do stage and costume designs for other companies. He worked with Rolf and Borgny Hammer in producing Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabbler* and *The Master Builder* in 1918.[113] In 1920 he worked at the Garrick Theater in New York City designing stage sets and costumes and serving as stage manager for another production of *Medea.*[114] In 1921 he taught stage design at Grace Hickox Studios, a small acting school in Chicago, to earn some extra money.[115] Once Jonson relocated permanently to New Mexico he never worked in theater design again. He abandoned this career not because he grew dissatisfied with it, but so that he could focus his efforts on his painting. Theater employment was no longer a financial option once he settled in New Mexico; opportunities for work in theater design were scarce in the Southwest.

Jonson always enjoyed working as a designer for the theater. Even though he did such work to earn a living, he felt he could create true, quality art that was not tainted by the

---

[112]Feinsod, *Poetry of the Theatre*: n.p., Jonson in letters to his mother dated March 30, 1913, April 8, 1913, March 16, 1914, RJ 1: 27, 39.

[113]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 175.

[114]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 176.

[115]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

motivations and concerns of commercialism. In a letter to his mother dated April 26, 1913, written only a month after getting the position with the Chicago Little Theatre, he said "[the Chicago Little Theatre] is probably the cleanest and highest in ideals than any dramatic company in the country. And of course they give classic works.... ."[116] He felt that there was a productive, symbiotic relationship between his painting and his designing for the theater. Jonson's saw definite similarities and parallels between his painting and the simple stage approach to theater design. He knew that his experience in theater design was profoundly influencing his painting. He once wrote:

> I have become so interested and excited over the thing, not as a theatre but as an art, and when I say art I mean in relation to my art. It seems that every day strengthens the common sympathy in ideas and ideals between Mr. Browne and me. Here he [Browne] is, trying, experimenting to make the stage, not a financial, cold, superficial, imitative realism for feeding people to gain their purse, but a decoration, a painting, a work of sculpture, a note, color, simplicity–all in one.[117]

It is noteworthy that Jonson used the term "decoration" in opposition to the term "imitative realism." This opposition suggests that for Jonson the term "decoration" also meant "abstract" or "non-representational."[118]

Jonson came to be in virtually complete agreement with Browne on theater design, and his stage and costume designs as well as his planned effects of stage lighting conformed

---

[116]Jonson to his mother, April 28, 1913, RJ 1: 29.

[117]Jonson to his mother, November 1, 1913, RJ 1: 33.

[118]The term "decoration" would appear often in Jonson's commentaries on art or in the writings of various Chicago critics about his work, and the inferred meaning of the term remains consistent. The term "decoration" seems to have been appropriated as a synonym for "abstraction" or "non-representation" among some American critics in the early twentieth century.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to the basic minimalist ideal of the simple stage. Jonson probably acquired his understanding of the simple stage aesthetic through Browne rather than by reading any of the extant literature on contemporary theater or having seen the earlier examples established by other companies. Most of the immediate sources for the little theater aesthetic were in early modern European theater, and Jonson had never been to Europe. Jonson's close personal friendship with Browne and the absence of commentaries in Jonson's writings on any of the leading theoreticians or practitioners of contemporary theater design also suggest that Browne would be the most likely source of understanding the simple stage aesthetic. The practical necessity of minimizing costs may have been a contributing factor in Jonson's simplified, straight-forward designs.

The stage designs Jonson created for the Chicago Little Theatre seem to have taught him about the capacity that bold, clear design, carefully manipulated effects of light and vivid, evocative color had for profound emotional and expressive impact. As he said in his 1917 lecture on theater design in Madison, Wisconsin:

> The aim of stage decoration is to promote the visual part of a consistent whole while establishing the mood and intensifying the rhythm and action of the play. The greatest asset of stage decoration is illusion. It should be a simplifying, a selective arrangement of essentials to give the illusion of some particular place, mood or condition. It should combine all the elements used into a sort of background and foreground against which and into which are placed the action and the voice, these striving for the same result.[119]

He believed that the theater designer who was also a painter [such as himself] should not simply apply the materials, techniques, and aesthetics of painting directly to stage design, but

---

[119]Jonson, lecture on theater design, given on March 6, 1917 at the State Historical Museum in Madison, Wisconsin, p. 1, RJ 8: 6274.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that such means should be modified to suit the content of the play (its story and characters) and the very nature of the artistic medium of the theater. He believed that an artist's style should not be dogmatically applied to all works, but that the design for a given play should depend on the content and purpose of the play. He felt that in general, simplicity and directness of expression which reinforce the content of the play are always necessary. He explained this when he said in his 1917 lecture:

> Each separate play, pageant, dance or musical demands entirely different treatment. All that is done, should, of course, be simple and direct.... . A scene design of course is not a finished thing. As a design it is complete but as a part of the production it is only the idea and arrangement of the form, color and style. The characters, light, action and voice are missing. You see, it is only one small part of a large composition.[120]

Stage design indirectly taught Jonson the concept of the sublime as it pertained to landscape painting.[121] The sublime landscape is a longstanding, widespread tradition in painting that originated in the seventeenth century in Europe and flourished in the early- and mid-nineteenth century both in Europe and America, in the paintings of Salvatore Rosa, Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Mallard William Turner, Thomas Cole, Frederic E. Church and others. The sublime landscape is characterized by large paintings of vastly broad and

---

[120]Jonson, lecture on theater design, pp. 3-4, RJ 8: 6275-6276.

[121]Helen C. Manning, "Portland Artist Praised by Many Eastern Critics," *The Oregon Sunday Journal*, December 2, 1923, p. 4, Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6481. Manning wrote that "the illusion of infinite space is an essential part of the Jonson setting." Earlier in the article she commented that Jonson's impatience with tradition in art and theater design, which is typical of his generation of artists and theater designers, may be based in the "promptings of his own Scandinavian blood, which he obeys with unfailing instinct, [unless it] may be called a tradition." Manning's idea, although briefly stated and seemingly quite speculative in this article, foreshadows one of the central concepts in Robert Rosenblum's article "The Abstract Sublime" and his subsequent book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition.*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

deep spaces, the enormous heights and depths of mountain summits and valleys, and extremes of light and shadow.[122] Such paintings were intended to inspire awe and wonder, a deep-rooted respect for the Divine and the forces of nature which could approach genuine fear and terror when confronting such rugged, overwhelming landscape views. The theory behind it was codified in the eighteenth century in England by numerous writers, but the most influential theoretical source was Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.* Jonson would have known the sublime from personal experience, even though he may never have known the theory behind it. There is no evidence that he was familiar with the theory of the sublime in landscape painting; it is never discussed in his surviving writings. However, Jonson grew up all across the West, in the presence of the rugged topography of the Rocky Mountains; he lived in the presence of the sublime on a daily basis long before he ever started to paint landscapes.[123]

Jonson's understanding of the sublime in a broad, vague sense, even when used apart from landscape painting, is evident in his sketch for the stage set for the 1915 Chicago Little Theatre production of *The Trojan Women.* [Plate 1] The set he conceived features a narrow fissure in an enormous wall comprised of rectangular stone blocks that formed the background for the figures on stage. The first production of *The Trojan Women* produced

---

[122]Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," *ARTnews* 59.10 (February 1961): 38-41.

[123]Jonson to Dane Rudhyar, June 28, 1941, RJ 4: 2736 Jonson lived in Colorado Springs around 1900, when he was about nine years old. His family's home there faced Pike's Peak, one of the most famous and celebrated mountains in the West.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

by the Chicago Little Theatre in 1913 featured stage sets designed by Nordfeldt. Nordfeldt's stage set [Plate 2] consisted of the same basic composition, except that the wall in the background was not as high, and the audience could see the top and sides of it. When Jonson designed the stage set for the 1915 production of the play, he used essentially the same setting as Nordfeldt had, but with significant changes. He changed it by making the wall higher and wider, so that its upper and side ends were behind the walls of the stage, and therefore remained invisible to the audience[124] This suggestively increased the size and apparent scale of the wall, creating a sense of broad, seemingly endless expanse of flattened space behind the actors. This use of the space of the stage recalls the use of vast, endless spaces that was essential to the sublime.

The surviving designs for this and several other plays that Jonson designed indicate how simple stage theater design developed Jonson's understanding of the emotive, evocative power of color, which was also integral to the sublime. In theater design, light and color are clearly inseparable, and Jonson had to consider both throughout the design process in creating stage sets and in manipulating the lighting during performances of a play. The deep, slightly purple tones of blue that Jonson used in *The Trojan Women*, or which are at least indicated in the designs for the stage set, further intensify the eerie, bleak mood appropriate to the play. Jonson used this shade of blue often during these years, in his paintings and his stage set designs. It is seen in Jonson's 1915 sketch for Act 2 (the forest scene) of *Diedre of the Sorrows* [Plate 3] and numerous other theater designs.

---

[124]Feinsod, *Poetry of the Theatre*: n.p.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson considered his lighting for this play to be highly effective in reinforcing the mood and drama appropriate to the narrative and emotional impact. In his 1917 lecture on theater design, he explained the importance of dramatic, emotive lighting in enhancing the mood of a play:

> The light equipment [of a theater] if adequate would make everything simpler and more convincing. A switch board can be used with as much feeling as a musical instrument. It is only because it is misused and the person controlling it not an artist that very little has been done here as yet. To be sure, the present mechanical apparatus is very inadequate and I dream of a much more perfect instrument. Few plays of the present demand or allow much light arrangement or composition, that is, change of light. I see no reason why light change should not be as subtle and capable of the same harmonic possibilities as the notes of a violin; or even more subtle.[125]

Jonson's lengthy explanation of his use of lighting in the performances of *The Trojan Women* reveals how carefully and skillfully he used light and color for emotive and expressive impact:

> A little illustration along this line [the importance of lighting in theater performances] was the production of the Trojan Woman. I was at the switch board and during the entire performance was working light. Yet few realized that there was change going on–only that there was different atmosphere throughout. In many places the change [in lighting] was definite for obvious reasons being used as accent or change of mood.[126]

For most of his time with the Chicago Little Theatre, Jonson had a nine-dimmer switchboard that weighed 600 pounds and which allowed him considerable control over the lighting during performances.[127]

---

[125]Jonson, lecture on theater design, p. 3, RJ 8: 6275.

[126]Ibid.

[127]McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: the Early Years*: 8.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson's stage set for the Chicago Little Theater's production of Cloyd Head's *Grotesques (A Decoration in Black and White)* is further evidence of his developing belief in the highly expressive and emotive power of simple, clear, bold design. In the sketch for the stage set [Plate 4], several trees, an owl perched on the branch of one of them, a tulip and the moon are rendered in simple areas of white, almost as silhouettes, with all the space surrounding these forms filled in with black that completely obscures any objects or landscape forms that might be present and suggests that the scene occurs at night. A surviving photograph of a performance of *Grotesques* [Plate 5] reveals how closely the actual stage set conformed to the sketch and how the stage set and lighting created powerful, dramatic contrasts of light and darkness that border on the abstract. The subtitle of the play indicates how important these effects of color and light were to the content of the play itself.

Jonson's earliest known works date to 1910, and Jonson's own record of his output, his "Catalogue of Works by Raymond Jonson," begins in 1910 and continues until he stopped painting in 1978. As far as Jonson was concerned, his career as a painter began in 1910. His earliest surviving works are several student assignments from his time at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. They include landscapes, figures, and still lifes done in oil or charcoal and are about 18" x 24" in size. Such early works as *Study–The Human Figure* and *Old Man (Student Study)* of 1912 indicate that at the very beginning of his career Jonson was a highly competent draftsman, with a skillful touch and a keen observation of the structure of forms and surface details.

Field Museum–Chicago of 1912 [Plate 6] may be Jonson's first independent work; this is apparently the first painting he made of his own initiative, and not as a student

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

assignment.[128] It depicts the famous anthropological museum of Chicago, a nineteenth-century Renaissance Revival building in Grant Park, from the front.[129] In it we are shown several ordinary people walking to and from the museum entrance. A gentleman with a cane and a woman pushing a baby carriage figure prominently in the foreground. Perhaps even more prominent is the leafless tree in the foreground slightly to the right of the center of the canvas, which serves to anchor the composition and indicate depth and scale. The painting consists of an array of pastel hues–beige, grays, light blues–applied mostly in quick small dabs of paint, which convey myriad reflections of light on a sunny but cold Chicago day. The slice-of-life theme, the momentary effects of light and atmosphere, and the loose, painterly technique are thoroughly Impressionistic, and the painting suggests that Jonson may have been aware of the paintings of not only Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro but Childe Hassam.[130] This work indicates that by 1912 Jonson was already studying and experimenting with recent developments in modernist painting.

Jonson produced numerous large portraits in oil during the second decade of the twentieth century. They include large oils such as *Salvation Army Woman* and *Figure Study–Girl* of 1913 [Plate 7], *My Musical Friend (Floyd Harris)* of 1914, *John Cowper Powys* of 1915, *The Lady–Mary Williams* of 1918 [Plate 8], and *Miriam Kiper–A Characterization* [Plate 9] and *The Sailor (Eric Smith)* of 1919. Also among this group are at least three portraits of his wife Vera entitled *Black Beads of Benares* of 1917, a second

---

[128]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 18.

[129]McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: the Early Years*: 5.

[130]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

painting of 1917 that may be the work identified in his "Catalogue" as *Arrangement Harmonious*, and *Violet Light* of 1918.[131] [Plate 10] The sitters for most of these portraits were Jonson's friends from the Chicago Little Theatre or the art community in Chicago in the 1910s. In each of these portraits the figure is prominently placed in the foreground with a blank background, as in *The Salvation Army Woman,* or a flat but decorative background as in *Violet Light* and *Mary Williams*, or, less commonly, a spacious landscape background, as in *The Sailor (Eric Smith).* The figures loom large, are usually seen from their knees up (except for the elderly woman in *The Salvation Army Woman*, who is seated), and often look directly toward the viewer, as is especially evident in the works from late in the decade such as *Violet Light* and *Mary Williams*. In some, such as these two late works, the figure is emphatically frontal, while in others, such as *Eric Smith* and *Miriam Kiper*, the figure is seen in a three-quarter view. The early portraits, those done from 1913 to 1915, feature a loose, rapid, Impressionistic handling of paint similar to *Field Museum–Chicago.* These early portraits are clearly influenced by the loosely-painted portraits with flat, empty backgrounds done by Nordfeldt in Chicago in 1912 and early 1913. Nordfeldt's portraits from just prior to the Armory Show, such as *Katherine Dudley, Robert Friedel, Maurice Browne,* and *Floyd Dell* [Plate 11], are similar to Jonson's in that the portraits made by both painters feature the same basic compositional arrangement and loose, sketchy application of paint.[132] Jonson's later portraits have smoother, more carefully finished surfaces, suggesting a tightening in the

---

[131]"Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

[132]Paul Kruty, "Mirrors of a 'Post-Impressionist' Era: B.J.O. Nordfeldt's Chicago Portraits," *Arts Magazine* 61.5 (January 1987): 27-28, 31.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

handling of the brush and the application of the paint as the decade drew to a close.[133] The late portraits usually feature backgrounds which are not spatially integrated with the sitter; many of them look like stage sets. The artificial quality of these backgrounds is probably the result of Jonson's involvement with theater design.

Jonson developed a distinctive technique derived from synthesizing Impressionism and pointillism, and he would use this technique for many of his paintings of all subjects–the portraits of the 1910s, the more numerous landscapes of the late 1910s and 1920s, and the thematic abstract paintings based on numerals, letters of the Roman alphabet, colors, plant forms and other subjects done from 1929 to the mid-1930s. This technique involved a careful, deliberate arrangement of small thin dabs of carefully chosen and mixed colors evenly placed across the canvas to create a broad range of color combinations that often radiate a bright or deep-colored light that is spiritually and psychologically charged. This technique of applying paint is not as mechanical as reproductions usually suggest. A close analysis of *Violet Light (Portrait of Vera)* indicates the nature of this technique that is so easily overlooked when Jonson's paintings are seen through reproductions.

In *Violet Light (Portrait of Vera)*, Vera is depicted sitting on what appears to be the front of a stage with the stage curtains behind her. She is seen frontally and from the waist up. She wears a dress with a pattern consisting of a dark blue background decorated with densely packed blue-green floral forms. She also wears a dark blue collar and a belt around her torso just above the waist. Over this she wears a white cape that covers her shoulders and arms. She also wears a matching blue hat with a broad rim in the front. Behind Vera is a

---

[133]Feinsod, *The Poetry of the Theatre*: n.p.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

stage curtain of dark blue with deep blue-green stripes that are evenly spaced. Vera sits with her back straight, her shoulders squared, and her arms at her sides with her hands resting on the stage on which she sits. She stares straight ahead, looking directly at the viewer who seems to be at her eye-level. The scene is illuminated by a bright spotlight that shines from in front of and slightly below her. As a result, a shadow of her is cast on the curtain behind her. The light has a violet quality to it, casting highlights of such colors on the undersides of Vera's jaw, cheeks, eyelids, and the bottom of the rim of her hat. Vera is shown to us as if she is on stage and bathed in a bright, tinted light–Jonson has painted her as she might look in a simple stage production by the Chicago Little Theatre. At 44" x 34", the painting is rather large for a portrait, and Vera is shown close to life-size. The composition resounds with monumentality and frontality. The composition for this portrait uses Vera's figure to vaguely form the general shape of a triangle. This gives the composition a sense of solidity and stability even though it is sparse and uncomplicated. The overall composition and pose of the figure has probably been greatly influenced by Nordfeldt's portraits of several years earlier. In *Violet Light*, Jonson has used a carefully controlled process of applying countless small dots, specks, and dabs of different, vivid colors densely packed together on the canvas, creating glowing, luminous effects. The method and effect is reminiscent of the pointillism of Seurat and Signac, from whose paintings Jonson must have learned of the technique, although exactly when, how, and through whom Jonson learned pointillism is not certain. The most likely sources through which Jonson would develop this technique would seem to be Nordfeldt and various works shown at the Armory Show. In rendering the shadow on the curtain, Jonson has applied many small dabs of dark ultramarine and purple closely together

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to create a uniform, deep color suggestive of shadow on the somewhat brighter ultramarine curtain. Specks of white have been scattered rather evenly on the portions of the curtain colored with ultramarine. Specks of dark green have been added to the dark blue stripes on the curtain and the shadow cast by Vera. The use of white paint in these different areas of canvas has been done deliberately and carefully to add or subtract brightness and light reflection form different surfaces, to suggest areas bathed in bright light and areas lost in deep shadow. From a relatively normal viewing distance of perhaps six to twelve feet, these individual strokes of paint blend easily. The packing of small strokes is denser than that of late nineteenth century French painters associated with Neo-Impressionism, indicating a tighter, more methodical handling of paint that would be considered more typical of an American artist's sensibility. Nevertheless, the technique is surprisingly loose and sketchy for a painter who would eventually embrace modern mechanical methods and materials of painting such as the airbrush and acrylic paints.

Jonson was very active in the art community of Chicago for nearly all of the fourteen years he lived in the city. He exhibited his paintings and theater designs often and in many venues in Chicago and elsewhere during these years. He first publicly exhibited his paintings in 1913 at the Third Annual Exhibit of Swedish-American Artists at the Swedish Club in Chicago, an occasion he described as "my art's debut."[134] He exhibited at the subsequent Annual Exhibits of Swedish-American Artists held in Chicago in 1916, 1917, 1919, 1920, 1921, and 1923. He had works included in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-first to

---

[134]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 174; Jonson to his mother, April 28, 1913, RJ 1: 29.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Twenty-fifth, and Twenty-seventh Annual Artists of Chicago Exhibits held at the Art Institute of Chicago in, respectively, 1914, 1915, 1917 to 1921, and 1923. He also showed works at the Twenty-sixth and Thirty-first Annual Exhibitions of American Paintings and Sculpture held at the Art Institute of Chicago in, respectively, 1913 and 1918. His early Symbolist-inspired landscape *Rhythm of the Wind* was exhibited in New York City in 1917 at the exhibition of the Independent Society of Artists. His theater designs were exhibited at the Chicago Little Theatre in 1915, in the "Exhibit of the Little Theatre" held in 1916 in St. Louis, in a "Retrospective Exhibition of Theater Craft" held in 1917 in New York City, and in other exhibits held in 1917 in St. Louis and Detroit.[135] He had a solo exhibit of his paintings and theater designs in Madison, Wisconsin in 1917, at which he gave a public lecture about both his paintings and theater designs. As the second decade of the twentieth century progressed, Jonson received a considerable amount of attention from the art critics in Chicago, and much of this criticism was at least tolerant and sometimes laudatory. Jonson was hardly ignored or dismissed by the critics in Chicago or Portland, Oregon, where he had lived as a teenager and was remembered as a local boy who achieved fame and success, or by critics in other parts of the country when he showed works in exhibits outside of Chicago. Jonson was certainly considered part of the avant-garde rather than part of the traditional artists in Chicago (who still favored academic realism) and their patrons and dealers who collectively constituted the Chicago (and by extension the Midwestern) art establishment.

---

[135]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 174-177. Garman's chronology lists the many exhibits in which Jonson showed his work during the years he lived in Chicago.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This is clearly evident in the numerous newspaper and magazine articles in which Jonson and his art are discussed.

Jonson was publicly recognized as an up-and-coming modernist artist in Chicago as early as 1914, when he was included in an article in the March 15, 1914 edition of *The Inter-Ocean* entitled "Insurgents in Art." Martyn Johnson, the author of the article, complained about the lack of artistic taste and judgement in the general public of Chicago and lamented the uninspired academic realism of most of the paintings included in the recent Annual Exhibit of Chicago Artists at the Art Institute of Chicago. He cited several young artists, among them Jonson, J. Blanding Sloan, and Jerome Blum (works by all three are reproduced in the article, including Jonson's *City Canyons*), as being the most inventive and daring artists included in this exhibit. He wrote:

> A significant feature of the recent exhibition of Chicago Artists at the Art Institute was the well defined break between the younger men and those painters about whose names the glamour of art in Cook County shines....the very few canvases which lent real interest were chiefly by young men whose names are as yet unknown. Their work was interesting, because it promised a future.[136]

He added that "it is easy to see that the exhibition of Post-Impressionists last spring had its influence" (he is presumably referring to the Armory Show) and continued by writing:

> Every one of these young men told me that the exhibition last spring had been a tremendous inspiration. It has given them courage to paint out boldly what they felt in their hearts. The result is that this year we have half a dozen young artists whose work is in sympathy with what may be called the 'new thought' in painting.... . These young men are intuitively alert and abreast of the times. They have felt the spiritual quality that has gradually characterized modern painting and the Post-Impressionists have given them a fresh

---

[136]Martyn Johnson, "Insurgents in Art," *The Inter-Ocean*, March 15, 1914: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6376-6377.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> conception of the function of painting. The result is that they are trying to express what the Post-Impressionists sought to express and work with much the same feeling.[137]

This critic had a sympathy for modern art that was unusual for Chicago in the early 1910s, and it must be remembered that his views were opposed to those of the public and even the local art community. This review indicates that at the start of his career, Jonson was publicly acknowledged as a leading modernist in the Midwest. In 1920, another art critic wrote that Jonson "became known thruout [sic] Chicago and among craftsman thruout [sic] the country, as scenic artist for the Chicago Little Theatre." [sic][138] Jonson was better known early in his career as a theater designer than he ever was as a painter, even though painting was always his greatest interest.

In February of 1919, Jonson had a rather lavish exhibit of his paintings at the Bell Studio Building in Chicago. The exhibit included lectures given by John Cowper Powys, a tea party, and other fanfare. An article about the event in *The Chicago Evening Post* of Tuesday, February 4, 1919, described it as "an unusual honor [that] was paid to a Chicago artist."[139] Jonson was mentioned specifically in a newspaper review of the Eighth Annual Exhibit of Swedish-American Artists held at the Swedish Club in Chicago in April 1919. In this article, the author commented that Jonson was "represented by two beautiful, rather

---

[137]Ibid.

[138]"Chicago Artists Plan to Exhibit Rejected Works: C. Raymond Jonson Tells Director Harshe of Move for Display," *The Chicago Evening Tribune*, Friday, November 4, 1921: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6422.

[139]"Raymond Jonson," *The Chicago Evening Post*, Tuesday, February 4, 1919: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6401.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

allegorical pictures."[140] In May of 1919, a broad selection of Jonson's work, including oil paintings, small sketches, and theater designs, were exhibited in room 802 of the Powers Building in Chicago. An article in *The Chicago Evening Post* stated that in this exhibit "one can view a gathering of well-chosen, interesting canvases, some large and important, by Raymond Johnson the painter."[141]

Around 1920, Jonson became active in the disagreements between the modernists and the traditionalists in the Chicago art community of the early-twentieth century. He belonged to and exhibited with three of the most adamantly anti-establishment, anti-traditionalist groups of avant-garde artists in Chicago at this time: the Salon des Refusés of Chicago, Cor Ardens, and the No-Jury Group.[142] The Salon des Refusés of Chicago took place in November 1921 at Rothchild's Department Store. It evolved in response to the Art Institute's rejection of all but 157 of the 1,150 paintings submitted to the Art Institute's annual fall exhibition of contemporary American artists in 1921. The rate of acceptance was much lower that year compared to previous years. Many local artists, especially the younger ones and the ones who were more avant-garde in style, were displeased that the Art Institute

---

[140]"Eighth Annual Exhibit On at Swedish Club," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, April 27, 1919: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6403.

[141]"Raymond Jonson," *The Chicago Evening Post*, Tuesday, May 27, 1919: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6403.

[142]Paul Kruty, "Declarations of Independence: Chicago's Alternative Art Groups of the 1920s," in Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 78-80. This article summarizes the state of art criticism and public taste in Chicago during the first quarter of the twentieth century and the founding and purpose of the various avant-garde artists' organizations. It explains the causes and outcomes of the conflicts between most art critics and the audience for art in Chicago and these modernist artists active in Chicago at the time.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

had rejected their work with no apparent reason or cause. This rejection was particularly bothersome since it ran quite contrary to previous annual exhibits of contemporary art at the Art Institute, and the younger artists wanted to know why the Art Institute had done this. They sought an explanation, and hoped that the Art Institute would even temporarily remove portions of its permanent exhibitions or make some other arrangement to accommodate more of the contemporary work that had been rejected. The artists whose works were rejected numbered in the dozens, and included many of the leading avant-garde artists of Chicago and its environs, including Jonson and the members of Cor Ardens. The rejection seems to have been the result of a sudden wave of reactionism in artistic taste at the Art Institute, which had in previous years been somewhat more receptive to modernist art. Many of the most outspoken artists who were rejected were well known in the art community of Chicago by 1920, and most had works shown at previous annual exhibits of contemporary art.[143] It was also claimed that in the 1921 Art Institute exhibition there were considerably fewer artists from Chicago than there had been in previous exhibits from recent years.[144] Several of the younger and stylistically more radical artists, Jonson prominently among them, became the spokesmen for the dozens more whose works were also rejected. The most outspoken artists included, besides Jonson, Carl Hoeckner, Raymond Shiva and Rudolph Weisenborn, most

---

[143] Rudolph Weisenborn, one of the Chicago modernists of the 1910s with whom Jonson was acquainted, is quoted as saying that "as many of the protesting artists are prize winners in previous exhibits they are naturally indignant at the action of the jury in this case," in "Irate Artists Ask Rejected Art Showing," *The Chicago Evening American*, November 4, 1921: n.p. Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6422.

[144]"Chicago Artists Plan to Exhibit Rejected Works: C. Raymond Jonson Tells Director Harshe of Move for Display," *The Chicago Evening Tribune*, Friday, November 4, 1921: n.p. Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6422.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of whom were members of the anti-traditional, avant-garde group known as Cor Ardens. Jonson acted as spokesman for the many artists involved, and he was quoted as saying:

> We are not exactly making a protest. We shall merely ask the Institute what it all means. We shall ask for an exhibition of all rejected paintings–not only those of Chicago artists, but of painters and sculptors thruout [sic] the country–so that the public may judge for itself whether or not our works are inferior to those included in the show as at present.
>
> We have been informed by members of the jury that 1,150 works of art were submitted in the competition for the show. Only 157 were accepted. We want to know why. We think an explanation is due us.[145]

The appeals and requests of these younger artist were denied, and so an alternative exhibition became the goal of Jonson and his colleagues. The owner of Rothchild's, one of the largest department stores in Chicago at the time, offered a large space in the store as a site for hosting an exhibit of the rejected works, and the alternative exhibition became known as Chicago's own "Salon des Refusés."[146] Works that were rejected, including works by Jonson and other members of Cor Ardens, were included in the Salon des Refusés held at Rothchild's beginning on November 21, 1921. The exhibit was considered a success because it was attended by many thousands of ordinary citizens, not just the art community, but it resulted in few sales. It also received a lot of attention in the Chicago newspapers, and was

---

[145]Ibid.

[146]"Irate Artists Ask Rejected Art Showing," *The Chicago Evening Examiner*, November 4, 1921: n.p.; "Chicago Artists Plan to Exhibit Rejected Works: C. Raymond Jonson Tells Director Harshe of Move for Display," in *The Chicago Evening Tribune*, Friday, November 4, 1921: n.p., both in Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6422. The first article quoted Weisenborn as saying: "If the Art Institute will not agree to the showing of the [rejected] paintings, I have already made arrangements with a manager of a big department store who has promised an eighth of a floor for the exhibit." The second article reported that Jonson announced on November 4 that if the Art Institute did not exhibit the works in question they would be exhibited elsewhere.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

even heralded as the first rebuttal to a major American art institution.[147] The Salon des Refusés held in Paris in 1863 was clearly the inspiration and prototype for this alternative, protest exhibition.

Jonson was a founding member and the first president of Cor Ardens, which meant "flaming heart" or "ardent heart," an organization of mostly modernist artists whose membership included Jonson, Hoeckner, Weisenborn, and Anthony Arguola–all of them among the most radical artists in Chicago.[148] Cor Ardens was a small but formally structured organization, with a body of elected officers, a charter stating its purpose and goals, and a basic constitution. The group was formed in late summer of 1921. It seems to have had its most public and influential presence in November 1921, when its members became the spokesmen for the dozens of mostly avant-garde artists who protested the rejection of so many works by the Art Institute. The organization existed more in theory than in practice, however. It had its only exhibit at the Arts Club in Chicago from November 16 to 29 of 1922.[149] Cor Ardens was conceived as an international organization of artists formed not to advocate any one style or movement in modern art, but to uphold certain goals and principles in the creation of art in all media and in all regions of the world by fostering a sense of

---

[147]"Chicago Artists Plan to Exhibit Rejected Works: C. Raymond Jonson Tells Director Harshe of Move for Display," *The Chicago Evening Tribune*, Friday, November 4, 1921: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6422.

[148]Kruty, "Declarations of Independence: Chicago's Alternative Art Groups of the 1920s," in Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde*: 79.

[149]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

fraternal comradery among artists. Its governing body included several honorary presidents for individual countries. Its declaration of purpose, issued as a pamphlet, read as follows:

> "Cor Ardens" recognizes art as the universal medium of expression and an evidence of life. It realizes the phenomenon that ideals in art manifest themselves simultaneously in all parts of the world and therefore acknowledges the creative impulse irrespective of heritage. Cor Ardens is a concrete move to bring together, at least in spirit, sympathetic isolated individuals.
>
> Art should be created with honest mind and from genuine necessity.
>
> Cor Ardens stands for no particular school or movement in art.
>
> The organization aims:
>
> To form a brotherhood of artists which is international;
> To hold exhibitions without juries, without prizes and without sales;
> To present concerts, drama and the dance, publish works of writer and composer members, through the co-operation of artists in these different mediums of expression where such co-operation is essential or desirable; and to promote and encourage sincere undertakings of individuals or groups in these forms of expression; to create by these activities centers where art and artists of all countries will be welcome;
> To work for the establishment of universal museums where works donated by members may have a permanent home;
> To publish annually in an artistic form a comprehensive report of the activities of the entire organization.
>
> Cor Ardens shall be the emblem as well as the symbol of this brotherhood of artists.[150]

The formal statement of purpose issued by Cor Ardens makes their goals and desires quite clear, and some of the principles the group advocated were taken very seriously by Jonson. The desire of Cor Ardens for artists' Meccas where comradery would provide support and inspiration for creativity of all kinds, and for museums where the work of artists who were

---

[150]"Cor Ardens" brochure, Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6458.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

kindred spirits would be kept and exhibited, are ideals that led Jonson to establish the Jonson Gallery many years later. Jonson was excited about Cor Ardens when the organization was newly formed because he felt it had great potential for encouraging artistic activity by promoting cooperation and support among artists in the face of hostility or indifference from the public. He explained his admittedly idealistic opinion of this new organization when he wrote the following to his mother in a letter of July 1921:

> This is the first organization that I have faith in. The first of the year a few of us began meeting and discussing our ideas and ideals in regard to an art organization. We were fairly well on our way in April when Nicolas Roerich arrived with his exhibition. And let me say that his exhibition was the high point of this last year's showings for us.... . We were all immediately interested in this man's work and, of course, became acquainted with him. He was here to the studio.... . So we invited him to one of our meetings. He was of the same mind as we, only more mature. He told us how in Europe certain artists had this same feeling. Well, he joined us and is now in New York working hard. We get many letters from him.
>
> We will have members over the entire world.... . I believe that in a year or so we shall have an exhibition and then we continue on down the line of aims.
>
> This is an example of a little idealism and I tell you I am honored to be president of such a group.... .[151]

Jonson's recent personal contact with the Russian painter Nicolas Roerich, who had been in the United States in the early 1920s, had an enormous influence on his concept of this international fraternity of artists seeking similar goals and its potential. However, Cor Ardens faded into nothing after a short time. Its membership never grew to anything close to what its founding members had hoped. Years later, Jonson would acknowledge that Cor Ardens was essentially unsuccessful when he wrote: "It no longer exists. Died when we [he and Vera] left Chicago. Evidently I was Cor Ardens. It is the only group I have ever been

---

[151] Jonson to his mother, July 20, 1921, RJ 1: 90.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

associated with.... . [up to this time] And this is one reason why I am not famous–because I have been and have worked independently not even tying up with a dealer."[152]

Shortly after the Salon des Refusés of Chicago and before the exhibit of the Cor Ardens, the "Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists" was founded to perpetuate the goals and ideals of the Chicago Salon des Refusés.[153] It held a large exhibit of modernist art at another department store in Chicago, Marshall Field's, in October 1922. Any artist could exhibit any works of his choice as long as he paid the nominal fee of $4.00 to show two works and, if desired, paid $4.00 more and provided a photograph to have any exhibited work included in the catalogue. All works were to be arranged alphabetically by the artist's surname. The exhibit included works by 200 artists in eight galleries on the second floor of the store. By the time of this exhibit, the modernists in Chicago were gaining ground in their duel with the art establishment and those who favored traditional styles. The Annual Exhibit of Chicago Artists held at the Art Institute in 1923, the first held after the 1922 "No-Jury" exhibit, included the work of many younger, modernist artists, including Jonson and most of the members of Cor Ardens. After the 1923 exhibit at the Art Institute, many of Chicago's modernists boycotted the annual exhibits at the Art Institute for the rest of the 1920s, preferring to exhibit their work at other venues, particularly the annual exhibits of the "No Jury" Society held throughout the rest of the decade.

---

[152]Jonson to Arthur, January 4, 1929, RJ 1: 304.

[153]Kruty, "Declarations of Independence: Chicago's Alternative Art Groups of the 1920s" in Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde*: 81-83.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Although Jonson's work was frequently exhibited in Chicago and other parts of the country and was discussed in many newspaper reviews, these experiences with the alternative art groups of Chicago seem to have adversely affected Jonson's view of the art community of Chicago and his future in it. He became very disenchanted with the practice of public exhibitions of contemporary art and this dissatisfaction would remain with him for the rest of his career.[154] Once he relocated to New Mexico, he ceased to submit his work to juried exhibits.[155] He came to feel that his art, and modern art in general, was not appreciated by the art critics and collectors of Chicago, that these critics and collectors were more interested in American art coming from the East (particularly New York City) and that he had no critical support in Chicago. He explained his frustration in a letter to Arthur written in 1923:

> There is no one to write articles on art here in Chicago. Hi Simons has given up writing on such matters. The magazines seem to be interested only in the Eastern painters. The Scandinavian-American Review is all right but who can write intelligently on my work? And if someone did, would it be printed? A friend, through Blanding Sloan, wants to write one for the International Studio but nothing has come of it as yet.[156]

---

[154]"Our Point of View," *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, Sunday, November 25, 1923: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6481. Although the comment which follows is stereotypical in its reference to the hyper-sensitivity and emotional frailty of artists, the writer's assessment of Jonson's displeasure with juried exhibits by the early-1920s seems reasonable and likely:

> It is natural, perhaps, for men like Raymond Jonson to lose faith, as he has, not only in art exhibition juries but in the entire system of public exhibitions. Only a naturally tenacious pit-fighting, never-say-die fighting nature can absorb the unlimited number of disappointments. Usually the sensitive, reticent nature of the artist recalls from these rebuffs and the greater the actual ability of the rejected [artist] the more keen and effective the resentment.

[155]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 178.

[156]Jonson to Arthur, August 3, 1923, RJ 1: 102.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The number of newspaper articles from these years which discuss Jonson indicate that Jonson's conclusion was mistaken; he was given considerable attention from the art critics and journalists, who were at least tolerant of his work and sometimes praised it. Even if critical attention in Chicago during the early 1920s had shifted away from him, he certainly was not ignored or dismissed during his years in Chicago. Jonson's experiences battling the art establishment in Chicago seem to have left him with a lingering sense of frustration toward it and the anti-modern traditionalists who dominated it. He felt that advocating the cause of modernist art in Chicago was an uphill battle, that the traditionalist attitude was deeply entrenched in the Chicago art community. He once wrote:

> In painting modernism is not a cult or dogma.... . As far as I know the "Modernists" [sic] in painting are not organized. The whole field is open to all. Rather I would say the "old school" is organized. Try and get a "modernist" into the official exhibitions. Of course recently things are loosening up but I do not think it is because the "terrible ones" [the modernists] are organized.[157]

Jonson's frustration with the Chicago art community was only one of the reasons why he and Vera soon relocated to the Southwest. There were many others, and they will be discussed in the next chapter.

---

[157]Jonson to Arthur, January 4, 1929, RJ 1: 305.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE RELOCATION TO NEW MEXICO AND THE ABSTRACT LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS AND COMPOSITIONS SERIES

Jonson moved to New Mexico in the summer of 1924, after deciding to do so in the summer of 1922 and devoting two years to earning and saving as much money as possible to pay for the move. The decision to relocate to New Mexico was based largely on the need to live inexpensively and to escape the noise, dirt, and hectic pace of the modern American city, which more often than not proved quite unappealing and disturbing to Jonson. The climate, terrain, and culture of the western United States–of the broad prairies and towering mountains of America–were intimately familiar to Jonson for as long as he could remember. It was in such rural environments that he found tranquility, spiritual renewal, and artistic inspiration throughout his life. When Jonson was living in or visiting a large city, he always availed himself of its social and cultural opportunities. He was a frequent visitor to museums, galleries, studios, theaters, and concerts. But the common urban dilemmas of dirt, noise, high rent, and dense crowding were always bothersome and distracting to his art, and they eventually compelled him to leave Chicago and return to the more rural, spacious West.

During the fourteen years Jonson lived in Chicago, he made numerous trips to rural areas across the United States, sometimes traveling only as far as the suburbs of Chicago, other times traveling thousands of miles east or west. Most of these trips were made for the purposes of sketching from nature and getting away from urban life. Some of them were made possible by nation-wide tours of plays produced by the Chicago Little Theatre. Jonson

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

would take side trips to the countryside whenever possible during the Chicago Little Theatre tours. Jonson made a long-distance sketching trip as early as the summer of 1914, when he was invited by J. Banding Sloan, his artist-friend from the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, to come to Texas (Sloan came from Corsicana, Texas) and tour the Southwest in order to sketch from nature during the summer.[1] Jonson and Sloan traveled by automobile through Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. This appears to have been Jonson's first visit to New Mexico. During this trip, Jonson found rural life and the landscape of the West very peaceful and comforting. He wrote to his mother while in Clayton, New Mexico, saying: "You will notice that we have reached N.M., and it's great. We came in sight of the mountains to-day, [sic] that is, the beginning of them..... We haven't done any painting yet. We are waiting till we get in the mountains. The next trip ought to be the beginning of great scenery."[2] A week later, in Raton, New Mexico, he wrote to his mother: "We have at last reached the mountains..... Made sketch last night. It's quiet and simple here."[3] About two weeks later he summarized his high praise for touring the countryside and sketching outdoors by saying: "It's wonderful, this thing of touring. And then to be painting, camping and traveling and really seeing things."[4]

In 1915, Jonson toured much of the country when the Chicago Little Theatre went on a national tour with its production of *The Trojan Woman*. This tour went to California,

---

[1]Jonson to his mother, July 1, 1914, RJ 1: 42.

[2]Jonson to his mother, August 9, 1914, RJ 1: 42-43.

[3]Jonson to his mother, August 26, 1914, RJ 1: 43.

[4]Jonson to his mother, September 3, 1914, RJ 1: 43.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and while in California Jonson had the opportunity to visit the nearby countryside and do some sketching.[5] In August of 1916, Jonson made a three-week visit to rural Michigan for recreation and sketching from nature.[6] In September 1917, Jonson and Vera visited Colorado, where they spent a few weeks in Eldora.[7] While in Eldora, Jonson wrote to his mother: "It is simply marvelous up here. I have painted everyday so it is beginning to look quite like home here. I have taken only one long hike as yet, but plan to do more before leaving. The air is so good."[8] In February of 1918, Jonson traveled through much of the West with Rolf and Borgny Hammer while working on their productions of Henrik Ibsen's plays *Hedda Gabbler* and *The Master Builder*.[9] Jonson and Vera visited Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah from March to September of 1918. While in Salt Lake City, Jonson wrote: "The country here is great. To-day [sic] being Sunday, we took a long walk up towards the mountains. A nice clear warm day and beautiful white snow-clad mountains made one feel happy to be here."[10] A month later, while visiting Estes Park, Colorado, Jonson wrote that "this is a glorious place–right in the mountains."[11]

Jonson spent several months during the summers of 1919 and 1920 at the MacDowell

---

[5]Arthur Feinsod, *Poetry of the Theatre: Raymond Jonson and the Chicago Little Theatre Years, 1912-1917*: n.p.; Jonson to his mother, July 31, 1915, RJ 1: 50.

[6]Jonson to his mother, August 15, 1916, RJ 1: 58.

[7]Jonson in letters to his mother dated August 27 and September 5, 1917, RJ 1: 67.

[8]Jonson to his mother, September 5, 1917, RJ 1: 67.

[9]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 175.

[10]Jonson to his mother, March 3, 1918, RJ 1: 70.

[11]Jonson to his mother, April 2, 1918, RJ 1: 70.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire.[12] He was able to go there because he was awarded the New York City MacDowell Association Scholarship in 1919. He wrote to his mother that "this [the MacDowell Colony and Peterborough, New Hampshire]–you may have guessed it–is a very nice, beautiful, peaceful place."[13] Prior to his stay at the MacDowell Colony in 1920, Jonson spent a few weeks in Ogunquit, Maine; he was there from April 29 to May 17. During this extended stay in Maine, he produced fifteen oil sketches and four drawings.[14]

The evolution of Jonson's thinking on the problems of urban life is clearly demonstrated by his letters to his family and his comments in his diary written in the years he lived in Chicago and the first few years he lived in New Mexico. References to these problems became more frequent in the few years before 1920. The earliest reference to these feelings appears in a letter of September 1916 that Jonson wrote to his sister Esther:

> How wonderful the outdoors is. I've just got back from a most wonderful trip, visit, vacation to old mother natural nature. Three weeks in the Michigan woods have done me more good than anything else I can think of. And I painted practically every day, real study.... . This unfortunate city, [Chicago] has no place that one in my position can call his own. One feels restless here. There is no calm. All is fighting and therefore one like myself, calm and peaceful, is rather swamped amidst the debris. One lives where he can and not as he would like.[15]

By the beginning of 1918, he had decided he wanted to move west. He wrote:

---

[12]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 40-41, 175; McCauley, *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years*: 31.

[13]Jonson to his mother, June 7, 1919, RJ 1: 77.

[14]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 176.

[15]Jonson to his sister Esther, September 23, 1916, RJ 1: 60.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> I am trying to locate some kind of work west of Denver, we [he and Vera] don't care much where. We are tired of this filthy, stinking hole, Chicago. The mountains–oh, that surely is the place for us. It's hard for I don't know where to look or write. We dream of California, we dream of Arizona and New Mexico, we know Colorado and where, oh where can one live?[16]

Chronic poverty and the absence of sufficient employment either in Chicago or out West, probably coupled with an uncertainty concerning his artistic direction, indefinitely postponed Jonson's plan to relocate to the West.

Jonson's two long visits to the MacDowell Colony helped to confirm his belief that quiet, peaceful, rural life was more desirable and comfortable for him. He wrote to his family during his first stay at the art colony: "I have no money. I carry none. I need none. I have all one could desire to-day. [sic] To-morrow [sic] one must needs [sic] move on and then–oh, well, that 'to-morrow' [sic] is not 'till fall. Meanwhile the birds sing on and I dream and paint.... . How can there be strife when life can be so wonderful?"[17] During his second visit to the colony the following year, Jonson wrote to his family: "Everything is going fine with us here. It always does. It is so pleasant to be out of the terrible commercial atmosphere of New York.... ."[18]

Jonson's comments about the geography of rural New England, inspired by his visits to the MacDowell art colony, reveal that his interest in painting landscapes favored the sublime landscape over the picturesque and beautiful landscape, although he was certainly appreciative of nature in its infinite variety and diversity. The following comment in his

---

[16]Jonson to his mother, January 29, 1918, RJ 1: 69.

[17]Jonson to his mother, June 7, 1919, RJ 1: 75-77.

[18]Jonson to his mother, June 8, 1920, RJ 1: 82.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

diary, written during his first visit to the MacDowell art colony, is the closest Jonson ever came to declaring his preference for the sublime:

> The country here is very nice–rather more dreamy and poetic than strong rugged and facinating [sic] like the western mountains. It is such that my mind rather dreams along composing imaginative arrangements.
>
> I have several ideas on which I am working. It is a great joy to be free from noise and the struggle in the city. Of course, I prefer the wilder large nature but grant that this is good for one's soul also. Therefore, I shall work by mood and spirit.[19]

Jonson and Vera spent the summer of 1922 in New Mexico. Although this visit to the state was not his first, it was far more influential than his 1914 visit, and would change the direction of his life and art. Jonson was encouraged to visit and explore the area once again by two close friends. One was the poet and art collector John Curtis Underwood, who financially subsidized the 1922 voyage by paying the travel expenses.[20] The second was the Swedish-born painter Birger Sandzén, who was something of a mentor to Jonson. Jonson met Sandzén as a result of having exhibited at the annual exhibit of Swedish-American artists held at the Swedish Club in Chicago in 1913, and they remained friendly and in frequent communication [21] Sandzén had traveled across much of Europe and North America before he settled permanently in Lindsborg, Kansas. He had first visited the West in 1899 and returned in 1908, 1915, and 1919, visiting Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and

---

[19]Jonson's diary, July 6, 1919, pp. 110-111, RJ 8: 6099-6100.

[20]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 176; Jonson to John Curtis Underwood, June 22, 1937, RJ 4: 2878.

[21]Jonson to Eunice Tietjens, 1919, RJ 1: 75.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

California.[22] He was amazed at the distinctively beautiful terrain and light which he encountered and realized early on that the Southwest offered much for his own painting. In a letter written to Jonson in September 1919, Sandzén, who lived in Kansas, wrote about the cultural richness and artistic happenings of New Mexico, which he had just visited:

> I have just come back from a long trip to New Mexico and Colorado which I enjoyed immensely.... . In New Mexico we made Santa Fe our headquarters. It is a most charming old town, a meeting place for artists and writers from all parts of our country. Nordfeldt has been living in Santa Fe ever since he was released from the naval camouflage. He has a lot of fine etchings and paintings–quite radical of course–from New Mexico. In spite of his extremely "advanced" manner of interpreting things, I think he is one of the very few that have understood the character of picturesque New Mexico, figure as well as landscape. Marsden Hartley is another gifted radical among the Santa Fe artists. Most of them are rather conservative.... . The new Museum in Santa Fe is a glorious building in Indian mission style. One of the many fine sites we enjoyed was Frijoles Canyon, about 38 m [sic] from Santa Fe, with its wonderful cliff dwellings. We also made a 400 mile trip in the wilderness, which took us four days, and saw several of the most picturesque Indian villages and the ruined "cities that died of fear."[23]

It is not hard to believe that such an enticing letter from an influential artist-friend, who mentioned that another mentor and friend of Jonson was already living and working in New Mexico, must have encouraged Jonson to not only visit the West once again but New Mexico in particular.

---

[22]Emory Lindquist, *Birger Sandzén: An Illustrated Biography* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993): 39-41.

[23]Birger Sandzén to Jonson, 1919, RJ 4: 2786-2787. The most recent and thorough studies of Sandzén are Emory Lindquist, *Birger Sandzén: An Illustrated Biography* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993) and Charles Pelham Greenough III, *Birger Sandzén: The Graphic Work* (Lindsborg, KS: Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, 2001).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson and Vera were in New Mexico from June 6 until October 11 of 1922.[24] Jonson wrote as early as April 16, 1922, in letters to his family, of his plans to visit New Mexico: "We are planning to leave here [Chicago] about June 2 for Santa Fe, N.M. A friend [Underwood] is paying our railroad fare. What we will live on I do not know yet."[25] For Jonson, the trip was enjoyable, productive, and, to say the least, profound. As he wrote in his diary a short while before leaving Chicago, he was anxious for this trip: "We are going west–Santa Fe–are planning to leave June 2. I am very glad for I feel the need of a change–to get away. I should like to go way off some place–to the wilderness but we cannot so must take what we can get. There are many painters in Santa Fe and that I do not like. I want to get away entirely. I must work by myself."[26] He expressed similar enthusiasm for the voyage when he wrote to his mother in a letter of April 26, 1922, that "both of us are well and somewhat keyed up in expectation of new camping grounds," and a few weeks later in another letter to her that "we are all excited and expect to get much from this summer's work."[27]

His earliest response to New Mexico was exuberant, as his diary entry of June 8, 1922, reveals: "Ha! Ha! Here we are–in the land of open spaces–mountains–fresh air–Mexicans–Indians–white men. We left Chicago June 1st–6 P.M. ....arriving [in New

---

[24]Jonson's diary, June 8 and November 10, 1922, pp. 344 and 347, RJ 8: 6209, 6211.

[25]Jonson to his mother, April 16, 1922, RJ 1: 93.

[26]Jonson's diary, entry dated April 25, 1922, p. 339, RJ 8: 6207.

[27]Jonson in letters to his mother dated April 26 and May 9, 1922, RJ 1: 94.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Mexico] at 6 P.M.–June 6th.... . This country looks good–every corner is of interest. Now for work."[28] The same exuberance is expressed in a letter to his mother in which he said:

> The place is wonderful, what little of it we have seen. The visual part is great. The human beings are evidently the same here as those in other places. Graft–graft, the struggle for existence induces in the human race a greediness that is obnoxious.
>
> There are quite a number of artists here but as far as I can make out, the bad predominate although there are a few who are very good. Nordfeldt is here–you remember he was in the 57th St. colony at the time I was. I haven't seen him yet. His work is good–very good. Many eastern painters come here for the summer, the place has a reputation as an art center, and as things are going at present it promises to produce a distinctive American art–which of course does not mean much as such.
>
> The Museum is the most beautiful I have ever seen. It is an example of what might be called the only American architecture aside from the skyscraper. It is a combination of Southwestern Spanish Mexican Colonial and Indian Pueblo.
>
> The people here, that is those who seem to fit the surroundings, Mexicans and Indians, are most interesting. The population is about 6000 Mexicans and 2000 Americans. The Indians are scattered around the surrounding country and come into town occasionally.[29]

More than a month later, in another letter to his mother, he described New Mexico as "the Land of Sunshine and Color and Tragedy" and went on to describe the region with the following lengthy comment:

> Santa Fe is a glorious place in many ways. I am gathering knowledge and material. While we have been here I've made about 85 sketches in color; not much good, but when I get through I hope to be able to do a few compositions that will have some significance. The skies here are the most satisfying I know of, the people perfectly decorative and somewhat primitive, the architecture the finest I have seen, the mountains not so much. But in the radius of 75 miles, I understand, there is everything to be desired in that line.

---

[28]Jonson's diary, June 8, 1922, p. 344, RJ 8: 6209.

[29]Jonson to his mother, June 8, 1922, RJ 1: 95.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> As I must walk I don't get far away. Nevertheless we are happy. We have work, a roof over our heads and food.[30]

Two weeks later he wrote: "We have been on a three day camping trip with some friends up in the Jemez Mountains. Had a most glorious trip, the scenery is gorgeous and we saw an Indian Dance [sic] which was great!"[31]

It was during this trip to New Mexico that Jonson had the third of the five religious, mystical experiences he claimed to have had during his lifetime. As with the first two, this one would profoundly influence the direction his artistic development would take. He briefly explained the event in the lecture he gave to the Chili Club of Santa Fe in August of 1949:

> Santa Fe, 1922:
> While visiting Santa Fe for the first time another such experience but advanced in character [compared to the first two] was granted me. During a 2 or 3 day camping and sketching trip at Buckman [New Mexico] I suddenly realized that this was a turning point and a new beginning was necessary and that the results of this would be along the line sensed but not really known back in 1911. This necessitated a long course of study and work in connection with the construction, atmosphere and character of our environment here. Through this I sensed a means of arriving at plastic design. Therefore it was necessary to move permanently into this country, which was finally accomplished in 1924. For the next several years much work was done directly from the landscape, which now in retrospect appears to be a part of the general foundation for what was to follow. Much of the work from 1922 to 1929 was semi-abstract.[32]

Consequently, Jonson's motivation to relocate to the Southwest was intensely personal and even religious in origin. It became something he felt he must do, not only to escape the

---

[30]Jonson to his mother, July 15, 1922, RJ 1: 95-96.

[31]Jonson to his mother, August 3, 1922, RJ 1: 96.

[32]Jonson, lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, p. 6, RJ 9: 6329.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

problems of urban life, not only to live less expensively, not only to have more time to paint, but because he came to believe it was predestined, that it was meant to be. Although Jonson does not specifically state that God directed him to move to the Southwest, it was his own sense of what is the Divine that completed the impulse to relocate. It is very much part of Jonson's character and spirituality that he did not identify God as the source of his direction. For Jonson, the Divine was a non-verbal, non-literal, inanimate presence, but a very real presence nonetheless.

By September, Jonson had decided he wanted to move permanently to New Mexico. In a letter to Arthur he wrote: "It is very wonderful here.... . We are trying to find a way to settle here. It seems almost a crime to bury onesself [sic] in the dirt and noise of Chicago."[33] He explained his intentions and plans more thoroughly in his diary, when he wrote a month after he and Vera had returned to Chicago:

> Too bad that I have neglected writting [sic] in this book. Our summer in Santa Fe was so wonderful! that [sic] a few notes on what was happening would have been interesting. Oh well. I spent my entire time working out doors [sic]–studying–sketching. I did about 50 fairly decent things. It is a good thing for one to get out and work with nature. It is the best means of study that I know of.... .
>
> In Santa Fe we made several friends. We plan to go back. Have decided that it is the place for us. I like it better than any place I've ever been in. So we decided to get a piece of land! I spent a great deal of time looking around and inquiring. So I found the thing–2 acres on the edge of town.... .[34]

He explained what was developing in a letter to his sister Ruth: "I get the deed to-morrow. [sic] We have gotten the piece we wanted–about two and a fourth acres, well up on a hill,

---

[33]Jonson to Arthur, September 22, 1922, RJ 1: 96.

[34]Jonson's diary, November 10, 1922, p. 347, RJ 8: 6211.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the town off below us. Of course we're in the city. The piece is out up with arroyos which makes it very interesting, and I believe the old Santa Fe Trail ran either through it or very near it. We are getting it for $460.00."[35]

Jonson and Vera decided to apply all their efforts to earning enough money to pay off their debts in Chicago and save enough money to travel back to Santa Fe and build a home and studio. It required exhaustive effort in doing all the assorted work in commercial art, teaching, and the theater that they could find for most of 1923 and the first half of 1924. As a result, Jonson did extremely little sketching or painting during this period, devoting all his time and energy to earning as much money as possible and refusing to allow his commercial activities and his painting to combine or even co-exist. He explained his intentions to his mother when he wrote in a letter of May 1923:

> I have stopped painting for a year if necessary in order to get this filthy lucre [money] that seems to be the world's curse. And I will not let it [doing various jobs to earn money] become mixed in with my true life and expression. Therefore I can do no work while I am making money. And I know that we shall have what is necessary within a year.[36]

At this time Vera was working for the Grace Hickox Studios, an acting and dance school in Chicago, and Jonson was selling lots of his works, doing repair work for his landlord, making stage sets for plays given by the College Club, doing a variety of commercial art projects, and teaching at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts.[37] Jonson explained his plans in his diary:

---

[35]Jonson to his sister Ruth Johnson, October 3, 1922, RJ 1: 96.

[36]Jonson to his mother, May 18, 1923, RJ 1: 99.

[37]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> About April first we made a decision that is still holding out..... We decided to get ourselves out of this mess of debts and rent paying. Vera has a job at G.H.S. [Grace Hickox Studios] and I am not painting but trying to find things to do. Vera is to save 1000 and I 4000 by the 1st of June 1924. Then we go to Santa Fe and build a studio home. After that. No one knows.[38]

Before moving to the Southwest, Jonson voiced his concerns that this move might not solve their financial difficulties. In a letter to his mother from January, 1924, Jonson discussed how he was effectively prostituting his artistic abilities by doing a variety of boring, hack commercial work just for the money, but he seemed a little uncertain that the pending move would end these problems. He wrote:

> I don't know whether it will be any better in Santa Fe. All I know is that we will have fresh air and a clean place to work in. I must get away from here and paint, where makes little difference. Santa Fe offers this means on a basis that I thought I could stand. And I'm going to make it. Here [in Chicago] I would have to work many years to get the equivalent of what we will have there. And then where would we be? Here in this uninteresting Illinois, in a suburb of dirty, brainless Chicago.[39]

Two months later he wrote in another letter to his mother: "I hope I can bid farewell to this commercialism that eats up the soul of man. Will I find my solace in the mountains? We shall see."[40]

Jonson and his wife left Chicago for Santa Fe on or around July 1, 1924, traveling by automobile in a vehicle they had managed to buy in early June of 1924.[41] They arrived in their new home on July 31, 1924. In his first diary entry after arriving in Santa Fe, Jonson

---

[38]Jonson's diary, July 6, 1923, p. 383, RJ 8: 6227.

[39]Jonson to his mother, January 5, 1924, RJ 1: 104-105.

[40]Jonson to his mother, March 21, 1924, RJ 1: 106-107.

[41]Jonson in letters to his mother dated June 4 and July 1, 1924, RJ 1: 108.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

declared that their mission was completed successfully: "I accomplished my aim–we are out of debt and have enough to build our studio–I believe. The sale of several not important things helped a great deal. I have taught steadly [sic] for 10 months at the Academy. I have done all sorts of things."[42] Relocating to New Mexico offered Jonson the promise of spiritual renewal and creative inspiration he had been seeking so desperately for years before the move. As he wrote in his diary: "Now. It seems I am at last to have a decent place in which to work. plenty [sic] of space, light and cleanliness. I am grateful."[43] In another passage from this diary entry he commented:

> We have come to a great country–full of the glories of nature, a climate that is a dream, a feeling to the atmosphere that it [sic] mystical, and a pack of painters that should be sent by 4th class freight to New England they are so lacking in concept and vitality. That is the one draw back [sic] here–too many painters and not enough artists.[44]

Jonson's displeasure with urban, industrial, capitalist life and his search for a peaceful, rural alternative parallels Gauguin's displeasure with Europe and supposedly highly developed civilizations in favor of a tranquil, tropical oasis where life would always be pleasant and simple and an artist would have ample time, inspiration and subjects to paint.

Moving to New Mexico did nothing to solve the financial problems that had beleaguered Jonson for his entire adult life. For the first several years in Santa Fe, he managed to earn enough to survive by teaching art and selling art materials to other artists

---

[42]Jonson's diary, September 1, 1924, p. 396, RJ 8: 6234.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Jonson's diary, September 1, 1924, p. 397, RJ 8: 6234.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

from the garage of his Santa Fe home.[45] Shortly after settling in New Mexico, Jonson conceived a plan to open his own summer art school. The Atalaya School that Jonson founded conducted programs of study in the summers of 1926 and 1927. Jonson closed the school permanently after the second summer, probably because it was financially unsuccessful.[46] Vera also worked at the Indian and Mexican Trading Store in Santa Fe for several years after she and Jonson settled in New Mexico, selling various handmade goods.[47] For the first ten years in New Mexico, the Jonsons would manage to survive financially with these meager sources of income.

In early 1934, Jonson began teaching at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He would continue to teach there for twenty years, retiring as a full professor in 1954. He briefly explained how he obtained this teaching position in a letter to Arthur written in 1934: "During December I fell heir to a teaching job at the University of New Mexico, at Albuquerque. There is only one criticism a week, beginning the first week in February, but will necessitate a weekly trip for that purpose."[48] He took over the teaching assignments of the New Mexico painter Kenneth Adams, who was going to Europe for a year.[49] He was offered two courses for the following semester, one drawing course and one

---

[45]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 176.

[46]Vera to Arthur, November 1, 1925, RJ 1: 246.

[47]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 176.

[48]Jonson to Arthur, January 15, 1934, RJ 1: 428-429.

[49]Jonson, interview with Sylvia Loomis, April 23, 1964, transcript p. 5, Oral History Collection of the Archives of American Art, reel 3949, frame 720.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

painting course, and he considered the pay satisfactory. As he explained to Arthur: "The pay will be proper and so we shall have almost enough to live on. And it means I will have 6 full days in the studio. An excellent arrangement. So you see things are on the upgrade."[50] Jonson would continue to teach at the University on a varying full-time and part-time basis for the next twenty years. He also curated many exhibits for University Museum and art galleries. His most famous student was probably the California abstract painter Richard Diebenkorn. This teaching work finally provided Jonson and his wife with a continuous, adequate income on which to live.

Jonson suffered periodic bouts of depression during the 1920s and early 1930s. This problem is indicated by vivid descriptions of symptoms typical of depression found in numerous letters Jonson wrote to his mother and Arthur at the time. The problem seems to have been rooted in chronic financial hardships, the lack of critical attention, and uncertainty concerning his artistic direction. The failure to solve these problems by moving to New Mexico and the stress of struggling to accumulate enough money for the move seems to have exacerbated the problem. It would not be until the mid-1930s, when Jonson achieved real financial security by teaching at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, that he would overcome this chronic depression. As he wrote to Arthur in 1926:

> You lucky boy–to have "a great capacity for happiness." That is the greatest thing in life. I know–because I have known those days–but now–Ah–for the last year I have been miserable–most unhappy. Happiness is the greatest thing–for then one can work and feel right in it–or one can do other things knowing it furthers the work. But with unhappiness–it is the reverse–Lucky Boy. Vera thinks it is my health–I doubt it. Anyhow I have had an examination. Everything excellent except teeth. Three abscesses. So out

---

[50]Jonson to Arthur, April 25, 1934, RJ 1: 436.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> come three. One came out today. Very bad. Here is hoping this is the cause. Last fall I had one out because it pained me and was obviously abscessed. It was. Looks as if I were well on the way for false teeth.[51]

Vera was well aware of the situation, and she discussed it with Arthur in at least one letter:

> We have so enjoyed your letters. Especially when Raymond was feeling so very wretched. They did so much to cheer him up. Lately he has been taking some treatments from a doctor who calls himself a chiropractor and is a graduate of the Los Angeles School of Osteopathy, Dr. Chas. W. Winchester, by name, and they seem to be doing him a great deal of good. The last two days, particularly, he has seemed so much more like himself that he has been digging out doors [sic] and working in the basement at carpentry without getting so completely exhausted as a few hours–or even minutes–made him heretofore.[52]

Jonson described the symptoms in a 1927 letter to his mother:

> I would have several days of terrible depression–then an adjustment [treatment for his back pain from a chiropractor or osteopathic physician] and presto–O.K. once more. These sieges came during unusual strain of work or immediately after ward. [sic] Here I've had a great number of treatments and to hardly any result.... . Now don't think I'm in the throes of melancholia all the time–I'm not.... . There are days when all is fine I work and live. Then down I go. Work no good–feel terrible–whats [sic] the use. Then back again. Its this terrific struggle to express in paint–the emotions–reactions–the life within one. I guess I'm paint mad and can't make any headway toward purification. My technique, or rather any means, seems inadaquate. [sic][53]

Jonson seemed to suspect that his depression was related to his chronic artistic frustration.

Four years later the problem occurred again, as indicated in a letter from Jonson to Arthur:

> I have not been able to do much work. May has probably mentioned the fact that I have been under a damp blanket. But I am feeling so much better that even the sunshine is sunshinny. [sic] I actually am looking forward to a swell siege of work. Nevertheless I have accomplished a little. After all it is not

---

[51]Jonson to Arthur, February 15, 1926, RJ 1: 259.

[52]Vera to Arthur, May 9, 1926, RJ 1: 267.

[53]Jonson to his mother, January 27, 1927, RJ 1: 126.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the quantity that counts, but to be so depressed and unhappy is not good. Life is a curious affair is it not.[54]

Arthur offered the following explanation of Jonson's condition and proposed the following solution:

> I'm sorry that you have been depressed and all of that. However, I don't feel that it is necessary for you to have these devastating attacks. To a certain extent I believe it is a bad habit that you have formed. I think also that you should analyze the situation and make use of what you find therefrom. Usually these periods of depression follow closely on an extremely productive period....they are, then, a reflex of the emotional and physical depletion that accompany your painting. If that is an accurate diagnosis it seems to me that a natural way to meet the situation is to avoid any attempt at painting and to calmly and reasonably understand that it is the same sort of exhaustion that a runner feels after a strenuous race. It is understandable that any creative worker feels that he must get things done, must keep at work all the time, as though any pausing would keep him from saying something. But is this true? It seems to me that for a man to force himself to work when he is not in the mood for work is sure to be ruinous to his chances for expression.... . After the emotional jag of painting, when you find yourself slipping into one of the depressed states why don't you throw yourself into other things? Do it consciously; recognizing that for a time you are yourself "fed up on painting," and in need of a change. Say to yourself: "Well, I find that I'm feeling in this rotten way, which must mean that for the time being I have painted enough. So now I shall recuperate my emotional, mental and physical resources.[55]

Jonson found his brother's opinion of his depression to be condescending and insensitive, as he indicated quite emphatically in his letter of response: "I cannot help if I am so made that through certain conditions resulting through my work I am cursed with these depressions at times. It may have nothing to do with art and it may have a great deal to do with it. I am

---

[54]Jonson to Arthur, March 13, 1930, RJ 1: 353.

[55]Arthur to Jonson, March 14, 1930, RJ 1: 353-354.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

not in position to say. And I doubt that you are."[56]

Ironically, Jonson may have acknowledged the accuracy of Arthur's explanation of the cause of his depression in a couple of letters he wrote during these years. One such instance is the previously quoted letter to his mother of 1927 in which he said that "these sieges came during unusual strain of work or immediately afterward." Another instance is the following, written in a letter to Jonson's mother and Arthur several years earlier about Arthur's concerns at that time with his own sense of purpose and achievement as a singer:

> Art has the power to raise me to such spiritual heights that man becomes only a small detail in the fabric of the universe.... . I do know one thing. If one can find the key to creation, I mean art creation, there is no material stumbling block to trip one up as long as faith remains.... . I suppose one must look for happiness, joy in one's work, an appreciation of life, and love. When one has these, life is a glorious thing. I don't see where the material and physical play any really direct part. We never enjoy or appreciate those things we can have without any effort or sacrifice. For myself, I would gladly sacrifice all physical for one complete existence of spiritual emotion.[57]

With these statements, Jonson made clear his belief that the spiritual in life is paramount in connection with the material in life, that the spiritual will sustain the individual and is at the core of his own artistic efforts. This letter is further evidence that Jonson's religious beliefs had transformed themselves early in his adult life, shifting from the dogma of the Baptist faith in which he was raised to a less specifically doctrinaire and less specifically Christian belief, but a belief in the presence and power of the Divine at a deeper, more personal, but less concrete level. It also indicates the connection that he perceived between his emotional well-being and the success of his artistic activity.

---

[56]Jonson to Arthur, May 30, 1930, RJ 1: 357.

[57]Jonson to his mother and Arthur, August 20, 1920, RJ 1: 83-84.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

It would seem at first that Jonson's relocation to the Southwest was a failure; he was socially and geographically isolated from the American avant-garde to the East, he had to continually devote time to teaching and selling art supplies to earn a living (time he desperately wanted for painting), and he suffered chronic depression during the first ten years he lived in New Mexico. Yet, Jonson remained prolific throughout the 54 years he painted while living in New Mexico. During the first ten years that he lived in New Mexico Jonson exhibited his work frequently at museums and galleries across the nation. Many of these exhibitions were devoted exclusively to his work and others were group exhibitions. The experiences with juried exhibitions in Chicago seem to have discouraged Jonson from participating in such competitive venues once he settled in New Mexico.[58] In the various exhibitions he had during the first ten years he lived in the Southwest, Jonson usually exhibited numerous works, some of them his most recent endeavors and others from years past that he considered important in his artistic development and pictorially successful in their own right. Although circumstances varied from exhibit to exhibit, it seems that as far as Jonson and the curators and dealers who exhibited his work were concerned, these exhibits were well attended by the public and received fairly positive responses from critics, but very few works were ever sold.

The reception of Jonson's work during his first several years in New Mexico was encouraging; the move hardly seemed detrimental to his career. *Light* was purchased by John Curtis Underwood in 1925 for $500, and Underwood then donated it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. At the same time, Jonson was awarded a prize of $1000 for *The Power of*

---

[58]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 178.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

God in a competition announced and juried exclusively by Underwood, in which Underwood visited the studios of numerous painters in Santa Fe to view their work before announcing his choice.[59] The event received considerable attention in Santa Fe newspapers, and the publicity helped Jonson gain some measure of fame in the community of artists and art patrons in New Mexico shortly after he settled in the state. In 1922 Jonson had exhibitions in Milwaukee, Madison, Minneapolis and Cedar Rapids.[60] In March 1924, Jonson had 33 works exhibited at the Omaha Society of Fine Arts in Kansas City, Missouri.[61] In 1928 Jonson showed forty works in an exhibit held at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in February and the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art in March.[62] In late 1931 Jonson showed twenty works at the Delphic Studios in Chicago.[63] In early 1932, Jonson showed 23 works at the Studio Gallery in Chicago that was operated by Increase Robinson.[64] During

---

[59]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 178; Jonson to his mother, September 13, 1925, RJ 1: 111; Jonson to John Curtis Underwood, June 22, 1937, RJ 4: 2878; "Raymond Johnson [sic] Winner of Underwood $500 Art Prize," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 15, 1925: n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6488.

[60]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 177; "Exhibit of Paintings by Raymond Jonson," Milwaukee Art Institute, May 1922, exhibit brochure, 76: 876-877.

[61]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 177; "Exhibition of Paintings by Raymond Jonson," March 24 to April 20, 1924, Omaha Society of Fine Arts, exhibit brochure with list of 33 works in Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6483.

[62]"Exhibition of Oils, Watercolors and Drawings by Raymond Jonson of Santa Fe, New Mexico," Museum of Fine Arts of Houston, February 5 to 27, 1928, exhibit brochure, 76: 881-883.

[63]"Exhibition of Paintings by Raymond Jonson," Delphic Studios, New York City, November 23-December 6, 1931, exhibit brochure, 76: 885.

[64]"Exhibition of Paintings by Raymond Jonson," Studio Gallery, Chicago, January 8-29, 1932, exhibit brochure, 76: 887-888.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

these years Jonson had works included in numerous exhibits at the Fine Arts Museum in Santa Fe.[65] In 1927, Jonson formed a short-lived, loose-knit alliance of modernist painters in the Southwest that took on the name "Six Men." The members of Six Men included Jonson, Nordfeldt, Andrew Dasburg, Josef Bakos, Willard Nash, and John E. Thompson.[66] They exhibited together as a group in 1927 in San Francisco, Seattle, and Tucson. Compared to the other artist organizations that Jonson was involved with before and after, Six Men involved little self-governance, spiritual or mystical thought, or ideology.

Relocating to the Southwest had profound ramifications for Jonson's art. The transformation of Jonson's art into a modernist, abstract mode of expression during his first several years in New Mexico is much more than simply coincidental. The Chicago years were years of continuous artistic struggle for Jonson, who felt he must always be drawing and painting for he believed he "had something to say," and yet he seemed uncertain as to what that was or how he could best convey it. It was in landscapes, mostly sublime views of the Southwest, that Jonson came into his own artistically. With each passing year while living in Chicago, Jonson did more and more landscape paintings. During these years Jonson spent as much time as he could sketching nature from direct observation. His trips to the suburbs of Chicago or across the country clearly demonstrate his devotion to the subject of landscape and the traditional practice of landscape painting. It was customary for landscape painters in nineteenth-century America to travel long distances during the summer to sketch

---

[65]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 177.

[66]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 178; Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1910-1935*: 102. All the members of Six Men were from New Mexico except for Thompson, who was from Colorado.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

new and different aspects of nature, so that they could spend the winter in their studios developing these sketches into finished oil paintings.

Urban landscapes from early in the second decade of the twentieth century such as *Field Museum–Chicago* and *Ring of Smoke* would disappear entirely from Jonson's oeuvre by the middle of the decade. In the middle of the 1910s, Jonson did several landscapes in which he depicted forest areas in a manner somewhat reminiscent of nineteenth-century French Barbizon painting, although the application of the paint shows the influence of later Impressionist landscape painting. These works, such as *Sketch–Road in Texas* of 1914 or *Eldora Creek* of 1917, were smaller, more intimate, and more conservative in technique and color than his landscapes based on the terrain of the West that Jonson began to paint around 1915. These paintings of Western scenes came to dominate his painting before the decade was over.

Jonson's landscape paintings from the mid-1910s to the early 1920s can be loosely grouped according to three basic patterns of style and content: the realistic, the Symbolist, and the abstract. A number of landscapes are fairly traditional, detailed views of mountain and forest scenes. Several others were done with great care given to the purely formal qualities of the composition and with a tendency to simplify and abstract forms and spaces for aesthetic effects. These paintings usually rely on the basic modernist tenets of simplification, distortion and exaggeration to convey meaning or create pleasing, intriguing visual effects. Hence, they tend toward abstract depictions of nature. Beginning in 1917 and continuing for several years, Jonson did numerous landscapes in which broad moral and philosophical themes are evoked. In telling a story, conveying a mood, or expressing an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

opinion, these works are Symbolist in origin and character. Some of the paintings are overtly narrative and convey meaning explicitly, others are more subtle in expression. They often involve distortion and exaggeration of nature for the expression of meaning, thereby making them all the more Symbolist in character. However, they are not abstract in the description of natural forms and spaces. By the mid-1920s Jonson would achieve his powerful and distinctive mode of expression by synthesizing these three tendencies into a balanced, personally workable whole. The continuous reoccurrence during these years of highly realistic landscapes demonstrates the slow, gradual and irregular pattern of development that Jonson's art took out of personal necessity; he had to develop his art as he deemed appropriate, and that development did not conform to much of the modernist art that was evolving at the time in Chicago, New York City and elsewhere in the United States, nor as it had developed in much of Europe.[67]

The expressive distortion, exaggeration and intensification of line, shape, color, and texture in Jonson's landscape paintings during these years originated in Pointillist, Symbolist and Fauve styles whose influence was spreading rapidly at this time. Jonson saw many such paintings at the Armory Show and at countless exhibits held in Chicago and elsewhere in the years after this groundbreaking exhibit. Among the Post-Impressionist landscapes that he would have seen at the Armory Show were several paintings of Tahiti by Gauguin, a couple of landscapes by Van Gogh, one by Cézanne, a mountain scene by Ferdinand Hodler, and a

---

[67]Nicolai Cikovsky, *Raymond Jonson (1891-1982): Pioneer Modernist of New Mexico* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, 1986): 5-6. Cikovsky briefly mentions the issue of Jonson's complicated stylistic evolution but offers little to help explain it.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

forest scene and a city view by Derain.[68] The various books and periodicals dealing with early modern that Jonson is known to have read or is likely to have read, such as Eddy's *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*, Wright's *Modern Painting*, and *Camera Work*, emphasized that art of the present could be more expressive and abstract than it had ever been before. In the years after the Armory Show, the exhibits of modern art at numerous galleries in the largest cities of the United States other than Stieglitz's 291 in New York would have also expanded and reinforced Jonson's awareness of the styles, ideas and goals of early modern painting.

A possible source of stylistic influence and artistic purpose for Jonson at this time, which would have been more personal and immediate for him, is the Post-Impressionist landscape paintings of Birger Sandzén. Sandzén's work could have demonstrated some of the many possibilities that could be derived from early modern painting. Sandzén developed a Fauve-like style in his landscape paintings around the time of the Armory Show. This is evident in such paintings as his *Grand Canyon* of 1915 [Plate 12], *Above the Timberline* of 1917 [Plate 13], *Sunshine and Shadow* of 1919, *Creek at Moonrise* of 1921, and *Twilight* of 1924.[69] [Plate 14] These last two paintings feature the somewhat rectangular, semi-fused array of brush strokes seen so often in Jonson's paintings up to the mid-1930s. Sandzén painted views of the West years before Jonson did and, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, he was fascinated by the West years before Jonson started painting. Sandzén's Post-

---

[68]Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988, 2nd ed.): "Catalogue Raisonné," pp. 241-327.

[69]Emory Lindquist, *Birger Sandzén: An Illustrated Biography* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993): xii-xiv, Plates 3-27.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Impressionist style would have been influenced not only by works in the Armory Show and other early exhibits and publications on modern art in the United States, but by his extensive travels and study of art in Europe at the dawn of the twentieth century. Sandzén studied in Paris and visited London in 1894, relocating permanently to the United States late the same year.[70] He returned to Europe in 1897, 1905 to 1906, and 1924. In 1897, he went to London, Paris, Cologne, Hamburg, Copenhagen and his native Sweden.[71] He spent much time visiting many exhibits, especially in Paris. During the 1905-1906 trip, he went to Sweden, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Munich, Venice, Rome, Florence, Naples, and Madrid.[72] In France and Italy he visited the major museums and architectural wonders of the past. These trips back to Europe coincided with important developments in early modernist painting, and it is likely that during these trips Sandzén saw much that influenced his painting for the rest of his career. Whatever Jonson learned from Sandzén about expressive, abstracted landscape painting, he quickly developed into something very much his own and more extreme in the distortion, simplification and exaggeration of nature.

Jonson's desire to paint the Rocky Mountains and the Southwest may have been inspired by Rockwell Kent, the well-known painter, printmaker, illustrator and writer. Kent became famous early in the twentieth century for his dramatic paintings of far-away locales such as Monhegan Island, Newfoundland, Greenland, Alaska, and Tierra del Fuego, which

---

[70]Lindquist, *Birger Sandzén*: 12-17.

[71]Lindquist, *Birger Sandzén*: 42-43.

[72]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

he visited starting around 1905.[73] His most famous painting is probably *Winter, Monhegan Island* of 1907. Although often vividly colored and gradually more abstract over the years, he never approached the abstraction that Jonson achieved. Jonson was familiar with Kent's work as early as 1918 and admired much of it. He wrote the following praise of Kent's work in his diary: "Kent's are powerful pieces of Dramatic [sic] mood. Simple and direct. Full of color with little actually used."[74] He does not mention what exhibits or publications of Kent's works that he had just seen nor what specific works he saw. In 1920, he saw an exhibit of Kent's work in New York City, and he wrote the following about it in his diary: "The most interesting and best exhibit we saw in N.Y. was Rockwell Kent. The Alaska pictures and oh how gorgeous they are."[75] In 1929, he wrote to Arthur: "I do not know [Rockwell] Kent personally but know his work pretty well.... . I have seen some works by him that were stunning and others that looked all the world like pot-boilers.... . I do not know his work of the last five years."[76]

Sketch–California Hills [Plate 15], an oil painting of 1915, is one of Jonson's earliest landscapes, and it shows that early in his career, about two years after the Armory Show, he was aware of the basic modernist tenets of simplification, exaggeration, and distortion for the sake of individual expression and creativity. It is an early example of Jonson's tendency

---

[73]The most recent study of Rockwell Kent is Constance Martin, et al., *Distant Shores: The Odyssey of Rockwell Kent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[74]Jonson's diary, November 11, 1918, p. 72, RJ 8: 6078.

[75]Jonson's diary, entry dated 1920 [no specific date given but apparently written in early May based on the dates of the entries before and after it], p. 199, RJ 8: 6141.

[76]Jonson to Arthur, January 29, 1929, RJ 1: 309.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to abstract nature in many of his landscapes. In this painting there are four rounded hills in the distance with a flat meadow in the foreground. The simplification and exaggeration of shapes and colors is a major stylistic departure and indicative of developments to come. The meadow is rendered with a slightly grayed, mustardy yellow. The hills behind it are rendered as smoothly rounded areas of yellow-green with darker, blue-green shadows that help to clarify contours. A pale blue has been used to fill in the sky. Several bushes and rocks in the foreground are described with loosely applied, short brush strokes. In most of the painting, paint is applied smoothly and flatly, as if it were intended primarily to fill in flat, abstracted shapes rather than describe actual forms in nature with photographic accuracy. The colors are intensified and exaggerated, not conforming to the scenery they are intended to depict. This painting was probably the result of sketches made during the Chicago Little Theatre's 1915 tour of *The Trojan Woman* that brought Jonson to California.[77]

The Rhythm of the Wind [Plate 16], done early in 1917, is probably Jonson's earliest Symbolist-inspired landscape. It also indicates the impact that stage design had on his painting in these years. In this painting, a tall tree with long, thin branches and no leaves is seen on the top of a rocky embankment alongside a river or sea. It has been placed to the far right in the composition. The tree and the rocky shore in the foreground are depicted only as one continuous, black silhouette. The tree is being blown by harsh winds, so that its branches bend far to our left in long, sweeping curves. The branches yield to the wind so

---

[77]This may be the painting Jonson described as follows in a 1915 letter: "One [of the works he had been painting recently] is a California scene–technically I believe it is the best–'Late Day,' with the warm evening sun hitting the clouds and the extreme top of the mountain. Predominance of green color." [Jonson to his mother, August 20, 1915, RJ 1: 51.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

easily that they look far too soft and flexible to be any kind of wood. Behind this tree and the shore we are given a panoramic view of the body of water. Far in the distance we see a coastline, painted in long strokes of dark blue. The body of water has been painted with a muted lavender, except for areas of white that describe splashing waves as the wind takes off briskly. Slightly toward the left is a single wave, cresting at an enormous height and taking on a perfectly round contour. Its underside is painted in lavender while the long side facing upward is painted in white. Other waves, shorter and choppier, surround it. A second rounded wave, smaller but seemingly increasing in size and strength, is seen farther to the right, close to the shoreline in the foreground. The sky is described as a large area of slightly muted ultramarine with several oval clouds scattered across our view of it. The description of forms and the illusion of depth in this painting are not as convincing as in many of Jonson's other landscapes from these years. The impossibly twisting tree, the enormous rounded waves, and the schematic sequence of clouds in the sky are artificial, decorative, and even slightly abstract. The arrangement of forms suggests depth according to abrupt shifts backward from one spatial plane to another, each one parallel to the canvas. Thus, the painting has the visual effect of a stage set, and this may not be coincidental. This effect of depth may have been inspired by the many stage designs Jonson had been creating for four years prior to making this painting. Solid forms have been distorted and exaggerated so that we may "see" wind by its physical interaction with more tangible forms in nature. This manipulation of representational content is indebted to the basic ideas of late-nineteenth century Symbolism. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, Jonson would return to this theme with a much more abstract approach in 1925, in *Composition Five–Wind.*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The Sentinel of 1917 [Plate 17], Jonson's next painting, is a much more realistic depiction of nature than that seen in the previous two paintings. This landscape features a tall, triangular mountain peak in the center of the canvas which is surrounded by somewhat flatter hills, some of which are covered with a smooth, thick coating of fresh snow. The right side of the mountain peak is bathed in bright, yellow sunlight while its left side is cast in cool, winter-like shadow. Rock forms in this painting have been rendered with flat, angular strokes of paint that are juxtaposed and fused carefully and thoughtfully to suggest nuances of shape, texture, color, and light. The paint applied to render the sunlit side of the mesa has been built up to a thick impasto surface with strokes of orange, yellow, and even slight traces of blue and purple. The sky is a bright light blue painted smoothly and with its tone carefully shaded so that it gradually becomes lighter toward the horizon. The mountain form that dominates the composition is a wonderful demonstration of Jonson's ability to render the forms of nature with both photographic conviction and emotive, spiritual impact. The paint handling indicates a thorough understanding of the painting techniques of Impressionism, Cézanne, Seurat, and perhaps (but less obviously and specifically) the early Fauve paintings of Matisse, along with a definite tightening of paint handling that would be considered more typically American. This painting is quite photographic in its depiction of nature, and can be considered Symbolist in meaning only because of the vague connotations of its title. It is very different in style from *Sketch–California Hills* and *Rhythm of the Wind*, and the enormous change in style among these three paintings, two of which were apparently done consecutively, demonstrates how Jonson's stylistic development was extremely changeable during the years in Chicago as he struggled to find an approach to painting that he considered

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

visually successful and entirely his own.

The aesthetic and expressive breakthrough that Jonson was searching for occurred in his 1917 painting *Light* [Plate 18] and a letter to his mother indicates he realized it not long after it was done:

> When the Brownes [Maurice Browne and Ellen van Volkenburg Browne] were in Chicago last February, we had them in the studio. I showed what I'd been painting. I have one picture which I feel has an element of that spiritual quality of which I speak. I usually show it last. It is not a perfect piece but it has something. It is called "Light." Well, I showed it. There were five people present besides Vera and me. It remained on the easel a long time. There was perfect silence. I don't know what happened. All rose to go. Maurice said to Vera: "This is the first time I have wept from emotion from painting. Poetry has moved me that way but never before painting." Then he said to me, "That is what we want in the Art Theater. [sic] That's spiritual." Now that picture has been worthwhile, and is just as important as anything else and I think more so.... . To be sure, all art does not consider the spiritual. I do.[78]

In *Light*, one slightly trapezoidal mesa looms over its neighbors and dominates the center of the composition. Most of the mesas, which stretch across the foreground around this dominant one, are colored with a medium-tone purple that is consistent throughout the painting, but which is lightened to a pinker hue in some areas to suggest the warm, bright sunlight passing through the clear, arid atmosphere. This tint of purple lines the right side of the dominant mesa, indicating the contrast of bright light and moderate shadow created as light is reflected through the cavernous spaces. The sky is a bright, deep yellow. The sun is defined by a white circle in the middle of the sky, its center placed in the composition so that it is slightly above the top of the dominant mesa. Two light-gray clouds, of almost cotton-like texture, float slowly by in the distance, apparently not that far above the ground.

---

[78]Jonson to his mother and Arthur, August 20, 1920, RJ 1: 83-84.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The simple but dynamic impact of Jonson's composition is achieved by placing the singularly important mesa slightly off center in the picture. The flattening and simplification of forms in this painting suggests the decorative artifice of simple-stage theater design. In fact, the mesa seems so flat and weightless as to appear to be a stage prop. This is Jonson's first triumphant use of light and color for pure emotive, even spiritual impact, and that it is achieved in a landscape of the Southwest and that it is indebted to stage design are surely not accidental or coincidental.[79]

The Decree of 1918 [Plate 19] is a Symbolist landscape in which the implied meaning of the title is clearly and emphatically reinforced by what is depicted. The painting is dominated by a deep yet luminous ultramarine that is the most distinctive color in Jonson's stage designs and landscapes of the late 1910s and 1920s. The painting features an enormous mountain rendered with irregular and jagged contours that suggest the weather-beaten rock formations of the Southwest. This mountain is centrally placed in the canvas and is flanked by other hills and summits of similar shape in the distance. Thick, dark blue-gray clouds blow across the mountains, engulfing and obscuring our view of many of them. A single lightning bolt, rendered with a zigzagging line of luminous yellow that contrasts vividly with the ultramarine, shoots from the clouds and heads downward from the right, striking the

---

[79]Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1910-1935*: 94-95. Udall considers *Light* a breakthrough work in that it combines Jonson's keen interest in light as pure optical experience with his interest in light for expression and spiritual enlightenment. She suggests that the sun in *Light*, depicted as a flat glowing circle, is derived from the Orphist abstractions of Delaunay and Kupka and American Synchromism. This connection is minimal and is most likely only coincidental. Udall's only evidence to support this claim is that Jonson read Willard Huntington Wright's *Modern Painting*, but she fails to realize that *Light* was painted in 1917 and Jonson's diary indicates he read Wright's book in 1918.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

mesa in its cavernous core. The lightning bolt creates a vivid magenta glow that illuminates this cavernous summit. It is a beam of light that interrupts the darkness of a stormy night in the mountains. The viewer observes the scene from a considerable but uncertain distance. He is sufficiently removed to have a panoramic view of the mountain and yet is made to feel that he is part of this stormy environment. The thematic overtones are overtly religious; the crack of thunder and the glow of a lightning bolt symbolize the Divine message, whatever that may be, referred to in Jonson's given title "The Decree." The overtones are also ominous and disturbing; clearly the Divine presence and power that is indirectly evoked is not pleased and is sending a corrective warning or instruction. The bleak mood is overwhelmingly reenforced by the palette, which is vivid and intense in color. The more overt simplification of forms, colors, and textures evident in earlier landscapes such as *Sketch–California Hills* has been replaced with a more solid, three-dimensional depiction of nature. However, the planarity of many of the mountain forms as well as the intensification of colors for emotive impact have been inspired by Jonson's earlier and continuing exposure to modernist painting and simple-stage theater design. The central and planar arrangement of the lightning-lit mountain and the focused, spotlight effect of the lightning bolt parallel the simplicity and directness typical of simple-stage theater design. Jonson's small gouache sketches for *The Trojan Women* and other plays feature a similar ultramarine used to describe the sky illuminated by moonlight. In this painting, the profound, religious meaning is conveyed in a very Symbolist manner; visual form and literal content are closely allied.

Although it was painted only weeks or months later, *The Power of God* of 1918 [Plate 20] is very different in style from *The Decree*. It features a large, rocky mesa at the top of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a sloping hill covered in snow. The mesa that fills much of the picture plane is cropped at the top of the canvas. The cropped view creates a sense of intimacy, of closeness to the beauty of the Western landscape, and yet simultaneously generates awe for the enormous space and scale of the land. The massive rock forms that comprise this mesa are described with various colors–ochres, siennas, very dark and deep shades of ultramarine, and some scattered blue-green. *The Power of God* and *The Sentinel* of 1917 and 1918 are more naturalistic than *Sketch–California Hills* of 1915 and *Light* and *The Decree*, both of 1918. Several other paintings of this period are realistic landscapes with no thematic overtones and no apparent attempts to apply an abstract vision to the depiction of nature. *Red Rocks, Colorado* of 1918 is similar in composition, color and subject to *The Power of God* and *The Sentinel* and yet it has no overt symbolic, moralistic meanings. These changes in style and themes are the result of Jonson's long, difficult search for artistic identity during his years in Chicago.

First Morning of 1920 [Plate 21] is a large (38" x 48") painting that features the planar, stage-set description of landscape found in the 1917 *Light*. The painting has a panoramic view of several mountains seen between large rocks which are placed at the lower left and right corners of the composition. Mountains are seen in parallel sequences extending farther and farther from the viewer.[80] The large rocks to the left and right in the foreground are defined with bright burnt orange. This use of color suggests raking light on the rocks that

---

[80]Jonson originally entitled this painting "Panorama" but changed it to "First Morning" in December 1921, according to a handwritten notation added to a sketch of the composition in his diary. In this diary entry, Jonson recorded the dimensions of the canvas and discussed some of the technical difficulties he had encountered with this painting. [Jonson's diary, December 18, 1920, p. 209, RJ 8: 6146.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

casts shadows containing traces of blue, a use of complementaries to define shadows that one would see often in Impressionist paintings. However, we quickly focus our attention on the mountains in the distance. Immediately behind the rocks we see a wide meadow, rendered with a pale and slightly muted green with the shadow of the mountain in the foreground cast over much of it. Beyond the meadow are seemingly parallel chains of mountains separated by other meadows. The mountains nearest the viewer are painted with a vivid, deep ultramarine that is gradually shaded to a lighter tone toward the ground, as if to indicate the presence of some mist in the atmosphere. The next series of mountains is depicted in the same gradually shaded manner, but some of the mountains are filled in with deep purple instead of ultramarine. The mountains that follow in seemingly parallel spatial planes are colored with slightly paler tones of purple and, in the most distant mountains, with blue-green. The meadows between the mountains are rendered with the same green. All the mountain forms are rendered with one or occasionally two hues that are gradually shaded to a lighter tone toward the ground. The contours of each mountain are clearly defined with sharp contrasts in tone and sometimes hue that indicate firmly defined shapes. The mountains become smaller in the distance, conforming to the reduction in size that would be customary in traditional perspective. Yet there is a vague sense that the mountain forms are creeping up the surface of the canvas. Hence, we are given accurate depth while at the same time we are reminded that this is a flat surface to which paint has been applied. There is little sense of texture or mass in these mountains, except for the rocks in the foreground which frame the panoramic view. The mountains in this painting seem somewhat like two-dimensional cut-outs placed upright, very much like stage sets. Considering Jonson's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

experience with theater design, this effect is hardly surprising, and may indeed be deliberate. The effect of simplified, flattened forms is very similar to that conveyed by *Light*.

This painting appears to have been inspired by the mountains of New Hampshire, not those of the West. Jonson is known to have started this painting as early as July 4, 1920, when he was spending his second summer at the MacDowell Art Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He worked on it for several months, not finishing it until late in December of 1920, when he was back in Chicago for a few months.[81] The mountain scenery of this painting is closer to the topography of the Northeastern United States than that of the West, but by comparing this painting to *Light* it becomes apparent that no matter what site provided the inspiration, Jonson's landscapes were filtered through a distinctly personal, modernist sensibility.

First Morning seems to have been instrumental in developing Jonson's abstract sensibility. Shortly after finishing this painting, Jonson discussed several new aesthetic possibilities he had recently discovered in an undated diary entry which was written in the middle of the summer of 1920. These possibilities allude to major aspects of his later, more abstract style. Some of these new guiding principles are concerned with the importance of abstraction and design regardless of subject and content. Jonson concluded that he should "make each thing [painting] a picture and one to be proud of. Compose–don't copy," and that he had "been thinking that the creation of an entirely abstract composition would be an excellent thing. Why shouldn't planes of color in gradation properly arranged make

---

[81] Jonson's diary, entries dated July 4, December 18, and December 28, 1920, pp. 205-208, 210, RJ 8: 6144-6146. In the last of these three entries, Jonson mentions that "Panorama" is finished and that he considers it successful.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

beauty."[82] He added to this by writing: "I doubt whether the forms of nature if rightly interpreted can be improved upon. Nevertheless it seems to me that the attempt to create abstract forms would be a very good study."[83] This is one of the earliest statements by Jonson in which he proclaims the supremacy of formal issues and the significance of abstraction in his art.

A few of the observations in this diary entry concern the use of color and are more specifically relevant to Jonson's imminent shift to a fully abstract mode of painting. Jonson wrote:

> Colour [sic] is not just pure colour. [sic] It is much more the tone as color throughout a picture should be very elusive in that it is a fine or close mixture. Large flat surfaces of colour [sic] are apt to be lacking in depth and mystery.... . Colour [sic] within a colour [sic] very closely related properly applied using definite but subtle gradation will give luminosity.... . By contrast of colour [sic] and of value this luminosity can be accentuated.... . Using this principal of definite colour [sic] spots I believe it possible by proper relation and gradation to obtain this luminosity in any value, tone or color.... . The thing is to have the colour [sic] spots closely enough related so that they are not obvious and do not vibrate among themselves. I have come to the conclusion than [sic] the space or mass should vibrate but not the colour [sic] spots within the mass. By vibrate ....I mean the mass should be alive and have luminosity.... . All this concerning luminosity is the bigest [sic] step I have discovered and taken.... .[84]

It is noteworthy that at this time, only a few years before his stylistic breakthrough of the mid-1920s, Jonson would specify that "luminosity" was of greatest concern to him. The use

---

[82]Jonson's diary, undated entry probably from summer 1920, pp. 215, 217, RJ 8: 6149-6150.

[83]Jonson's diary, undated entry probably from summer 1920, p. 217, RJ 8: 6150.

[84]Jonson's diary, undated entry probably from summer 1920, pp. 215-218. RJ 8: 6149-6150.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of light in the Chicago Little Theatre had been very influential and had permanently shaped Jonson's aesthetic theories. The use of color explicated in this lengthy diary entry describes, in complex and indirect terms, Jonson's distinctive means of applying paint in semi-fused, fairly rectangular, adjacent strokes of paint that coalesce to create individual, brightly colored, richly tonal forms. This technique is common in Jonson's oil paintings from the start of his career through the 1930s. These diary comments explain how Jonson felt that he must gradually work his way through the representational to greater and greater abstraction; it explains the slow, complex development of his painting toward the completely non-representational over the next twenty years. These diary entries also reveal the utmost importance for Jonson of color and light and their close connection to one another in creating the spiritually powerful abstractions that he would paint in the years ahead.

Life of 1921 [Plate 22] is perhaps Jonson's most overtly symbolic, moralizing landscape painting. In this painting two tall, steep mesas, one darkened yellow-green and the other dark purple, fill the canvas. Each one has the singular, emphatic verticality of a skyscraper in stone; they seem to be made of enormous rectangular blocks. Two dark purple clouds of smoke emerge from the ground and float upward behind the two mesas, engulfing the top of one of them. The sky is depicted as a flat, smooth plane of bright, mustard-like yellow. A river of deep crimson, which looks more like blood than water, flows in front of the mesas. An enormous, dark-green snake crawls along the ground, into and then out of the river, over a hill behind the mesas and then around the mesa to the right. We finally see the serpent's rearing head facing us at the bottom right of the composition. The serpent has glowing red eyes and its stare is fixed on the two small plants that grow in isolation in the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

foreground. The survival of the plants is obviously threatened by the serpent, against which they have no chance.[85] The title of this painting in connection with the image depicted indicates the painting is a comment on the precariousness of life–be it that of inanimate life forms in the wild or of humans. It is a heavily Symbolist painting, relying on multiple symbols–the clouds, the snake, the plants, the river–to convey meaning, and it is rather heavy-handed in conveying meaning. Jonson wrote the following explanation of the painting, which indicates the meanings intended were not specific to the Southwestern setting depicted:

> The composition I am starting on is one that is rather symbolical. Long slabs of rock forms against a chaotic sky. In the foreground a pool of liquid–blood, a huge serpent–green–threatening a modest pure growth–life–which has sprung up in the pool of blood.
>
> I have good and evil emerging from the same source–the earth–typified by the pool of blood–good is always threatened by evil–it can grow in the same environment with evil. The serpent may stand for other things as well just as the plant may. The evil thing stands as a barrier to vision. The great joy, the mystery that which makes life possible–that which offers more than existence–Light–is there behind the dark mass, seeping through in a glorious shaft of colour [sic] and radiance. It is the complement of Life. I believe I shall call this composition 'Life'.... . The idea of life–the great thoughts, and hopes, and faiths being forever mocked at, abused and handicaped [sic] and finally poisoned by the materialistic, the darkness, the first tempter on earth–the Serpent![86]

Jonson's statement subtly alludes to his profound concern with the spiritual in life and his dissatisfaction with formally structured, organized religion such as the Baptist faith in which

---

[85]This detail is curious because snakes are carnivorous and one would not expect to see a snake about to devour a plant. It seems possible that Jonson chose to ignore the facts of the dietary activities of snakes in favor of depicting plants forms since plant forms could easily and clearly be symbolic of life and growth.

[86]Jonson's diary, June 25, 1921, pp. 254-255, RJ 8: 6168-6169.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

he was raised. This statement also indicates that early in his career Jonson equated the spiritual and the Divine with bright, glowing light and vivid, rich color.

The sources and influences that shaped Jonson's Symbolist landscapes of around 1920 are difficult to trace. These works are similar to numerous paintings by the Russian philosopher, mystic, social activist and artist Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947).[87] Throughout his long and prolific artist career, which began at the end of the nineteenth century, Roerich did narrative, allegorical, and landscape paintings which are often loaded with philosophically profound, historically and culturally relevant, and morally didactic meanings. His narrative subjects were often drawn from Christine doctrine and the Bible, Russian and Scandinavian folklore and history, and other mythic, legendary or historic stories and events. Roerich did numerous landscape paintings that are realistic in the description of nature but which convey meanings because they have been given philosophically suggestive titles that conjure broader ideas than the immediate landscape they portray; perhaps one of the best known of these is his 1911 *Battle of the Heavens*.[88] [Plate 23] The similarities between Jonson and Roerich exist mostly in the themes chosen for these relatively non-narrative landscape scenes, but although intriguing the similarities are at best vague. It is possible that Roerich's work influenced Jonson because Jonson came to know Roerich personally and is

---

[87]The most current and thorough monographic study of Roerich is Jacqueline Decter, *Messenger of Beauty: The Life and Visionary Art of Nicholas Roerich* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1997). This book is the paperback reprint of the original hardcover edition entitled *Nicholas Roerich: The Life and Art of a Russian Master* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1989). Roerich's first name is sometimes spelled in English as "Nicolas."

[88]Jacqueline Decter, *Messenger of Beauty: The Life and Visionary Art of Nicholas Roerich* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press): 33-35.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

known to have greatly admired his art and personal mysticism. However, as far as it can be determined, Jonson did not become aware of Roerich and his painting until the early 1920s, a few years after he had started his own Symbolist landscapes.[89] According to Jonson's letters to his family, he first came to know Roerich and his art in 1921 when the Russian artist was in Chicago while a major exhibit of his work was on view at the Art Institute. It was at this time that Roerich became involved with Cor Ardens, which Jonson helped establish. At the time of this exhibit, Jonson commented in his diary about the wonderful works by Roerich spanning his 25 years of painting in a lengthy statement in which it becomes clear that although Jonson was particularly impressed with certain works, it was Roerich's mystical, spiritual mentality and how his paintings visualized the spiritual that most impressed him. He wrote:

> There has opened at the Institute the exhibition of the work by Nicolas Roerich. It is glorious. Would that I could express the wonder of it. I feel that at his best he has accomplished that which all great artists hope to do. There are at least six paintings that I believe to be the most spiritual pieces of expression that I have ever seen. I feel here a great sympathy with my own feelings and desires. I feel very close to this art.... . Roerich is a great artist. In his work there is much unevenness. The showing covers a long period and I am conscious of a natural development to final expression. I find the work that is simply for its self [sic] and not a design for something else is by far the most complete and satisfying. Here we have the ultimate use of art. The work for itself–to stand as the expression of an emotion, the abstract spiritual

---

[89]Although Roerich was active in theater design for much of his life starting in 1907, and Jonson was also involved with theater design from 1913 to 1920, Jonson seems to have been unaware of Roerich's theater work while he was involved with the Chicago Little Theatre or the other theater companies for which he worked. For more on Roerich's theater work, see Decter, *Messenger of Beauty: The Life and Visionary Art of Nicholas Roerich*: 47-66.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> ego of the individual. How little in painting has this aim–or accomplishment.[90]

Jonson mentioned in his diary several paintings by Roerich in this exhibit that were particularly clear examples of what he liked about the spirituality in Roerich's art, and those works were *The Treasure*, *Ecstasy*, and *The Call of the Sun* (he specified that he was referring to the second version of the last of these three). He said of them that these were "great works of spiritual art–I feel very close and am moved beyond words by this mans [sic] spirit–his work."[91] Jonson admired Roerich's work because in it he found a strong sense of the spiritual as experienced and visualized by an artist. Several years later, in 1929, Jonson indicated that he continued to admire Roerich and his art, but he had now evolved stylistically away from his own Symbolist tendency and felt that Roerich's use of more overt symbolism and his adherence to Theosophy were major factors that separated their respective approaches to achieving the spiritual in painting. He wrote:

> I feel he [Roerich] has done some very fine work. Too bad the element of quantity is there to prejudice one. I my self [sic] prefer a work to have an inner symbol and not an outer one. In Roerichs [sic] case it is pretty much both and there is where we part. But nevertheless there are works that give one that purely emotional reaction that the arts are capable of doing. Most of his work is in relation to Theosophy. Again I part ways. Painting is not the means of defining a religion–it is rather one of itself.[92]

Jonson's Symbolist landscapes, such as *The Power of God*, *The Decree*, and *Life*, are vaguely similar in the choice and interpretation of themes to numerous works by Roerich.

---

[90]Jonson's diary, April 20, 1921, pp. 247-248, RJ 8: 6165.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Jonson to Arthur, December 5, 1929, RJ 1: 339-340.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Many of Roerich's paintings and Jonson's Symbolist paintings of around 1920 involve didactic, philosophical, vaguely religious ideas as the basis for large, dramatic landscape views. Some of these works by Roerich were done long after Jonson had moved away from Symbolism and therefore could not have influenced him. However, there is a noteworthy similarity between Jonson's *Life* and several paintings by Roerich done from 1913 to 1920 in which serpents are prominently featured as references to death and destruction, including *Cry of the Serpent* of 1913 [Plate 24] and *The Doomed City* of 1920.[93] Even though Jonson makes no specific mention of these works by Roerich, it is quite possible he became familiar with them around the time that Roerich's exhibit was touring the United States. How he would have known of these works is unknown because according to the catalogue for the exhibit, *Cry of the Serpent* and *The Doomed City* were not included in it.[94] *Life* and *Cry of the Serpent* feature snake-like creatures placed prominently before a background of steep, jagged mountain formations. Considering Jonson's Symbolist paintings from around 1920 in their entirety, Roerich seems to have been important mostly as a highly regarded kindred spirit, not as a source of stylistic or iconographic possibilities. True to his almost stubborn determination to find his own artistic path, Jonson assimilated many different styles and ideas in the process of achieving a powerful but personal artistic vision.

A distinctive and important aspect of Jonson's painting from the early 1920s until the mid-1930s is his practice of working in series, of doing numerous paintings that are

---

[93]Decter, *Messenger of Beauty: The Life and Visionary Art of Nicholas Roerich*: 73.

[94]Christian Brinton, *The Nicolas Roerich Exhibition* (New York: Redfield-Kendrick-Odell Co., 1920): n.p.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

deliberately intended to form a sequential, thematically-related group. His reasons for working in series are not clear. Jonson seems to have found the practice helpful in pursuing his long-uncertain artistic goals. It allowed him to explore human experience from a variety of perspectives which were physical and conceptual, natural and mechanical, and scientific and mystical. It was part of his extremely long search for self-realization and effective, genuine self-expression in his art that characterizes his complex, gradual development. Jonson's practice of working in series based on carefully defined and specifically chosen subjects, which vary widely but include many things fundamental to life, allowed him to explore many different, basic aspects of human experience in a thorough, meticulous, and intensely focused manner that seemed to suit his personality and temperament. It also satisfied a deep-rooted need for subject matter in painting while simultaneously striving for purely formal effectiveness, for having a purpose in expression and communication that was more universally understood than abstraction and of significant intellectual and moral importance.

In the 1920s there were numerous series. The first of them was the *Seasons* series, a group of four paintings done from 1921 to 1926.[95] Of the four, *Autumn* was the first, *Winter* is the most Symbolist, narrative, and moralizing in tone, and *Spring* is probably the most characteristic of the season it attempts to portray. The second series was the *Compositions* series, a group of ten paintings and one drawing done from 1922 to 1931. Of this group, *Composition Four–Melancholia* and *Composition Five–Wind*, both done in 1925, are two of Jonson's best known works and are among his most stylistically transformative

---

[95]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

paintings. Most of the series from this decade were of landscapes, and almost all of these paintings were highly abstract depictions of the terrain and environment of the Southwest. Of the landscape series from this decade, the first of them and the most important for Jonson's stylistic transformation is the *Earth Rhythms* series. The *Earth Rhythms* series consists of eleven paintings done from 1923 to 1927. At the end of the decade Jonson gave up painting landscapes almost entirely. Before abandoning landscape, he produced the *Carlsbad Caverns* series and the *Grand Canyon* series, his final testimonies to the glory and wonder of the American Southwest.

Winter [Plate 25], a painting of 1922, is among the last of Jonson's overtly Symbolist landscapes. It depicts two nude adult figures, one male and the other female, in the middle of a desolate, dark expanse of snow-covered hills. The male figure, bald and emaciated, lies on his back and stares blankly at the sky above. The female sits to the left on the snow-covered ground, her back to the viewer and her arms wrapped around her torso as if trying to rub her body to generate some warmth. Her head is bent forward, as if she were weary, sad, or withdrawn. The snow that fills the scene is rendered in white and the hills cast in shadow are rendered with a deep, almost murky cerulean. The sky is painted with a dark ultramarine, and the light of the setting sun generates a striking glow of purple in the atmosphere. The sun itself is defined as a circle of bright carmine red surrounded by radiating beams of purple and blue. Two large rock formations, vaguely like Southwestern mesas, loom large in the background. Except for these small areas of vivid color, the painting is nearly monochromatic. The absence of clothes and distinctive facial likenesses or gestures makes these figures generic types; they could be anyone at anytime. The rocky

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

hillside they occupy is far from site-specific, especially for Jonson. The frigid chill in the air extends beyond the snowy terrain to the ominous but perplexing implications of the two nude figures who are seemingly lost and aimless in this barren land. It seems possible that the implied meaning in this painting could be autobiographical. In such a reading, the two figures would probably be Jonson and his wife Vera. Could the cold, snowy, isolated environment in which they exist allude to their artistic frustration and alienation or their growing displeasure with modern urban, industrial life? Although the full meaning of the painting may never be known, Jonson did attempt the following explanation of the painting in his diary:

> I don't believe I can express what the symbols are, adequetly [sic]–for they are rather felt than thought. Looking back and sitting with it in front of me I say this. "Winter"–the space of rest–old age of life. It is the time before spring when seeds sprout. The figures may be the symbol of all life. The sitting female, at rest, holding within the warmth of life waiting for the male to join her. The male horizontal at complete rest. Principle lines horizontal–color–no it can't be done–that is not it–it is more, it is something else–it is greater. Why describe it?[96]

In late 1922 and early 1923, after he returned to Chicago from New Mexico, Jonson produced numerous paintings based on the landscape of the Southwest. He painted and sketched very little from 1923 to 1925 because, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, the need to accumulate money for the move to New Mexico consumed all of his time and interfered with his creative focus. Several of these works are highly abstract in their depiction of the Southwest, and they indicate that this most recent and by far longest exposure to the Southwest had further transformed Jonson's style, making it much more

---

[96]Jonson's diary, March 14, 1922, p. 325, RJ 8: 6205.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

abstract. In 1922 Jonson did two paintings in immediate succession which he entitled *Arroyo* and numbered *(1)* and *(2)*. These are the first two paintings he did of the Southwest after the trip of 1922. The first of the two is considerably more naturalistic than the second. In *Arroyo (1)* [Plate 26], there are rolling hills in the foreground which are dotted irregularly by small green bushes and numerous hills in the distance. *Arroyo (2)* [Plate 27] is very different in that it is more abstract and the use of line, color, and texture is more exaggerated and intensified. Since the two paintings are numbered and listed consecutively in Jonson's "Catalogue," it seems certain that *(1)* and *(2)* were probably done only days or weeks apart.[97] This makes the dramatic change between these two works all the more remarkable. In *Arroyo (2)*, we are given a broad, over-head view of several hills, plateaus, and the vertically-incised, water-eroded rock formations from which the painting derives its name. The colors are diverse, vivid, and exaggerated, and they have been roughly filled into firmly contoured landscape forms. The contours have been rendered with fairly crude, abstracted outline drawing done in thickly drawn strokes of black and brown paint. The application of these intensified, exaggerated colors of paint is loose, thick, and vigorous. Broad, flat, intersecting planes of roughly applied strokes of color can be seen. The influence of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse is readily evident in these works, although Jonson has thoroughly assimilated these earlier, European styles into a distinct, personal mode of expression which he has applied to subjects even more distinctly his own–the landscape of the American Southwest.

The *Earth Rhythms* series is a group of eleven paintings Jonson did between early 1923, several months after his return from New Mexico, and 1927, when Jonson had lived

---

[97]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in Santa Fe for three years.[98] The *Earth Rhythms* feature panoramic views of mountains, mesas, and Indian encampments rendered as enormous, crystalline, architectonic structures. Natural forms are rendered in bold, planar, somewhat schematic shapes that more or less suggest the essential physical characteristics of the landscape of the Southwest and stylistically are indebted to the Analytic Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque done between 1908 and 1910.[99] They are most similar to the Cubist landscapes that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque painted in Horta during the summer of 1909, such as Pablo Picasso's *The Reservoir at Horta*. [Plate 28] Jonson was certainly familiar with French Cubism, at least as early as the Armory Show. However, most of the works by the Cubist painters that were exhibited in the Armory Show (specifically Picasso, Braque, Fernand Léger, and Albert Gleizes) were images of human figures, not of landscapes.[100] Although few details are known, after the Armory Show Jonson probably saw various Cubist paintings at the Art Institute and various galleries in the city that exhibited modern art. Jonson would have read about Cubism and seen reproductions of various works in Eddy's *Cubists and Post-*

---

[98]The individual paintings in the *Earth Rhythms* series are identified in this dissertation using the abbreviations "No." and "Nos." rather than the equivalent words "Number" and "Numbers" spelled in full. They are also identified by numerals rather than the words for these numerals. For example, "Earth Rhythms No. 3" instead of "Earth Rhythms Number Three." This is done to follow the customary way in which the paintings were titled and identified by Jonson in the "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson" and his diary and letters and how these titles are indicated in Garman's monograph and other exhibit catalogues over the years.

[99]Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1910-1935*: 95, 99.

[100]Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*: "Catalogue Raisonné," pp. 241-327.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Impressionism and Wright's *Modern Painting*.[101] Another possible published source is *Camera Work*, but it remains unknown if Jonson read *Camera Work*.

Earth Rhythms Nos. 1, 2 and *3* were done consecutively in 1923 while Jonson was living in Chicago after he returned from New Mexico. The next eight in the series were done after Jonson settled permanently in New Mexico. *Earth Rhythms Nos. 4, 5*, and *6* were done consecutively in 1925. *Earth Rhythms Nos. 7, 8*, and *9* were done consecutively in 1926. The final two paintings in the series were done consecutively in 1927.[102] In a diary entry from January 1923, Jonson gave an extended explanation of his reactions to the landscape of the Southwest, which he had studied extensively during his visit of 1922: "The curious thing is that many rock forms on some peak or some mesa suggest castles–buildings figures–and what not. There is a confused rhythm of forms running through my head. And most amazing they tend toward abstraction. The spirit of the thing in its most salient elements. Is not rhythm of the whole just about the first to consider?[103] This statement of purpose for the *Earth Rhythms* reaffirms the continuous importance of formal issues for Jonson and how his style was becoming more abstract in the mid-1920s. Jonson offered a more succinct explanation of the purpose of the series when he wrote to his friend, the philosopher and professor Charles W. Morris: "In the Earth Rhythms I have attempted to express universally a rhythm and design found in nature. Pure nature forms, throughout. They are all very definitely based on particular phenomena. There is no single idea other than this, no theory

---

[101]Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1910-1935*: 95.

[102]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

[103]Jonson's diary, January 9, 1923, p. 354, RJ 8: 6213.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

or creed. Simply an effort to paint my reactions received from nature, organizing a new unit in color."[104] It seems that the grandeur, beauty, and sublime wonder of the Southwestern landscape came to Jonson at a most opportune time in his life and artistic development, when he was overdue for a profound shift in style and confirmation of what direction his art should take. His lengthy stay in New Mexico proved to be an enormously meaningful eye-opener for him just when he needed one. The opportunity to analyze and visualize new geological terrain may have provided a variety of aesthetic and expressive possibilities, which were not exclusively connected to landscapes and which would provide for enormous growth and diversity in his painting for many years to come. These possibilities, influenced by the many developments in modern art over the forty years preceding the *Earth Rhythms*, lent themselves to abstraction. The landscape of New Mexico began the process of freeing Jonson from figurative, narrative, and illustrative imagery so that he could pursue abstract, personally meaningful expression. The visual vocabulary of Cubism was essential to facilitating this stylistic transformation. True to the essential spirit of Cubism, these paintings are pictorial analyses of the landscape of the Southwest. Jonson seems to have begun a search for understanding the world around him, and after moving to the Southwest he had an enormous, very new world to explore.

---

[104]Jonson to Morris, January 11, 1928, RJ 3: 2153-2154. This sense of purpose was observed by a critic who wrote that "the series of 'Earth Rhythm [sic],' while based on particular experiences, aims to indicate the essential forms and movements rather than the infinity of experienced detail. The same may be said of the series of 'The Seasons,' although here the abstract element of mood is present along with the abstract character of nature. In the 'Compositions' the sensations and emotions, rather than the objective event, form the content for the realization of the abstract." ["Jonson's Paintings Exhibited," *Houston Post-Dispatch*, February 12, 1928, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6515.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In 1923 Jonson discovered Jay Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry. Dynamic symmetry was important to Jonson only for a short period of time, probably only several months, but Jonson became aware of and interested in this theory of design at a crucial time in his stylistic development–as he was beginning the *Earth Rhythms* series. Dynamic symmetry may have influenced three of the four paintings that Jonson produced in 1923–*Earth Rhythms Nos. 1* to *3*–and although the number of works directly involved is few, this was an extremely important period for Jonson's development, and these works are hallmarks in his gradual embrace of modernist modes of expression.[105] There are no direct references to Hambidge and dynamic symmetry in any of Jonson's letters, diary entries, or lectures, just an oblique reference to the theory in his diary in the pages where he recorded his sketches for *Earth Rhythms Nos. 1* and *3*. In a diary entry from January of 1923, when he was about to begin work on the first of the *Earth Rhythms*, Jonson wrote that he had recently discovered a new system of geometric composition that promised endless new opportunities of design and expression. He explained his thoughts on this discovery at length:

> I have recently come in touch with an idea of a geometrical frame-work or governing system of direction in composition. I have only the bare principles. I find it is marvelous as I am using it. I shall have to apply it in my own way as that is what I believe in. It is a simple thing in one respect and complicated in another. It offers unlimited development.
>
> I have always felt that there should be a governing sense of arrangement.

---

[105]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 59, 61. Garman claims that only *Earth Rhythms Nos. 3* was directly influenced by dynamic symmetry, but Jonson's geometric, diagrammatic sketches in his diary suggest that the first three paintings in the series, all done in a short span of time, may have been planned according to geometric frameworks inspired by Hambidge's theories.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> That is that a composition should have order–and most often a simple basic motiv [sic] of spaces–an interesting variety of shapes and spaces–a balance of line direction.
>
> I feel that any mechanical means one uses should not restrict but release. Then it is justifiable.
>
> So often in a composition one is conscious of so confused arrangement of directions that there is no order. I feel one must have order. Therefore, why shouldn't one plan the limits of directions, space & [sic] shape edges adhering to such plan.[106]

Several pages of the diary that follow this statement are filled with diagrams that seem to have been drawn from Hambidge's lectures and writings. [Plates 29-31] These diagrams consist of rectangles subdivided with great care by horizontals, verticals, and diagonals in numerous permutations that convey a deliberate but controlled imbalance within the delimiting rectangle. They convey energy, excitement, and pictorial interest. Jonson's diagrams for the compositions of the first three *Earth Rhythms* paintings, which were meticulously rendered in his diary, show the schematic frameworks explained and recommended by Hambidge. The diagram for the composition of *Earth Rhythms No. 3* [Plate 32] is the most elaborately worked out and carefully drawn of the sketched diagrams for the three paintings. It looks very much like the diagram in Hambidge's lecture on subdividing a root two rectangle into internal rectangles in ratios of four.[107] [Plate 33]

It is not certain how Jonson came to be aware of dynamic symmetry. Before his early

---

[106]Jonson's diary, January 9, 1923, pp. 355-356, RJ 8: 6214.

[107]Jay Hambidge, *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry* (New York, Dover Publications, 1967): 42. This is an unabridged republication of the third,1948 edition of the collection of Hambidge's published lessons on dynamic symmetry then published by Yale University Press.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

death in 1924, Hambidge's theories were known mostly through the articles he published in the short-lived periodical *The Diagonal* (which was published from 1919 to 1920) and the many lectures he gave across the United States in the five or so years before his death. Although most of Hambidge's widely-read books on dynamic symmetry were not published until after his death, his small book on the subject, *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition, as Used by the Artists*, was published in 1923.[108] After Hambidge's death in 1924, his writings for the *Diagonal* were published together in slightly edited form under the title *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*, and it is primarily through this book that dynamic symmetry is known to us today.[109] However, in vague, more intuitive ways, dynamic symmetry was deeply and permanently influential for Jonson. Jonson seems to have found an important sense of visual order and unity in dynamic symmetry at this most critical stage in his artistic development, but he abandoned any attempt at the specific, doctrinaire use of the theory as soon as he sensed it was becoming systematic, and hence restrictive. Ultimately, Jonson preferred to achieve the same results that dynamic symmetry permitted, but through more personal, intuitive means.[110] Dynamic symmetry had a lasting but non-specific impact on Jonson's painting; its basic premises would remain relevant to his work but the specifics of the theory would not be applied systematically. The lasting impact of dynamic symmetry on Jonson's painting is subtly suggested by a comment he made in a 1954 lecture in which he discussed

---

[108]Michael Quick, "Technique and Theory: the Evolution of George Bellows's Painting Style," in Michael Quick, et al., *George Bellows* (Fort Worth and New York: Amon Carter Museum and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992): 93 (footnote 53).

[109]Hambidge, *Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*: n.p. [preface]

[110]Garman to the author, August 10, 1998.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

how an artist, himself included, might begin pictorial composition: "I believe the first move toward design is that of a dynamic sub-division of the area to be used. 2nd a further division of the resulting shapes."[111] Assimilating and adapting new ideas and influences came naturally to Jonson; following dogmatic instruction or theories did not.

The previously-quoted statements from Jonson's diary that appear to refer to dynamic symmetry leave no doubt that Jonson had long been preoccupied with purely formal concerns, that achieving effective and visually satisfying abstract images had been of great importance to him for many years, and that he had long sought a way of achieving abstraction that suited his temperament, aesthetic sensibilities, and the expressive intentions and content he believed his painting must have. The following extract from Jonson's diary explains how merging meaningful content or subject matter with effective, visually satisfying and expressive abstract imagery was important to him. For years Jonson sought to eliminate qualities that he described as "sweet," "sentimental," or "illustrative" from his paintings. Now, in the presence of the New Mexico landscape and with knowledge of Hambidge's dynamic symmetry, he had the means to do so. Abstract pictorial achievements were paramount, but the particulars of subjects and themes were not to be disregarded; they were the motivations and bases for his abstract imagery. He wrote:

> It is possible now to co-ordinate a whole in pure abstractions. I am certain of that. But pure abstraction will be cold unless there is a strong emotion behind the impulse to do it.
>
> So called realism, the representative object, can be projected with some meaning behind it other than what it usually bears. It can have emotional

---

[111]Jonson, "Abstract and Non-Representative Painting," lecture given at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque on November 7, 1954, p. 3, RJ 9: 6354.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> relationship co-ordinated. As for instance–placing an object not in any old place but fitting it in where it holds importance and relationship to the entire area being designed. In other words, the whole canvas will be thought of in relation to itself–to the geometry of the area.
>
> And it can guide in the laying out of an idea and arrangement no matter of what nature they may be.... .
>
> The dividing up must be mathematically correct so that all portions of ones area will be in relation and balance. This gives the first step–a guiding framework. Then comes the relationship to it of the interior of forms themselves–the composition within form.
>
> Then there is the balancing and construction of light and shade or light and dark in relation to this resulting in a consistent massing together of all the elements of ones entire single work.... .[112]

In *Earth Rhythms No. 3* [Plate 34] the basic contours of geological forms–the horizontal lines of passing clouds, the steeply vertical contours of mesas, and the swelling contours of hills and sand dunes, are emphatically repeated in schematic patterns. Geological growth, decay, and transformation are recorded in a literal, almost diagrammatic manner–these are the rhythms of the physical world made vividly clear. Most of the paintings in the series do not express the rhythmic structure of nature with the clarity and force evident in this one. Although the landscape portrayed looks very much like the Southwestern United States, it is revealed in Jonson's diary that the painting, although it was done in 1923, was the result of ideas Jonson had first conceived during his visit to Ogunquit, Maine, in 1920, and it was not the first and only version of this composition.[113] Jonson

---

[112]Jonson's diary, January 9, 1923, pp. 356, 358-359, RJ 8: 6214-6216.

[113]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 59. This noteworthy exception to the source of inspiration for the *Earth Rhythms* series, first stated by Garman, has been repeated several times in exhibit brochures without further analysis or explanation.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

wrote:

> This [*Earth Rhythms No. 3* according to a note written between the lines above where he has crossed off the original title of the painting, which was "Composition Five."] I have worked at since the Ogunquit trip. Last year I painted an entire canvas and discarded it immediately. Then I got this desire and in spite of the situation [of working to raise as much money as possible for the move to New Mexico] it turned out to be completely successful–as such. It pertains principally to the tide–I have in mind the sun, the moon, and earth. It has turned out to be almost purely compositional.[114]

The painting seems to be an imaginative synthesis of landscape elements from the rocky coast of Maine and the rocky mesas of New Mexico, of two very different and separate geological areas. That this painting was begun months after Jonson returned to Chicago from New Mexico and that he had already done several paintings shortly before it that deal with the terrain of New Mexico indicate that in spite of what Jonson wrote and said, the New Mexico landscape was very much in his mind (and was certainly more immediate and vivid to his mind's eye than the coast of Maine) when he did this painting. Jonson was somewhat concerned with the specificity of his landscapes; as he wrote when he was at the MacDowell art colony, "a sketch done in New England should not be like one done in Colorado."[115]

Earth Rhythms No. 3 features a large mesa form in the center of the composition rendered as a sequence of large, hard-edged, crisply chiseled rock formations. The application of a Cubist understanding of form has emphasized the geometric, planar character of this enormous rocky mass. These forms have been rendered very schematically, with sharp-edged, planar shapes that look very much like a child's building blocks. Each of these

---

[114]Jonson's diary, December 4, 1923, p. 391, RJ 8: 6231.

[115]Jonson's diary, October 4, 1919, p. 127, RJ 8: 6108

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

rock forms is a large, solid, geometricized volume, distinct in shape, contours, and color from the one next to it. The rock form at the far left is the tallest and broadest. It has been colored with a deep but lustrous purple. To the right is a deep orange rock that is shorter and much narrower than the one to the left. Next to this form is a broader and slightly taller form that has been shaded to include siennas on the wide facets of the rock facing the viewer and much lighter and brighter oranges, reds, and purples on the narrow facets facing to the right and away from the viewer. Next to the orange rock form is a dark lime green one that is broad and carefully shaded to appear crystalline and solid. Next there are rocks of orange, magenta, and ultramarine. Below the centrally placed mesa form are three smaller rock forms that are highly angular and geometric in character, and which also look like a child's building blocks. Shades of umber have been used to describe these low-lying rocks. In the foreground are concentric alternating stripes of deep cerulean and very dark, muted navy blue which describe rounded, curving hills or, since this composition may have been inspired by the coast of Maine, the waves of the tide on the shore of the Atlantic that Jonson referred to in his diary. Similarly, the mesa-like forms could also be identified as weather-beaten rocks on the Maine coast. The hill seen in the distance on the far right has been rendered with a series of at least seven concentric, shaded arcs of dark turquoise that have been gradually shaded from dark to medium tones. This may also refer to the processes by which forms in nature move, grow, contract, and are worn down by forces such as wind and water. In the upper center of the picture is a glimpse of the sky rendered as a series of horizontally arranged strips of green, blue, and blue-green. The upper half of a white circle representing the sun can be seen in this band of clouds.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson began the *Compositions* series in 1922 and by 1931 had produced ten paintings and one drawing in this series. Most of the eleven works in the series are not suggestive of landscape views, at least not as directly or literally as the *Earth Rhythms*. Some visualize natural phenomena such as wind, rain, and fire. A few others were inspired by Jonson's personal, psychological, even spiritual reaction to the visual experience of the subjects of the paintings. The rest seem to be imaginative projections of Jonson's emotions and states of mind. These paintings are Jonson's attempt to give visual form to ideas and experiences which are extremely common phenomena but by their ephemeral, intangible nature are extremely challenging to illustrate. Arthur seems to have observed the underlying unity in this series when he wrote in a letter to Jonson of 1935 that they are "emotional reactions to specific stimuli, more particularly individual components of nature, hence the explanatory titles as, 'Wind,' 'Snow,' 'Fire,' Rain,'etc.... .'"[116] Jonson wrote in 1928: "The Compositions are purely imaginative. They are an attempt to define in color the forms that express my sensations."[117]

Jonson's choice of the term "composition" to title these works and identify them collectively is complicated but intriguing. The term has a basic meaning in both the visual arts and music, and Jonson was certainly aware of these dual meanings. The term had specific meaning for Kandinsky, who used the term to title many of his early non-representational paintings. He used the term "composition" to refer to paintings whose compositions were carefully and deliberated planned, as opposed to the term

---

[116]Arthur to Jonson, July 15, 1935, RJ 1: 450.

[117]Jonson to Morris, January 11, 1928, RJ 3: 2154.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"improvisation," which he used for paintings that were more spontaneously and rapidly executed with little or no advance consideration.[118] The use of the term in music did not go unnoticed by Kandinsky or Jonson. Both artists were aware of the concept of synaesthesia. Jonson would have been aware of the musical significance of the term through his wife Vera, his brother Arthur, and Arthur's wife May van Dyke, all of whom were musicians. He would probably have understood the concept through his study of early modernist painters in Europe, especially Kandinsky. When Jonson used the term "composition" to entitle paintings, he did so because he was extremely concerned with their purely formal qualities. Jonson also seems to have applied the term as titles for subjects that would not fit neatly into the traditional system of subject categories in the visual arts, namely portraiture, landscape, still life, genre, and the like.

Composition One–The Garden of 1922 was the first in the series. *Composition Two–Struggle*, also of 1922, was begun as a charcoal study but was never developed into an oil painting.[119] *Composition Three–The Verge* is the first of only four paintings Jonson did in 1923. It is a figurative image of an emotionally troubled woman sitting at the entrance of an adobe building in the desert. It is highly illustrative in the narrative, Symbolist manner of such earlier works as *Life* and *Winter*. It was followed by *Earth Rhythms Nos. 1* to *3*. *Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods)* and *Composition Five–Wind*, the next two works Jonson painted, were done in 1925 and are also integral to Jonson's stylistic evolution.

---

[118]Long, *Kandinsky: the Development of an Abstract Style*: 65-66.

[119]Jonson to Morris, January 11, 1928, RJ 3: 2153-2154. Jonson wrote: "The drawing you have is Composition Two-Struggle. I never painted it because the drawing seemed complete, and no urge to go on with it developed."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

They were followed by *Composition Six–Agony* and *Earth Rhythms Nos. 4, 5,* and *6. Composition Seven–Snow*, the next in the series, was the first painting Jonson did in 1928. *Composition Eight–Repose*, *Composition Nine–Flame*, and *Composition Ten–Music* were done consecutively in the middle of 1929. *Composition Eleven–Rain*, the last in the series, was done toward the end of 1931, about two years after the others.[120]

Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods) [Plate 35] was, like the *Earth Rhythms* series, a major breakthrough for Jonson. It was the first painting Jonson did once he had settled permanently in New Mexico and was the first work done after *Earth Rhythms No. 3*, although the two works are separated by more than a year. It is far more thoroughly non-representational and directly expressive of the artist's personality, emotional state, and world-view than anything he had done before. Recognizable objects are identifiable, but only after careful examination of the image, for they have been deliberately submerged into purely non-mimetic forms and colors in a vague, indeterminate three-dimensional environment.

In the middle of the composition is a large, rounded purple form that looks vaguely like a snail or perhaps a clenched fist and a raised arm. The deep purple, ever so slightly blue, is rendered with smoothly applied and carefully shaded paint to make this form look solid and three-dimensional. At the bottom of the image, several large bubbles, each painted with a smooth, creamy cerulean, float out of an opening that is apparently in the ground. These bubbles float upward and engulf the bottom of the purple form. Behind the purple form is an equally long and high green form, with a long curving bottom and arrow-shaped

---

[120]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

top that suggests it is some sort of serpentine creature, perhaps a snake. Both the purple and green forms are surrounded by circles of blue and milky white that seem like rings of colored smoke floating upward. Floating in this composition are two forms that consist of several brown and tan zigzagging stripes. These forms vaguely suggest areas of rock, and seem to function as signifiers of the Southwestern environment that Jonson was now exploring in his paintings. Near these forms are bright green and darker blue-green stripes that are longer and wider than the brown and tan-striped forms. They suggest grass, weeds, shrubbery, and other forms of plant life.

On the right side of the composition are flattened, fusing planes of dark umber that seem to coalesce in the foreground of this space. At first they seem to suggest mountain forms–rocks and caves–in the foreground. However, when the painting is viewed from certain angles and at a considerable distance these planes fuse in such a way as to conjure the shadowy profile of a bearded man that resembles Jonson. The title of the painting, with its specific references to "melancholia" and "space moods," suggests the emotive evocations of the sublime landscape, which Jonson experienced in the Southwest, and to Jonson's depressed state of mind in the mid-1920s. *Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods)* was intended as a psycho-biographical image, as Jonson explained in his diary shortly after this painting was made: "I have managed to do some work. Shortly after the last entry [a year earlier than this one which is dated February 2, 1926] I began painting. The first work was Composition Four-Melancholia. It was an attempt to express the way I felt in form and colour. [sic] Then followed–Earth Rhythms No. 4-5-6 and Composition Five-the Wind.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Now I am working on E.R. [*Earth Rhythms*] No. 7."[121] This comment is most unusual for Jonson, for it is a brief admission of a personal, psychological meaning in one of his works.

Jonson's next painting, *Composition Five–Wind* [Plate 36], is another part of this breakthrough phase in Jonson's art. It is a painting made predominantly of various tones and intensities of blues, blue-violets, and some purples and grays. The composition is an abstraction of the experience of wind over broad, open spaces. To this extent, the painting is at home with the many landscapes Jonson made during the 1920s, but these other works are more overtly recognizable images of the Southwest. The composition of this painting is dominated by a long triangular form that projects into the picture from the left and ends near the center of the canvas. The triangular form has been painted a medium-tone cerulean, but it has been shaded carefully to appear three-dimensional, as if it were made of some pristine, shiny metal. The light illuminating this and other forms in the painting appears to come from the upper left, presumably from behind the viewer. Behind and above this blue triangle are numerous smaller triangular forms as well as a few circular forms. These triangular cerulean forms are schematically shaded from dark to light toward their points. All are arranged so that their points face right and are of the same size, creating a stylized, decorative pattern. Another large triangular form, wider than the first but diaphanous, comes to its apex near the center of the composition, at the same point in the picture where the more solid, cerulean triangle ends. In placing this point of convergence off-center Jonson has allowed the composition to become more dynamic and captivating through calculated asymmetry. To the right of where these triangles meet is a series of almost concentrically placed bubble-

---

[121]Jonson's diary, February 2, 1926, p. 407, RJ 8: 6239.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

forms that suggest floating clouds. These puffy cloud forms are partially covered by a transparent layer of blue that runs in a smooth curve up the middle of the picture and terminates near the center of the composition. This diaphanous layer of blue then turns abruptly to the right. This overlapping layer of cerulean darkens all the forms behind it. Several thin, black lines streak irregularly across the composition. In the bottom right of the composition, a series of closely spaced blue-green and green curving forms is seen. Behind them, larger and more carefully modeled mounds of dark blue-green have been depicted. The mounds are textured with dabs of slightly darker tones of the same color. They suggest rolling hills that extend far in the distance. The maze of rectangular blocks in the lower left, painted with various shades of muted violet, may suggest in highly geometric terms the steep, rocky mesas of the Southwest. Most of what is seen in this painting not only occurs in the foreground, but in mid-air, in the atmosphere.

In this painting, Jonson has found visual equivalents for the intangible forces in nature; he has found the means to visualize the phenomenon of wind. Although an imaginative composition based on natural phenomena, *Composition Five–Wind* involves expressive content as well as the abstraction of nature. *Rhythm of the Wind* of 1917 involved the same theme, but in this earlier painting it was depicted in a more literal, representational manner. Now, Jonson had found the means to convey the idea or experience of this natural phenomenon in highly abstract terms. Arthur wrote the following about the implied meanings of this painting in a letter to Jonson in which he cautioned his brother to be prepared for an endless struggle for acceptance and understanding among the art-viewing public:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Frankly, you will never live to see the day when an average American can look at your "The Wind" and, without the kindly assistance of a guide, get anything out of it. Color! Composition! Technique! Drama! Action! Form? Poetry?–not [sic] a thing. To him the wind means and for a long time is going to mean, leaves blown down the street, trees bending over, waves tossing on the sea, and so on, and so on.[122]

In creating a painting that depicts the rapid movement of air, *Composition Five–Wind* seems to have utilized the visual vocabulary of Futurism. Jonson has skillfully manipulated abstract form and color to suggest the rapid movement of large masses of air across vast distances. This is accomplished by the array of small arrows pointed to the right, the large triangular forms that also point to the right, and the transparent layers of pale cerulean that stretch across the painting. These devices are adaptations of Futurist methods for conveying movement and speed. Jonson's painting and Futurism are very different in that the latter was very concerned with the rapid movement, speed, energy and activity of modern urban and industrial life, while Jonson had by the 1920s found the modern urban and industrial world very displeasing. However, in their concern for using modern stylistic devices to convey motion and speed, they are very similar. It is uncertain how Jonson would have become familiar with Futurism, but by the 1920s he certainly knew of the movement as it concerned painting. His works were occasionally considered Futurist in style by critics. Jonson and Arthur did not feel Jonson's paintings were Futurist, but they seemed to understand why Jonson might be mistaken for a Futurist painter. Arthur made this clear when he wrote:

> I've been thinking about that word "dynamism" which you use in some of your titles. It is a word which, rightly or wrongly, has certain connotations with the "Futurists".....of Italy. I think you are not a "futurist." But the "F." were fond of using that word "dynamism" in <u>their</u> titles.... . Jonson says

---

[122]Arthur to Vera, March 1, 1928, RJ 1: 284.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> "City Dynamism" [a painting Jonson did in the 1930s] therefore he must be a "Futurist."–this without reference to the work itself. However, the term remains a good one.[123]

Apparently, Jonson's use of the term "dynamism" in the title of at least one of his recent paintings, apparently *City Dynamism* [although it is possible that he might have used he word in the titles of other works made around this time and changed the titles later] led some viewers to associate him with Futurism. Arthur admitted that *Composition Five–Wind* "does have a superficial resemblance to some of those Futurist paintings such as 'Dynamism of an Automobile,' 'Dynamism of an Engine,' et. al.," but that the similarities between Jonson's paintings and Futurist paintings were at best superficial.[124]

Certain Futurist paintings reveal how abstract visual devices found in *Composition Five–Wind* express motion and speed in ways that were never seen before the early-twentieth century. Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* and *Young Girl Running on a Balcony*, both of 1912, rely on fragmentary repetition of the forms of the dog and the girl to suggest movement. Consequently, we see many more paws of the dog and legs of the girl than really exist, but since we see all of them virtually simultaneously we perceive movement. The closest prototypes among Italian Futurist paintings for Jonson's *Composition Five–Wind* are probably Balla's 1909 painting *Street Lamp* [Plate 37] and his 1913 painting *Swifts: Paths of Movement + Dynamic Sequences.* [Plates 38] In *Street Lamp*, Balla has depicted the glowing yellow light emanating from the lamp at night by using densely packed, short, quick strokes of white, yellow, red and even some green paint. Many

---

[123]Arthur to Jonson, June 8, 1933, RJ 1: 418.

[124]Arthur to Jonson, June 9, 1936, RJ 1: 472.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of these strokes of paint are small, quickly rendered triangular marks packed close together and aimed upward, toward the lamp. In *Composition Five–Wind*, Jonson has altered the direction of these triangular marks, homogenized their color, and solidified them into individual, carefully contoured and shaded planar forms. Hence, he has taken a more linear, precise approach to creating the illusion of movement using the formal vocabulary of Futurism. Nevertheless, he has given almost tangible, directional form to something as ephemeral as wind. In *Swifts: Paths of Movement*, Balla has suggested broad, sweeping movement of vaguely defined forms using broad curving shapes overlaid with long, gray lines. The curving lines are particularly similar to the slightly fuzzy black lines in *Composition Five–Wind*. Although it is not known if Jonson was familiar with this 1913 work by Balla, his 1925 painting is remarkably similar to it.

In *Earth Rhythms No. 6* [Plate 39], done in the middle of 1925, the mesa form that dominates the center of the composition is made to look more geometric and architectonic that the centrally placed rock form in *Earth Rhythms No. 3*. This mesa consists of at least five cylindrical, vertically positioned forms that are cast in dramatic shadow, as if the light comes from a bright spotlight to the right. It seems that Jonson's experience with stage lighting influenced this abstracted landscape painting. Each form has a small, rounded, gray-blue top that is decorated with small dark blue dots that seem to abstractly indicate the rough, irregular texture of rock. The first two cylindrical forms at the left are the largest. The first one is a bright orange with one side rendered in brown to indicate it is cast in shadow. The second one is burnt orange with its shadow rendered with very dark red. The next two are brown and blue and seem wider at the bottom than the first two. Between and in front of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

them are more angular, geometric rock forms that are described as geometric solids, with arrangements of cylinders and triangular forms meticulously outlined and shaded to show the consistent bright light from the right. Most of these geometric rock forms look like a child's building blocks. Below the mesa form, across the bottom of the picture, are smaller forms whose planar surfaces of beige, sienna and deep cerulean seem to have been raked deeply, leaving shadowy depressions arranged sequentially on their surfaces. Thus Jonson has emphatically and abstractly described the natural processes of erosion in his rendering of the terrain of New Mexico. Above the mesa form are a series of light-blue cylindrical forms that further enhance the architectonic quality of this landscape. The various cylindrical forms in this painting look more like the smoke stacks of factories or the silos of farms rather than hills, mesas or arroyos from the Southwest. Many of the paintings in the *Earth Rhythms* series depict the terrain of the Southwest as architectonic structures with vague allusions to the most distinctly modern type of building, the skyscraper.[125] The energetic, circular placement of cylindrical forms in this painting may be an example of the enduring influence of dynamic symmetry in Jonson's painting.

Earth Rhythms No. 9 of 1926 [Plate 40] does not have the clarity of space and focused composition of the previously discussed paintings in the series. It is also less abstract. It features at its center a triangular space that is a cavernous opening in the side of a mountain. This space has been framed by many planar, hard-edged forms arranged in series but also grouped in abruptly angular configurations. The rock formations that outline

---

[125]MaLin Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, 1989): n.p.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

this cavernous space have been described with a series of angular, gradually shaded planes that consist of blues, grays, and earth tones. These forms suggest actual colors in nature but are exaggerated and distorted for expressive and compositional effects. There is a large, bulging mesa form to the left, behind the cavern and the mountain that surrounds it. This mesa is cast in deep shadow. Depicted with a dark cerulean, it has rounded and deep depressions in its surface that suggest the erosion of rock. In the upper left section of the composition, a tall yellow-green mesa that becomes narrower toward its peak is seen in the background. Its wide base is shaped as a box-like form with deeply-cut vertical depressions in its surface. The overall design of this form has the quality of a Greek or Roman temple. To the right of the center of the composition are several mesas seen in the distance. Some mesas are orange and light brown, while others are dark brown. They consist of geometric planes arranged at angles which allow them to project forward forcefully. At the upper left and right corners of the composition are flattened areas of deep burnt orange which suggest large mountainous forms described very geometrically. The triangular framework for this composition is one of great simplicity and clarity, and yet this composition lacks the rhythmic force of repetition, distortion, and exaggeration that is so effective in *Earth Rhythms Nos. 3* and *6*.

As the *Earth Rhythms* series progressed, and as other series based on the landscape of the Southwest were developed, the solidified, geometric, crystalline forms typical of the series became softer, flatter, and more subtle and intricate in arrangement. The transition in style may be due to a more thorough, careful consideration of the subject and to the greater access to the topography of the Southwest that Jonson had once he moved to New Mexico.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The *Earth Rhythms* series signaled Jonson's transformation into a truly modernist, abstract painter. The transformation was furthered by *Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods)* and *Composition Five–Wind*, which overlap with the *Earth Rhythms* series, coming between the third and fourth paintings in the series. Jonson recognized the change, which he saw as the shift from iconographic and representational to purely visual and abstract. He observed this change occurring as the series progressed. In his last diary entry, written in 1926 when the series was mostly complete, he said:

> I feel the definite consideration for symbolism is replaced by one more plastic–shall I call it design or form. It has worked through the Earth Rhythms. The first 2 or 3 were based primarily on my feeling of the symbols involved in the last I have no symbolism whatever but an organization built on material at hand. In other words the forms must depend on themselves and other forms of like nature with no ulterior connections but their own. There is no story whatsoever. That is one thing.[126]

The sublime landscape–its broad spaces, dramatic scale, and intense light and color–was a catalyst for meaningful, expressive, totally non-representational imagery in Jonson's art that originated in earlier avant-garde developments. For Jonson, the sublime landscape and light of the West was fundamental to his artistic transformation; without it he would not have been the same artist. He was a landscape painter before he was a modern painter, and his earliest groups of works from New Mexico should be appreciated and understood in that context, and not just as precursors of things to come. Jonson's intention to paint the landscape of the Southwest for the rest of his career was steadfast when he first settled permanently in New Mexico. As he wrote in his diary in February 1925, only months after settling permanently in Santa Fe and resuming painting after a hiatus of nearly two

---

[126]Jonson's diary, February 2, 1926, p. 405, RJ 8: 6238.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

years: "Spreading out in every direction is material, marvelous material–work for a life time–if I can get it. The most symbolic place I know."[127]

Jonson began a painting of the subject of spring shortly after completing *Winter* in 1922, but he quickly abandoned work on the painting and destroyed what he had done, concluding it was an ill-fated effort from the start. He wrote in his diary in April 1922: "For about two weeks I've been working on composition Spring. Began it some time ago. Have worked sincerely on it and have in sincerity and disgust destroyed it all entirely. All–wrong–Sweet!"[128] Four years later Jonson returned to the subject and produced the extant painting *Spring*, which he considered an unquestionable success. It is not as narrative and allegorical as *Winter*, but deals far more carefully and specifically with the theme of new life and growth indicative of the season in question. The new modernist sense of expressive distortion and abstracting from nature is applied to this work, but there is also an almost Surrealist imaginative quality to this scene of lush fauna.

Spring [Plate 41] does not depict the terrain or plant life typical of the American Southwest, but it was one of the first paintings Jonson made after settling in New Mexico. It therefore reminds us that Jonson's stylistic and thematic interests were diverse and complex. Jonson followed a pattern of development that zigzagged for many years before leading to concrete new achievements. The subject of the seasons of the year is certainly not new in the history of painting; among many earlier examples of the theme are Botticelli's *La Primavera* and Breugel's series on the seasons that includes his famous *Hunters in the Snow*

---

[127]Jonson's diary, February 19, 1925, p. 399, RJ 8: 6235.

[128]Jonson's diary, April 25, 1922, p. 339, RJ 8: 6207.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(December). However, the subject has usually lent itself to landscape views that may include human figures, be they ordinary humans or allegorical figures. Jonson's painting is hardly a landscape in the traditional sense of the genre and it contains no human figures. It is more like a Surrealist still-life in that the painting is filled with enlarged trees, flowers, and plants densely packed together in a vaguely described setting–a landscape no doubt but one where the abundance of verdant nature has crowded the land so much that almost none of it can be seen and there is little sense of scale and depth.

In the center of the composition are two tall tree forms. They are perfectly vertical cylinders that are carefully shaded with a dark forest green. At their tops are densely packed leaves shaped in oval patterns. These two trees are surrounded by densely packed, oversized plants that fill the lower half of the canvas. Each petal and leaf is carefully described, with delicately delineated contours and smoothly shaded surfaces to describe subtle changes in contour and texture. The greens used to define these leaves range from dark greens to lighter, yellow greens, to earthy, brown-greens. Most of the leaves and petals are approximately oval in shape, with pointed rather than rounded ends. In the middle-ground on opposite sides of the picture are groups of long, curving forms, which seem to be wide plant stems or individual blades of grass or weeds. There are three such forms on the left and two on the right. These forms are described with purple surrounded by white, creating the unnatural effect that they are glowing. In the background on the right we see several hills, described abstractly as circular mounds of burnt orange. These landscape forms in the background seem disproportionately small compared to the closer trees and plants, which loom large in this composition. Thus, the idea that spring is the season of life and growth

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

is conveyed clearly and emphatically through calculated exaggeration and distortion.

In 1927, Jonson worked on a series of landscapes he entitled *Cliff Dwellings*. *Cliff Dwellings No. 3* [Plate 42] is a highly abstracted, Cubist-inspired treatment of the rugged terrain of the Southwest. This large, vertically oriented composition consists of a jigsaw-puzzle arrangement of flat planar forms and more irregularly contoured and textured forms that are intermittently suggestive of the rocks, hills, and mesas of the Southwest. In the center of the image is a large mesa defined with light brown faintly tinted with pink. The mesa is shown with the many deep, irregularly shaped gaps that have been etched in it over the millennia. These are the cliff dwellings that local Native American tribes often lived in, and from which the series has acquired its name. The top of this mesa form is defined by a series of five narrow, vertically aligned planes, ranging in color from deep purple to pink to vivid cadmium. They are only moderately shaded to suggest solidity but are heavily outlined in black to separate the facets of the rock. In front of the cliff dwellings is a large mesa rendered as a flat, geometric area of bright, slightly green yellow that gradually shifts to a cooler tan toward the bottom of the picture. The contour of this form has been emphatically described as a loosely geometric shape, suggestive of the craggy contours of Southwestern mountains and mesas. This form features a thin black line down its center that defines a deep fissure in the rock. Behind and to the left of these central forms are mountains in the distance that have been rendered as deep ultramarine planes that are rather schematically outlined and shaded. Forms of similar color but of more rounded, organic shapes appear on the right side of the picture. Flat planes of gray on the left and somewhat darker planes of blue and gray on the right suggest clouds in the distance. If the *Earth Rhythms* are stylistically indebted to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

early Analytic Cubism, then it seems that landscapes of the late 1920s such as this one are stylistically indebted to late Analytic Cubism.

In 1927, Jonson did *The Grand Canyon Series: First, Second, and Third Movements*, a three-part series of canvases which Jonson intended to be exhibited side-by-side. The inclusion of the word "movement" in the title is intriguing because it implies the presence of music or qualities of music in these paintings. Jonson's interest in the pictorial equivalents of music, especially rhythm, would become much more apparent in paintings done in the years 1929 to 1936, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. In *The Grand Canyon: First Movement* [Plate 43], intended to be placed on the left, we see a panoramic, bird's eye view of the Grand Canyon. The variety of geometric shapes and intense colors shows a continuing sense of exaggeration and distortion of nature in Jonson's work. *The Grand Canyon: Third Movement* [Plate 44], intended to be seen on the right, is far more planar in the description of rock formations. It is apparent that as the 1920s progressed, Jonson's style proceeded toward greater abstraction as he continued to analyze the Southwestern terrain in his paintings.

The second painting in the series is noteworthy for its radical approach to pictorial space. *Grand Canyon: Second Movement* [Plate 45] is immediately distinctive because it is a shaped canvas that was made thirty years before Color-Field Painters such as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly became famous for them. This canvas is an inverted triangle, with the narrow, flattened tip of the triangle at the bottom. Jonson probably chose this shape for this painting because it visually reinforced the sublime effect of depth and height he sought to create in this depiction of the Grand Canyon. Format followed content, or was inspired by

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

it. The sides of the image feature large, flattened planes of deep umber that overlap and intersect, suggesting the structure and texture of rock forms. Between these two series of brown planes we have a deep view of other mesas, mountains, and rocks farther away in the Canyon. The shape of the canvas and the placement of framing planes of brown at its bottom and sides suggest to the viewer that he is standing on a flat area of rock between other rocks, or perhaps is at the front of a cave or on the edge of a cliff overlooking the broad expanse of caverns in front of him. Thus the distinctive shape of the canvas serves to situate the viewer psychologically and spatially in the place from which he is supposed to be viewing the scene.

Jonson's interest in and sources of inspiration for using shaped canvases remain virtually unknown for he apparently wrote and said nothing about the practice and most scholars have ignored or overlooked this distinctive development in his career. Jonson made four paintings with shaped canvases around 1930 and this was the first of them. When Jonson made these works, the shaped canvas was still an usual practice among modernist painters. The idea of using a non-rectangular canvas may have been inspired by Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1912 and the tilted, diamond-shaped canvases of some of Piet Mondrian's Neoplastic paintings of the 1920s, works which Jonson was probably aware of by 1927. It is noteworthy that Jonson did shaped canvases before the still-relatively unknown New York abstract painter Abraham Joel Tobias explored this possibility in the 1930s with his "sculptural paintings."[129] It seems possible that Jonson created shaped canvases because the energetic, vigorous visual rhythms that he always sought to convey

---

[129]Jeffrey Wechsler. *Abraham Joel Tobias: Sculptural Paintings of the 1930's.* (New Brunswick, NJ: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1987): n.p.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

were further emphasized by the use of alternatively shaped canvases. He may have reasoned that the dynamic, excited pictorial rhythms he sought to convey in compositions could also be achieved by manipulating the very shape of the canvas, of the picture plane that enclosed and defined these compositions.[130] The content of these paintings also seems to have been related to the choice of these unconventional shapes, even if the associations were at best vague and the meanings intended were not effectively communicated.

The 1920s was a decade of enormous change for Jonson. In the middle years of the decade, he discovered new inspiration for his art in the Southwest and the ideas of dynamic symmetry. Simultaneously, he finally developed his understanding of the numerous sources in early modernist painting that he had long known and studied into a personally distinct, highly expressive, and pictorially effective style that was becoming increasingly abstract. By the end of the decade Jonson was approaching the age of 40 and he had not yet reached what he considered to be his fullest or ultimate artistic expression, but he remained prolific and creative for decades to come. At this time, major changes that grew naturally out of his personality and his sense of purpose and direction led to new, different, and exciting developments in his art. At the end of the 1920s, more extreme changes occurred in his painting that further changed the course of his artistic development. These changes, which continued well into the 1930s, are discussed in the next chapter.

---

[130]Van Deren Coke, "Mountains Shaped, Mountains Recollected, and Mountains Given Spiritual Form," lecture given at the Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, November 6, 1996, pp. 6-7. This lecture contains the only known commentary by a scholar of Jonson on his use of the shaped canvas.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE ABSTRACT, THEMATIC AND SERIES PAINTINGS OF 1929-1936 AND THE TRANSITION TO SUBJECTS OTHER THAN LANDSCAPE

The year 1929 was a truly momentous one for Jonson. His style and choice of subjects for his paintings changed drastically and abruptly at the beginning of the year. Jonson gave up landscape painting almost entirely by the end of 1928. After 1928, he rarely did paintings that were primarily or exclusively landscape subjects. He still took sketching trips, but they were less frequent, shorter, and produced fewer sketches from nature. He continued to work in series, doing numerous paintings based on particular subjects or themes whose choice was anything but random, because these paintings were started with the intention of constituting thematically related groups. Although he stopped painting landscapes, Jonson's range of subjects and themes suddenly widened considerably. In this period, Jonson did the last four works in the *Compositions* series and numerous paintings based on Arabic numerals, the letters of the Roman alphabet, plant life, colors, the cyclical movement of the earth, the transition from day to night, the modern skyscraper and the natural sciences. He did a number of other works that were individually conceived compositions and not done as part of any group or series. The most important for his artistic development and the best known of these individual works is his *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke* of 1929.

Jonson's style not only changed enormously and suddenly at the beginning of 1929, but most of the works done from 1929 to 1936 are somewhat unified stylistically compared

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to the abstracted landscapes or the first several *Compositions* of the 1920s. The shift in the late 1920s was toward a more overtly abstract depiction of these new subjects. In these paintings of 1929 to 1936, basic modernist tenets of simplification, exaggeration, and distortion became more pronounced, more overt, and more essential to the composition and expressive content of the works. In these works, shapes are larger, flatter, and more geometric. Lines are clearer, more pronounced, and function to define the contours of shapes clearly and emphatically to an extent not seen earlier. Colors have become more diverse, intense and saturated, sometimes to the extent that they almost glow as if fluorescent. In these paintings, there is an almost gaudy playfulness and a spirit of exploration of new possibilities of style and subject not seen as obviously in any of Jonson's earlier work.

The choice of subjects as mundane as numerals, alphabet letters, plant forms and colors is itself problematic but intriguing. It creates a paradox of complexity that is difficult to reconcile; the subjects are deceptively simple, obvious and ordinary. Since the subjects chosen are so mundane and uncomplicated the viewer is tempted to speculate as to what hidden, underlying meanings may have been associated with them. However, it seems that there were no hidden meanings and purposes to these uncomplicated subjects; documentary evidence does not support such interpretations of these works. It is more likely that Jonson made the shift in style and subjects when and how it suited his artistic temperament and sense of purpose and direction.[1] Jonson was never afraid to do his own thing in his own way, and this staunch individualism is at the core of his personality and may even be a streak of stubbornness rooted in the distinctly American psyche. Jonson was striving for a completely

---

[1]Garman to the author, September 13, 1998.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

non-representational type of painting, but his search for such a mode of expression in a manner that he considered successful and satisfying was slow, complex, and idiosyncratic. It had to evolve naturally in his work and take the form that best suited him.

The reasons why Jonson suddenly gave up painting landscapes and starting painting abstract compositions based on various other subjects are difficult to explain; Jonson was no longer keeping a diary and the surviving letters from these years that he wrote and received from relatives and friends make virtually no mention of these sweeping changes in his art. However, it seems likely that the climactic quality of the *Grand Canyon* and *Carlsbad Caverns* series of 1927 and 1928 suggested to Jonson that he had exhausted the possibilities of the terrain of the Southwest. Jonson alluded to the climactic quality of these last series of Southwestern landscapes when he wrote to Charles Morris in 1928: "I suppose I am going through a course of purification. Much work is experimentation. If you could see the Grand Canyon group I believe you would feel that here I have made a statement that is final. That does not mean that I have reached the ultimate in these three canvases but only that they are brought together into a powerful expression of feeling."[2] The shift in subjects at the start of 1929 seems to be the result of a conscious realization by Jonson that he needed recognizable, intelligible subjects as the basis for his abstract compositions, but that the possibilities afforded by landscapes had been exhausted, and so he needed to explore the many other aspects of everyday life that had potential to produce abstract imagery. In the search for new source material for his paintings, Jonson seems to have consciously attempted to create abstract compositions based on ordinary, everything objects and concepts, and

---

[2]Jonson to Morris, March 23, 1928, RJ 3: 2157.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

therefore he chose subjects like alphabet letters, numbers, plant forms and colors. Jonson was trying to create abstractions that embraced and involved many different aspects of human experience and which helped to expand his understanding and response to things and concepts experienced and encountered daily. Subjects such as numerals and letters of the Roman alphabet were immediately a step toward greater abstraction because they are already abstractions, visual signs that represent non-visual, intangible concepts.

In the late 1920s, Jonson realized the importance of recognizable subjects as the basis for abstract images and the possibilities of subjects other than landscapes for creating abstract paintings. He realized the possibilities were quite broad and could extend to things that were not tangible and physical, many of which did not lend themselves to being visualized. He wanted to incorporate the totality of human experience in his work, and seems to have been adamant about depicting that which did not lend itself to visualization. By depicting anything abstractly, he felt he could gradually master and perfect his ability to paint abstractly. He explained this when he wrote the following to Morris:

> The few canvasses you saw and knew that were primarily of the abstract began in 1922. For many years I have worked, thought, and experimented in that line. It has been my hope to so purify, simplify, and organize a work that it expresses completely my reaction, or emotion, or sensation, in regard to nature, life, and in fact, to any object, even to the things that are not visible but have a profound emotional reaction upon one. I feel that it is the inner significance of things that counts, and that is a quality that is abstract. It is the abstract that so interests me at present. It seems to be the life and soul of painting. I do feel, though, that it is to a certain extent connected with the actual. In other words, a work results from some actual experience. From that point it becomes pure creation–creation in relation to the experience and to the medium one is using. Experiences of course vary. So do emotions.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> So do the ideas of the one expressing them.... . Also, all forms exist to us because of an abstract rhythm and design. It is my aim to define them.[3]

Jonson's comment indicates that creating visually pleasing and effective abstract compositions was his ultimate goal, but he realized that he could not dispense with figurative, recognizable content completely, at least not yet. He knew he had to slowly and carefully work his way through abstraction, until he reached purely non-representational art. In this, Jonson's approach to abstraction was very similar to that of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Robert Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka, and other pioneering abstractionists in Europe who were a generation older.[4] It was very difficult for Jonson to surrender the figurative, the narrative, and the iconographic in his paintings. Perhaps this enduring connection to subject matter while in the pursuit of abstraction was rooted in Jonson's piously Baptist, rural, and fairly impoverished youth. In a social and cultural environment that would have promoted the practical and functional above the frivolous and luxurious, Jonson may have felt a need to retain subject matter in his painting. The abstract pictorial experience was, as far as he was concerned, inextricably connected to events, experiences and objects from ordinary life and such everyday subjects were to be carefully selected as the means for beginning abstract paintings.

Jonson was aware of the important new developments in his art that occurred in this year, although he discussed these changes only occasionally and briefly. In 1949, he explained that in 1929 his art underwent another major change in development as a result of

---

[3]Jonson to Morris, January 11, 1928, RJ 3: 2153.

[4]Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*: 1-12, 137-151.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

what he considered to be the fourth of the five mystical experiences he claimed to have had. He described this event as follows:

> Santa Fe, 1929.
> During this year a definite change occurred through a series of specific inspirations with the result [being that] most of the work was really abstract. Again a turning point was reached with the accompanying cleansing and feeling of animation.[5]

Although this statement is quite vague, it indicates that Jonson knew his art changed dramatically at this time and that he felt this change resulted from deep within himself, that it was the result of a personal, spiritual change.

Jonson's first paintings in 1929 were the first four paintings in the *Digits* series. The *Digits* series is a group of ten small paintings Jonson did in 1929 and 1930. The remaining six paintings in the series were the first six oils Jonson did in 1930. The *Digits* are the first of the non-landscape, thematic series of paintings Jonson produced in the eight-year period discussed in this chapter. Each painting in the series is a highly abstract composition based on a single Arabic numeral repeatedly depicted in many different ways throughout the design. The new simplification and exaggeration of the elements of design that is characteristic of the works of this period is evident early in the series. Most of the paintings in the series are attempts to merge the human figure, particularly the nude female figure, with the simple geometric sign of the given numeral. Although the colors in these paintings are as diverse as they are intense, most of the paintings feature a predominant hue as the basis for the color scheme of the entire composition. The departure from the more intricately

---

[5]Jonson, lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1929, p. 7, RJ 9: 6330.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

planar style of the landscape paintings from the late 1920s and the choice of subjects that are more conceptual than perceptual (since our thinking in numbers and words does not usually concentrate on the visual signs for them) seem to be an attempt to create abstract compositions that are further removed from the physical reality of landscapes. The *Digits* series marks the beginning of a new phase in Jonson's development, one that led toward greater abstraction.

The discussion of the series in the letters exchanged between Jonson and Arthur in 1935, instigated by a letter from Arthur in which he summarizes his understanding of the meanings and purposes of Jonson's painting since the mid-1920s, indicates that these works were part of the move toward increasing abstraction. In the letter from July 1935 which initiated this dialogue, Arthur stated his perceived understanding of the series as follows:

> To me the numbers, as such, are almost a side-issue; something like an imposition of composition–the important thing is that the effort here–or so it seems to me–is to explain the rhythms and implications of the rhythms of the human body not only in a way that literature can't explain but through a whole cosmos of explanation where words are futile.[6]

In his letter of response written the following month, Jonson assessed Arthur's interpretation of the meaning of the series as "fair" and went on to say:

> I wish I could give an adequate explanation of just what these are and stand for. They really start as a dance feeling following the main movement of the particular digit. First the dominant rhythm–then the female form highly stylized carrying out this rhythm. I do know they are the first direct attack in the direction of creating a purely abstract form or rhythm. Each one of them is an emotional concept of an organization that functions independent of

---

[6]Arthur to Jonson, July 15, 1935, RJ 1: 450-451.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> anything but itself. Each one is definitely pitched in a particular key as well as color.[7]

Jonson's explanation of the *Digits* series is based on the concept of pictorial rhythm, a concept closely parallel to musical rhythm. By the time this series was painted, the idea of synaesthesia, which was basic to early theories of abstract painting, was commonly known. Jonson was thinking much about rhythm at this time and qualities of rhythm appear in many of the paintings done in this eight-year period. Creating visual rhythms with line, shape and color in any given composition played a large role in Jonson's ongoing efforts to achieve purely non-representational painting. Jonson achieved qualities of rhythm in this series by repeating the basic sign of the numeral in many different ways throughout the composition. Jonson's comment that each of the paintings is "definitely pitched in a particular key as well as color," certainly an allusion to music theory, may indicate that each painting was constructed around a particular tone of the dominant hue, that color in these paintings was coordinated not just according to hue but according to tone as well. Jonson's comment that this series is "the first direct attack in....creating a purely abstract form or rhythm" is as explicit as he would be in explaining that the earliest works from the period in question here were a significant shift toward increased abstraction compared to the *Compositions* and abstracted landscapes of the 1920s.

Abstract Four [Plate 46] features the numeral four cast as a nude female sitting as if slightly tilted to the viewer's left. The figure is clearly and smoothly contoured, with every edge of the main form distinct and legible. It is colored mostly with a bright lime green. The

---

[7]Jonson to Arthur, August 29, 1935, RJ 1: 452-453.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

left third of the figure is colored with a purple-gray separated from the green by a line extended down the left shoulder and left leg of the figure. The headless figure sits with its legs close to one another and its arms akimbo. Its feet merge with one another as they merge with the bottom edge of the picture plane. The narrow arms have no hands but instead terminate in crossing lines which vaguely suggest fingers. Breasts are indicated abstractly by sweeping curves that extend from the armpits to the chest. The upper part of the figure ends with a smooth curve at the base of the neck slightly below the top edge of the canvas. The figure seems to be sitting on a geometric structure consisting of planes of cerulean and magenta. These colored planes have been rendered with the sketchy pointillist technique Jonson developed more than ten years earlier in some of his Chicago portraits. Planes of yellow, pale green, light gray and red suggest forms in the background. The numeral four is rendered backwards in dark gray on a pale green plane in the background. It is also depicted upside down on the far left. The arms akimbo position of the green figure echoes the numeral four twice, once in its correct orientation and the other time in reverse.

In the first several months of 1929, Jonson did three of the eleven works in the *Compositions* series; *Composition Eight–Repose*, *Composition Nine–Flame*, and *Composition Ten–Music* were done within weeks or months of one another. The later works in this series tend to reflect Jonson's interest in natural phenomena, rather than the exploration of states of mind and emotions that are evident in *Composition Three–The Verge*, *Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods)* or *Composition Six–Agony*. However, there is no absolute division of this series into two distinct tendencies or phases, with one earlier than the other. *Composition Nine–Flame* is one of the later paintings in the series and the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

one that perhaps most clearly embodies the trend of this series to depict common natural phenomena as the main subject and basis for the design. It is also unusual in that it is not a rectangular image; it is shaped so that the bottom third of the canvas narrows slightly. It is Jonson's second use of shaped canvases. The use of multi-sided, asymmetrical picture surfaces as seen in *Composition Nine–Flame* and two of the paintings in the *Growth Variant* series that Jonson started in 1930 was, as was discussed in the previous chapter, quite unusual among American painters at this time. Jonson's reasons for using the shaped canvas in *Composition Nine–Flame* are not clear.

In *Composition Nine–Flame* [Plate 47] the edges of the composition are narrow areas of black which frame the rest of the image. These areas of black consist of small, projecting, rectangular forms, a series of ring-like openings, straight lines that shift periodically and other silhouetted shapes which suggest mechanical and industrial structures and apparatus. In the bottom of this composition there is a series of zigzagging forms painted with vivid cadmium and some browns and black from which a long, curving form of the same cadmium projects upward. This cadmium form curves gracefully and weightlessly upward and narrows gradually until it reaches a point near the top of the canvas, becoming a long flame. The composition is dominated by the single flame that is centrally placed in the composition. It is surrounded by dark gray filled into large curving forms that become smaller and more numerous toward the top of the picture, thereby suggesting billowing smoke. Is this flame coming from a furnace, an engine, a burning building, or somewhere else? Jonson does not provide enough information concerning the setting for the viewer to know. Although it is not known if Jonson was familiar with the work, the flame in this painting is similar to the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

incense in Charles Demuth's 1919 painting *Incense in a New Church.* [Plate 48]

Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke of 1929 [Plate 49] is a large canvas that at first seems entirely non-representational, but upon closer examination a female figure emerges. The figure is May van Dyke, Arthur's wife. This large canvas–it is almost six feet high and almost four feet wide–features a cleverly obfuscated image of May in its center. May is described as having a thick, curly mass of blue-gray hair and as wearing a long dress with a design of many large diamond shapes. These diamond shapes are outlined with a consistent black line and filled in with various bright colors–cadmium red, cerulean blue, olive green, and purple. May is seen in profile and faces to the left. Her face, neck, and shoulders have been defined with a deep flesh tone. She appears to be leaning forward, as if she may be playing a piano, which is likely because she was a musician and played the piano. Jonson has deliberately allowed May's body to appear flat and decorative because there is little modeling of the skin and hair and there are no folds in the fabric of her gown. This results in an emphatically decorative, flat pattern, in which one has to look closely to identify the figure. The same group of intense hues used to fill in the diamond pattern of May's dress appear frequently, achieving a careful and even dispersal that can be likened to the complex arrangements of notes and instruments in a musical composition. The color scheme for the painting is a complicated and diverse arrangement whereby half the color wheel from red to blue to green is included, but the hues analogous to blue are allowed to dominate by filling most of the small diamond areas of May's gown. This painting is Jonson's most successful realization of synaesthesia up to this point in his career, using carefully chosen and repeated colors to suggest the intricate harmonies and rhythms of a musical composition. Long, thin

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

bands of gracefully curving white with a slightly yellow glow stretch all around the image, crossing over everything in the picture. These smoothly flowing arcs of even width seem to suggest a sweet, melodic sound as they vaguely allude to musical notation marks. Since they overlap all other forms, including May, they serve to flatten the image and obfuscate May's figure even more. Large planes of blue and purple surround May as they overlap and penetrate one another. The decorative flattening of forms achieves a limited sense of three-dimensional space not yet seen in Jonson's painting. Figurative content and purely abstract design have been successfully integrated.

Jonson is known to have been sexually attracted to at least two women other than his wife after he married Vera in 1916. The first of these women was May van Dyke, and this infatuation seems to have flourished for several months in 1929, when Arthur and May were newly married. The second woman was Margaret Naumburg, the wife of Waldo Frank, the early-twentieth century American writer and critic of art and culture. This attraction flourished for a couple of months in 1931, during Jonson's trip to Chicago and New York City. It is not known if these sexual attractions were mere infatuations or if they resulted in physical encounters. This aspect of Jonson's personal life is relevant to his art because it gives meaning to certain paintings and it demonstrates that Jonson's art was occasionally imbued with meanings that could be highly personal and psycho-biographical. His relationship to May van Dyke will be discussed as it relates to his *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke* and *Composition Ten–Music*. His relationship to Margaret Naumberg will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to Jonson's 1931-1932 visit to Chicago and New

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

York City and the series of paintings based on the modern urban environment and the skyscraper that he painted in the several years after that trip.

Jonson's sexual attraction to May is revealed in a few letters he wrote to Arthur over the years. Jonson, Vera, Arthur and May spent the summer of 1929 together in Santa Fe. May visited the Jonsons in Santa Fe without Arthur late in 1929 and again in the middle of 1930. Jonson's comments about the visit with May in late 1929 are suggestive of his amorous, elated feelings toward May:

> First I want to tell you what a brick you have been in being so generous–kind–thoughtful–etc [sic] and the fine spirit in which you made it possible for May to stop over on last Monday. I shall never forget it. I am sure you too will profit by it. It was a gorgeous day. I believe it has saved May from the awful curse that was New York. I believe you will find that she will be happier. All this will make life more beautiful for you. I am sure you will be happy when I tell you that I feel and know May to be the great and beautiful person that she is. I too bow down before this great beauty. And I tell you it will make both of us bigger and greater in every way. And I think I know the meaning of it all. What greater tribute can I pay.[8]

In anticipation of May's 1930 visit, Jonson wrote the following to Arthur, which is equally suggestive of Jonson's attraction toward May:

> First I want to tell you how excited and how thrilled I am over the coming event of May taking a trip here. I think the idea of my meeting her at Gallup is a very good one. I will make the most of the trip and to see May and have some time with her will be most wonderful. It gives me a new lease on life to contemplate this God send. I need this opportunity of seeing May and know it will do me a great good and I feel that the same is true of May. And you dear boy have been wonderful in making it possible for her to come. I believe when you see the two particular canvases I have done as a direct result of May you will fully realize and also appreciate the significance of our knowing and seeing each other..... It makes me very happy to know that I am

---

[8]Jonson to Arthur, December 5, 1929, RJ 1: 339.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> going to have the opportunity of seeing May. I hope that you there will try to arrange for her to have plenty of time.[9]

Jonson's sexual attraction to May was made explicit in a letter he wrote to Arthur in December 1963, immediately upon learning that May suffered a fatal cerebral hemorrhage. When Jonson received two letters from Arthur explaining what happened and telling him that May had died, he wrote back:

> Oh my God. Help help. Here I sit with the tears running down my face trying to say something. I do not know what to say. I have suffered also since Monday morning when your first letter arrived informing me of May being in the hospital. Have wanted to phone–to write–anything to let you know that I was and am with you both. This is Wednesday 1:30 pm. [sic] yours of 3:20 pm [sic] on Sunday and Monday's letter came at noon. They [Arthur's letters] are here and they tell me the sad, heart rending information of May's not surviving the attack..... I am still reading them and it is hard to fully realize that our May is gone. As difficult as it is I am grateful that our dear did not suffer and passed from this life just as she wanted to. This we know and for this one thing let us be grateful..... You dear Arthur and I have loved the same woman but you have had the privilege of living with her and I have not. But as you know I know the mysteries of a total love with her of the long ago. And as you also know the whole flaming hot love of 34 years ago flared up in seeing her again. [May had visited Jonson and Vera in Albuquerque earlier that year.] But nothing could be done about it and so a kind of hell has existed because of a total frustration. And now this epic, and even archetypal, love looms up in strong relief and I weep in sorrow, regret and some anger in the realization that she has been taken from us. And so I, just as you, must suffer. Undoubtedly your ache must be greater than mine for you have had the privilege of practicing and living with your loved one. Some of my ache relates to what might have been had I been able to possess two women at the same time.[10]

For the first time that is known, Jonson openly admitted that he loved May, that he was strongly attracted to her sexually even as he remained sexually attracted to Vera. His

---

[9]Jonson to Arthur, March 12, 1930: RJ 1: 353.

[10]Jonson to Arthur, December 11, 1963, RJ 2: 1176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

comments imply that he seemed to have reasoned that on some level he and Arthur had "shared" May over the years she and Arthur were together. Supposedly, Arthur was not disturbed by Jonson's relationship with May and his attraction toward her; in fact, he seems to have found it flattering.[11]

Jonson's sexual attraction to May is provocatively suggested in *Composition Ten–Music*, which was done probably only weeks earlier than *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke* in 1929.[12] *Composition Ten–Music* [Plate 50] features a highly schematic figure of a nude female crouching with her arms behind her back. The woman's body is defined with large flat planes and more intricately and volumetrically described forms, all of the same tan. The contours of the breasts are defined only with thin lines and light gray shadow. The structure of the torso below the breasts is more abstract; forms have been defined in strictly planar, geometric terms, with careful shading used to make them appear solid. The legs of the figure are more completely described; Jonson has carefully defined the contours of the planes that construct the sides of the legs and the knees. Although the woman's face is defined only with two diagonal slants for eyes, her hair is described as a large, round curly mass. Two long, thin curving forms stretch directly upward and across the figure. The one

---

[11]Virginia Mullen, interviewed by the author, June 9, 1998. Virginia Mullen's husband William (deceased at the time of the interview) was a close friend of Arthur Johnson. William Mullen and Arthur had been friends since they were teenagers and involved in the same choral groups. They remained friends for the rest of their lives and eventually their families became friendly. William and Virginia Mullen were well-acquainted with Arthur, May, Jonson and Vera.

[12]This painting is recorded in Jonson's "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson" as being done two oil paintings before *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke*, and since the arrangement of this list is chronological, it is likely this work was done first. ["Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to the right ends at the top of the picture. The other form curves in a gradual arc so that it coincides with the figures' face and then loops again in a small circle before ascending in the upper left corner of the picture. A section of a piano keyboard tilts upward in the lower left corner of the composition. Behind the figure is a dark blue-violet rectangle, and above and behind this are areas of deep brown, green and tan. The G-clef and a portion of musical bar notation can be seen in the area of brown in the far left of the composition. The hairstyle of this figure is distinctive in this otherwise highly abstract figure and is similar to the hairstyle worn by the female figure in *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke*.

Jonson's 1930 letter to Arthur that was previously quoted indicates he did two paintings of May at the time, and yet only one is identified in his "Catalogue" as a portrait of her. Since none of the other extant works from this period are depictions of May and very few depict figures at all, *Composition Ten–Music* must be the second of the two portraits of May that Jonson made. The connections between *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke* and *Composition Ten–Music* are numerous and include the similarity in the hairstyle of the figures, the references to music, the personal significance of *Composition Ten–Music* to May, and the short span of time between these paintings suggests that *Composition Ten–Music* is an obfuscated portrait of May. May was known for her large, curly mass of gray-brown hair; the style was unusual and she was immediately recognizable because of it.[13] May is known to have considered the painting of great personal meaning and she was anxious to own it the year after it was painted. Arthur conveyed May's interest in the work in a letter to Jonson when he wrote:

---

[13]Interview with Virginia Mullen of Portland, Oregon, in June 9, 1998.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> As you know, I have never seen your canvass [sic] "Music," but May has set her heart on having it. There are personal reasons for her desire to have it which you understand, I think, better than I do, perhaps. So strong is the desire to have the canvass [sic] that she actually is willing to make a deal for it; she would trade "Spring" for it. It must be very good for anyone to be willing to give up "Spring" in order to have it. "Spring," of course, was a gift to May, so this is a matter that is up to her. How do you feel about this? Would you consider such a trade?[14]

Thus it is highly likely that this crouching female figure is May. The figure's nudity and sexually provocative pose leave little doubt as to how Jonson perceived her. These two paintings, especially *Composition Ten–Music*, indicate that Jonson's paintings from throughout the 1920s and early 1930s were not without meaning, and that this meaning could be highly personal and psycho-biographical.

Shortly after these two paintings of May van Dyke, Jonson began the second series from this period, the *Growth Variants*. Jonson did eight paintings in this group, the first five in the middle of 1929, the sixth in the middle of 1930, the seventh late in 1931, and the eighth in the middle of 1935. He originally entitled the series "Tree Variant" but changed the title to "Growth Variant" before the series was finished.[15] Although more naturalistic in subject than the *Digits* series, these paintings are less connected to nature than any of Jonson's landscape paintings from the 1920s and only the first and fifth in the series feature landscape settings of any kind. Arthur wrote to Jonson in July 1935 that he understood the *Growth Variant* series "does for the vegetal world what the E.R. [*Earth Rhythms*] series does for the geologic.... . For me these are often the most difficult of comprehension. They seem,

---

[14]Arthur to Jonson, January 6, 1931, RJ 1: 366.

[15]Jonson listed "Tree Variant 1-5" in a letter to Arthur of February 14, 1930 in which he listed all the paintings he did in 1929. [RJ 1: 350-351]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

at times, almost too subtle, but you know I've had very little opportunity to study them."[16] Jonson's response in his letter to Arthur the following month was one of approval regarding his interpretation of the series, for he wrote: "Good. Yes. Variations on the sensation of growth."[17] The paintings in the series are quite diverse in composition and color as well as in their abstract treatment of their subject, which is plant forms; some are clearly more abstract than others.

Growth Variant VI of 1930 [Plate 51] features two long, thick plant stems of a creamy dark green that twist in sharp turns from the lower left of the canvas to its upper center. In the right third of the picture there are two straighter plant stems. The first one is a light gray-purple and the one farther to the right a darker, muted green. A short, brown stem emerges from the green stem at the far left. All of these plant stems emerge from a milky white and light blue ground that seems to have the soft, spongy texture of marshmallows. Two green stems, smaller than the first two mentioned and surrounded by interlocking planes that are very Cubist, have been placed in the center of the picture and appear to be in the distance. An irregularly contoured plane of gray-blue stretches along the left and upper edges of the canvas, suggesting an expanse of deep blue sky. The larger pair of green stems on the left are carefully modeled to appear three-dimensional; shading creates highlights down the length of each stem and suggests a smooth, shiny, even moist surface. The light gray-purple stem on the right has been modeled with many partially blended dabs of paint that create a rough, slightly mottled texture. The effect of this painting, as in the

---

[16]Arthur to Jonson, July 15, 1935, RJ 1: 451.

[17]Jonson to Arthur, August 29, 1935, RJ 1: 453.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

other *Growth Variants* and the 1926 *Spring*, is to exaggerate the scale and tactile qualities of the plant forms.

Growth Variant VII of 1931 [Plate 52] is an enlarged, distorted depiction of plant forms that seems to be a close-up, detailed examination of their shape, color, texture, and growth patterns. It is an irregularly-shaped, asymmetrical canvas that consists of seven sides and is much wider at the top than at the bottom. Jonson's reasons for choosing this irregular shape for several paintings of this period in his career are uncertain; there are no explanations or comments about these irregularly shaped canvases in any of the surviving letters that Jonson wrote or received during these years and Jonson had stopped keeping a diary years earlier. Since his choice of the inverted pyramidal shape for the *Grand Canyon Series: Second Movement* was probably inspired by the illusion of space he desired to convey, it is likely that the irregular canvases used for two of the *Growth Variants* had definite connections to the particular content of these paintings. Perhaps Jonson thought the irregularity of the shape of the canvas suited the irregular, organic growth of plants and trees; that the forms he was depicting were anything but geometric and so a truly geometric canvas should be avoided in order to reinforce the meaning of the painting.

In this painting, a long, blue-gray, tubular form runs from the upper right down in a smoothly flowing curve toward the lower left, where it suddenly shoots back up and then down again in a sharp curve in the center of the picture. In the bottom of the image, the tube ends in a bulging knot and then shrinks to a much thinner segment that extends to the lower left corner of the picture. The tubular form has been carefully shaded, as if bright light from the right is shining on it. In the center of the composition and far in the background are two

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

more tubular branches rendered with a bright tint of blue. The large tubular form that dominates the composition is surrounded by large planes of yellow and orange which meet at various angles and whose contours have been firmly delineated. These planes also surround the area of light blue in the middle. A solid plane at the top of the painting curves over the space depicted. An area of dark brown along the upper left and a triangular area of dark gray at the lower left suggest dark, murky space behind the forms placed prominently in the foreground. At the far right is a series of long, irregularly contoured areas of deep yellow-green. These forms are vague in texture but seem to be long, straight plant leaves. *Growth Variant VII* is an exercise in visualizing the curving, elongated rhythms associated with plants and flowers and their processes and patterns of growth. Jonson has created a lively mix of sharply curving, more subtly curving and even bluntly angular geometric, linear rhythms. In this painting we have over-sized plant stems that are emphatically three-dimensional and diaphanous planar forms that are far less connected to anything botanical. The painting features Jonson's typical painting technique at this time, which involved an array of uniformly spaced rectangular strokes of paint placed in sequence according to tone. Jonson allowed the edge of each applied brush stroke to terminate in a slightly elevated ridge of paint, which projects forward slightly and separates each stroke from the others before and after it. At first glance, this method of application of paint mimics the cracking of paint surfaces over time, but upon close examination it becomes evident that this textural effect is the result of Jonson's careful, methodical technique, a technique he had developed years earlier, under the influence of Cézanne and Neo-Impressionism.

Many of Jonson's paintings from these years are similar to the paintings of Arthur

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Dove. In fact, of all the leading modernist painters in the United States in the early twentieth century, Dove is probably the one whose style and understanding of nature is closest to Jonson's. The similarities are more in the themes chosen than in the painting styles of the two artists. Jonson's *Compositions* series, including *Composition Five–Wind*, *Composition Nine–Flame*, *Spring*, and the *Growth Variants* involve weather and atmosphere, plant forms, and processes of growth, change and the transformation of energy in nature. These are themes that preoccupied Dove throughout his life and which are apparent in many of his works, from his earliest breakthrough abstract paintings of around 1910 until the end of his career.[18] Dove's early abstract pastel *Plant Forms* [Plate 53] with its close-up, enlarged view of simplified, generic flower and plant forms, is an excellent example of how Dove exaggerated, simplified and distorted nature for the purpose of expressing underlying forces of growth, movement, energy and life. It is also vaguely similar to Jonson's *Spring* and the *Growth Variants* and is probably the one work by Dove which is most similar to anything Jonson ever painted.

Jonson knew of and admired Dove's work, although he apparently never knew him personally. He knew Dove's work at least as early as 1912, when Dove's breakthrough paintings and pastels were shown in Chicago at the Thurber Gallery in March of 1912.[19] At this time, Dove's work was considered radical and bizarre and it received a lot of attention

---

[18]Barbara Haskell, *Arthur Dove* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974): 14-20, 33-34, 73; Debra Bricker Balken, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997): 20-21, 24-25, 28-29.

[19]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 23.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

from art critics in the local newspapers, news coverage Jonson read.[20] However, Dove apparently had little influence on Jonson at this time. It would not be until the early 1930s that Jonson would discuss Dove's work and acknowledge his admiration for it. In 1933, Jonson named Dove as one of the best abstract painters in America in a letter in which he responded to an inquiry about whom he thought were the most important and capable abstract artists in America at the time. Jonson wrote that "I wish I could give you a really good list of artists who are working in the abstract. But I know of very few. But here are a few that I happen to know about and whose work I know.... ."[21] Jonson then named Dove and gave Stieglitz's address for An American Place as the person and location through which Dove could be contacted. Later that year, in a letter to his close friend and fellow artist Agnes Pelton, Jonson briefly stated that he liked Dove's work and considered it related to his and Pelton's work, implying that they were following parallel paths toward a common goal. He wrote:

> Do you know the work of Arthur Dove? He is continually coming to mind. I wonder what the connection might be. I wonder if you know him. I saw his exhibition at Stieglitz season before last [he had been to New York City two years earlier] and it was and remains one of the high spots for me. I sort of see them as a fine addition to ourselves–that is you and myself.[22]

It seems possible that Jonson was influenced years earlier by Dove's keen interest in

---

[20]Ann Lee Morgan, "'A Modest Young Man with Theories': Arthur Dove in Chicago, 1912," in Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 23, 26.

[21]Jonson to Lloyd LaPage Rollins, January 13, 1933, RJ 4: 3029. Rollins was from San Francisco and he was apparently a museum curator or art dealer.

[22]Jonson to Agnes Pelton, September 26, 1933, RJ 4: 2568.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the seen and unseen forces of creation, growth and change in nature, an interest that led Dove to create abstractions based on plants and trees, the weather, and changes in sunlight and moonlight. Dove explored these themes because he was trying to find visual means of expressing the patterns and processes of growth, change, and transformations of life forms and energy forces.[23] Jonson was depicting these subjects as part of his own efforts to understand the world in pictorial, visual terms. Both artists were searching for abstract imagery with which to express their personal, somewhat spiritual, understanding of nature. Dove's force lines and growth lines are quite similar to Jonson's pictorial rhythms and were used for similar purposes. Both artists adapted the ideas of Symbolism for abstract imagery, but whereas Dove seems to have done so intentionally, Jonson did so less purposefully as he tried to redirect his art away from Symbolist methods of conveying meaning.[24]

Jonson's began 1930 by doing the six paintings which completed the *Digits* series. Then, in succession, he did *Variations on a Rhythm–A*, *Abstraction in Blue*, *Growth Variant VII* and *Time Cycle*.[25] In this year his thematic interests broadened considerably. The

---

[23]For more on Dove's artistic and intellectual sources and influences and the goals of his art see the following articles by Sherrye Cohn: "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove; Part I: 'Force Lines, Growth Lines' as Emblems of Energy," *Arts* 58.4 (December 1983): 90-93; "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove, Part 2: Dove and 'the Fourth Dimension,'" *Arts* 58.5 (January 1984): 121-126; "Arthur Dove and the Organic Analogy: A Rapprochement Between Art and Nature," *Arts* 59.10 (June 1985): 85-89; and "Arthur Dove and Theosophy: Visions of a Transcendental Reality.: *Arts* 58.1 (September 1983): 86-91.

[24]Charles Eldredge, "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley," in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986): 115-118, 122-124. In this essay, Eldredge explains how Dove's abstraction originated in Symbolism.

[25]"Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Variations on a Rhythm series is a group of 26 paintings in which each painting is an imaginative, colorful abstract composition based on one letter in the Roman alphabet. At 26 paintings done from 1930 to 1936, it is the ultimate series in Jonson's oeuvre. It most completely embodies the goals that Jonson had in working in series. It allowed him to explore his chosen subject for its possibilities of abstract design in the thorough, systematic manner that suited him. It also provided him with a wealth of guaranteed material with which to work. In each painting in the series, the alphabet letter that is the basis for the composition is usually repeated numerous times in many different ways. This repetition produces exciting and dynamic effects of pictorial rhythm, effects that were probably attempts to create visual experiences equivalent to the pure expression of music. Without saying so, Jonson seems to have been applying the concept of synaesthesia to these paintings.

Jonson first mentioned his plan for the series in a letter to Arthur written in January 1931: "I am now getting into a new group–and if ever completed will consist of 26 canvases."[26] Two months later he further described the series in another letter to Arthur: "The series of 26 is well under way. They are pure abstract. They have to do with the alphabet. I finished the fifth today."[27] Although Jonson began the series in the middle of 1930 with his painting based on the letter A, he was preoccupied with other paintings for the rest of that year. However, he devoted almost all his efforts in painting during 1931 to the series; of the ten oils he did that year, eight were for the *Variations on a Rhythm*. In 1931, he did paintings for the letters B to I; in 1932, for the letters J to P; and in 1933, for the letters

---

[26]Jonson to Arthur, January 2, 1931, RJ 1: 364-365.

[27]Jonson to Arthur, March 11, 1931, RJ 1: 369.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Q to V. Jonson's determination to finish the series lessened by the end of 1933 and it took him another three years to finish the last four paintings in the series. He ceased working on the series until late in 1935, when he did paintings for the letters W and X. In late 1936, he finished the series with paintings based on the letters Y and Z. Jonson rarely deviated from alphabetical order while working on this series; he did the painting for O after the one for P and the one for T between the ones for R and S.[28]

There are two discernible trends in the *Variations on a Rhythm* series. One is toward spatially ambiguous compositions in which the particular alphabet letter takes on architectonic qualities or is allowed to mimic physically real objects from everyday experience. The second is toward flat, decorative patterning based on the simple geometry of the given alphabet letter. The first trend is more common in the earlier paintings in the series, the second trend more common in the later ones, but there is no firm chronological separation between the two trends. The tendency toward flat, patterned effects with fewer variations in the form of the alphabet letter could be the result of Jonson's gradual push toward greater abstraction, that as the years passed and Jonson produced more paintings on these intangible subjects, he was able to create more intense, extreme abstractions with fewer connections to tangible, physical reality.

The choice of subjects for the *Variations on a Rhythm*, so obvious, mundane, and self-explanatory, is problematic because of its very simplicity. In the previously discussed letters exchanged between Jonson and Arthur in the summer of 1935, Arthur summarizes the purpose and meaning of the series as follows: "The alphabet is here the framework, as the

---

[28]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

numbers are in the abstract series. I imagine that in both cases most people would tend to look at the framework and miss the building. Am I right that a new explication of natural form (as in, but different from the E.R. [*Earth Rhythms*] series)?"[29] Jonson replied in his letter of August that Arthur's explanation of this series was "fair." He went on to say: "In only a few of them is there any connection with the so-called natural. They are entirely different from the Earth Rhythms. Most of them are entirely abstract except in that they do carry on the established rhythm indicated by the particular letter..... These are the second attack on the abstract."[30] Jonson's comment that the *Variations on a Rhythm* series is "the second attack on the abstract" is most revealing as to the true and full purpose of this series and, by extension, all the series from 1929 to 1936. It is probably the most compelling evidence, as far as written testimony from Jonson is concerned, that his paintings from these years were made to further explore the problems of creating abstract designs without completely giving up recognizable subjects and figurative content.

The mundane quality of subjects such as numbers and alphabet letters is a problem for most viewers; works based on such subjects seem to be without any compelling purpose and meaning. It was even problematic for Arthur, who wrote to Jonson in 1931 about the difficulty he had comprehending the meaning of *Variations on a Rhythm–A*, which at that time Jonson had called *Apex*. The dialogue between the brothers is very enlightening as to what the series meant for Jonson and what it contributed to the development of his art. Arthur began the dialogue when he wrote:

---

[29]Arthur to Jonson, July 15, 1935, RJ 1: 451.

[30]Jonson to Arthur, August 29, 1935, RJ 1: 453.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The idea of running through the alphabet for abstract paintings is probably ok, [sic] but what is the meaning of a letter A or a letter F. And sense is to me the most important thing in painting. I can understand an alphabetical series in abstract, such as:
>
> Aspiration
> Billow
> Chaos
> Desire or Despair
> Ephemeral or Energy–etc.....
>
> I suppose there is a certain "idea" in the canvas as entitled "Apex," [sic] but my dear boy, I do not quite follow it. Did you have some particular idea, some definite thought or meaning in mind, or were you intent solely on painting an abstraction based on the letter A? Do not misunderstand me, all the painting skill, all that delicately-nuanced color sense, that emanation of light–they are all there; but to what end? It is not the lack of subject matter, you know that I am not tied-down in that respect, it is the absence of meaning, emotion, feeling.... . Tell me honestly, have all those squares, angles, etc.... any definite relation to any thought-content, or are they merely "architectural" lines?[31]

Jonson responded to Arthur's confusion about *Variations on a Rhythm–A* in a letter written several weeks later. He disagreed with his brother's opinion of the series and offered a succinct explanation of what the series, and by extension his other work of the early 1930s, was attempting:

> I cannot help but feel you were predjudiced [sic] because you happened to know on what particular rhythm the composition was based. It happens that it is just as legitimate to compose on the ideas a letter offers as it is to do so on the ideas a tree offers.
>
> Please grant me the privilege of doing various kinds of creative work without damning them because they are not like what preceeded [sic] them. There is just as much of an idea in Apex as in anything I have done. The only difference is that it comes from a different source. I am sorry you feel it is devoid of meaning, emotion and feeling. If any of my works have these fine

---

[31]Arthur to Jonson, April 27, 1931, RJ 1: 377.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> qualities then this must have it also. I place it with the list of successful works.[32]

Jonson's comments make it clear that he felt it was entirely possible and desirable to create abstract compositions based on the simplest, most ordinary objects and intangible concepts, and that the purpose or meaning of such paintings could be entirely or primarily formalist. Although many of Jonson's paintings from the years discussed in this chapter are demonstrations of Jonson's pictorial talent while creatively exploring basic principles of modernist art, they are part of his gradual push for complete non-representation in painting, and this goal was founded on achieving the spiritual in art. By creating vibrant, dynamic abstract images based on the variety of subjects that he was selecting during these years, Jonson was attempting to find a satisfying approach to non-representational painting by using these subjects as the basis or point of departure for creating abstract imagery. These subjects were the catalysts for compositions that were leading from the more realistic landscapes of the 1920s to the even more abstract paintings of the mid-1930s and the purely non-representational paintings of the late 1930s and after.[33]

Variations on a Rhythm–B [Plate 54] exemplifies the trend in this series toward flat, planar depictions of the alphabet letters. It features the letter B deconstructed and then reconstructed throughout the composition. The basic form of the letter, consisting of two pale orange ovals and a vertical zigzagging area of pink, fills the entire canvas and seems to lean toward the left. Several large, cerulean planes intersect and overlap in the background.

---

[32]Jonson to Arthur, June 16, 1931, RJ 1: 378.

[33]Garman to the author, December 13, 1998.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Some planes are very flat and parallel to the canvas, while others are angled so that they seem to tilt toward or away from the viewer. In the middle of the lower orange oval there are numerous small planes of blue, with the letter "B" faintly seen as several quickly drawn, curved lines. These planes have been shaded to suggest that they are solid, and yet at some junctures they overlap or interconnect in ways that suggest they are intangible. Once again, a Cubist understanding of space is present in Jonson's paintings of this eight-year period. The spaces inside the upper orange oval and below the lower oval are filled in with brown. The pink form at left is shaded so that it becomes darker toward the top. Its left edge is a long vertical zigzag. Its right edge is a straight line inclined upward gradually. The form has been painted to appear very smooth and almost metallic. The area of sienna under the dominant letter B is dark and spatially unclear. The plane of blue that emerges at the top of the composition in a sweeping curve is wide, flat, and pale compared to most of the variations of blue in this painting. It ends abruptly when it meets a plane of gray-blue situated at an angle to it, but then seems to continue on the other side of that same gray-blue plane. Behind this gray-blue plane are several dark ultramarine planes that seem to be cast in shadow. At the far right, among the dark blue planes, there is a small letter B in purple seen backwards. Another plane of cerulean curves sharply downward in the lower right. The repetition of the letter B in fragments, at various sizes, and upside-down or backwards, continues the "rhythm" of the letter throughout the composition. Pictorial rhythms created by abstract forms were of great interest to Jonson during these years and are dominant features in many works of the time.

Jonson's paintings of thematic series based on various everyday objects and concepts

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

are somewhat related to developments in modernist painting in America at around the same time and slightly earlier. A number of American painters of the 1920s and 1930s were creating highly abstract paintings based on similarly ordinary, mundane things or concepts. Perhaps the best known is Stuart Davis, who in the early 1920s did his first abstract still lifes of packaging design for smoking and household cleaning products such as his *Lucky Strike* paintings, *Odol*, and his eggbeater series. However, other artists were part of this trend. The one example that is most similar to *Variations on a Rhythm--B* and perhaps other paintings by Jonson from these years is Charles Demuth's 1928 painting *The Figure Five in Gold.* [Plate 55] The two paintings are similar in that both repeat and transform the principle motif through dynamically rhythmic rearrangement and Cubist-inspired fragmentation, yet the motif is conspicuously depicted as a large, flattened shape that fills the center of the canvas. Demuth's painting features a distinctly American variation of the Cubist-Futurist stylistic vocabulary that originated in Europe, a variation which Wanda Corn has described as "billboard Cubism."[34] Billboard Cubism involves the planar fragmentation of forms found in Analytic Cubism and merges it with large, flat planes of vivid color that often have no clear connection to the physically real world and which often suggest the bright lights and intense colors of modern advertisements and urban spaces. Although not interested in the modern industrial and commercial environment, Jonson seems to have been responsive to this aesthetic, although how he came to know about it remains unclear. He was somewhat familiar with Demuth's work. He saw Demuth's 1927 painting *My Egypt* when he was in

---

[34]Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: American Art and Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 201-213.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

New York City in 1931 and was very impressed by it.[35]

Variations on a Rhythm–H [Plate 56] demonstrates the second trend in this series, that toward depictions of the alphabet letters as three-dimensional and even architectonic. In this painting, Jonson has used the emphatically vertical and horizontal elements of the letter H to create an architectonic form in the midst of a vaguely described environment of vast yet uncertain scale. The composition is dominated by the volumetric rendering of the letter H as a large white structure with a bright light shining across it from the upper left. The light creates a complex pattern of highlights, reflected lights, and shadows that make the form undeniably solid. The architectonic letter is described as overly narrow and very tall, with thick vertical bars connected by short, narrow horizontal bars. Thick horizontal bars extend from the sides of the vertical forms and curve downward. They seem to exist as flying buttresses, holding up this tall architectonic structure. The white letter H stands on a curving ground plane of deep pink, a flat precipice on the edge of the dark purple abyss in the background. Behind the white H are two pink cylindrical forms. One is vertical and thick. The other is connected to the large white letter H but is narrower and turns downward in a sweeping curve. These two dark pink cylinders have been modeled in the formulaic way Jonson often used at this time. The modeling which seems so smooth and seamless at first glance is actually achieved by partially blending semi-rectangular strokes and dabs of paint, which is typical of Jonson's painting technique during these years. Another component of this composition is the three long and narrow strips of dark ultramarine. One extends across

---

[35]Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes*: n.p. and footnote 32. Jonson wrote to Vera in a letter of November 19, 1931: "It is the finest work by an American that I have seen."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the picture from the upper left down to the lower right. At each end of this long arc, two shorter strips of the same ultramarine connect to it at almost perpendicular angles. One runs to the upper left corner of the composition while the other runs to the lower right corner. The ultramarine strips are another rhythmic reference to the letter H. Throughout this series of 26 paintings, the shift between the flat, planar treatment and the more three-dimensional, architectonic treatment of the alphabet letters continued. *Variations on a Rhythm–E* [Plate 57] and *Variations on a Rhythm–R* [Plate 58], done only weeks or months apart in 1932, clearly demonstrate how these two tendencies co-existed and came and went from painting to painting and sometimes appeared simultaneously in individual paintings.

In the early 1930s Jonson did a group of abstract compositions in which each painting is based on a single color. The first of these was *Abstraction in Blue*, which Jonson did in the middle of 1930. Jonson then abandoned the series for about two years, until the middle of 1932. After having completed the *Variations on a Rhythm* series up to the letter P and having done three paintings based on the modern American city, he produced *Abstraction in Red* and *Abstraction in Yellow* consecutively. He then did *Abstraction in Violet* in the middle of 1933. After letting the series lapse for another two years, probably because he was preoccupied with completing the *Variations on a Rhythm* series and the *Cycle of Science* series, he produced the last in the group, *Abstraction in Green*, in the middle of 1935.[36] In the dialogue between Jonson and Arthur in their letters of the summer of 1935, Arthur acknowledged that he knew little of what this series meant. In his letter of response, Jonson stated that these paintings were essentially his personal, emotional response to the particular

---

[36]"Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

color at the time he composed the painting, that the subject of the series was the possibilities for creating abstract compositions based on the ideas made possible by individual colors. Jonson wrote: "They are frankly abstract. But each is based on my personal feeling at the time as regards the particular color. They come from contemplation of a color as an item of itself. The color creates or dictates the form–the form the design etc."[37]

Abstraction in Red of 1932 [Plate 59] depicts numerous geometric forms colored in various red hues and tones. Some forms have been rendered as solid, geometrical objects bathed in a bright spotlight. Others have been depicted as diaphanous, transparent planes of colored light. A narrow, tilted cylindrical form projects upward and slightly to the left. Its three-segmented form, with a small triangular cap, makes it look like a giant crayon or lipstick. It has definite phallic allusions, although such implications may not have been deliberately intended and do not seem to be fundamental to any meaning intended in this painting.[38] It has been meticulously shaded so that a nearly white highlight extends down the side of the form on the right, while its left side is cast in moderate shadow. At the bottom of the composition, there are two curving forms which look somewhat like hills in the distance, even though they are painted with the same bright cadmium as many other forms in the painting. They have been methodically shaded as well, with nearly white highlights

---

[37]Jonson to Arthur, August 29, 1935, RJ 1: 453.

[38]Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes*, n.p. Wilson sees phallic symbolism and meaning in many of Jonson's paintings and sketches from the early 1930s that depict the modern city. Skyscrapers were characterized by towering forms that by their very architectural character easily suggest phallic forms. However, there is no compelling reason to believe that these vaguely phallic forms were deliberate and specific in meaning, as Wilson briefly suggests. Wilson does not explore this issue at length and does not relate this symbolism to Jonson's artistic development and intentions at the time.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

across their uppermost surfaces. There are numerous forms behind the long cylindrical form. Some are small circular forms of the same cadmium and are similarly shaded with the light coming from the right. A couple are almost balloon-like in shape. The curved body and ball-shaped end of one of these forms is an intricate design that suggests any number of forms, natural or man-made. Directly behind the main cylindrical form, an irregularly shaped, solid-looking plane colored with orange is placed vertically. An irregularly contoured plane filled in with dark purple is seen near the bottom of the composition. Numerous broad, flat, translucent planes of orange and purple are seen in the background. They seem to project in all directions and overlap. There is a large rectangle of orange surmounted by a longer, narrower rectangle of purple in the center of the composition. In the foreground, several highly translucent, diaphanous, curving planes of color seem to overlap many of the more tangible, seemingly closer forms in this painting. They are lighter tones of the cadmium already seen, and the effect achieved by their placement is that of multiple, overlapping spotlights illuminating this space. This is an approach to creating effects of light and shadow in abstract painting that Jonson learned from his experience as a theater designer. Jonson has defined the surfaces and described the solidity of forms and the different gradations of light and shadow on their surfaces with small, rectangular, semi-blended strokes of paint. This is yet another example of Jonson's typical painting technique of the period and of how the aesthetic of billboard Cubism is evident in so many of his paintings, regardless of their subjects.

The composition of *Abstraction in Red* is very similar to that of Jonson's 1931 small pen-and-ink drawing *New York* [Plate 60] and it is very likely that the drawing was the basis

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for the composition of the painting; both feature the long crayon-like form in a prominent place in the composition.[39] Since *Abstraction in Red* was done shortly after Jonson completed three paintings based on the modern American city and several months after his trip to Chicago and New York City in late 1931 and early 1932, it is likely that the modern urban environment was very much in Jonson's mind when he composed this painting. Considering the similarities between these two works, it is possible that *Abstraction in Red* is a highly abstract depiction, even a deliberate obfuscation, of the modern city. However, it is not clear what associations if any Jonson contemplated between the color red and the modern city. As for the meaning of the abstractions based on colors, the following explanation of *Abstraction in Red*, written by Jonson in a letter of 1948, essentially reiterates the explanation offered by Jonson thirteen years earlier in the letters exchanged between Jonson and Arthur in 1935:

> This work is the result of an effort to express the emotional meaning of the color RED through an abstract design. The forms and the resulting design are entirely creative in that they appear because of the concept of an abstract order through emotional realization. Some of the items that presented themselves at the time are–an insistence of red–a thrust of force–an interweaving of three dimensional forms with two dimensional transparent planes.[40]

The shifting between two-dimensional shapes and the illusion of three-dimensional forms and the sensation of thrusting movement are essential qualities of many of Jonson's paintings of the 1920s and 1930s. Considering this statement about *Abstraction in Red*, the thrusting

---

[39]Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes*, n.p.

[40]Jonson to Reginald Poland, May 4, 1948, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 84, 86. Capitalization is Jonson's.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

movement embodied in the crayon-form could refer to the phallus and procreation (a type of "natural energy"), the upward motion of skyscrapers, the dramatic space and scale of the modern city, or even the ascendence of the spirit.

In 1930 Jonson did *Time Cycle: Morning, Noon,* and *Night*, a three-part series in which the passing of time during the course of the day and the changes in light (and the related rotation of the earth) are illustrated in highly abstract terms. In *Morning* [Plate 61], a yellow-green globe that has been meticulously shaded to appear solid seems to be growing larger before our eyes, suggesting the rising of the sun. The effect of growth and movement is achieved by rendering wide, circular planes of shaded dark green to the right of the globe and similarly shaped planes of dark green-blue to the left of the globe. These concentrically placed arcs suggest movement and the transition from darkness to light as the viewer's eyes move in the direction suggested by these planes, from the lower left to the upper right. Jonson has achieved the effect of bright light emanating from the globe by rendering broad curving beams of light. These beams of light are clearly defined with abrupt shifts in tone that conform to implied lines. The description of colored light in clearly delineated, geometric areas of vivid color is Jonson's version of the billboard Cubism aesthetic. The orange and yellow rounded forms across the bottom of the composition suggest hills and mountains.

Noon [Plate 62] consists of a white circle in the center of the picture that is surrounded by two concentric circles of bright yellow and green. Wide, oval beams of light, a bright cadmium at the top and a similarly bright orange at the bottom, extend from the white circle and terminate at the edges of the canvas. This is the sun in the middle of the day,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in all its spectacular, luminous glory. The rays of bright light are indicated by how they change the tones of the numerous, abstracted forms that fill the space surrounding the sun. The sun has been described so that it looks like a solid glowing orb. Jonson has rendered a schematic hand holding it up in the sky. The hand emerges from the relatively undefined space that surrounds it. Is this perhaps the hand of God holding the sun in its proper place in our solar system? The glowing sun is surrounded by two wide, long, curving tubes carefully shaded with an intense shade of violet. They meander around the circular white form, extending across the canvas from all of its edges. They have a firmly contoured, geometric quality that makes them look almost like plumbing. Perhaps these are abstracted vegetational forms, which can only live and grow when they are exposed to sunlight. Behind them is a series of wide planes of oranges and reds that glisten in the bright light that fills this space. The planes on the left of the sun are deep pink and the planes on the right are bright orange. Each plane is carefully shaded from light to dark toward its bottom. The beams of light spreading upward create a range of hues in various pockets of space between and around the tubular forms, including slightly muted pinks, oranges, and yellow-greens. The sense of a bright light filling this space has been achieved by shifting tones and even hues if appropriate according to a carefully planned array of lines. These lines serve not to separate forms from one another but instead to differentiate various intensities of light.

Night [Plate 63] depicts the same solid-looking orb that is seen in *Morning*. However, the range of colors and tones is very different in this work. The orb is now placed at the lower right in the composition. It gives off a narrower, less intense beam of white light. The orb has been shaded from light to dark using a cool, muted cerulean. The beams

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of light that project from the orb are not as bright and the changes in tone are less dramatic than in the other two paintings in the series. The shifts in hues are now mostly toward varieties of blue and green, cool hues which easily suggest night. At the bottom of the composition are a couple of triangular mounds and broadly sweeping curves rendered with a carefully shaded burgundy. Scattered across the composition are irregularly shaped planes of dark blue that occasionally feature specks of white. The landscape of the Southwest has been suggested abstractly by these triangular mounds and planes of dark blue. This is emphasized by the long, segmented form in the left and upper middle of the composition that seems to encircle the globe. The form suggests the limb of a scorpion, spider, or a similar hard-shelled creature that would be found in the Southwestern desert. *Time Cycle* demonstrates that Jonson's abstract paintings during these years were not totally without intellectual, philosophical meaning. The theme of the passage of time as understood through the transitions from morning to noon to night are universal. Although traces of the terrain of the Southwest are evident in this series, such references to nature are occasional, scattered, and highly obfuscated. The broader theme involved is of greater importance to Jonson.

In the mid-1930s Jonson did several abstract compositions based on the modern American city and the skyscraper, a distinctly American architectural structure which characterized this new urban, capitalist environment. The choice of such a subject for a series is a peculiar one for Jonson, for he had moved to New Mexico ten years earlier to escape the problems of modern urban life. The skyscraper was a very popular subject for many early modernist painters in the United States. Painters including those associated with Alfred Stieglitz and those associated with Precisionism depicted this most distinctive feature

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the new urban environment of America; John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Joseph Stella, Max Weber, Charles Sheeler, and others explored this subject in numerous works produced during the first three decades of the twentieth century.[41] By the time Jonson started his series of paintings on the modern American city, interest in the theme was declining.

This series was inspired by visits to New York City and Chicago that Jonson made in late 1931 and early 1932. These visits were made primarily so Jonson could attend the exhibitions of his most recent works that were held at the Delphic Studios in New York City from November 23 to December 6, 1931 and at the Studio Gallery in Chicago from January 8 to 29, 1932.[42] These two exhibitions were among the largest Jonson had during the first fifteen years he lived to New Mexico and they were the major exhibitions of the new developments in his art that are the subject of this chapter and the previous one. They were well-attended but generated few sales; they provided publicity but little financial reward. When the exhibits were over, Jonson had hardly made a lasting impression on the Chicago or New York art communities. Jonson left Santa Fe for New York City in late September of 1931, traveling by train. He stayed in Chicago for several days to visit friends and arrived in New York City on October 7.[43] He spent about two months in New York City before Vera

---

[41]To date, the most thorough and authoritative study of the subject of the skyscraper and other modern urban buildings in American art of the early modern period is Merrill Schleier's *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890-1931* (New York, De Capo Press, 1986).

[42]"Exhibition of Paintings by Raymond Jonson," November 23 to December 8, 1931, Delphic Studios in New York City; "Exhibition of Paintings by Raymond Jonson," January 8 to 29, 1932, Studio Gallery in Chicago, exhibit brochures, 76: 885-888.

[43]Jonson to Vera, October 7, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

made the trip East to join him. They left New York City in early January and went to Chicago for the exhibition at the Studio Gallery. They left Chicago around the end of January, right after the exhibition closed, and returned to New York City, where they remained until the end of March. On March 28 they headed back to Santa Fe. During this trip, Jonson went to as many gallery and museum exhibitions, concerts and plays as he could. He is known to have gone to the Art Institute of Chicago, his first visit in nearly ten years, and was particularly impressed with Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte.*[44] While in New York City he must have visited the Metropolitan Museum and is known to have visited the newly opened Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art. At the end of this nearly six-month visit to the Midwest and the East, Jonson and Vera stopped in Marion, Pennsylvania to view the Barnes Collection.[45]

The series of paintings of the modern American city eventually grew to include seven canvases. In the middle of 1932, only months after returning to New Mexico, Jonson painted *City Forces*, *City Dynamism*, and *City Perspectives (First Version)* consecutively. His last painting of 1932 was *City Motive Number One* and his first painting of 1933 was *City Perspectives (Second Version)*. In the middle of 1933 he did *City Lights*. Jonson abandoned the series for three years, returning to the theme in the middle of 1936 to produce the last of the series, *City Ultimate*. He also produced numerous drawings on this theme, including the 1931 *New York* and the 1933 *Design of a Structure–City.*[46]

---

[44]Jonson to Vera, October 7, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

[45]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 90, 179.

[46]"Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Early in this trip Jonson experienced the second instance of sexual interest in a woman other than his wife, and this time the object of his interest was Margaret Naumberg, the wife of Waldo Frank, the writer and critic of art and culture. Although the full nature of their relationship is uncertain, Jonson was intensely interested in her sexually for a period of several weeks in the fall of 1931.[47] This sexual interest seems to have involved the possibility of a ménage-à-trois involving Jonson, Vera, and Naumberg. Jonson remained deeply in love with Vera during the entire episode and never considered leaving her and ending their marriage. It seems possible that Jonson's sexual attraction to Naumberg may have been rooted in some sort of male mid-life crisis, since Jonson was forty years old at the time. However, Jonson's frequent and enduring bouts with depression during the first ten years he lived in New Mexico would be expected to result in a reduced interest in sex rather than new sexual interest in women other than his wife. Jonson met Naumberg early in this trip, in Chicago during his brief stay there on the way to New York City. He mentioned in a letter to Vera dated October 7, 1931 that he met Margaret on Sunday morning [apparently the previous Sunday but he is not specific] and, a little earlier in this letter, he commented: "Regarding the 'experiment' I will have to wait until I get settled and rested. Certainly we shall try it and I will let you know when the time arrives."[48] He continued to allude to the situation by writing to Vera about his discussions of his sexual concerns with Charles Morris:

> The time came and I told him rather briefly, to be sure, those points in my life to date that no one knows completely but myself. I believe he was able to

---

[47]Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes*: n.p.

[48]Jonson to Vera, October 7, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> accept my sincere statements regarding certain aspects of life that involved sex but involved with it something more and always beauty reigning supreme. .... I believe he sees the rightness of my own doings. He was not the least surprised..... He will probably write you and I feel sure he will say something about my love and admiration for you Vera as something that many ["other" crossed out] loves can only strengthen and certainly will never die. He feels with me I believe in that the relationship that now exists is not only possible but can be practical. And now my blessing let me say that here I am approaching New York for I will be there in the morning and I shall be met I believe and know that I will see Margaret and yet even though that may be all, that is wonderful–so even now, having you is not only all the wonder that it is, but added to it there is something that seems rather related to the God of Beauty. In other words I feel no less close to you but rather closer and expansion within me results. Really I cannot express it–perhaps someday I can paint it.[49]

The crossed-out "other" in relation to "loves" suggests that Jonson believed that extra-marital affairs could actually strengthen his love for Vera, although his letters are so vague and theoretical that why and how he came to believe this are unknown. Upon his arrival in New York City, Jonson resumed his relationship with Naumberg, who met him when his train arrived and helped him get settled in an apartment and purchase a suit.[50] In one of his letters to Vera after arriving in New York City he wrote:

> Margaret's and my relationship is and has been purely platonic. I felt I should tell you this as I do not want you to think certain things are occurring that are not. We none of us know what the future will bring but I cannot but feel that all is right and beautiful..... I am sure you sense the wonder of my love for you Vera but I want to say it to you right now. And certainly it is of finer material than it has ever before been. It is greater and on a higher plane. I cannot but always love you my darling and you must know it. So for the present it really doesn't matter that we are so far apart in body for the spirit within us has become a free one and we can function independently which is after all greater than it has ever been with us before. Do I make myself clear. It is a beautiful and wonderful thought and feeling and I shall glory in it. And

---

[49]Ibid.

[50]Jonson to Vera, October 11, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> my glory will extend to you–you who are so much responsible for what I am today..... I have only beauty associated with you my dear so that all seems right..... Stay close my wonderful dear love and if at times things seem wrong or are difficult remember that I am near you and that even I have these things to meet too. Not with you my dear but with myself for I believe in you and I trust myself..... My darling love–I really do love you you know and my heart is with you.[51]

Jonson's letters about his interest in Naumberg are as excessively wordy as they are vague, and this seems to suggest that Jonson's feelings and desires were conflicted, that he could not find the words to explain them to Vera and he may have been reluctant to explain himself directly to Vera out of fear that he would upset her and damage their marriage (although one would expect that this situation would be so damaging that what little he did say could have only caused harm to their relationship). A few days later, he explained in another letter how his relationship with Naumberg had deteriorated because she was apparently experiencing some reservations and doubts about it. He wrote:

> A whole new set of complications have set in as regards Margaret. It is something she has to work through and I am therefore pretty much out of the picture..... So there is a great shock and some misery attached to my entry into New York City. I wish I could go into detail but I cannot for I am at a loss as to what it is all about. It has nothing to do with me and that I guess is the reason I am out of it..... But I sort of feel that what I am experiencing is something big and of real value perhaps to all of us. It certainly is unusual and brings suffering not only to me but to Margaret. She is noble and I know will master the problem. And already I have had some amazing talks with her. You my dear have had and have a terrific thing to master and I want you to know that now Margaret has one too and I sense it is even more difficult than yours. So I want you to feel close to us both just as we do toward you and myself perhaps more so than is common for human beings. I see before us one of the most amazing, astounding and inspiring occurrances [sic] possible. It might be the materials for great things. And you my dear play an amazing part. My God Vera do you sense the glorification we may be approaching?..... I believe there must be the element of sex even in this great

---

[51]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> phenomenon. I hope you are surmounting the problemn [sic] in as fine a way as I seem to be doing.[52]

A month later in a letter to Vera, Jonson wrote:

> There is really not much I can say in writing regarding Margaret. Some day you shall have the facts and I would rather discuss them to you personally and not in long distance writing. Let me say that to a certain extent the matter is clearing up and I sort of know where I stand. Curiously enough the whole confusion centers around sex and it is just there that I have become so disrupted. Regarding all that has preceded my entrance into New York it certainly strikes me as an enigma. It does not fit into my conception and feelings regarding love and I am making every effort to not go down under the crash. For me there is no such thing as Platonic love. There is Platonic friendship but it cannot be connected with what I mean by love. What you say regarding sex is perfectly all right in the abstract but unfortunately in a way it does not work in practice.... . You ask if it is because she will not give herself physically and I must answer yes that is part of it. I say part of it because it also involves items that in a way connect up to it but have never seemed to me necessary to prohibit. I say also now for I have it straight that the item of desire has departed from Margaret.... . It tears down my whole conception of what I thought I was. It is not so much the withdrawel [sic] itself–its [sic] what it did to me.... . I know we shall have profited by it all and I know too that I can depend on you which is more than I san [sic] say of any other human being. And I know you will always come if I call. That makes me very happy and gives me strength and brings me closer in every way to you and your beauty.[53]

As these letters reveal, Jonson's sexually-oriented but supposedly platonic relationship with Naumberg ended because, for reasons that are not clear, Naumberg had second thoughts or experienced different feelings toward Jonson after some time had passed. Vera's response to this situation is unclear; it can be determined only through Jonson's letters to Vera and

---

[52]Jonson to Vera, October 13, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

[53]Jonson to Vera, November 11, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Morris because the letters from Vera that Jonson referred to remain unlocated.[54]

Jonson discussed the situation involving Naumberg with Charles Morris both in personal conversations during his stop in Chicago in early October 1931 and in letters he wrote to Morris later in this trip to the Midwest and the East. In a letter dated October 18, 1931, Jonson wrote to Morris, saying:

> I shall do my best to stay on top even though there are many items that could easily pull me down. New York is really a terrible city and I only hope I can keep my fresh feeling in approaching all these new experiences. At times I wish Vera were here to partake of the activity. I hope you have managed to arrange the wild material I discussed with you regarding myself. But whatever you make of it always bear in mind that my feelings for Vera are supurb. [sic] My love for her is of such a character that nothing can stain it as far as I am concerned. And what she and I are going through is really a very wonderful and beautiful thing. I shall carry my concept of beauty through all this mess here in this very wild and dirty city. It is very precious to me these days.[55]

In a letter written two weeks later, Jonson told Morris: "I am indeed a very fortunate person to have her [Vera] to back me up in life and in work.... . I have found in Margaret a most remarkable friend and I want you to know that I am making a terrific struggle through a most curious and at the same time amazing situation."[56]

---

[54]The letters exchanged between Jonson and Vera during Jonson's trip to Chicago and New York City in 1931 to 1932 were not included in the Raymond Jonson Papers that were microfilmed by the Archives of American Art. The surviving letters exchanged during this trip are in the archives of Jonson Gallery. MaLin Wilson's essay in *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes* only refers to letters that Jonson wrote to Vera; Wilson never mentions or quotes any letters from Vera to Jonson during this period. To date, the letters that Vera wrote to Jonson at this time have not been found in the personal papers of the Jonsons at the Jonson Gallery. It seems possible that Jonson lost or destroyed the letters he received from Vera during his trip eastward. It is also possible that they are misplaced in the Jonson Gallery.

[55]Jonson to Morris, October 18, 1931, RJ 3: 2190.

[56]Jonson to Morris, November 2, 1931, RJ 3: 2192.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson's trip to Chicago, New York City and Philadelphia was stimulating and productive with respect to his artistic activity, in the paintings Jonson saw and the paintings he made after the trip was over. The many skyscrapers that had been built in the 1920s and early 1930s in the largest cities of the United States, while Jonson was living in New Mexico and exploring the Southwest, had a profound impact on him. He wrote about this to Vera:

> Friday noon I walked up 5th Ave [sic] from 8th St. to 59th St. and Vera it is immence. [sic] The Empire State building [sic] is the most stunning of all I have seen. Seems to go right up into the clouds. It is gray white with perpendicular lines of metal running clean to the top and at times these bands catch the sun and glisten. Modern architecture....modern design.[57]

His reaction to the modern American city was still mixed; he was by no means absolutely pleased with urban life once he had experienced it for the first time in nearly ten years.[58] In

---

[57]Jonson to Vera, October 11, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

[58]Wilson, *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes*, n.p. Wilson has interpreted Jonson's cityscape abstractions of the 1930s as indicative of his changing, inconsistent attitude toward the modern urban environment after living in rural New Mexico for ten years. She has concluded that Jonson's attitude toward the modern American city changed as his relationship with Naumberg changed. According to Wilson, when it appeared likely or at least possible that Jonson's sexual relationship with Naumberg would be sustained and fulfilled, his attitude toward urbanism was approving and optimistic, but when his relationship with Naumberg collapsed, his attitude toward urbanism soured immediately. Wilson's interpretation of the city abstractions of the 1930s is based on a selective, narrow reading of the surviving letters from the 1931-1932 trip to Chicago and New York City. A more careful reading of Jonson's letters to Vera and Morris during the entire length of his trip reveals that Jonson's attitude toward the modern urban experience was continuously ambivalent; he was critical of the noise, dirt and expensiveness of urban life even as he was intrigued by the rapidly changing architectural environment of America's largest cities during the 1920s. This is evident in the previously quoted excerpts from Jonson's letters written to Morris which are dated October 18 and November 2, 1931. These letters were written early in Jonson's trip and long before the possibility of a sexual relationship with Naumberg ended. A careful analysis of the city abstractions that resulted from this trip provides no reason to conclude that Jonson's attitude toward modern urban life had grown any more critical than it had been during the several years before he and Vera moved to New Mexico. Quite to the contrary, his desire to depict the modern urban experience implies an interest

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

this same letter he complained about the high rents and noise of city life as he searched for an apartment to rent:

> I have looked in many parts of town [for an apartment to rent] and have seen many studios but all have something wrong with them. Usually the rent is too high. But I have decided to take the space back of Carroll French. 13 East 14 Street. I want to be in this neighborhood and this is the best I have found. The light is not anything to brag about but as it is in the rear it is quiet and that is a great asset. Found a fine studio with bath here on 8th Street near 5th Ave [sic] at 65.00 but I fear the noise, as there is car line and heavy traffic.[59]

However, at the beginning of this letter Jonson declared: "First New York is GREAT. It is all that I had anticipated. It surpasses Chicago in every way and is I feel now the only city in which to live if one must live in the city."[60]

City Perspectives (First Version) [Plate 64] depicts the countless towering skyscrapers of the modern American city in the highly abstract manner typical of Jonson in the early 1930s. The painting features several skyscrapers defined more or less as solid, three-dimensional forms. In the middle of the painting there is an array of flat, rectangular shapes which as a whole are inclined slightly toward the left. These forms, which dominate the composition, consist of orange with two long, vertical strips of bright yellow parallel to one another and placed within this orange area. The yellow strips lead up to two concentric circles placed near the top edge of the canvas. The smaller circle is described with white on the bottom half and a pale, peach-like hue on the top half. The larger circle that surrounds

---

and enthusiasm for the subject that is far from the attitude espoused at great length in letters and diary entries years earlier.

[59]Jonson to Vera, October 11, 1931, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

[60]Ibid. Capitalization is Jonson's.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the smaller one is filled in with a bright but more saturated orange. Bright light seems to emanate from these circles. The circles have been inscribed in a black triangle which leads up to a rectangular area of dark crimson that ends at the top edge of the canvas. To the left of this planar arrangement of oranges, yellow and red and running close to the left edge of the canvas, is the facade of a skyscraper. It has been rendered as a plane of pale violet. The faint outline of windows on the facade of the building has been schematically defined by two vertical columns of squares that are filled in with a darker tone of the same violet. Along the lower left edge of the canvas is a dark form which is not easily identified, but is presumably the edge of a building in the foreground. Far to the right is the schematic form of another skyscraper, rendered with the same violet. This building appears more solid and three-dimensional because Jonson has carefully shaded the color on the side that faces away from the viewer. Windows on this building have been described in the same manner as in the building to the far left. On the far right side of the canvas is a smaller and shorter building depicted with the same violet used to define the other buildings. This building has been constructed with simple geometric forms and it vaguely resembles the Empire State Building. This similarity is probably not a coincidence, since Jonson commented on the architectural splendor of this world-famous skyscraper in the letter to Vera that was quoted previously.

The light projected by the orange circle at the top of the composition creates myriad highlights and shadows over the numerous architectural forms depicted. Jonson created this spotlight effect by carefully varying the tones of hues along consistent but smoothly defined lines that overlap and engulf the many forms in the painting. At the bottom of the composition are two planar forms. One is orange and the other is purple, and they suggest

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

rooftops seen from far above. In the same part of the composition, several smokestacks have been depicted as vertically aligned ovals. They have been colored with olive-green, burgundy, and purple. Each has a single narrow, vertical exhaust pipe projecting directly upward. Although these forms are vaguely phallic, there is little reason to believe that such forms were deliberately intended and loaded with symbolic meaning. The overall impact of this painting is a glorification of modern American urban and industrial architecture, and it suggests a very different attitude toward the subject than that expressed by Jonson in his letters and diaries from more than ten years earlier.

In 1934, Jonson interrupted his work on all the series and themes he had been exploring to work on *A Cycle of Science*, a series of six large oils on canvas he was commissioned to do by PWAP (Public Works of Art Projects) for the library of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. The six canvases are among the largest Jonson ever made, and they were done consecutively. The series includes the following paintings, most likely done in the order in which they are listed in Jonson's "Catalogue": *Mathematics*, *Biology*, *Astronomy*, *Engineering*, *Physics*, and *Chemistry*.[61] It was Jonson's goal in each to find an abstract composition to embody all that characterized each branch of science. The opportunity to do this series came at the end of the period discussed in this chapter, and it seems to be the ultimate realization of what Jonson had been trying to do during these years, to give visual form to the many different aspects of human thought and experience other than the terrain of the Southwest. This series suggests that Jonson discovered that the spiritual could be found in any aspect of human existence, including the natural sciences, which

---

[61]"Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

would seem to be as removed from spirituality as possible. In a way, this was Jonson's triumph over the tangible, material content in his art. Perhaps it was this triumph, achieved in paintings such as those which comprise *A Cycle of Science*, that helped Jonson to make the complete break with representational content that he would achieve a few years later. *A Cycle of Science* is unusual for government-sponsored public art of the 1930s in the Southwest because the murals are larger than most, their subjects are not the local people and their ways of life, but instead are subjects of universal significance and are depicted in highly abstract ways.[62] Vera explained how Jonson came to get the PWAP assignment that became *A Cycle of Science* in a letter to Morris and his wife: "The U.S. Government, as you undoubtedly know, has taken it upon itself to assist the artists of the country.... . Raymond put in his application for one of the projects and found that the University of Albuquerque had offered two large spaces for murals to be done under this plan and requested that Raymond be assigned for one of them!!"[63]

Jonson was very pleased with his relationship with the local directors of PWAP. He felt that they were quite liberal and open-minded in their attitudes toward art and gave him virtually complete freedom to paint as he desired. As he explained the situation to Arthur:

> I feel a little badly over the February 15th letter because I realized we had given you no information regarding the GREAT PROJECT.... . Since this, the first panel has been completed–completed just a few days ago. The entire first section has been approved by the Committee here, and I am in a position to continue in an orderly fashion, as originally planned, independent of anything and all connections with the committees. The Regional Committee

---

[62]Peter Birmingham, *The New Deal in the Southwest: Arizona and New Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Museum of Art, 1980): 10-11.

[63]Vera to Morris, December 26, 1933, RJ 3: 2232.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> here has been most thoroughly generous and liberal. The University Committee accepted Nash [Willard Nash, another painter in New Mexico and friend of Jonson] and myself unqualifiedly and assume no critical or dictatorial attitudes. In other words, I have planned the first wall and finished one panel without any of the University Committee seeing any of the work to date. The Regional Committee turned us over completely to the University group. What I am trying to say is that as far, and I feel it will continue, the whole situation and program has been delightfully ideal.... . Rumors are going about that my idea promises to be the A 1 decoration.[64]

In the previously discussed letters exchanged between Jonson and Arthur in 1935, Arthur said that *A Cycle of Science* was about "what there is to be painted (not said) concerning the sciences" and to this Jonson replied only "good."[65] Jonson's most complete explanation of the murals was included in another letter to Arthur, in which he said:

> [The series of murals] can be called the spiritual side of Science. I have taken the idea that contemporary knowledge offers an emotional and spiritual approach for the modern youth. As these panels are for the University Library wall it seemed that studies pertaining to the Youth [sic] were consistent with the purpose of the building. The lowest panel I call "Mathematics"–the foundation of knowledge. In this canvas the beginning of my movement through the compositions originates. In a sense the others develop out of it. Above it comes "Biology." To the left of "Biology" is "Astronomy" and to the left of this "Mechanics." Naturally the abstract element functions to a great extent in all of these works.[66]

The murals were installed in the library of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque shortly after they were completed. They remained on public view for years. When the library was converted for other use, the paintings were removed and sent to the

---

[64]Jonson to Arthur, March 11, 1934, RJ 1: 433-434. Capitalization is Jonson's.

[65]Arthur to Jonson, July 15, 1935, and Jonson to Arthur, August 29, 1935, RJ 1: 451, 453.

[66]Jonson to Arthur, March 11, 1934, RJ 1: 433-434. The painting Jonson referred to by the title "Mechanics" is probably the painting in the series that he later called "Physics."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson Gallery, where they remain.[67] This was the first of two mural series that Jonson painted under the auspices of the federally-funded arts programs that were part of the New Deal. In 1936, Jonson received a commission from the WPA-FAP to do a pair of paintings which were entitled *Science* and *Art*. These paintings, also quite large at 60" x 90" each, were put on permanent exhibit at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales.[68]

Chemistry [Plate 65] is a highly abstract image in which test tubes and pipes are described schematically in a complex network of geometric forms and vivid colors. A tall flask-like form is placed in the center of the composition. Behind it is a series of narrow connecting tubes that twist and turn in many directions as they frame out a basic rectangular path across the middle of the canvas and therefore suggest a network of pipes that might be used to allow different liquids to flow in laboratory apparatus. The flask-form, mostly a milky white, ends in a circle of pink, white, and blue at its bottom. It is surrounded at its circular base by a larger circle that is red at the bottom and then shaded to two concentric bands of different tones of yellow at its top. Three bands of transparent red stretch across this circular form. The bottom of the flask-form and the circles of bright color surrounding it seem to be sitting in a small gray frame that in a laboratory might be used to hold the flask in place and upright. The upper part of the composition is filled in with broad triangular areas of vivid blue-green, yellow-green, and pink, while behind them is a background of darkened shades of burgundy. This array of colors suggests a variety of colored lights illuminating darkened, empty space behind the test-tube apparatus that seems fairly close to

---

[67]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 98.

[68]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the viewer.

Jonson's paintings throughout the 1920s and 1930s, which grew increasingly abstract over the years as he went from painting abstracted landscapes to non-landscape subjects of all kinds to the biomorphic abstractions of the late 1930s (which are discussed in the next chapter), involved a spiritual understanding of and response to two-dimensional shapes and three-dimensional forms and the spaces they occupy. Jonson's writings of the late-1930s and 1940s often refer to conveying or capturing the spiritual rhythms of life that underlie physically real objects and spaces. In these writings he discussed the distinction between shape and form, between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. He also discussed how effects of visual rhythms, which were important to his paintings from throughout his career, were part of his effort to visualize the spiritual. Jonson firmly believed that the spiritual, which is fundamentally ephemeral in nature, was closely related to the physical reality of spaces, shapes and forms, of expansive, clearly defined areas or solid objects and the spaces they occupy or which surround them. This insistence on material fact even when attempting to visualize the spiritual in painting is something deeply-rooted in the traditional sensibility of the American artist. It seems to distinguish American abstraction from much European abstraction, at least in theory if not always in style or practice. Jonson's ideas on the spirituality of shapes, forms and spaces were explained most thoroughly when he wrote the following for a 1948 lecture:

> It is not the object as such that is the important item in this consideration of form–for we speak of form as something other than shape. The object has shape whereas the form has to do with some mysterious order–some structure which relates to its environment in the composition. Of course this form usually has a shape, but it often is of such a character that it does not define

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the shape as much as the rhythm, and because of the need of order it often is necessary to twist, bend and re-design the shape so that in the end it becomes functional rather than illustrative of the object.[69]

Up to the late-1930s, Jonson believed that the recognizable figure or object was necessary as the starting point for achieving deeper meaning and understanding and attaining ultimate order, for attaining the spiritual in art. This was to be achieved through the abstraction of real, tangible objects. Material reality was the means for Jonson's access to spiritual reality. The idea that the spiritual exists as rhythms within the physically, tangibly real is one that Jonson often referred to in his comments explaining absolute art. Jonson's distinction between "form" and "shape" explained in the above quote may serve to explain the shift between clearly delineated forms and more intangible, diaphanous shapes that float and move through the pictorial spaces of Jonson's absolute paintings. These shifts occur not only from painting to painting but within paintings, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter. Jonson's comment that it is sometimes necessary to "bend, twist and re-design" a shape or form in a painting explains his distortion, exaggeration, and repetition of recognizable forms in the *Digits*, the *Variations on a Rhythm*, and even *A Cycle of Science*. According to Jonson, such manipulation of real forms and shapes helped remove them from their traditional, representational function and context in painting. Therefore, it was necessary for Jonson to gradually work his way through all kinds of subject until he finally freed himself of any and all inhibitions in creating totally abstract images.

Rhythm, which Jonson saw as the link between real objects and pictorial shapes removed from the natural world, was fundamentally intangible but nonetheless a potent

---

[69]Ibid. Underlining is Jonson's.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

visual force. In 1938 he stated: "The purpose of any art work is to cause an emotional reaction on the part of the person in contact with it after the artist has managed to create his vision of those fundamental rhythms and structures that underlie the visible and non-visible forms of our concrete world or universe."[70] Of course, for Jonson this could not be done unless the artist's materials were carefully manipulated for the purpose, for he stated in the same essay that "through the use of the medium, independent of imitation, it is possible to paint or draw shapes, lines or masses in such a way that the result....looks like rhythmic design made up from the imagination."[71] He once wrote that "it is not the aspect of the object we contemplate but the structural rhythm within which is its heart and the seat of its life."[72] Jonson's comments about rhythmic qualities in abstract painting bring to mind the ideas that concerned Arthur Dove as he sought to create paintings which visualized in an abstract vocabulary the forces of energy, growth and transformation latent in the forms and phenomena of the natural world.[73] Therefore, it is not surprising that by the early 1930s Jonson felt there was a common sense of purpose and meaning between his painting and Dove's.

The paintings of 1929 to 1936 allowed Jonson to approach bolder and more extreme abstraction with the methodical exploration that suited his personality and artistic vision.

---

[70]Jonson, "What Is the Role of Abstract Art?," p. 2, RJ 9: 6277.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Jonson, "What Is the Role of Abstract Art?," p. 3, RJ 9: 6277.

[73]Cohn, "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove," Parts 1 and 2; and "Arthur Dove and the Organic Analogy."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

They allowed him to incorporate the totality of human experience, or to expand his understanding of it, in his choice of subjects as the basis for abstract compositions. The intensified colors, flattened and geometricized shapes, more dynamic arrangements of forms, and more dramatic use of vividly colored light in these works reveal the bold change in direction that Jonson discovered in 1929 and which he was compelled, by a sense of artistic purpose he always considered sacred and divinely inspired, to explore well into the 1930s. These works brought him closer to purely non-representational imagery and creating paintings that would fully realize his goal of conveying and visualizing the spiritual through art.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER FOUR:

ON THE ROAD TO "ABSOLUTE" PAINTING, 1929-1937, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL PAINTING GROUP

Although most of Jonson's paintings done in the years 1929 to 1937 were vividly colored, highly abstracted images of plant forms, numerals, alphabet letters, colors and modern architecture, these were not the only subjects or themes Jonson explored at this time. It was during these years that Jonson created his first totally non-representational paintings. They are few and far between at the beginning of the 1930s, but by the middle of the decade they are more numerous. Ever since his admiration for Kandinsky's paintings and theories became apparent and steadfast in 1921, Jonson seemed to have been searching for a means to achieve completely non-representational painting that was visually effective, personally fulfilling and spiritually potent. Though Jonson did not immediately adopt abstraction upon discovering the works and theories of Kandinsky, his career from 1910 to the early 1930s was a gradual, somewhat haphazard progression toward greater abstraction. In the mid-1930s, several years after many American painters began to avoid or abandon abstract styles in favor of more representational painting of social and regional content, Jonson began to paint totally non-representational works. He had become very detached from the artistic mainstream of his time, perhaps more so during the mid-1930s than ever before. He was, as always, a maverick.

Although Jonson did not have a clear and definite sense of what direction his painting would take in the 1920s and early 1930s, he remained well aware of his own development.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

He never seemed to think that what he had done was his ultimate or permanent artistic achievement; he may have been quite pleased with his most recent work, he may have thought it was the best he had done so far, but he never seemed to think that he had arrived at a style or subjects that he would stay with for the rest of his life. Arthur was well aware of this too. In a letter of 1935, he wrote to Jonson saying that he may be ready for a bold, new change of direction once again:

> As I see it, your whole career, up to a comparatively short time ago, was experimental, in that you were feeling out the way towards the particular expression that you sought. I think it has been a very good thing that you have come to your present point of view, not as a matter of dogma, but through experiment and development out of almost straight academic on through stage after stage of liberation–technical, mental, literary–into your present abstraction. One never knows. You may be at the threshold of still another development, though I'm sure I can't see what it will be.[1]

Since Jonson had always worked in oil on canvas, it is ironic that his first totally non-representational work seems to have been the painted relief-assemblage *Space Abstraction (a Construction)* [Plate 66], which was done in the middle of 1929. This work is a mixed-media composition done with oil on wood panel with pieces of masonite and sections of wood molding affixed to the flat panel. The masonite has been cut into intricate shapes. They and the wood molding are vividly colored. The work is a complex array of diverse and brightly colored shapes but there are no apparent references to anything even vaguely recognizable. There is no sense of depth or scale to give the viewer a better understanding of who or what is depicted. Two multi-sided geometric shapes that look somewhat like bent arrows have been placed over one another on the left half of the composition. One is bright

---

[1]Arthur to Jonson and Vera, May 7, 1935, RJ 1: 447.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

yellow and orange and the other is red. Short pieces of wood molding have been placed on top of them. A number of longer wooden strips have been aligned nearly horizontally above these arrow-shaped forms. A more organically shaped olive-green form has been placed along the right edge of the image. The middle of this work has been painted with rectangular areas of various shades of blue, purple, and pink. This work features geometric and biomorphic shapes superimposed for visual excitement and contrast. Jonson would rely on this duality of the biomorphic and the geometric often in his non-representational works. The geometric, arrow shapes could be seen as phallic and the olive-green biomorphic shape as a face in profile, but such allusions are extremely vague. This work was highly experimental for Jonson, who seems to have found the experiment unsuccessful because he quickly abandoned this mixed-media approach, having concluded that it failed to conjure the spiritual in any significant, accessible way.[2] What led Jonson to this experiment remains unknown. He apparently never wrote anything about this work; there are no references to it in any of his surviving writings. By 1929, there were many possible precedents for mixed-media assemblages that could have influenced Jonson in making this work, but it is unknown what led him to explore this very different artistic approach so briefly.

Jonson's first totally non-representational painting, the first done purely in paint, is *Variation I* [Plate 67], done in late 1929.[3] This work seems to have been part of a vaguely

---

[2]Garman has said that he and Jonson discussed this work and that Jonson firmly believed the work did not achieve the spiritual significance he was searching for, and so he abandoned this practice of mixed-media. [Garman to the author, March 4, 2000.]

[3]The *Variations* series was never discussed in Garman's book *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* because, as Garman has stated, he was never aware of the works. [Garman to the author, March 4, 2000.] They were in Arthur's and May's possession since shortly

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

conceived series of three small oil paintings done in the years 1929, 1930 and 1932. It is possible that all three were done as tokens of affection and possibly birthday gifts for Arthur and his wife May.[4] Whereas *Variation II* of 1930 has plant forms reminiscent of the *Growth Variant* series and *Variation III* of 1932 is a highly abstract, sketchy Southwestern landscape, *Variation I* is completely non-representational. It is the first known, surviving painting by Jonson to show the direct stylistic influence of Kandinsky. The influence of Kandinsky's paintings evident here is that of his highly geometric, carefully linear painting done while teaching at the Bauhaus. This work is similar to Kandinsky's *In Blue* of 1925 [Plate 68], although it is not known how familiar Jonson was with this period in Kandinsky's career when he painted it or if he had seen *In Blue* in particular. Prior to *Variation I*, there is only one known work by Jonson that is completely abstract and similar to Kandinsky's paintings. This is a small, untitled sketch done in black ink on paper in 1921. [Plate 69] It is similar to Kandinsky's more painterly, loosely rendered, early abstractions of 1909 to 1913, done during the era of the Blaue Reiter. It looks somewhat like the illustrations in *Concerning the*

---

after they were made and Garman never saw them (he did not yet know Jonson when they were made) and, apparently, Jonson never discussed them with Garman. Jonson may have not considered them very significant as far as his development was concerned or he may have felt they were private, personal works and their content and meaning should not be publicly explained.

[4]In a letter to the author dated December 11, 1999, the current owner of *Variations I, II* and *III* has stated that on the back of *Variation II* Jonson wrote "painted especially for May and Arthur, Dec. 3, 1930." In this letter the owner states that May's and Arthur's birthdays were, respectively, December 2 and December 3. The listing of all three works entitled "Variation" in "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson" suggests that each one was done late in the calender year and indicates that May was the first owner of each one, apparently receiving them shortly after they were painted. It therefore seems likely these were done as birthday gifts for Arthur and May. ["Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Spiritual in Art. It is likely that Jonson made this sketch, which was not recorded in his "Catalogue," around the time he saw the Eddy collection and read Kandinsky's 1912 treatise. It is appears to have been a quick attempt to emulate Kandinsky's early abstract style around the time that Jonson first became seriously interested in the older Russian abstract painter.

Jonson's highly experimental painting is only 6" x 6". It consists of numerous circles and rectangles of various hues and tones, some of which are solid and clearly defined while others are highly translucent and diaphanous. The latter allow the shapes behind them to be partially seen. Bright yellow and deep blue-violet circles in the center of the image are the most conspicuous. Behind them is a larger, even more translucent circle of pink that surrounds many of the smaller circles. The background for the entire image is a deep ultramarine that does not describe any particular forms but rather suggests endless space. In the far corners there are small groups of intersecting lines, some with colors filled in between the intersections. The pattern of colored diamonds outlined in black that is seen in the upper corners is very similar to the description of May's dress in *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke*, done earlier the same year. The ultimate effect of this painting is that of bubbles popping and floating and planes of color shifting and intersecting, as one seems to enter an imaginary world of spiritual energy.[5] Perhaps Jonson tried such a bold experiment on such a small scale because he was still very uncertain of his mastery of the totally non-

---

[5]Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Expressionism, Abstraction, and the Search for Utopia in Germany," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 214. Long interprets paintings by Kandinsky such as his *Circles within a Circle* of 1926 as conjuring images of spiritual realms (ideas of the fourth dimension) through the careful choice and arrangement of circles and straight lines in front of spacious, relatively empty background planes.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

representational, a long sought-after but elusive goal for him.

Jonson's *Southwest Arrangement* [Plate 70], an oil on canvas of 1933, is noteworthy not only because it is one of his earliest paintings to be almost totally non-representational, but because the inspiration for the composition came from Native American art. It is one of a few works Jonson did in the early 1930s that resulted from his contact with Native American people and cultures.[6] Jonson was intrigued by the Native Americans and Mexicans who populated the Southwest, especially when he first settled in Santa Fe, but his greatest interest was always the terrain of the region. However, Jonson and Vera were sufficiently interested in Native American peoples and cultures to collect art of various kinds and from different tribes.[7] This collection included Navajo rugs and blankets, Zia, Zuni, Acoma and Pima pottery, Navajo bracelets, Hopi Kachina dolls and numerous other objects made by Native Americans. Consequently, although it is atypical of his work at the time,

---

[6]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 71. Garman states that this work is one of several works from the early 1930s that were influenced by Native American art, but he does not identify any of the other works; W. Jackson Rushing, III, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995): 81. Rushing claims this painting is the best-known in a series Jonson called the *Indian Motifs series*, but he does not identify the sources for this information and no mention of such a series has been found anywhere else. Garman has said that there was no *Indian Motifs* series. [Garman to the author, March 4, 2000.]

[7]Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*: 83-84. Rushing states that the collection was the work of Vera and that her practice of collecting may have begun when she started working in the Spanish and Indian Trading Post in Santa Fe in 1927. After Vera's death in 1965, Jonson gave the collection to the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. The Jonsons' collection of various kinds of artwork, including Native American crafts, were inventoried in the years 1959 to 1964. This list, entitled the "Jonson Collection of Crafts and Allied Items," includes 86 objects, only some of which are Native American crafts. It is part of the Raymond Jonson Papers in the Archives of American Art. See RJ 10: 7443-7445.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Southwest Arrangement places Jonson in the broad tendency of primitivism, one of the fundamental sources of artistic inspiration and stylistic formation in early modern painting and sculpture. Native American art did not facilitate Jonson's progress toward abstraction or liberate him from the representational; instead, it was one of numerous sources of inspiration that Jonson explored in his continuous efforts to achieve complete abstraction.

The painting features a series of rectangular planes of tan and muted pink that rhythmically follow from the top and bottom of this tall, narrow canvas toward its middle. These planes are somewhat interrupted by triangular shapes of orange, green and brown. The triangular forms in the upper half face downward while those in the lower half face upward. The bases of the triangles coincide with the black lines that separate the rectangular sections of tan. These triangular areas lead the viewer's eye from the top or the bottom to the center, in the process allowing us to perceive the rich and dynamic play of shapes and colors that fill the canvas. The middle of the painting is filled with areas of light and dark blue surrounded by smaller areas of tan. Narrow, vertically placed strips of white run the length of the painting but are broken up by the black lines that separate the planar areas of tan. Another long, narrow, vertically-aligned form of tan runs the length of the canvas but is not broken up in any way; it reaches a terminal point near the top of the canvas as it meets a red line. A black oval-shaped, ribbon-like form has been placed in the middle of the composition.

There is little in this painting that is figurative. It is possible that the central section of the composition refers to the mountain peaks and mesas of the West.[8] It has been

---

[8]Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*: 83. Rushing is the first to make this plausible observation.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

suggested that the highly geometric, carefully outlined forms that fill the painting are triangular mountains and stylized bird forms that are similar to the decoration found on several Native American objects that Vera owned, including a Zia olla, an Acoma jar, a bowl from San Ildefonso and a Navajo rug.[9] In response to the question of what influence the Native American cultures of the Southwest had on his painting, Jonson once said: "I began to feel that there was a connection between the landscape and certain aspects of Indian design. I also deliberately used Indian elements in a few works of 1933."[10] However, in this painting Jonson has not taken fragmented images from Native American art of the Southwest and arranged them for the possibility of recognition or de-coding. Instead, he has thoroughly absorbed the abstract imagery of Southwestern Native American art and modified it to his own, modernist sensibility. The abstracted motifs found in Native American pottery, baskets and textiles served as meaningful, intelligible source material which Jonson was able to develop into dynamic, colorful paintings. In the case of *Southwest Arrangement*, this practice, which by the mid-1930s was common to his work, led to an almost complete break with anything representational.

By the mid-1930s, Jonson's concern for the spiritual in life conveyed through art became paramount and with each passing year he began to paint non-representationally more

---

[9]Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*: 84. Rushing is ambivalent about how strongly Native American art influenced Jonson, but he seems to suggest that Jonson tended to borrow and reproduce fragments of Native American art in his paintings, that this work is almost collage-like in its treatment of references to actual objects.

[10]Interview with Jonson conducted by Van Deren Coke in December 1963, in *Raymond Jonson: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964): 10.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

often. It was at this time that Jonson's ideas about abstract art as spiritual experience and enlightenment crystallized and so it is not surprising that during these years his work became increasingly abstract. In these years, Jonson also began to think more theoretically about his own work and the historical foundations for expressing or achieving the spiritual in art. This more theoretical approach to his own work led Jonson to give numerous lectures on these issues from the mid-1930s through the late-1940s at various public events and artists' groups and exhibits. Perhaps the new experience of teaching (of sharing his knowledge, opinions and experiences with younger artists who were still in search of their own artistic identities) and the need to clarify his own perspective on abstraction encouraged Jonson to give these lectures on the history and origins of modern art and the purpose and meaning of abstract and non-representational art. It seems possible that Jonson became more theoretical at this time because Kandinsky had also become more theoretical during his years at the Bauhaus.

Jonson's firm belief that the goal of art was to achieve or convey spiritual experiences and states of mind, and that non-representational art was superior to more traditional, representational art in achieving this, was guided and influenced by the works and writings of Kandinsky and, to a lesser extent, the theories of Mondrian. It was influenced by other sources as well, and some of these were more powerful and direct because they were literally closer to home and more personally accessible. Jonson never went to Europe and never met such European pioneers of non-representational art as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Kupka and Delaunay. But at the same time there were influential scholars and advocates of abstract art in the United States, and Jonson knew their writings and was personally acquainted with a few of them. One of the first historians of modern art in the United States,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Arthur Jerome Eddy, espoused the idea that it was the goal of modern art to tap into and depict spiritual forces and powers.[11] As was discussed in Chapter One, Jonson may have read Eddy's *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*, and there he would have become well-acquainted with Eddy's ideas on the social function and philosophical importance of abstract art. Eddy wrote: "Pure art speaks from soul to soul, it is not dependent upon one use of objective and imitative forms.... . It is only when new and strange forms are used because they are necessary to express a spiritual content that the result is a living work of art."[12] Jonson was a good friend of Sheldon Cheney, another early historian of modern art in the United States and prolific author who was also among the first who discussed the spiritual content and function of abstract art.[13] Jonson and Cheney knew one another as early as 1921, when they had various encounters because Jonson had been a stage set and costume designer for the theater and Cheney had been a critic of contemporary theater and editor of *Theatre Arts Monthly*.[14] Cheney wrote in 1924 in his book *A Primer on Modern Art* that "the ideal of abstraction somehow seems to underlie the whole modern art movement."[15] By the mid-

---

[11]Maurice Tuchman,"Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 17.

[12]Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*, quoted in Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 17.

[13]Tuchman,"Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 17.

[14]Shelldon Cheney to Jonson, October 21, 1921, RJ 2: 1454.

[15]Sheldon Cheney, *A Primer on Modern Art*, quoted in Tuchman,"Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 17.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

1930s Cheney was very interested in mysticism and its connection to abstract art and he wrote about this at length in his book *Expressionism in Art*.[16] It may be more than coincidental that it was around the same time that Jonson began to write and give lectures explaining the spiritual function of non-representational art.

Jonson declared without hesitation his staunch belief that art is fundamentally about the spiritual when he wrote in the text for a 1934 lecture "Creativeness in Painting" that "art is not a cultural factor but a spiritual one" and he added: "The past represents the history of art as well as the spiritual history of man. The present is built on the past. Through the study and experience emotionally with works of the past, I cannot but feel that the so-called Modern Art [sic] is a natural continuation of this history of the spirit.[17] In 1949, in another lecture, Jonson defined the spiritual as:

> Spirit: The life principle viewed as the "breath" or gift of deity; hence, the agent of vital and conscious functions in man; the soul. In the abstract, life or consciousness viewed as an independent type of existence. Spiritual: Of or consisting of, spirit; incorporeal. Of the intellectual and higher endowments of the mind; of the moral feelings or states of the soul. And of course of sacred things in the religions.[18]

Jonson's explanation of the spiritual has clearly religious and vaguely Christian connotations, but the absence of any specific Christian doctrine or Biblical references demonstrates that Jonson's spiritualism was very independent and intuitive, something informed by his early

---

[16]Tuchman,"Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 17.

[17]Jonson, "Creativeness in Painting," lecture given to the Art Club of Albuquerque in 1934 [no date indicated], pp. 1, 3, RJ 9: 6331-6332.

[18]Jonson, lecture given to the Chile Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, p. 4, RJ 9: 6328.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

religious experiences but not constructed on them. By the mid-1930s, Jonson had come to believe without question that non-representational painting was the superior and more effective means of conveying and experiencing the spiritual. He asserted that "a complete emotional experience from a non-objective work is fuller and richer and more complete than from an objective work. At its best the non-objective work speaks through its spiritual potentiality."[19] For Jonson, the non-representational seemed to be the most effective means available for liberating oneself and one's society from the materialism, commercialism and capitalism that he had long despised for its demoralizing, socially destructive effects. Jonson believed the pursuit of the spiritual in art was timeless and global. He saw non-representational art as the natural expression of its time and place and as a continuation of the expression of the spiritual that much great art of the past conveys. He made this quite clear when he concluded his lecture "The Non-Objective in Painting" with a quote from Hilla Rebay's essay in the catalogue to the first exhibit of the Solomon R. Guggenheim collection:

> Never before in the history of the world has there been a greater step forward from the materialistic to the spiritual than from objectivity to non-objectivity in painting. Because it is our destiny to become creative and our fate to become spiritual, humanity will come to develop and enjoy greater intuitive power through creations of great art, the glorious masterpieces of non-objectivity.[20]

He justified the use of non-representational imagery by explaining:

---

[19]Jonson, "The Non-Objective in Painting," lecture given to the Art Club of Albuquerque on October 20, 1936, p. 4, RJ 9: 6338.

[20]Jonson, "The Non-Objective in Painting," p. 5, RJ 9: 6338. This quote was taken from Rebay's essay, "Definition of Non-objective Painting," in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (New York: Bradford Press, 1936): 13. This was the catalogue to the first major exhibition of Solomon R. Guggenheim's collection and it was held in Charleston, South Carolina, from March 1 to April 12, 1936.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> One underlying reason for the abstract is that in our present age there have appeared so many developments and such an extension of just those unseen forces that it is natural for the creative painter to draw his inspiration from the basic principles of mind and matter. Art is a living expression of its age. And the expression is the statement of an intuitive knowledge in relation to its environment.[21]

Jonson's brief reference to "unseen forces" brings to mind the concept of the fourth dimension, which was of great importance philosophically to so many early abstract artists, although how much he knew about the science and philosophy underlying this broad concept is uncertain.[22] His awkwardly worded reference to "intuitive knowledge in relation to its environment" is probably a vague assertion of his belief that the non-representational painter is almost a visionary, that he visualizes the spiritual when others cannot. This theme of the artist as visionary would reappear frequently in Jonson's theoretical writings. His comment that the abstract artist is influenced by the "basic principles of mind and matter" suggests that the non-representational is achieved by abstracting the natural world in art, that it is the geometric aspects of nature and the abstract tendencies of human thought which give rise to the non-representational in art.

Jonson eventually chose the term "absolute" to refer to his approach to non-representational painting, believing that "absolute painting" was sufficiently accurate in meaning while being free of the negative implications of terms such as "abstract," "non-objective," or "non-representative" (the last being his version of the term "non-

---

[21]Jonson, "Creativeness in Painting," p. 4, RJ 9: 6332.

[22]The most thorough study of the ideas of the fourth dimension and their impact on modern art is Linda Dalrymple Henderson's *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

representational," which he used occasionally in the 1930s and early 1940s). Jonson defined the term "absolute" with the following definition (which he stated came from a dictionary but he did not specify which one): "complete, perfect, unrestricted, independent, real, not merely relative or comparative and self-existent and conceivable without relation to other things."[23] He then offered his own definition of "absolute painting":

> By absolute painting we mean painting which is entirely creative. All the forms, lines and color relationships, etc. are pure intentions in their relationships. It is painting which makes no use of the objective world and depends for its comprehension, not on imitation or suggestion, but on structure. Here pure imagination functions. The emotional element exists through the dynamic apprehension, on the part of the painter, of a particular created environment. These environments are invented and imagined by the painter and knowingly have no connection with physical environments. These environments are therefore of another world, the inner or spiritual.[24]

In the following year, he explained that the "absolute" was "the purely imaginative where no religious object, no occult symbolism, and no abstraction is used–in short the absolute.... ."[25] In other words, the absolute meant the totally non-representational. He went on to say:

> The hope has been to arrive at a state of pure feeling–to create through the spirit rather than the physical. To deal with shapes, forms and color in such a way that they appear to expose the spirit of man rather than his physical being. To go beyond the appearance of the world and its forms into a realm of an idealistic condition of order and space that pertains to structure as it can function in the plastic creative act. Some of us believe that the spirit is an inner consciousness and therefore in dealing with it it seems most appropriate

---

[23]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 1) for September 29, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6242.

[24]Jonson's lecture notes (pp. 1-2) for September 29, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6242.

[25]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> to use forms, shapes and color that are not interpretations of the outer aspect of life but rather deal with the concept of soul and God.[26]

Hilla Rebay's writings on abstract and non-representational art are the most likely source for Jonson's terminology and conceptual framework in explaining his theories on the subject. Jonson probably discovered the term "absolute" in Rebay's essays in the catalogues of the first several exhibits of Guggenheim's collection in the late 1930s.[27] Jonson owned a copy of one of the first two of these exhibition catalogues by May 1937, and he may have owned copies of the others.[28] Since Jonson used an exact quote from Rebay's essay "Definition of Non-Objective Art," which was published in the catalogue of the first exhibit of Guggenheim's collection held in March to April 1936, to conclude his October 1936 lecture "The Non-Objective in Painting," he must have read Rebay's essay in the middle of 1936. Rebay used the term "absolute" frequently in her essays for the Guggenheim exhibition catalogues of the 1930s and the meaning is consistent. Both Jonson and Rebay

---

[26]Jonson, lecture given to the Chile Club of Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, p. 5, RJ 9: 6329.

[27]Rebay wrote essays on the goals, meanings, and origins of abstract and non-representational art for the catalogues to four of the seven exhibitions of Guggenheim's collection which were held in various cities in the United States and in Paris in the late 1930s. Solomon R. Guggenheim's collection was shown in seven exhibitions from 1936 to 1939. All but one of these exhibitions included works by the many abstract artists in Guggenheim's collection. The seventh was a solo-exhibition of Rudolph Bauer's work. All but one of the seven were held in the United States, in Charleston, South Carolina, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City. The seventh was held in Paris. Four of the six exhibitions encompassing the breadth of the collection were showcased with publications containing exhibition checklists, reproductions, and essays by Rebay. [Ann Butler, Archivist of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, to the author, July 17, 2001.]

[28]Arthur to Jonson, May 22, 1937, RJ 1: 489. In this letter, Arthur thanks Jonson for sending him a copy of one of these catalogues, and at the time of this letter the first two exhibitions had been held in Charleston, South Carolina and Philadelphia in 1936 and 1937.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

used the term "absolute" to indicate the complete absence of any figurative, recognizable imagery, as synonymous to "non-objective" or "non-representational" or Jonson's awkward term "non-representative," and different in specific, important ways from "abstract" or "abstracted." In "Definition of Non-Objective Painting," Rebay used the term "absolute" as synonymous with "non-objective," and explained the meaning of the term when she wrote that "the reproduction of objects has changed to the art of non-objectivity in which form, rhythm, and color are used to create the absolute, with no intellectual relationship to the materialistic side of earth."[29] As Rebay had done in "Definition of Non-Objective Painting," Jonson differentiated the meanings of the terms in his 1936 essay "The Non-Objective in Painting" when he said: "Abstract and non-objective are generally used to mean the same thing, but they should not be. The word abstract is confusing, for an abstract painting is drawn, or abstracted from something objective. The use of non-objective is clear enough, meaning–no object."[30] He explained the problems with the more commonly used terms in the typed text for a lecture in an art appreciation course he taught in 1948: "I am using the term absolute in place of non-objective or non-representative because both of the latter are negative. Objects and representation are not involved in this type of painting and so why should we use the words in naming it?"[31]

---

[29]Hilla Rebay, "Definition of Non-Objective Painting," in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (New York: Bradford Press, 1936): 8.

[30]Jonson, "The Non-Objective in Painting," p. 1, RJ 9: 6337. The term "non-objective" may have been clear in its meaning to Jonson, but, as was discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, it has long been problematic.

[31]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 1) for September 29, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson apparently started using the term "absolute" to refer to purely non-representational art, or at least his own abstract painting, in the mid- to late-1940s. It is found often in the lectures on abstract art that Jonson gave in the late-1940s and is found in the typed notes to the lectures for an art appreciation course that he taught in the fall of 1948. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Jonson became frustrated with the existing nomenclature of abstract art by the late 1930s as he and his fellow members of the Transcendental Painting Group struggled to find a suitable name for their new organization. In 1938 "transcendental" was deemed suitable for the new organization and by the late-1940s "absolute" was embraced enthusiastically by Jonson for his own painting.

Jonson believed that there were four basic approaches to conveying the spiritual in painting.[32] The first approach, by far the oldest and most commonly known to the public because it filled countless places of worship, was the use of narrative, iconographic figures, perspectival space, the modeling of light and shadow on three-dimensional forms. This was the tradition of painting in Europe since the early Renaissance, in which Christian narratives were depicted with increasing realism in depicting light, depth, texture, human anatomy, nature, and the like. The second approach, according to Jonson, was to convey the presence of the spiritual as emanations coming from solid, recognizable objects depicted in paintings, and Jonson thought Gauguin and Van Gogh exemplified this approach. The third approach that Jonson described was the use of abstract symbols drawn from mysticism, the occult, and

---

semester, RJ 8: 6242.

[32]Jonson, lecture given to the Chile Club of Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, pp. 4-5, RJ 9: 6328-6329.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the supernatural; for Jonson, this approach was exemplified by his friend the painter Emil Bisttram. The fourth and last approach, according to Jonson, was "absolute painting," or in other words, totally non-representational imagery, which was the approach he favored. In conceiving this system of four paths to the spiritual in art, it is curious as to where Jonson would have placed Kandinsky, but unfortunately he did not say.

Jonson saw the modern artist as one who has both the technical skills to use materials effectively and the developed or heightened spiritual understanding and awareness that is the meaning of his work. Hence, the artist must not only have the ability to express himself, he must have something to communicate in his work. In "Creativeness in Painting," Jonson labeled these two aspects that are united in non-representational or "absolute" painting as the "technical" and the "emotional." Jonson explained the "technical" as that which "pertains to the physical materials with which the emotional concept is expressed and this is to a great extent conscious."[33] He explained the "emotional" as something that "pertains to the spiritual and the subconscious. This is the concept of the idea and the thing to be said."[34] Therefore, it should be remembered that Jonson's frequent use of the term "emotional" in his writings usually pertains to spiritual experience.

This explanation of the artist contains overtones that suggest the artist is almost a mystic or a sorcerer, and that the "emotional" contribution to painting was innate and could not be taught or learned. As Jonson said in "Creativeness in Painting:"

---

[33]Jonson, "Creativeness in Painting," p. 1, RJ 9: 6331.

[34]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> I believe that until an artist has had his monent [sic] of emotional vision there can be no work of art. This emotional vision as a rule dictates the physical vision or nature of the work. I believe that when this emotional quality is raised to such a pitch that the vision seen is one of a new and ordered form we can call it ecstasy. That is the moment of conception but the task still remains to hold and to translate it. And for that two main factors are vitally necessary:
> 1st That the conceiver be an artist
> 2nd That he possess the force–the feeling and the skill to project it.[35]

Jonson continued by saying that "it is difficult to say where this emotional element comes from but if we have a soul it probably originates there. And its nature depends a good deal upon the entire makeup of the individual. The emotional is made from the stuff of the inner life of human beings."[36] According to Jonson, the painter who achieved the spiritual in his work would not "abstract" visible, natural reality but would create a new visual reality that would have little or no connection (certainly no deliberate connection) to the natural world. This new reality would come from within the mind and visual creativity of the painter.

Jonson's concept of how the spiritual could be achieved in painting was founded on the merging of spiritual revelation with skillful control of the technical means in painting. Jonson's connection of the "technical" and the "emotional" seems to have been necessitated by his belief that with complete mastery of the use of materials and the elements of design (such as line, shape, color, texture, and their position and arrangement), the artist could overcome his attachment to depicting the physical world around him. As far as Jonson was concerned, the artist should "see" with his mind, soul, and spirit. Jonson felt that it was through the physical, material reality that higher, spiritual truths could be accessed. Jonson

---

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

made this emphatically clear when he wrote in 1938 that "in the finest sense this non-objective results because of the idealistic concept of the force, essence and rhythm of matter and spirit. The method is intuitional through the imagination and sometimes the subconscious."[37] Jonson's painting was always very intuitive.

Although Jonson had given up painting landscapes almost entirely by the end of 1928, most of his drawings done in the years 1929 to 1932 (at least most of those which have survived and were recorded in the "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson") are of landscapes or, less commonly, still lifes. Starting in 1933 Jonson's drawings are often of geometric forms and natural phenomena that are inherently less tangible and permanent than landscapes. This shift in subjects for his drawings repeats his shift in subjects for his paintings, but it occurred a few years later. The drawings of the mid-1930s are titled to indicate that they are about more conceptual, intangible things and phenomena; *Ascending Circle* [Plate 71], *Suspended Planes*, *Suspended Ovals*, *Patterns of Growth* and *Energy* are some of the drawings done in 1933. The shift that occurred in Jonson's drawings in 1933 may be the result of his efforts to explore and experiment with purely non-representational imagery in the more modest scale and less expensive media of drawing and to rely on the highly linear character of pencil to work out his understanding of completely abstract lines and shapes. In these abstract drawings, it seems as if Jonson was exploring the expressive possibilities of line and shape, without relying on color, and following the style of Kandinsky's non-representational paintings, particularly those done while he was at the

---

[37]Jonson, "What Is the Role of Abstract Art?," lecture given to the Axis Club in 1938 [no date given], p. 3, RJ 8: 6277.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Bauhaus. In the mid-1930s, Jonson realized that drawing media and watercolor, or in other words media other than oil (he had painted exclusively with oil paints since he began painting in 1912), were viable means for personal creativity and expression that could serve him well in the future. As he wrote in a letter of October 1933: "I have been doing some water colors and having a great time with it. Not until this year have I found an adaquate [sic] means in the use of black and white drawing and water colors as far as the abstract is concerned. Most of my drawing has been with lithograph crayon working direct from nature in the form of study."[38]

In 1933 Jonson began to explore watercolor and it is in some of these watercolors that his abstract vision seems to have taken hold and evolved. In 1933 Jonson did a series of completely non-representational watercolors that he called *Arabesques. Arabesque No. 1* of 1933 [Plate 72] features a flattening of pictorial space into a handful of large, angular planes of color distinguished from one another by abrupt shifts in hue defined by darkened lines. In the center of the watercolor is a large area of sky blue in the middle of which we find a continuously curving and meandering line of darker blue. This area of bright blue is framed by large areas of purple that have been shaded to somewhat lighter tones toward the edges of the paper. The clumped, large strokes of purple watercolor are immediately noticeable. This use of flattened, geometric shapes that are fairly simple in number and pictorial arrangement constitutes a drastic change in Jonson's stylistic development. In earlier paintings done in oil, Jonson created complex networks of forms, colors, patterns of light and shadow, and textures, all of which existed and interacted in a constantly shifting space. In

---

[38]Jonson to Pelton, October 6, 1933, RJ 4: 2576.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Arabesque No. 1 that shifting of different levels of space has been lost to an emphatic flatness of the picture plane broken up into areas of vivid colors and distinct shapes. This change was noticed by Arthur, who considered it important. In discussing a later series called the *Figurations* and relating it to earlier works by Jonson, Arthur observed: "The figure or figures of the Figurations is quite new for you isn't it? So far as the photographs that I have are concerned, it seems to emerge in 1933 in Arabesque No. 1. I associate it with the human figure and feel it is something of a reduction to line of the mass forms in previous paintings.... ."[39] The presence of the human figure in the zigzagging and curving lines in the center of *Arabesque No. 1* is highly obfuscated, if it is really there at all. The lines may faintly conjure the presence of a dancing figure. The fact that this vestige of the representational is so uncertain further demonstrates how Jonson's abstract sensibility was intensifying.

After completing *A Cycle of Science*, with which he was occupied for most of 1934, and while completing his various non-landscape, thematic series started in the years 1929 to 1933, Jonson began several series in the middle of the 1930s that clearly demonstrate his stylistic shift toward greater abstraction. Among the most important of these series are the *Figurations*, the *Interlocked Forms*, the *Dramatic Forms*, the *Synthesis* series, the *Chromatic Contrasts* and the *Cosmic Theme* series. In all of these, Jonson's nearly complete break with the representational is evident. Stylistically, these works are related in that they treat forms

---

[39]Arthur to Jonson, February 16, 1937, RJ 1: 482. Garman has recognized this work as one of Jonson's first non-representational paintings, but has not declared it the first. [Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 107] When Garman wrote this he was unaware of Jonson's slightly earlier *Variations* series.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

much more two-dimensionally than Jonson's earlier work. Some of these series, namely the *Figurations*, *Interlocked Forms* and *Dramatic Forms*, are also united by the primacy of line and shape as the operative, dominant visual effects. The *Figurations* were begun in 1934 and grew to become a group of nine oils on canvas.[40] The *Interlocked Forms* were also begun in 1934 and became a group of seven watercolors and one oil on canvas.[41] The *Synthesis* series was begun in 1934 and continued to grow until 1947, when it finally numbered sixteen oils.[42] The *Chromatic Contrasts* were begun in 1935 and grew to consist of 35 paintings by 1965. These series are not only more abstract than those of the years 1929 to 1936 discussed in the previous chapter, but their lack of an obvious, focused subject matter left them open-ended as to their ultimate scope and the number of works involved.

The *Figurations* represent a radical change in Jonson's style for in them we see an emphatic flatness of biomorphic shapes filled in smoothly and flatly with broad areas of various colors. This is foreign to Jonson's earlier painting but common to his work of the mid-1930s. Line has become the vital component in the structuring of these compositions and all sorts of lines appear in this series. However used, line describes two-dimensional shapes of all kinds, and these shapes are often filled in with various colors that differentiate them. The tight, interlocking, visually compelling arrangements of these lines and the shapes they define is a critical effect in these works. Arthur was correct in his observation that this series represented a radical departure for Jonson that had immediate roots in *Arabesque No.*

---

[40]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 107.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 110.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

1. Jonson once described the impetus for this series by saying that the "word Figuration was an inspiration. It means '1. Act of giving figure, or determinate form; determination to a certain form. 2. Form; Shape; Outline.'"[43] The *Figurations* are far more non-representational than Jonson's thematic series of the early 1930s.

The importance of line in these works indicates that Jonson may have now been indirectly influenced by Surrealism, particularly the technique of automatism and the paintings of Joan Miró from the early 1930s. Whereas Miró's biomorphic Surrealist paintings often feature free-floating shapes, Jonson's abstractions of the mid-1930s tend to feature carefully structured lines that may have qualities of weight, mass, and direction relative to the ground plane. In the *Figurations*, Jonson seems to have sought to achieve the effect of automatism without the uncontrolled technique supposedly required. He may also have believed he could use automatism to tap into the spiritual instead of the individual, human subconscious, thereby modifying a basic method of Surrealism and applying it to the pursuit of the spiritual. In 1935 Jonson wrote the following about his work in a letter to a friend from Chicago, and it may apply specifically to this series since it was well underway at the time:

> To find through the subconscious these universal rhythms is one thing and to create a form that will express them is another. To do both results, or can result, in a new form and one that is abstract. And until we are able to create a visual order that is structurally as consistent and as emotionally moving, independent of the object world, we have failed to free our medium and bring

---

[43]Jonson to Edee-Lou Eckart, August 12, 1935, RJ 3: 1604. Edee-Lou and her husband Carl Eckart were friends of the Jonsons since Jonson and Vera had lived in Chicago. Edee-Lou was a painter who had been Jonson's student during the years he taught at various art schools in Chicago.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> it into the realm of pure emotional expression such as is possible with music.[44]

In the following year in a letter to Arthur, Jonson implied that the *Figurations* were imbued with psychological meanings, he acknowledged the importance of line in this series, and he indirectly suggested that Arthur was correct in his observation that *Arabesque No. 1* was the inspiration for this series: "Regarding Embraced Figuration that you mention in your last letter. It is entirely non-objective, at least as far as I am concerned, consciously. Freud would probably find a lot of 'things.' The works in the Figuration group are built primarily on line arabesques."[45]

Dramatic Configuration of 1935 [Plate 73], a nearly monochromatic painting, may be the most successful painting in the series in its use of line as the primary aesthetic and expressive element. The picture is dominated by smoothly curving, overlapping, graceful lines. Jonson maintained remarkable continuity of the width of the line throughout the painting while varying the color of the line slightly from place to place, shifting mostly between green and gray. Two large oval forms, which appear to be in the background, extend up and down from the top and bottom edges of the canvas. In the middle of the composition and seemingly closer to the viewer, there are more tightly packed curving shapes, which look vaguely like flower petals or peanuts, and which are allowed to overlap in numerous places. These shapes have been filled in with various shades of gray and pale, muted greens. Hue and tone have been varied as the lines overlap and the shapes they create

---

[44]Jonson to Edee-Lou Eckart, April 16, 1935, RJ 3: 1599.

[45]Jonson to Arthur, December 1, 1936, RJ 1: 48.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

are superimposed, suggesting a translucency of flat, large forms. Jonson would use this pictorial device often in his absolute paintings, regardless of media. The left and right edges of the canvas have been bordered with narrow vertical areas of violet and cream, which serve to frame the central figure, to focus our interest on it.

This painting also appears to be the most abstract composition by Jonson up to this time to have a known, specific inspiration: Ellen van Volkenburg Browne, wife of Maurice Browne, founder and director of the Chicago Little Theater.[46] This work is known to have been an almost ecstatic, spiritual response to a visit with Van Volkenburg because Jonson wrote the following about the work in a letter to her:

> The painting is an attempt to express in abstract forms and color the amazing sensation and experience of you through some spiritual kinship. For days a kind of happy thrill pervaded this place. I must tell you that you made a beautiful impression on both Vera and myself. In my composition I have hoped to state some of it. I let the thing flow and whatever I have of Nellie [as Van Volkenburg was called] in it is intuitive and natural. I hope I have drawn the best portions and that they, in the work, are functional. The work is as abstract as anything can be so I do not suppose anyone but myself will sense the beautiful concept of a great human contact. Even though it is not a "portrait" of you it has resulted because of you and to me that is far greater. I am very happy..... I have brought into the visual field in a permanent form the beauty and joy of what I feel to be a mutual understanding of two human beings through the spiritual and the emotional.[47]

He explained the meaning of and inspiration for the work when he wrote the following to Maurice Browne about the recent visit with Van Volkenburg:

> It is one of the great emotional contacts of my life. Everything clicked in perfect time and if there ever was a successful mutual understanding through

---

[46]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 75-76.

[47]Jonson to Ellen Van Volkenburg Browne, May 6, 1935, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 78.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> the esthetic, I believe this was one. It isn't often that an abstract rhythm through form can result because of human personality. This time that occurred for I have just done an abstract composition that resulted directly as a result of what Nellie meant to me. It is not a portrait of her but a pure rhythmic composition of a form and design, etc. Of course it may not mean the same thing to anyone else but myself. If so, I do not care for it suffices that at the time I had the great emotion and felt right and consistent in the order I was establishing.[48]

Spiral Trilogy of 1936 shows how the various expressive and aesthetic options that were of interest to Jonson in the mid-1930s could result in extremely different results pictorially and spiritually. These differences provide insight into how Jonson's paintings could succeed or fail in conveying spiritual experiences. *Spiral Trilogy I (Left)* [Plate 74] is dominated by a spiraling column of dark and pale tones of yellow-green that shoots upward and then bends slightly to the right at the top of the canvas. The spiral has the form of a long coil of metal; areas of yellow-green are encased in dark green lines that seem to have been generated by drawing in a rather broad, continuously circular motion across the canvas. *Spiral Trilogy II (Center)* [Plate 75] is quite similar in that the composition is dominated by a long, twisting red line studded with barbed-like marks that meanders continuously in tight circular patterns from the upper left to the lower right of the canvas.

Spiral Trilogy III (Right) [Plate 76] is a predominantly linear, somewhat biomorphic composition. However, it is different from Jonson's earlier attempts at the non-representational in some important respects, and these differences signal developments that Jonson explored and developed at length in the years to come. In this painting a dark purple line meanders between the upper left and lower right corners of the canvas, forming two tight

---

[48]Jonson to Browne, April 29, 1935, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 78.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

clusters of circles near the top and the bottom of the painting and looping more widely elsewhere. Behind the spiraling line is a misty, almost atmospheric background created by carefully shaded cerulean and smaller areas of purple. Much of the upper part of this space is shaded a pale cerulean. The bottom part is shaded a much deeper tone of the same hue. This shading starts at a diagonal line below the middle of the canvas and becomes lighter toward the bottom of the canvas. Jonson has created a circular area of deep cerulean around the upper cluster of purple lines. The two areas of blue are separated by a narrow, diagonal area of purple, which falls just above the line defining the deep cerulean on the lower part of the canvas. The composition is completed by curved areas of gray that occupy the lower left and upper right corner of the paintings. These areas of gray have been smoothly shaded and firmly contoured with oil paints applied with a brush and are much more conventional in paint application than most of the rest of this painting.

Spiral Trilogy III is intriguing yet problematic concerning medium and technique. Although it has long been believed that Jonson began to use the airbrush in 1938, much of this painting, which was done in 1936, was rendered with the airbrush. The areas of cerulean and purple have the evenness of paint application and slightly grainy texture characteristic of the use of the airbrush. However, all three works in the series are recorded in Jonson's "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson" as having been done in oil. This is questionable for the third in the series since oil paints are extremely difficult if not impossible to use in an airbrush because they are too thick in consistency to flow inside its small metal apparatus. It is likely that Jonson used other paint media, probably casein tempera, to complete this work, but simply did not bother to record the use of different,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

water-soluble media in the "Catalogue." He may have concluded that this detail did not matter since it was so unusual in his work up to this point in his career. Had he known the direction his work would take two years later, he might have recorded the media of this work in more detail.

Biomorphic abstraction is found in numerous paintings by Jonson from the mid-1930s. *Interlocked Forms in Space* of 1937 [Plate 77] is a clear example of Jonson's best efforts at this type of abstract imagery. The painting features several amoeba-shaped forms of various sizes and tones of a peach-like orange. Each area of peach has been carefully outlined with a dark gray or dark red line that is even in width and tone. Most of these forms are clustered in the center of the composition and there they overlap. Two small forms have been pushed to the left and right, both near the side edges of the canvas. When they overlap, their colors are blurred and their contours shift from gray to red. Two wide, dark-gray amoeba-like forms creep into view at the top and bottom edges of the canvas. Long dark-gray tentacles extend from each; those originating from the bottom come very close to connecting to the amoeba-form at the top, while those originating at the top disappear behind the peach-colored forms in the middle of the picture. There are two sets of four dark red lines in parallel, gradual curves that connect to the amoeba forms in this painting. One set is attached to the largest of the peach forms and vanishes at the far left. The other set of lines connects two small amoeba forms, both of which are placed to the far right. The background is a vague area of gray that is dark toward the edges of the canvas but lightens considerably toward its center. The motif of a group of parallel lines connecting clearly outlined biomorphic or rock-like forms floating in vague, imaginary spaces is a common one in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson's paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s. During these years it is seen more often in Jonson's oil paintings than in his watercolors. The meanings of these motifs are not clear but in works such as this one these linear forms may serve to fulfill the intentions stated in the title of the painting. This motif is frequently awkward in Jonson's paintings but is of unusual pictorial interest in this painting, making it one of Jonson's more successful biomorphic abstractions. This motif may be visually tolerable in this composition because the textures are mostly the same throughout the painting, no matter what the forms. In many other such works this is not so, and the disparity among textures is aesthetically bothersome. The application of oil paints in this work has a smooth, creamy quality that is quite different from the broad, semi-fused, rectangular strokes of paint seen so often in Jonson's paintings up to the early 1930s.

Cosmic Theme No. 3 of 1937 [Plate 78], one of several related paintings Jonson did in the late 1930s, is a very different painting from the one just discussed, for it is a pictorially successful example of geometric abstraction that was done just as Jonson embarked on what he called absolute painting. It is an important early example in Jonson's oeuvre of the evocation of the spiritual through the use of transparency and translucency in non-representational painting.[49] At 28" x 40", *Cosmic Theme No. 3* is a large canvas, and it is filled with numerous floating circles, some of them large and some small, some of them deep in color and others quite pale. In the middle of the canvas is a large circle of deep blue. The exact hue varies as other circles of similar size float around and over it and large oval forms with pointed tips reach from above and below so that their ends overlap it in the middle of

---

[49]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 112, 114-115.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the picture. One of the overlapping circles is pink and the other is a very pale violet. The two oval forms are brown, although they lose their color as they overlap with so many other forms in the center of the composition. The overlapping of these circular and oval forms allows Jonson to manipulate subtle features of hue, tone and brightness to suggest how some forms can alter the appearance of others when they are transparent and overlap one another. Behind these circular and oval forms are a number of long, irregularly-shaped forms of cerulean blue, violet and gray. These long forms are shaded from dark edges at their tops to lighter tones at their bottoms. A dark brown area becomes the background for these forms, suggesting they are closer to us and rather tangible in spite of their apparent transparency. To the far left in the painting, a few small circles float and overlap, almost as moons orbiting planets.

This painting is a continuation of the interest in astronomy seen in the 1930 *Time Cycle*, but the intervening seven years have resulted in profound changes in style. Although effects of transparency and translucency were operative in *Time Cycle*, there are no forms in *Cosmic Theme No. 3* that are nearly as solid and tangible. In *Time Cycle*, shining and reflective light was used to convey the changes in light as day turns to night. In *Cosmic Theme No. 3*, there is no reflective light from solid forms. Instead, light manifests itself by permeating or emanating from geometric forms. This is the result of the smooth, careful shading of forms using vibrant, eye-catching hues that are carefully juxtaposed and harmonized. This is the continuation and modification of Jonson's practice of using flat, outlined, vividly-colored and abruptly juxtaposed shapes that suggest colored light, an effect seen in much modernist painting in America at this time which has been referred to as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"billboard Cubism."[50] Of course, Jonson's subject for this series is as far from billboards and other forms of advertising and mass-media and commercial imagery as one could imagine, but the stylistic vocabulary is related. Except for the vague references to planetary forms in astronomical space, there is nothing representational about this painting.

Cosmic imagery appeared often in earlier abstract painting. A profound curiosity in the cosmos was part of the intellectual legacy and sustenance for the occultism and mysticism that was the impetus for much early-twentieth century abstract painting.[51] One of the first painters of spiritually evocative abstract painting that involved cosmic imagery was Frantisek Kupka, who in breakthrough works such as *The First Step* of 1910 created geometrically abstract compositions with strong suggestions and overtones of cosmic forces and spaces.[52] In many of his Orphist abstractions, such as his *Amorpha* series, circular forms move and float in vague spaces and emanate light, thereby suggesting they are celestial bodies. Through this creation of imaginary spaces and internally glowing light, Kupka unites the cosmos with the individual experience of the spiritual.[53] In *The First Step* [Plate 79], two large disks at the top of the canvas overlap one another as they are encircled by eleven small

---

[50]Corn, *The Great American Thing*: 201-213.

[51]Tuchman,"Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 20-29.

[52]Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-Figurative Painting in Paris, 1910-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979): 86-90; Michael Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996): 48; Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 35-36.

[53]Spate, *Orphism*: 90, 104, 109, 123-136

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

circles that stretch across the canvas. By the 1920s, Kupka's belief that the spiritual could be experienced through the cosmos and that the artist could depict or allude to it in his abstract paintings had considerable influence and many painters had come to share his goals for abstraction.[54] Jonson seems to have been one of them. Jonson's familiarity with Kupka's paintings by the late 1930s is uncertain. However, it is likely that Jonson was familiar with the idea that transcendental experiences could be found in the cosmos, one of the basic tenets of turn-of-the-century mysticism which was of particular importance to Kupka. *The First Step* is similar to *Time Cycle* in that both deal with the circular movement of planetary forms, but the use of translucent, overlapping geometric shapes in *Cosmic Theme No. 3* is closer in style to such paintings by Kupka as *First Step*.

Jonson helped create the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG) in New Mexico in 1938. The TPG was a small, short-lived group of painters working in various abstract styles that was essentially the Western equivalent to the better-known American Abstract Artists, which was founded in New York City in 1936.[55] The Transcendental Painting Group was

---

[54]Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*: 48.

[55]The literature on the Transcendental Painting Group and its members is scant, although growing interest over the past fifteen years has begun to generate more scholarly research. The most recent and thorough study of the group is Ed Garman's *Vision and Spirit: The Transcendental Painting Group* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico, 1997). Monographs on most of the artists who belonged to the TPG have been written only in recent years. The most recent and thorough study of Emil Bisttram is Ruth Pasquine's "The Politics of Redemption: Dynamic Symmetry, Theosophy and Swedenborgianism in the Art of Emil Bisttram (1895-1976)," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 2000). The most thorough study of Agnes Pelton is Michael Zakian's *Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature* (Palm Springs: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995). Although not well known in the United States, Lawren Harris is one of the most famous modernist painters in his native Canada and he has been the subject of numerous monographs, exhibit catalogues and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

founded in June of 1938 after meetings at Jonson's home in Santa Fe on June 7 and the home of his friend the painter Emil Bisttram in Taos, New Mexico on June 10.[56] The TPG was founded with nine artists who at the time lived and worked in New Mexico and California. The artists involved were Jonson, Emil Bisttram, Agnes Pelton, Lawren Harris, Florence Miller Pierce, Horace Towner Pierce, Stuart Walker, William Lumpkins and Robert Gribbroek. The membership grew by one when Ed Garman joined in 1941. Shortly after the TPG was formed the American Foundation for Transcendental Painting (AFTP) was formally established by these artists and a few of their non-artist friends who were sympathetic and supportive of their cause. The two most prominent non-artist members of the AFTP were the writers, philosophers, spiritualists and mystics Dane Rudhyar and Alfred Morang.[57] This second organization consisted of interested persons (not just artists working in abstract styles) who were, like the artists who belonged to both groups, dedicated to the cause of abstract art as a means of communicating and perceiving the spiritual. The AFTP was legally incorporated in the state of New Mexico and was intended to broaden the scope

---

dissertations as a result of this nationalistic fame. The most recent study of Lawren Harris is Andrew Hunter's *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter's Progress* (New York: The Americas Society, 2000). However, there are numerous more detailed and specialized studies of Harris' life and work, many of which are included in the bibliography of this dissertation. The first monograph on Florence Miller Pierce is Lucy R. Lippard's *Florence Pierce: In Search of Light* (Smith Book Fund, 1998).

[56]Ed Garman, *Vision and Spirit: The Transcendental Painting Group* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, 1997): 7.

[57]Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 4-5, 24, 33, 67. Rudhyar did some drawing and painting during the years he was associated with the AFTP, and his work has been included in some exhibitions of the TPG, including *Vision and Spirit.*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and appeal of the movement with the intention of eventually freeing the artists in the TPG from the routine matters of managing the affairs of both organizations (once its membership had grown large enough to handle such matters, which never happened). The governance of both organizations was carefully structured; this was necessary for the AFTP because it was legally incorporated.[58] When the TPG was established, Jonson was the chairman and Lumpkins was the secretary and the treasurer. When the AFTP was established shortly thereafter, Harris was the president, Pelton was an honorary president, Rudhyar and Bisttram were vice-presidents, Jonson was secretary, Lumpkins was treasurer, and Morang was publicity director.[59]

The TPG and the AFTP were created to promote the cause of abstract art in the United States at the time when Regionalism and Social Realism were far more popular and widespread and received much more attention from critics, curators and collectors. Promoting the cause of abstraction was to be achieved by generating public attention and interest through publishing articles and brochures and arranging group exhibitions of the works of the members. The TPG did enjoy a few noteworthy successes in its first three years. In 1939 its members exhibited their work at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. In 1940 they exhibited several works at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York City (now called the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum).[60] The TPG and AFTP lasted briefly; by 1942 their meetings and activities had long since ceased and by

---

[58]Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 62.

[59]Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 63.

[60]Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 7

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

1945 the AFTP was legally dissolved as a corporation.[61] Various circumstances, including the relocation of certain members due to the United States' involvement in World War II, the absence of Pelton from New Mexico (she lived and worked in California during the years the TPG and AFTP existed and was always involved in absentia), the sudden death of Stuart Walker in 1940, and the dissipating interest and enthusiasm of some members led to the early demise of the TPG and AFTP.

Organizations such as the American Abstract Artists and the TPG are testimony to the continuation of the ideals and values of abstraction in the United States during an era when it was often considered foreign, elitist and irrelevant. In spite of their highly abstract imagery, which is usually perceived as having no apparent relation to the concerns of everyday life, these artists were aware of and concerned with the complex and volatile social, economic and political circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s–global depression, the spread of Communism and Fascism, World War II and the Holocaust. Unlike many artists in the United States during these years, they did not illustrate or directly comment on these social and political issues, but they were not oblivious to them. Although these concerns are barely mentioned in the official statements of the TPG, it shall be demonstrated that Jonson's comments about the new organizations indicate that as far as he was concerned, the TPG and AFTP were responses to the global problems of the 1930s and 1940s.

The purpose and goals of the TPG were made clear in the manifesto that was issued in a brochure published in 1938:

---

[61]Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 4, 7.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The Transcendental Painting Group is composed of artists who are concerned with the development and presentation of various types of non-representational painting; painting that finds its source in the creative imagination and does not depend upon the objective approach.
>
> The word Transcendental has been chosen as a name for the group because it best expresses its aim, which is to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual. The work does not concern itself with political, economic, or other social problems.
>
> Methods may vary. Some approach their plastic problems by a scientific balancing of the elements involved; other [sic] rely upon the initial emotion produced by the creative urge itself; still others are impelled by a metaphysical motivation. Doubtless as the group grows other methods will appear.
>
> The Transcendental Painting Group is no coterie, no accidental group of friends. The members are convinced that focal points in terms of group activity are necessary in order to present an art transcending the objective and expressing the cultural development of our time.
>
> The main activity of the Group will be toward arranging exhibitions of work. The goal is to make known the nature of transcending painting which, developed in various phases, will serve to widen the horizon of art.[62]

Except for the common devotion to non-representational imagery, these artists had little in common stylistically. There was no common style among the members of the TPG.

Jonson was one of the strongest supporters of and advocates for the TPG and AFTP; he played a crucial role in their formation in 1938 and was the last member to give up any hope that they would survive in the early 1940s. The primacy of Jonson in the formation of these two organizations is suggested by the positions of leadership and authority he held in both, those of president and secretary, and his hosting of the dinner party of June 7, 1938 at which the idea for what would become the TPG and AFTP originated. For Jonson, the TPG

---

[62]"Transcendental Painting Group," brochure printed in Santa Fe in 1938, reprinted in Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 62. At the end of the above quote, the names of the nine original members, along with the towns and cities in which they lived at the time, appeared as they had in the original brochure.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and AFTP must have seemed like a second "Cor Ardens," a cherished opportunity to try once again the "little bit of idealism in art" which he had eagerly pursued earlier in his career with this short-lived, idealistic group founded more than fifteen years earlier in Chicago. Even though Cor Ardens had failed, Jonson retained the belief that such a fraternal organization of artists could succeed in generating public interest in and understanding of abstract and totally non-representational art.

Jonson explained the purpose, goals and governing structure of the TPG in a letter to Arthur written in July 1938, only weeks after the TPG was formed:

> During June a group of us arranged an exhibition with the idea of seeing how our works looked together. From it we planned to form a group for the purpose of exhibiting–talking together and attempting to publish a few folders or booklets etc. Out of it we have formed a group. Therefore, I am sending you a copy of what we have formulated to date.... . I realize it is pretty idealistic and that many people will laugh because it does not fit into the program that fools them and plays up to their bad taste.... . It [the TPG] hopes to become a focal point for the development of a type of Art [sic] vitally rooted in the spiritual needs of the times and expressing the most truly creative, fundamental and permanent impulses emerging from the American continent; an art which releases from its creators the deepest springs of vitality and consciousness and which aims to stimulate in others, through deep and spontaneous emotional experiences of form and color, a more intense participation in the life of the spirit.[63]

Jonson's comment that the TPG was, as far as he was concerned, intended to become "a focal point for the development of a type of art vitally rooted in the spiritual needs of the times" suggests that his own painting of these years and that of the other members of the TPG and AFTP were responses to the global crises of the era. Therefore, the declaration of no involvement with social, economic and political circumstances in the official TPG

---

[63]Jonson to Arthur, July 28, 1938, RJ 1: 530.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

manifesto may have been intended to deny any specific political allegiances and to thwart any efforts to connect their universal, spiritual concerns with the more nationalistic, social and political concerns of the Social Realists and the Regionalists.

The TPG and AFTP had roots in Jonson's concerns with exhibiting his work and that of like-minded artists which became critical for him once again in the early 1930s. It was at this time that the network of friendships that brought the members of the TPG and AFTP together came to exist. Jonson was closest to Pelton, Bisttram, Harris and Rudhyar before, during and after the TPG and AFTP. As Jonson's friendship with Pelton evolved, so did his desire for the means of exhibiting the works of non-representational painters who dealt with the spiritual in their work. Jonson and Pelton came to know one another around 1933. Pelton first learned of Jonson's work when she saw his exhibit at the Delphic Studios in New York City in 1931, and may have seen a few of his works even earlier.[64] Jonson seems to have been introduced to Pelton around 1933 through his sister Esther, who at this time lived in Southern California and was a published art critic.[65] Rudhyar was, by 1933, a close mutual friend who had shared his praise and enthusiasm for Pelton's work with Jonson.[66] Jonson apparently first saw Pelton's work when she shipped several paintings to Jonson to

---

[64]Pelton to Jonson, August 22, 1933, RJ 4: 2558.

[65]Jonson to Pelton, July 21, 1933, RJ 4: 2551. Jonson wrote: "My sister wrote me about going many times to see your works there in Palm Springs. And her praise was terrific!"; Jonson to Arthur, March 11, 1931, RJ 1: 369. Jonson wrote: "You know it is very amusing this having an art critic in the family!! I thought her review of Chirico [sic] very good."

[66]Jonson to Pelton, July 21, 1933, RJ 4: 2551. Jonson wrote: "Rudhyar has spoken so wonderfully of you and your work that I really am all worked up and most anxious to see some of it."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

be included in an exhibit he was curating which was to be held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe in August to September of 1933. He was excited and fascinated by her work, considering them stunningly beautiful expressions of the spiritual and, although very different in style from his work, related to it in an underlying sense of how to visualize the spiritual effectively. As Jonson wrote to Pelton in August of 1933, upon receiving her paintings:

> I cannot begin to tell you how thrilled I am with them!! They are stunning!! You have a new admirer!! They clicked with me immediately and when I tell you I spent most of an afternoon alone with them–looking and looking and ending up with a complete acceptance you will perhaps get some idea of what I would like to say. I feel that "Beneficence" and "Equilibrium" are entirely successful–containing a complete spiritual expression. I am completely moved by these two.... . How does it happen that we have never met. I was shocked just as I believe you would be if you could sit here in the studio and see some of the works I have done. Our work is not alike but I do believe some inner significance touches the same rhythm, chord or spirit.[67]

As their friendship developed in the following years, Jonson and Pelton exchanged views on the marginal status of abstraction in contemporary American painting and its exclusion from public exhibits. Their concerns and the speculative solutions to which they referred almost predict the advent of the TPG. They believed that only through cooperative efforts would abstract artists in America in the 1930s be able to have their works seen and their ideas known. Jonson lamented the situation in writing to Pelton as early as September of 1933:

> I have never exhibited at the Carnegie International. [Pelton asked in an earlier letter if he had] For the past ten years I have not sent to juries. And of course I am not invited. So I have done little exhibiting. But I think we should be included in all the large and so called [sic] important exhibitions.

---

[67]Jonson to Pelton, August 17, 1933, RJ 4: 2557.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> But how to do it is a question. There are so few of us who work in the abstract with the idea of a magical quality that few people will, or even desire to, contact with it. In other words we are not heard. And of course we are continually harased [sic] with financial difficulties which prohibits a personal action in the way of presenting the work. I have felt that the best we can do is create the work. It will eventually be heard.... .[68]

Two years later Jonson wrote again of his frustration with having no venues at which to exhibit his work, which he felt was still shunned because it was abstract, and this time he alluded to the possibility that collective effort among abstractionists might solve this problem:

> When I read of various exhibitions I begin to wonder if we should not take more of an active part in that department. But if the so called [sic] powers that be will have nothing to do with us I do not see what we can do especially when we are not in position to finance these activities.... . For instance the Whitney Museum has on at present an exhibition of 'Abstractions' and I wonder if the best of the country is represented. I mean the best of the abstract. I'll bet you were not invited. I certainly was not. But some day I shall arrange an exhibition. Meanwhile the thing for us to do is work–work and work.[69]

Without realizing it, Jonson had, in these letters, described the need for the TPG and AFTP.

The inception of the TPG and the American Abstract Artists were approximately simultaneous occurrences that seem to have occurred independently and in complete isolation from one another. However, it is likely that the American Abstract Artists served as a prototype for the TPG, since it was formed two years earlier and Jonson knew of the American Abstract Artists by May 1937, more than a year before the TPG was formed.

---

[68]Jonson to Pelton, September 26, 1933, RJ 4: 2568.

[69]Jonson to Pelton, February 22, 1935, RJ 4: 2598. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue to which Jonson refers is *Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1935).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Arthur must have been referring to the New York City group when he wrote to Jonson in May 1937:

> Have you heard of or from the new cabal of abstraction painters? It is a fatality of the society in which we live that groupings of this sort often seem necessary. However, I often wonder whether they do any good. I suppose that if they produce some propaganda of the right sort they fulfil [sic] a function that may have some good results. What do you think of such a group as this new one?[70]

This letter to Jonson may well be the means by which he learned of the new group. However, only a couple of weeks later, Josef Albers, whom Jonson came to know a few years earlier and with whom he corresponded regularly, wrote to Jonson about the American Abstract Artists:

> It may interest you to know that last winter in New York there was organized the Association of American Abstract Artists, a group with almost forty members now. They had an exhibition last April. [April 1937] I believe that you would like to get in touch with this group, therefore I give you the address of the secretary, Mr. R. D. Turnbull, 51 West 10th Street.[71]

Jonson may have learned about the American Abstract Artists through the New York City non-representational painter Vaclav Vytlacil, whom Jonson came to know from his periodic visits to the Southwest.[72] Jonson never attempted to create any affiliation with the American Abstract Artists, probably because the distance between New Mexico and New York City was so great that he knew he would never be able to fully or adequately participate in the

---

[70]Arthur to Jonson, May 6, 1937, RJ 1: 488. In the surviving letters written by Jonson to Arthur after this one, no response to these questions and no mention of the American Abstract Artists appears.

[71]Josef Albers to Jonson, May 19, 1937, RJ 2: 1263.

[72]Vera to Mrs. Sheldon Cheney, March 28, 1938, RJ 2: 1475.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

activities of the New York City organization.[73] His awareness of this new group based in New York City along with his continuous frustration with problems exhibiting abstract painting during the 1930s must have led Jonson to work with like-minded artists in the West to establish the TPG and AFTP in 1938.

The use of the term "transcendental" became a complicated matter as the TPG tried to establish its identity as a group and its sense of purpose as the initiators of a new abstract movement. The term seemed problematic at first because it suggested direct connections to Transcendentalism, the mid-nineteenth century American philosophical movement whose leading proponent was Ralph Waldo Emerson. The TPG chose the term to emphasize that their abstract painting was intended to go beyond physical, tangible, visible reality and matters of individual, national, ethnic or religious identity to deeper meanings and truths which were timeless and universal.[74] When Arthur questioned the use of the term "transcendental" in 1938, shortly after hearing about the TPG for the first time, Jonson defended the validity of the TPG's use of the word:

> I might say our aim is to transcend all isms! Certainly the words abstract and non-objective have been used to death. They emanate from Europe and our hope has been to point out that in America we have painting also.... . The Guggenheim Foundation is primarily European. I know of no American represented in the collection..... Naturally we are attempting to differentiate between the European idea as represented by the Guggenheim collection and ourselves–and that is one reason for the new name–transcendental. We stand for those fundamental serious items and do not hestitate [sic] to say that art to us is meaning and reason for life.[75]

---

[73]Ibid.

[74]Garman, *Vision and Spirit*: 9-10.

[75]Jonson to Arthur, August 28, 1938, RJ 1: 532 .

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson's defense of the term "transcendental" reveals how frustrated he was with existing, established terminology for abstract art. Therefore, his adoption of the term "absolute" only a handful of years later is not surprising. He revealed this frustration most clearly when he wrote to Pelton in 1938:

> I am entirely dissatisfied with the term non-objective and have tried to find a word or name that would cover what we are attempting to do. Rudhyar is here and is helping me with this and one suggestion he has offered is TRANSCENDENTAL. As your non-objective work is a fine example of what I have in mind I should like to know what you think of using the word transcendental to designate it instead of abstract or non-objective.... . Does this word seem to you to cover the aim of our work insofar as the objective departure and the hope for spiritual content are concerned?[76]

Although Jonson consistently thought of his work as achieving the spiritual in truly international and timeless ways, he also believed that the term "transcendental," with its implied American connotations, served to call attention to those painters in the United States in the 1930s and early 1940s who were not Regionalists or Social Realists, to alert the public to the fact that abstract art was still being created in the United States and that it should not be ignored or discredited.

Jonson's involvement with the TPG occurred as he created his first truly and fully non-representational paintings in 1938. This appears to have been coincidental, since his work is very different in style from most of the members of the TPG. His work of the late 1930s and early 1940s is sometimes similar to certain works by Bisttram and Garman, but why and how these similarities occurred remains unclear. Jonson's non-representational paintings and drawings of the mid-1930s show that as the decade progressed his work

---

[76]Jonson to Pelton, June 4, 1938, Agnes Pelton Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 3426, frame 186.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

became increasingly abstract. It was during this time that Jonson finally liberated himself from depicting the physical, tangible world around him. The foundation was in place for the various expressive, tantalizing innovations that were about to come, innovations that would be the hallmark of Jonson's most creative, self-fulfilling period of spiritual painting. These developments were in place before the TPG and AFTP existed. These organizations did not bring Jonson to absolute painting, but they embodied what he considered to be the significance and purpose of abstract art in America in the era of the Great Depression and World War II..

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE TECHNIQUES, THEORY AND SOURCES OF JONSON'S ABSOLUTE PAINTING

The year 1938 was one of profound change for Jonson's painting. It was at the beginning of this year that Jonson first achieved truly "absolute" paintings, paintings that were fully-realized non-representational images designed to evoke and communicate spiritual experiences and states of mind. These paintings were visually potent and yet free of literal, narrative or iconographic content. The sweeping changes in style that occurred at this time forever transformed Jonson's work; there would be no turning back and, except for vague allusions in some works (many of them among his less visually effective works from these years), there would be little that remained of the figurative or representational. Jonson had finally arrived at a means of visualizing the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the spiritual in life which he had long sought to express. From this time on, Jonson rarely pondered the validity of his artistic approach, the genuineness of his abstract vision, and the future directions in style he would take. Jonson believed he had finally achieved his goal; he had come to paint that which he had long desired to express in his work. His development would become more fluid and spontaneous; although he had finally achieved the completely non-representational, his work would continue to evolve over the next forty years of his long and prolific career.

Jonson was well aware of the important changes that occurred in his work in 1938, for he once wrote that it was in this year that he experienced the last of the five mystical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

experiences which he credited with shaping his artistic career. In the text to the 1949 speech in which he explained all five experiences, he said:

> In this year [1938] a wonderful and terrific experience occurred. Over a period of several months the whole method appeared in regard to creating simply and without strain, in pure painting terms–the absolute. It was as if a complete cleansing process was in effect leveling off all the accumulation of subject matter, technique, experimentation and the agony accompanying them.[1]

Although Jonson was not specific, this mystical experience somehow led him to completely purge his painting of all recognizable, figurative content. It allowed him to achieve the absolute in his work.

Jonson's stylistic shift in the late 1930s and early 1940s was instigated by his personal response to the looming global crises that defined the era and which changed forever the course of history, including Nazism, Fascism, and Communism, the Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, and the invention of the atomic bomb. Jonson's fifth mystical experience and the profound change in style that it seems to have prompted occurred as these global problems became critical. In response to all the horrors of war, suffering and poverty, Jonson found solace and empowerment in the completely non-representational; it seems as if a world of pure geometric forms and vivid, luminous color gave Jonson the peace, order and understanding he hoped all humanity could achieve. In 1947 Jonson was quoted as saying, in reference to his non-representational painting, that "it has never been my intention to make pictures of places and things, but rather an effort to

---

[1]Jonson in a lecture to the Chile Club in Santa Fe given on August 29, 1949, p. 7, RJ 9: 6330.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

work out my salvation."[2] In the late 1930s Jonson's search for salvation in his art went from a personal endeavor to a communal one. In the face of the enormous horrors that would define this era, Jonson found a sense of purpose that led him to the complete realization of artistic goals he had long contemplated and pursued but which he had been unable to achieve; now he was about to embark upon the period of his most innovative and inspired works.

Jonson's absolute painting was for him the perfect response to the world crises of the 1930s and 1940s. In late 1940, he explained his discouragement and frustration with the world's deteriorating political situation in a letter to Arthur:

> I end my year with the hope that the fools in Europe and Asia will before another year is out have hung themselves so that the rest of civilization can live in peace. I dedicate my time–my effort–my thoughts and my feelings to the highest ideal of love–brotherhood and peace on this our only earth. May it contribute to the total desire to abstain from hate and fear and may we find ourselves in a world a year from now that is working for constructive ends and not this deplorable condition of complete destruction that now exists.[3]

Little did Jonson know that the worst was yet to come. He further clarified his sense of purpose when he wrote in the same letter:

> For 25 years I have struggled to exist in a world that is against a pure concept of love and peace. During these years my effort has been constructive and I have hoped that it would contribute to the heightening of civilization and the freeing of humanity. But humanity has failed me. But I shall continue–continue on to the end. Some one [sic] simply has to keep up the tradition or the whole episode of life on earth will pass away in smoke–pain and death. Love and religion have failed as expressed by power and so we

---

[2]Edna Manley Lewisohn, "Raymond Jonson, Painter," *El Palacio* 54.5 (May 1947): 111, RJ 9: 6828. This statement has been quoted repeatedly in efforts to summarize Jonson's artistic purpose but this is the earliest known published source to give this quote, and so this article may be where it originated.

[3]Jonson to Arthur, December 31, 1940, RJ 1: 595.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> can well dedicate our effort toward an abstract vision of the ideal that underlies the truth in them. I see now that the only effort that survives is the constructive one. My power in the past has been the opposite of what is now commonly considered power. But I hope that this different power–this power that raises instead of lowers life will be able to function full blast. I hope the visions will come to me so that I may be the humble servant of that beautiful strength and courage in order to record the highest in man and that some portion of it may be saved for the new civilization that will have to start all over. The present seems hopeless but it is not and the future may blossom and the whole panorama of living survive, decently and honestly. And so may this vehicle–me–be able to stick by the job of recording our real makeup, life in the full.[4]

About the same time, Jonson also wrote to Morris, explaining at length and with unusual passion his feelings about the current state of the world and how he and his absolute painting figured into the complex, turbulent, frightening situation:

> Within me things are boiling. I see so much injustice and lack of attention to things that seem to me to matter and I personally have such a struggle to accomplish a few of things that seem worthy of accomplishment that at times the whole business of trying to live beautifully in a man-made ugliness seems hopeless. One aspect of the reason for painting seems to be a kind of oasis necessary through this kind of effort because of the lack in general of the finer things possible in life. So I suppose we at times make a protest through creating something that is beautiful and moving. But when opposition and hatred attacks [sic] from all sides it becomes difficult to keep dignified through completely ignoring it. Frustration is a devastating ogre. So some of the work I am doing is a kind of challenge to existing conditions. The material is entirely abstract so no one will I imagine suspect it or recognize it.[5]

Jonson later wrote more to Morris about this need to direct his artistic efforts to the cause of solving or escaping the enormous world problems of the 1930s and 1940s: "You see I intend to work through any and all complications. If the whole world is going to pot I feel a few of us must stand pat and carry on the necessary act of making the emotional and spiritual record

---

[4]Ibid.

[5]Jonson to Morris, June 6, 1939, RJ 3: 2340.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of these trying days–otherwise all will have been in vain."[6] Jonson became an artist and discovered modernist painting during the decade of World War I. He and Vera moved to New Mexico to escape the problems of urban life and to immerse themselves in the artistic inspiration they found in the Southwest. Now crises of even greater scale had developed and for Jonson the only refuge was in absolute painting. Even as World War II ended, Jonson's concept of the utopian, social function of his absolute painting remained steadfast. In 1945 Jonson was quoted as explaining:

> To me, art and life are synonymous. In the creation of a significant work the forces of life and the act of living are brought into a focus. With the concept at hand, through the conscious, subconscious, intuitive and inspirational, the abstract social rhythms are brought to a vital and living entity..... One could feel that to have been the vehicle in the creation of works which are records of the age and which would furnish hope for greater order in life and emotional enjoyment, is one of the finest monuments one could leave.[7]

Jonson was mildly critical of the more representational painting of the era, namely Regionalism and Social Realism, with regard to how it dealt with the enormous global problems that he was engaged with in abstraction. He seems to be alluding to these better known, more popular developments in art of the 1930s and early 1940s when he wrote:

> All our pictorial illustrations of what we are doing [perhaps referring to Regionalist and Social Realist styles of painting] seems to me a cheap kind of escape for the painter. They are against us who are attempting to clean up the back yard [sic] of rubbish painting. They will probably succeed for they are in the majority and we will never be heard from and painting in the end will be where it was during the 18th century–namely nowhere. But that does not stop us for in spite of this possibility we must go on and on. And even so I feel we are living in an age such as never before existed. It is a struggle between the great and the cheap. Which will win out? We know not and can

---

[6]Jonson to Morris, September 14, 1940, RJ 3: 2387.

[7]Condict Freeman, "Outstanding UNM Faculty: Raymond Jonson," *New Mexico Lobo*, April 20, 1945, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6776.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> only hope that the great will and in that hope we struggle on through opposition of every kind.[8]

This comment clearly indicates the staunch conviction with which Jonson embraced non-representational art after it had fallen out of favor with most American artists between the World Wars.

Jonson's ideas concerning the purpose and significance of his art during the global turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s reflect the visionary, spiritual, even messianic intentions of Kandinsky as explained in many of his writings.[9] They are loosely connected to the trend of utopian protest that underlies the work of pioneers of non-representational painting such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich and others.[10] As with Jonson, the paintings and sometimes the writings of these artists called for a new utopian, peaceful, stable social order as part of their rejection of the materialist, capitalist values which had long been common in Western civilization. As was true for the earlier Europeans, Jonson's absolute art was a rejection of the same social and economic values and an attempt to create a new, better, essentially utopian social order to replace old, stale, destructive values. Jonson's comment that he dedicated his life to the pursuit of art that would improve the human condition and rebuild its spiritual foundation is similar to Kandinsky's concept of the "inner necessity" of the abstract artist to confront and reverse the moral decay, social chaos and lack of genuine spirituality that had damaged modern life by using the power of abstract art. Jonson's

---

[8]Jonson to Morris, June 6, 1939, RJ 3: 2340.

[9]Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Kandinsky's Vision," in John E. Bowlt and Rose-Carol Washton Long, eds., *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: a Study of "On the Spiritual in Art"* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980): 44-45.

[10]Donald B. Kuspit, "Utopian Protest in Early Abstract Art," *Art Journal* 29.4 (Summer 1970): 430-436; Long, *Kandinsky: Development of an Abstract Style*: 5-6, 11-17.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

comments also parallel Kandinsky's idea of the "spiritual triangle" as the path to "the epoch of the great spiritual," a theoretical construct that describes a complex process of the transformation of society at all levels which will ultimately elevate mankind from its debased social and moral condition through the enlightenment provided by non-representational art.[11] Jonson's comments that abstract art connects to "a kind of oasis," that his abstract painting makes a statement of "protest through creating something that is beautiful and moving," and that it is "a kind of challenge to existing conditions," and his declaration that he desired to "contribute to the heightening of civilization and the freeing of humanity" reveal how Jonson's thinking during World War II was very similar to Kandinsky's just before World War I. Other comments by Jonson parallel those made by Mondrian in several of his major writings. Jonson's occasional references to achieving perfection, beauty, harmony and order in life and art parallel Mondrian's desire to achieve pure truth and logic through his carefully ordered, logical, geometric paintings.[12] This parallel is suggested by Jonson's comments quoted earlier that reveal he devoted his art to "an abstract vision of the ideal" and that to "furnish hope for greater order in life and emotional enjoyment, is one of the finest monuments one could leave."

At the beginning of 1938 Jonson adopted a new system of labeling his works that he

---

[11]Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," part A, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 127-155.; Long, "Kandinsky's Vision," in Bowlt and Long, eds., *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of "On the Spiritual in Art"*: 44-45; Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 67-69.

[12]Yves-Alain Bois, "Iconoclast," in Yves-Alain Bois, et al. *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995): 313-362; Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity*: 41-46.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

used for the rest of his career. This new system identified individual works by the medium in which they were made, the chronological order within each medium, and the year in which they were made. From 1938 until he ceased painting forty years later, all works were identified as having been done in oil, watercolor or casein tempera; only occasionally are works further identified as being done in combined media, namely oil and casein tempera. This naming system allows the order in which works were done to be determined only within separate media and by year; it is not possible to use this system to tell in what order works done in different media in the same year were made. Jonson switched from one medium to another frequently and with ease, and so stylistic developments shift across differences of media. Jonson's new system of identifying works seems to have been inspired by his desire to avoid any and all references to narrative, symbolic or figurative content in his work. It is not clear how Jonson came to use this generic system for identifying individual works. It is possible that he got the idea from Kandinsky, Mondrian, and perhaps even Malevich, who used such general, non-specific terms as "composition," "improvisation," and "painting" to identify their totally abstract paintings years before Jonson ever achieved fully non-representational painting. It is also possible that Jonson got the idea from László Moholy-Nagy, who in the mid-1920s adopted a system of identifying his geometric abstractions by using the non-specific term "construction" along with combinations of numbers and alphabet letters.[13] As will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter, Jonson's adoption of this new medium-number-year system coincided with his trip to Chicago in late 1937 and early

---

[13]Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lizzitsky and Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 60-62.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

1938, during which he met Moholy-Nagy and other artists associated with the relocated Bauhaus, and so his adoption of this new naming system at this time seems more than coincidental. There are some works done in 1938 and later that Jonson entitled not only with the medium-number-year label but with more specific and seemingly descriptive titles. Some of these titles are quite thought-provoking, for they suggest to the viewer connections between the non-representational imagery and the seemingly meaningful and revealing titles. Although the titles are not necessarily deliberately perplexing and speculative, they sometimes encourage wonder and uncertainty as to what meaning is conveyed or what intention inspired them.

Jonson's practice of working with watercolors, which began around 1933, was a major departure in his choice of media, since he used oils almost exclusively since he began painting in 1912. In 1938 Jonson began to produce many more works in media other than oil than he ever had before. He started producing many watercolors. Between the years 1933 and 1937, Jonson produced as few as one watercolor in 1935 and as many as eight in 1937. But in 1938 Jonson produced 32 watercolors. Between 1938 and 1945 Jonson produced as few as 23 watercolors in 1939 and as many as 41 in 1945, so even at its lowest his production of watercolors during these years was much greater than before 1938.[14] In 1949, Jonson's interest in watercolor began to decline, and several years later he gave up the medium altogether. In the middle of 1938 Jonson began using casein tempera.[15] From 1938 until the

---

[14]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 180-181; "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176. According to Garman's chronology, Jonson began using watercolors in 1933.

[15]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 178-181; "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176. According to Garman's chronology, this is the first

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

late 1940s, Jonson usually produced only three to six casein tempera paintings a year and there were years when he produced none. However, in the years 1954 to 1956 his interest in this medium suddenly revived and during these years he produced between twenty and 32 temperas a year. In the years 1939 to 1942 he produced a small number of paintings done by combining oil and tempera.[16] He occasionally worked with gouache in the mid-1940s.[17] Jonson continued to work in oil paints after the breakthrough year of 1938. In 1961, he gave up using all of these media in favor of acrylics, after having become enthralled with this medium in 1957. From 1938 until the late 1950s, Jonson produced many works in various media; no single medium dominated in this period.

Jonson may have been encouraged to use water-based media for his absolute paintings by the example established by Kandinsky. Kandinsky used transparent watercolor, gouache and various kinds of tempera throughout his career. Information in his notebooks dating as far back as 1900, early in his years in Munich, deals with different mixtures of paint ingredients to produce different kinds of gouache and tempera paints.[18] Kandinsky painted abstractly in watercolor as well as oil during the critical period of 1909 to 1913, but he produced the most watercolors of his career during his years at the Bauhaus. It was during his time at the Bauhaus that his painting was at its most precisely linear and strictly

---

year that Jonson produced any works in casein tempera. In a letter to Arthur written in July 1938, Jonson commented that he had recently been experimenting with casein tempera. [Jonson to Arthur, July 28, 1938, RJ 1: 530.]

[16]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 178-181; "Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Rudolf H. Wackernagel, "Kandinsky–An Exponent of Modern Tempera Painting" in Vivian Endicott Barnett, ed., *Kandinsky Watercolors: Catalogue Raisonné: 1900-1921* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992): 20-24.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

geometric. It seems more than coincidental that Jonson took up watercolor as his work became increasingly abstract and more linear and geometric than it had ever been; his choice of media and transformation of style followed a pattern very similar to that which Kandinsky had taken nearly fifteen years earlier.

Although it has long been thought that Jonson first used the airbrush for painting in 1938, it is evident from *Spiral Trilogy III* that Jonson made a serious attempt at painting with the airbrush as early as 1936. He began using the airbrush regularly in the middle of 1938, the same year his use of watercolor increased enormously and around the same time that he began to use casein tempera.[19] Jonson executed his airbrushed paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s with watercolor and casein tempera.[20] His adoption of the airbrush necessitated the adoption of water-based media. Oil paints would be too thick to flow through the intricate apparatus of an airbrush. The texture of water-based paint applied to paper or board with the airbrush was a stylistic and expressive epiphany for Jonson. It suited his technical preferences, in particular his need for speed and efficiency in creating his visions of the spiritual. Airbrushed watercolor and casein tempera also offered the unusual advantage of providing more immediately verifiable results. By contrast, oil paint applied with brushes and the palette knife could change in various aspects of tone and brightness as the paint

---

[19]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 118, 180; Jonson to Arthur, July 28, 1938, RJ 1: 530. Garman in his monograph and every other known exhibition catalogue and brochure on Jonson have stated that Jonson first used the airbrush in 1938. In a letter to Arthur written in July 1938, Jonson mentioned that he recently started using the airbrush. This is the same letter in which Jonson stated that he recently experimented with casein tempera.

[20]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 119.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

dried.[21] The combination of evenly applied, luminous color with the slightly grainy texture of aerated paint made possible by the airbrush was the perfect merger of medium and message for Jonson. Watercolor and casein tempera applied with the airbrush became Jonson's most beautiful and eloquent means for expressing the spiritual.

It is not clear how Jonson came to use the airbrush. It has been said that the abstract painter Harry Holtzman suggested the use of the airbrush to Jonson, although there is no documented evidence to support this claim.[22] It has also been said that Jonson was introduced to the airbrush by a student of his who had used the airbrush to retouch photographs when he was working in Hollywood, and that this student brought his equipment to Jonson to allow him to experiment with it.[23] As with the first explanation, there is no documented evidence to support this one. A more likely inspiration for Jonson's use of the airbrush would have been Kandinsky. Kandinsky used the airbrush, an atomizer, or a blow pipe to create numerous paintings in the late 1920s. He may have learned the technique from Paul Klee, who also used such spraying techniques in the 1920s.[24] As will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter, Jonson would have seen airbrushed paintings by Kandinsky such as *Emotions* [Plate 80], *Out of Cool Depths* [Plate 81] and *Into*

---

[21]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 118.

[22]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 120; Garman to the author, July 24, 2000.

[23]Garman to author, July 24, 2000. Garman says that these two accounts of how Jonson came to use the airbrush are essentially speculative.

[24]Vivian Endicott Barnett, *Kandinsky at the Guggenheim* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983): 199, 299. Barnett notes that Kandinsky and Klee shared an apartment in 1925 and then a house in 1926, implying that their artistic connections were very close at this time.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the Dark [Plate 82] of 1928 when he was in Chicago in January 1932.[25] Kandinsky discussed the textural effects made possible by spraying paint as the extension of his theory of the point as the basic element in visual composition in *Point and Line to Plane*, and he even included an illustration of a large point consisting of many tiny points achieved by spraying paint.[26] [Plate 83]

In 1939 Jonson simultaneously justified the virtues of the airbrush technique while downplaying the significance of any particular technique when he wrote to Arthur saying:

> There is I suppose a great deal that could be said regarding the method [of using the airbrush] but instead of going through a whole programme [sic] of statement let me say that in the final analysis I feel that it does not make a bit of difference as to what method is used to put paint on. If one were to be a purist on the subject then the only proper method would be to put it on with the fingers for no object should function between the paint and the surface! I know the airbrush has a rotten reputation but that should not prejudice us against using it for idealistic purposes. If a painter can express then I feel, at least at present, that it is the quality of his concepts that count most and the business of putting it down in concrete form is a nuisance. It takes too long and involves a maze of outside forces striving to take hold where they have no business to be. But perhaps it is just that struggle that urges us on and on day and night to attempt to record and set in form a symbol that may function as a constructive and structural piece of perfection. To achieve that state of perfection–any means are legitimate.[27]

This somewhat ambivalent statement is most insightful if it is remembered that Jonson emphasized that any technique, equipment or media are acceptable if they are effective. What was most important for Jonson was getting the spiritual vision recorded in the painting

---

[25]Vivian Endicott Barnett and Josef Helfenstein, eds., *The Blue Four: Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, and Klee in the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 346-347.

[26]Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 366-369. The illustration in question is Figure 13.

[27]Jonson to Arthur, March 16, 1939, RJ 1: 559.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as quickly, directly and purely as possible before it was lost or corrupted; the particulars of how this was achieved were worth only passing consideration.

Five years later, Jonson offered Arthur another explanation of the specific importance of the airbrush to his work that was clearer and more consistent, and which essentially expanded on what he had stated earlier:

> I use the airbrush for with it I can get down in the way I desire certain fast arriving and spontaneous combustions of color–space–line and design. I have thought the integration of idea and these constituted form. But it is a new concept of form. With this means I have almost made a complete release. [from representational imagery?] Perhaps if and when I do make a complete one the means will be thrown away. I do not know. All I know is that I work like mad hoping to be able to set in motion these magnificent ravings pertaining to order. They are the sunshine in the present blackness of destruction and hate. [the global crises of the 1930s and 1940s] They are love and hope. But this is not what I was going to say at the moment. One might as well disagree with the use of the bristle brush because it has been used in doing so much bad painting. I feel that it is not the kind of brush that is used that is important but rather the idea and feeling and the way in which the particular brush is used to carry them out–that is the idea and feeling. Some of my best oils are painted with a rag. That too I suppose should be condemned. But it seems to me that if one is bright enough to find ways and means of projecting the flood of ideas that come and if those results point in the right direction as for as those ideas are concerned we should be open minded to accept the methods.... . There is practically no difference in watercolor and tempera. They both are water mediums. Both can be handled the same. Watercolor can look like tempera and tempera like watercolor.... . If the difference in concept, the feeling in each and the difference in space were missed, I think it matters little whether they were done with the airbrush, the fingers, rags, or flat or round brushes.[28]

Although declaring that differences in technique mattered little to him, Jonson revealed that the airbrush was extremely useful because he could work rapidly when filling in large areas of color. He felt that the airbrush was able to keep pace with his spiritual vision, and that is

---

[28]Jonson to Arthur, February 7, 1944, RJ 1: 643.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

why he chose to use it. By the early 1940s, Jonson had come to feel that watercolor and casein tempera applied with the airbrush had led to his most spiritually evocative paintings of his career. Jonson realized this at the time. In 1941 he stated that after years of experimentation he had finally become more comfortable with watercolor than with oil paint. As he wrote to Rudhyar: "Realizing that up to four years ago I was an oil painter and now I feel more at home with watercolor throws an interesting sidelight on what can happen. I feel more at home in the very fluid medium now whereas before it was almost useless for me."[29] Jonson's use of watercolor was inextricably connected to his use of the airbrush, and by the early 1940s he also realized that he had become very proficient with the tool. He told Arthur in 1941 that "I know it [the airbrush] now as a flexible medium."[30]

Jonson's absolute painting was most strongly influenced by the highly geometric, precisely linear paintings Kandinsky made while he was in Germany teaching at the Bauhaus from 1921 to 1933. Kandinsky's paintings from these years usually feature precisely contoured, intricately defined geometric shapes of diverse colors and tones, with forms of many different sizes carefully arranged and juxtaposed.[31] They were influenced by the Suprematist and Constructivist painting of Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Ivan Kliun, and others. Kandinsky had become familiar with this highly linear and geometric painting while living in Moscow during the political upheaval in Russia during and after World War I that

---

[29]Jonson to Rudhyar, June 28, 1941, RJ 4: 2736.

[30]Jonson to Arthur, August 24,1941, RJ 1: 607.

[31]Clark V. Poling, *Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years, 1915-1933* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1983): 13-21. This catalogue and its lengthy essay by Poling are the most thorough study to date of Kandinsky's post-World War I, Bauhaus-era paintings and theories on abstract art.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

led to the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.[32] Kandinsky's paintings from these years are very different from the more painterly, gestural, and loosely rendered abstractions he made in Munich before World War I, when he was part of the Blaue Reiter.

By the late 1930s, as Jonson embraced totally non-representational imagery, he had come to benefit from all that Kandinsky had been exposed to during the Soviet Revolution and his twelve years at the Bauhaus, from the many developments of Constructivist and Bauhaus painting that Kandinsky had seen and then adopted and assimilated into his own painting. Like Kandinsky, Jonson would adopt, discard, assimilate and transform things that he encountered in this new geometric abstraction in a very selective, personal, intuitive manner. Kandinsky and Jonson both responded enthusiastically to the new geometric abstraction of others while still upholding the goals and ideals of an art of spiritual power and utopian promise that transcended the technological and industrial era which had motivated and generated so much of the geometric abstraction that they found inspirational.

Jonson's absolute paintings were also greatly influenced by Kandinsky's theories, particularly those espoused in his major writings *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* of 1912 and *Point and Line to Plane* of 1926. Many of Jonson's absolute paintings suggest that the influence of Kandinsky's theoretical writings was greater than that of his paintings; this is apparent because some of Jonson's absolute paintings seem to follow Kandinsky's writings closely and carefully. Jonson seems to have learned broad lessons from Kandinsky as to the use of pure design–of line, shape, color, texture, arrangement of components, and the like–for the creation of spiritually evocative images without references or traces of the

---

[32]Poling, *Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years, 1915–1933*: 20-36.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

natural, physical world. Kandinsky's Bauhaus-era paintings demonstrated the possibilities of purely non-representational, geometric imagery as a means of attaining spiritual fulfillment and expression. Whereas *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* contained a lengthy section on the expressive and spiritual possibilities of color, *Point and Line to Plane* was a lengthy discussion of the expressive possibilities of points, lines, shapes and the arrangement of such components in a two-dimensional composition. The latter treatise was somewhat a sequel to the former, expanding and developing Kandinsky's theories of visual design.[33]

Jonson is known to have read the English translation of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in the summer of 1921, shortly after his second visit to the Eddy collection. It is not known when or even if he read *Point and Line to Plane*. Kandinsky wrote and published this second major theoretical treatise in 1926, while he was teaching at the Bauhaus, but it was not translated into English until 1947. Therefore, Jonson probably could not have read it until then and it is not known if he ever did.[34] However, it is very likely that Jonson was aware of many of the ideas and illustrations in the book by 1938 if not earlier, through his friend Charles Morris and perhaps other sources as well. Morris stated in the detailed outline for a book on Jonson that he was planning in 1938, but which was never written, that he intended to discuss Jonson's work in connection with Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual*

---

[33]Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 524-525.

[34]Levin and Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation*: 96. Little is known of Jonson's knowledge of various foreign languages. Since his parents were Swedish immigrants and his collection of newspaper clippings about his art include several articles from Swedish and Scandinavian publications of the early twentieth century, it is quite possible that he spoke and read Swedish. However, it is not known if he had any knowledge of German.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in Art and *Point and Line to Plane*.[35] Since a copy of the outline for this book was sent to Jonson by Morris in September 1938, Jonson must have been familiar with the ideas of *Point and Line to Plane* by then if not earlier, even if he could not read the book himself. Considering that Morris was one of Jonson's closest friends for many years, and that he had personal access to Jonson which would have been especially useful in writing the book that never came to be, it seems that Morris' intention to analyze Jonson's paintings by relating them to Kandinsky's major writings is quite insightful and revealing. It suggests that relating Kandinsky's theories to Jonson's works is a valid, promising method of studying the meaning and effect of Jonson's paintings, one Jonson might have approved of and supported. There are no letters from Jonson to Morris rejecting his plans for this book and his intended approach to analyzing Jonson's work. Connections between Jonson's absolute paintings and the works and theories of Kandinsky will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, as Jonson's non-representational paintings from the late 1930s to around 1950 are examined.

The most important source through which Jonson became familiar with Kandinsky's geometric, Bauhaus-era paintings appears to have been the works exhibited and collected by Galka Scheyer, the art patron, collector and promoter who created the Blue Four in 1924 as a means of publicizing the work of Kandinsky, Klee, Alexei von Jawlensky and Lyonel Feininger in America.[36] The Blue Four was not so much an artistic movement as a publicity

---

[35]Morris to Jonson, September 15, 1938, RJ 3: 2324. This letter included an outline prepared by Morris for a book on Jonson that he intended to write but which, for reasons still unknown, he never did..

[36]The most recent and thorough study of the Blue Four and Galka Scheyer's activities as a collector, patron and promoter of modernist art is Vivian Endicott Barnett and Josef Helfenstein, eds., *The Blue Four: Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, and Klee in the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tool; although reminiscent of the Blaue Reiter, it existed to make the four artists that it grouped together better known in the United States. Jonson saw works by Kandinsky in the exhibition of the Blue Four held at the Arts Club of Chicago and in another exhibit in New York City (that was not part of the Blue Four) during his trip to Chicago and New York in 1931 to 1932. He was impressed and intrigued by the exhibits, and seems to have paid more attention to the works by Kandinsky than those by the other members of the Blue Four. At the time, he wrote to Arthur: "There is one exciting item in the way of exhibitions in New York that I know of and that is the exhibition of the work of Kandinsky. I saw some of Madame Scheyer's collection at the Arts Club in Chicago and in it were some of Kandinsky's."[37]

Jonson met Scheyer in 1925 when she and Angelika Archipenko, the wife of sculptor Alexander Archipenko, visited Santa Fe as they were traveling across the United States from New York to Los Angeles. The two women were supposed to meet an unidentified acquaintance of their friend the collector J. B. Neumann, but they were unable to locate him. They eventually met and spent the day with Jonson.[38] Jonson saw Scheyer again in 1940

---

[37]Jonson to Arthur, December 6, 1932, RJ 1: 401. Jonson does not identify the New York City exhibit by name or gallery in this letter.

[38]Christina Houstian, "Minister, Kindermädchen, Little Friend: Galka Scheyer and *The Blue Four*," in Vivian Endicott Barnett and Josef Helfenstein, eds., *The Blue Four: Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, and Klee in the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 42; Angelika Archipenko to Jonson, 1925, RJ 5: 3624. Houstian says that surviving documents indicate Scheyer and Archipenko spent a day in Santa Fe with an artist known only as "Johnson," and she thinks this artist may be Jonson. She does not explain how she reached this conclusion. It appears that she reached it only by the similarity of the surnames and the confusion between "Johnson" and Jonson that occurred often with the unusual spelling and pronunciation of Jonson's surname. However, a letter in the Raymond Jonson Papers proves that Angelika Archipenko spent a day with Jonson in Santa Fe in 1925 when she and Scheyer were traveling across the country.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

when she was visiting New Mexico. At the time they discussed plans for an exhibit of Jonson's work to be held in California, but the proposed exhibit never materialized.[39] Jonson's written comments about this visit suggest that Scheyer knew Jonson and his work for some time, and it was only recently that she had come to like his work. It seems possible that Scheyer had come to admire Jonson's work by 1940 because his recent work reflected the influence of Kandinsky's Bauhaus-era paintings, including the sprayed watercolors that she exhibited in Chicago in 1932, works Jonson is known to have seen. Jonson wrote the following to Arthur about his meeting with Scheyer in 1940:

> One interesting thing that has happened this fall is that Madam Galka Scheyer has been here and at last she is in favor of what I am doing. This means much to me for I feel she knows what its [sic] all about. She is responsible to a great extent for the Blue Four being known in this country. She has a good collection of their works and has in her possession a great number loaned for her activity in exhibiting and lecturing.[40]

The 1932 Chicago exhibit of the Blue Four held at the Arts Club of Chicago had a profound but delayed impact on Jonson, for his absolute paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s include several works which are similar to Bauhaus-era paintings by Kandinsky which were exhibited at the Arts Club in 1932. Among these works by Kandinsky that are similar to Jonson's absolute paintings are *Circles within a Circle* [Plate 84], *Emotions* [Plate 80], *Out of Cool Depths* [Plate 81], and *Into the Dark.* [Plate 82] Jonson was familiar with *Circles within a Circle*, one of Kandinsky's best-known Bauhaus-era paintings, by the mid-1930s. In 1935 Vera gave Jonson a copy of the January 1, 1935 issue of *Axis*, which featured

---

[39]Jonson to Arthur, October 23, 1940, RJ 1: 589.
[40]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

an article on Kandinsky that included a reproduction of *Circles within a Circle*.[41] Jonson probably saw the painting when he and Vera visited Walter Arensberg during a trip to California in December 1935 to January 1936, for Arensberg bought the painting from Scheyer in 1931 and still owned it when the Jonsons visited.[42]

Jonson eventually came to see his abstract painting as the continuation and development of what Kandinsky pursued in his art. This is evident in the dialogue between Jonson and Arthur established in two letters of 1955. In a letter to Jonson written on July 15, Arthur was critical of Kandinsky's paintings for their clutter and unfocused quality:

> My feeling in many of the Kandinsky works is a surfeit of detail–I mean too many lines, darts, arrows, etc., etc.... . For me the effect has been the opposite of cogent and has often seemed fussy rather than precise....the individual shapes seemed to fail to function of themselves and often not in relationship to each other. Of course, of necessity, these reactions were based on photographs of the works. But certainly some of these things are very beautiful and it is in a way almost amusing that sometimes they seem to have a definite atmosphere, in which the forms exist, which even in the very "flat" works gives a sort of depth dimension.[43]

A few days later Jonson wrote back to Arthur, admitting he held a similar opinion of Kandinsky's work while respecting his importance to modernist painting. In this letter, he claimed that he saw himself as a painter of the non-representational who continued to build and expand on what Kandinsky had pioneered:

> I must comment on your statement regarding Kandinsky. Very good. It's the best analysis I have seen and I believe pretty much correct. You might be amused to know that I have always admired Kandinsky and consider him one of the greatest innovators in painting. Nevertheless I have come to feel that what he gave us can be extended. And in a way that is my intention. Not that

---

[41]Levin and Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation*: 113.
[42]Ibid.
[43]Arthur to Jonson, July 15, 1954, RJ 2: 825.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> I hope to improve on the work of K but rather to start where he left off. I believe that is one reason why much of my work is extremely simple, and why I have attempted to project a dynamic design.[44]

This mildly critical view of Kandinsky is unique in Jonson's comments about the earlier artist. Jonson avoided laying claim to being superior to or more innovative than the pioneers of abstraction whom he admired, but ten years after Kandinsky's death he seems to have felt that he had assumed a more prominent role in abstract painting that visualized the spiritual and led humanity to a higher, utopian state of existence. Now that most of the pioneering abstractionists were deceased, the responsibility of continuing their mission fell to a new generation of artists that included Jonson. Jonson's concept of his artistic relationship to Kandinsky as articulated in these letters exchanged with Arthur helps to explain his ambivalent, complex stylistic debt to the older Russian abstractionist. Jonson's absolute paintings feature clarity of individual forms that is considerably different from most of Kandinsky's abstract paintings in all media from throughout his career. Jonson's absolute paintings are most similar to those paintings by Kandinsky in which forms are extremely clear in their contours and specific in their compositional relationships.

As Jonson first created absolute paintings, he may have learned one specific thing from Kandinsky's work that was of great importance to the effectiveness of his own paintings–the evocative possibilities of transparent and translucent forms. This quality is seen in many of Jonson's paintings from before the turning point of 1938, but Kandinsky's works and theories were of great importance to Jonson in further developing it. This was an essential quality in Jonson's absolute paintings, and it was a quality that Arthur detected and

---

[44]Jonson to Arthur, July 18, 1954, RJ 2: 826.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

claimed was traceable in Jonson's painting back to some of his earliest paintings from before World War I. He explained his thinking when he wrote to Jonson:

> We hung "The Ring of Smoke" because it is such a happy, exuberant sort of work with its swirling steam and smoke, it's [sic] glorification of color and that fast, "Impressionistic" look–a moment caught and fixed forever, and yet, due to the way structures rise in the mists and all that, there is also a quality of mystery to it. And it's lots of fun to get up close to it and see how this dab of color and that dab of color resolve into people and objects. You know, even then, completely unlike the later work though it is, you already were showing an interest in that movement of one "plane" across another–what happens when one sphere, blue, crosses another sphere, green; only then it was, what happens when a swirl of stroke crosses a red building or a yellow building, etc.... .[45]

Many paintings by Kandinsky executed in oil and watercolor throughout his years at the Bauhaus feature overlapping transparent forms–one geometric shape is discernable behind another even though each one is clearly and distinctly contoured. The numerous, tightly clustered circles of various hues in *Circles in a Circle* [Plate 84] overlap and some are deliberately rendered with slightly muted tones to suggest that they are closer than the others. Two long, diagonal forms of pale colors streak across the canvas, suggesting beams of colored light. It is important to remember that Jonson probably saw this work both in reproduction and in person by the mid-1930s. The center of *In Blue* [Plate 68] features several quadrilaterals of red, blue and black which overlap one another. They are made to appear transparent, for the colors of these trapezoidal forms vary in tone and brightness as they overlap neighboring forms. Hence, the blue trapezoid in this painting changes from one light shade of blue to dark blue to yet another light shade of blue as it is veiled by a larger cadmium red trapezoid. The vertical orange bar and the much smaller horizontal black bar

---

[45]Arthur to Jonson, July 9, 1954, RJ 2: 823.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that cross it are changed by neighboring, overlapping forms. The same effect is achieved much more simply in *Arch and Point* [Plate 85], in which the yellow circle on the left becomes green as it overlaps the triangular blue form. Kandinsky's *Composition VIII* [Plate 86] features many small transparent and translucent circles and sections of overlapping checkerboard patterns.

Effects of transparency are evident in some of the airbrushed watercolors Kandinsky produced during his years at the Bauhaus. *Towards Green* of 1928 [Plate 87] features three beige semi-circles that gradually become darker in tone as they rise toward the large white circle inside of which two non-concentric circles of dark gray have been placed slightly to the left. The semi-circular beige forms slightly overlap one another and the circles that occupy the upper half of the composition. These forms have been rendered so transparently that the semi-circles can still be seen; they appear to be only gently veiled. Likewise, the gray circles above them are sufficiently transparent, in spite of their dark tones, to allow them to be seen through one another. *Out of Cool Depths* [Plate 81], which Jonson is known to have seen, features various rectangles, triangles, and truncated circular forms floating in a meandering, diagonal path across the resonating, mysterious space created by a background of various tones of vivid and darkened crimson airbrushed onto the board. Many of these forms overlap, and some are rendered so transparently as to be discernable behind seemingly closer, more opaque and tangible forms.

By the late 1930s, as Jonson made the leap to absolute painting, he became familiar with the geometric abstractions painted by artists other than Kandinsky who were also associated with the Bauhaus. It was around this time that Jonson came to know Albers and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Moholy-Nagy, two of the leading figures of the Bauhaus who had emigrated to the United States in the mid-1930s. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Jonson corresponded with Albers regularly over many years beginning in 1937. Jonson spent several weeks in Chicago in late 1937 and early 1938. He went to Chicago to accompany an exhibit of his recent work that was held at the Katherine Kuh Gallery in January 1938 and to visit numerous old friends, including Morris.[46] Jonson met Moholy-Nagy in Chicago in late 1937 and saw some of his works during that visit.[47] Jonson's friend Charles Morris taught at the University of Chicago and the Chicago Bauhaus in the late 1930s and 1940s. At the Chicago Bauhaus Morris taught philosophy and helped supervise the liberal arts curriculum.[48] Morris kept Jonson informed about the problems of the short-lived Chicago Bauhaus and some of the activities of Moholy-Nagy at this time through the many letters that he wrote to Jonson.[49] Jonson's awareness of the happenings at the Chicago Bauhaus were also sustained by his correspondence with his friend and former student Mary-Lou Eckart, who lived in Chicago for many years and also knew Morris and Moholy-Nagy.[50]

---

[46]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 180.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lizzitsky and Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1944* (Chicago: Univesity of Chicago Press, 1997): 222-223.

[49]Morris mentioned Moholy-Nagy numerous times in letters written to Jonson in 1937 and 1938. These letters discuss their meetings and dinners, Moholy-Nagy's concerns for the Chicago Bauhaus, and various other matters, but they never go into depth. See the Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, reels RJ 3 and RJ 4.

[50]Jonson to Morris, February 5, 1938, RJ 3: 2305. Shortly after he returned to New Mexico, Jonson mentioned in a letter to Morris that he should give his "sincere regards to all the friends–Moholy, Carl [Eckart]... ." Obviously, Moholy-Nagy made a favorable personal impression on Jonson. Carl Eckart was Edee-Lou's husband.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The works by various geometric abstractionists from Europe that Jonson saw during this trip to Chicago had a profound impact on his artistic direction. Jonson came to feel that his own work was somewhat backward and that a purely abstract, highly geometric way of painting was desirable, yet none of the work he saw seemed completely suitable to his own artistic temperament and purpose. Although it seemed to be the appropriate and desirable direction for his own abstract painting to take, he still felt that purely geometric and linear abstraction seemed lacking in emotion, personal identity and spirituality. He needed to modify it as he pursued it in order to make it suitable for him. Jonson made this clear in some of his letters from the time of his trip to Chicago and New York, shortly after he had seen the work of these European geometric abstractionists. In December 1937, during his stay in Chicago, he wrote to Vera, saying:

> I am getting much from this trip. I hope to feel that a fresh impulse will result. The geometrical painters such as Albers, Moholy-Nagy, Helion, [sic] etc. have gone so much farther in the purity of form that my exhibit will probably look a little academic! But I do not quite agree with the geometrical approach and feel confident that my own can go farther in the end than the other. But at present....it is farther along the path than the thing I am after."[51]

In the following month, shortly after he left Chicago, Jonson wrote to Morris: "There is a great deal in geometrical painting but I am not satisfied with what I have seen. It is and can be more than we have seen. The great field is other than emotional-less arrangement. I do not mean that as a dirty dig--I am only trying to say that I think I see further."[52]

---

[51]Jonson to Vera, December 14, 1937, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 180.

[52]Jonson to Morris, January 18, 1938, RJ 4: 2302.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Since Moholy-Nagy epitomizes the synthesis of the aesthetics, philosophies and ideals of the Bauhaus and Constructivism in Germany, central Europe and the Soviet Union, and since he made paintings, constructed sculptures of metal, glass, and plastic, and worked in photography, he could have been a fountain of ideas and possibilities for the more isolated and provincial Jonson. However, very little is known as to what Jonson learned from Moholy-Nagy as a result of meeting him in Chicago.[53] There are noteworthy similarities between Jonson's paintings of the late 1930s and Moholy-Nagy's paintings of the mid-1920s which are surely more than coincidental. In the mid-1920s, Moholy-Nagy created numerous geometrically non-representational paintings that feature smooth surfaces, crisply outlined and mechanical forms, and the dynamic interplay of variously colored, sometimes floating forms that reveal no references to the physical, natural world.[54] Moholy-Nagy did not give these paintings suggestive and descriptive titles, preferring instead to give them identifying labels consisting of combinations of alphabet letters and numerals, and often including the word "construction" in the titles.[55] Many of these works are similar to Jonson's earliest absolute paintings, particularly several works done in 1938. Shortly after the trip to Chicago, Jonson made a rapid transformation in style and adopted the new practice of titling his works generically. It seems possible, even likely, that Jonson was inspired to make these drastic changes in his work by his contact with Moholy-Nagy. The closeness in time between Jonson's trip to Chicago and these changes in his work is surely more than coincidental. It

---

[53]In spite of Jonson's apparent fondness for Moholy-Nagy, their friendship was not sustained and apparently they did not correspond after this meeting. Furthermore, Jonson apparently wrote nothing about what works by Moholy-Nagy he saw in Chicago.

[54]Kristina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985): 52-53.

[55]Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*: 60-62.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

is possible that the combined influence of the Bauhaus-era paintings of Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy's geometric abstractions of the mid-1920s had a sudden, cumulative effect on Jonson's painting at this time. Although Kandinsky had the greater, enduring influence, both in his works and his theories, the Chicago Bauhaus and Moholy-Nagy provided the sudden impetus needed for Jonson's embrace of the completely non-representational. It is also noteworthy that Jonson's first absolute paintings of 1938 are the most severely geometric and linear of his career, which suggests that the very precise, linear geometry typical of painting in the Bauhaus was indeed a sudden, intense inspiration. After Jonson had thoroughly explored these influences, he modified them to better suit his own artistic needs.

Jonson was aware of the new direction his painting had suddenly taken in 1938 but he apparently perceived it as the renewal of experiments from two years earlier, not as the result of his recent visit to Chicago and encounter with the Chicago Bauhaus. When Jonson wrote to Morris in the summer of 1938 about his most recent work, he acknowledged the new development of the complete break with the representational and briefly described the geometric, linear and precise character of his recent paintings without relating them to Kandinsky, the Bauhaus or Moholy-Nagy. He wrote:

> Some of the works are indeed thrilling. I have as you may have guessed been experimenting with a kind of geometrical approach. This seems at present the natural continuation as far as what I was doing 2 years ago is concerned. Where it will lead to I do not know. But as the ideas and emotions come so must they be done. I have no theory regarding it except that. The more I work the more satisfying it becomes in that I feel I am able to see into the plastic meaning of concept in the direction of composition and space and light.... .[56]

---

[56]Jonson to Morris, July 28,1938, RJ 3: 2314.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In referring to his earlier work in the above-quoted letter, Jonson may be referring to his *Spiral Trilogy* of 1936, which certainly anticipates his completely non-representational paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s and which was done two years. However, he may also be referring to his *Cosmic Theme* series or his *Synthesis* series of the late 1930s.

Jonson believed that absolute painting involved a completely new visual vocabulary, one that had equivalents to the traditional visual vocabulary of representational painting. In his 1938 lecture "What Is the Purpose of Abstract Art?," he explained the differences (which may be considered the correspondences) between traditional painting and abstract or non-representational painting. He explained that instead of perspective there is now space, instead of atmosphere there are now planes, instead of recognizable objects there are now forms, and instead of chiaroscuro there are now light and darkness. He went into more detail, adding that instead of the local colors of objects there is now color in new combinations that he described as "arbitrary," by which he presumably meant that they were produced for pictorial and spiritual effectiveness and not to reproduce recognizable objects. He also noted that instead of light shining on objects there is now light for its own sake, light which often seems to come from everywhere and nowhere in particular in a painting. He also observed that instead of the imitation of the textures of real objects there is now the texture of the media used, which is the result of how they have been applied to the canvas, board or paper. These equivalents were the visual manifestations of the new way of perceiving and understanding the world in the modern era.[57]

---

[57]These equivalents between traditional painting and abstract painting were enumerated by Jonson in "What Is the Role of Abstract Art?," p. 2, RJ 8: 6277.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson developed specific, idiosyncratic theories on the use of line, shape, space, depth, color and texture, and these theories would be used in many of his absolute paintings. As will be demonstrated throughout the next chapter, Jonson's carefully devised theoretical basis for visual design and painting techniques became integral to the success and failure of his absolute paintings as he sought to convey spiritual experiences and states of mind in his absolute paintings. Not every work by Jonson demonstrates or exemplifies these theories, but understanding them is useful in coming to terms with any sense of meaning to be found in Jonson's absolute art. Jonson believed that in non-representational painting, or "absolute painting" if he was referring to his own work, design was fundamental and structural, not secondary and decorative; an image evolved from its pictorial design and was not embellished with it. Jonson's new visual "vocabulary," which was based on the complete conversion to the non-representational imagery in both theory and practice, was founded on a set of predetermined theories of design that were used often and in subtle, diverse ways. Although Jonson codified his ideas by the late 1940s, which is known because of the surviving texts to various lectures and the lecture notes to a course in art appreciation that he taught in the fall of 1948, he must have developed these ideas years earlier, most likely in the mid- to late-1930s as he made the leap to absolute painting.

The foundation for many of Jonson's ideas on visual design as applied to spiritually evocative abstraction can be traced to the writings of the mystic, spiritualist, astrologer, writer and philosopher Dane Rudhyar, in particular his unpublished manuscript "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," which was written in the fall of 1938, shortly after

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the TPG was established.[58] Rudhyar proposed that there were three basic types of symbolism: the psychological or personal, the cultural or traditional (that which came from one's racial, ethnic, religious, historical, and social origins and would include religious iconography, themes in folklore, and myths and legends), and the universal. In contrast to personal or psychological symbolism and cultural or traditional symbolism, Rudhyar saw universal symbolism as the highest and purest, the closest to a universally intelligible means of communication and the truest and most appropriate in attaining the spiritual in art because it encompasses and expands on the other two. According to Rudhyar, geometric symbolism was a type of universal symbolism that was truly of the highest order intellectually and spiritually. For Jonson, it meant achieving an art that was, as he termed it, "absolute." As Rudhyar explained:

> To these two types of symbolism we should add moreover a third: universal symbols, which are related to the common inner and outer experience of the human race [i.e., the other two types of symbolism] as a whole and which constitutes the deepest layer of the Collective Unconscious. To this type of symbol belong all basic instinctive symbolism. For instance solar and lunar symbols, sex and mating symbols, storm and crops symbols, sea and mountains symbols, etc. Such symbols are parts of the common experience of the human race as a whole and are usually intelligible by everyone who is open to the deeper realms of the Unconscious and not crystallized within the narrow frame of modern intellectual materialism.
>
> To such universal nature-symbolism one should add a higher or more mental type of symbol, also universally valid: geometrical symbolism. Each of the basic geometrical forms–dot, line, circle, square, up and down-pointing triangles, cubes, spiral, etc.–have very real emotional and spiritual significance beyond any personal theorizing. Every sincere person,

---

[58]Rudhyar's manuscript for this book was never published and existed only in handwritten form until it was transcribed to typed text by Ruth Pasquine, Ph.D., in 1997. The quotes and page numbers cited from this unpublished manuscript are taken from Pasquine's typed manuscript, a copy of which was graciously provided to the author shortly after it was transcribed.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> functioning mentally at the abstract level and open to vital depths of being, will agree fundamentally on the broad meaning of such geometrical figures–once he is made to think about and feel them. Why "made to?" Because human beings are very inert by nature and they have been satisfied for countless millennia to deal with natural or physiological [biological, organic] symbolism. Thus they need to make an effort of concentration in order to reach the level of geometrical symbolism....to become aware of and experience the vital, organic meaning–releasing reality of these "building stones" of the psycho-mental nature of man.[59]

Geometric imagery evoking forces in the physical world, life and death, growth and contraction, movement through space, the structure and order of the cosmos, and so on appear often in Jonson's absolute paintings and are discussed frequently and at length in Rudhyar's unpublished manuscript. At the time this manuscript was written, the TPG was newly established and its members in closer contact than ever, so it is likely that these complex philosophical, mystical, spiritual ideas were discussed by Jonson, his fellow artists who belonged to the TPG, and Rudhyar and his fellow writer and spiritualist Alfred Morang.

Jonson's concept of the possibilities of line for its own sake or in the creation of shapes and forms was founded on the assumption that endless variety could be achieved by employing basic types of lines and shapes that are geometric and biomorphic, types which he believed originated in prehistoric and tribal art forms. In developing this theory, apparently by the mid-1940s, he was particularly influenced by the ideas of the Mexican painter Adolfo Best Maugard as explained in his 1926 book *A Method for Creative Design*.[60]

---

[59]Dane Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," October–November 1938, transcript p. 39, unpublished manuscript for a book in the Dane Rudhyar Papers in the Library of Syracuse University. Underlining is Rudhyar's.

[60]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 1) for October 20, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6246.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Ironically, Maugard's ideas were influenced by Jay Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, so whether he realized it or not, by following and teaching Maugard's ideas, Jonson had indirectly returned to Hambidge's theories twenty years after he had experimented with them.[61] Jonson's explanation of the basic types of lines that had origins in early human culture involved the use of Jungian terms such as "archetypal" and "primitive."[62] Jonson outlined seven basic types of line as follows:

The spiral: possibly derived from the snail shell, whirlpool, etc.

The circle: sun, surface of still water into which a stone has been thrown, etc.

Half circle: rainbow, crescent moon, etc.

Two half circles joined in the shape of an S: flames, etc.

Wavy line: wavy hair, worms, etc.

Straight line: Horizon line of oceans, mesa tops, etc.

Zigzag line: lightning, mountain peaks, etc.[63]

---

[61]Ruth Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption: Dynamic Symmetry, Theosophy, and Swedenborgianism in the Art of Emil Bisttram (1895-1976)" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York: Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 2000): 228-231. Pasquine's dissertation offers the most thorough explanation of Best-Maugard's theories of visual design.

[62]Rudhyar's discussion of symbolism in transcendental painting brings up the contribution of Jung's theory of the collective subconscious several times. [Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," pp. 14-15, 30, 42] Rudhyar wrote: "Only the mind that is rooted in the depth of the Collective Unconscious and that is at ease in the realm of Ideas and Symbols born of life itself and forever energized by the universal experience of human beings–only such a mind can 'go through' the crystallization of the intellect and of the academic tradition, and give birth to really transcendental art." [Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," pp. 14-15]

[63]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 2) for October 20,1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6246.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

From these seven basic types of lines Jonson believed an infinite variety of shapes could be developed; from basic geometric forms such as the cone, sphere, cylinder, pyramid, and cube could come more complicated forms, some of which he described as "ellipsoid" and "deformed ellipsoid." For Jonson, the geometric forms could be changed in many ways, while the more complicated forms such as the "ellipsoids" he mentioned could be developed into countless possibilities. Jonson's ideas parallel Rudhyar's claim in "The Transcendental Movement in Painting" that more complex geometric forms are appropriate in our more advanced, complicated, and technological era. As Rudhyar wrote: "Today the most advanced minds of the race apprehend a continuum, a constantly self-transcending life-process. Our geometry has moved from squares to parabolas and spirals; our mathematics, from numbers to functions."[64] Jonson's theory of line and shape was a means of achieving pictorial order, which was essential to achieving the spiritual in painting. He is quoted in his lecture notes as having said "It is in the structural totality of lines, shapes and forms used that we can find a degree of order. The higher the degree [of order] the greater the work. It takes real intelligence to put together all these lines, shapes and forms with good taste and in a convincing and emotional way."[65] The seven types of line that Jonson described in his lecture notes appear often as the dominant motifs in his absolute paintings.

Jonson's concept of space in painting categorized the handling of two-dimensional space and the illusion of three-dimensional space according to space projecting inward or

---

[64]Dane Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," p. 5.

[65]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 2) for October 20, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6246.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

away from the viewer, space on the painting surface, and space projecting outward toward the viewer. According to his theory, space projecting away from the viewer was the most traditional and common handling of space in painting, for it had been a basic concern of representational painting since the Renaissance and the development of linear and atmospheric perspective. Space on the surface was a difficult effect to achieve because certain shapes and colors are naturally inclined to suggest depth, to seem closer to or farther from the viewer than others. However, he believed that counteracting this effect and achieving complete flatness of forms in the composition could be very useful in absolute painting. By becoming perfectly flat, a design would be profoundly non-illusionistic. Jonson is quoted in his lecture notes as saying:

> The desire nevertheless is to avoid deep space, and in so doing the painter at least aims toward arriving at a spatial character that is dominantly 2 dimensional. I believe it is with absolute painting that this intention comes nearest to reaching its goal..... The intention here is primarily that of <u>not</u> using arbitrary or forced means of dictating a movement into deep space or setting up 3 dimensional forms. In other words it aims at avoiding the 3 dimensional objectivity of our physical world. For the observer who can react to this type of painted space an added emotional impact can be experienced.[66]

The third aspect of space according to Jonson was space projecting outward, and this was the most uncommon effect of space in painting because it was the most difficult to achieve. Jonson stated in his lecture notes:

> To set planes, color and movements in or on this space in such a way that they have the appearance of being suspended in this space and advancing out of it toward one [the viewer] becomes even more exciting. I believe this

---

[66] Jonson's lecture notes (p. 3) for October 27, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6249. Underlining is Jonson's.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> aspect of space is in its infancy but have hopes for its maturity some day. To me it is legitimate in its relationship to the contemporary idiom of form. [abstract or non-representational painting?] It is another means pertaining to the concepts in absolute painting.[67]

Depth and space were very important issues for Jonson's absolute painting, because his geometric abstraction depended greatly on effects of transparency and translucency, which immediately involve the perception of space, depth, light and color. Several of Jonson's paintings from the late 1930s and early 1940s are obviously experiments in creating these different types of space.

Jonson's theory of color harmony and arrangement was based on a tripartite division of the use of color according to what he described as "brilliant," "tonal" and "dissonant." He believed it was possible for these three uses of color to co-exist in a given painting, that a painting could be successfully created by combining two or all three methods of using color which comprised his theory of color for absolute painting. For Jonson, the "brilliant" meant colors that were vivid, rich and varied in hue. "Brilliant" paintings consist predominantly if not exclusively of pure, spectrum colors that are high in tone or value. He described brilliant colors as having "a feeling of transparency and lightness."[68] "Tonal" meant that one color in various shades dominated a painting and that it was created by adding black or complementary colors to make the dominant color darker and less intense or saturated. He

---

[67]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 4) for October 27, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6249.

[68]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 1) for October 13, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6244.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

described tonal colors as having "a feeling of density and weight."[69] Colors that were brilliant or tonal came in a wide variety and allowed for many different expressive and aesthetic possibilities.

The third basic way color could be used, according to Jonson, was a method he described as "dissonant." By this he meant "a kind of color relationship which is not an example of usual harmony but rather one which has a gentle kind of jolt, irritant or shock."[70] Dissonant color relationships could be achieved in numerous ways, and Jonson enumerated the following:

- 2 different colors along side of each other of the same value
- Strong colors touching each other and so placed and adjusted in tint or shade that they take on a vibratory effect
- Certain manipulated contacts of complements
- The use of neutralized or grayed colors with pure colors, but not in the usual way where typical harmony is the aim
- The placing of bands of color alternating them parallel in such a way that at a distance they become visually different colors
- Reversing the natural value of colors such as making a purple lighter than an orange against it
- The interruption of a sequence or gradation with a contrasting note or notes of color
- Certain uses of black in an environment of definite color.[71]

---

[69]Ibid.

[70]Jonson's lecture notes (p. 2) for October 13, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6244.

[71]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The common denominator in achieving dissonant relationships, according to Jonson, is that two areas or shapes of color must be adjacent, they must touch one another. He also felt that the overall arrangement of lines, shapes and forms (what he referred to in summary as "design") is inextricably tied to dissonant color effects.

Jonson's interest in dissonant color relationships became so great years before he wrote at length about his color theory that it led to the longest series of paintings he ever produced. The *Chromatic Contrasts* series grew haphazardly from 1935 to 1965 to include 35 works done in oil, watercolor and acrylic.[72] There is little stylistic continuity among the works in the series because of the long period of time over which they were done. Jonson explained the reason for painting this series in a letter to Arthur of 1937: "One important element in them is the attempt to establish a kind of dissonance in color. It is this dissonance that distinguishes them from the Figuration series. It is very exciting and in spite of the fact that I have not been able to go very far with the matter I do think it will some day be possible to realize it."[73] The *Chromatic Contrasts* series was begun with two paintings done in 1935 followed by four more in 1937, all of which were done in oil on canvas. These early works in the series are derivative of other works by Jonson during these years, including the *Figurations*. Some of them feature disorganized compositions and prominent two-dimensional shapes that are awkward and cumbersome. Many of the *Chromatic Contrasts* were done in the 1940s. Although only one painting in the series was done between 1938 and 1942, nine were done in 1943 and four in 1947. Jonson's interest in dissonant color

---

[72]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.
[73]Jonson to Arthur, October 25, 1937, RJ 1: 504-505.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

relationships resurfaced irregularly in the early 1950s; four paintings in the series were done in 1951, two in 1956, two in 1958, and, finally, four in 1965. Some of the works in the middle of the series were done in watercolor while the last in the series were done in acrylic. Since many of the *Chromatic Contrasts* are currently unlocated, examining their development as a series is not possible. Therefore, it is impossible to determine specifically when and in which work or works Jonson made this series aesthetically and spiritually effective.

Chromatic Contrasts Nos. 1 and *6*, done respectively in 1935 and 1937, demonstrate that Jonson achieved considerable variety in this series but that pictorial or spiritual effectiveness did not come quickly or easily with this group. *Chromatic Contrasts No. 1* is similar in its use of curvilinear forms to the *Figurations* that Jonson was making at the same time. However, the assortment of shapes and the relationships of color are neither cohesive nor focused. *Chromatic Contrasts No. 6* [Plate 88] is a patchwork-quilt array of colors which achieves limited evocation of the spiritual. It consists of four diaphanous, wavy planes, each plane featuring a checkered pattern of a dominant hue: green, brown, blue and red. The background is a cerulean blue with meandering red lines circling around the planes. Color-grid abstract patterns appear in numerous oils and watercolors by Paul Klee, and this work by Jonson is particularly similar to Klee's *Abstraction with Reference to the Flowering of a Tree* of 1925 [Plate 89] and *Blossoming* of 1934.[74] Color-grid abstract patterns also

---

[74]Carolyn Lanchner, ed., *Paul Klee: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987): 188-189, 192, 214-215, 241, 265, 269.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

appear in a few stained-glass assemblages done in the early 1920s by Josef Albers.[75] However, Jonson's painting is most similar to Kandinsky's *Square* [Plate 90], an oil on canvas of January 1927, and *Chequered*, a watercolor of December 1925 which is believed to be a preliminary sketch for *Square* because the two works are so similar to each other.[76] Although *Chromatic Contrasts No. 6* is similar to these works by Kandinsky, there is no evidence that Jonson ever saw them. These similarities seem more than coincidental since Jonson's work gradually became increasingly similar to Kandinsky's during the 1930s and Jonson greatly admired Kandinsky's work and ideas as early as 1921. These works by Jonson and Kandinsky take the color-grid pattern and twist and turn it around, so that it projects boldly through space. As spiritual or artistic statements, these two early paintings in the *Chromatic Contrasts* seem to fall short.

In 1938 Jonson and Rudhyar produced a series of drawings and watercolors symbolizing the twelve signs of the zodiac, with each drawing serving as the basis for the composition of the watercolor depicting the same zodiac sign. The works were done late in 1938 in a collaborative effort by the two men, with Rudhyar having made the drawings which Jonson then executed as watercolors.[77] In each, Jonson closely followed the composition of Rudhyar's drawing. Most of them are overtly symbolic of the zodiac signs.

---

[75]Nicholas Fox Weber, *Josef Albers: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1988): 105-106.

[76]Hans Roethel and Jean Benjamin, *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, 1916-1944.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994): 761; Vivian Endicott Barnett, *Kandinsky Watercolors: Catalogue Raisonné: 1922-1944* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994): 152.

[77]Robert C. Hay, "Dane Rudhyar and the Transcendental Painting Group of New Mexico, 1938-1941."(M.A. Thesis. University of Michigan): 80-81, 86-110.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Although not of much importance to Jonson's stylistic development, they reveal his continuous interest in the mystical and the supernatural as part of his pursuit of the spiritual in his art. Even as he had achieved "absolute painting," he could temporarily retreat to more literal, iconographic symbolism. Furthermore, themes of the cosmos had long been of interest to Jonson, and cosmic imagery appeared frequently in various ways in his absolute paintings. By depicting the signs of the zodiac in collaboration with Rudhyar, Jonson was, perhaps unintentionally, engaged in Theosophy, for the zodiac signs were essential to much Theosophical thinking. Spiritualists and Theosophists often relied on the zodiac in their writings, illustrations and discourse.[78] Furthermore, Rudhyar was known to be greatly interested in spiritualism, the occult, and Theosophy. Therefore, in this close collaboration shortly after the founding of the TPG and AFTP, it is likely Jonson was exposed to mystical and Theosophical thinking just as he embarked on absolute painting. Though Jonson's spiritualism remained private, intuitive and unverbalized, his awareness of these occult ideas cannot be dismissed as irrelevant.

Another intriguing case of Jonson working symbolically with Theosophical ideas and themes during the era of the TPG is the Maitreya symbol he painted for Charles Morris in 1941. In a letter of June 1941, Morris described what the Maitreya is, why he wanted Jonson to create a painting of it based on a drawing his daughter Sally had made, and what he wanted this image to include. He wrote:

> I inclose a little sketch (made by Sally) of what I call the Maitreyan symbol. Maitreya is the man-god of my new religion, representing the Maitreyan ideal

---

[78]Robert P. Welsh, "Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction," in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 63-64.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> of personality which I am presenting as the new ideal of man toward which we should struggle. I try to show that there have been six other ideals which men have followed (Christian, Buddhist, etc.) and that this ideal, while new, includes something of all these other six. The symbol aims to show this relation.[79]

Jonson quickly replied that he could create this design and that he felt the ideas behind it were in keeping with his own spiritualist ideas. He said that "it's a stunning design and naturally fits in with my own ideas."[80] Within two months, the project was completed and the work was delivered to Morris.[81]

Buddhist doctrine and concepts such as the Maitreya were very important to Theosophy. Blavatsky produced many diagrams for her book *Isis Unveiled* in which spiritualist doctrines were explained and integrated through the use of complex geometric diagrams. Numerous other spiritualists and Theosophists of the era also used diagrams to help explain their ideas.[82] Jonson's creation of the Maitreya image demonstrates that during the years of the TPG he was interested in and intrigued by the spiritualist and mystical ideas that were vital for many pioneer abstractionists and their followers. The zodiac illustrations and the Maitreyan symbol indicate that even as Jonson's paintings became completely non-representational, he was still capable of thinking in visually symbolic ways and that he could find artistic expression in the literal, theoretical spiritualism that in his writings and paintings he usually rejected.

---

[79]Morris to Jonson, June 28, 1941, RJ 4: 2398.

[80]Jonson to Morris, July 8, 1941, RJ 4: 2399.

[81]Jonson to Morris, September 6, 1941 and Morris to Jonson, September 16, 1941, RJ 4: 2400-2401.

[82]Welsh, "Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction": 63-65.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER SIX:

JONSON'S ABSOLUTE PAINTING, 1938–1950

Absolute painting constituted a long, prolific and complex phase in Jonson's career. Although it began in the second half of the 1930s, it had no definite conclusion, other than the end of Jonson's career in 1978. There is a complex stylistic unity in Jonson's abstract paintings. Some works done within short periods of time often look very different from one another, while other works done years apart are very similar. Jonson's awareness of Kandinsky's Bauhaus-era paintings and Moholy-Nagy's geometric abstractions of the mid-1920s along with the purely abstract formal vocabulary that he perfected in the1930s and early 1940s were the basis of his totally non-representational paintings. Certain motifs and compositional devices were repeated, often with impressive ingenuity and variety. These include overlapping and transparent geometric forms, zigzagging and curving lines independent of two-dimensional shapes, circular forms in various combinations and sizes that allude to the cosmos, deliberate and abrupt juxtapositions of individual forms, sensations of complete stasis or dynamic movement, vaguely defined background spaces, and suggestions of glowing, evocative light that fill broad areas of the picture plane. Consequently, moods of silence and noise, tranquility and excitement, peace and turmoil, and contentment and sadness are often conveyed by these works. The connection with the spiritual that Jonson and the TPG sought is something that is internal and non-verbal, seen and not told, felt and not explained. Absolute painting was a process of self-discovery and personal rejuvenation for Jonson; each painting was almost a shamanistic act of spiritual

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

enlightenment, understanding and healing.[1] Such a personal basis for creating each work motivated and justified diverse trends and developments and was often the cause of the apparently erratic and uneven pictorial quality of Jonson's work; not all attempts at the transcendental were successful.

In order to understand how the spiritual is communicated in Jonson's absolute paintings, the works and theories of Kandinsky, Jonson's own theories concerning visual design, and occasionally the theories of Mondrian must be considered and carefully applied to the interpretation of various works. This is why Jonson's own theories of the visual vocabulary of purely non-representational painting and the connections between his theories and Kandinsky's theories were discussed at length in the previous chapter. It is often helpful to compare Jonson's work to those of other abstractionists, particularly Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, and members of the TPG. Finally, understanding the spiritual in Jonson's work is sometimes possible if the philosophical environment in which Jonson painted is considered. The ideas of Dane Rudhyar, particularly those espoused in the unpublished treatise on transcendental painting written in 1938, are sometimes helpful. Since many of Jonson's works after the mid-1930s are currently unlocated and photographs of them have not survived, and there is little scholarship dealing with the second half of his long career, tracing Jonson's stylistic development is difficult and, at times, speculative.

The new stylistic trends that distinguish Jonson's absolute painting of the late 1930s to around 1950 from the rest of his career are evident as early as *Oil No. 1–1938.* [Plate 91] Considering that this work was done very early in 1938 and is far more geometrically

---

[1]Ed Garman interviewed by the author, January 8, 1999.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

abstract than any extant works from 1937, it may well be the first painting in the new highly geometric style, the very work that announced Jonson's new approach of the late 1930s. The focal point of the composition of *Oil No. 1–1938* is the small red circle in the upper middle from which wide triangular areas of tan, brown, dark cerulean blue and dark green emanate. As seen often in Jonson's earlier work, such as his *Time Cycle*, the volumetrically shaded circle appears to glow as a result of the shading of the red circle to a lighter tone toward its bottom and of the curving bands of lighter tones of the triangular areas of colors placed around the circle. On the left and right sides of this horizontally-oriented painting are long vertical rectangles of equal width and distance from the sides of the canvas. Each one has been carefully delineated by black lines. The rectangle on the left is filled in with deep, blended tones of red, purple, blue and green. The one on the right is filled in with tones of red, orange and yellow. Placed around the middle of the canvas are small horizontal and vertical rectangles, which overlap at right angles. These rectangles are colored with greens, light blues, grays and pale browns. A second small circle has been placed at the lower left. A thin wisp of what appears to be smoke runs across the bottom of the canvas. The glowing circles and triangular areas of luminous color are motifs seen often in Jonson's earlier paintings.

However, the rectangular forms placed in rigidly juxtaposed horizontal or vertical alignment are new. They have the quality of geometric forms floating in space that one might expect of Suprematist compositions of Malevich, the Prouns of El Lissitzky, and, closest of all, the geometrically abstract paintings made by Moholy-Nagy in the mid-1920s. The geometric forms in the center of Jonson's painting are quite similar to the overlapping

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

gray-toned parallelograms in Moholy-Nagy's *Composition A II* of 1924 [Plate 92] and *The Great Aluminum Picture (AL II)* of 1926.[2] [Plate 93] It is quite possible that Jonson saw some of these works (or at least reproductions of them) when he was in Chicago in 1937 to1938. Jonson supposedly owned some early exhibition catalogues that included Moholy-Nagy's work, and in these catalogues he may have seen these or similar works.[3] Of all the extant works by Jonson, there are none that look more like the paintings of Moholy-Nagy than this one. Since *Oil No. 1–1938* was painted shortly after Jonson's visit to Chicago in late 1937 and early 1938, the similarity is probably more than coincidental. Within months, Jonson realized that this strict geometry did not suit him, and so he modified his geometric approach, shifting away from that of his very first absolute paintings. The paintings of Moholy-Nagy from the mid-1920s may have been the impetus for Jonson's absolute painting, but Kandinsky's works and theories were of greater and more enduring influence.

The enormous variety and diversity in Jonson's absolute painting is demonstrated by comparing this oil painting to *Casein Tempera No. 3–1938* [Plate 94], which is much less geometric and linear, but more vividly and expressively colored. A large orange triangle and red trapezium, both of which seem to point downward, along with a smaller purple triangle

---

[2]Kristina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985): 52-53, Part 2, ills. 138, 145.

[3]Tiska Blankenship, *Raymond Jonson: Geometric Form in the Pursuit of a Unifying Principle* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico, 1990): n.p. Moholy-Nagy's *Composition A II* is reproduced in this exhibition brochure, but the complete title and location of the work are not given. The author does not discuss specific connections between works by Jonson and this work by Moholy-Nagy. She does not identify what books or exhibition catalogues Jonson owned or read that included works by Moholy-Nagy. No exhibition catalogues or brochures of Moholy-Nagy's work published in the 1930s and 1940s have been found in the archives of the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

pointing upward, have been placed in the lower center of the composition and partially overlap one another. In the upper right are three small triangles and trapeziums colored in red, orange, and purple, which by their small size appear to be in the distance. At the same time, two long, curving lines, one orange and the other purple, meander from the upper left to the bottom of the composition. In the background are numerous small circles in various colors distributed evenly across the picture plane. All forms have been rendered with the airbrush. Whereas the geometric forms have been defined fairly clearly, the other forms in the painting are defined with fuzzy contours that blur their physical presence. The painting conveys an aura of mystery through this evocative blurring of contours. After the viewer contemplates the larger forms in the foreground, his attention gradually shifts to the less defined forms that seem farther away. As in many of Jonson's absolute paintings, the viewer is drawn into an evocative, imaginary environment of light and color that transcends the physical reality of everyday life. Such evocations of supernatural, ephemeral, three-dimensional realms of existence occur in many of Jonson's absolute paintings. They are essential to the spiritual fulfillment and release at the core of Jonson's abstraction. This painting epitomizes Jonson's adoption and modification of Kandinsky's style; it has greater freedom of form and expression than the geometric abstractions of the 1920s by Moholy-Nagy but has the expressive, lively geometry of Kandinsky's Bauhaus-era paintings.

A slightly more delicate geometry is found in *Casein Tempera No. 4–1938* [Plate 95], which demonstrates Jonson's growing mastery of the new approach of the late 1930s. This painting is similar to Moholy-Nagy's paintings *LIS.* [Plate 96] and *Q 1 Suprematistic* [Plate

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

97] of 1922 and 1923, although it is unknown if Jonson ever saw these works.[4] *LIS.* consists of several vertical black, tan, yellow and white lines floating across a vaguely defined space, the background of which has been structured with horizontal lines. These lines separate large rectangular areas of brown, gray and blue. *Q 1 Suprematistic* features a series of thin, yellow parallel lines running down the middle of the composition, cutting across a large red circle and partially obscuring two small black circles. Moholy-Nagy has, in these works, juxtaposed straight lines and circles in delicately balanced, dynamic arrangements. Such slight asymmetry is seen in many of Jonson's absolute paintings.

In *Casein Tempera No. 4–1938*, our attention is drawn to the large blue circle that floats in the middle of this undefined space. The bottom of a large but cropped circle of pale green fills the upper third of the painting. Several small circles of blue, green and red float in the center of the composition. Some overlap the blue circle. Others float in the broad white field behind these geometric forms. All of these small circles have been shaded to appear somewhat three-dimensional. The ones floating in the area of white almost glow with yellow light. There are several sets of long, thin lines, three to each set, that run straight up the center of this vertically-oriented canvas, across it near the top, and then into or out of the picture in the upper left and center right. The lines feature small rectangular forms of the same colors placed at various intervals. These forms have been made to appear like some sort of abstract, vividly-colored plumbing or neon tube apparatus.[5] Two blue-green

---

[4]Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*: Part 2, ill. 62; Magdalena Dabrowski, *Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art 1910-1930* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985): 142.

[5]*Casein Tempera No. 4-1938* may have been the most publicized of Jonson's non-representational paintings of the years of World War II and the TPG. It was reproduced and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

triangular areas, with slightly concave contours, have been placed in the lower corners of the picture. Between these forms are horizontal areas of purple and orange.

The smooth yet slightly grainy texture of the paint reveals that this work was done entirely with the airbrush. Even more than in the previous painting, there is a quality of luminosity and weightlessness in this painting that conveys a sense of the spiritual. The resonant, smoothly applied color and the absence of traditional paint facture help create this sense of the other-worldly. The qualities of weightlessness, precisely linear geometry, and careful juxtaposition of geometric shapes can be traced to Kandinsky's Bauhaus paintings and Moholy-Nagy's geometric abstractions of the 1920s. However, aspects of color in this work seem to have been derived from the theories of Kandinsky. The large circles of violet-blue and green may represent emotional-psychological states of wholeness and emotional stability and calm. These circles and the smaller ones that float around them seem to emerge from the vague white field in the background, an emptiness laden with spiritual possibilities. Such suggestive meanings of shape and color were described by Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and Kandinsky's theories may have influenced the creation and spiritual meaning of this and many other absolute paintings.[6] The floating forms in ambiguous, empty

---

commented on a few times in newspaper articles that reviewed the 1941 exhibition of recent work of Jonson and the TPG. At least one critic observed the highly mechanical, industrial character of the imagery. Eddie Apodaca, a critic writing for *The New Mexico Lobo* in February 1941, described it as "portraying....fluorescent lighting." [Eddie Apodaca, "Only an Artist Knows Real Meaning of His Own Painting, Says 'Arty' Lobo Reporter," *New Mexico Lobo*, February 11, 1941, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6680.]

[6]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 181-185; Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 590-591, 599. In his writings, Kandinsky equated the circle with blue, blue was the color of tranquility and spiritual inwardness, and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

space suggest celestial forms and spaces. Cosmic imagery appeared earlier in Jonson's paintings, in works such as the 1930 *Time Cycle* and the *Cosmic Theme* series of the late 1930s. As was discussed in the previous chapter, such imagery was praised in Rudhyar's "The Transcendental Movement in Painting" as part of the ultimate kind of "universal symbolism." In this text, Rudhyar wrote that geometric symbolism could have self-revealing, psychological meanings and that such images could embody the essence of the person who created them: "Transcendental realms for some painters are apprehended mentally or intuitionally as realms of geometric perfection and structural accuracy: realms of architects and engineers' blueprints."[7] Rudhyar identified Jonson as an example of those transcendental painters whose technique involves "the ideal of engineering precision of form, outline and color-spread."[8] Around the same time, Alfred Morang wrote that this work "contains hints of mechanization–not the spirit of the machine, but the mental effort that brought the most delicate mechanism of machines from the mental to the material plane."[9] Morang's interpretation seems to suggest that paintings such as *Casein Tempera No. 4–1938* helped bring about the modern industrial age by visualizing it in artistic, non-utilitarian ways.

Watercolor No. 8–1938 [Plate 98] was conceived as a composition of carefully related circles and ovals along with numerous arabesques of various lengths. The painting

---

green was a color closely related to it that could suggest peace and contentment.

[7]Dane Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," p. 52.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Alfred Morang, "Santa Fe Painter, Writer, Critic Adds His Praise of Jonson's Show," *Albuquerque Tribune*, February 28, 1941, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6682.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

is composed entirely of lines; since no forms have been filled in with colors there are no two- or three-dimensional forms. Three concentric circles are placed slightly above and to the right of the center of the composition. They are perfectly parallel to the picture plane. Two sharply angled circles, one twice as wide as the other, have been placed so that they overlap the sides of the concentric circles. One more circle, placed to the far left and angled less sharply, carries our vision across the composition. Numerous thin, sinuous lines extend across the circles diagonally and upward on the right half of the painting. Some shorter, cross-hatched lines have been placed in the lower left and right corners and near the top center and upper right. The color range is limited to dark, muted tones of blue, green and brown. The allusions to the cosmos, to the elliptical movement of planets, moons, and comets, is unmistakable in this work, and, considering Jonson's interest in cosmic imagery throughout the 1930s, probably intentional. Airbrushed circles in concentric or non-concentric series and groups of long, sinuous lines are common motifs in Jonson's absolute paintings, and they often suggest celestial forms and forces.

Watercolor No. 9–1938 [Plate 99] relies on vivid, luminous color used transparently to create an evocative, spiritual atmosphere. This painting is immediately distinguishable by its resonating background of medium-toned, highly saturated red, which glows with a bright light emanating from the center. The rich, vivid crimson has the spiritually evocative, pulsating, all-consuming glow that Kandinsky said deep, cool-toned red could produce, and it seems possible that Jonson's use of red in this painting was influenced by Kandinsky's theories on the expressive, spiritual meanings of red. The red that dominates this painting is the rather cool, intense red that Kandinsky described as a less common version of red,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

involving medium-tones of vermillion, which he felt was capable of sustained intense emotional power of almost a meditative quality, of generating a glow from within, and yet capable of alluding to the possibility of sudden, intense eruptions of emotion.[10] The red in *Watercolor No. 9–1938* is similar to that in Kandinsky's *Out of Cool Depths* [Plate 81], a sprayed watercolor that Jonson is known to have seen in Chicago in 1932. In the middle of Jonson's painting are several star-shaped and triangular forms that overlap one another and appear to float effortlessly. Each of these forms has been filled in with a single color–red, purple, sienna and umber. Along the top and bottom are rectangular shapes, which are similarly outlined, colored and overlapping. These forms have been sketched with deceptively free rendering of their contours, an effect of spontaneity that was actually created by carefully allowing the watercolor to puddle slightly at the edges. Scattered about in the composition are groups of two or three long, thin black lines shooting across this image in all directions; it is only their delicate, narrow quality that makes them so unobtrusive. They may be variations of the force lines and speed lines found in the paintings of the Italian Futurists, Arthur Dove, and the Bauhaus-era geometric abstractions of Kandinsky. In that capacity, they would have functioned as visual vectors, activating and energizing the pictorial space. Tiny geometric shapes of deep colors are also scattered around in the composition. The painting has the feeling of poetic levity and instability, of forms coming into existence and then vanishing forever. Whereas *Oil No. 1–1938* and *Casein Tempera No. 4–1938* are

---

[10]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 188.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

orderly, stabile and logical, this watercolor seems carefree, excited, and almost whimsical.[11] However, this painting also has overtones of cosmic themes, in its glowing color, the "twinkle" of the scattered small geometric forms, and the overtly triangular and star-shaped forms floating in the middle of the composition. This work is closer to Kandinsky's paintings from his years at the Bauhaus than any of the extant works by Jonson from earlier in this critically important year. It reflects how Jonson adapted various sources into something more personally distinctive and freely reflective of his artistic vision.

Watercolor No. 16–1938 [Plate 100] is altogether different from the other extant watercolors of the late 1930s. Four transparent squares of dark-tones of blue, green, purple and red float in a dark, murky space. They overlap at their corners, which suggests that they are at various distances from the viewer. The squares are framed by areas of dark umber along the sides of the picture plane. The squares are separated from the viewer by two brown and white vertical bars running along the center of the composition. By framing the brown strips with white ones, Jonson has made them appear to glow in this murky environment. This painting is almost the opposite of *Watercolor No. 8–1938* [Plate 98], an entirely linear composition. It virtually epitomizes Jonson's early comment in his diary: "I've been thinking that the creation of an entirely abstract composition would be an excellent thing.

---

[11]Levin and Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation*: 115. Marianne Lorenz interprets this painting as the result of the liberating ideas and stylistic influences that Kandinsky's *Improvisations* would have provided for Jonson. Although this connection seems less certain than she concludes, she correctly observes that Jonson maintained tighter control over compositional elements in this watercolor than is found in most of Kandinsky's work.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Why shouldn't planes of color in gradation properly arranged make beauty?"[12] This work is similar to Kandinsky's *Thirteen Rectangles* of 1930 [Plate 101], an unusual work for the artist because it consists entirely of rectangular forms. It is possible Jonson was familiar with this work because it was in the possession of Galka Scheyer for years.[13] Jonson's painting is also an experiment with his theory of the creation of space that recedes, projects or adheres to the picture surface. His careful manipulation of overlapping geometric shapes of various sizes but with a limited and darkened range of tone and intensity creates the complex puzzle of inferring spatial relationships among the forms and between them and the viewer. For Jonson, as he explained in his lecture notes and essays on pictorial space, this sense of mystery was adventurous, and its ambiguity was a means of visualizing the spiritual.

Watercolor No. 19–1938 [Plate 102] consists of flat, transparent circles and zigzagging white lines. In stark contrast to *Watercolor No. 16–1938*, this painting consists mostly of tightly clustered circles floating in a cramped but otherwise vaguely described space. The circles have been depicted with pale tones of blue-green, yellow-green, violet and yellow that have been carefully airbrushed. The airbrushing of the colored circles creates a smooth, uniform texture that permits the brightness of the white watercolor board to reflect through the aerated color, thus giving increased luminosity and colorful presence to these stabile, calming shapes. They vary somewhat in size but all are large, so large relative to the picture plane that most of them are cropped by the edges of the picture. In front of these

---

[12]Jonson's diary, entry undated but apparently from mid-summer 1920, p. 215, RJ 8: 6149.

[13]Hans Roethel and Jean Benjamin, *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, 1916-1944.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994): 882.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

circles are numerous thin white lines that zigzag in sharp angles and overlap one another numerous times. The use of lines, shapes and colors in this work may have been influenced by Kandinsky's theories. Kandinsky wrote about the stability and calm of the circle in *Point and Line to Plane*.[14] He explained in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that green was the color of tranquility and contentment.[15] In this same treatise he wrote that violet was a color suggestive not only of tranquility but of sadness.[16] The slight adjustments of green toward yellow and blue and the inclusion of violet as a minor contribution to the overall color system of the painting are easily explained if they are understood as Jonson heeding Kandinsky's warning that the excessive use of green and violet could become tedious and depressing. By contrast, the complex, lengthy zigzagging lines, here depicted in bright white, generate movement, excitement and drama.[17] This composition was probably influenced by Kandinsky's Bauhaus-era paintings, many of which contain circles of various sizes, colors,

---

[14]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 590-591, 599.

[15]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 182-183. Kandinsky considered green the perfectly balanced synthesis of blue and yellow and their respective aesthetic and expressive qualities, and therefore it achieved perfect calm and stability.

[16]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 189. Kandinsky commented that violet was a color of mourning in China and that many elderly widows wore violet garments.

[17]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 586-589, 594-595. Kandinsky explained in detail how right angles were emotionally cool, obtuse angles were of diluted emotional impact, and acute angles were the most intense emotionally and visually.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tones and arrangements that often intersect and overlap.[18] Some of these later Kandinskys consist almost entirely of circles; among them are *Circles within a Circle* [Plate 84] and *Several Circles* of 1926 [Plate 103], and *Heavy Circles* of 1927.

Oil and Tempera No. 1–1939 and *Watercolor No. 14–1939* are two early examples of Jonson's successful use of a common pictorial motif in his absolute paintings: lines which are straight, curved, or zigzagging, long or short, and so on, but which exist as forms in their own right, independent of defining shapes and surfaces. Jonson used these purely linear motifs in the mid-1930s, in his series of *Arabesques* and *Figurations*. In *Oil and Tempera No. 1–1939* [Plate 104], several black lines zigzag in all directions across a vaguely described space filled with bright yellow-orange punctuated by scattered circles. The circles vary considerably in color and light seems to emanate from most of them. There is a large yellow circle which glows with a deep red light, two sets of yellow circles and a faint white circle which overlap one another, an orange circle which glows with a yellow-green light emanating from it, and circles of green, red and black with vaguely defined contours. The zigzagging lines direct the viewer's attention all around the composition, but his vision tends to gravitate between the upper left and lower right, where the lines have been clustered. The resulting arrangement of circular shapes and zigzagging lines creates a cosmic environment, as do many of Jonson's absolute paintings, suggesting that small celestial objects are moving rapidly through vast cosmic space.

---

[18]Josef Helfenstein, "'The Most Precious and Most Personal of Gifts'–Pictures Exchanged between Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, and Klee," in Vivian Endicott Barnett and Josef Helfenstein, eds. *The Blue Four in the New World: Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky and Paul Klee*: 85.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson's use of dynamic, expressive lines independent of the description of forms can be traced to Kandinsky's paintings and drawings. Although independent lines are seen often in Bauhaus and Constructivist painting, Jonson's use of line is closer to the freer, more spontaneous, emotive quality of line in Kandinsky's work. Many of Jonson's completely non-representational paintings from World War II until the end of his career feature this free, loose, and expressive use of line. Many paintings by Kandinsky clearly demonstrate this use of line. Jonson's paintings demonstrate how his use of line varied considerably from work to work and sometimes even within individual works, but that it commonly featured rhythmic, dynamic and zigzagging patterns. Jonson's theory of visual design, which was discussed in the previous chapter, emphasized the aesthetic and expressive importance of line for its own sake and in the creation of two-dimensional shapes. For Jonson, line was essential to the spiritual content of a painting. In his writings he specifically mentioned zigzagging lines, which he stated could refer suggestively or abstractly to lightning bolts and mountains. After his many landscape paintings done years earlier, Jonson was well aware of the abstract linear patterns discernable in nature. His observation that zigzagging lines could suggest lightning bolts reveals that he conceived of zigzagging lines as expressive of powerful, even violent forces in nature. By contrast, Jonson's written comments about straight and curving lines, motifs which appear often in his work, associate them with organic, biological forms. His frequent use of curved and straight lines independent of defining shapes rarely suggests such natural forms. The straight lines in his paintings often move in all directions and are suggestive of lightning, and less so of mountain forms. It seems that Jonson frequently did not follow his own recommendations or observations

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

concerning the uses and meanings of straight lines. Ultimately, Jonson's frequent use of zigzagging lines may be signifiers of spiritual power and transcendence, of the activation and movement of the spirit.

By 1939, Jonson's absolute paintings were very diverse and often quite complex in the use of color and compositional forms. This reveals that Jonson had quickly mastered the new visual vocabulary of absolute painting and was totally comfortable with purely non-representational imagery. Many of Jonson's paintings done during World War II are predominantly blue. This may be due to Kandinsky's claim in *Concerning the Spiritual in* Art that blue was the color closest to the "infinite," the "heavenly," and the "supernatural."[19] Watercolor *No. 22–1939* [Plate 105] features diaphanous rectangular planes of light cerulean which overlap one another and float in front of a circle of white. The circle of white is bounded by a narrow ring of light cerulean and then a larger area of darker cerulean which fills the rest of the top of the composition. The diaphanous cerulean planes overlap at their corners, and are very much in a state of flux, for they appear as if they are about to coalesce or diverge at any second. This subtle articulation of light and transparent color had become common in Jonson's paintings by the late 1930s, and this watercolor is a masterful demonstration of the aesthetic and expressive possibilities of these effects, which were made possible by watercolor. This painting is easily read as blue over brown, and as a result it can be interpreted as a highly abstract desert landscape with the bright, glowing light of the sun in the sky. Such references to nature seem plausible because Jonson painted the terrain of

---

[19]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 181-182.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the Southwest extensively earlier in his career. However, this work is so abstract that the landscape references are fleeting, and the painting can also be understood as carefully structured abstract forms that resonate with colored light. It is the light-suffused, translucent, and interlocking diaphanous shapes, especially in the middle of the composition, that hold the viewer's attention. Through this use of carefully structured yet intangible forms, Jonson has encouraged the viewer to contemplate the painting more carefully and thoroughly, to study it so intensely that he takes part in the desired transcendental experience that connects the viewer with the higher, spiritual plane of existence and understanding.

The motif of bright, glowing light coming from a localized, specific source that emerges from the sky and floats weightlessly above the land is seen frequently in Agnes Pelton's paintings, such as her *Illumination* of 1930, *Sand Storm* of 1932, *Beatitude* of 1935, *Future* and *The Blest* of 1941, and *Light Center* of 1960.[20] Of all of them, Jonson's watercolor is most similar to Pelton's 1941 oil painting *Future* [Plate 106], but since this work was done later it could not have influenced Jonson's watercolor. Nevertheless, considering Jonson's intimate knowledge of and fondness for Pelton's work since the early 1930s, it is possible that her paintings inspired *Watercolor No. 23–1939* and that there is a common meaning involved. Michael Zakian has interpreted *Future* as an image of utopian idealism and optimism attained through physical exertion and spiritual enlightenment. In reaching this conclusion, he interprets the four white cubes floating in the sky as a visualization of Christ's statement that "God's House has many mansions" and he quotes

---

[20]Michael Zakian, *Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995): 55, 71, 81, 92, 96, 107.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Pelton's writings about this work, in the process explaining that the four white cubes were meant to be understood as "opening rooms with lights on" and that to enter these mansions of Heaven one had to "pass through 'pillars not heavy but solid, built up of stone-like forms.'"[21] Zakian has observed that paintings by Pelton such as her 1931 *The Ray* show a beam of light stretching between Heaven and Earth, functioning as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment and transcendence. Very similar themes are common in Jonson's TPG-era paintings. Although Pelton and Jonson shared a profound interest in the spiritual, Pelton's paintings usually have more layered meanings involving narrative and symbolism. Jonson was rarely as literal and specific.

Jonson's *Watercolor No. 22–1939* is also fairly similar to certain works by Lawren Harris done during the years of the TPG, when Harris lived in New Mexico and was close to Jonson. Among these paintings by Harris are his well-known *Abstraction Painting 95* done around 1937. [Plate 107] Jonson was certainly familiar with Harris' painting for it was the one work by Harris which was sent as part of a group of works by the TPG to Hilla Rebay and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation to be shown at an exhibit of American abstractionists held at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) in 1940, and Jonson had been the TPG-member who packed the paintings for shipping to New York City and handled the correspondence with Rebay.[22] In Harris' painting, vividly colored, precisely-contoured geometric forms, which allude to steep mountain peaks and cloud forms, float over an ambiguously described tract of desert. Such

---

[21]Zakian, *Agnes Pelton*: 93.

[22]Jonson to Arthur, July 31, 1940, RJ 1: 582-583.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

abstract compositions are common in Harris' work of the late 1930s and early 1940s, many of which were done while he was living in New Mexico and socializing with members of the TPG.[23] Before he settled in New Mexico and became involved with the TPG, Harris had been a member of Canada's Group of Seven and had become well-known for his expressionist, fairly abstract landscapes of the rugged, snow-covered terrain of Canada. Jonson's and Harris' artistic development had followed similar paths in that each developed various modernist sources, including Symbolism and Cubism, into a distinctive style which they applied to their local, unique landscape. In Jonson's watercolor, very different yet concurrent artistic sources fused into something new and original.

The comparison of *Watercolor No. 22–1939* with the next one Jonson made reveals how Jonson's work could change abruptly and greatly from work to work in a short span of time. The possible references to nature in the next watercolor are quite different from the work just discussed. *Watercolor No. 23–1939* [Plate 108] is an image of extraordinary beauty that demonstrates Jonson's talent for creating poetic, evocative color and texture in imagery that is organic and biomorphic. Circular and oval forms of various cerulean tones have been centrally placed, symmetrically arranged, and overlapped in various ways. A complex pattern of circles, ovals and more intricate curvilinear shapes has been constructed by airbrushing cerulean blue and sienna. Jonson defined a gracefully curvilinear cerulean form by airbrushing over the contours of the sienna-colored form at the bottom of the composition. The sienna form has ridged curves leading in stages to its summit in the center

---

[23]Andrew Hunter, "A Painter's Progress," in Andrew Hunter, et al., *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter's Progress* (New York: Americas Society, 2000): 68.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the composition. The form outlined in dark blue takes on divergent symbolism, suggesting a vase, a test tube, and a uterus. If the symbolism is sexual, an interpretation further supported by the flowing lines of light blue spouting out of the top of the large, dark blue form, then the curving, reverberating lines and areas of shaded cerulean throughout this image may be intended to suggest the flowing energy of procreation and other natural forces involved with the creation of new life. Superimposed over this vase-like, possibly uterine form are two concentrically arranged oval forms whose tapered edges make this shape seem all the more vaginal. Below this is a wide, dark blue line that swoops down toward the bottom of the composition, almost functioning as a structural support for the forms above it.

This watercolor was done not long before Jonson's 1940 trilogy *Life Cycle*, which features overt phallic and vaginal symbolism. Jonson's correspondence indicates that at the time he painted *Life Cycle* the series was of great importance to him, that he had conceived the trilogy after long and careful deliberation.[24] Jonson painted a thematic trilogy of paintings at the turn of every decade. In 1930 he had painted *Time Cycle*. In 1940 he painted *Life Cycle*, which consisted of *Birth*, *Growth* and *Death*. He painted trilogies in 1950, 1960, 1970 and, anticipating he would not live until 1980, 1973. *Life Cycle* is reactionary among Jonson's other paintings of the time because the series is symbolic and iconographic. In dealing with the theme of the cycle of life, they are profoundly philosophical and relate to the thematic interests found in his paintings from 1929 to the mid-1930s. Although the series was no longer at the forefront of Jonson's painting, Jonson's interest in such themes,

---

[24]The trilogy is not discussed or reproduced in Garman's book, even though it has remained in the collection of the Jonson Gallery since it was painted. Apparently, as the years passed, the importance of the series as far as Jonson was concerned had diminished.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

which he expressed at length in letters from the time when he painted *Life Cycle*, suggests that the vaginal symbolism in *Watercolor No. 23–1939* may have been intentional and part of Jonson's process of working out his developing ideas. He wrote the following explanation of *Life Cycle* to Arthur in 1940:

> The main theme is my creation of a phalic [sic] symbol. In the three variations I have used them expressively to denote the beautiful aspect of sex throughout life. Anyone sensitive to the beauty of plastic works and who is not entirely physical in their reactions should be able to look at these works and get a terrific reaction and I would hope it to be along the purely aesthetic with a kind of concrete flavoring of the physical. That is the clue–the interpretation I will leave up to you.... . To me these works are just as spiritual in feelings as a madonna or a 'mother-child.'!! No vulgar-common or pornographic attitude exists in the soul of the painter and anyone who so interpreting them is only a filthy-minded half-wit.[25]

Whereas *Growth* features a towering, architectonic phallus in the center of the canvas (it was originally entitled *Fulfillment*), *Birth* features curving, oval forms which flow in long paths suggestive of sexual penetration, and these forms are similar to forms in *Watercolor No. 23–1939*. In *Birth* [Plate 109], two egg-forms are propelled upward by a cannon-like phallic form. The larger of the two eggs, the first to be propelled, approaches a narrow opening enclosed by long, curving forms suggestive of the vagina. These and the more rounded forms behind the phallic form are similar to the curving, oval forms of *Watercolor No. 23–1939*. Jonson's reasons for exploring this theme at such length are not clear. Was he interested in the cycle of life purely for its own sake, as a philosophical statement about the human condition? Or, since he made the series early in World War II, could it be some kind of anti-war statement, an affirmation of the continuation of life in the face of so much

---

[25]Jonson to Arthur, November 5, 1940, RJ 1: 592.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

suffering and death? Considering Jonson's concerns with the global crises of the era, the meaning of *Life Cycle* could have been specifically related to contemporary social and political problems and circumstances.

Watercolor No. 1–1940 [Plate 110] is a highly abstract composition in which there are no discernible references to nature but linear forms move, turn and float in an evocative, uncertain space. Jonson has created a spatially vague environment by overlapping large geometric areas of light and medium tones of transparent gray that seem to recede. Three long, snake-like forms of cerulean blue streak and twist across the picture space, coming from the bottom and right sides of the composition. They stop short toward the left of the composition and seem to turn in upon themselves. Two white forms, shorter than the blue ones, also streak quickly into our view from the bottom and center of the composition. A few narrow, zigzagging black lines, connected at points and turning in all directions, float in the middle of the picture. Smaller, shorter lines painted in white float in the center of the painting. The linear forms become dynamic thrusts–visual vectors–in an undefined space loaded with uncertainty. Although earlier works made extensive use of line as a dominant, expressive element, what is new and different in this painting is the vitality of the lines, especially the blue and white ones that are organic in shape and fuzzy in texture; it is almost as if they are living entities moving through space. The composition brings to mind Kandinsky's theories of the visual properties of different kinds of lines. He wrote in *Point and Line to Plane* about the expressive possibilities of diagonal lines and linear movements in abstract compositions. Kandinsky explained that diagonals were dynamic, fast-moving, emotionally potent elements of design, which also have qualities of relative warmth (between

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the extremes of cold horizontals and warm verticals) and balance (between the extremes of the stability of the horizontal and the instability of the vertical).[26] Even more important for Jonson, perhaps, was Kandinsky's suggestion that diagonals had sufficient thrust to pierce the picture plane; such effects of relative depth among forms in a composition were of great interest to Jonson for their evocation of the spiritual. The creation of depth helped create the spiritual atmosphere essential to any absolute painting, especially *Watercolor No. 1-1940*, where a murky, light-colored mist is the most distinctive feature of the painting.

This watercolor is remarkably similar to a number of paintings done in oil on canvas by Clyfford Still in the 1940s, including *1944–G (PH–204)*, *(PH–128)* of 1948, and, most of all, *(PH–282)* of 1943. [Plate 111] The similarities are uncanny because the works by Still were done later and there is no evidence that Jonson and Still ever knew one another. It is particularly intriguing since Jonson and Still came from somewhat similar backgrounds. Both were raised in the rural, western United States and then lived in the Northwestern United States (Still lived in eastern Washington state and western Canada). Stephen Polcari has observed that long, twisting linear forms floating through vaguely described space constitute a frequent motif in Still's paintings. He has referred to this motif, which is seen in *Untitled (PH–282)*, as a "life line figure" and has interpreted it as symbolic of the voyage of the spirit of a shaman during rituals that attempt to achieve enlightenment and understanding through mystical, otherworldly, even ecstatic experiences.[27] Although

---

[26]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 584-591.

[27]Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 106-113. Clyfford Still remains one of the most

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Polcari's interpretation of these and other works by Still is open to debate, it does provide a means of interpreting Jonson's work that seems enlightening. Therefore, it is possible that the long blue and white lines refer to the movement of spiritual forces in an uncertain environment of the spiritual and the mystical. Such an interpretation of Jonson's watercolor is supported by Kandinsky's ideas of the meanings of colors, that blue suggests the heavenly and the spiritual and that gray is suggestive of the vague, the unknown and the mysterious. This interpretation is further supported by some of Jonson's own comments concerning how his absolute paintings visualize spatially vague, mystical environments. He wrote: "The emotional element exists through the dynamic apprehension, on the part of the painter, of a particular created environment. These environments are invented and imagined by the painter and knowingly have no connection with physical environments. These environments are therefore of another world, the inner or spiritual."[28]

Watercolor No. 1–1940 seems to follow the basic premise of this explanation more than most of Jonson's absolute paintings, for it succeeds in conjuring a vaguely three-dimensional, mysterious, murky space full of the potentiality of the spiritual. The idea of a spiritual force or entity floating through endless space is a possibility that fascinated Jonson in much more mundane ways. He is known to have speculated as to how those who flew in

---

enigmatic and perplexing artists of the New York School. This lack of understanding is probably due in part to Still's notorious hostility toward art historians and critics and his fierce refusal to explain his ideas, his sources and influences, and the meaning of his own work. In his refusal to verbalize his painting, he is somewhat similar to Jonson.

[28]Jonson's lecture notes (pp. 1-2) for September 29, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6242.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

airplanes, particularly those who were painters, would view the world and comprehend it spiritually. He expressed his curiosity when he wrote to Paul Lawrence, a former student of his who was serving in World War II at the time: "I sometimes wonder if all you painters who are flying will be able to obtain any inspiration and material or vantage point from the experiences of seeing our world and ourselves from above and at great altitudes and strange perspectives. It should it seems to me cause some sensation that has possibilities in form–design–space and color."[29] Since air travel was still new and unusual, it is not surprising that Jonson was so curious as to what new experiences of light, space and movement, and their connection to experiencing the spiritual, were possible with this new mode of transportation. Air travel literally brought humans into the upper atmosphere, to the "heavens," closer than ever before possible to the outer limits of the sky where humans have always looked to find the Divine and the spiritual as they understood it. This watercolor, and perhaps some of Jonson's other paintings in which vast but vague environments are created, may be attempts to place the artist's perspective of existence in the upper atmosphere, making not only the ascent to the sky but the ascent to the ultimate realm of the spiritual.

Watercolor No.17–1940 [Plate 112] is one of Jonson's most simple yet poetic watercolors from the era of World War II. In this painting, several concentric lines of blue, red, green and yellow have been carefully rendered with the airbrush. They move in long, elliptical paths between the lower left and right corners of the composition. Another, more

---

[29]Jonson to Paul Lawrence, February 8, 1944, RJ 7: 4771. Jonson remembered the work of Leon Gaspard, a Russian painter and World War I pilot who years earlier, shortly after World War I, had created paintings based on his visual experience of flight. At the time of this letter, Gaspard was living in Taos, New Mexico, but it does not appear that Jonson knew him personally.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

complex line of dark green overlaps the long, elliptical lines. It loops at the lower left, shoots straight up and then down toward the middle of the image, make a circular turn and then loops up and shoots down again, forming a second loop in the lower right. The line is almost symmetrical and the continuous, fluid movement it generates can be read from left or right. A thin, slightly tilted line painted in red has been placed in the middle of the image, surrounded by the much thicker and more vivid lines of various colors. There are short narrow lines cutting across this long, diagonal line. A translucent white circle has been placed at the top of this line. The background space behind these linear forms has been colored with smoothly airbrushed pale blue-violet. The sharply arched lines have been slightly shaded on their lower or inner sides, creating areas of color between the lines. The lower center of the composition, between the smallest of the arched lines, has been shaded with a luminous yellow. The long diagonal line notched by three short lines perpendicular to it is vaguely suggestive of a cross. The meaning of this cross-like form is subtle but seems intentional, and has definite Christian overtones. It may be a reference to Jonson's compulsion to "work out his salvation" in his painting, a longstanding concern and motivation of his art. Veiled Biblical themes and their associated moral content appeared in the work of other abstractionists before Jonson, including many breakthrough abstractions by Kandinsky from 1909 to 1914.[30] It is possible that in this painting, such symbolic references are subtly worked into the overall geometry of the composition. It is impossible to determine conclusively how intentional such meanings were. Although Jonson almost

---

[30]Long, *Kandinsky: Development of an Abstract Style*: 65-66.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

always denied that symbolic content existed in his absolute paintings, it is very likely that he was aware of the symbolic connotations of this watercolor, since they are so conspicuous.

Of all of Jonson's absolute paintings, this one has probably been interpreted more iconographically than any other. Critics and scholars, examining the work ever since Jonson first exhibited it in 1941, have read very literal, symbolic meaning into it. When this painting was exhibited in 1941 in Albuquerque at the first major solo exhibit of Jonson's absolute paintings, it was commented on by a few critics, who thought it had specific meanings related to World War II and the chaotic political situation of the era. In a review of Jonson's winter 1941 exhibit published in the New Mexican newspaper *Lobo*, Eddie Apocada wrote the following about what is almost certainly the watercolor in question: "'Watercolor No. 17,' formerly a series of arches and crosses, [is] symbolizing peace with religious tolerance and tranquility."[31] In another review of the same exhibit written by an unidentified critic, an unidentified work by Jonson that sounds very much like it is *Watercolor No. 17–1940* (although the author does state it is done on canvas), is interpreted as symbolically referring to the current global political situation and World War II: "One canvas gives the feeling of peace in a design built upon a series of arches and a cross, only to shatter the tranquillity [sic] with a discordant green line symbolizing the war threat."[32] Robert C. Hay interpreted this watercolor as a response to the tyranny of Nazi Germany in his pioneering study of the TPG:

---

[31]Eddie Apocada, "Jonson's Paintings Make No Attempt to Convey Meaning," *Lobo*, February 18, 1941, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6680.

[32]"One Man Show by Raymond Jonson Transcendental Leader, Opens Here," *Albuquerque Tribune*, February 7, 1941, n.p. Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6679.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> War tensions can be felt in *Watercolor No. 17.* The iron-like lines (Blut and Eisen) suggest lines drawn on a war map as the Blitzkrieg reigns; the loops might be the advanced armies that often reared forward, encircling and capturing whole armies or vast areas very much like the lines present. (Possibly the color black in 1940 symbolized the black shirts of the Fascists.) Though not necessarily inserting ideology in his work, Jonson gave lectures in Sante Fe as early as 1933 in which he warned his audience of an impending disaster in Europe.[33]

Hay's reading of symbolic meaning in this painting is highly specific and detailed. Although Jonson did denounce the tyrannical forces in Europe, he did so only occasionally, briefly and privately, usually in letters written to Arthur. There is no evidence that he ever gave public lectures about World War II and Nazi Germany. The mood of this watercolor is slightly menacing and unsettling, the result of the wide colored lines encroaching upon the narrow straight line and the white circle as well as the result of the prominent use of the dark yellow-green lines stretching and twisting across this sparsely filled image. It is difficult but not impossible to connect the emotive impact of the work to specific historical and political circumstances of the era, to World War II, Nazism, and the Holocaust, but this cannot be done with any specific interpretation of what observations, commentary or response Jonson was attempting to convey.

The best evidence in support of a political, historical interpretation of this work has not been previously discussed but can be made by comparing it to similar works done in the same year. Two slightly earlier works, *Watercolor No. 12–1940* and *Watercolor No. 13–1940*, were conceived as a pair. Their basic forms are similar to one another and to those

---

[33]Hay, "Dane Rudhyar and the Transcendental Painting Group": 141, 146.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of *No. 17.* Whereas *Nos. 12* and *13* feature long, vertically-oriented ovals that are clearly described, *No. 17* suggests a similar form by the accumulation of the closely spaced, shaded, arched lines. *No. 12* [Plate 113] was subtitled *Peace During Activity*, an obvious political reference considering the year in which it was made. Furthermore, Jonson did a few other works during World War II that are very illustrative and figurative and are about the then-current global crisis. *Casein Tempera No. 3–1942* was subtitled *Our Country* and depicts an enlarged outline of North America wrapped around the Earth as if seen from outer space; its meaning is overtly patriotic and nationalistic. *Oil No. 7–1945* was subtitled *Peace* [Plate 114] and depicts three doves, two standing still and one in flight, in a highly abstract manner. Although these two works are highly unusual for Jonson's painting during World War II because they are so figurative and symbolic, their implied meanings and references to America's moral and military supremacy in World War II and the desirability of peace in the face of all the turmoil and misery of the era are unmistakable.

Perhaps Jonson's most powerfully evocative series of non-representational watercolors from the era of World War II is his *Esoteric Trilogy* (*Watercolors Nos. 24* to *26–1940*). In these watercolors, the careful choice and arrangement of small, defined shapes and large, more ambiguous forms, all done according to a tonal palette of browns and tans and rendered with the airbrush, achieve a powerfully dynamic and expressive geometry that transports the viewer to a new and different level of spiritual consciousness. They are among the best examples of the universal symbolism that Rudhyar discussed in "The Transcendental Movement in Painting" to be found in Jonson's oeuvre. The use of geometric symbolism for spiritual, even mystical meaning is suggested in this series by the use of the word "esoteric"

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in the title. The term has been commonly used among modern spiritualists and mystics as synonymous for the occult, the mystical and the supernatural.[34] It is likely that Jonson understood the term as Rudhyar understood and used it. Rudhyar used the term "esoteric" in "The Transcendental Painting Movement" as part of his lengthy explanation of how this new painting would be spiritually transcendent. He wrote: "To transcend, to step through, actually and finally, requires another power than emotional fire. It requires mental vision and integrative power. The follower of the esoteric-mystical tradition will relate the former to the 'higher Mind'–the latter, to the 'Soul.'"[35]

The first in the series [Plate 115], designated so by Jonson and intended to be seen on the left, is the most severely reductive of the three. Slightly to the right of the center of the composition is a vertical series of forms consisting of, from near the top and moving downward, a rectangle, a triangle, another rectangle identical to the first, a square, and then another triangle. The rectangles have been colored in orange-brown, the square in dark brown and the triangles in gray. The vaguely defined, almost mysterious background of Jonson's watercolor has been shaded with a light tone of beige. The only distinct form in the beige background is the arc of gray that swoops down from the upper right and then fades into nothing behind the circles.

In this series, geometric shapes have been chosen and arranged with evocative potential and subtly symbolic meanings. The sequential arrangement of simple geometric

---

[34]"Occult," in "A Glossary of Spiritual and Related Terms," in Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 380.

[35]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," pp. 6-7.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

shapes in *Esoteric Trilogy–Left* is similar to that found in the many diagrams of spiritual enlightenment and transformation that numerous mystics, spiritualists, occultists and Theosophists drew in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Madame Blavatsky created numerous geometric diagrams for her books on Theosophical ideas in which the doctrines espoused by various world religions, astrology and newer mystical belief-systems were explained and their underlying relationships were analyzed.[36] [Plate 116] The arrangement of geometric forms in the middle of *Esoteric Trilogy–Left* is similar to the column of green and brown triangles in Kandinsky's *Into the Dark* of 1928 [Plate 82], which was included in the Blue Four exhibit in Chicago in 1932 that Jonson saw. The use of slightly overlapping triangles shifting in color and diminishing in clarity in Kandinsky's *Into the Dark* seems almost illustrative of his theory, as explained in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, of spiritual experience as a multi-leveled pyramid ascending to a higher plane of spiritual existence.[37] The downward movement of the triangles in the sequence of geometric forms in Jonson's watercolor is not as sweeping and dramatic as that of *Into the Dark*. Their movement is impeded by the interruption of the rectangular forms which alternate with the triangular ones. If *Into the Dark* suggests the ascent of the human spirit to a more spiritual realm of existence, then Jonson's watercolor seems to suggest the descent of the Divine to the Earth, to the physical reality and domain of humanity.

---

[36]Welsh, "Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction": 64-66.

[37]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 153-155.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The forms in the first of the *Esoteric Trilogy* are basic geometric shapes which have many mystical meanings and implications among Theosophists and other modern spiritualists and mystics. The use of strict, overt geometric forms in this and many of Jonson's other absolute paintings from the years of World War II also relates to Rudhyar's claim in "The Transcendental Movement in Painting" about the expressive, symbolic possibilities of geometric forms:

> Whether our conscious mind knows it or not, geometrical forms are the language of expression of our innermost being at the unconscious abstract level; the level at which Archetypes [sic] or principles of psycho-mental and cosmic organization operates–a purely transcendental level. Mankind is not normally conscious of such processes of psycho-mental or cosmic organization; nor is it conscious of processes of biological growth such as take place during gestation.[38]

According to Theosophical and related mystical thinking, the triangle is the most basic geometric shape and is suggestive of the triune godhead, of the projection of light and energy, and of the movement of the spirit of the Divine toward earth and humanity (as in the symbolism underlying the Egyptian pyramids).[39] Likewise, the square and rectangle are almost as fundamental, but they are more stabile, earthly, and material symbols, references to human existence on Earth.[40] The juxtaposition of triangles and rectangles in vertical series in the center of this painting may be very significant if a mystical, Theosophical reading of this work is hypothesized. According to most Theosophical thinkers, including Blavatasky,

---

[38]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," p. 41. Underlining is Rudhyar's.

[39]Welsh, "Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction": 64-66.

[40]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the numeral seven represented by a triangle next to a rectangle or square was the most important numerological and geometric symbol, for it combined the heavenly and spiritual with the mortal and the earthly as the unified life-force.[41]

Two large, non-concentric circles of airbrushed black overlap these forms and have been placed slightly away from the center of the composition. A smaller circle of brown is placed toward the upper left and overlaps the other circles. Jonson's concept of the meaning of the circle seems to have been adapted from astronomical, Christian and even Theosophical sources. Circles are usually understood to embody simplicity and wholeness, they allude to the shape of stars and planets and the motions of various celestial forms, and they suggest radiating energy forces, expansive natural growth, and the cycle of life.[42] They are also important to various world religions, including Christianity and more recent developments in spiritualist thinking such as Theosophy. The circle is the basic shape of the halo, a traditional Christian symbol of the divine nature and spiritual enlightenment of living or once-living humans, including Jesus, Mary and countless saints. Circles, as do other simple geometric shapes, have important meaning in occult and mystical thinking. Circular forms held spiritual, mystical meanings for Jonson that went from the specifically Christian to concepts, beliefs and symbols in Theosophy to, perhaps, more universal symbolic meanings and implications.

In his 1941 lecture "Psychic Phenomena," delivered publically the year after *Esoteric Trilogy* was painted, Jonson gave a lengthy explanation of his understanding of Theosophy

---

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

which included some of the meanings that circular forms embodied. Jonson's understanding of Theosophy led him to believe that if some of its precepts were true, then many supernatural, para-psychological phenomena could be explained. In this lecture, he said that there were three aspects of the human being: the physical body, the soul, and the astral form of the person. He explained that the astral body or aura was the force that directed and empowered the physical body upon the instigation of the soul (which he also called the "ego"), that it was made of very fine textured material, was very durable yet flexible, and that it contained forces which could be tapped by humans in the physical, natural world. He associated the human aura with the supposed field of spiritual energy that surrounds the earth and in which human activities, feelings, and thoughts are forever stored.[43] This surrounding aura was essentially circular. Jonson wrote:

> There are according to the doctrine of Theosophy those methods and results that are constructive and genuine. For instance one fascinating principle is that pertaining to the field of recording all the thoughts, actions, etc. that are produced here on earth. This field is a band around the earth a certain distance out in space, in ether, and there is the material for us if we are able to tap it. Many things have taken place that could be accounted for if this is a fact. Genius may therefore be the ability of tapping this reservoir of knowledge and I believe the Theosophist would claim this ability is the result of reincarnation.[44]

Jonson's explanation of this Theosophical concept reveals that circular imagery had spiritual meaning and significance for him, and it seems possible that his frequent use of circular motifs in his absolute paintings may have been intended to refer to or at least suggest the all-absorbing spiritual presence that Theosophy claimed surrounded humanity and the Earth and

---

[43]Jonson, "Psychic Phenomena," pp. 7-8, RJ 8: 6294-6295.

[44]Jonson, "Psychic Phenomena," p. 9, RJ 8: 6295.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

permeated its everyday existence. Jonson's use of the circle as symbolic of the spiritual, mystical and perhaps even the holy and divine in the Christian meaning of the form is revealed by his conspicuous, overtly symbolic depiction of circles in *Watercolor No. 20–1941*. [Plate 117] In this watercolor, done a year after *Esoteric Trilogy* and the same year as he wrote "Psychic Phenomena," a number of tall, eroded rock forms are surrounded by two airbrushed circular forms which look like haloes, especially due to their slightly fuzzy contours as rendered by the airbrush. It is possible that Jonson's idea that this aura was of "very fine textured matter" led Jonson to conclude that the distinctive texture of airbrushed paint–fine, smooth, even, slightly grainy–was the texture of this band of ether that surrounded Earth.[45]

The second watercolor in the trilogy [Plate 118], meant to be seen in the center, features the same arrangement of three airbrushed circles seen in the first watercolor. This motif also dominates the third painting in the series, and thus it becomes the identifying characteristic and unifying motif for the trilogy. In the second painting, the space of the picture is now horizontally oriented and the arrangement of three circles has been rotated, so that the smaller circle is now slightly off-center toward the lower left. In this painting, the background is more complex, in that several darker tones of browns and beige are juxtaposed in large geometric areas that extend in broad horizontal sweeps across the space of the picture. One narrow, dark brown form extends straight up the middle of the composition, creating a dynamic thrust that contrasts with the beautiful, contemplative equilibrium of the

---

[45]Jonson, "Psychic Phenomena," p. 8, RJ 8: 6294.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

first in the trilogy. In the center of the painting is a rectangle with curving red forms contained within its firmly enclosed contours which are clearly separated from the diaphanous planes of color that fill the rest of the picture plane. This form seems distant, even unrelated, to the rest of the composition. The subtle ingenuity of Jonson's best works from the era of World War II is that they are often successful in creating harmonious groupings out of seemingly disparate components such as this firmly outlined rectangle and the short, red, curving forms it encloses.

The third painting in the trilogy [Plate 119], meant to be seen on the right, features the dominant motif of three circles and a background of broad areas of beige and gray similar to that in the first painting of the series. In this work, which is vertically oriented like the first, the series of flat geometric forms has been replaced with a series of volumetrically shaded, curvilinear forms placed slightly toward the right within the composition. As a whole these forms suggest a mechanized, standing figure. These volumetric forms continue across the bottom of the painting, as if they establish the ground plane on which the figure is positioned. The figure is humanoid, and seems mechanically streamlined, even robot-like, due to its rigid posture and shiny, geometric surfaces.

As a group, the first in the series is pictorially the most successful for it is in this carefully organized geometric construction that Jonson achieved the most satisfying visual arrangement of forms, with the most subtle shifts in hue and tone. With the suggestive implications of the title, the forms encourage speculation as to their mystical, spiritual meanings. It seems possible that the trilogy, when read from left to right, is about the manifestation of the spiritual in intangible, abstract form in the first painting that becomes

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tangible, human form in the third painting, through a process of transformation alluded to in the second painting. Hence, the divine is made physically real and visible to the ordinary viewer who looks at the *Trilogy* from left to right, which is the natural way for the eye to pass from one image to another when they are arranged horizontally. It is also possible that the figure in the third painting is not representative of humanity but of the fetishes and ritualistic objects that are supposed to facilitate the personal, inward connection between the individual and the spiritual forces around him, which include the figurative, ritual objects of the tribal, indigenous societies of Africa, North America, and elsewhere and the iconic images and sculptures in Christian churches and Buddhist and Hindu temples. Nevertheless, in this series more than in almost any of his other absolute paintings, Jonson's imagery becomes conspicuously concerned with the mystical and the supernatural, and does so by using symbolically meaningful geometric forms and combining and integrating them with organic forms to complete or expand the meaning. True to his fundamentally reticent spirituality, Jonson leaves more questions than answers.

Casein Tempera No. 6–1941 [Plate 120] is an intriguing, complex combination of figurative and abstract forms which may visualize some of Rudhyar's ideas concerning the attainment of the spiritual in transcendental painting. In this painting, which consists of various tones of ultramarine, a serpentine form moves upward as it twists around a nearly vertical white line which intersects two white circles. Large, transparent areas of pale blue run along the left and right sides of the composition and frame the serpentine form and white line and circles. Jonson has carefully airbrushed these misty forms so that they appear to reflect light and occupy three-dimensional space even as they become transparent and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seemingly weightless. As is often true of Jonson's absolute paintings, contradictions and oppositions are depicted with amazing conviction. The background is a deep, muted ultramarine, into which the serpentine form sometimes merges, becoming indistinguishable from the background. The serpentine form has been rendered to seem smooth and shiny, but only some of its broadly curving contours are visible in this murky blue environment. The white line and two circles bisected by it, all of which have been airbrushed with a glowing white, were common motifs in Jonson's absolute paintings by 1941. However, the rather intangible serpentine form is a rare feature of his absolute paintings. This sort of form was seen in *Life* of 1921. [Plate 17] In the earlier painting, the serpent crawling through the desert is part of a very Symbolist painting. In the 1941 painting, Symbolist and Surrealist themes and references may be present, but iconographic and narrative meanings are minimal and much more subtle than in Jonson's earlier paintings.

The serpentine form may be part of an elaborate metaphor for spiritual transformation, a fundamental theme of transcendental painting. This painting may be an attempt to visualize Rudhyar's idea of how spiritual enlightenment through non-representational painting is a personal, intuitive, dynamic process, rather than a fixed, unchanging result of spiritual experience or contemplation. Rudhyar explained this concept at great length in his unpublished treatise on transcendental painting, and although there is no evidence Jonson intended to do so, this painting seems to visualize the transcendental experience in art that Rudhyar described. Rudhyar explained how "transcendental," the philosophically complex term adopted by the TPG, originated from a presumed duality between the material and the spiritual, but that ultimately this debate was irrelevant to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

modern philosophical thinking. However, Rudhyar's explanation of what is meant by the concept of transcendental painting helps explain the inclusion of this serpentine form and the vagueness with which its scale, form and solidity have been described. Rudhyar wrote:

> In philosophy the word "transcendental" has been usually associated with the concept of spirituality or other-worldliness, and often the connotation is one of contempt for the material world of sense-perception....the spiritual Real [sic] as opposed to the material Unreal. [sic] Thus a dichotomy opposing a Platonic realm of Ideas [sic] or a mystic realm of Spirit [sic] to the physical world of everyday experience apprehended by our bodily sense is ordinarily established or presupposed as the background for the use of the term "transcendental."[46]

Although Rudhyar continued by stating that this dichotomy need not be sustained in order for the term to have meaning in modern times, and the use and understanding of the term needed to be modified, it seems that this basic conflict of the material world and the spiritual world is alluded to in Jonson's painting. This is suggested by the vanishing contours of the serpentine form and the close similarity of its color and texture to the muted, flatly applied ultramarine behind and around it. By juxtaposing the serpentine form with this geometric configuration of a line and two circles around which it wraps itself, Jonson seems to have visualized the process of spiritual transformation, the transition from the material world to the spiritual world as Rudhyar conceived it in the polarity between the organic and the geometric. Rudhyar explained how a living thing could undergo such a transformation, namely from material reality to spiritual reality, when he wrote:

> A living organism transforms itself spontaneously from within as the result of the instinctual pressure of the life-force, whose cycles of transformation are regular and conditioned by inherent cosmic necessity. Likewise when we speak of a "transcendental movement" in the arts, or in philosophy, science

---

[46]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," pp. 3-4.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> and human civilization in general, we are referring to a self-induced, organic, inherent process of transformation of human consciousness and of the forms in which human consciousness makes itself manifest, articulate and compelling; an inevitable process rooted in historical, generic necessity.[47]

In Jonson's painting, the living organism undergoing spiritual transformation is literally embracing the "inherent cosmic necessity" to which Rudhyar referred. Cosmic imagery appears prominently in many of Jonson's absolute paintings, so this work is not unusual in that respect. However, here is the juxtaposition of organic life and geometric structure that was of the highest spiritual order according to Rudhyar; it is leading the tangibly real toward the spiritual fulfillment it seeks.

In sharp contrast to many of Jonson's oil paintings done during World War II, many of his watercolors of these years are more strictly geometric, demonstrating a precise visual order and more transcendental, mystical experience. *Watercolor No. 6–1942* [Plate 121] seems to have originated in the innovations in evoking the spiritual that Jonson used so effectively in *Esoteric Trilogy* two years earlier. Numerous transparent geometric shapes have been placed parallel to this vertically-oriented picture plane and allowed to overlap one another. Two triangles and three wide arcs project upward beyond the center of the picture. In the top of the painting are two concentric circles filled in with a bright, light-toned cadmium red. The tip of the larger triangle coincides with the centers of the two circles. Whereas the two circles are opaquely colored, the other, larger forms are transparent, muted shades of cadmium blue, green, and siennas. Another, narrow, dark-gray triangle projects upward at an angle in the upper right corner of the painting. The empty space in the

---

[47]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," pp. 4-5.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

background, behind all of these forms, is filled in with a medium-toned sienna, which permeates the delicately colored geometric shapes. In this painting, Jonson has exploited the spiritual suggestiveness made possible by the use of the airbrush to smoothly and carefully fill in large areas of color. This work is truly a triumph of the potential of the airbrush as a tool for artistic expression. The large geometric shapes in this composition function here as they do in similar absolute paintings, as visual vectors that direct the viewer's attention in one direction or another. In this case they seem to move upward at various speeds, most of them slowly but others (particularly the narrow triangle at the far right) with much greater thrust. The suggestion of movement in this painting is intended to achieve the heightened spiritual awareness that was the purpose of absolute painting. Although the selection of colors and their careful, delicate application with the airbrush makes this work similar to *Esoteric Trilogy*, here the geometric forms are larger, flatter and more transparent. As with *Esoteric Trilogy*, the subtle selection and arrangement of shapes encourages careful, thoughtful deliberation, and this meditative experience is essential to the effectiveness of an absolute painting.

Watercolor No. 12–1942 [Plate 122] is one of Jonson's most intriguing and visually satisfying absolute paintings, and further demonstrates that Jonson's best works from the years of World War II are his watercolors. The careful choice and arrangement of intricate geometric shapes and the complex harmonization of colors is key to the work's spiritual effectiveness. For Jonson, a transcendental painting needed to inspire lengthy, riveting contemplation, and this work truly succeeds in doing this. The airbrush technique has been used to fullest effect in this painting, creating smooth surfaces of vibrant colors and crisp

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

geometric shapes. The composition is dominated by two partially overlapping, almost symmetrical geometric forms. The one to the left is dark olive green, the one to the right is crimson. Both forms have been outlined in thin, even strips of white. These white lines were probably rendered with careful masking of intricately shaped areas of the watercolor board. Each form consists of three rectangular shapes that meet at corners, almost forming the letter "L." Behind them are two broad areas of rich cerulean blue which are separated from one another by a central, vertical band of a lighter blue. As with most of Jonson's more pictorially successful and spiritually evocative paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s, the forms are flat and parallel to the picture plane. Although the two L-forms are not identical and Jonson has devoted large portions of the painting to the different tones of blue, he has achieved extraordinary clarity, balance and harmony in both the organization of shapes and the selection of colors. The order, clarity and slightly asymmetrical balance of forms is essential to the composition's spiritual fulfillment.

Color also operates for full spiritual effectiveness. True to Kandinsky's explanations of the qualities of different colors, the blues in the background recede into the distance and draw the viewer's attention into the imaginary space behind the picture surface. Hence, blue functions as the heavenly, transcendent, and emotionally sedate and inward color that Kandinsky considered it to be in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.[48] The dark green and red geometric forms project forward and become almost iconic emblems of contemplation and transcendence. This work embodies Jonson's belief that spiritual experience would come

---

[48]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 181-185.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

through the careful contemplation of the design of an abstract image. Green and red, as complementary hues, project away from one another. As warmer and more saturated hues than the tones of blue, they project toward the viewer. Outlining them in white further differentiates them from one another and the background space. It is testimony to Jonson's supreme sense of color that he could harmonize three completely different hues, including one pair of complements and the adjacent hue of one member of the pair. This painting has no plausible connection to anything in the natural world; it is completely and undoubtedly non-representational. Thus, it fulfills Jonson's theoretical ideal that the transcendental experience would come about through an image of pure form, color and structure. The viewer's attention is focused on pure visual elements chosen, arranged and modified by the artist's "inner necessity" to provide the leap from the natural, everyday world to an intangible, spiritual environment.

Oil No. 12–1942 [Plate 123] is similar to the watercolor just discussed in choice of shapes and colors and is one of Jonson's best oils from the era of World War II.[49] In this work, two connected rectangular red forms extend along the left edge of the canvas. They meet two semi-circular black forms, one much larger than the other, at the bottom. One is shifted slightly away from the horizontal, while the other is vertical. The larger of the semi-circular black forms tilts upward slightly in the lower right corner of the composition. A smaller network of forms, consisting of triangular, interconnecting areas of red, extends down the right side of the canvas. All forms are outlined with white lines of even width.

---

[49]It should be noted that although this work and the one discussed just before it are both numbered "12" and done in 1942, one was done in oil and the other in watercolor and there is no reason to believe that there is any deliberate pairing of these works.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This same linear device was used in *Watercolor No. 12-1942*, and is the distinctive feature that connects these works stylistically. Behind these forms is a large oval area of deep cerulean blue surrounded on both sides by curving areas of brown with a black circle in the center of it. This composition is a marvel of subtle contrasts. The symmetrical stability of the large, curvilinear forms of blue and brown contrast with the asymmetrical energy of the smaller geometric forms outlined in white. The cooler and more-subdued tones of blue and brown seem to recede compared to the geometric forms of red and black outlined in white which appear to project forward, as if they occupy another spatial plane within the composition.

This painting demonstrates some of the most important ideas on the use of shape and space that Jonson explained in his writings of the 1940s. In the treatment of shape, this painting features the semicircular shapes and zigzagging lines that Jonson felt were essential to abstract composition and the more complicated forms that could be derived from basic geometric shapes. In the treatment of space, this painting demonstrates how the skillful manipulation of shapes, colors and their arrangement in the composition could make one set of forms adhere flatly to the picture plane while another set projects forward in another plane of space. In the use of color, Jonson has managed to combine disparate spectral hues (blue and red) with neutrals and earth tones (black, white and brown). Once again, Jonson's delicate balance of forms and his success with complicated color harmonies is evident. This oil painting is noteworthy for its lack of facture; the presence of semi-fused, rectangular brush strokes seen so often in Jonson's earlier oil paintings is absent here. Compared to *Watercolor No. 12–1942*, this composition has more dynamic rhythm and less static balance.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This painting has no discernable references to anything in nature; it is unquestionably "absolute."

Aspects of Kandinsky's theories as outlined in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane* provide a means of reading the spiritual in this painting. The background of blue and brown creates a mood of stability and tranquility, of quiet transcendence. These background forms are in stark contrast to the long rectangles, small triangles, and sharply fragmented circular forms, which come together to generate circular movement that simultaneously projects forward. According to Kandinsky, diagonally placed forms and bright, warm colors are dynamic, energized, and emotionally intense. Kandinsky also wrote about how forms arranged symmetrically, centrally, and parallel to the picture plane and its sides are more stabile, immobile, and emotionally sedate. He went further, explaining that cool, muted colors also conveyed similar emotional and spiritual experiences.[50] There is an apparent contrast in mood, emotion and space in this carefully developed painting. Although it is not known if Jonson consciously and deliberately followed the ideas and theories that Kandinsky wrote about in his major treatises, some of his works suggest that he studied Kandinsky's theories and that he deliberately applied them to some absolute paintings.

Watercolor No. 6–1943 [Plate 124] is another example of Jonson's skillful manipulation of color and spatial relationships involving completely geometric forms with no references of any kind to the natural, physical world. In the middle of the composition

---

[50]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 177-189, 584-591.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

is a diagonally positioned series of four circles. The circles are connected by narrow white lines. Each circle consists of alternating black-and-white stripes. The circles are in order of decreasing size; each circle closer to the bottom of the composition is smaller than the one above it. Behind all but the uppermost circle are trapeziums which are evenly colored with sienna. As the viewer's eye moves diagonally along the series of circles, his attention shifts left and right and up and down as it follows the contours of the trapezoids which interfere with the continuous flow of his vision. In the upper right and lower left corners of the composition are several parallelograms colored with an umber that is more opaque than the sienna and cerulean blue used elsewhere in the painting. These quadrilaterals zigzag back and forth as they connect to one another at their corners. Seemingly behind these black-and-white striped circles and brown trapezoids are overlapping, diaphanous planes of cerulean blue. Two of these planes are oval-shaped and extend from the top and bottom edges of the painting. The cerulean planes are darkest where they overlap behind the four circles in the center of the painting, and even there the tones of cerulean are not dark. This painting is a successful use of Jonson's theory of the evocative possibilities of colored planes shifting in space to create ambivalent depth or, more specifically, to neutralize the sensation of things projecting forward or receding into the distance.[51] Once again, carefully modulated tonal planes of color have been used for translucent, poetic, evocative impact. They suggest glowing spiritual light, which had long fascinated Jonson as a highly effective means of visualizing the spiritual. In accordance with Jonson's theories, the black-and-white circles

---

[51]Jonson's lecture notes (pp. 3-4) for October 27, 1948 in his course on art appreciation taught at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque in the fall 1948 semester, RJ 8: 6249.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and brown quadrilaterals seem to project forward, until one looks closely and notices that the overlapping planes of cerulean blue darken the large sienna trapeziums in many places, thereby undermining any clear and definite sense of depth, of what is near or far.

Watercolor No. 9–1943 [Plate 125] is impressive for the clever combination of powerfully expressive abstract forms with subtly disguised symbolism of timeless, universal spiritual meaning. Whereas many of Jonson's paintings from these years are predominantly blue, this painting consists mostly of a highly saturated cadmium red, with smaller areas of orange-red of intensity and tone almost the same as that of the predominant red. The most contrast in color achieved in this watercolor is seen in the small forms in black and white. The most immediately noticeable feature of the painting is the rapidly ascending black and gray arrow trailed by three long, narrow white lines and two overlapping triangular areas of orange-red. This is a symbolic reference to the ascent of the spirit. It brings to mind Kandinsky's concept of the ascending triangle as symbolic of the human spirit in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. This black triangle in this painting is surrounded by two large, flat red forms with smoothly rounded contours that swell to large, bulging circular, tear-drop shapes. These shapes wrap around one another asymmetrically. Each one is conspicuously punctuated by a small black circle. These large, interlocking, rounded forms comprise an obfuscated T'ai chi, the symbol of the ancient Chinese spiritual concept of the yin and yang. Therefore, this painting combines the ascent of the spirit with one of the oldest concepts of the fundamental dualities of life and the human spirit that the yin and yang embody. Referential symbolism and pure formal expression are well-united in this work. The evocative power of red as described by Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seen in his *Out of Cool Depths* and Jonson's *Watercolor No. 9–1938* is present here.

Watercolor No. 14–1943 [Plate 126] features shaded, pulsating colors in circular shapes that create powerful visual rhythms which allude to movement, energy and light, all of which are often found in Jonson's absolute paintings. Three wide arcs of colored light, shaded areas of pale tones of blue, brown and orange, project from the upper right corner of the composition. Two smaller, more completely delineated arcs of pale brown emanate colored light from the left. The poetic, spiritual effect of colored light is a visual device Jonson employed often and to superb effect. These reverberating circular forms are equivalents to the force lines used by the Italian Futurists and Arthur Dove, although they have been handled in a much tighter, more mechanical manner. Their meaning would be essentially the same: to visually suggest the power of forces in nature through concentrically circular forms, to allow abstracted forms to allude to the forms and forces found in nature.[52] Here, the power would be solar energy, the light coming from the sun or perhaps a star. The sun, stars, planets and other astronomical forms were frequent motifs in Dove's paintings and were part of his interest in creating abstractions based upon natural forms, events and processes that had fascinated him since childhood.[53] Considering Jonson is known to have admired Dove's work and to have felt there was an underlying kinship between his work and Dove's, it is entirely possible that Dove's paintings were a source of inspiration for this watercolor. Jonson considered semi-circular forms one of the basic shapes in painting. His

---

[52]Cohn, "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove, Part I" and "Arthur Dove and the Organic Analogy."

[53]Debra Bricker Balken, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1997): 9-10, 17, 20-21. 24-25.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

keen interest in astronomy and astrology, demonstrated by his periodic returns to the theme as seen in his *Time Cycle*, *Astronomy* in his *Cycle of Science* series, the *Cosmic Theme* series, and the *Zodiac* series, suggests that the interpretation of *Watercolor No. 14-1943* as symbolic of radiating energy forces in the cosmos is plausible. In the middle of this work is a nearly vertical rectangular area of blue with a narrow, lance-shaped form projecting upward through it. The area of blue is somewhat integrated with larger, more transparent, less clearly defined planes of blue that surround it. This form is an emblem of stability in a composition in which geometric, abstracted forms are in constant, pulsating motion.

Another possible way to comprehend this painting is to explore its possible spiritual, mystical meanings as opposed to its likely references to phenomena and forces of nature and the cosmos. The composition of pulsating circles moving through space seen in this painting is similar to the brightly colored, vertically oriented, concentric circles in Emil Bisttram's *Pulsation*. [Plate 127] This large oil on canvas was painted no later than 1941, so Jonson is likely to have seen it before this 1943 watercolor was made. Ruth Pasquine has interpreted *Pulsation*, one of Bisttram's best known paintings, as a Theosophical visualization of the elevation or transcendence of the individual human being from the lower level of personality and everyday corporeal existence to the higher, more spiritual, fundamental reality of the individual. Pasquine describes this transformation, using Bisttram's terms which came from various Theosophical sources, as a shift from the "personality" to the "ego," or, respectively, the "lower man" to the "higher self."[54] Rudhyar espoused similar philosophical concepts in

---

[54]Ruth Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption: Dynamic Symmetry, Theosophy and Swedenborgianism in the Art of Emil Bisttram (1895-1976)" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 2000): 419-422.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"The Transcendental Movement in Painting" when he described the importance of the individual intellect as a means of spiritual transformation by stating: "We can say that mind is the transcending energy of the life-process at the human level of life organization and consciousness; that Soul is the result of the transcendental process having succeeded in producing organic integration at the next higher level of being and consciousness for man."[55] Jonson's painting is significantly different because in his work the circles are large, concentric forms that move horizontally, not vertically. Therefore, the spiritual energy forces do not elevate the individual as obviously as they seem to do in Bisttram's painting. Since they seem to engulf the almost vertical narrow blue form in the center of the composition, they may refer to spiritual or even natural forces that embrace humans in their earthly existence, such as sunlight.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the *Chromatic Contrasts* series was begun in the mid-1930s, but after six paintings made during only a few years, Jonson abandoned the series, perhaps because he thought it had not produced any works which were successful in visualizing the spiritual. In 1943, Jonson revived the series, and in the next few years he created numerous works in which subtle disharmony of color proved more interesting and effective in conveying the spiritual.[56] It is not surprising that the series proved challenging for Jonson, since it was founded on the difficult premise of combining and harmonizing colors, tones and degrees of brightness which are usually not visually pleasing when

---

[55]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," pp. 6-7.

[56]Jonson to Arthur, January 6, 1944, RJ 1: 638. Jonson wrote in this letter: "Much work has been done with the Chromatic Contrasts group. This is the most exciting element under work for a long time. It has to do with dissonance in color."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

combined in a painting. In 1943 Jonson painted three watercolors in a series he entitled *Trilogy–Dissonance*. As was usually true for his three-part series, the works were meant to be seen from left to right. These works were part of the ongoing *Chromatic Contrasts* series, for Jonson included them as *Nos. 8*, *10* and *13* in the series. Although planned as a trilogy that was supposed to be most effective if the works were viewed side-by-side, they are part of the *Chromatic Contrasts* while remaining separate within this large, ongoing series.[57] The lack of continuity in their numbers as part of the *Chromatic Contrasts* indicates that Jonson executed other works in between painting the *Trilogy*.

The first of the watercolors in *Trilogy–Dissonance* [Plate 128], meant to be seen on the left, is probably the most visually and spiritually effective of the trilogy. In this painting, two dark blue-gray triangles overlap the corners of a dark blue rectangle in the middle of the composition. These solidly-colored flat forms are surrounded by geometric forms that have been rendered with alternating stripes of various colors. These striped forms hold together as individual shapes even though they are not as clearly and tightly contoured as the darker forms in the center. To the left of these dark blue-gray forms are two small forms, a circle of alternating light and dark blue-green lines and a rectangle of alternating orange lines. To the right of the dark blue-gray forms are two larger, striped geometric forms. One is a circle composed of alternating purple and lavender lines and the other is a rectangle of alternating red and yellow lines. All of these geometric forms float in a vague space of yellow. This wide area of yellow is framed in the upper left and lower right by large triangular areas of alternating stripes of black and orange. On the far left, the various forms are flanked by two

[57]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," RJ 10: 7112-7176.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

long, vertical red strips. Jonson's painting makes use of the rhythmic quality of line and the differences between lines placed in various directions. The patterns of alternating lines used throughout this composition are motifs that can be directly traced to Kandinsky's theories concerning the elaboration of line in non-representational painting as explained and illustrated in *Point and Line to Plane*. Near the end of his discussion of the use of line, Kandinsky gave numerous examples of how line could be developed, and one of his examples matches Jonson's striped forms in this painting.[58] Finally, the entire image is enclosed by a wide framing area of black that runs the perimeter of the composition and varies slightly in width. This is a highly successful and evocative use of the concept of dissonant color relationships as Jonson had explained at length in numerous lectures of the 1940s. Jonson has succeeded in combining bright and subdued, pale and vivid oranges, reds and yellows with dark, cool tones of gray-blue.

Chromatic Contrasts No. 19 (Watercolor No. 32–1944) [Plate 129] features the most basic color contrast possible, that created by complementary colors. Most of the painting consists of a smoothly airbrushed layer of vibrant cerulean that forms the background for other forms. Throughout the painting are zigzagging lines of a pure, bright orange. Across the bottom of the painting is a series of short, irregular zigzagging lines. In the top of the painting are two long zigzagging lines. Each one shoots upward and then bends to the right. In the middle of the painting is a small white circle which obfuscates the possible connection or continuation of the lines. Are the long lines seen in the top of the composition the

---

[58]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 612-615.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

continuation of the shorter lines on the bottom or are they separate lines? The white circle prevents the viewer from knowing. Between the short and long zigzagging lines are two white apostrophe-shaped forms arranged symmetrically. The simplicity and clarity of shapes and colors and their homogenous texture make this composition visually striking. Zigzagging lines were described by Jonson as one of the fundamental types of lines, originating in prehistoric and ancient arts, and so they had longstanding cultural and expressive origins. As Jonson declared in his writings, such lines were wonderfully expressive and could, if used effectively, be spiritually enlightening.

Jonson's *Dynamics* series of 1944 to1945 are three of his most impressive paintings done in oil during this period of great innovation. These canvases (*Oil No. 7–1944*, *Oil No. 1–1945*, and *Oil No. 2–1945*) are rather large–the left and right ones are each 28" x 40" and the center one is 40" x 40". The series relies entirely on compositions based on zigzagging patterns separated from any clearly recognizable phenomena or things, except perhaps for lightning in one of the paintings. In this series, Jonson has demonstrated the importance and utility of zigzagging lines by making them the dominant features of these uncluttered, activated pictorial spaces. Compared to many of Jonson's other absolute paintings, these are energetic, excited, dramatic pictorial statements. Of the three canvases, it is probably the second that is the most contemplative and hence the most transcendent. The first is a more tentative expression, and the third is a seemingly hasty work, as if it exists only for the sake of the zigzagging lines. All three rely on unconventional, startling arrangements of shapes and colors for their effectiveness.

Dynamics No. 1 [Plate 130], intended to be seen on the left, features a continuous red

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

line that curves across the top of the canvas before it zigzags downward in a wide, sweeping thrust on the right side of the composition. It is surrounded by a pale tint of blue while it partially encloses an area of pale gray. In the lower left is a small, irregularly shaped area of bright green, part of which is firmly outlined by a broken black line. In the center of the composition are four small forms which in shape and scale are in sharp contrast with the line that surrounds them. The bottom form is fairly geometric while the other forms are rather biomorphic. All four have been painted in vivid shades of blue-violet, dark green, yellow-green and purple. The zigzagging red line creates positive and negative or aggressive and passive sensations. This generates the dynamic quality basic to this series and this concern for the interaction between line and picture plane is part of Kandinsky's theory, as explained in *Point and Line to Plane*, of the alternating power of visual thrusts of the zigzagging line and the relationship between the edges of the picture plane and diagonal lines placed on it.[59]

Dynamics No. 2 [Plate 131], intended to be seen in the middle, features two wide lines that meander around the composition with sudden shifts of direction. The line to the left, which is half dark green and half purple, shifts direction three times, becoming a distorted letter Z. The other line, which is toward the right side of the canvas, is half dark blue and half orange. It is much longer than the first line and encompasses a large area as it shifts direction five times, shifting from the upper left, across the middle of the canvas, and then down to the lower right. The space around the two lines is bright green. The area enclosed by the smaller line is pale violet while that enclosed by the larger line is pale

---

[59]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 652-655.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

yellow. A couple of small circles and bent lines painted in orange and green have been placed inside these semi-enclosed spaces and they seem to float weightlessly. This painting utilizes some of Kandinsky's basic theories concerning the expanding point and the zigzagging line. According to Kandinsky, the point, even as it grew larger but remained essentially circular and self-contained, was a shape that established visual focus, contemplation and stability. In other words, it represented quiet, repose and immobility.[60] By contrast, Kandinsky saw the zigzagging line as a vibrant, energetic visual force. According to Kandinsky's theory, such lines are the result of a point sent in various directions as different forces and tensions act upon it and drive its movement through pictorial space.[61] Hence, *Dynamics No. 2* is a combination of stasis and movement, silence and noise, action and repose. The contrast between the small circle and the long, sweeping zigzags that surround it create the dynamic energy and movement that generate an emotional, perhaps even spiritual response from the viewer.

Dynamics No. 3 [Plate 132], meant to be seen on the right, is dominated by a wide line of blue outlined in black that zigzags sharply to the left and then back to the right, almost looking like a thunderbolt. A smaller version of the same line, painted in orange and outlined in black, has been placed toward the left. The space surrounding the main zigzagging line has been filled in with yellow and a small curving area of light peach. The space surrounding the smaller zigzagging line has been filled in with white and a small

---

[60]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 538-547.

[61]Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*: 584-589.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

curving area of pink. The edges of the canvas and the space between the zigzagging lines has been filled in with a deeper peach tone. Compared to the first two paintings in the series, this one fails to have the complex, subtle, almost symphonic development of the predominant theme that establishes the spiritual, emotional reaction which Jonson considered essential to the success of transcendental painting.

In the years 1946 and 1947, Jonson did seventeen oil paintings in a series he entitled *Pictographic Compositions*. The motifs used as the basis for this series were loosely based on the pictographic drawings made by Native American people of the Southwest hundreds and even thousands of years ago that have survived on cave walls. Jonson once explained the series as "an emotional [hence spiritual] organization established in design terms upon thinking of pictographs and petroglyphs in general."[62] These works feature white lines created by making incised linear marks in the paint surface, a surface which Jonson may have deliberately thickened by adding sand.[63] By the 1940s, many artists in the United States had turned to Native American art as sources of inspiration and visual material to be used in their works. Hence, Jonson was involved with a broad trend in American painting after World War II, a trend that contributed much to Abstract Expressionism.[64] As shown in previous

---

[62]Jonson as quoted in Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*: 84.

[63]Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*: 84.

[64]Among the most thorough and recent studies of the importance of Native American art, culture, ritual and philosophy to Abstract Expressionism include Kirk Varnedoe, "Abstract Expressionism," in William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984): 615-660; Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); W. Jackson Rushing III, *Native American Art and the New York*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

chapters, Jonson's work had been connected with the local terrain and indigenous cultures of the Southwest on numerous occasions since he moved to New Mexico. In the *Pictographic Compositions*, Jonson was inspired by the ancient cave drawings of Native Americans in the Southwest to develop precisely controlled, geometrically structured linear designs in combination with geometric and biomorphic forms that have little if any connection to the natural world.

Some paintings in the series tend toward geometric, somewhat cosmic imagery, but take it in directions unprecedented in Jonson's oeuvre due to his new technique of incising lines through paint. *Pictographic Composition No. 1 (Oil No. 7–1946)* [Plate 133] is a vertical canvas in which narrow bands of yellow, ultramarine, orange, and yellow-green surround a wide area of black. A small, carefully shaded yellow sphere appears in the lower right corner of the area of black. In this area of black there are two lines, usually parallel, which have been incised into the canvas, exposing layers of white primer underneath. One long set of lines makes a hook at the top of the picture, turns down sharply, and then makes a long curve back up. Superimposed over these lines are two parallel lines that form a perfect circle. *Pictographic Composition No. 17 (Oil No. 6–1947)* [Plate 134] is another painting in the series with cosmic imagery. In this horizontal painting, a large irregular area of black is framed by an evenly painted area of light blue which, in turn, has been matted with medium-blue paperboard. Inside this black area is a large red circle. Numerous twisting, curving and sharply turning lines extend across and over the black area and the red circle. They are thin lines rendered by incising through paint. A small purple circle is placed

---

Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

near the center of the area of black. A small medium-tone blue circle has been placed on the far left, in the middle of the light blue area.

Other paintings in the series involve biomorphic imagery. *Pictographic Composition No. 9 (Oil No. 19–1947)* [Plate 135] is a vertically oriented composition in which three large, amorphous areas of color bleed down and up from the edges of the canvas, overlapping in the center of the composition. The amorphous shape extending from above is deep green while the two shapes extending upward are bright cadmium red and muted lavender. The area where all forms overlap is black, a pictorial device intended to mimic the effects of complementary colors (in this case green and red) creating a dark neutral when combined or overlapped. Overlapping of the other hues creates pockets of darkened colors. The quality of transparency seen so often in Jonson's absolute paintings is still present. Three amoeba-like shapes, each with a hollow center, float down the center of the painting. They are yellow, light green and white. Three narrow, widely spaced lines extend vertically and three similar lines extend horizontally. These lines have been placed so that they divide the composition into four areas of nearly-equal size. The large, irregular planes of color that bleed over the space of this composition and the narrow, geometrically precise lines may be interpreted as illustrative of Rudhyar's ideas of the merging of the organic and the geometric, of the imperfect and the perfect as part of the vitality of physical existence and spiritual experience, all in the process of achieving the ultimate realization of the spiritual. Rudhyar explained this idea when he wrote in the fall of 1938:

> Such an immediacy of living awareness necessarily a vibrating, throbbing quality which overflows the geometrical edges of reality, which is a radiation, an "aura" thanks to which "things are more than what they are." It is the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> quality of wholeness overflowing the structure of the whole as love, as ecstasy; and negatively as infections fear and disease. No living fact is structurally and geometrically perfect. Imperfection is the condition for life. Without imperfection, without residue and overflow, there would be no vital surge, no manifested universe. It might be static Spirit; the "Inertia of the Sprit" as Blavatsky once wrote, but it would not be life, for there would be neither experience nor experiencer. In all life there is a plus element which defies analysis and eludes all geometries. No two cycles in the universe are exactly commensurate with each other.[65]

Other paintings in this series seem related to the theme of how geometric perfection can be obtained through the material and organically vital, although they do not adhere so closely to Rudhyar's descriptive prose. *Pictographic Compositions Nos. 15* and *16 (Oils Nos.* 6 and *7–1947)* [Plates 136 and 137] are quite similar in composition. In each one, four amoeba-shaped forms of various colors float around the center of the canvas. In *No. 15*, four long, curving forms float around a yellow circle whose contour is slightly irregular. Each one has been shaded so that its outer edges are brighter than its center. This suggests that they are bathed in the bright light that seems to emanate from the yellow circle in the center. Six white circular lines grouped in pairs and placed concentrically resonate from the center, almost absorbing the amoeba-forms as radiating lines of energy. In *No. 16*, three of the four forms are cropped by edges of the canvas, which makes the viewer feel he has been propelled forward into the space that these forms occupy. Nine white circles grouped in sets of three lines emanate concentrically from the center of the composition. Two other sets of three white lines stretch across the vague dark green space in gentle arcs behind the amoeba-forms. In these two paintings in the series of *Pictographic Compositions*, the geometric and the

---

[65]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," p. 53. Underlining is Rudhyar's.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

organic have been combined in a way that seems to relate to Rudhyar's idea of the imperfection of reality in opposition to the perfection of the geometric, spiritual environment.

Variations on a Linear Theme is a group of three works done in 1948 that are among the last of Jonson's finest absolute watercolors. These horizontally-oriented paintings are each 22" x 35", quite large for watercolors. In each painting, the dominant impact is the contrast between the arrangement of white lines that seem to project forward and the different arrangements of colors in rectangular areas that form two-dimensional planes which seem to recede. The color arrangements in each work are noticeably different from one another and have been developed with great care and subtlety, creating evocative, poetic expressions of the spiritual through planar arrangements of color. This series evokes the spiritual in a rather synaesthetic way, through the careful orchestration of changes in hue, tone and brightness among the rectangular areas of color. The colored backgrounds in this series are unusual for Jonson's painting because of the pastel-like tonalities in the first two and the softened, blurred contours in all three. The checkerboard arrangement of planes of various colors are similar to the many grid-pattern abstractions by Klee such as *Abstraction with Reference to a Flowering Tree* of 1925 [Plate 89], *Polyphonically Enclosed White* of 1930, *Blossoming* of 1934 and *New Harmony* of 1936.[66] Some of these color-grid paintings by Klee are similar to Jonson's *Chromatic Contrasts No. 7*, but the *Variations on a Linear Theme* series is even more similar to Klee's paintings. It remains unknown if Jonson was familiar with these works by Klee. Each painting in the series exemplifies one of the three basic ways that Jonson believed color could be organized–the brilliant, the tonal, and the

[66]Lanchner, ed., *Paul Klee*: 188-189, 192, 214-215, 241, 265, 269.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

dissonant. Throughout this series, Jonson has managed to create considerable variety with color as well as with line, holding true to the title and conception of the series. These watercolors, with their arrangements of white lines and grids of color, may be indebted to the ideas and, to a lesser extent, the Neoplastic paintings of Mondrian.

Jonson seems to have considered this series important to his artistic development since they were apparently exhibited shortly after they were done, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe in early 1949. The description in *The Santa Fe New Mexican* of several works by Jonson which were shown at the Museum in early 1949 matches this series, and the writer's interpretation of the series, although brief, is intriguing. The critic wrote:

> The present group of six water colors was painted in 1948, in a style developed during the past few years: air brush technique with occasional use of masking, carrying out nonobjective [sic] designs with variations in texture, in almost every instance using linear themes. Three of the paintings are grouped as a trilogy; white lines in these paintings are arranged in parallels of two, in various relations, against differing backgrounds of larger color areas. As always in Mr. Jonson's work, color and texture, transparency, and rhythm make for life and brilliance even when tones are somber.[67]

Variations on a Linear Theme One [Plate 139], the first in the series and meant to be seen on the left, features several pairs of white lines placed across the composition in slightly diagonal arrangements. They often overlap one another as they tilt slightly away from the horizontal or vertical. These white lines seem to have been superimposed on a background of subtly colored rectangles. Many of the rectangular shapes which appear behind the white lines have been colored with luminous shades of peach and orange, while the smaller rectangular areas along the edges of the composition have been filled in with pastel-like

---

[67]"Varied Exhibits Usher in 1949 at Art Gallery," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 6, 1949, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6850.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

blues, greens and reds. A vertical area of deep red has been placed to the left of the center of the composition, approximately where the golden section of this composition would be. This red plane appears closer to the viewer than the cerulean and purple planes next to it. The subtlety of choice and variation of colors and the dynamic flow of the lines that attract our attention create almost musical vibrations to delight and entrance the viewer. In managing to harmonize so many different hues, Jonson successfully realized the idea of dissonant color relationships. The white lines project forward while the translucent, pastel areas around them seem to recede. Such manipulations of pictorial space were of great interest to Jonson for their spiritual impact.

Variations on a Linear Theme Two [Plate 140], intended to be seen in the center, has more pairs of lines, some of which are now strictly horizontal and vertical and meet at right angles. The rectangular areas behind them are fewer but larger, and most have been filled in with muted shades of purple and violet. A couple of smaller rectangular areas across the top of the painting have been filled in with similarly muted shades of blue and green. In this work, shapes are simpler. There are nine rectangles and they are symmetrically balanced. The ones to the left and right are wider than those in the center. The limited range of hues in this painting demonstrates tonal color harmony. Although most of the pairs of white lines extend in all directions at sharp diagonals, there are a few pairs in the middle of the painting which are shorter than the others and completely vertical.

Variations on a Linear Theme Three [Plate 141], intended to be seen on the right, changes the configuration of white lines once again. In this watercolor there are single lines and pairs of lines. The lines are strictly horizontal, vertical, and diagonal, and all intersect

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

at right angles. Lines overlap only near the ends, so that the array of lines, while not as densely packed as in the other two paintings, spreads evenly across this composition. The vertically-aligned rectangles are filled in with a wide range of colors and shades–from light blue to dark blue, grass green to yellow green, yellow-oranges to pinks, siennas to umbers, and tones of gray. Jonson has taken care to avoid putting similar hues or tones next to one another, but there is no identifiable pattern apparent in the arrangement of this wide assortment of colors. The variety, brightness and saturation of the colors in this watercolor make this painting an example of what Jonson conceived of as brilliant color harmony.

Although using white instead of black and configuring them in various combinations, the lines that structure these compositions are similar to Mondrian's use of horizontals and verticals as the means of juxtaposing opposites in careful balance, equilibrium and logic. In his own way, Jonson has tried to visualize the spiritual order, stability and intelligibility that Mondrian intended his Neoplastic paintings to convey.[68] These three paintings are essentially diversely and intensely colored, emotive variations of Mondrian's austere, cerebral geometric abstraction. Jonson is known to have admired Mondrian, particularly for his theories of abstract art. In 1964, Jonson was quoted as saying the following in response to an interviewer's question as to what painter had influenced his work and theories the most:

> Mondrian. For me, Mondrian's theory is a perfect one. But in thinking of him I eliminate any connection he has with subject and concentrate on only the elements having to do with creative paintings. When it comes to imagery I am not so strict; while I stand for the attitude of purity that exists in Mondrian, in actually doing my work I am apt to run the whole gamut,

---

[68]Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity*: 41-46; Bois, *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994): 314-315; Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*: 22.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> allowing all kinds of happenings–through intuition, feeling and accident–to get into my works.[69]

This is Jonson's most extensive praise of Mondrian and explanation of the significance of his work and theories in relation to his own painting. Jonson admired the ideals of purity, clarity, reason, logic, and stability as means of higher, more profound understanding of the very nature of existence and the spiritual. However, he implied that he found Mondrian's distinctive Neoplastic style of painting too limited and even formulaic. The greater spontaneity and fluidity of Kandinsky's paintings was more appealing to his own sensibilities. Jonson's earliest known praise for and interest in Mondrian dates back to 1944, when Mondrian and Kandinsky died within months of one another. After Mondrian's death he painted *Oil No. 1–1944*, which he subtitled "Souvenir of Mondrian" and which obviously and deliberately looks very much like one of Mondrian's Neoplastic paintings.[70] Therefore, it is hardly surprising that these three paintings might be understood as Jonson's attempt to achieve Mondrian's goals on his own terms. However, the *Variations on a Linear Theme* are quite similar to *Colorful Sticks* [Plate 142], an oil on cardboard done by Kandinsky in 1928. *Lines* features numerous white and red lines densely packed on a darkened canvas and zigzagging in all directions. Jonson's series seems to have synthesized stylistic

---

[69]Jonson, interview by Van Deren Coke, December 1963, in Van Deren Coke, *Raymond Jonson: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964): 10.

[70]Jonson to Arthur, January 21, 1945, RJ 1: 661. In this letter, Jonson essentially eulogized both Kandinsky and Mondrian. He also explained that he made *Souvenir to Mondrian* look like one of the artist's Neoplastic paintings. It is curious why Jonson did not paint a tribute to Kandinsky. Perhaps he felt that he had learned so much from Kandinsky and that the stylistic influence of Kandinsky was so obvious in his own work that there was no reason to make a painting that looked like a Kandinsky.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

developments and theoretical concepts of Kandinsky and Mondrian into a workable, personal whole.

Jonson's absolute paintings from 1938 until around 1950 show enormous variety in style and expression, and yet they also demonstrate a definite unity of artistic purpose and vision. During these years, Jonson created his most innovative, provocative and personal expressions and visualizations of the spiritual. It was during this period that Jonson was at the height of his powers artistically. The variety within the unity of Jonson's absolute painting and the meaning of many of the works or of some of the individual motifs that appear often in these works may be explained by one aspect of the complex theory of transcendental painting explained by Rudhyar. Rudhyar believed transcendental painting was a process of self-realization and personal recreation, that every transcendental work was an act of personal rediscovery and rejuvenation by the artist. Rudhyar explained this idea in "The Transcendental Movement in Painting" when he wrote:

> The transcendental approach to the arts is one of continuous growth, constant self-renewal in answer to new needs. It is not the purely abstract or metaphysical approach which so quickly crystallizes into set formulas and empty repetitions of conventionalized patterns or decorative motives. [motifs (?)] It never sets boundaries and never stultifies technique with "thou shalt nots." It is a continual improvisation under conscious guidance of the discriminative faculty; constant rebirth. It is not bound to a particular culture, because it is itself free of universal civilization. Its nobility does not rest upon ancestors, but upon its future progeny. For it is a moving toward a constantly receding beyond. Thus it carries the true signature of the Spirit, the essence of which is motion, absolute yet cyclic; motion is always harmonic, always equilibrated in action.[71]

---

[71]Rudhyar, "The Transcendental Movement in Painting," p. 16.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Ideally, a transcendental painting would have broader appeal and meaning; what it offered its creator could be shared with its viewers. Of course, not every painting is meaningful and spiritually effective for every viewer.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

THE FOUNDING OF THE JONSON GALLERY AND JONSON'S LATE WORK, 1951-1978

Jonson's painting changed considerably in the mid-1950s, and these stylistic changes characterize the many works he produced during the later years of his career. His artistic goals remained the same, but his means of achieving them evolved. Jonson seems to have taken great interest in the revival of abstract and non-representational painting that occurred shortly after World War II. He seems to have been drawn to much of Abstract Expressionist and Color-Field Painting, and was inspired to adopt aspects of these post-war styles and incorporate them into his own paintings. His work evolved in the direction of post-World War II abstraction and yet retained much of what was distinctive in his earlier work. During the 1950s Jonson was intrigued by the large scale and all-over scattering of forms, strokes and marks of paint that was common in Abstract Expressionism. However, he was drawn more to the large areas of bold, vivid color and the overt, crisp geometry of Color-Field and Minimalist Painting of the 1960s. Although his experiments with aspects of Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s produced tentative, hesitant results, his exploration and incorporation of many aspects of Color-Field and Minimalist Painting into his work beginning in the early 1960s rejuvenated and inspired his painting, breathing new life and vigor into it. He quickly adapted Color-Field Painting to suit his own artistic and expressive needs.

Jonson had a long and productive late career. He lived to the age of ninety and painted continuously until four years before his death. He retired from the University of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

New Mexico at Albuquerque in 1954 as full professor with a pension and professional honors after twenty years of teaching. His wife Vera, eleven years his senior, died in 1965 after several years of declining health. Consequently, Jonson spent the last years of Vera's life devoting much of his time to caring for her and the rest of his time painting. He often painted at night when Vera was sleeping and he was done caring for her for the day.[1] Observing Vera's gradually failing health left him sad and depressed (and he had suffered depression in the 1920s and early 1930s), and so painting often became a refuge from this inescapable problem. After Vera died, he was widowed for seventeen years, and since he and Vera never had children, he had almost no family to occupy his time.[2] Therefore,

---

[1]Jonson in letters to Garman dated August 3, 1962, September 21, 1962, January 23, 1963 and September 27, 1964, RJ 3: 1880, 1886, 1889, and 1901 respectively.

[2]After Jonson and Arthur were widowed within approximately eighteen months of one another, Arthur moved from Portland, Oregon, where he had for most of his life, to Albuquerque to live with Jonson in the Gallery. Jonson's other siblings lived in Oregon and California, and so they were not nearby and did not visit often if at all. Jonson, Arthur and their siblings never had any children. Jonson once explained to his friend and fellow professor at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque the artist Ralph Douglass why he and Vera never had any children. He explained that they were childless because they were married during World War I and had reservations about bringing children into the world at such a terrible time in history, that they were both very dedicated to their artistic pursuits, and that a few years later they discovered that it would have been medically unwise if not impossible for Vera to be pregnant. He explained these reasons in a letter of condolence written to Ralph Douglass in 1945, shortly after Douglass' son was killed in World War II. He wrote:

> I have no son. Nevertheless I think I can pretty well sense the nature of the experience of having one and also of losing one. I started out by missing the first experience and losing all my sons by not having any. Vera and I were married during World War I and we decided that it would be sacrilegious to produce children into the world we planned to create–our aesthetic world–and the outside world which seemed at least at that time to be bent upon legalized murder and destruction. We felt that a male child born into a war could and might be inspired with the curses of it. Then later we felt that even though there would never be another war it would not be fair to any

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jonson had plenty of time during the last 28 years of his life to paint; more free time to paint than he ever had before. This abundance of time, something he had never seemed to have earlier in his life, explains why he was so prolific during his long, late phase of artistic activity.

To this day, Jonson's late works remain the least appreciated and understood of his career. Compared to his earlier work, there has been virtually no interest in his them among scholars and collectors. The beginning of Jonson's late style coincided with the revival of abstraction among the artists associated with the New York School. The irony, probably disappointing and frustrating for Jonson, is that when interest in abstraction revived after World War II, he and other artists of his generation were eclipsed as the attention was directed toward a group of younger artists based in the East, who were neophyte painters during his long struggle to create meaningful abstract art that would be appreciated and understood during an era of unprecedented global crisis.

The defining event that separates Jonson's absolute paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s from the long, late phase of his career is the founding of the Jonson Gallery in the late 1940s. The Jonson Gallery is a branch of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. It is housed in a small pueblo-style building on the north side of the campus designed in 1948, in close collaboration with Jonson, by the well-known Southwest architect

---

> child we brought into the world, for by that time I was far enough along on the journey of painting to know that at any time all of us might well starve. Then still later it became physically impossible and we learned that it was fortunate that we had not tried to have children. In all this there lies somewhat of a tragedy, for we both realize what we have missed.

[Jonson to Ralph Douglass, January 30, 1945, RJ 2: 1543.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

John Gaw Meem.[3] The building was created specifically for the purpose of being Jonson's home, studio and exhibition space for the rest of his and Vera's lives. After their deaths, the Gallery was destined to become the property and responsibility of the University of New Mexico. It was intended to serve as a permanent museum space to continuously show Jonson's life's work, much of which he still owned and promised to bequeath to the University. The Gallery was also intended to exhibit works by other artists that Jonson owned, works by artists who were from the Southwest and works by students at the University, and artists whose work was of similar purpose and inspiration to Jonson's in that it dealt with the spiritual. Consequently, the Jonson Gallery was conceived almost as a shrine to modernist art that explored and visualized the spiritual, as a shrine to the ideals, values and goals that Jonson felt abstract art should incorporate.

The Jonson Gallery stills exists and actively collects and exhibits art, particularly work by modernist and contemporary artists of the Southwest, many of whom were or are dedicated to expressing and conveying the spiritual through their art. It is believed to be the oldest institution for collecting and exhibiting contemporary art in New Mexico. The Reserved Retrospective Collection (RRC), as it came to be called, is the large group of more than 400 works by Jonson that now belong to the Gallery's permanent collection and are to

---

[3]Jonson to Arthur, October 24, 1948, RJ 1: 729. These and other letters written by Jonson in the late 1940s indicate that he carefully scrutinized all aspects of the planning and construction of the building in close discussion with Meem, who was the chief architect for the University. Jonson's letters reveal that he paid particular attention to cost control, a concern that often required him to compromise on his original, more ambitious plans for the building and reduce its size and other relatively expensive amenities.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

remain in the Gallery permanently.[4] Since Jonson had complete authority over his works until his death, many important works that were supposed to become part of the Reserved Retrospective Collection were sold through various collectors and dealers over the last thirty years of Jonson's life, and have since entered museum collections and private collections across the United States. Jonson inventoried his life's work carefully and thoroughly during his lifetime, and long before he died he had a sense of what works by him constituted his own, self-determined canon. The Open Collection is a large body of works by Jonson that belongs to the University of New Mexico but which it has the freedom and right to sell. Many of these works are still unsold and in the possession of the Jonson Gallery.

The idea for the Jonson Gallery was conceived in late 1947 during a discussion between Jonson and Dr. Phillip Bernette, who at the time was president of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.[5] It was received enthusiastically by the entire Board of Regents of the University when Jonson proposed the idea to them and they approved the plan in the spring of 1948.[6] During his years at the University Jonson had curated and installed many exhibits of works by artists who came from the local area as well as periodic exhibits of works by artists from across the United States and, occasionally, abroad. The proposed gallery was the ultimate opportunity for Jonson to obtain a brand new, permanent facility

---

[4]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 4; Jonson to Garman, January 1962, RJ 3: 1875. In this 1962 letter, Jonson lists the works up to 1961 that he intends to include in the bequeathed permanent collection of his works, which he states he is calling the "Reserved Retrospective Collection."

[5]Jonson, interview with Sylvia Loomis, April 23, 1964, transcript p. 1, Oral History Collection of the Archives of American Art, reel 3949, frame 716.

[6]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 3-4; Jonson to Arthur, May 31, 1948, RJ 1: 711.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

dedicated to hosting art exhibits at the University and exhibiting and preserving his works. The new facility was intended to provide him and Vera with a home for the rest of their lives and space for Jonson to paint freely and in comfort. Jonson explained the origins of the Jonson Gallery at length in a letter to Arthur written in May 1948, shortly after it was determined that the administration of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque liked the plan and intended to go forth with it:

> Some time ago I presented to the Board of Regents of the University through the President a proposal offering a complete Retrospective [sic] collection of the work. In making out this list last week I find it amounts to 318 works dating from 1912. And a small group of about 40 misc. [sic] drawings as well as a group of the theatre designs. All these will be the Jonson Retrospective Collection. With this gift we offered to give our Santa Fe property which will be sold and with the proceeds build an establishment on University property. This will contain a gallery, studio, shop, study and living quarters. We will have the use of this during our life time. We would act as custodians of the collection and as long as I live will of course keep adding to the collection. Another item is the works we own by other painters. This too will be given as a gift. This collection numbers 50 works. The agreement will be that we will have the use of this establishment free from any costs except such items that we have here such as light, heat, repairs, insurance etc. with [sic] the exception that there will be no property taxes as the University is tax free.
>
> I have before me now four documents that the University attorneys have prepared as a result of the Board of Regents request. They are: A Warranty Deed to this Santa Fe property with the provision that arrangements must be made that we are to occupy it until the place at the University is ready for occupancy. A gift document of the Collection of my own work. A gift document of the works by other painters and an agreement between us and the university defining the relationship of us and the set-up at the university. This latter is the security for us that we will always have a home and that the great problem of what becomes of the works when I have finished is solved.
>
> It is expected that all the papers will be ready to present to the Board at their next meeting on June 10th. Our President as well as myself believe they will O.K. it without question.... .[7]

---

[7]Jonson to Arthur, May 31, 1948, RJ 1: 711.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

During the rest of 1948, Jonson, the administration of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, and their respective attorneys sorted out various legal and financial matters concerning the Jonson Gallery. It had been planned from the beginning that the funds for constructing the new building would come from the liquidation of the Jonsons' property in Santa Fe. Since it became apparent that the funds obtained from the liquidation of the property would not be sufficient to build the new building on the campus, additional, outside funding became necessary. This additional funding came mostly from Frank C. Rand, Jr. and his wife Adele Levis Rand, who were former owners of the *Santa Fe New Mexican* and neighbors and friends of the Jonsons in Santa Fe.[8] These donations were followed by donations from Amelia White, James G. McNary and his family, Earl Manning Oren and his wife, and the painter Cady Wells[9] The plan for the Gallery as a non-profit art institution connected with the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque was formally agreed upon by Jonson and the University Board of Regents in October 1948.[10] The building, located at 1909 Las Lomas Road, opened with its first exhibit in January 1950.[11] Jonson and Vera had

---

[8]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 2, 4; Jonson to Arthur, October 8, 1948, RJ 1: 726; "Jonson Art Gallery to Hold Open House," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 1, 1950, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6872.

[9]Garman. *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 190.

[10]Jonson to Arthur, October 8, 1948, RJ 1: 726.

[11]"UNM Jonson Gallery Sets Dates for First Open House," *Albuquerque Journal*, January 1, 1950, n.p. and "Jonson Art Gallery to Hold Open House," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 1, 1950, n.p., Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6872; Jonson to Morris, October 14, 1948, RJ 4: 2428.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

moved into the residential area on the second floor the previous October.[12]

Jonson once explained the purpose of the Gallery when he wrote the following to Garman in 1956, quoting from a statement that he helped write [hence his references to himself as "him" and his"]:

> [The Gallery was founded on] the idea of an eventual permanent set-up whereby works by Jonson may be seen and studied under proper conditions. While the project is not thought of as a memorial it nevertheless appears that after his demise it automatically becomes one. The thought has been that instead of a group of works hung permanently a rotation, drawing on the store rooms, would make for a more comprehensive demonstration [of all of Jonson's work throughout his career].... . In creating the Jonson Gallery project in 1948 we planned and designed the entire lower floor to be an entirely satisfactory and completely working unit while I live and thereafter as a complete arrangement for setting up adequate facilities for showing the work I have left here.[13]

In the same letter to Garman, Jonson enumerated the goals he hoped the Gallery would eventually fulfill and, now that it had been more than six years since the Gallery opened, he assessed how successful the Gallery had been to date in these various respects. He described six specific goals. He began by saying that "1. I had in mind....the demonstration of an ideal environment as regards space and the arrangement of that space for a painter.... ."[14] He felt that in achieving this objective the Gallery was demonstrating success but that more time was needed to determine how truly successful it would be in this respect. In the letter he

---

[12]A printed announcement of the Jonson's move to Albuquerque and their new address at the Jonson Gallery is included in Jonson's scrapbook, RJ 9: 6873. It is ironic that the Jonsons moved to Albuquerque from Santa Fe in 1949, fifteen years after Raymond started teaching at the University and five years before he retired, because over the years he often complained about the long commute between his home in Santa Fe and the campus in Albuquerque and even occasionally contemplated moving closer to the campus.

[13]Jonson to Garman, June 9, 1956, RJ 3: 1809–1810.

[14]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

wrote that "so far it has proved right but what I have in mind is not a matter of a few years but rather a couple of hundred."[15] He went on to explain a second objective of the Gallery: "2. I had in mind a meeting place for discussions on the subject of painting and allied subjects."[16] In the letter he wrote that "this has not worked out at all. There have been 1 or 2 [meetings] but on the other hand have had groups in and have talked. But again this is personal."[17] A third objective of the Gallery, according to Jonson, was that he "hoped that the art students would find a good influence here and that they would take advantage of it" but he lamented that this was a "total failure as far as I know."[18] Another goal he described was that he "desired as much publicity as possible so that people would know about the gallery and thereby attract a decent attendance."[19] In this he concluded that there was "plenty of local publicity but nationally it appears impossible to get a single word."[20] A fifth objective which Jonson enumerated was that he "expected a means of extensive activity in the way of bringing in fine exhibitions [which] would materialize through financial support through donations to the University earmarked for the Jonson Gallery," but he concluded that in this respect the Gallery was a "total failure."[21] The sixth and final objective of the Gallery that he mentioned to Garman was: "6. I want the whole affair to be a demonstration

---

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of what one man can do through work and proper application without a private income," and fortunately he thought that in this respect the Gallery had been a "total success."[22]

Jonson's painting changed considerably in the mid-1950s, heading toward new directions in style that broadly characterize his abundant production from the time of his retirement from teaching until he ceased painting 24 years later. One of the basic changes that occurred in Jonson's late work is his choice of medium. In 1957 Jonson began using acrylics. He quickly grew to like the medium very much, and by 1961 he gave up all other media to use it exclusively, which he did for the rest of his career.[23] In the late 1950s acrylic paints, which are essentially chemically synthesized plastics that used to be called polymers, were a recent technical development in art materials. Since the term "polymer" was commonly used for this medium at the time, Jonson used it regularly and started to entitle these works "Polymers" and number them consecutively. Jonson explained his new interest in acrylics when he wrote to Arthur in 1957:

> The last three works are executed with a different medium. A Polymer Emulsion (plastic). The color is brilliant, dries immediately and can be controlled absolutely for any degree of matness or glossiness. After I have worked with it more extensively shall attempt to make a list of virtues and handicaps. I am sure the former will far exceed the latter."[24]

---

[22]Ibid.

[23]The only apparent exception to Jonson's exclusive use of acrylics in the later years of his career is the series of three lithograph prints he produced in 1965 under the auspices of the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque. Sets of these three prints are now in the collections of the Jonson Gallery and also in the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, the Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Portland Art Museum (Oregon), and elsewhere. [Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 143]

[24]Jonson to Arthur, November 5, 1957, RJ 2: 879.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

He explained how he came to use acrylics when he wrote to Arthur: "I have known of the water plastic some years but never investigated until Permanent Pigments brought it out in color. They sent me some samples, and here I am using it extensively."[25] Jonson used acrylics purely in most of his late works, but he sometimes mixed the liquified paints with various materials, including sand, wood shavings, sawdust and powdered Plexiglas.[26] He also developed various new techniques of working with acrylics, with or without other substances and materials mixed with them. In addition to applying acrylics with brushes, obviously the most common and traditional way of applying paint, he used the airbrush (which he had been using for years), sprayers without needles, and brayers.[27] He also developed the practice of pouring paint onto large flat sheets of glass and then pulling the large flat layers of paint off the glass and cutting and shaping them as desired, and then attaching them to the canvas or board on which he was working.[28] This created broad, flat, smooth areas of vivid colors that showed no trace of brush strokes (since they were never applied with brushes) and which could take on countless shapes, both geometric and organic, large and small. This technique is essentially collage using paint on paint. Jonson sometimes mixed thick, heavy clumps and swirls of acrylics for his paintings by pouring the paint directly on the canvas or board and then working these masses of thick paint

---

[25]Jonson to Arthur, February 4, 1959, RJ 2: 901. The acrylics manufactured by Permanent Pigments which Jonson used exclusively were sold under the brand name Liquitex.

[26]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 145.

[27]Ibid. A brayer is a hand-held device consisting of a roller which is customarily used to roll ink onto plates used to print text or images.

[28]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

extensively with brushes or other implements.[29]

Another major change in Jonson's late work is the scale on which he painted. His works from the mid-1950s and later are very large, much larger on average than most of his earlier works in all media. It seems likely that Jonson was led to work on larger canvases and boards by following the examples of the Abstract Expressionists and Color-Field Painters, whose notoriety during the 1950s and early 1960s was based in part on the enormous, overwhelming scale of their canvases. Jonson adopted the practice of painting with his canvases placed on the floor no later than 1955.[30] He probably adopted it because he had started painting some very large canvases and felt this was the best way to move around and reach all portions of them. This new painting method is obviously similar to the methods adopted by Jackson Pollock in 1947, when he began making the enormous poured and dripped paintings for which he is best known. It is unlikely that this similar development occurred in Jonson's panting independently and coincidentally. In numerous letters to Arthur written in the late 1950s, Jonson often comments that he is working on very large canvases. He quotes measurements of works that are 27" x 40", 40" x 40", 48" x 54", and at least two that are 50" x 60".[31] Never before had Jonson demonstrated so much

---

[29]Ibid.

[30]Jonson to Arthur, December 15, 1955, RJ 2: 848. It is interesting to note that painting with the canvas on the floor led Jonson to give up smoking because ashes kept falling on the painting and he was finding ashes and burned spots on furniture, carpeting and other objects in his studio and grew concerned about the dangers of fire. This is ironic because Pollock smoked as he painted his large canvases which were placed on the floor of his studio, but he sometimes threw his cigarettes onto the canvas and allowed them to become part of the multilayered, diffused, dematerialized effect of his drip paintings.

[31]Jonson in letters to Arthur dated May 26, June 19, June 24, and December 6, 1957, January 21, 1958, RJ 2: 872–874, 880, 883.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

concern for the size of his paintings. This reveals that the size of the canvas had become critical to Jonson's paintings at this time, that it was essential to the meaning and visual, expressive impact of the work. He made this clear when he wrote to Arthur in 1958 saying that "I consider these 5 [sic] works very exciting and because of their size [they] have an impact that is of a different character than [that which] we find in the small works."[32]

Jonson's paintings from the mid-1950s on feature distinct stylistic changes which, although hardly consistent from one work to the other, suggest some basic, underlying affinities that group them into a late-career style. These late works feature large, vividly and diversely colored forms with clear, emphatic contours. Colors are rich and vibrant and applied in broad areas that are often very smooth and even. The subtle delicacies of carefully shaded and overlapping layers of transparent paints are no more.[33] The newly available acrylic paints made these glowing, vibrant colors possible, but virtually eliminated the poetic translucency of thin washes and aerated paint that was so unique and effective in Jonson's watercolors from the late 1930s to around 1950. The carefully described and arranged forms seen in Jonson's paintings in all media from the years of the TPG and immediately thereafter gave way to bold, simple arrangements of large, crisply defined shapes. This new use of color coincides with the large scale of most of his later paintings. Jonson acknowledged this broad shift in style when he wrote to Arthur in 1957:

---

[32]Jonson to Arthur, January 21, 1958, RJ 2: 883.

[33]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 145. Garman alludes to this broad change in Jonson's style by describing it as "a movement from tightly knit organizations....to a broader, open statement," and that compared to his earlier paintings his acrylics "use color boldly, aggressively, in direct physical vibrancy."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Several of the recent works strike a somewhat different note in that I have used very strong pure color in bold contrasts. There are some new colors available which are transparent and of dye character that are very brilliant and I believe using these are safe as long as little or no white is added to them. By applying them they go on as a glaze and with the Polymer it is practical and advisable to build layer upon layer intil [sic] one reaches the desired value and color. The Polymer dries very fast (Oil oxidizes, Polymer dries) so one can paint over and over one layer following immediately another.[34]

The changes in style are evident as early as *Oil No. 6–1952.* [Plate 142] At 38" x 48", this is a large canvas, larger than virtually any transcendental painting Jonson made from the mid-1930s to around 1950, but by the end of the 1950s there would be even larger works. New stylistic tendencies which are distinct from the work of the 1940s and which appear frequently in the later works are evident here. Since this painting was done in oil, it indicates that the new stylistic tendencies of Jonson's late work were not completely connected to nor even instigated by his use of acrylics. Instead, it appears his use of acrylics later in the decade intensified and focused his development of these new stylistic possibilities. In this painting, two long forms, one pink and the other light green and both outlined in white, appear to float across the picture plane. These forms are surrounded by large, flat forms filled in with smoothly applied areas of sea green, light blue, aquamarine, pale green and pink. The forms are defined with broad, carefully curving contours rendered with continuous black lines. The colors in this painting are varied, vibrant, and luminous, but are not as spiritually evocative as many of Jonson's TPG-era works. The mood of this painting is surprisingly lively and buoyant, yet calming and peaceful. The two long, horizontal shapes appear to be imaginative aquatic life forms that float through the depths

---

[34]Jonson to Arthur, September 14, 1959, RJ 2: 909.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of an imaginative, translucent sea suggested by the wide areas of pale greens and blues.

Numerous paintings of the later 1950s are similar to the works of various Abstract Expressionists, and some of them are more pictorially and spiritually effective than others. During the decade, Jonson appears to have experimented with the stylistic breakthroughs of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline and Clyfford Still in numerous works. By the mid-1950s, these artists were widely exhibited and internationally famous, so Jonson undoubtedly knew their work. Several of Jonson's works from the later 1950s show the influence of Franz Kline's distinctive style of broad, slashing lines; among them are *Oil No. 10–1955*, *Oil No. 6–1956*, *Oil No. 21–1956* and *Casein Tempera No. 3–1956*. In *Oil No. 10–1955*, sketchy lines meeting at sharp angles have been drawn in paint. The overall, zigzagging quality of these lines spreading across the picture surface is a tentative attempt at Kline's classic action painting. *Casein Tempera No. 3–1956* is dominated by wide, zigzagging black lines spreading across the composition and superimposed over a roughly painted spiral of bright red. *Oil No. 6–1956* [Plate 143] is one of the most effective and intriguing works by Jonson to reveal the influence of Kline's stylistic vocabulary. In this painting, a long black form flows in short, jagged turns from the bottom of the composition to slightly above its center, where the form branches in two directions. One branch moves upward and then left. The other turns sharply to the right. This black form floats in a field of deep green, in the middle of which is a small, white circular area. Compared to Jonson's earlier absolute paintings, forms are not as precisely contoured or as overtly geometric. The black form has been rendered with short, interlocking, twisting strokes made by using a brayer, a tool Jonson had only recently started to use. The individual brush strokes can be seen easily; they are immediately noticeable and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

it is their pulsating, dynamic rhythm that leads our eye around the canvas. The white circle has also been rendered with the brayer; that is why it is so irregularly shaped and its contours are so painterly. It is surrounded by an area of green which is lighter than that in the rest of the canvas. The small white circle seems to glow, and the effect is the continuation, more or less, of the poetic translucency seen in Jonson's earlier absolute painting. However, the gestural application of the paint and the dominant twisting black line are reminiscent of Franz Kline's well-known black-and-white gestural abstractions of the same decade.

This is as close as Jonson would ever come to action painting. The immediacy and spontaneity of the application of paint and the traceable movement of the hand and the brush across the canvas seen in this work are unprecedented in Jonson's oeuvre. Jonson referred to paintings such as this one as his "improvisations." The "improvisations" constitute a loosely conceived group of works done in the second half of the 1950s, all of which seem to incorporate the spontaneous, chance effects of the gestural tendency of Abstract Expressionism. Jonson once explained the purpose of these "improvisations" as follows:

> The intention in the improvisations is to bombard the eye by a spontaneity of direct execution either in a calm or an active environment as the case may be. My hope is that, because of the long and constant striving for control with all the elements of painting, it is possible to invent, create, and improvise not only in a spirit of abandonment, but with a physical attack as well, in causing the surface to come to life. If the work is alive, I believe it must possess the ingredients that make it a dynamic and pregnant statement.[35]

Jonson's comment echoes some of the most insightful comments offered by Pollock concerning his drip paintings. Pollock was once quoted as saying: "On the floor I am more at ease, I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk round it, work

---

[35]Jonson to Reginald Fisher, March 10, 1956, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 141.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

from the four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West.... . When I am in the painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing....the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.[36] Interestingly, both Jonson and Pollock spoke of their work in terms of something organic, biological, and animated, as being "alive" or "having a life of its own." They also discuss how their painting process involves eliminating the artist's inhibitions. For Jonson, there is "a spirit of abandonment" and for Pollock "the painting has a life of its own." Pollock refers to the Indian Space Painters while Jonson does not, yet the influence of this little-known group of Western abstractionists, who were very interested in the abstract imagery of Northwest Native American art, is an intriguing issue in understanding Jonson's paintings of the 1950s in which he works on a much larger scale with the canvas on the floor and occasionally attempts the new techniques of pouring, dripping, and splattering paint.[37] There is no evidence that Jonson was familiar with the Indian Space Painters.

Several works from the late 1950s reflect Jonson's experimentation with Pollock's revolutionary techniques. In *Polymer No. 16–1959* [Plate 144], black paint has been poured

---

[36]Jackson Pollock, quoted in Bryan Robertson, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1960): 193–194.

[37]The Indian Space Painters were a group of mid-twentieth century abstract painters who drew on the abstract imagery used in the art of Northwest Native American cultures. The artists associated with this group include Steve Wheeler, Will Barnet, Peter Busa, Worden Day, Robert Barrell and Norman Daly. The most recent and extensive studies of this group are Ann Gibson, "Painting Outside the Paradigm: Indian Space," *Arts Magazine* 57 (Feb. 1983): 92-104; Sandra Kraskin and Barbara Hollister, *The Indian Space Painters* (New York: Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, City University of New York, 1991); W. Jackson Rushing, III, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); and Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

over a background of thick, creamy areas of muted pink tones, dark earthy red tones, yellows and white. The black paint has been meticulously poured and dripped in a roughly linear path from the upper left of the composition down to the lower left and then over to the lower right. The dripped and poured paint has been allowed to clump heavily in some areas and wither to thin, twisting lines in others. This painting is as close to Pollock's drip technique as Jonson ever came, and it is certainly a tentative, fleeting attempt at what was then the most radical development in post-World War II painting.

Several paintings by Jonson from the 1950s are sufficiently similar to the paintings of Clyfford Still to suggest that he was influenced by the complex, quirky Abstract Expressionist who, like Jonson, came from the rural West. No extant work better demonstrates this connection than Jonson's *Oil No. 11–1956.* [Plate 145] In this painting, two irregularly contoured, jagged, tapering forms of dark blue seem to slowly crawl toward one another across the lighter cerulean that forms the background. Small, vaguely defined areas of green, red and darkened purple float in this ambivalent blue space. The careful rendering of curving, twisting, jagged forms with a slight painterly facture is similar to Still's signature style and quite unusual for Jonson.

At 57" x 45", *Polymer No. 29–1959* [Plate 146] is one of the largest canvases, except for the murals in *A Cycle of Science*, that Jonson ever made. As one of Jonson's earliest acrylics, a close examination of the painting reveals Jonson's technique in using the medium. The pink form in the middle of the painting has been rendered with drybrushed strokes of red evenly applied over the dried under-layer of pink. The dark green form in the upper right has been similarly painted, with dark blue-black applied over green. This technique would be challenging to work with when using oils, since different paints would likely blend as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

more turpentine is added, or in the use of watercolors, where additional layers of water-soluble paint would tend to bleed into lower layers. However, with quick-drying acrylics that create sturdy, elastic, insoluble layers of paint, the drybrush technique allows optical mixing of different colors of paint. This work features flat, irregular forms that seem to crawl or drip across the surface of the picture plane, forms which are commonly seen in Still's paintings. Compared to *Oil No. 11–1956*, this work is much more innovative in adapting and incorporating aspects of Still's style into his own painting, of taking whatever if anything Jonson observed in Still's work and making something personal from it. In the middle of *Polymer No. 29* is a large, irregularly contoured form filled in with bright pink. Below this form are several more forms filled in with bright green, deep crimson, pink and light blue. These forms overlap slightly, which suggest they are three-dimensional and tightly packed together. In the upper half of the composition, there are long, flat areas of ultramarine, muted cerulean and dark blue-green. The contours of all forms have been defined with wide lines of white paint which have been slightly blended into the colors which they enclose.

Compared to Still's paintings, Jonson usually favored more tightly described forms and more vivid, brighter, saturated colors. As with Rothko, Newman and Still, the overwhelming impact of large, flat areas of vivid color is the crucial experience of Jonson's late, large paintings. Jonson's ingenious sense of color has, in *Polymer No. 29–1959*, provided a variety of evocative hues to experience. The absence in his paintings of the 1950s of the transparent and translucent forms seen in his earlier abstract paintings is evident here. This work is unusual in that Jonson has successfully created an intriguing contrast of colors according to the principle of color harmony that he referred to as dissonant color

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

relationships, which Jonson considered a highly promising but challenging approach to using color. Unlike many of Jonson's paintings of the 1950s, in this work he has managed to create a very large composition in which broad, flat areas of diverse, vivid color have spiritually evocative possibilities.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Jonson was mastering the use of acrylics, he created numerous large paintings in which elaborate textures made with thick, creamy applications of acrylics became the pronounced, emphatic impact in each work. His 1958 series *Five Variations* is a major early example of this development. In each painting, several oval-shaped forms with thick, smeared, blended textures of different colors of acrylics float in a broad but vaguely defined space. These experimental effects of texture may have been inspired by the recent developments in Abstract Expressionism. However, the practice of combining starkly contrasting, seemingly incompatible textures appeared in Jonson's earlier work; for example, there were several such paintings done in oil around 1940.

Polymer No. 24–1962 [Plate 147] is one of the most interesting examples of these experiments with new and unconventional paint textures. In this painting, a large oval form floats near the top of the composition, surrounded by a thin outline of white and a wider, smoothly painted area of light green. The green seems to float upward, as if moving away from a large, irregularly contoured area of dark green at the bottom of the painting. The oval form has been rendered with thick, densely packed, overlapping and curved strokes of paint. The colors are mostly cool, light tones of blue, green and white. Directly below, near the bottom of the composition, is a small rectangular area placed over a large area of dark green. This rectangular area is white with small chips and patches of red, dark cerulean, light blue

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and other colors affixed to the canvas. The small pieces of various colors appear to be dried pieces of acrylic paint that have been glued to the canvas. In this painting, Jonson finally created a visually engaging composition in which distinct and inconsistent textures have been abruptly juxtaposed. The thick, swirling strokes of paint massed together in the upper part of the composition are made possible by the sculptural malleability of acrylics. The small colored flakes near the bottom may have been obtained from acrylic paint dried on a palette. The compositional structure of this painting is similar to numerous paintings by Adolph Gottlieb in which roughly circular, vigorously painted, clearly separated and abruptly juxtaposed forms float in an ambiguous space and have been aligned in vertical or horizontal axes on the picture plane. *Orb* of 1964 [Plate 148] is a particularly clear example of this compositional structure in Gottlieb's oeurve. However, Jonson's works are very different in that his use of painterly texture is foreign to Gottlieb's paintings just as Gottlieb's concept of closed and open forms densely packed togther is foreign to Jonson's paintings.

The paint scrapings and chips applied to an otherwise painted canvas as seen in *Polymer No. 24–1962* and several other works Jonson made around 1960 connects Jonson to the tradition of mixed-media and collage techniques that span twentieth-century art ranging from Picasso's collages and Max Ernst's frottage paintings to Robert Rauschenberg's combine paintings of the 1950s and his photo-montaged and print-montaged images of the early 1960s. As a purist in painting, rarely given to working in mixed-media, this painting appears to have been the closest Jonson would ever come to the assemblages and junk-aesthetic objects that were part of the latest developments in art, or even the collage

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

aesthetic developed fifty years earlier when he had just began his artistic career. [38] Jonson explained his technique in detail when he wrote to Sheldon Cheney in 1963 about his newly adopted media and techniques:

> It seems that I've surprised some people that of late I've been doing some "collages" though I don't feel the term, which carries the implications of the collages produced in different ways and from different motives, is right for this type of work. The "collage" elements in these works (with a few exceptions involving rice paper) are themselves shapes developed with the polymer and affixed with the polymer medium so that the entire work is of polymer–no newspapers or magazine cutouts or "found objects" or any of the "traditional" collage assemblages.[39]

Although more aesthetically compelling than most of Jonson's earlier paintings featuring abruptly juxtaposed differences in texture, this painting and the others like it are not as effective in evoking the spiritual because they do not adhere to Jonson's established means of using color and light for such purposes. Many of Jonson's works from the 1950s seem to fall short of his long-established goal of conveying the spiritual. They seem to be part of a searching effort, of a process of exploring new expressive and stylistic possibilities. They seem to be part of a process of artistic re-discovery at a time when abstract painting was once again popular and cutting-edge. Jonson probably did not know how he and his work fit into these new developments and was attempting to determine his place in post-World War II abstraction.

---

[38]Arthur to Garman, May 27, 1962, RJ 3: 1883. Arthur told Garman that Jonson was experimenting with the techniques and aesthetics of collage in the early 1960s when he wrote in this letter: "Great big secret: he's doing collages. At any rate, the last four works are collages and the one before them has a sort of collage area. Of course they are different from any collages I ever saw and with literally a rather different viewpoint or intention than most collagers (eh?) seem to have."

[39]Jonson to Sheldon Cheney, October 25, 1963, RJ 2: 1479-1480.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In the early 1960s, Jonson seems to have rejuvenated his artistic vision, the means by which he could convey the spiritual in new, exciting, engaging ways. These means often seem to be related to or reminiscent of recent, post-World War II abstraction. This occurred after more than ten years in which most of his works were hesitant, uneven experiments with the various stylistic tendencies of Abstract Expressionism. It seems that the diluted influence of Abstract Expressionism was more a hindrance than a help, at least for most of the works Jonson did in the 1950s. Once Color-Field Painting and Minimalism came to the forefront of modernist art in the early 1960s, Jonson seems to have discovered a new mode of abstract painting that was better suited to his own artistic sensibilities. Jonson was almost certainly aware of Color-Field Painting and Minimalism, but how deep his knowledge of these new developments was is uncertain. He subscribed to several of the most widely read art periodicals of the era, including those considered relatively mainstream and those considered more avant-garde, such as *Artnews* and *Arts Magazine*. Yet he claimed he perused them for the reproductions, rarely reading the articles.[40] He owned a copy of *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, the catalogue to the momentous 1964 exhibition curated by Clement Greenberg for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which indicates he was aware of and interested in then-recent developments in abstract painting.[41]

Jonson's *Polymer No. 12–1961* [Plate 149] is one of the breakthrough works of the long, late phase of Jonson's career, in which he revitalized his painting in the face of new trends in abstract art that were arousing attention and controversy thousands of miles away

---

[40]Garman to the author, February 13, 2001.

[41]A copy of the catalogue to this landmark exhibition is in the archives of the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in New York and elsewhere.[42] This painting may well be his first attempt at his own spiritualist approach to Color-Field Painting, and it demonstrates that early on Jonson responded enthusiastically and creatively to the developments in abstract painting of the early 1960s. In *Polymer No. 12–1961*, a dark cerulean line erupts from the bottom of the canvas and breaks into two branches just below the center of the composition. One of these branches projects straight up to the top of the canvas while the other one turns down briefly before shooting upward to the middle of the right edge of the canvas. The background of this painting consists of a large area of bright white surrounded by smaller, glowing areas of cerulean blue, bright cadmium red and gray which gradually blend inward from the edges of the canvas. The narrow areas of color create an evocative, luminous effect that is very spiritual in the tradition of Jonson's earlier absolute paintings. The zigzagging blue lines are in stark contrast to the glowing colors which surround them. They have the character of lightning bolts and suggest the drama, energy and movement of the spirit. They draw the viewer's eye around the entire composition, and as they move on the surface of the picture plane they help to inspire a seemingly spiritual response. Twelve year later Jonson used broad, faintly contoured, highly luminous areas of color with no clearly delineated forms to create an abstract luminous environment in *Polymer No. 4–1973*. In this acrylic, a vaguely rectangular area of white is surrounded by similarly vague areas of yellow, light blue, yellow-green, and pink. The areas of color are only faintly contoured by the borders of where the airbrushing of paint stopped. Compared to Jonson's earlier work, this painting is

---

[42]Garman in an interview conducted on January 8, 1999. Garman has said that Jonson thought this painting was especially successful and effective compared to his other works from these years.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

remarkable for its lack of precisely delineated contouring of individual forms.

This handling of vividly colored form in both the 1961 and 1973 paintings is highly unusual for Jonson's absolute paintings because of the absence of clearly defined shapes. The vivid emanation of white light from these two paintings seems to have originated in certain aspects of nineteenth century American landscape painting which survived to give expressive power to abstract painting of mid-twentieth century America. Many luminist landscapes and seascapes done in America during the middle of the nineteenth century featured a similar treatment of space and natural light as immobilized, light-suffused planes of smoothly shaded color. This tendency has been linked with the Northern Romantic tradition that gradually led from the sublime landscape paintings of the early-nineteenth century to the work of such Abstract Expressionists as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.[43] Considering that Jonson was the American-born child of Swedish immigrants and he grew up living throughout the rural, spacious West, this stylistic connection with the Northern Romantic tradition as a source of artistic inspiration and meaning in his work is all the more tantalizing.

---

[43]This sweeping stylistic analysis has been most thoroughly and cogently discussed by Robert Rosenblum in his pioneering study *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: From Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975). Rosenblum discussed these dispersed parallels in American painting in greater detail in his essay "The Primal American Scene," *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, 1800–1950* (New York: Museum of Modern Art): 13-38. Barbara Novak has also discussed the spiritual and abstract qualities of luminism in her essay "On Defining Luminism," *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850–1875* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1980): 23-30. For a detailed discussion of how luminist landscape painting in the United States in the nineteenth century and its theoretical and philosophical context lent itself to a tentative, proto-abstraction derived from the impersonalized observation of nature, see the author's M.A. thesis, "Abstraction in the Landscape Paintings of John F. Kensett," (M.A. Thesis. Flushing, NY: Queens College of the City University of New York, 1993).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In 1966 Jonson painted *Light–A trilogy,* in which he combined his longstanding concern for the poetic, evocative power of light with the new stylistic and expressive possibilities of the most recent development in abstract painting and sculpture at the time, Minimalism. This series may be his most successful attempt at adapting the new developments in abstract painting to his own expressive and philosophical concerns. As with most of Jonson's trilogies, the three canvases, each the same size, are intended to be seen in a predetermined order. However, unlike his earlier series, Jonson intended these three paintings to be seen vertically, not horizontally. In this trilogy, each painting features the same, simple composition; only the colors change. The compositional format is truly "minimal;" in each painting, a narrow, vertically-aligned rectangle runs down the center of the canvas, creating two symmetrical, larger rectangular areas of equal size on opposite sides of the canvas. *Polymer No. 10–1966,* meant to be seen on top, consists of a yellow-green stripe surrounded by deeper green. *Polymer No. 11–1966* [Plate 150], meant to be seen in the middle, features a pale yellow strip surrounded by deep orange-red. The orange-red has been shaded to lighter tones along the sides of the yellow strip, thereby intensifying the effect that the yellow strip glows brightly. *Polymer No. 12–1966,* meant to be seen on the bottom, features a pale blue strip in the middle surrounded by deeper areas of cerulean. The cerulean around the central strip has also been shaded to a lighter tone in order to intensify the glowing effect of this bright area.

Jonson's concern for the poetry and spirituality of light is basic to his absolute painting and can be traced back to his 1917 Southwestern landscape *Light* and several of his stage sets from his years with the Chicago Little Theatre. Fifty years later, Jonson's themes were essentially the same, but the visual vocabulary utilized was the product of current

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

artistic trends. It seems that Minimalism offered Jonson new aesthetic and expressive possibilities that Abstract Expressionism usually did not. In particular, this series seems to be the equivalent in large-scale oil paintings of Dan Flavin's sculptures consisting of fluorescent neon tubes arranged in various ways to create evocative environments of colored light. Such sculpture was truly immaterial, with light as sculptural form and space. The similarities may not be coincidental, since Flavin began making his fluorescent tube sculptures in 1963, two years before Jonson made this trilogy.[44] Jonson made the trilogy shortly after a number of important early exhibits of Minimalist art, including the first solo-exhibit of Flavin's work in 1964.[45]

The paintings in this trilogy are also similar in compositional structure to some of the large canvases of vivid, expansive color painted by Barnett Newman about fifteen years earlier, such as his 1950 painting *Onement I.* Little is known about Jonson's familiarity with Newman's work; he probably saw Newman's most famous works, but may not have seen this intriguing early painting. *Onement I* [Plate 151] features a narrow, pale orange strip running down the center of a vertically-oriented canvas surrounded by two larger areas of darker-toned, almost earthy orange. Although facture is evident in Newman's very sparse composition, the sense of bright, glowing light emanating from the center of his painting is a common motif in his mature work that is often referred to as a "zip." *Onement I* has usually been considered a stylistic precedent to Newman's classic paintings such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and has also been interpreted as a philosophical statement of the new

---

[44]Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988): 97.

[45]Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988): 242.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

social, moral and spiritual order and rejuvenation that many artists and thinkers were seeking in the aftermath of World War II, the Holocaust, the spread of Communism and the Great Depression. In such a reading of the painting, as proposed by Stephen Polcari, the orange zip surrounding the larger, darker areas of orange is a thin beam of light that interrupts and eliminates the darkness of the "void;" the zip represents the birth of the new post-war order and harmony that will bring enlightenment and understanding to the viewer.[46] *Light–A Trilogy* seems to have similar philosophical meaning. This is not surprising since, like Jonson, Newman's mature paintings were the result of the need (shared by the other Abstract Expressionists) to find a viable approach to painting that could restore stability and tranquility to a chaotic, brutalized world after World War II, and like Jonson, Newman satisfied this need with purely non-representational painting.[47] In each painting in Jonson's trilogy, the central area becomes a field of bright light that breaks through the darkness or an opening in an otherwise enclosed space. It seems to be the light of knowledge, of understanding, of peace, perhaps even of the Divine.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jonson produced several large paintings using shaped canvases or mixed-media constructions attached to canvases. Forty years earlier, Jonson had explored alternatives to pure painting and the rectangular painting support, in *Composition Nine–Flame*, two of the *Growth Variants*, and *Space Abstraction: a Construction*. Now he suddenly and briefly returned to this unorthodox approach to pictorial composition. In so doing, Jonson seems to have responded to the explorations of shaped and

---

[46]Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*: 195-200.

[47]Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*: 187-196.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

constructed paintings made by Color-Field Painters throughout the 1960s such as Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly. For Jonson, these new compositional shapes probably constituted new approaches to the use of pictorial space for expressive, spiritual effects.[48] *Polymer No. 19–1969* and *Polymer No. 11–1970* are tondos. Tondos were certainly not new; they were made frequently in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Polymer No. 24–1973* consists of a flat board with four geometric sections cut out. *Polymer No. 7–1974* features long strips and circles of hard paperboard affixed to the canvas.

Jonson was probably led to the use of the tondo in the late 1960s by the late work of Ilya Bolotowsky. Bolotowsky was a member of the American Abstract Artists in New York City and one of the most innovative abstract painters in the United States between the World Wars, and during this period he created some of his best works as he experimented and combined curvilinear, biomorphic and geometric forms which were drawn from such sources as the works of Klee, Mondrian, Malevich and Jean Arp.[49] He created numerous tondos in the 1960s. Jonson and Bolotowsky became good friends in 1969, when the latter was a visiting professor at the University of New Mexico.[50] Jonson knew of Bolotowsky's work before he met the artist, but he became intimately familiar with and fascinated by Bolotowsky's work when he curated an exhibit of it for the University of New Mexico that

---

[48]Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*: 145, 152.

[49]John R. Lane and Susan Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983): 51-55, 85-87.

[50]Jonson to Helen B. Schiavo, Chairperson of the Department of Art of Queens College of the City University of New York, January 13, 1973, archives of the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

was held in 1970.[51] He praised Bolotowsky's work when he wrote to him, after looking at works by him which were reproduced in the February 1970 issue of *Artnews* and in the catalogue of the exhibition of Bolotowsky's work that was held at the University of New Mexico in April 1970: "I am glad that I know your painting in originals for that makes it possible to know, relatively anyway, what these reproductions represent. Just now I have been looking at the Tondo in color in the Art News–I've concentrated on it for the past 15 minutes–and I find it beautiful, very much in "the groove."[52] Not only did Jonson greatly admire Bolotowsky's recent paintings, but he was clearly fascinated with the possibilities of the shaped canvas, which was a radical departure initiated by the Color-Field Painters in the early 1960s. Jonson's comment that Bolotowsky's tondos were "very much in 'the groove'" implies he was well aware of recent developments in abstract painting and was anxious to explore them. Bolotowsky's tondos seem to have had great personal meaning for Jonson, because it was Bolotowsky's *Rising Tondo* that was donated to the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico as a gift in memory of Vera. Jonson made this clear when he concluded a letter to Bolotowsky by stating: "You can, perhaps, imagine my pleasant surprise on opening the catalogue [to the 1970 University of New Mexico exhibit] to find the 'Rising Tondo'–in color!–on one page and a picture of you, looking at me, on the opposite page. It brings you very close to me and as I sit here and look at this double spread I feel like weeping for it was you who painted the work that is a memorial to Vera."[53]

---

[51]Ibid.

[52]Jonson to Ilya Bolotowsky, April 20, 1970, archives of the Jonson Gallery. Underlining is Jonson's.

[53]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Polymer No. 19–1969 [Plate 152] is a large tondo (47-1/4" in diameter) consisting of broad, geometric areas of smoothly, flatly painted green and red, which are interrupted by smaller areas of red and lavender. The large areas of green and red are divided by two white lines that intersect at a sharp angle near the bottom of the painting, while two shorter white lines separate the smaller areas of lavender from the other hues. The entire tondo is bordered by narrow strips of white, blue and lavender. A dark ultramarine circle has been placed in the middle of the large area of red. Although remarkable for its delicate balance in handling large areas of deep, saturated hues, the smooth mat surfaces of opaque paint seem to be almost a rejection of the translucency and transparency that was essential to Jonson's TPG-era paintings, especially his watercolors.

A particularly interesting late painting is *Polymer No. 39–1970.* [Plate 153] Unlike virtually any other extant late work, it is the result of diverse sources, inspiration, and aesthetic and expressive goals which Jonson carefully perfected and synthesized over the course of nearly sixty years of painting. This large painting (48" x 39") features two segments of black circles, one much larger than the other, which float in a murky field of dark olive-green. A narrow, irregularly contoured, triangular area of gray floats slowly upward, partially obfuscating our view of the fragmented circles. It looks very much like a cloud of smoke floating upward. The black circle fragments have been outlined with thin areas of yellow-orange, which makes them appear as if bright light emanates from behind them. Jonson painted these large areas of acrylic color by carefully drybrushing layers of acrylic evenly and smoothly over the canvas, thereby allowing these layers of color to mix optically. In this painting, Jonson has drybrushed dark green and gray over most of the painting to create a slightly grainy texture that is extremely uniform across the entire canvas.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This had become the typical manner in which Jonson worked with acrylics since he started painting with them regularly in the late 1950s. In this work, Jonson created a highly unorthodox color system, using dissonant tones and hues that are very muted and murky. The dark colors are moody and almost gloomy, while the small areas of glowing oranges and yellows are much more vibrant and even cheerful in comparison. In this painting, he avoided the saturated, bright hues often seen in Color-Field Painting and his own paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, but he has also abandoned the clarity and simplicity of color found in Minimalist painting. The aura of light coming from the large areas of dark olive-green and gray and the more smoothly painted narrow bands of yellow-orange around the black circle fragments creates a spiritual environment that seems lacking in much of Jonson's late work. The translucency in this painting is not new to Jonson's work, but it had not been seen in a long time.

The combinations of colors and tones in this painting are part of the tradition of dissonant color relationships in Jonson's work, an aspect of color theory that had interested Jonson since the mid-1930s, when he started the *Chromatic Contrasts* series. For Kandinsky, green was the color that most successfully conveyed tranquility and peace; it was the perfect balance of the visual and emotional effects of the two colors that comprised it, blue and yellow. Hence, as Kandinsky thought, green balanced the heavenly and the earthly, the perception of depth that was traditional in painting versus the projection of forms forward and outward from the picture plane. Furthermore, for Kandinsky, dark green was particularly peaceful, but green that tended toward yellow contained a trace of dynamic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

activity that pure green lacked.[54] Jonson's painting is extraordinarily complex because it delicately balances these competing, conflicting aspects of green.

In the 1970s, Jonson's works featured highly saturated colors in broad, flat, rather geometric areas or shapes that are more carefully delineated and bluntly arranged than ever before. The colors are often so saturated as to become fluorescent, sometimes even garish. It appears that Jonson was using either a new brand of acrylics or he had come to rely on large areas of highly saturated colors that were virtually unmixed on the palette once they were squeezed from the tube. The use of such saturated hues leading to paintings that are sometimes garish in color is problematic, for the spiritual impact of these works is limited and perplexing. The more subtle, delicate colors and harmonies of Jonson's earlier absolute paintings are almost entirely absent in these paintings of the 1970s. At this time, Jonson seemed to favor intense reds, oranges, and yellows, although some works feature purples, greens and ultramarines.

Polymer No. 22–1970 [Plate 154] is an intriguing example of Jonson's works from the 1970s. This large painting (48" X 33") consists mostly of a flat area of fluorescent orange which Jonson has shaded to a lighter, more yellow tone across the middle of the canvas. In front of this vivid background is a narrow, vertically-oriented white arc encircled by a smaller, horizontally-oriented white circle seen in sharp perspective. The horizontal white circle may be an abstracted, obfuscated reference to a halo, and hence to the spiritual. Both oval forms suggest the movement of celestial bodies through space, and since this was a popular theme in Jonson's earlier works its highly obfuscated presence here may be

---

[54]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: the Complete Writings on Art*: 180-183.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

deliberate and meaningful. The contours of the horizontal circle are slightly fuzzy, which increases the effect of spiritual transformation communicated in this painting. In the middle of these two arcs is a small, narrow oval consisting of white shaded to purple at its upper edge and green at its lower edge. The small, tri-colored oval seems to shimmer and glow as it floats in a vaguely defined space. Such vague, uncertain spaces had been a frequent feature in Jonson's absolute paintings since around 1940. The different colors of the small, tri-colored oval in *Polymer No. 22-1970* give the viewer of this painting a sense of the otherworldly, the supernatural, and the transition from physical space to spiritual space. In its small, focused size, it becomes an iconic emblem of the spiritual. *Watercolor No. 17–1940* [Plate 113] is a prime early example of Jonson's spiritually evocative use of curving and oval-shaped linear motifs, and this 1970 acrylic shows how Jonson developed similar aesthetic possibilities in his late work.

Polymer No. 18–1973. [Plate 155] is a large painting filled with broad areas of vivid color, and yet it conveys more luminosity than almost any extant acrylic painting by Jonson. Two large triangular areas of pale green extend from the sides of the canvas to near its center, where they meet at a small, bright red, zigzagging shape. The two triangular areas have been filled in with a light green that in each one has been shaded to a bright yellow-green at its widest and narrowest ends. The farthest edges of these triangular forms have been gradually shaded with darker green. Unlike most of Jonson's acrylic paintings, light is allowed to breathe through forms and colors in this composition. The use of relatively pale, modulated and shaded colors is unusual for Jonson's late acrylics and for most Color-Field Painting in the 1960s. It is a stylistic reversal, a return to the more subtle, tonal harmonies of intense, varied colors seen in Jonson's TPG-era paintings. Considering

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Kandinsky's theories of the different spiritual impact of variations of green , the large areas of translucent, light green in this painting offer a tranquil, contented, harmonious spiritual experience for the viewer.[55] As was often the case in Jonson's painting, light-suffused areas of vivid colors became spiritually evocative.

Although extremely productive throughout the 1970s, Jonson gave up painting completely and abruptly in 1978, four years before he died. Jonson stopped painting because his health had been steadily declining, and in particular his vision was deteriorating. In the "Catalogue of the Works by Raymond Jonson," he added the following statement dated September 30, 1978, after he listed *Polymer No. 19–1978*, which was to be his last work and which he subtitled, appropriately and poignantly, *Swan Song*:

> This painting is my Swan Song. With it, I discontinue painting. The primary reason for this decision is that I have a profound belief that an artist should retire while he is at the apex of his creative work. Though this is not an easy decision to make. I feel that rather than chancing the production of works that indicate the artist has gone to pot, I should now simply stop.
>
> There are, of course, other contributing factors. I seem to feel tired all the time; I have great difficulty in walking; I have a constant fear of falling again; my eyes bother me. A recent examination found no immediate tendency toward blindness in my right eye. About 16 years ago there were the first indications that my left eye was affected by "Macula [sic] degeneration" which produces blurred vision. This condition progresses rapidly with the result that my left-eye vision is a total blur.... .[56]

---

[55]Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in Lindsay and Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: the Complete Writings on Art*: 182-183. For Kandinsky, pure green was the balance of the qualities of blue and yellow and conveyed "absolute peace."

[56]"Catalogue of the Works of Raymond Jonson," p. 154, Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. This part of the Catalogue was prepared after the Raymond Jonson Papers were microfilmed and is available only at the Jonson Gallery.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

After several years of steadily declining health, Jonson died on May 10, 1982 at the age of ninety.[57] His wife Vera had died seventeen years earlier, on June 13, 1965.[58] Arthur, his confidant and advisor, his most ardent supporter and thoughtful critic, had died on October 3, 1980.[59] With Jonson's death came the end of a career that was distinctly and truly American, one of unwavering determination, stubborn persistence, wholesome individuality and the unfaltering belief that all great art, no matter when and where it was made, must be about the spiritual.

---

[57]Records in the Jonson Gallery provided by then-current director Cindy Leyba via e-mail, July 3, 2000.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Unpublished and archival resources (by surname of author / creator)

Emil J. Bisttram Papers, 1902-1982. Archives of American Art, reels 79, 581, 2787, 2892-2894.

Letters exchanged between Raymond Jonson and Ilya Bolotowsky. Archives of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.

Coke, Van Deren. "Mountains Shaped, Mountains Recollected, and Mountains Given Spiritual Form." Lecture given at the Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque on November 6, 1996. Unpublished typed manuscript of lecture in the archives of the Jonson Gallery. 11 pp.

Diamond, Martin. "Who Were They? My Personal Contact with 35 American Modernists Your Art History Course Never Mentioned." Written in 1995. Unpublished manuscript in the Archives of American Art not yet microfilmed and also circulated privately. 61 pp.

Garman, Ed. "A Position Paper Directed to Revitalizing a Fine Modern Tradition." Unpublished manuscript in the Archives of American Art. Written in 1993. 58 pp. Archives of American Art, reel 4994, frames 1058-1122.

Jay and Mary Crovatt Hambidge Papers, 1841-1973. Archives of American Art, reels 3176-3186.

Johnson, Arthur. "The Theatre of Raymond Jonson." Unpublished manuscript. Archives of the Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.

Letters from Raymond Jonson to Vera Jonson, 1931-1932. Archives of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.

Letters exchanged between Raymond Jonson and Charles W. Morris, 1924-1979. Archives of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque

Raymond Jonson Papers, 1910-1964. Archives of American Art, reels RJ 1-RJ 10, 76, NDA 14.

Morang, Alfred. "Transcendental Painting." Monograph Number 1 of the American Foundation for Transcendental Painting, Inc. Written in 1940.

Bror Julius Olsson Nordfeldt Papers, 1909-1989. Archives of American Art. Reels D166-D167.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Agnes Pelton Papers, 1886-1958. Archives of American Art, reels 3426-3427.

Rudhyar, Dane. "The Transcendental Movement in Painting." Written in 1939. Unpublished manuscript in the Dane Rudhyar Papers in the Library of Syracuse University. 84 pp. Typed transcript prepared by Ruth Pasquine.

Woodall, Helen. "The Motif of the Circle and the Transcendental Painting Group." Research paper for graduate course. The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. April 1985.

Interviews (by surname of person interviewed)

Kenneth Adams by Sylvia Loomis, April 23, 1964. Archives of American Art, Oral History Collection, 21 pp. transcript.

Martin and Harriet Diamond (art dealers who knew Jonson) interviewed by the author, July 1997.

Richard Diebenkorn by Susan Larsen. Archives of American Art, Oral History Collection, May 1, 1985-December 12, 1987, 53 pp. transcript. Jonson discussed on tape 3, side A, recorded on May 1, 1985.

Lee Ehrenworth (collector) by the author, July 1997.

Ed Garman by Derrick Cartwright, March 25-30, 1998, Archives of American Art.

Ed Garman by the author, January 8, 1999.

Ed Garman by the author, August 6, 2001.

Raymond Jonson by Sylvia Loomis, April 23, 1964. Archives of American Art, Oral History Collection, 24 pp. transcript, reel 3949.

Raymond Jonson by Susan Noyes Platt, August 9, 1980. Archives of American Art, Oral History Collection, 50 pp. transcript, reel 3752.

Virginia Mullen (friend of Jonson, Vera Jonson, Arthur Johnson, and May Van Dyke) by the author, June 9, 1998.

John Rise (Jonson collector and student) by the author, January 13, 1999.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Writings, Statements and Lectures by Raymond Jonson (in chronological order)

Diaries of Raymond Jonson, 1917-1926. 3 volumes. Raymond Jonson Papers. Archives of American Art. Reel RJ 8: 6040-6238.

[Published under C. Raymond Johnson] "The New Stage Designing." *Theatre Arts Magazine* (August 1919).

Lecture on stage design, 1917, 4 pp., RJ 8: 6274-6276.

"Creativeness in Painting,"lecture given to the Art Club of Albuquerque in April 1934, 4 pp., RJ 9: 6331-6332.

"An Aspect of Modern Painting," lecture given to the Rotary Club of Albuquerque and the Kiwanis Club of Santa Fe in April 1936, 8 pp., RJ 9: 6333-6336.

"The Non-Objective in Painting," lecture given to the Art Club of Albuquerque on October 20, 1936, 5 pp., RJ 9: 6337-6339.

"What Is the Role of Abstract Art?," lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on December 6, 1948, 8 pp., RJ 9: 6323-6326.

"Aspects of Space in Painting," lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on December 15, 1947, 7 pp., RJ 9: 6320-6322.

"Aspects of Color in Painting," lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on December 6, 1948, 8 pp., RJ 9: 6320-6322.

Lecture given to the Chili Club in Santa Fe on August 29, 1949, 8 pp., RJ 9: 6327-6330.

Lecture notes to a course on art appreciation Jonson taught in the fall semester (September 1948 - January 1949) at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, RJ 8: 6240-6272.

Writings and Statements by Artists other than Raymond Jonson (by artist or editor)

Albers, Josef. *The Interaction of Color.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971. Rev. ed., 1987.

Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Futurist Manifestos.* New York: Viking Press, 1973.

Ashton, Dore. *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views.* New York: Da Capo Press, 1988.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Brooks, Van Wyck, transl. *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*. New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Browne, Maurice. "The Temple of a Living Art." *The Drama* 3 (Nov. 1913).

-----. "The New Rhythmic Drama." *The Drama* 4 (Nov. 1914).

-----. "Lonely Places." *Theatre Arts Magazine* 5 (July 1921).

-----. *Too Late to Lament.* London: Victor Gollanez Ltd., 1955.

Chipp, Hershel B., ed. *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

De Leeuw, Ronald, ed. and Arnold Pomerans, transl. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. Repr. ed.

Doran, Michael, ed. *Conversations with Cézanne*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

Flam, Jack D., ed. *Matisse on Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Fry, Edward. *Cubism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1966.

Gauguin's Letters from the South Seas. New York: Dover Publications, 1992.

Guerin, Daniel, ed. and Eleanor Levieux (transl.). *The Writings of a Savage*. New York: De Capo Press, 1996. [writings of Paul Gauguin]

James, Martin S., ed. *The New Art, the New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1983.

Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art. (Uber der Geistige en der Kunst)*. Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, 1977. Translation of original 1912 German ed.

-----. *Point and Line to Plane*. Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, 1979. Translation of original 1926 German ed.

Kandinsky, Wassily, and Franz Marc. *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*. New York, Viking Press, 1974. Translation of original 1912 German ed.

Kostelanetz, Richard, ed. *Moholy-Nagy: An Anthology*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1992.

Lindsay, Kenneth C., and Peter Vergo, eds. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Long, Rose-Carol Washton, ed. *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmina Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Miller, John, ed. *Noa Noa: The Tahiti Journal of Paul Gauguin*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985.

Nochlin, Linda, ed. *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874-1904: Sources and Documents*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976.

-----. *Realism and Tradition in Art, 1848-1900: Sources and Documents*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976.

Rewald, John, ed. and Seymour Hacker, transl. *Paul Cézanne Letters*. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1985.

Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence*. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000.

Writings by Spiritualists, Mystics, Philosophers, and Design Theorists (by surname of author)

Best-Maugard, Adolpho. *A Method for Creative Design*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1927.

Blavatsky, Helena. *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Philosophy*. New York: J. W. Bouton, 1877. Repr: Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1988.

-----. *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. London: Theosophical Publishing Company, Ltd., 1886. 2 vols. Repr., Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1988.

Dow, Arthur Wesley. *A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students of Teachers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 1st ed. published in 1899.

Hambidge, Jay. *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition as Used by Artists*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923.

-----. *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924.

-----. *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946.

-----. *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948. 3rd ed. Repr.,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. [includes articles originally published in *The Diagonal* which were slightly edited for inclusion in this book]

-----. *The Parthenon and Other Greek Temples: Their Dynamic Symmetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924.

Leadbeater, C.W. *The Chakras*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1927.

-----. *The Inner Life*. Los Angeles: Theosophical Publishing House, 1910.

Mead, George Herbert and Charles W. Morris, eds. *Mind, Self, & Society : From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

-----. *Philosophy of the Act*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938.

Morris, Charles W. *Paths of Life : Preface to a World Religion*. New York: George Braziller, 1956. 1st ed.

-----. *The Pragmatic Movement in American Philosophy*. New York: George Braziller, 1970. 1st ed/

-----. *Signification and Significance: A Study of the Relation of Signs and Values*.

-----. *Signs, Language, and Behavior*. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1946.

-----. *Six Theories of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932. Repr., 1946.

-----. *Varieties of Human Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Ouspensky, P. *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920.

Rudhyar, Dane. *The Astrological Houses: The Spectrum of Individual Experience*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972.

-----. *Astrological Insights into the Spiritual Life*. Samuel Weiser, 1940.

-----. *An Astrological Mandala : The Cycle of Transformations and Its 360 Symbolic Phases*. New York: Random House, 1973.

-----. *An Astrological Study of Psychological Complexes*. San Jacinto, CA: Self-published, 1966. 1st rev. ed., Berkeley: Shambhala, 1976.

-----. *The Astrology of America's Destiny*. New York: Random House, 1974.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

-----. *Astrology of Personality : A Reformulation of Astrological Concepts and Ideals in Terms of Contemporary Psychology and Philosophy.* New York: Lucis, 1936. 1st ed.

-----. *The Astrology of Transformation: A Multilevel Approach.* Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980.

-----. *Beyond Individualism: The Psychology of Transformation.* Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986.

-----. *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity.* Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1977.

-----. *Galactic Dimension of Astrology : The Sun Is Also a Star.*

-----. *Lunation Cycle: A Key to the Understanding of Personality.* Berkeley: Shambhala, 1967.

-----. *Occult Preparations for a New Age.* Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975.

-----. *Person Centered Astrology.* Lakemont, Georgia: CSA Press, 1972.

-----. *Practice of Astrology.* St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1968.

-----. *Rhythm of Wholeness: A Total Affirmation of Being.* Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1983.

Catalogues to Exhibitions of Jonson's Work (in Chronological Order)

Fifteenth Annual American Exhibition. St. Louis: St. Louis City Art Museum, 1920.

An Exhibit of Paintings by Raymond Jonson. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Institute, 1922.

Twenty-Seventh Annual Artists of Chicago Exhibit. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1923.

An Exhibit of Paintings by Raymond Jonson. Kansas City, MO: Art Institute of Kansas City, 1924.

Raymond Jonson. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts of Houston, 1928.

Raymond Jonson. New York: Delphic Studios, 1931.

Raymond Jonson. Chicago: Studio Gallery, 1932.

An Exhibition of Paintings by Agnes Pelton, Drawings by Raymond Jonson, Watercolors by Cady

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Wells. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Art Gallery, 1933.

Twenty-Third Annual Exhibition of Painters and Sculptors of the Southwest. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Art Gallery, 1936.

Thirty-Fifth Fiesta Exhibition. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Art Gallery, 1948.

Coke, Van Deren. *Raymond Jonson: A Retrospective Exhibition.* 1964

McCauley, Elizabeth Ann. *Raymond Jonson: The Early Years.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Art Museum, 1980

Raymond Jonson: Abstract Landscapes, 1922-1947. Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1988.

Wilson, MaLin, and Tiska Blankenship. *Raymond Jonson: Cityscapes.* Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery, University Art Museum, 1989.

Blankenship, Tiska. *Raymond Jonson: Geometric Form in the Pursuit of a Unifying Principle.* Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1990.

Raymond Jonson: Centennial Retrospective. Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1991.

Symbolizing New Mexico: Native Iconographic Influences in Raymond Jonson's Painting. Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico Art Museum.

Feinsod, Arthur. *Poetry of the Theatre: Raymond Jonson and the Chicago Little Theatre Years, 1912-1917.* Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1994.

1945: Abstractions by Raymond Jonson. Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1995.

Raymond Jonson: A Modernist View of Landscape: Chromatic Contrasts. Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1996.

Surveys, Monographs, Exhibition Catalogues, Articles, Dissertations

Abegglen, Homer N. "The Chicago Little Theatre, 1912-1917." *The Old Northwest* 3 (June 1977): 153-172.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Abstract Painting in America. New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1935.

Adams, Clinton, et al. *Cubism: Its Impact in the U.S.A., 1910-1930.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Art Museum, 1967.

Adams, Henry, et al. *Albert Bloch: The American Blue Rider.* New York: Prestel, 1997.

Adams, Steven. *The Barbizon School and the Origins of Impressionism.* London: Phaidon Press, 1994.

Adamson, Jeremy Elwell. *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930.* Ontario: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978.

"After the Group of Seven." *Apollo* 123 (1986): 46-47.

Agee, William. "Arthur Dove: Life and Work with a Catalogue Raisonné." *Archives of American Art Journal* 34 (1984): 15-20.

-----. *Modern American Painting, 1910-1940: Toward a New Perspective.* Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1977.

-----. *The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America.* New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968.

Agee, William, and Barbara Rose. *Patrick Henry Bruce: American Modernist.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1979.

Alviani, Getulio, ed. *Josef Albers.* Milan: L'Arcaedizioni, 1988.

Andersen, Wayne. *Gauguin's Paradise Lost.* New York: Viking Press, 1971.

Ashton, Dore. "A Classic Modern: The Art of Jean Xceron." *Arts* 58.10 (June 1984): 131-133.

-----. *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning.* New York: Viking Press, 1973. Repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Auping, Michael. *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987.

-----. *Abstract Geometry Painting: Selected Geometric Abstract Painting in America Since 1945.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989.

Baker, Kenneth. "Just North of Modernism." *Artforum* 22 (June 1984): 71-73.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Barnett, Vivian Endicott. *Kandinsky at the Guggenheim.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983.

-----. *Kandinsky Watercolors: Catalogue Raisonné: 1900-1921.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

-----. *Kandinsky Watercolors: Catalogue Raisonné: 1922-1944.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Balekian, Anna. *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal.* New York: Random House, 1967.

Ballo, Guido: *Boccioni: la Vita e l'Opera.* Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1964.

Balken, Debra Bricken, et al. *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective.* Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1997.

Barr, Alfred H., Jr. *Cubism and Abstract Art.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936. Repr. paperback ed., Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974.

Barron, Stephanie and Wolf-Dieter Dube, eds. *German Expressionism: Art and Society.* New York: Rizzoli Publications, 1997.

Battcock, Gregory, ed. *The New Art: A Critical Anthology.* New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969. Repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

-----. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology.* New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968.

Beeren, W.A.L., et al. *Kasimir Malevich, 1878-1935.* Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1990.

Belloli, Andrea, ed. *A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984.

Blankenship, Tiska and Ed Garman. *Vision and Spirit: The Transcendental Painting Group.* Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico, 1997.

Blotkamp, Carel. "Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985.* Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 89-112.

-----. *De Stijl: The Formative Years, 1917-1922.* Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1986.

-----. *Piet Mondrian.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Boggs, Jean Sutherland. *Degas*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.

Bois, Yves-Alain, et al. *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995.

Boll, Deborah, Peter Walch, and MaLin Wilson. *Albuquerque 50s*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Art Museum, 1989

Bowlt, John, and Rose-Carol Washton Long, eds. *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of "On the Spiritual in Art."* Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980.

Breskin, Adelyn. *Ilya Bolotowsky*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1974.

-----. *Roots of Abstract Art in America, 1910-1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1965.

Bretell, Richard, et al. *The Art of Paul Gauguin*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988.

Brockett, Oscar, and Robert Finlay. *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre Since 1870*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

Bronstein, Leo. *El Greco*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990.

Brooks, Rosetta. "Agnes Pelton." *Art and Text* 55 (October 1996): 92-93.

Brown, Jonathan, et al. *El Greco of Toledo*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982.

Brown, Milton W. *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955.

-----. *The Story of the Armory Show*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1963. Reprint, 1988.

Bywaters, Jerry. *Andrew Dasburg*. Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1957.

Cachin, Francois, et al. *Cézanne*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1996.

-----. *Manet, 1832-1883*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983.

Calvini, Mauriuzio and Ester Coen: *Boccioni: l'Opera Completa*. Milan: Electa, 1963.

Carrier, David. "American Apprentices: Thirties Abstraction." *Art in America* (Feb. 1984): 109-114.

Cassidy, Donna M. "Arthur Dove's Music Paintings of the Jazz Age." *American Art Journal* 20 (1988): 4-23.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Celant, Germano. "Futurism and the Occult." *Artforum* 19 (January 1981): 35-43.

Chave, Anna. *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Cheetham, Mark A. "Mystical Memories: Gauguin's Neoplatonism and 'Abstraction' in Late-Ninetenth Century French Painting." *Art Journal* 46.1 (Spring 1987): 15-21.

-----. *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Cheney, Sheldon. "The American Artist and the Stage." *International Studio* 74 (December 1921): 150-157.

-----. *The Art Theatre.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917.

-----. "Cloyd Head's *Grotesques*." *Theatre Arts Magazine* 1 (November 1916): 13-20.

-----. "The Exhibition of American Stage Designs at the Bourgeois Galleries." *Theatre Arts Magazine* 3 (April 1919): 83.

-----. *Men Who Have Walked with God: Behind the Story of Mysticism Through the Ages Told in the Biographies of Representative Seers and Saints with Excerpts from their Writings and Sayings.* New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc.

-----. "The Most Important Thing in the Theatre." *Theatre Arts Monthly* 1 (August 1917): 167-171.

-----. "The Painter in the Theatre." *Theatre Arts Monthly* 6 (July 1922): 191-199.

-----. *A Primer on Modern Art.* New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1924. 1st edition.

-----. *A Primer on Modern Art.* New York: Liveright Publishing, 1935. 7th edition.

-----. *A Primer on Modern Art.* New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1939. 10th edition.

-----. *A Primer on Modern Art.* New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1947. Revised and enlarged edition.

-----. *The Story of Modern Art.* New York: Viking Press, 1941.

Cikovsky, Jr., Nicolai. "The Art of Raymond Jonson." *American Art Review* 3 (September-October 1976): 129-136.

Clark, T. J. *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Revolution of 1848.* Berkeley: University

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of California Press, 1999. Rev. ed.

-----. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of the Manet and His Followers.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986. Reprint ed.

Coen, Ester. *Boccioni.* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.

Cohn, Sherrye. "Arthur Dove and Theosophy: Visions of a Transcendental Reality.: *Arts* 58.1 (September 1983): 86-91.

-----. "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove, Part 1: 'Force Lines, Growth Lines' as Emblems of Energy." *Arts* 58.4 (December 1983): 90-93.

-----. "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove, Part 2: Dove and 'the Fourth Dimension.'" *Arts* 58.5 (January 1984): 121-126.

-----. "Arthur Dove and the Organic Analogy: A Rapprochement Between Art and Nature." *Arts* 59.10 (June 1985): 85-89.

Coke, Van Deren. *B. J. O. Nordfeldt: The Lambertville Years.* Trenton, NJ: New Jersey State Museum, 1981.

-----. *Nordfeldt the Painter.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972.

-----. *Taos and Santa Fe: The Artist's Environment, 1882-1942.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1963.

Craig, Edward Gordon. *On the Art of the Theatre.* Chicago: Browne's Bookstore, 1911.

Czestochowski, Joseph S. *The American Landscape Tradition: A Study and Gallery of Paintings.* New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982.

Dabrowski, Magdalena. *Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art, 1910-1980.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985.

-----. *The Symbolist Aesthetic.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.

Dasburg, Andrew. "Cubism–Its Rise and Influence." *Arts* (Nov. 1923): 278-283.

Davidson, Abraham. *Early American Modernist Painting, 1910-1935.* New York: De Capo Press, 1981. Reprint ed., 1994.

Decter, Jacqueline. *Messenger of Beauty: The Life and Visionary Art of Nicholas Roerich.*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1997.

Delevoy, Robert. *Symbolists and Symbolism.* New York: Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 1988.

Denvir, Bernard. *Post-Impressionism.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992.

Doerner, Max. *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting with Notes on the Techniques of the Old Masters.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934.

Donnell, Radka Zagaroff. "Space in Abstract Expressionism." *Journal of Aesthetics* 23.2 (Winter 1964):

Donovan, Fiona. *Woodblock Prints of B. J. O. Nordfeldt: A Catalogue Raisonné.* Minneapolis: University Art Museum, University of Minnesota, 1991.

Droste, Magdalena. *Bauhaus, 1919-1933.* Cologne: Taschen, 1990.

Druick, Douglas, et al. *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840-1916.* Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1996.

Dukore, Bernard F. "Maurice Browne and the Chicago Little Theatre." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1957.

Duncan, Michael. "Cosmic Ardor." *Art in America* 84 (October 1996); 108-111.

DuVernet, Sylvia. *Lawren Harris and William Lumpkins, Members of the Transcendental Painting Group, New Mexico, 1938-1940.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

Ed Garman: Ideal Modern. Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico, 1992.

Elderfield, John. "American Geometric Abstraction in the Late Thirties." *Artforum* (December 1972): 35-42.

-----. "Color and Area: New Paintings by Ellsworth Kelly." *Artforum* (November 1971): 45-49.

-----. *Geometric Abstraction, 1926-1972.* Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1972.

-----. *Henri Matisse: a Retrospective.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992.

-----. "Mondrian, Newman, Noland: Two Notes on Changing Style." *Artforum* (Dec. 1971): 48-53.

-----. *The "Wild Beasts": Fauvism and Its Affinities.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Eldredge, Charles. *Georgia O'Keeffe*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991.

-----. *Georgia O'Keeffe: American and Modern*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

-----. "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*. Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 113-130.

Eldredge, Charles, et al. *Art in New Mexico, 1900-1945: Paths to Taos and Santa Fe*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986

Eddy, Arthur Jerome. *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1914.

Fahlman, Betsy, et al. *American Images: The SBC Collection of Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996.

Faunce, Sarah and Linda Nochlin. *Courbet Reconsidered*. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, 1988.

Feinsod, Arthur. *The Simple Stage*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992.

Flam, Jack D. *Matisse: The Man and His Art, 1869-1918*. Utica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.

-----. *Richard Diebenkorn: The Ocean Park Series*. New York: Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 1992.

Fonti, Daniela. *Gino Severini: Catalogo Ragionato*. Milan: Mondadori, 1988.

Fort, Ilene Susan. *American Paintings in Southern California Collections*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996.

-----. "Raymond Jonson." *Arts* 55.10 (June 1981): 18.

Freeman, Judi, et al. *The Fauve Landscape*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1990.

Freches-Thory, Clair. *The Nabis: Bonnard, Vuillard and Their Circle*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991.

Fried, Michael. *Courbet's Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

-----. *Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Paperback repr. ed.

-----. *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*. Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Fulford, Robert. "Regrouping the Group." *Canadian Art* 12 (Fall 1995): 68-77.

Gale, Iain and Thomas Parsons. *Post-Impressionism: The Rise of Modern Art, 1880-1920.* London: Studio Editions, Ltd., 1992.

Garman, Ed. *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.

Garvey, Timothy J. "László Moholy-Nagy and Atomic Ambivalence in Postwar Chicago." *American Art* 14.3 (Fall 2000): 22-39.

Gaugh, Harry. *Franz Kline.* New York: Abbeville Press, 1993.

Geldzahler, Henry. *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970.* New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1969.

Gibson, Ann Eden. *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. Paperback repr. ed., 1999.

-----. "Painting Outside the Paradigm: Indian Space." *Arts Magazine* 57 (February 1983): 92-104.

Gibson, Arrell Morgan. *The Santa Fe and Taos Colonies: Age of the Muses, 1900-1942.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983.

Gibson, Michael. *Symbolism.* New York: Taschen, 1997.

Golding, John. *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-1914.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1988. 3rd ed.

-----. *Paths to the Absolute.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Goldwater, Robert. *Gauguin.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983.

-----. *Primitivism in Modern Art.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986. Enlarged and revised 1936 ed.

-----. *Symbolism.* New York: Harper Collins, 1979.

Gordon, Donald. *Modern Art Exhibitions, 1900-1916.* 2 volumes. Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1973.

-----. *Expressionism: Art and Idea.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Gowing, Lawrence. *Cézanne: The Early Years, 1859-1872.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Gray, Camilla and Marian Burleigh-Motley. *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986. Rev. and enlarged ed.

Green, Nancy E., et al. *Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922): His Art and His Influence.* New York: Spanierman Gallery, 1999.

Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. Repr., 1978.

-----. *Barnett Newman.* New York: French and Company Galleries, 1959.

-----. *Post-Painterly Abstraction.* Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964.

Greenough, Sarah, ed. *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries.* New York: Bulfinch Press, 2000.

Grohmann, Will. *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1958.

Guberman, Sidney. *Frank Stella: An Illustrated Biography.* New York: Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 1995.

Gurin, Ruth. *American Abstract Artists 1936-1966.* New York: Ram Press, 1966.

Hanson, Anne C. *Manet and the Modern Tradition.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

-----. *Severini Futurista, 1912–1917.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Hartel, Herbert R., Jr. "Abstraction in the Landscape Paintings of John Frederick Kensett." M.A. Thesis. Queens College, City University of New York, 1993.

Haskell, Barbara. *Arthur Dove.* San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts, 1974.

-----. *Burgoyne Diller.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986.

Hay, Robert Charles. "Dane Rudhyar and ;the Transcendental Painting Group, 1938-1941." M.A. Thesis. University of Michigan, 1980.

Head, Cloyd. "The Chicago Little Theatre." *Theatre Arts Magazine* 1 (May 1917): 110-116.

Henderson, Linda D. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

-----. "Editor's Statement: Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art." *Art Journal* 46.1 (Spring 1987): 5-8.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Herbert, James D. *Fauvism: The Making of Cultural Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Herbert, Robert. *Georges Seurat, 1859-1891*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.

-----. *Impressionism: Art, Liesure, and Society*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

-----. *Neo-Impressionism*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1968.

Herding, Klaus. *Courbet: To Venture Independence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Hess, Thomas. *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*. New York: Viking Press, 1951.

-----. *Barnett Newman*. New York: Walker and Co., 1969.

-----. *Willem de Kooning*. New York: Brazillier, 1959.

Hewett, Edgar L. *Representative Art and Artists of New Mexico*. Santa Fe: School of American Research, Museum of New Mexico, 1940.

Hochfield, Sylvia. "Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature." *Art News* 95 (December 1996): 125.

Holloway, John H. and John A. Weil. "A Conversation with Josef Albers." *Leonardo* 3.4 (Oct.-Nov. 1970): 459-464.

Homer, William Inness. *Alfred Stielgitz and the American Avant-Garde*. Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976.

-----. *Seurat and the Science of Painting*. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1971. Reprint ed., 1985.

-----, ed. *Avant-Garde Painting and Sculpture in America, 1910-1925*. Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 1975.

Howat, John K., et al. *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987.

Hulton, Pontus. *Futurism and Futurisms*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986.

Hunter, Sam. *B. J. O. Nordfeldt: An American Expressionist*. Fort Lauderdale: Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, 1984.

Hunter, Sam, and John Jacobus. *American Art of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1972.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Jaffe, Hans L. *De Stijl*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971.

-----. *De Stijl: 1917-1931*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986.

-----. *Mondrian*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986.

Joachimides, Christos, ed. *American Art of the Twentieth Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1913-1993*. New York: Prestel, 1993.

-----. *German Art of the Twentieth Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1905-1985*. New York: Prestel, 1985.

Joosten, Joop M., and Robert P. Welsh. *Piet Mondrian: Catalogue Raisonné*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998.

Jordan, Jim. *Paul Klee and Cubism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Karlstrom, Paul J., ed. *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900-1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

-----. "Regional Reports: West Coast." *Archives of Ameican Art Journal* 24.3 (1984): 36-38.

Karlstrom, Paul J. and Susan Ehrlich. *Turning the Tide: Early Los Angeles Modernists, 1920-1956*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1990.

Kirschner, Melanie. *Arthur Dove: Watercolors and Pastels*. New York: George Braziller, 1999.

Kozloff, Max. "The Critical Reception of Abstract Expressionism." *Arts* 15.2 (Dec. 1965).

Knott, Robert. *American Abstract Art of the 1930s and 1940s: The J. Donald Nichols Collection*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999.

Kraskin, Sandra, and Barbara Hollister. *The Indian Space Painters* (New York: Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, City University of New York, 1991)

Kruty, Paul. "Arthur Jerome Eddy and His Collection: Prelude and Postscript to the Armory Show." *Arts* 61.6 (February 1987): 40-47.

-----. "Declarations of Independence: Chicago's Alternative Art Groups of the 1920s," in Sue Ann Prince, ed., *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. pp. 78-80.

-----. "Mirrors of a 'Post-Impressionist' Era: B.J.O. Nordfeldt's Chicago Portraits." *Arts* 61.5

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(January 1987): 27-33.

Kushner, Marilyn. *Morgan Russell.* New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986.

Kuspit, Donald B. "The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art." *Art Journal* 31.1 (Fall 1971): 26-30.

-----. "Utopian Protest in Early Abstract Art." *Art Journal* 29.4 (Summer 1970): 430-436.

Lancher, Carolyn, ed. *Paul Klee.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987.

Landau, Ellen. *Jackson Pollock.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989.

Landsbury, Edgar. *Nicholas Roerich.* Inner Traditions Intl. Ltd, 1993.

Larisey, Peter. "The Landscape Painting of Lawren Stewart Harris." Ph.D. Dissertation. Columbia University, 1982.

-----. *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris' Life and Work.* Toronto: Dudurn Press Ltd., 1993.

Larsen, Susan C. "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History, 1936-1941." *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.1 (1974): 2-7.

-----. "The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and an Evaluation of Its Impact upon American Art." Ph.D. Dissertation. Northwestern University, 1975.

Larsen, Susan, and John R. Lane. *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America: 1927-1944.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983.

Lehmanm, A. G. *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885-1895.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1968.

Leja, Michael. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Art and Subjectivity in the 1940s.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Paperback reprint ed., 1997.

Levin, Gail. *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925.* New York: George Braziller, 1978.

Levin, Gail, et al. *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950.* New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1992.

Leymarie, Jean. *Fauvism, Biographical and Critical Study.* New York, Skira, 1959.

Lewis, Mary T. *Cézanne's Early Imagery.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Lindquist, Emory. *Birger Sandzen: An Illustrated Biography.* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993.

Linsley, Robert. "Landscapes in Motion: Lawren Harris, Emily Carr and the Heterogenous Modern Nation." *Oxford Art Journal* 19.1 (1996): 80-95.

Lipsey, Roger. *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art.* Boston: Shambhala, 1997. Reprint paperback ed.

Lloyd, Jill. *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Long, Rose-Carol Washton. "Expressionism, Abstraction, and the Search for Utopia in Germany" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985.* Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 201-218.

-----. "Kandinsky and Abstraction: The Role of the Hidden Image." *Artforum* 10.10 (June 1972): 42-49.

-----. *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style.* New York: Clarendon Press, 1980.

-----. "Kandinsky's Vision of Utopia as a Garden of Love." *Art Journal* 43.1 (Spring 1983): 50-60.

-----. "Occultism, Anarchism and Abstraction: Kandinsky's Art of the Future." *Art Journal* 46.1 (Spring 1987): 38-45.

-----. "Non-Objective," in Spector, Nancy, ed. *Guggenheim Museum: A to Z.* New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2001. Rev. ed. p. 256.

Loran, Erle. *Cézanne's Composition : Analysis of His Form With Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963. Paperback reprint ed., 1985.

Lukach, Joan M. *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art.* New York: George Brazillier, 1983.

Lynes, Barbara Buhler. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

McKay, Constance D'Arcy. *The Little Theatre in the United States.* New York: Henry Holt, 1917.

Machotka, Pavel. *Cézanne: Landscape into Art.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Mansbach, Steven A. "Visions of Totality: László Moholy-Nagy, Theo van Doesburg, and El Lissitzky." Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1980.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Margolin, Victor. *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Marks, Matthew. "Provincetown Prints." *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 15 (September / October 1984): 131-133.

Martin, Marianne W. *Futurist Art and Theory, 1909-1915.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.

-----. "Some American Contributions to Early Twentieth Century Abstraction." *Arts* 54.10 (June 1980): 158-165.

Maxon, John. *The Art Institute of Chicago.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1970.

McCoubrey, John W. *American Tradition in Painting.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. New ed.

McCoy, Garnett. "Poverty, Politics and Artists 1930-1945." *Art in America* 53 (August-September 1965): 88-130.

McCullagh, Janice. "Disappearances, Appearances: The First Exhibition of the Blaue Reiter." *Arts* 62.1 (September 1987): 46-53.

McShine, Kynaston, et al. *The Natural Paradise: American Painting, 1800-1950.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1975.

Mecklenburg, Virginia. *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930-1945.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

Messer, Thomas. *Kandinsky.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997.

Messer, Thomas, et al. *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944: Centennial Exhibition.* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971.

Milner, John. *Malevich and the Art of Geometry.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Mitchell, Brenda Marie. "'Music That Makes Holes in the Sky': Georgia O'Keeffe's Visionary Romanticism." Ph.D. Dissertation. Urbana-Champagne: University of Illinois, 1996.

Mitchell, Carolyn B. *Great French Paintings from the Barnes Foundation: Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Early Modern.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

Mladek, Meda. *Frantisek Kupka, 1871-1957: A Retrospective.* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1975

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Moak, Peter van der Huyden. "Cubism and the New World: The Influence of Cubism on American Painting, 1910-1920." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1970.

Modernist Themes in New Mexico: Works by Early Modernist Painters. Santa Fe: Gerald Peters Gallery, 1989.

Moffett, Charles S. *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886.* San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986.

Moholy-Nagy, Sibyl: *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality.* Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1969. 2nd ed.

Morang, Alfred. *Transcendental Painting Group.* Santa Fe: American Foundation for Transcendental Painting, 1940.

Morgan, Ann Lee. *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, with a Catalogue Raisonné.* Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1984.

Moser, Chrlotte. "Agnes Pelton." *Artweek* 20 (October 21, 1989): 13.

Moszynska, Anna. *Abstract Art.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

Murray, Joan. *Beginning of Vision: The Drawings of Lawren Harris.* Olympic Marketing Corporation, 1982.

Nasgaard, Roald. *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America (1890-1940).* Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984.

Needham, Gerald. "The Mystic North." *Art Journal* 44 (Summer 1984): 183-186

-----. *Nineteenth-Century Realist Art.* New York: Harper and Row, 1988.

The New Mexico Transcendentalists. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, 1994.

Nicholas Roerich: A Short Bibliography. New York: Nicholas Roerich Museum / Agni Yoga Society, 1988.

Nochlin, Linda. *Realism.* New York: Penguin Books, 1971. Reissue ed., New York: Viking Press, 1990.

Novak, Barbara. *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism and the American Experience.* New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

-----. *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

O'Connor, Francis V. *Federal Art Patronage, 1933-1943.* College Park, MD: University of Maryland Art Gallery, 1966

Paelian, Garabed. *Nicholas Roerich.* Sedona, AZ: Aquarian Educational Group, 1974.

Palazzeschi, Aldo. *L'Opera Completa di Boccioni.* Milan: Rizzoli Publications, 1969.

Pasloff, Patricia, ed. *The 30's: Painting in New York.* New York: Poindexter Gallery, 1957.

Passuth, Krisztina. *Moholy-Nagy.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Paul Klee Foundation. *Paul Klee, 1879-1940: Catalogue Raisonné.* London: Thames and Hudson. 1998. 3 vols. Vol. 1: 1883-1912, Vol. 2: 1913-1918, Vol. 3: 1919-1922.

Perlmutter, Penny L. "Toward the light–Agnes Pelton's Transcendental Paintings." *Antiques and Fine Art* (March / April 1990):

Pincus-Witten, Robert. *Post Mondrian Abstraction in America.* Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1973.

Polcari, Stephen. *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Pontello, Jacqueline M. "Southwest No Longer Stigma." *Southwest Art* 19 (December 1989): 23-24.

Pool, Phoebe. *Impressionism.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988.

Porter, Dean, et al. *Taos Artists and Their Patrons, 1898-1950.* Notre Dame, IN: Snite Museum of Art, 1999.

Prince, Sue Ann, ed. *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago: 1910-1940.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Quick, Michael. "Robert Henri: Theory and Practice." in Valerie Ann Leeds. *My People: The Portraits of Robert Henri.* Orlando: Orlando Museum of Art, 1994. pp. 50-55.

-----. "Technique and Theory: The Evolution of George Bellow's Painting Style." in Michael Quick, et al. *The Paintings of George Bellows.* Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1992.

Rebay. Hilla. *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings.* Charleston, SC:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery. 1936.

-----. *Second Enlarged Catalogue of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Art Alliance, 1937.

-----. *Third Enlarged Catalogue of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*. Charleston, SC: Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery, 1938.

-----. *Fourth Catalogue of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*. Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939.

Reff, Theodore. *Degas: The Artist's Mind*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976. Reprint, Belknap Press, 1987.

Reid, Dennis. *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Late Works of Lawren S. Harris*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1985.

Rembert, Virginia Pitts. *Mondrian, America, and American Painting*. New York and London: 1979.

Rewald, John. *Camille Pissarro*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989.

-----. *Cézanne: a Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948. Reprint, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996.

-----. *History of Impressionism*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1974. 4th revised and enlarged ed.

-----. *History of Post-Impressionism: From Gauguin to Van Gogh*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978. 3rd ed.

-----. *Paul Cézanne: The Watercolors, a Catalogue Raisonné*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983.

-----. *Seurat: A Biography*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990.

-----. *Studies in Impressionism*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986.

-----. *Studies in Post-Impressionism*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986.

Rewald, John, et al. *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997.

Rice, Megan and Sharyn Udall. *The Informing Spirit: Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada, 1925-1945*. Colorado Springs: Taylor Museum for Southwestern Studies, Colorado

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Springs Fine Arts Center, 1994.

Ringbom, Sixten. "Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual: Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 386-418.

-----. "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*. Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 131-154.

Ritchie, Andrew. *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951.

Roethel, Hans. *The Blue Rider*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971.

-----. *Wassily Kandinsky*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1979.

Roethal, Hans, and Jean Benjamin. *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, 1896-1915*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982.

-----. *Kandinsky: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings, 1916-1944*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Rose, Barbara. *American Abstract Artists: The Early Years*. New York: Sid Deutsch Gallery, 1980.

-----. *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967.

Rosenberg, Harold. "American Action Painting." in *The Tradition of the New*. New York: Horizon Press, 1959.

Rosenblum, Robert. "The Abstract Sublime." *ARTnews* 59.10 (February 1961): 38-41.

-----. *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1961.

-----. *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: From Friedrich to Rothko*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Rosenthal, Michael. *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996.

Rosenthal, Michael and Matthew Drutt. *Visions of Paris: Robert Delaunay's Series*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997.

Roskill, Mark W. *Klee and Kandinsky and the Thought of Their Time*. Chicago: University of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Illinois Press. 1986.

-----. *The Interpretation of Cubism*. Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1985.

-----. *Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Impressionist Circle*. Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970.

Roth, Evan. "Dove Painting and Studies: National Museum of American Art." *Museum News* 68 (May / June 1990): 48-49.

Rowell, Margit. "On Albers' Color." *Artforum* 10 (January 1972): 26-37.

Rubin, William. *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970.

-----. *Frank Stella, 1970–1987*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987.

----. *Picasso: A Retrospective*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.

-----. *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989.

Rubin, William, et al. *Cézanne: The Late Work*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977.

Rubin, William, ed. *"Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984. 2 volumes.

Rushing, W. Jackson, III. *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

-----. "Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*. Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 273-296.

Rye, Jane. *Futurism*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1972.

Sandler, Irving. *American Art of the 1960s*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.

-----. *Art of the Post-Modern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*. New York: New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

-----. *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

-----. *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Harper

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and Row, 1970.

Schapiro, Meyer. *Paul Cézanne*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988. Concise edition.

-----. "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting." in Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: George Braziller, 1978, pp. 233-261.

-----. "The Nature of Abstract Art." in Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: George Braziller, 1978, pp. 185-211.

-----. *Van Gogh*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982. Rev. ed.

Scott, David. *Stanton MacDonald-Wright*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1967.

Selz, Peter. *German Expressionist Painting*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957.

Seuphor, Michel. *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1958.

Shaw, Sophia, ed. *The Arts Club of Chicago: The Collection, 1916-1996*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Sherman, Lisa. "Matter into Sensation." *Southwest Art* 11.4 (September 1981): 117-121.

Shiff, Richard. *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Sims, Lowery Stokes, et al. *Stuart Davis: American Painter*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.

Smith, Paul. *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Smith, Richard Candida. *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

South, Will. "Stanton MacDonald-Wright: From Synchromism to the Federal Art Projects." Ph.D. Dissertation. The Graduate School and University Center of The City University of New York, 1994.

South, Will, et al. *Color, Myth and Magic: Stanton MacDonald-Wright and Synchromism*. Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2001.

Spate, Virginia. *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-figurative Painting in Paris, 1910-1914*. New York: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1979.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Spector, Nancy, ed. *Guggenheim Museum: A to Z.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001.

Stratch. Ronnie Barrett. "The Enigmatic Arthur Dove." *Art News* 84 (January 1985): 80-85.

Steiner, Margaret. *Agnes Pelton.* Freemont. CA: Ohlone College Art Gallery, 1989.

Stavitsky, Gail, et al. *Precisionism: Reordering Reality, 1917-1941.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

Strickler, Susan E. *The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s: Selections from the Penny and Elton Yasuna Collection.* Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 1991.

Stuckey, Charles. *Monet, 1840-1926.* Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1995.

Suhre, Terry. *Moholy-Nagy: A New Vision for Chicago.* Springfield, IL: Illinois State Museum, 1990.

Sylvester, David, et al. *Willem de Kooning: Paintings.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

Taylor, Joshua. *The Graphic Work of Umberto Boccioni.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961.

Tietjens, Eunice. "The Work of C. Raymond Johnson." *Theatre Arts Monthly* 4 (July 1920).

Thomson, Belinda. *Gauguin.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987.

-----. *Post-Impressionism.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

-----. *The Post-Impressionists.* Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1983.

Towards a New Art. Essays on the Background to Abstract Art, 1910-1920. London: Tate Gallery, 1980.

The Transcendental Painting Group: New Mexico, 1938-1941. Albuquerque: Albuquerque Museum, 1982. [Essay and biographies written by James Monte and Anne Glusker.]

Theberge, Pierre, et al. *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe.* Montreal: Montreal Museum of Art, 1995.

Troy, Nancy J. *The De Stijl Environment.* Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1983.

-----. *Mondrian and Neoplasticism in America.* New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1979.

Tucker, Paul H. *Claude Monet: Life and Art.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Tuchman, Maurice, "Hidden Meanings of Abstract Art" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*. Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 17-62.

Tuchman, Maurice, et al. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*. Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986.

Tupitsyn, Margarita. *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design. Collaboration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Udall, Sharyn. *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1913-1935*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984.

-----. *O'Keeffe in Texas*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999.

-----. *Sacred Ground: Myth and Meaning in Southwestern Art*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

Varnedoe, Kirk and Pepe Karmel. *Jackson Pollock*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998.

Vrachopoulos, Thalia Trezos. "Jean Xceron: Rediscovered American Modernist Pioneer. Life and Works, 1912-1949." Ph.D. Dissertation. New York: The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1999.

Vriesen, Gustav and Max Imdahl. *Robert Delaunay: Light and Color*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1967.

Wainscott, Ronald H. *The Emergence of the Modern American Theater, 1914-1929*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Waldman, Diane. *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992.

-----. *Ellsworth Kelly*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997.

-----. *Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1977.

-----. *Willem De Kooning*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988.

Walton, Paul H. "The Group of Seven and Northern Development." *RACAR / Revue d'Art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 17.2 (1990): 171-179.

Ward, Martha. *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*. Chicago:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

University of Chicago Press. 1996.

Weber. Nicholas Fox, et al. *Josef Albers: A Retrospective.* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1988.

Wechsler, James. *Abraham Joel Tobias: Sculptural Paintings of the 1930s.* New Brunswick. NJ: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1987.

Weiss, Peg. *Kandinsky in Munich, 1896-1914.* New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1982.

-----. *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jungenstil Years.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Wells, James S. *The Arts Club of Chicago: Portrait of an Era.* Chicago: The Arts Club, 1986.

Welsh, Robert P. "Piet Mondrian: The Subject Matter of Art." *Artforum* 11 (April 1973): 50-53.

-----. "Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction" in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985.* Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986. pp. 63-88.

Westfall, Stephen. "Abstract Naturalism: Arthur Dove." *Art in America* 73 (May 1985): 124-133.

Whitfield, Sarah. *Fauvism.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Whitford, Frank. *Bauhaus.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Wiggins, Walt. *The Transcendental Art of Emil Bisttram.* Ruisodo Downs, NM: Pintores Press, 1988.

-----. *William Lumpkins: Pioneer Abstract Expressionist.* Ruisodo Downs, NM: Pintores Press, 1990

Wilkin, Karen. *Kenneth Noland.* New York: Rizzoli Publications, 1990.

-----. *Stuart Davis.* New York: Abbeville Press, 1987.

Wilmerding, John, et al. *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875.* Washington. D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1980.

Wilson, Michael. *The Impresionists.* Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1983.

Witt, David. *Emil James Bisttram.* Taos, NM: Harwood Foundation. Museum of Taos, 1985.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Wolf, Ben, and Raymond Jonson. *New Mexico Artists.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1952.

Wood, James. N. *The Art Institute of Chicago: Twentieth Century Painting and Sculpture.* Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1996.

-----. *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism at the Art Institute of Chicago.* Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000.

Wood, Mary-Helen, ed. *Edvard Munch: The Frieze of Life.* London: National Gallery, 1992.

Wood, Paul, et al. *The Great Utopia: Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde.* New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992.

Zakian, Michael. *Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature.* Palm Springs, CA: Palm Spring Museum, 1995

Zelvansky, Lynn, ed. *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992.

Zilczer, Judith. "The Aesthetic Struggle in America, 1913-1918: Abstract Painting and Theory in the Stieglitz Circle." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1975.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

THE ART AND LIFE OF RAYMOND JONSON (1891-1982):

CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART

Volume II: Illustrations

by

Herbert R. Hartel, Jr.

A dissertation submitted to the Doctoral Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2002

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

VOLUME II: ILLUSTRATIONS TO ACCOMPANY THE TEXT

All reproductions are referred to in the text, the list of illustrations, and the captions as "Plates." Unless otherwise indicated, all works are by Raymond Jonson. Works in the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, which belong to its Reserved Retrospective Collection, are identified by the acronym "RRC." The RRC consists of those works which are in the permanent collection of the Jonson Gallery of the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. The Open Collection consists of those works in Jonson's estate which the University of New Mexico owns but which it has the freedom and right to sell. Information on each work is given in the following order: artist (if other than Jonson), title, date, media, dimensions (height before width) and the owner and location of the work if known. For those works which have been entitled by medium-number-year, information concerning date and medium is included in the titles of the works which are printed in italics. Owners who desire to remain anonymous are identified as "private collection."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

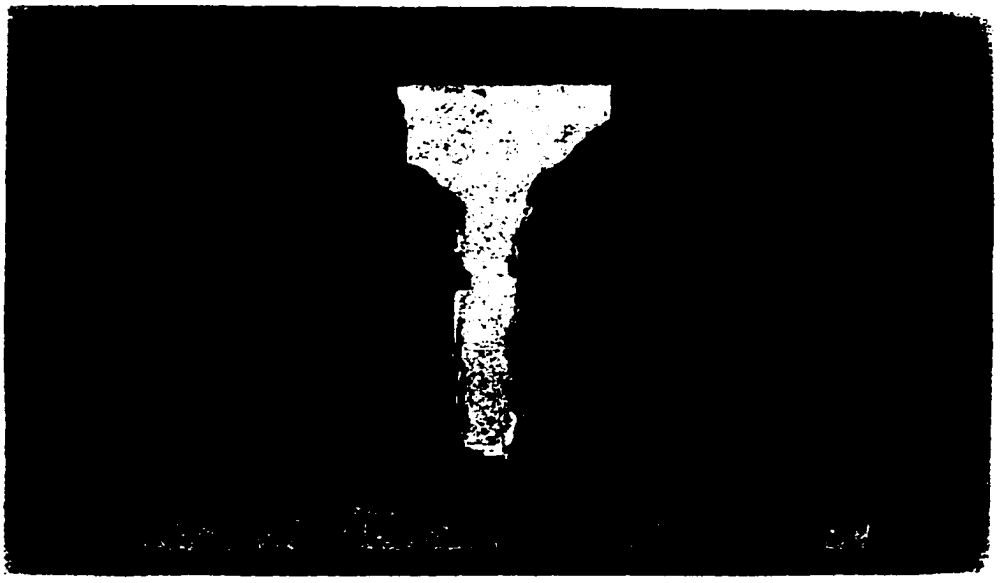

Plate 1 Sketch for the stage set for the Chicago Little Theatre's 1915 production of *The Trojan Woman*, gouache on paper, 13-1/2" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

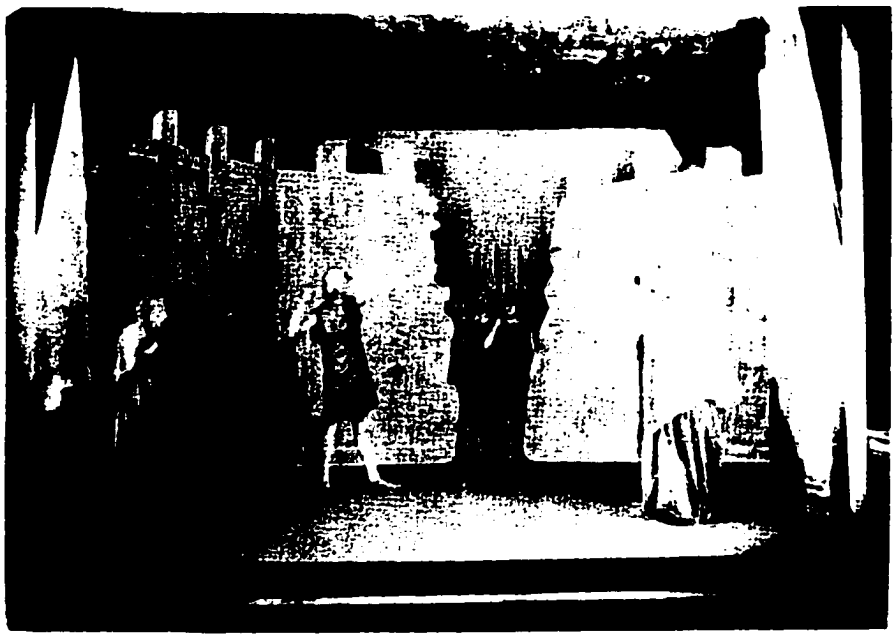

Plate 2 Photograph of the Chicago Little Theatre's 1913 production of *The Trojan Woman*, showing the stage set designed by Bror J. O. Nordfeldt. Photograph in the Van Volkenberg-Browne Collection, University of Michigan.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 3 Sketch for the stage set for the Chicago Little Theatre's 1917 production of *Diedre of the Sorrows*, Act 2 (the forest scene), 1917, gouache on paper, 11-1/2" x 19", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

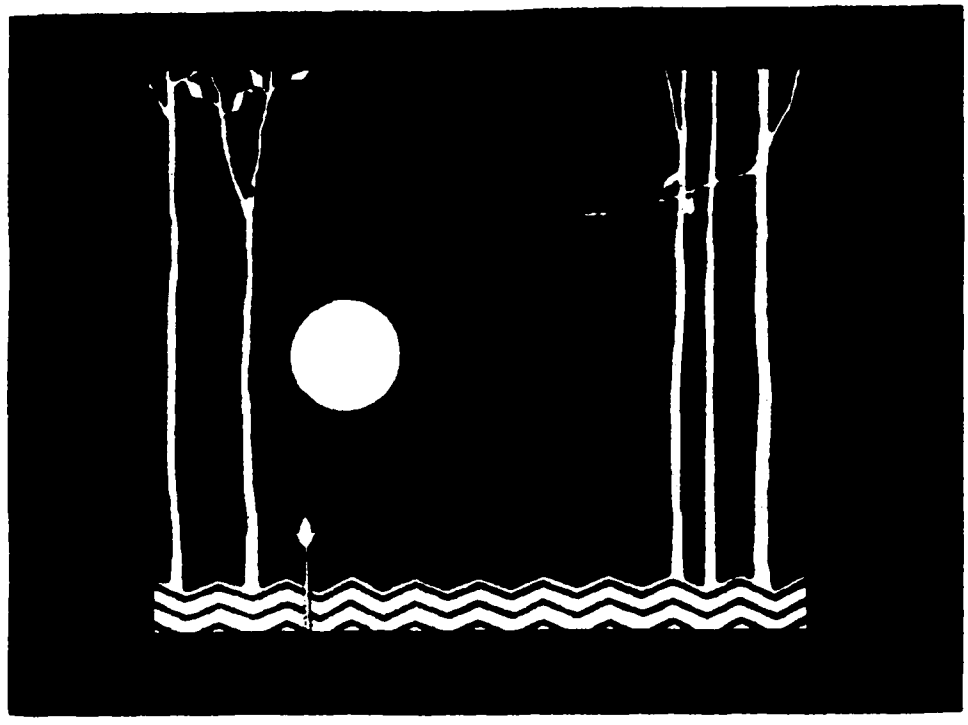

Plate 4 Sketch for the stage set for the Chicago Little Theatre's production of Cloyd Head's *Grotesques*, 1915, gouache on paper, 13-1/2" x 18-1/2". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

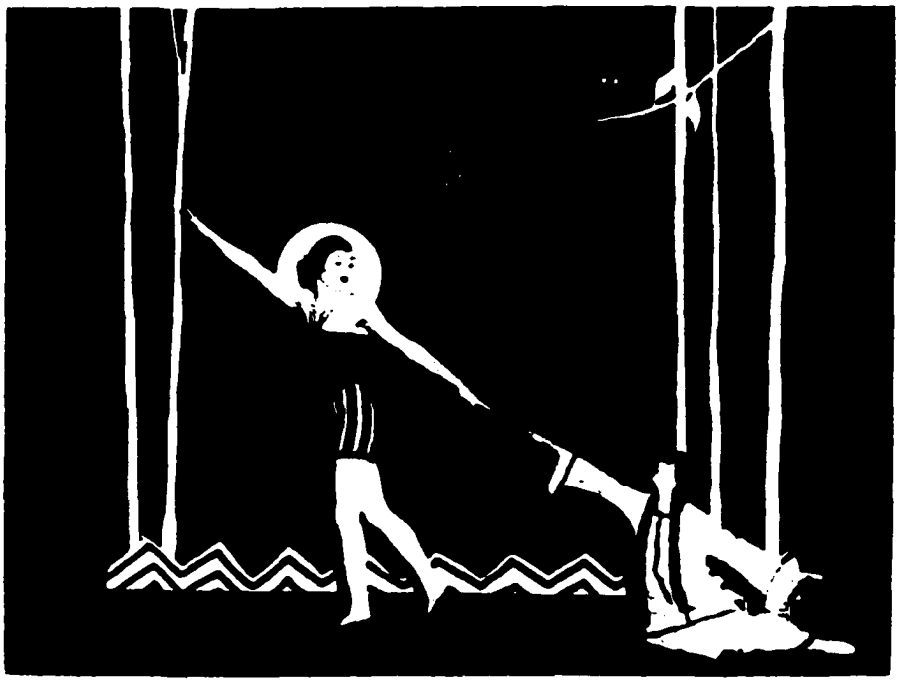

Plate 5 Photograph of a performance of Cloyd Head's *Grotesques* as produced by the Chicago Little Theatre in 1915.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 6 *Field Museum–Chicago*, 1912, oil on canvas, 28" x 33", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 7 *Figure Study–Girl*, 1913, oil on canvas, 38" x 34", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 8 *The Lady–Mary Williams*, 1918, oil on canvas, 48" x 38", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 9 *Miriam Kiper–A Characterization*, 1918, oil on canvas, 42" x 38", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 10 *Violet Light (Portrait of Vera)*, 1918, oil on canvas, 44" x 33", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

NOTE TO USERS

Copyrighted materials in this document have not been filmed at the request of the author. They are available for consultation in the author's university library.

Plates 11-14, 23-24, 28, 37-38, 48, 53, 55, 57, 68, 79-90, 92-93, 96-98, 101, 103-106, 111, 114, 117, 126, 141, 148, and 151

This reproduction is the best copy available.

UMI ®

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 15 *Sketch–California Hills*, 1915, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 16 *The Rhythm of the Wind*, 1917, oil on canvas, 42" x 45", private collection, Albuquerque.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 17 *The Sentinel*, 1917, oil on canvas, 45" x 42", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

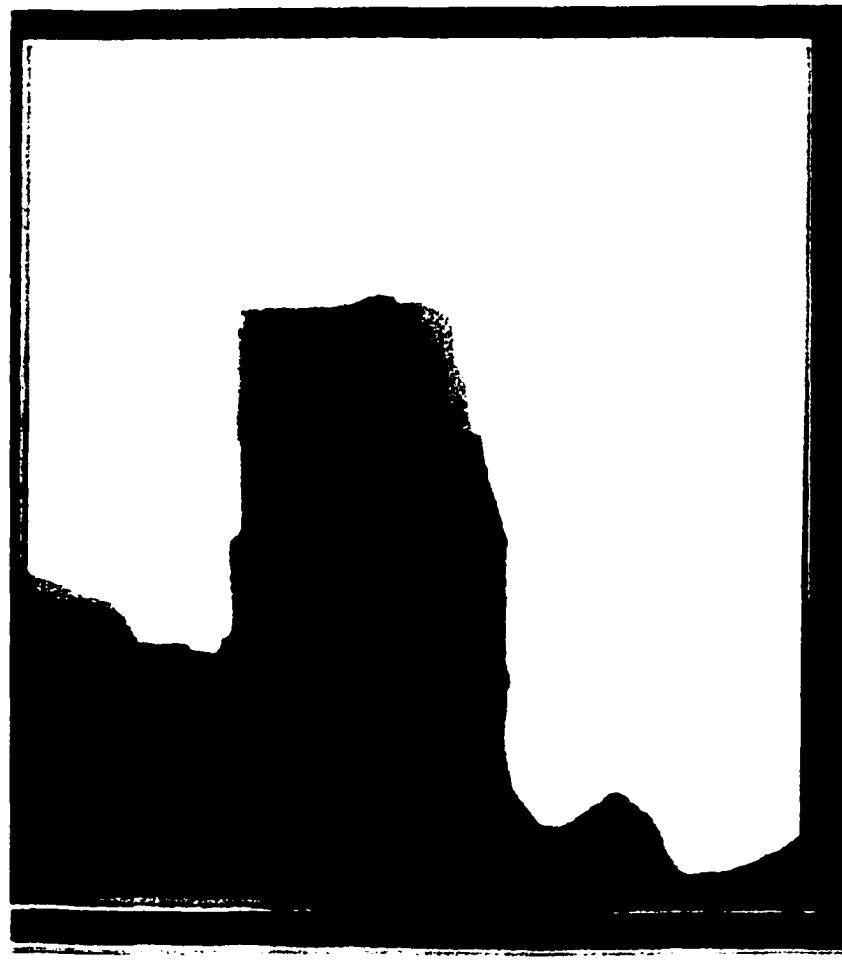

Plate 18 *Light*, 1917, oil on canvas, 45" x 42", Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 19 *The Decree*, 1918, oil on canvas, 35" x 41". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

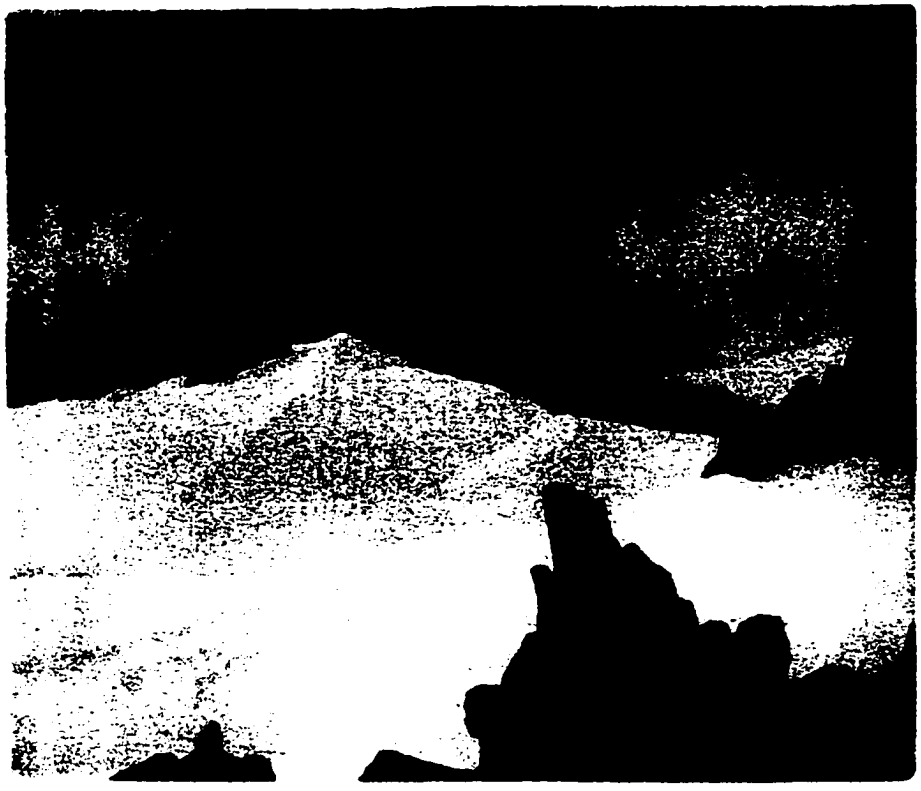

Plate 20 *The Power of God*, 1918, oil on canvas, 35" x 41", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 21 *First Morning*, 1920, oil on canvas, 38" x 48", private collection, Charleston, West Virginia.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 22 *Life*, 1921, oil on canvas, 45" x 42", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 25 *Winter (Seasons Series)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 35" x 45". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 26 *Arroyo (1)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 27 *Arroyo (2)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

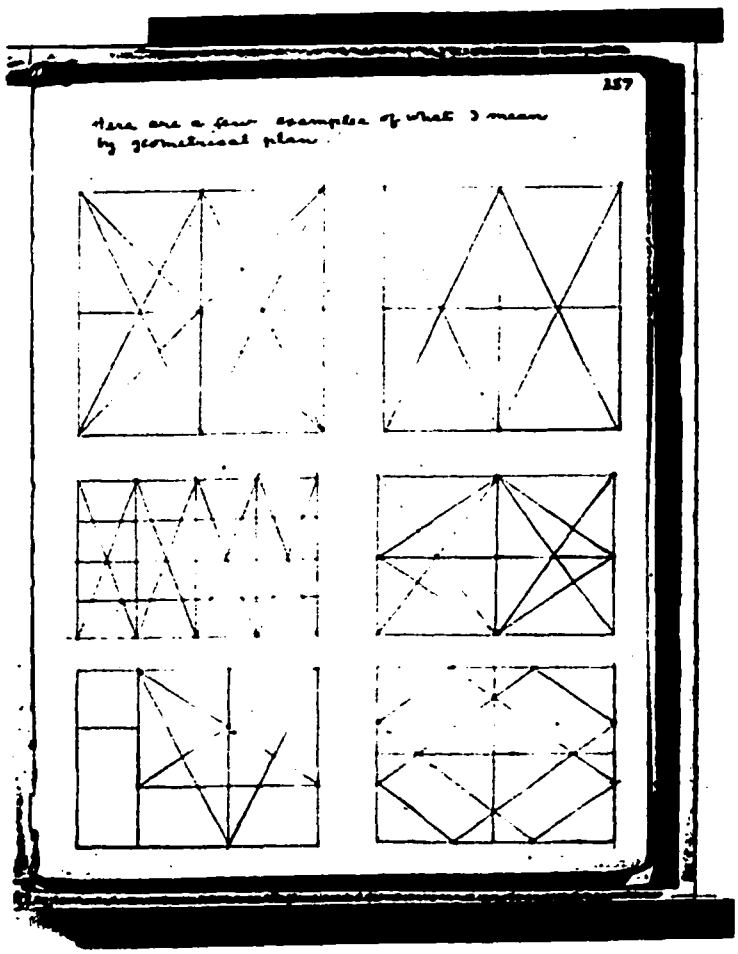

Plate 29 Jonson's diary, entry dated January 9, 1923, p. 357, featuring geometric diagrams probably derived from Jay Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6215.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

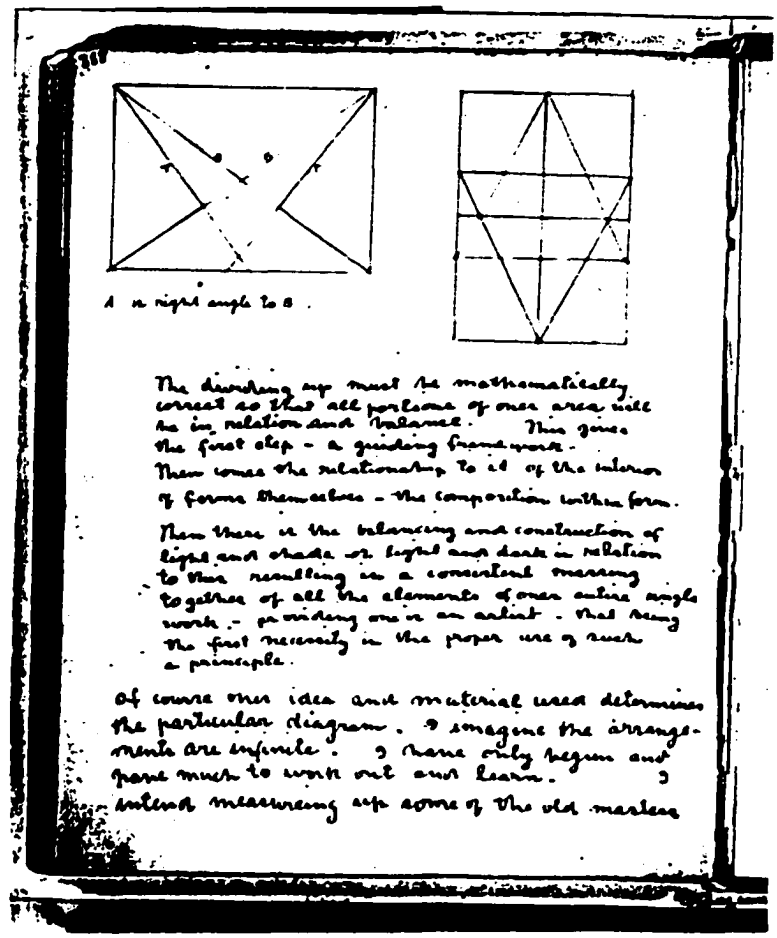

Plate 30 Jonson's diary, entry dated January 9, 1923, p. 358, featuring geometric diagrams probably derived from Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6215.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

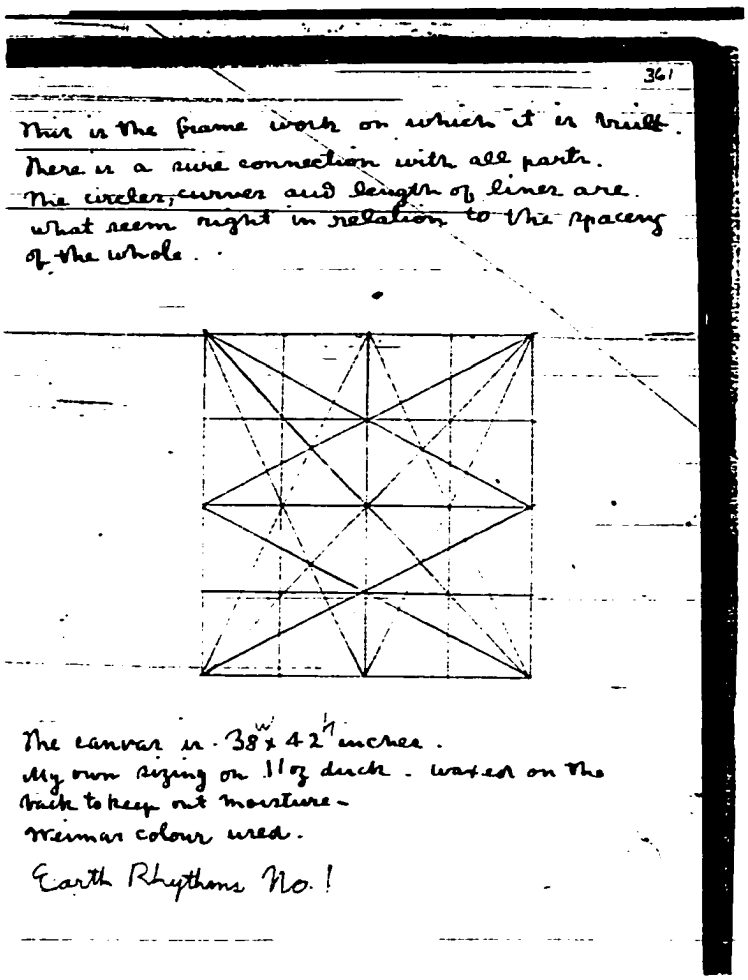

Plate 31 Jonson's diary, entry dated January 9, 1923, p. 361, featuring geometric diagram probably derived from Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6217.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

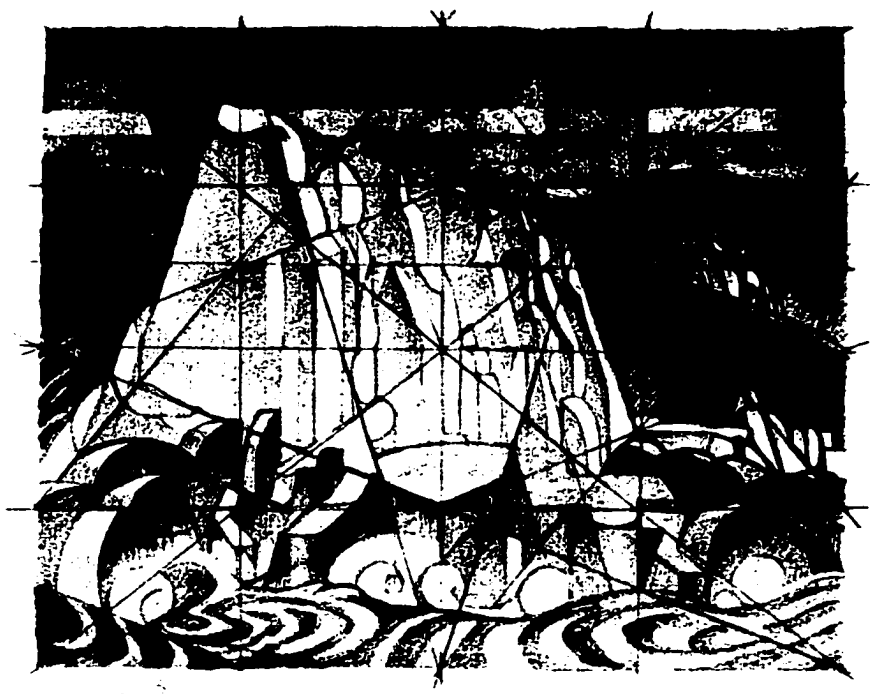

Plate 32 Sketch for *Earth Rhythms No. 3*, showing geometric framework probably derived from Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Jonson's diary, entry dated July 6, 1923, p. 389, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, RJ 8: 6230.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In a root-two rectangle diagonals of the whole and diagonals of the reciprocals divide the area into a never ending series of smaller root-two rectangles. Fig. 28.

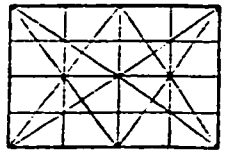

Fig. 28*a*

a. Continued subdivision of a root-two rectangle into similar figures, with a ratio of two.

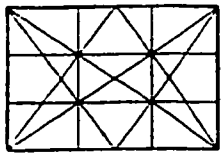

Fig. 28*b*

b. Continued subdivision of a root-two rectangle into similar figures with a ratio of three.

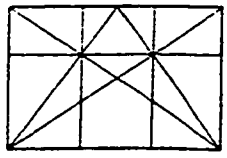

Fig. 28*c*

Fig. 28c illustrates the fact that the intersection of the diagonal of the whole rectangle with the diagonal of half the rectangle determines its division into thirds. This fact applies not only to the root-two rectangle but to all the rectangles and is therefore of great use to the designer.

Plate 33 **Diagram of the subdivision of the root two rectangle by Jay Hambidge, from *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*, p. 42.**

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

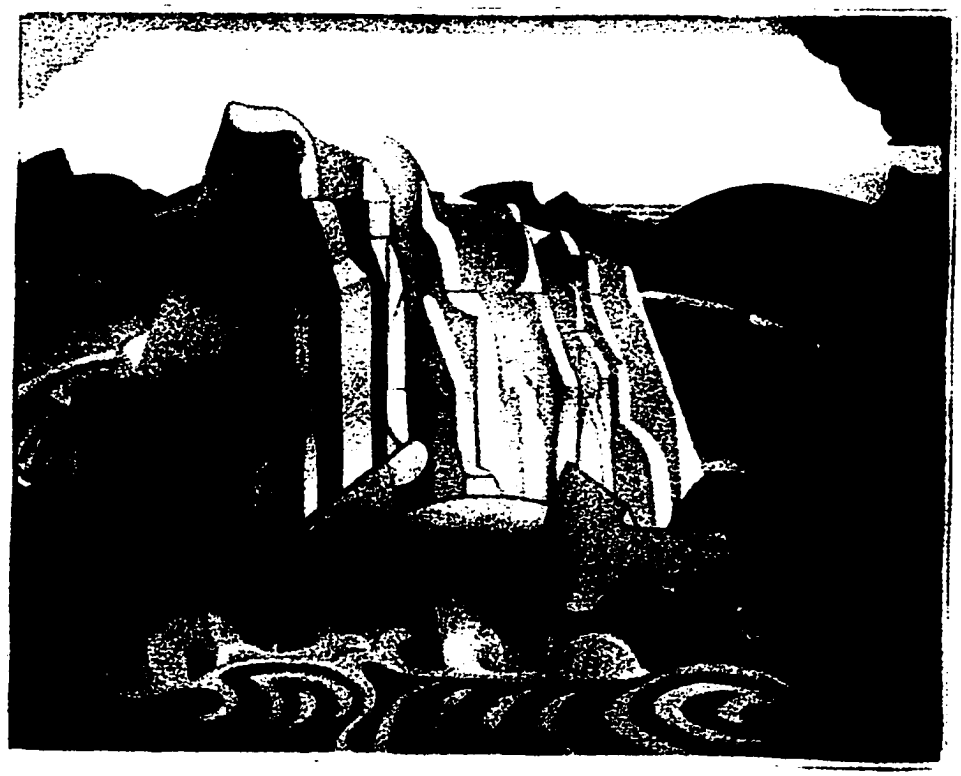

Plate 34 *Earth Rhythms No. 3*, 1923, oil on canvas. 32" x 40". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 35 *Composition Four–Melancholia (Space Moods)*, 1925, oil on canvas, 46" x 38", Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

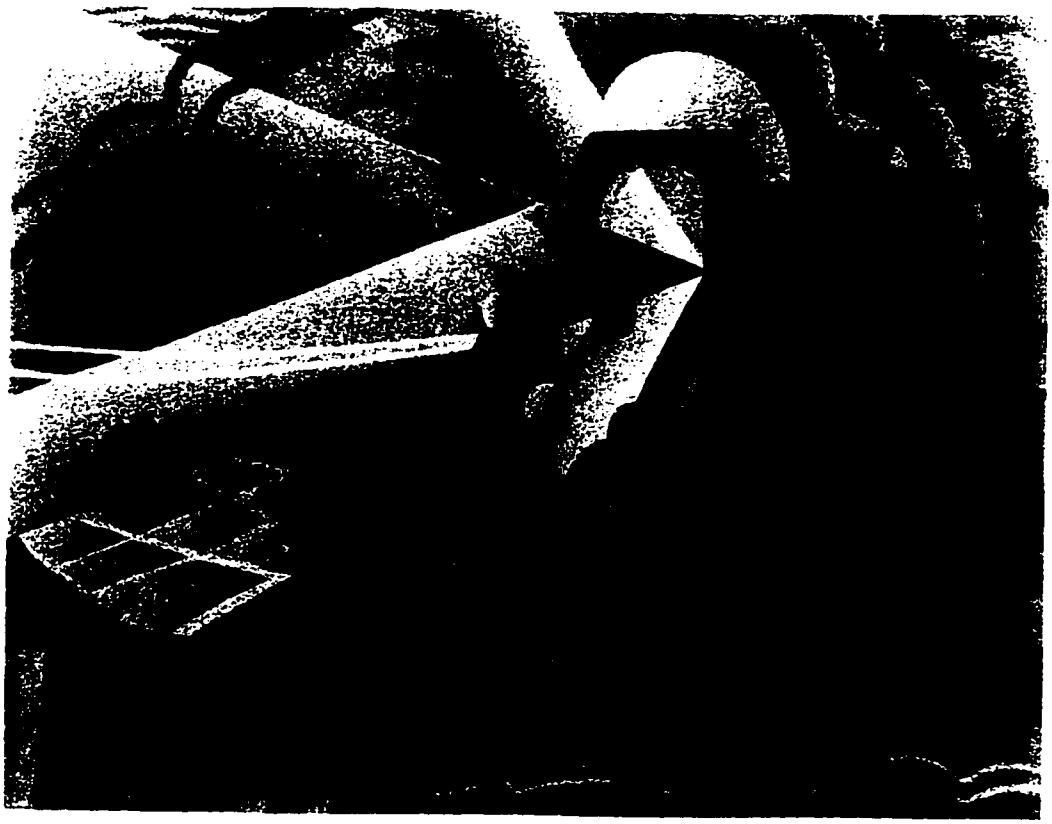

Plate 36 *Composition Five–Wind*, 1925, oil on canvas, 33" x 44", Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 39 *Earth Rhythms No. 6*, 1925, oil on canvas, 37" x 40", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 40 *Earth Rhythms No. 9*, 1926, oil on canvas, 45" x 52", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 41 *Spring (Seasons Series)*, 1926, oil on canvas, 41" x 28", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 42 *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, 1927, oil on canvas, 48" x 38", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 43 *Grand Canyon Trilogy: First Movement*, 1928, oil on canvas, 45" x 56", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 44 *Grand Canyon Trilogy: Third Movement*, 1928, oil on canvas, 45" x 56", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

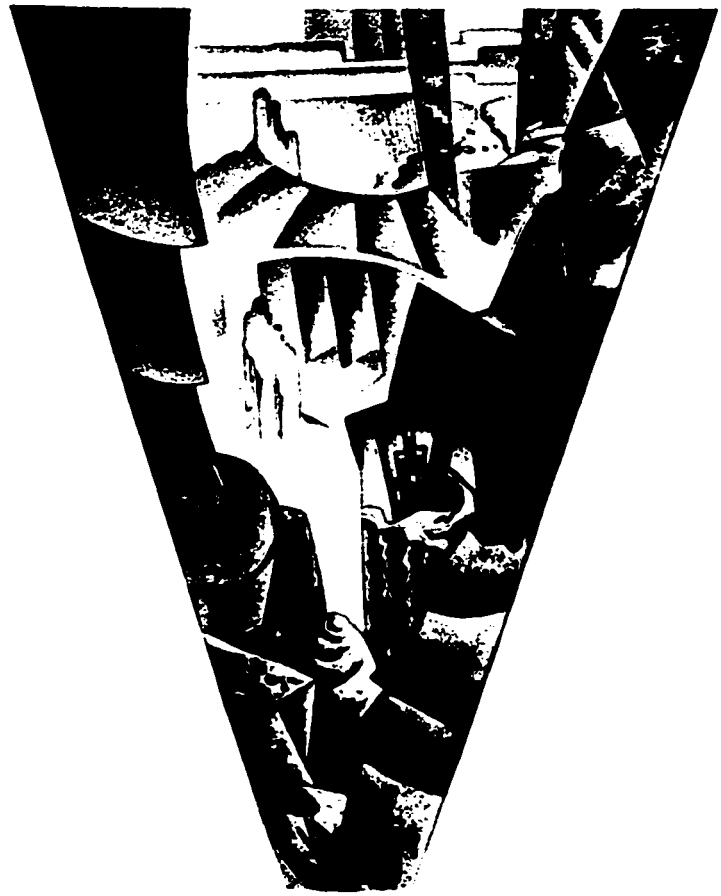

Plate 45 *Grand Canyon Trilogy: Second Movement*, 1928, oil on canvas, 67-1/2" x 52-1/2" X 9", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 46 *Abstract Four*, 1929, oil on canvas, 24" x 15", private collection, Los Angeles.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 47 *Composition Nine–Flame*, 1929, oil on canvas, 38-1/2" x 26-1/2" (irregular shape), collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Spiro, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 49 *Symphonic Portrait of May van Dyke*, 1929, oil on canvas, 70" x 50", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 50 *Composition Ten-Music*, 1929, oil on canvas, 50" x 33", private collection, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

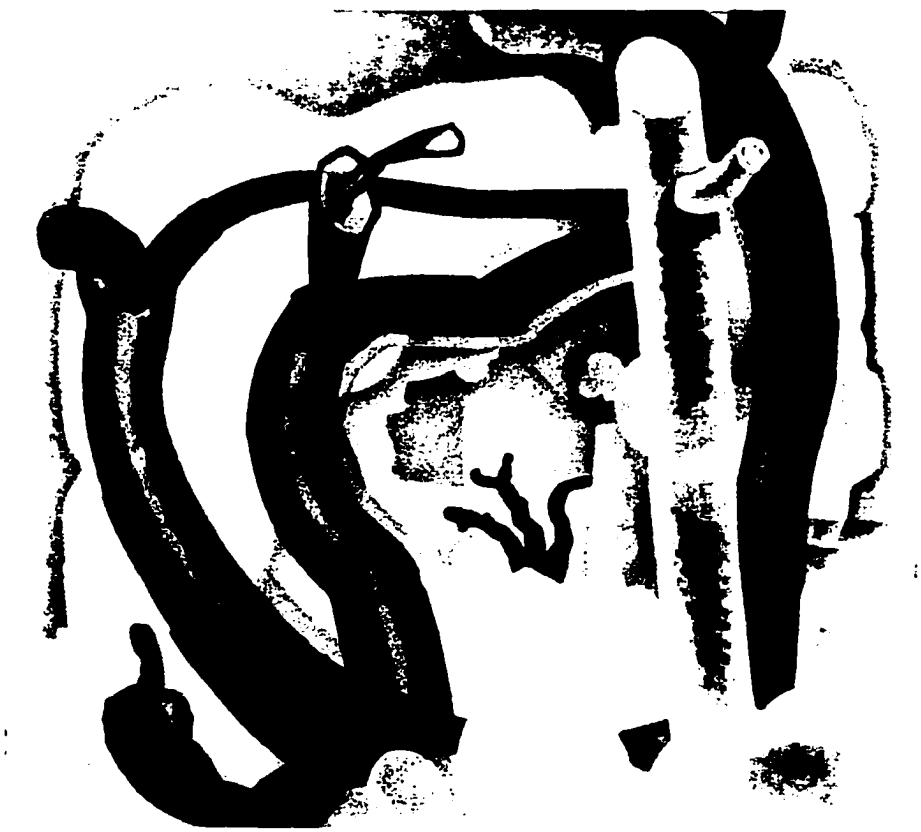

Plate 51 *Growth Variant No. VI*, 1930, oil on canvas, 33" x 38, RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 52 *Growth Variant No. VII*, 1931, oil on canvas, 35" x 30" (irregular), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

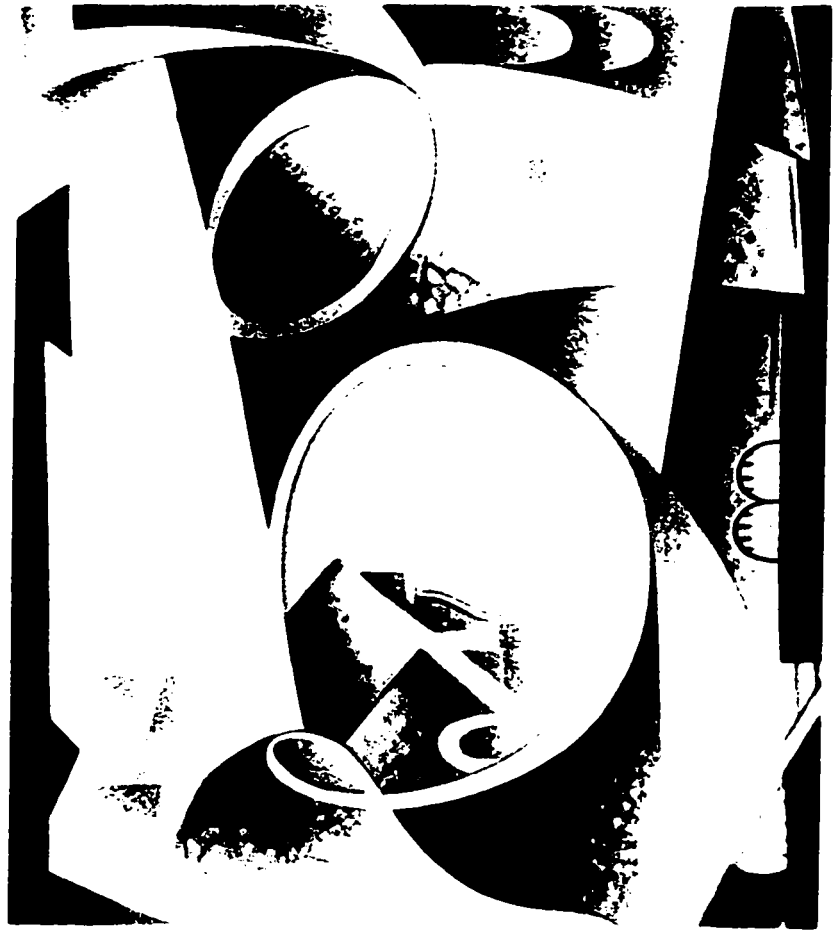

Plate 54 *Variations on a Rhythm–B*, 1931, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 56 *Variations on a Rhythm–H*, 1931, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 58 *Variations on a Rhythm–R*, 1933, oil on canvas, 33" x 29", private collection, Albuquerque.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 59 *Abstraction in Red*, 1932, oil on canvas, 24" x 20", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 60 *New York*, 1931, pen-and-ink on paper, 12-1/2" x 7-1/2", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 61 *Time Cycle: Morning*, 1930, oil on canvas, 33" x 38", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

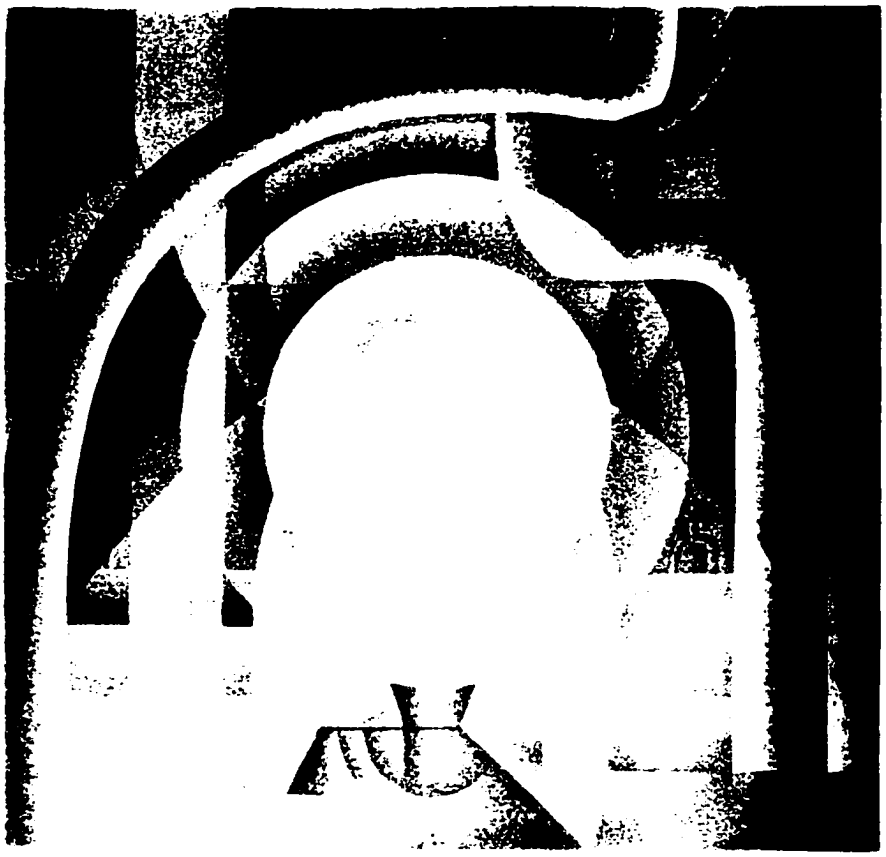

Plate 62 *Time Cycle: Noon*, 1930, oil on canvas, 36" x 38". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

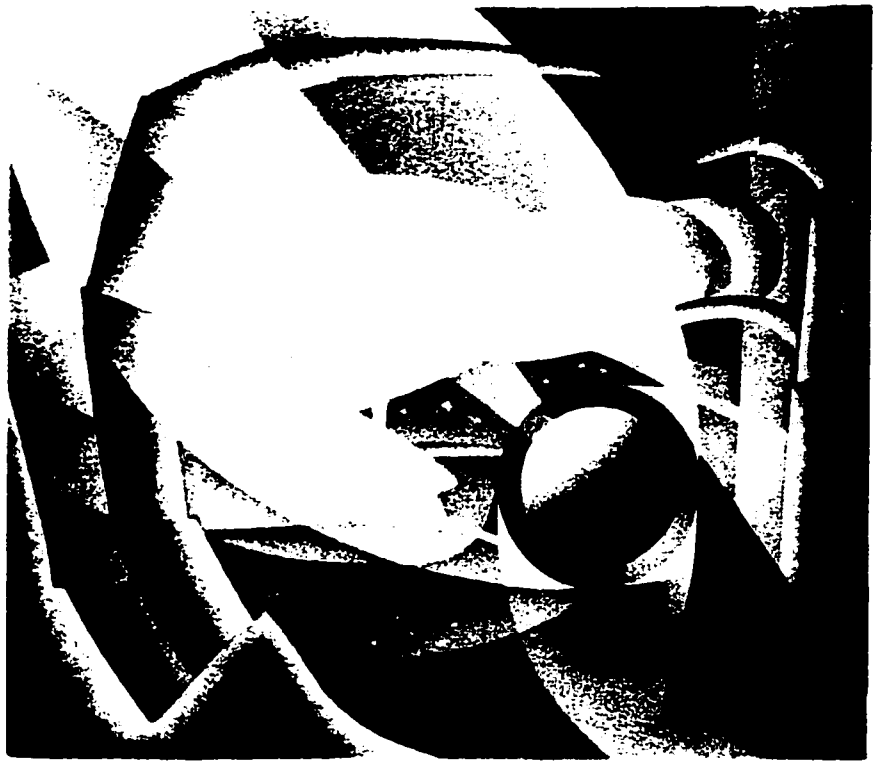

Plate 63 *Time Cycle: Night*, 1930, oil on canvas, 33" x 38", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

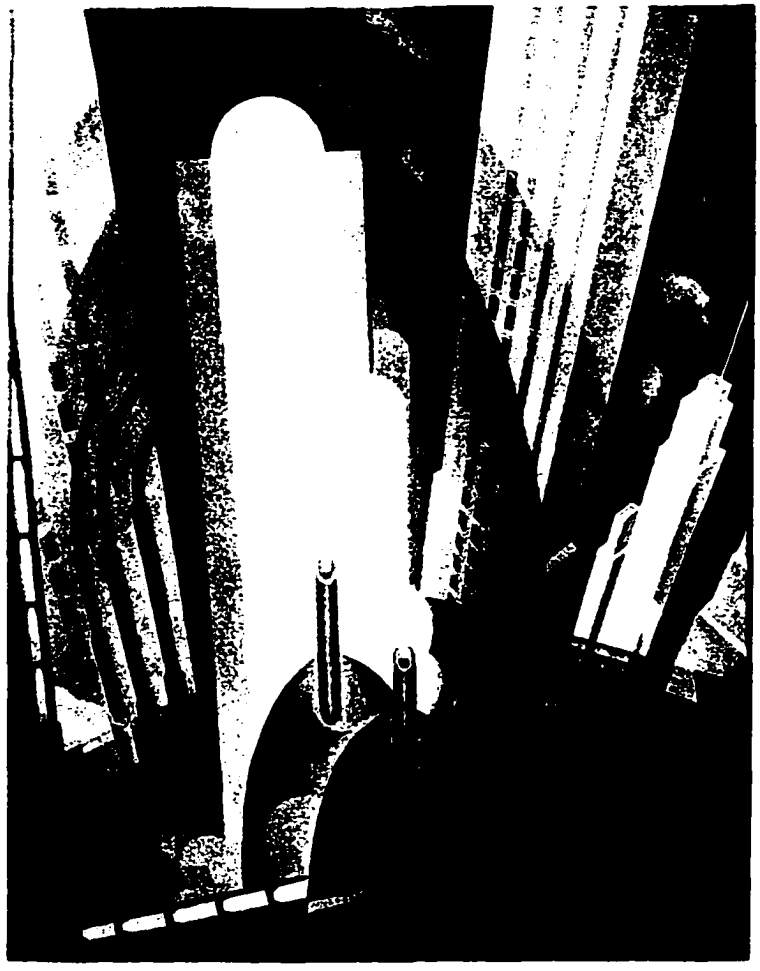

Plate 64 *City Perspectives (First Version)*, 1933, oil on canvas, 48" x 38", Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

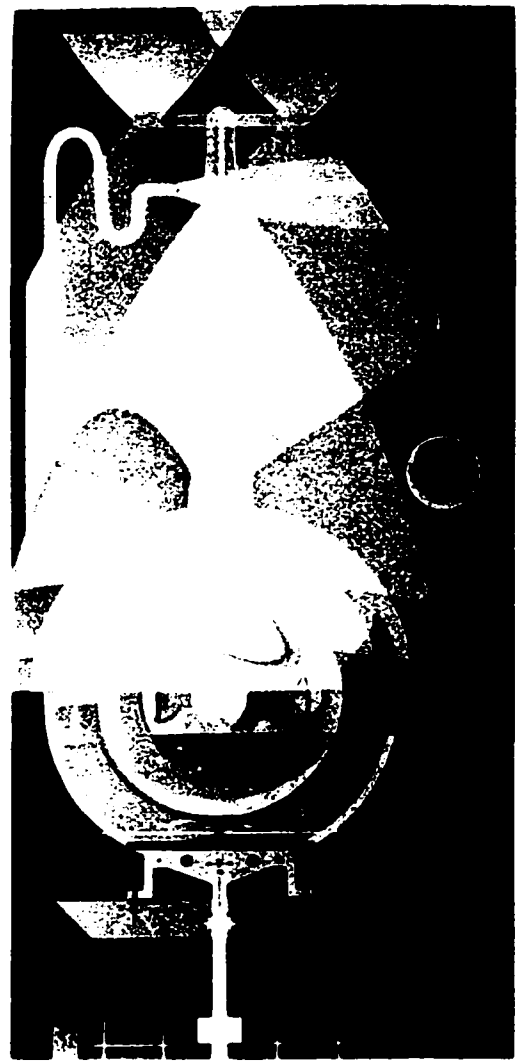

Plate 65 *Chemistry*, from *A Cycle of Science*, 1934, oil on canvas, 80" x 37", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 66 *Space Abstraction (a Construction)*, 1929, oil and mixed-media, 31" x 22", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

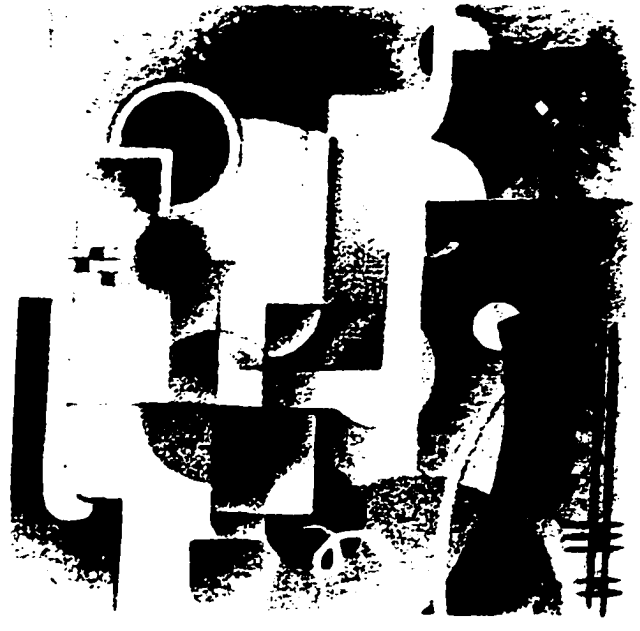

Plate 67 *Variation I*, 1929, oil on canvas, 6" x 6", private collection, Portland, Oregon.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 69 Untitled sketch, 1921, ink on paper, 8-1/2" x 11," private collection, San Diego.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

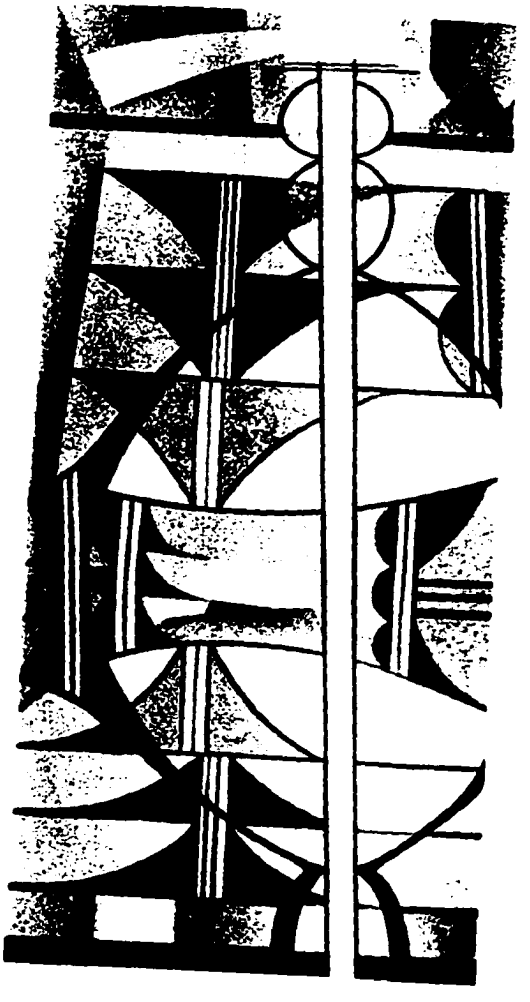

Plate 70 *Southwest Arrangement*, 1933, oil on canvas, 45" x 20", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 71 *Ascending Circle*, 1933, graphite on paper, 19" x 13", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 72 *Arabesque No. 1*, 1933, watercolor on paper, 19" x 13", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

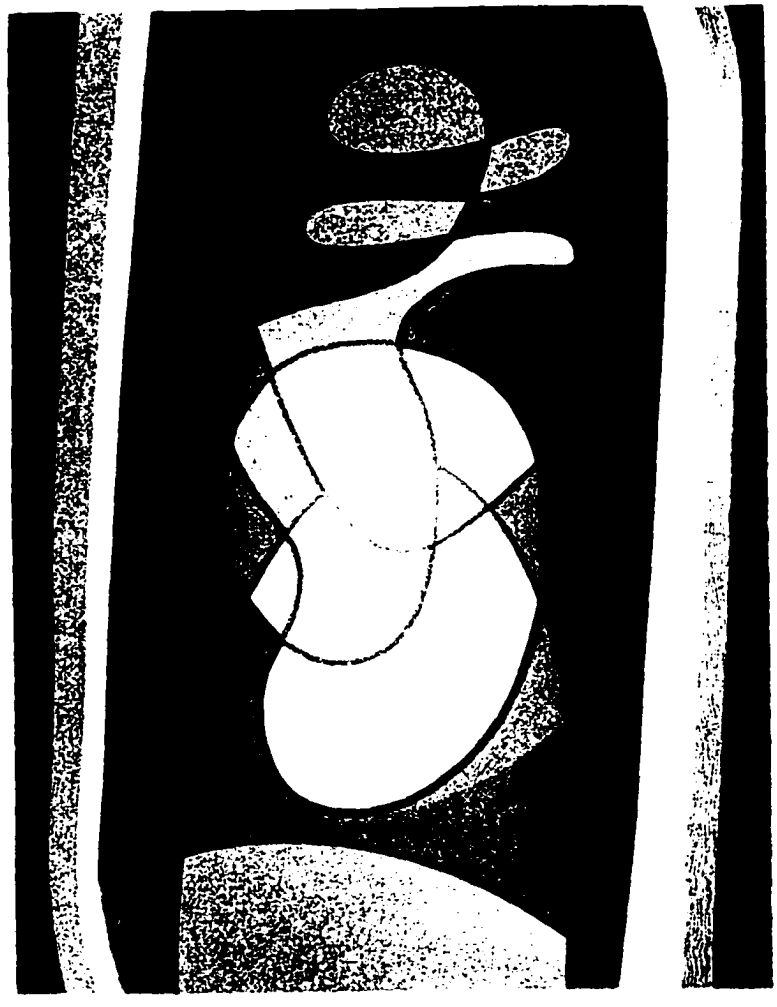

Plate 73 *Dramatic Figuration*, 1935, oil on canvas, 32" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

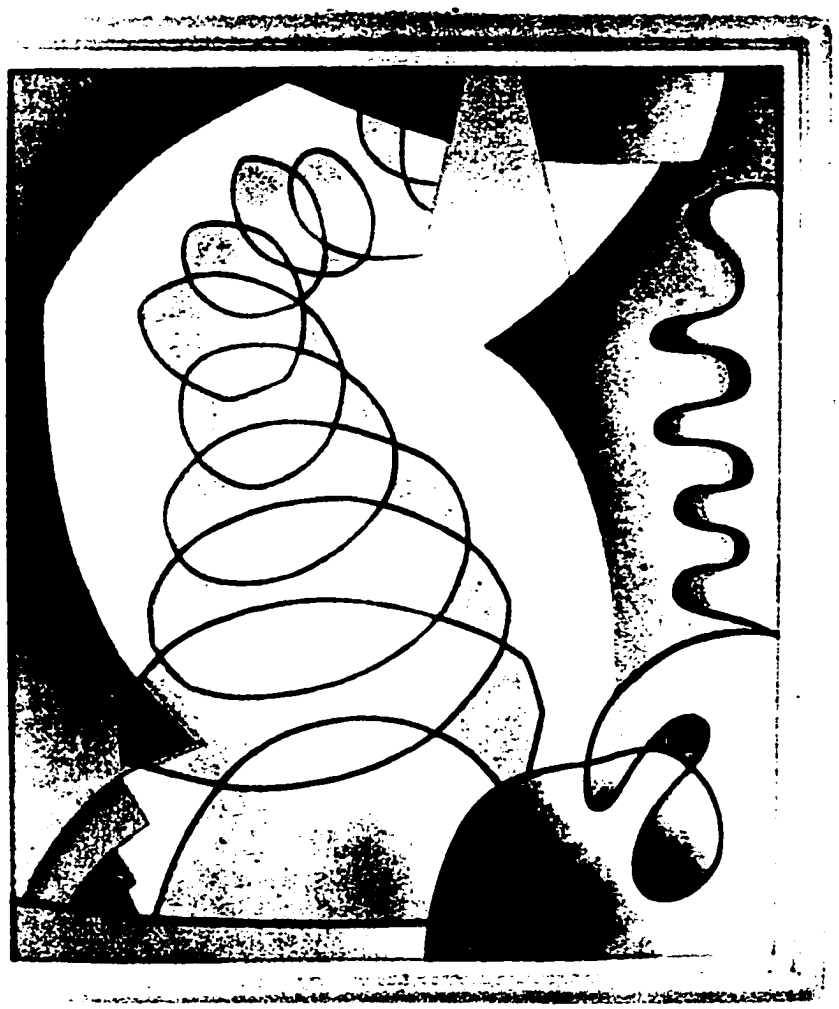

Plate 74 *Spiral Trilogy I (Left)*, 1936, oil and canvas, 31" x 27", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

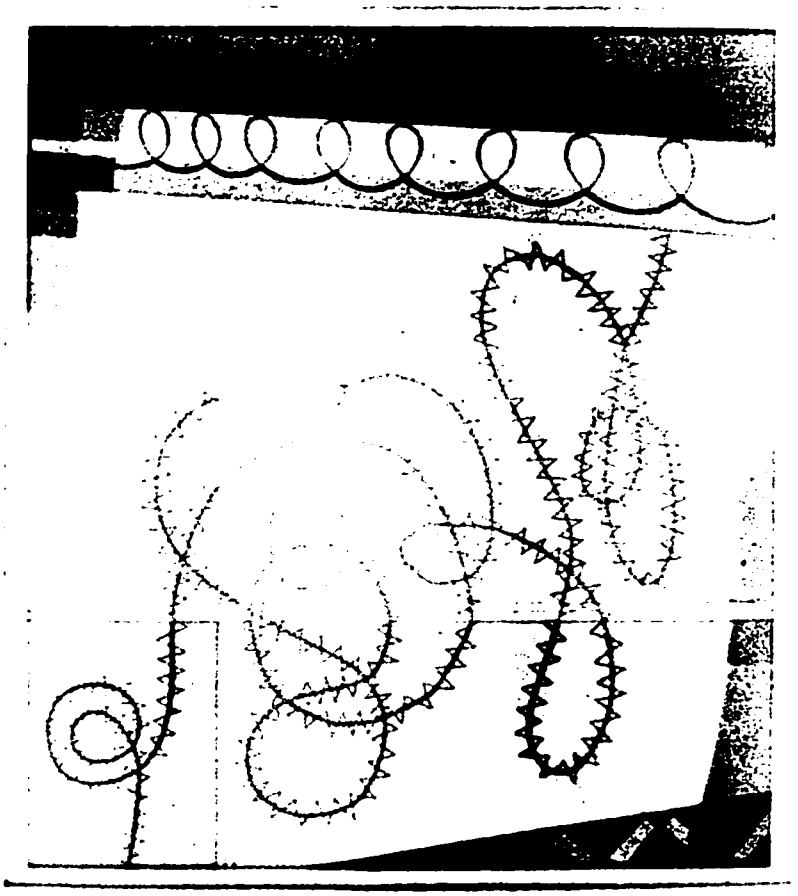

Plate 75 ***Spiral Trilogy II (Center)*****, 1936, oil on canvas, 27" x 31", RRC.**

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

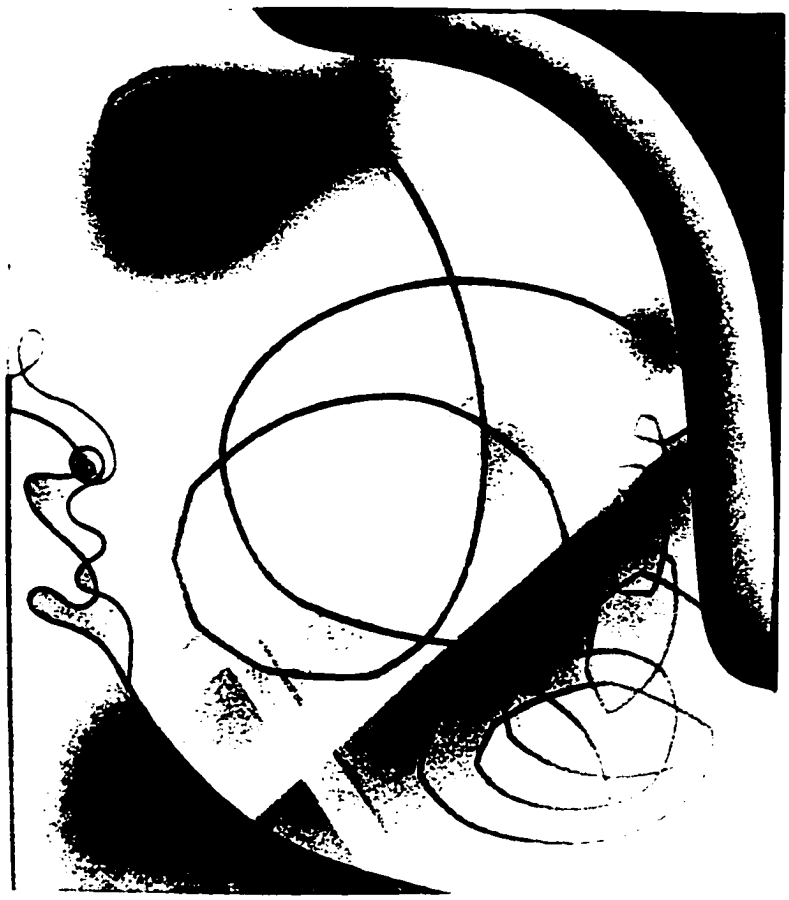

Plate 76 *Spiral Trilogy III (Right)*, 1936, oil on canvas with airbrushed water-based paint. 31" x 27". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

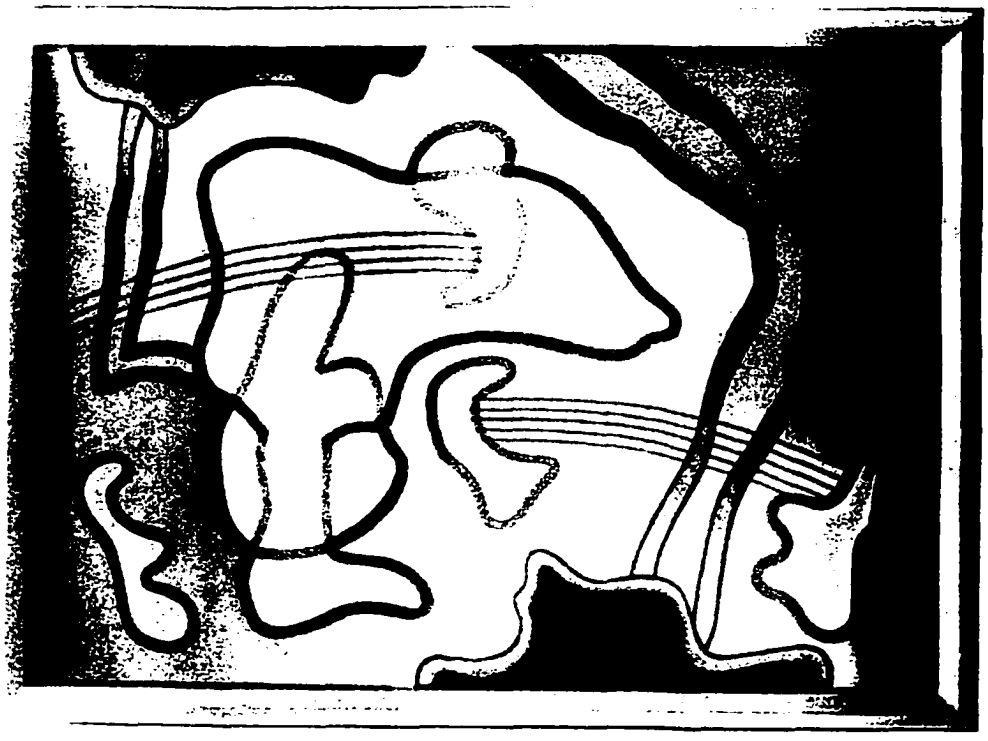

Plate 77 *Interlocked Forms in Space*, 1937, oil on canvas, 22" x 31", collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Spiro, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

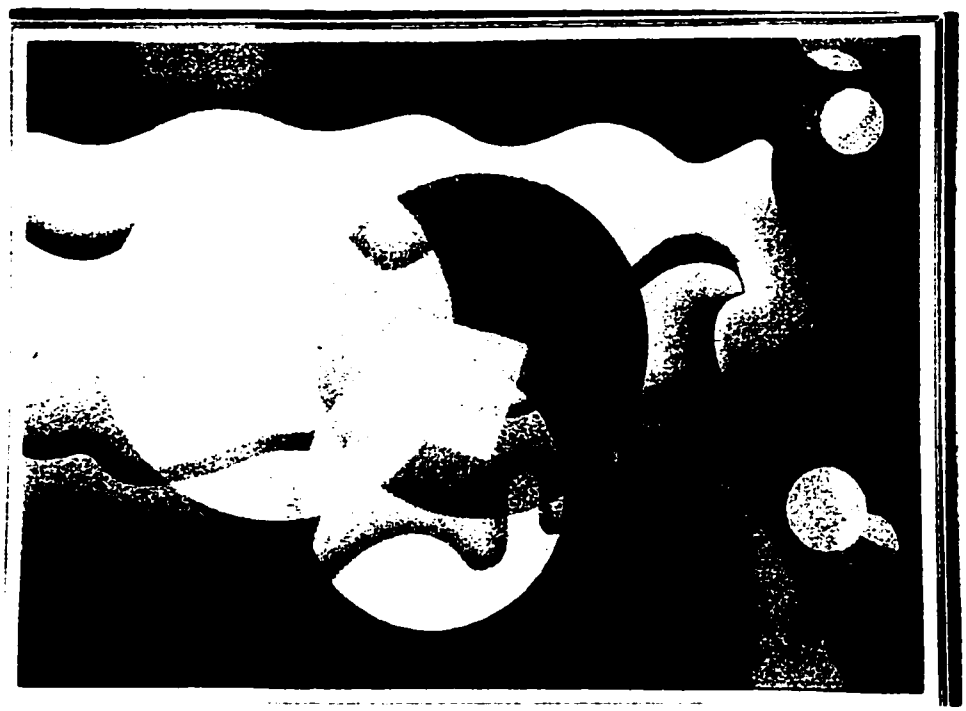

Plate 78 *Cosmic Theme No. 3*, 1937, oil on canvas, 28" x 40", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 91 *Oil No. 1–1938*, 24" x 35", private collection, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

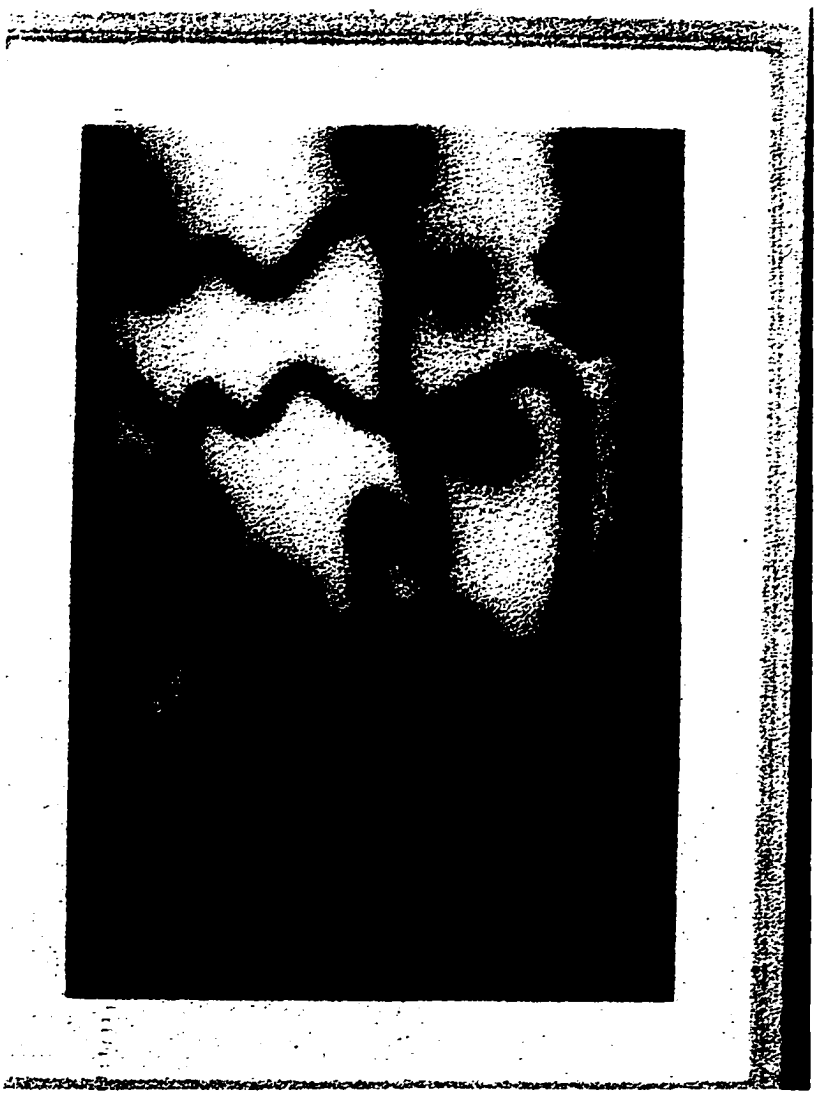

Plate 94 *Casein Tempera No. 3–1938*, 24" x 16", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

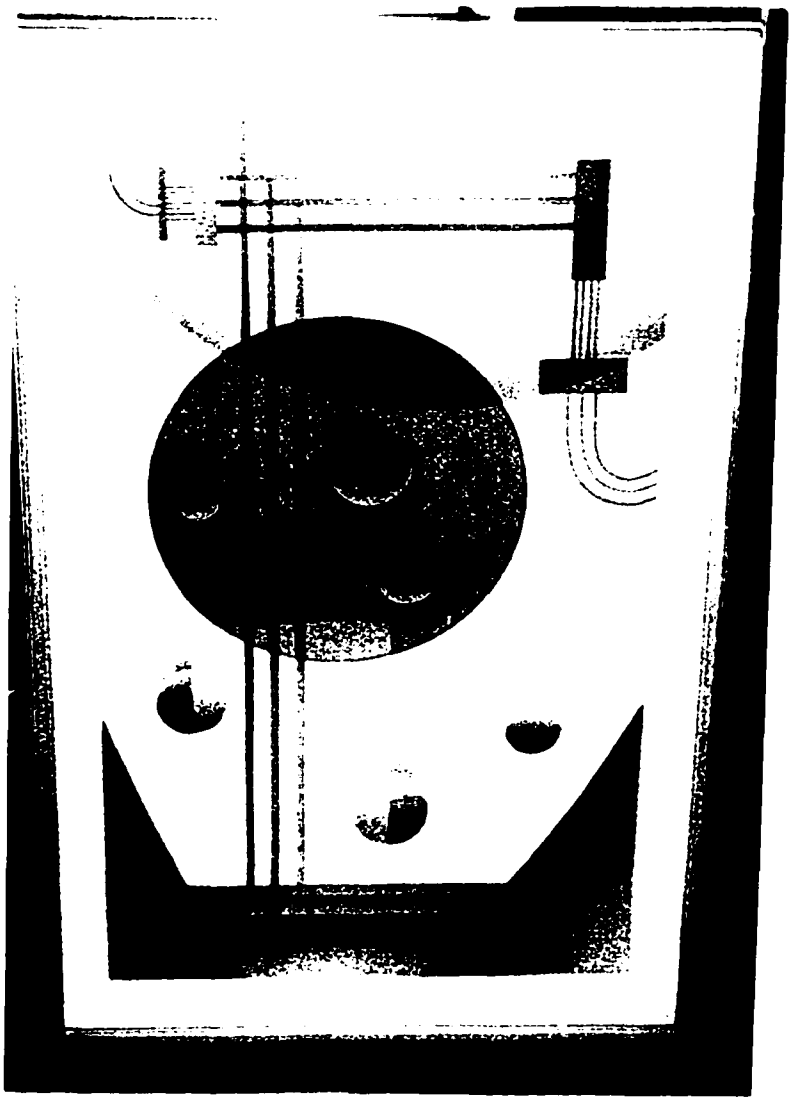

Plate 95 *Casein Tempera No. 4–1938*, 34" x 20", collection of Georgia de Havenon, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

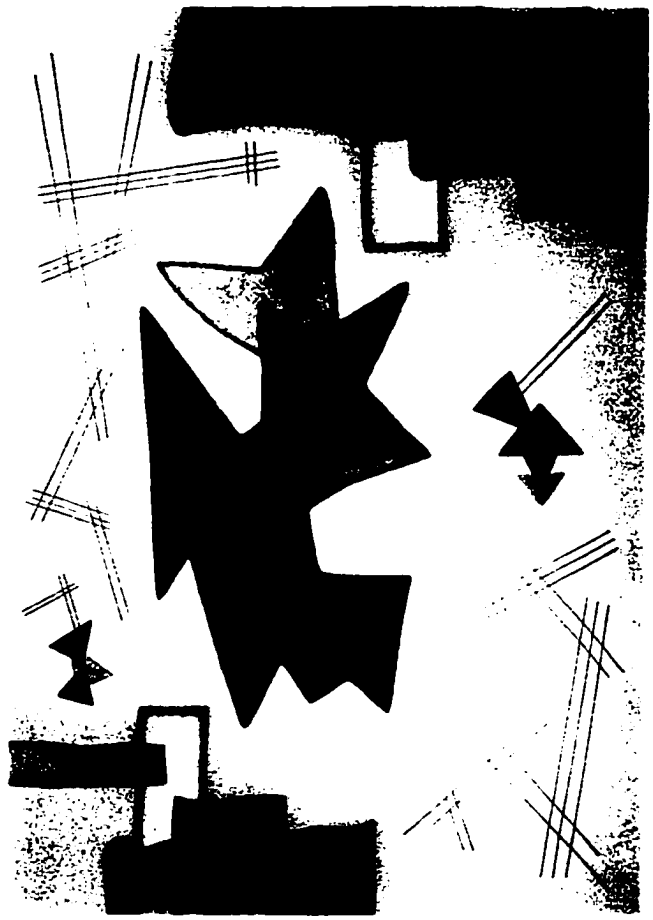

Plate 99 *Watercolor No. 9–1938*, 32" x 22", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

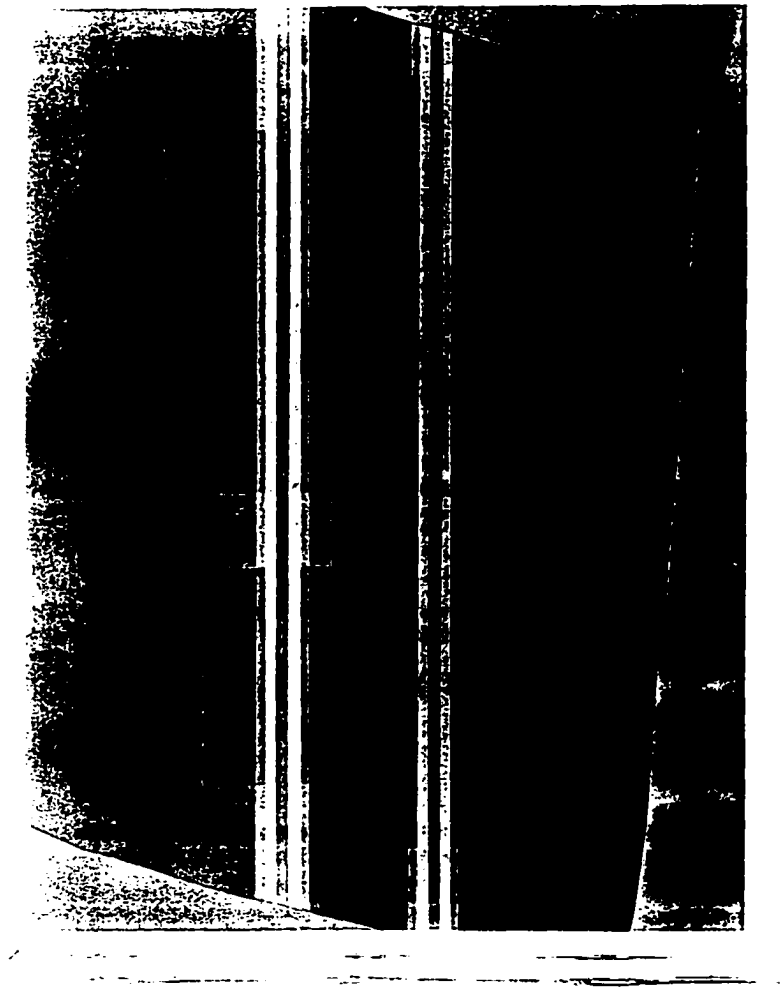

Plate 100 *Watercolor No. 16–1938*, 26-1/2" x 20", private collection.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

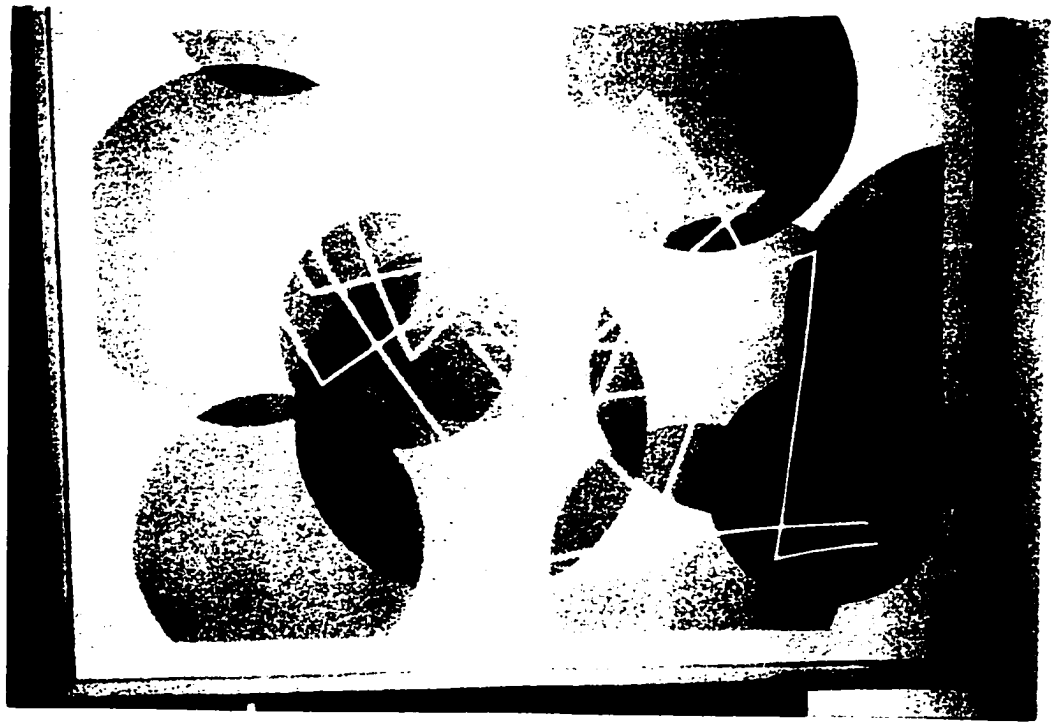

Plate 102 *Watercolor No. 19–1938*, 20" x 28", private collection, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 107 Lawren Stewart Harris, *Abstract Painting 95*, c. 1937, oil on canvas, 56" x 46", collection of Georgia de Havenon, New York City.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 108 *Watercolor No. 23–1939*, 20" x 26", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 109 *Life Cycle: Birth (Left) / Casein Tempera No. 2–1940*, 1940, oil on canvas, 36" x 42", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

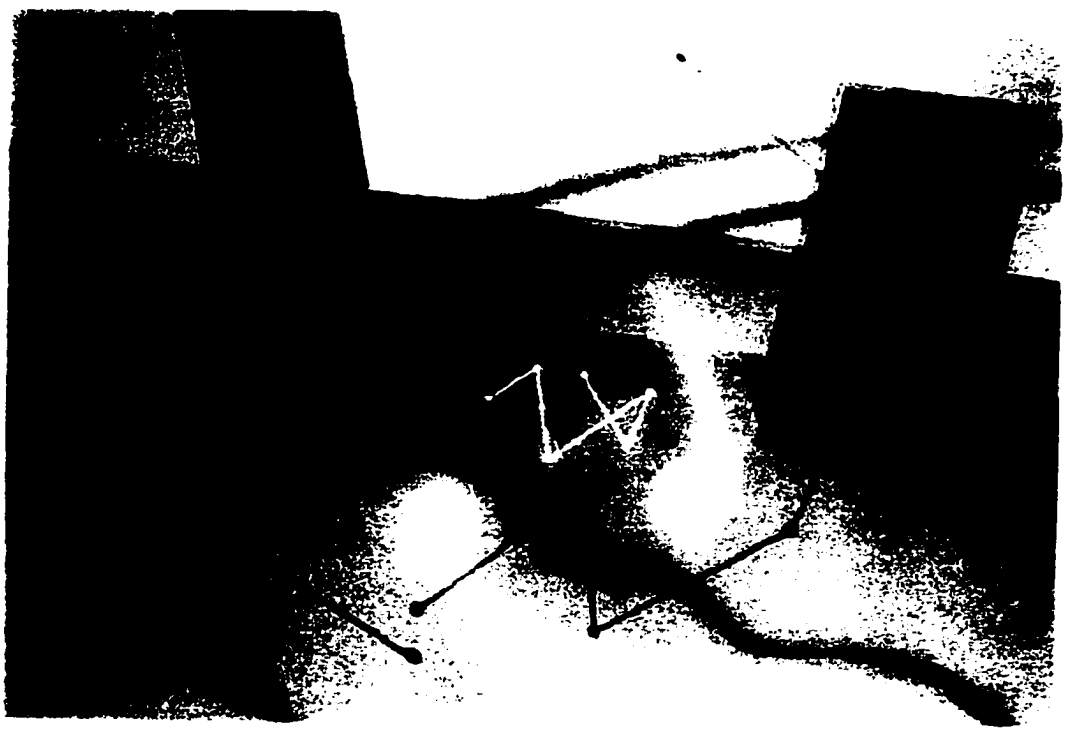

Plate 110 *Watercolor No. 1–1940*, 22" x 35", private collection.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

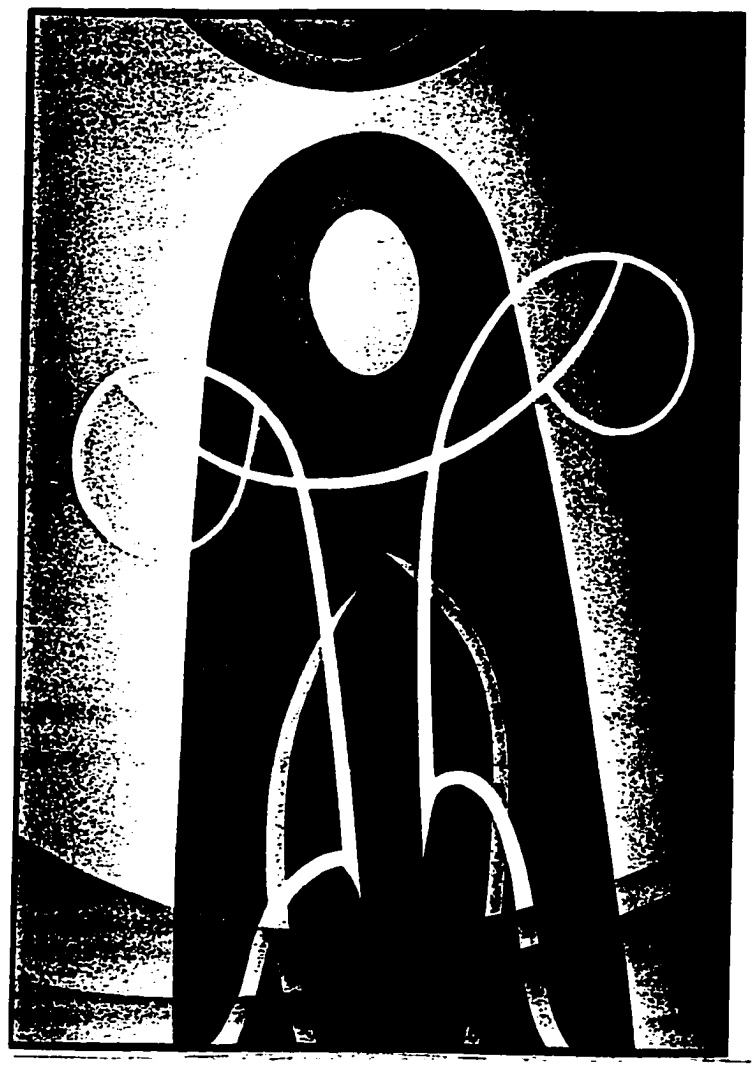

Plate 113 *Watercolor No. 12–1940 (Peace During Activity)*, 27" x 19". RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

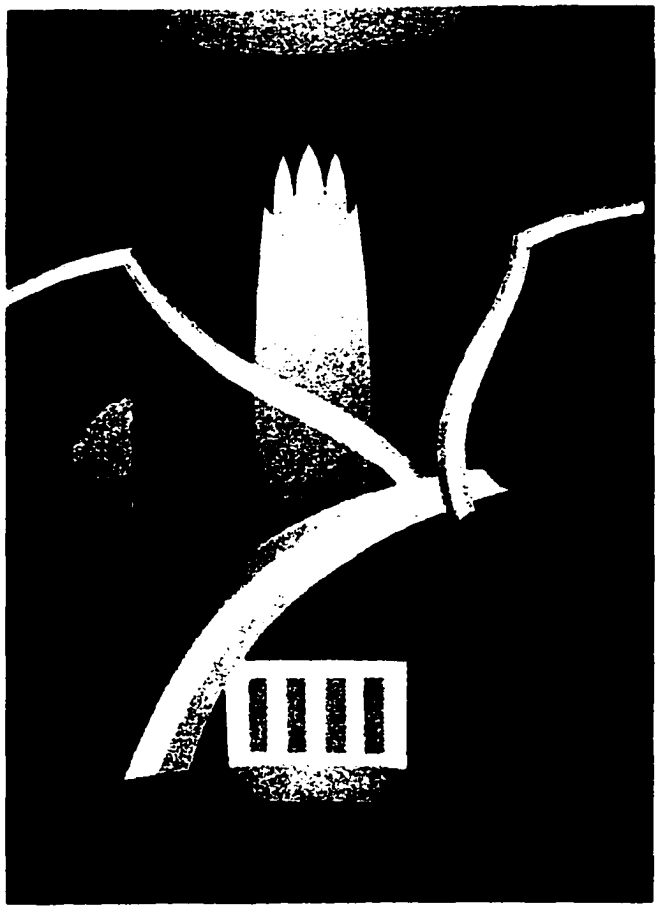

Plate 114 *Oil No. 7–1945 (Peace)*, 50" x 37", Fred R. Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma at Norman.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 115 *Esoteric Trilogy–Left (Watercolor No. 24–1940)*, 26" x 22", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

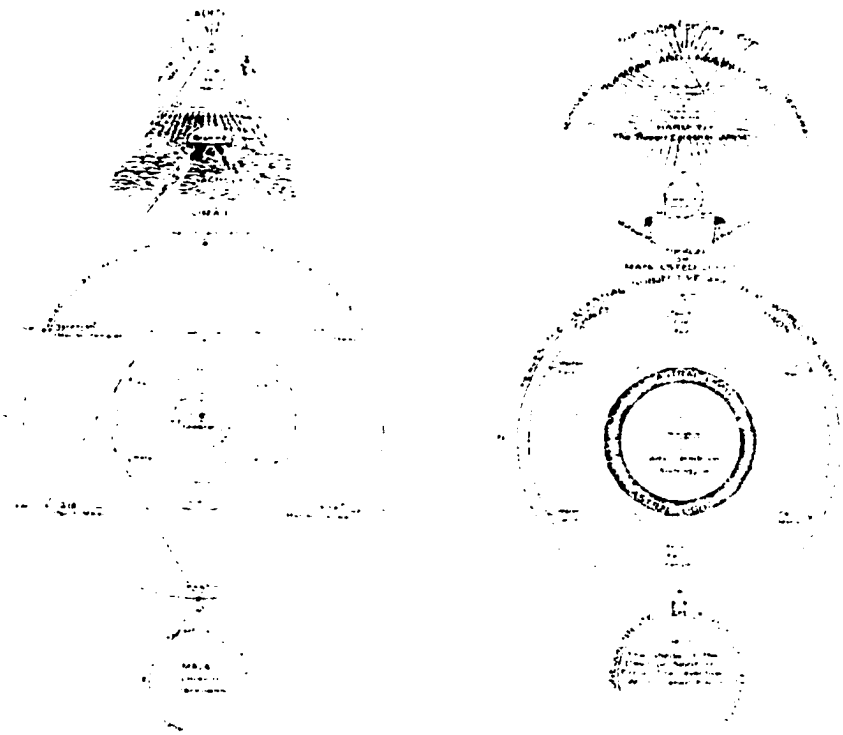

Plate 116 Helena Blavatsky's foldout diagrams of Hindu cosmogony and Chaldeo-Jewish cosmogony, from *Theology*, volume 2 of *Isis Unveiled*, n.p., 1877. [reproduced in Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*: 65.]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

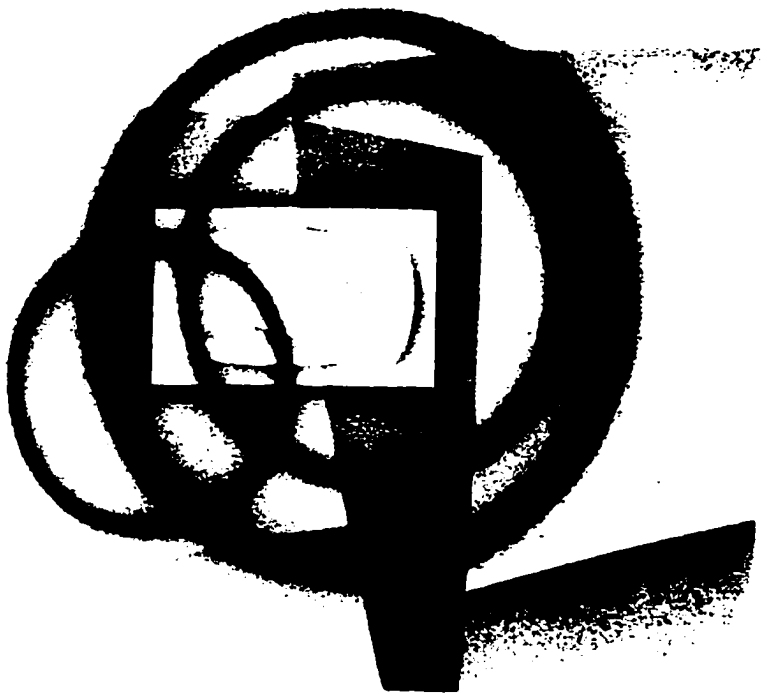

Plate 118 *Esoteric Trilogy–Center (Watercolor No. 25–1940)*, 22" x 29", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

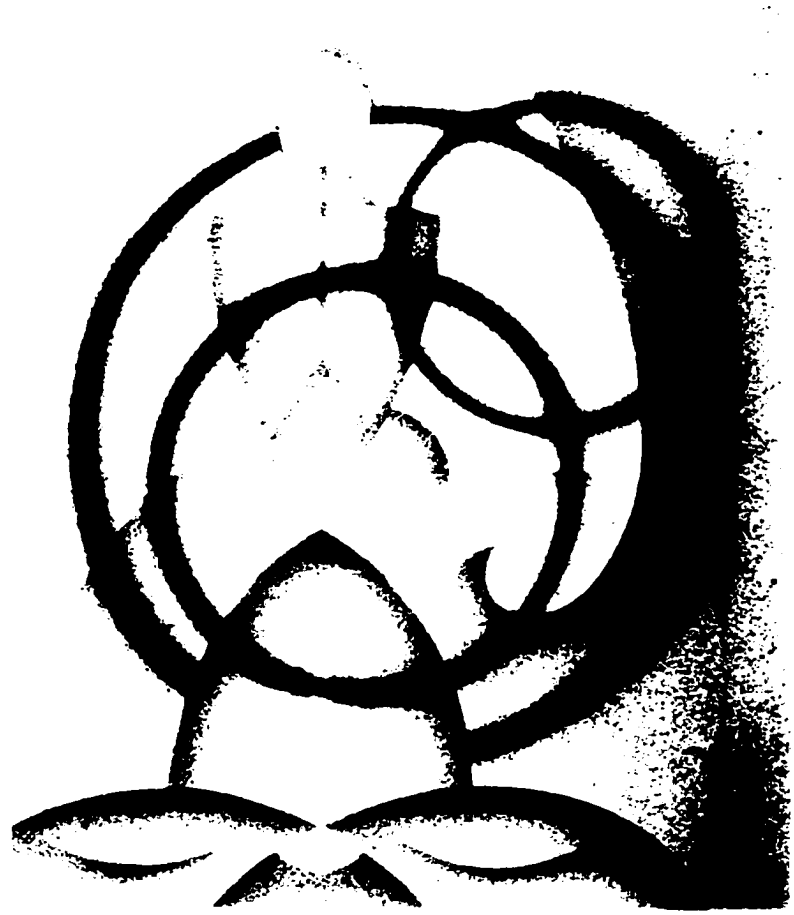

Plate 119 *Esoteric Trilogy–Right (Watercolor No. 26–1940)*, 26" x 22", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

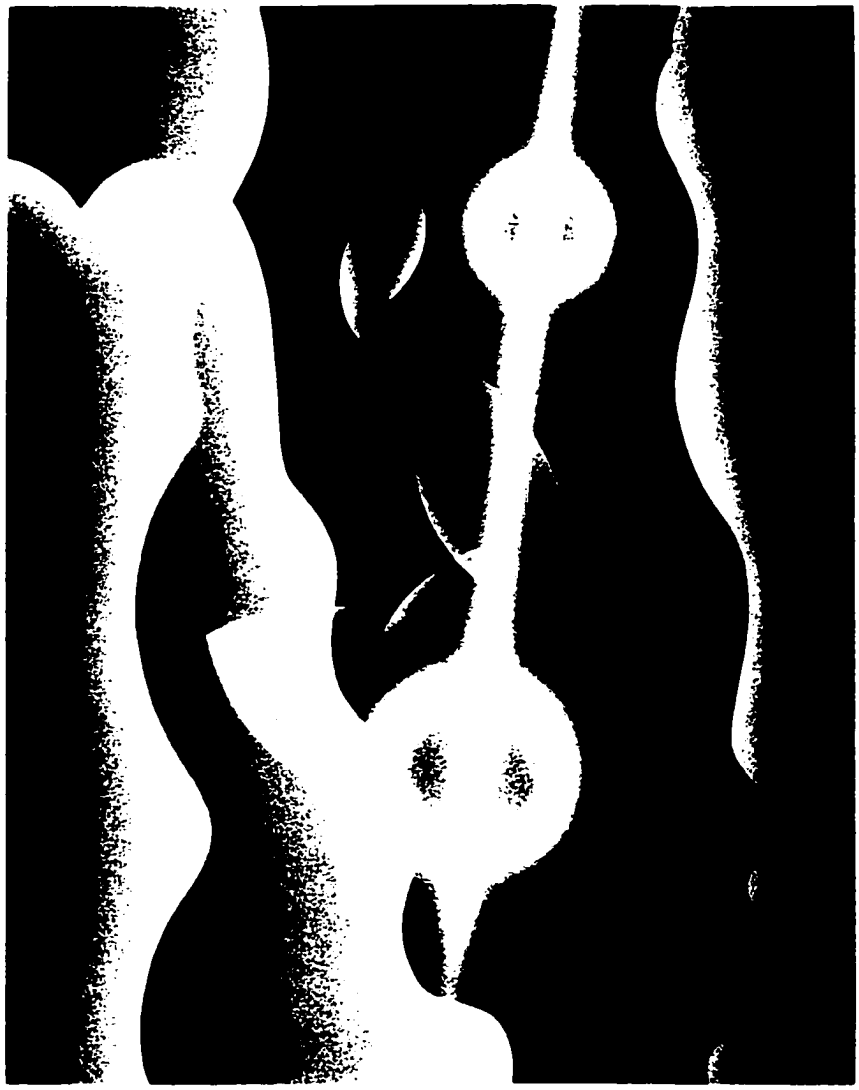

Plate 120 *Casein Tempera No. 6–1941*, 31" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 121 *Watercolor No. 6–1942*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

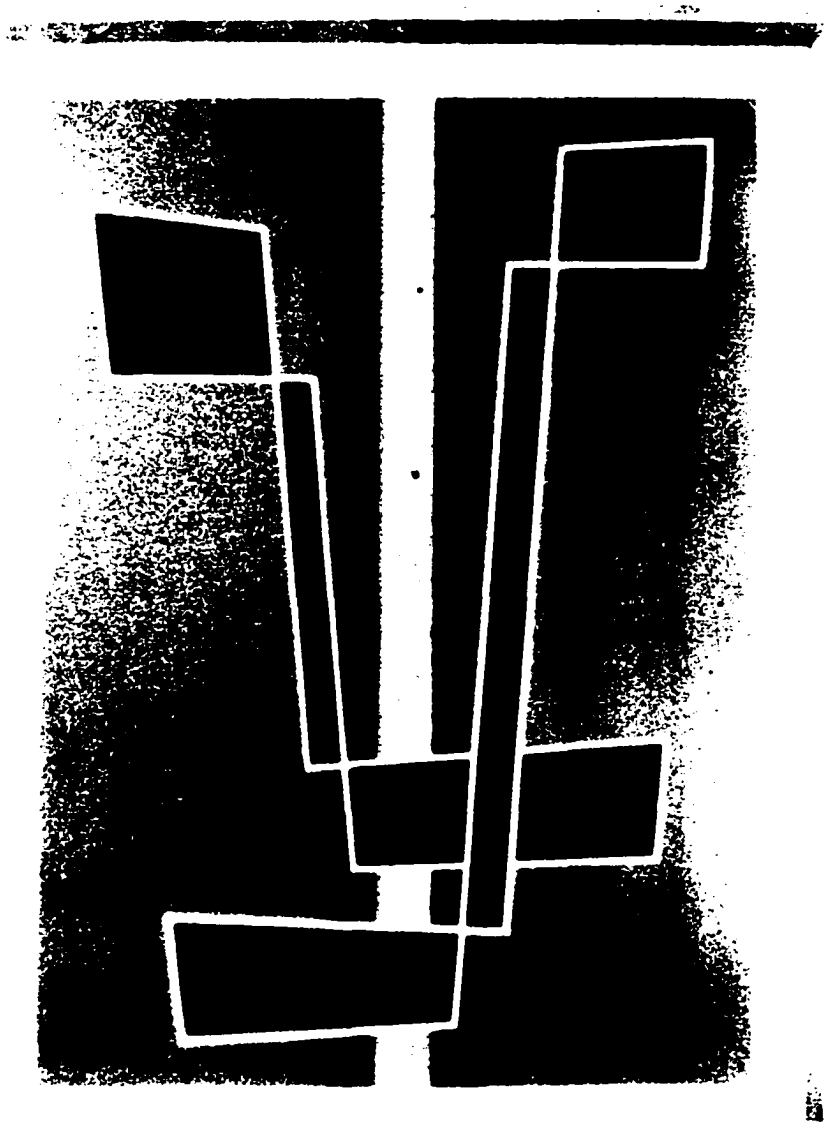

Plate 122 *Watercolor No. 12–1942*, 30" x 22", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

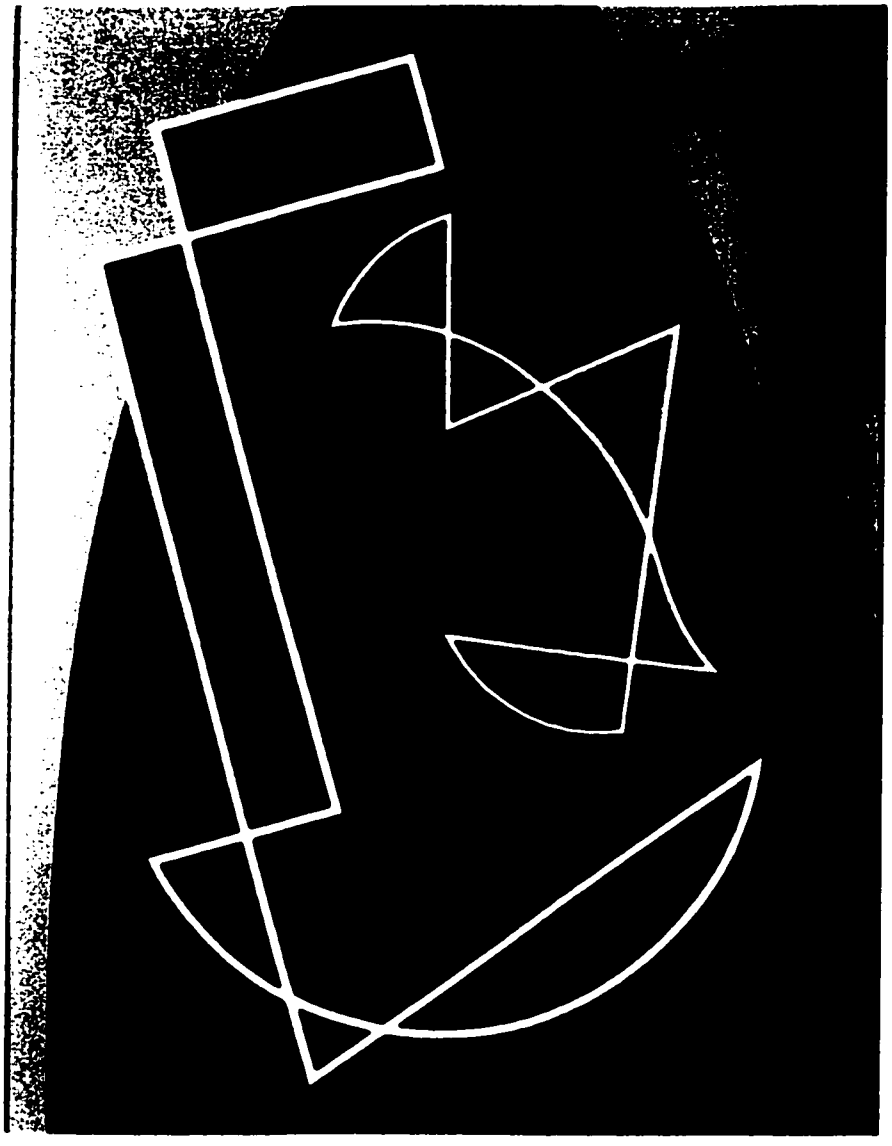

Plate 123 *Oil No. 12–1942*, 45" x 35", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

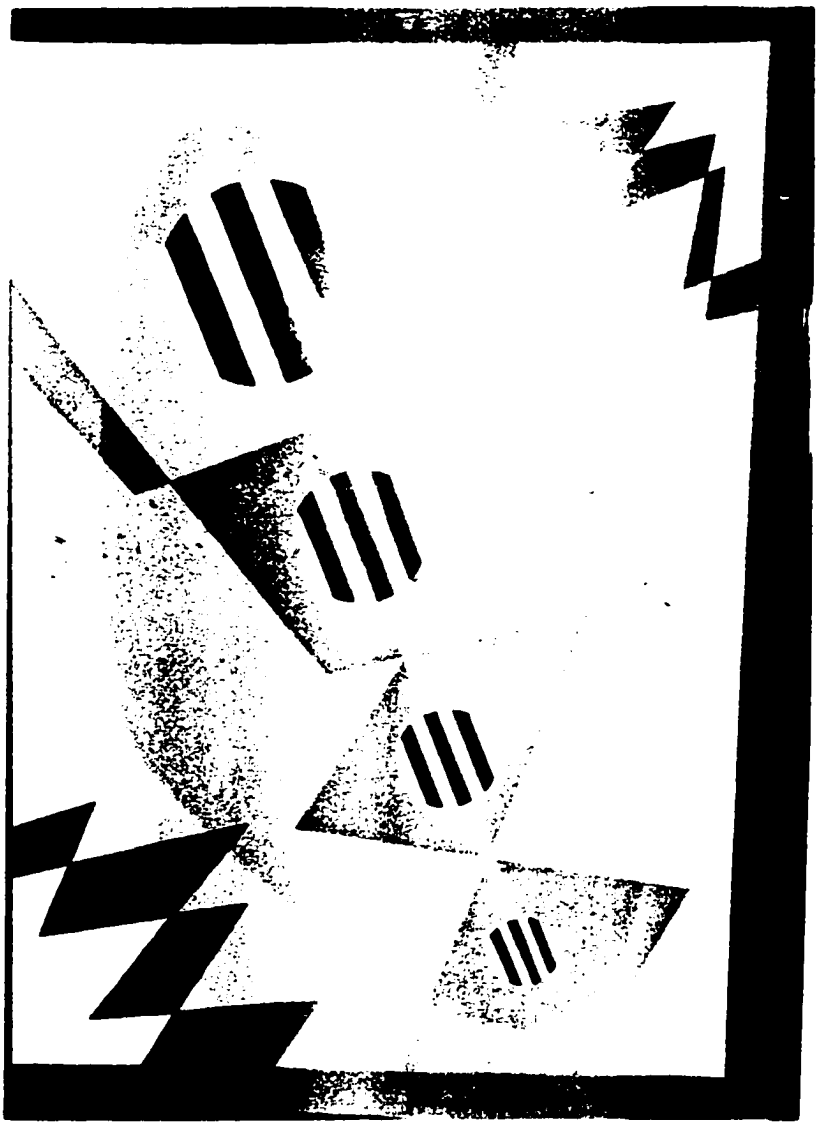

Plate 124 *Watercolor No. 6–1943*, 27" x 19", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

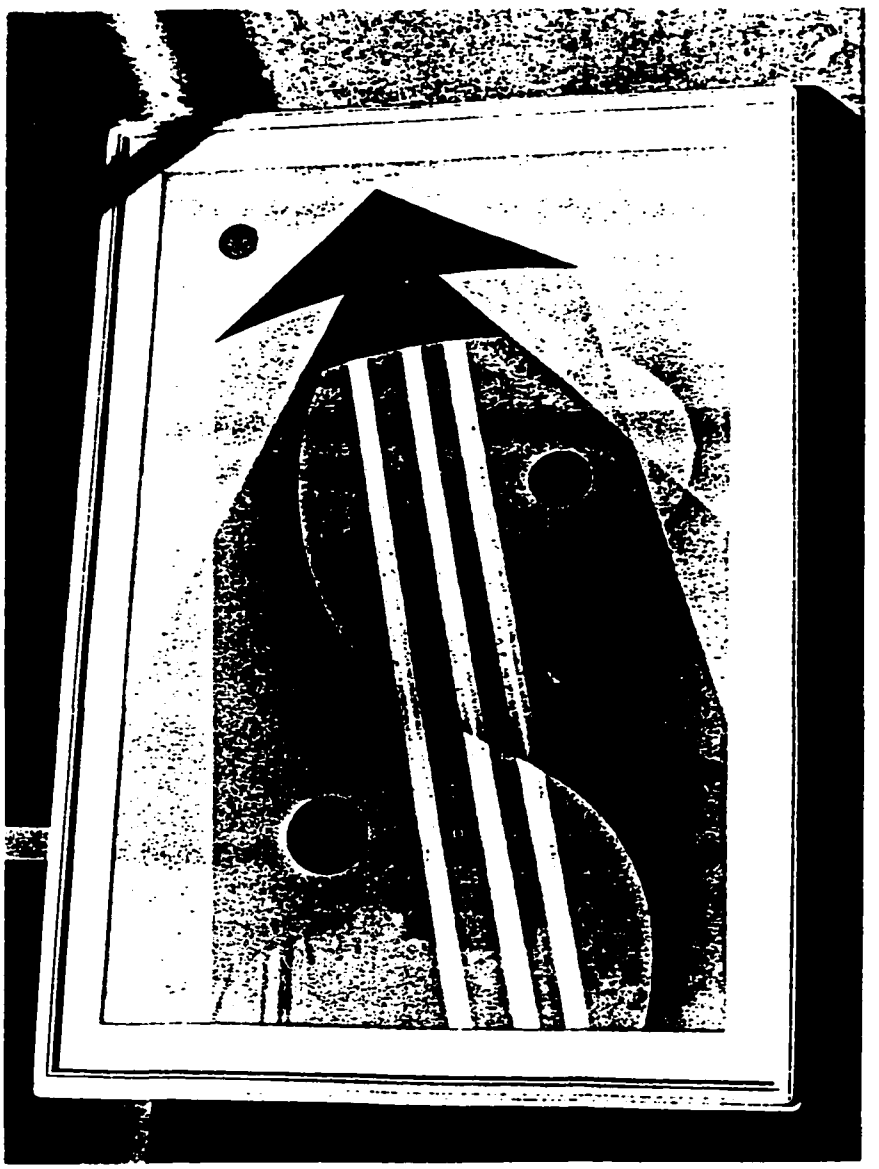

Plate 125 *Watercolor No. 9–1943*, 35" x 22", Sunwest Bank, Albuquerque.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

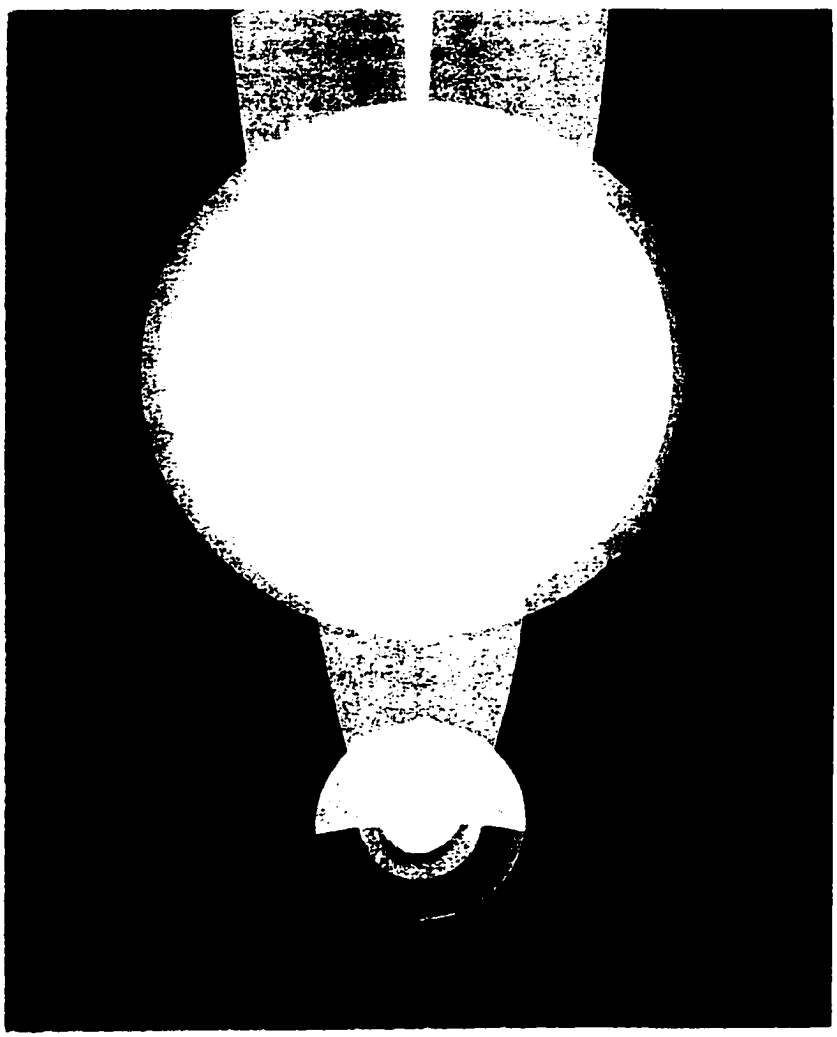

Plate 127 Emil Bisttram, *Pulsation*, c. 1941, oil on canvas, 45" x 60", private collection, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

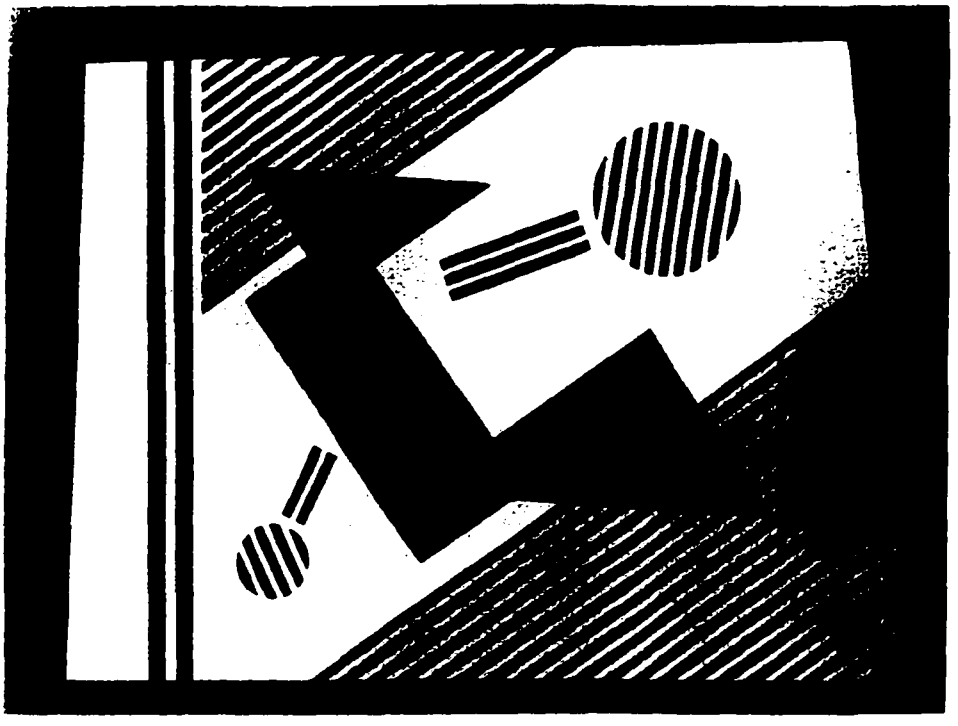

Plate 128 *Trilogy–Dissonance (Left) / Chromatic Contrasts No. 8 / (Watercolor No. 10–1943)*, 22" X 30", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

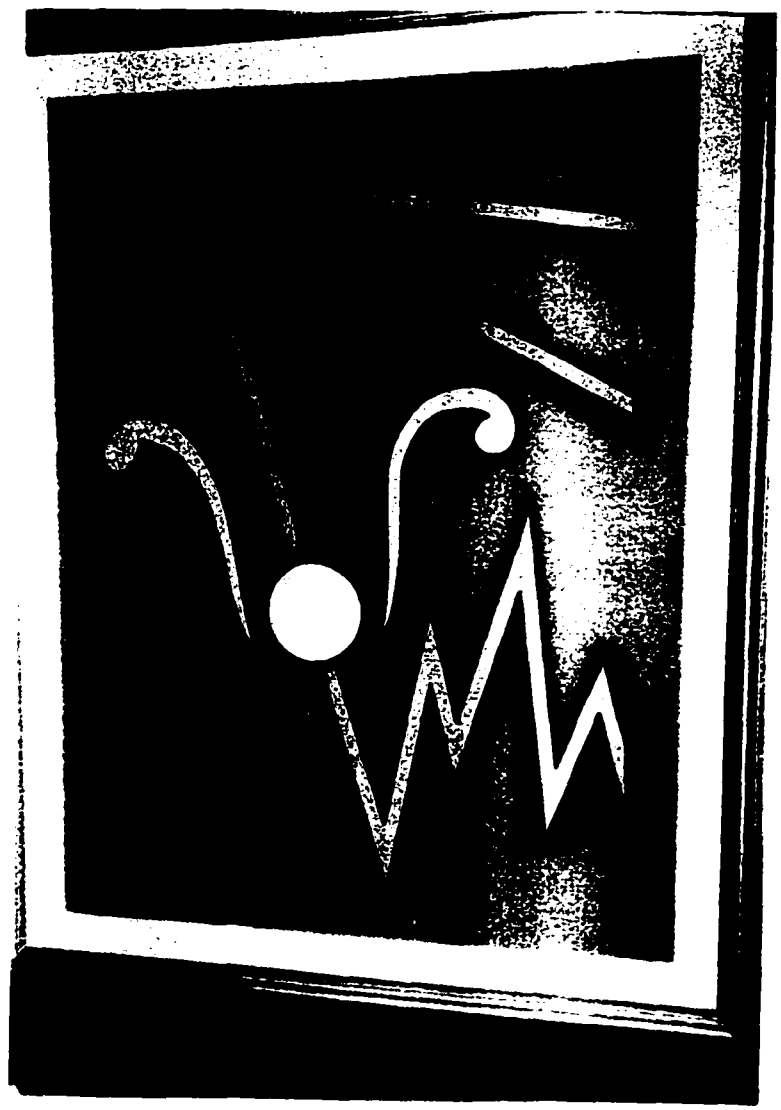

Plate 129 *Chromatic Contrasts No. 19 (Watercolor No. 32–1944)*, 30" x 22", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

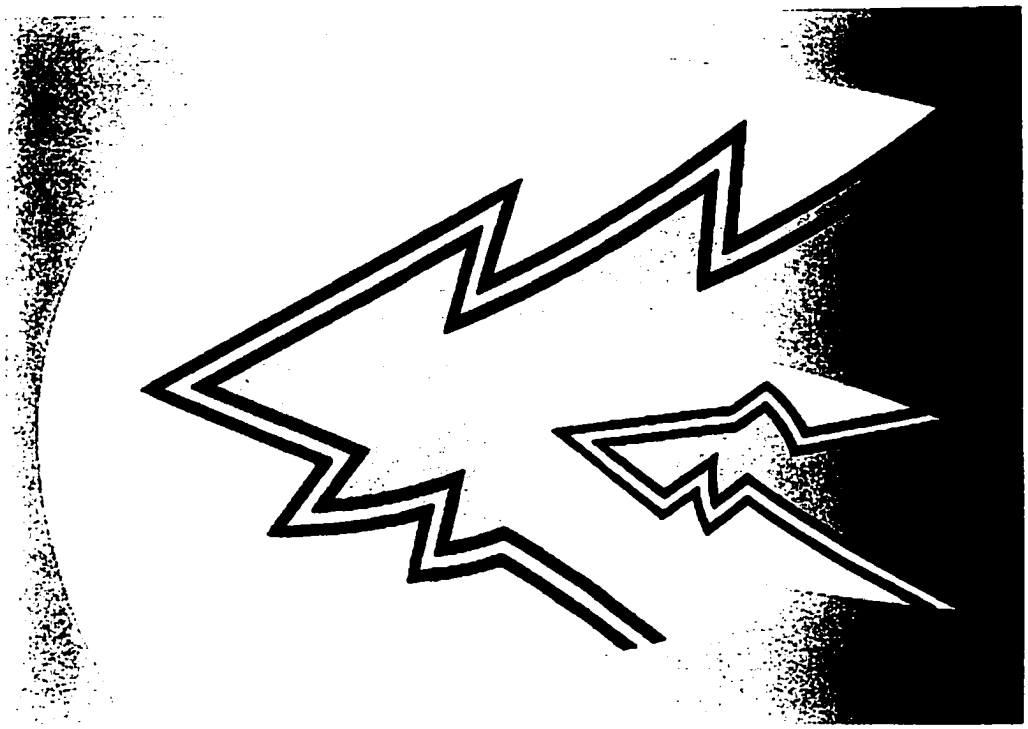

Plate 130 *Dynamics No. 1 (Oil No. 7–1944)*, 28" x 40", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

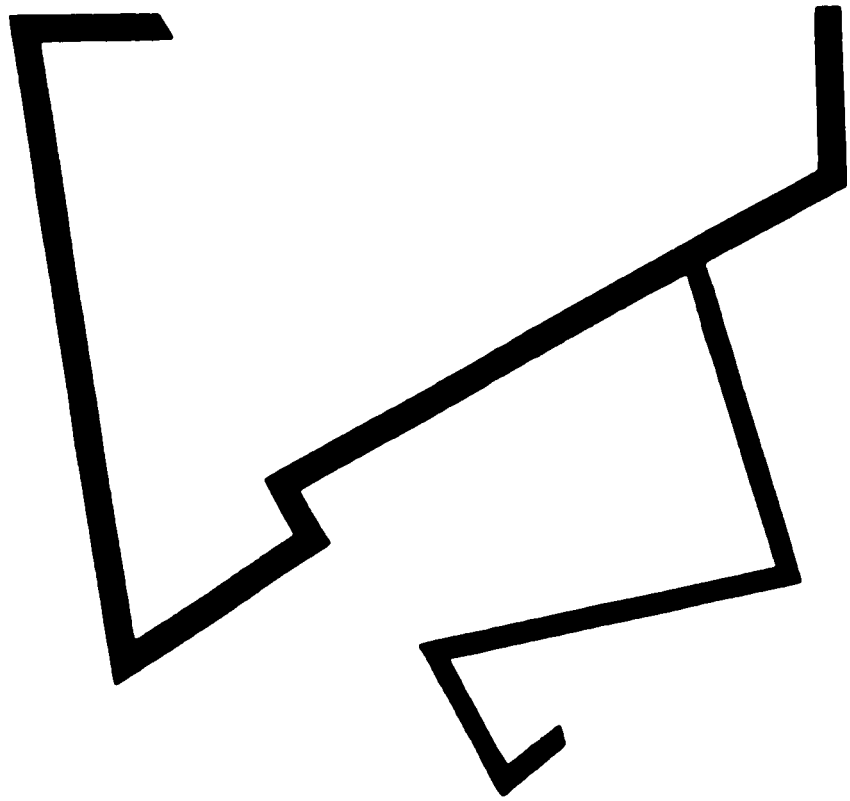

Plate 131 *Dynamics No. 2 (Oil No. 1–1945)*, 40" x 40", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

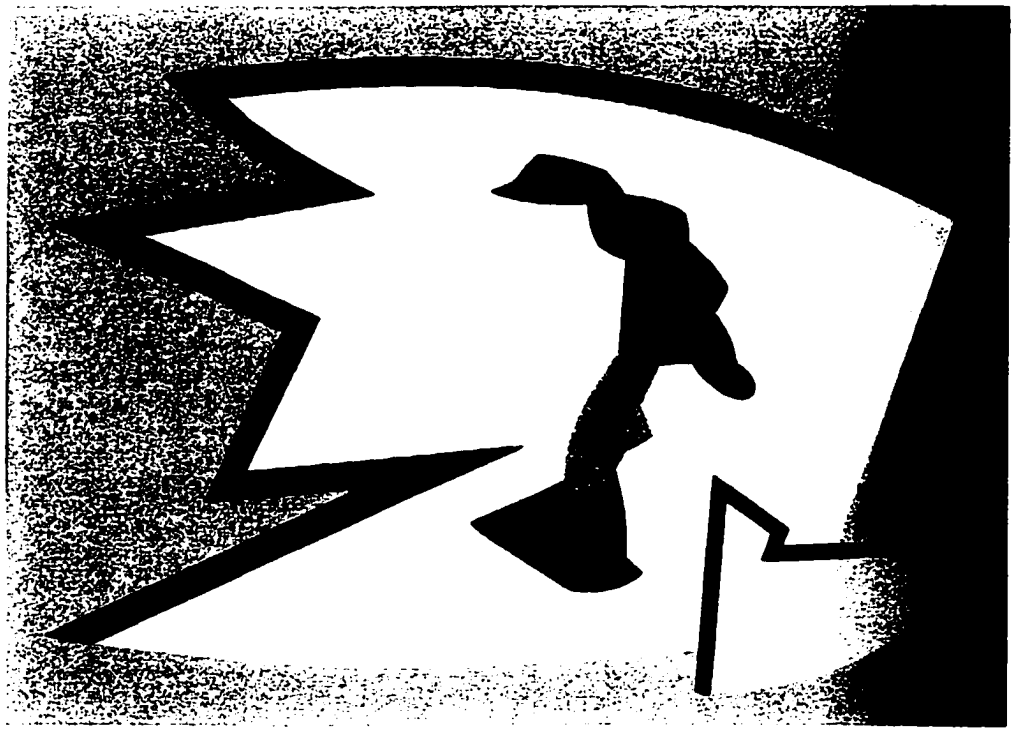

Plate 132 *Dynamics No. 3 (Oil No. 2–1945)*, 28" x 40", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

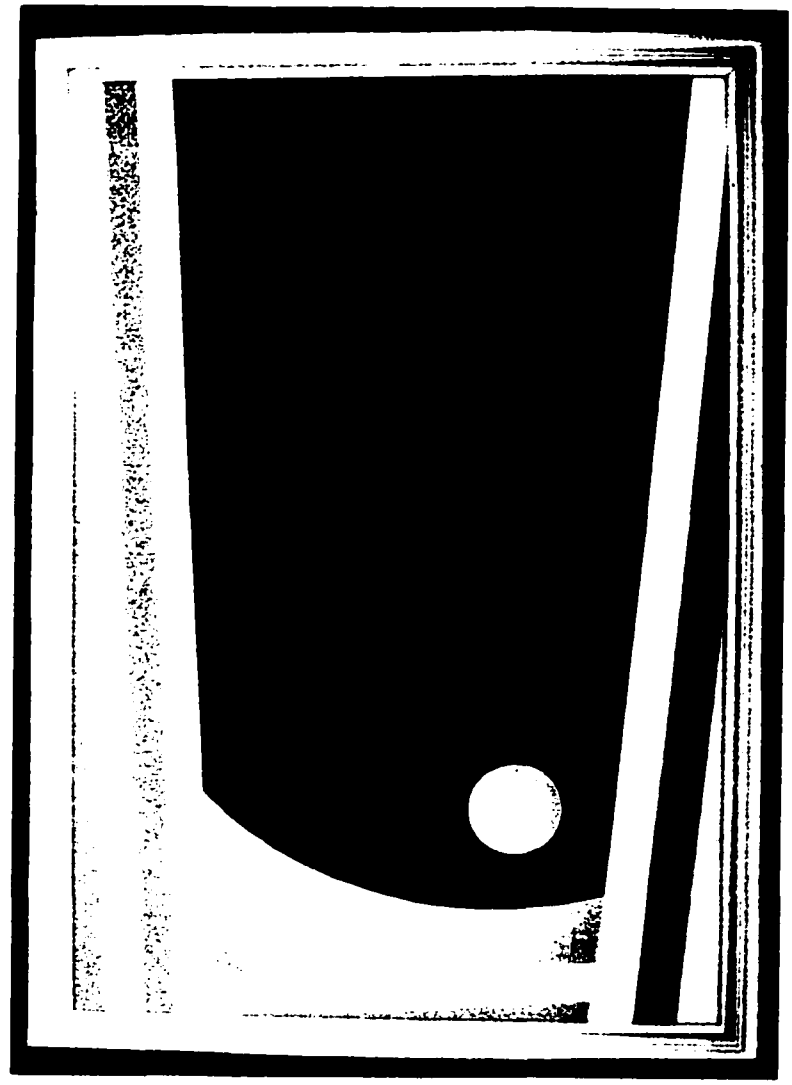

Plate 133 *Pictographic Composition No. 1 (Oil No. 7–1946)*, 35" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

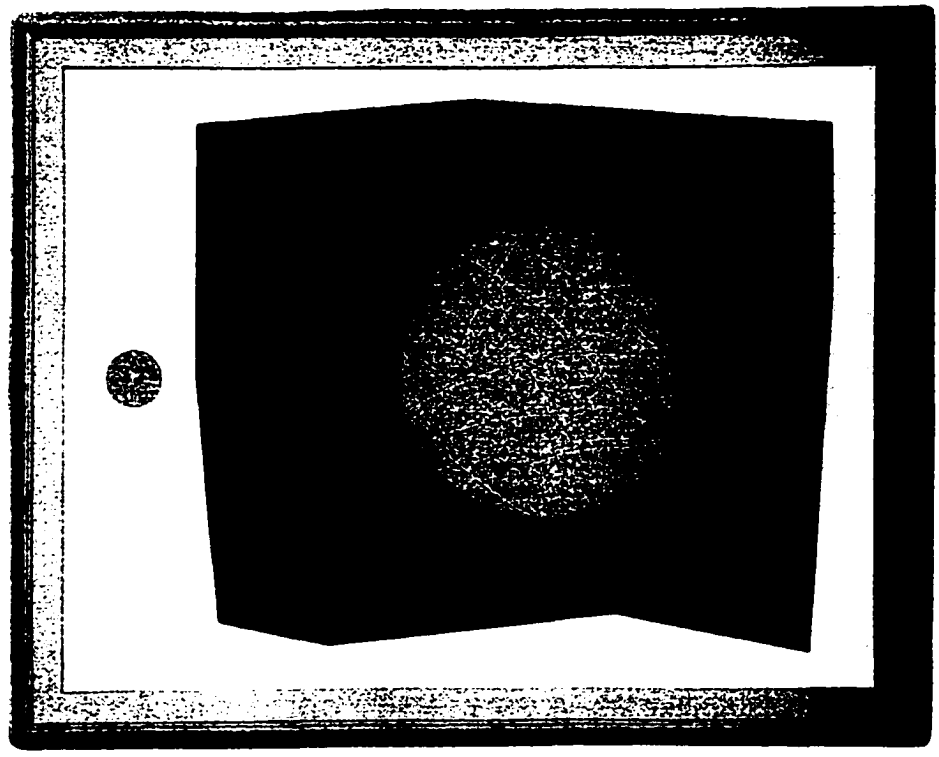

Plate 134 *Pictographic Composition No. 7 (Oil No. 17–1946)*, 28" x 36", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 135 *Pictographic Composition No. 9 (Oil No. 19–1946)*, 28" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

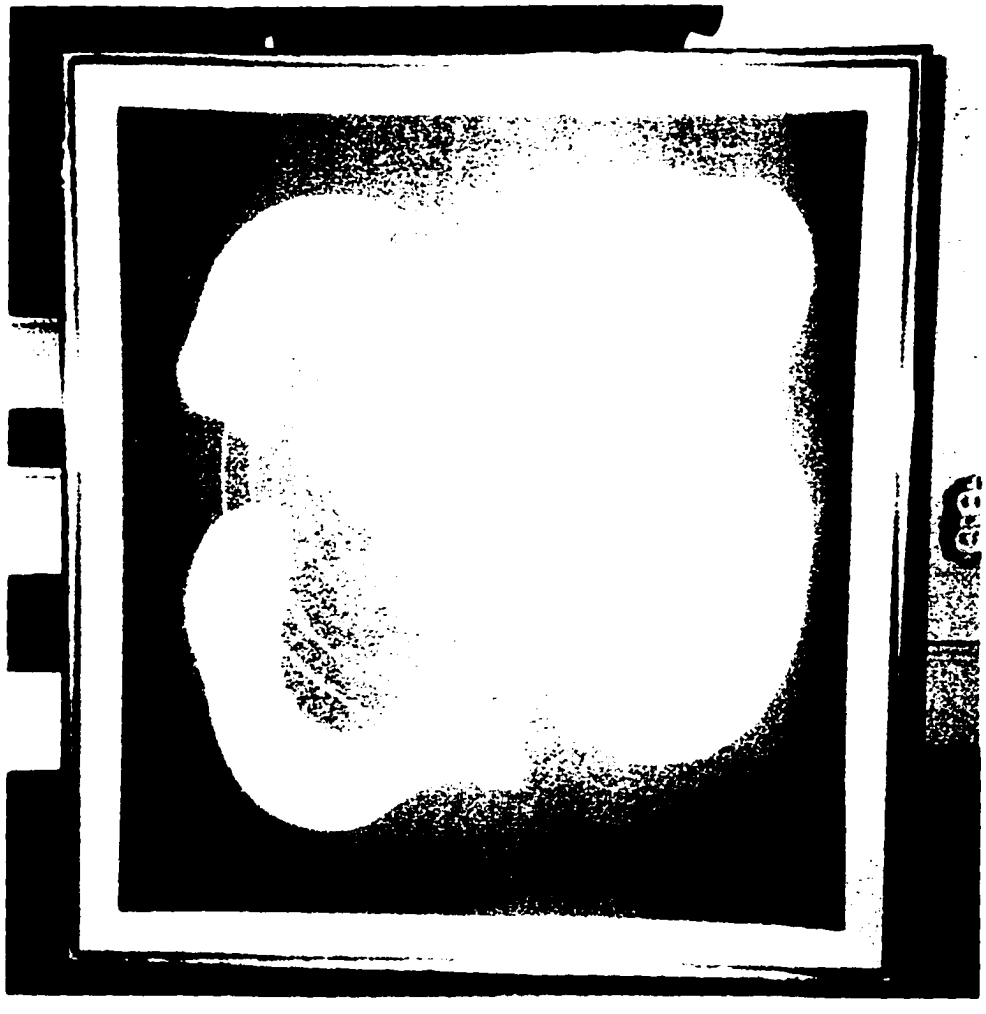

Plate 136 *Pictographic Composition No. 15 (Oil No.6 –1947)*, 26" x 24", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

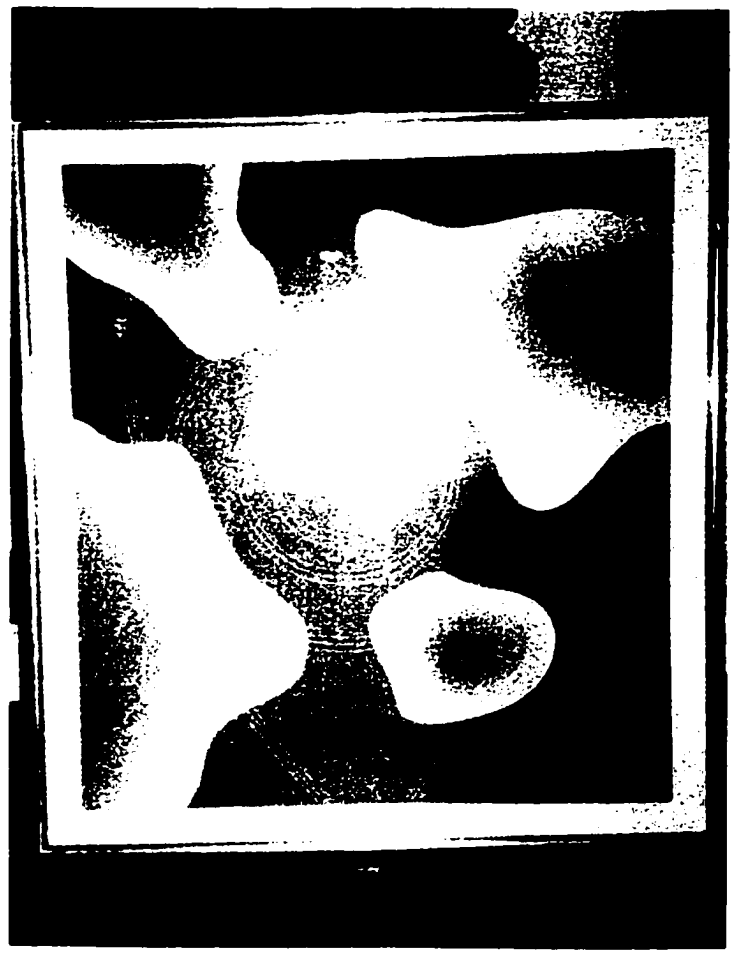

Plate 137 *Pictographic Composition No. 16 (Oil No. 7–1947)*, 26" X 24", estate of Harrison Eiteljorg, Indianapolis.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

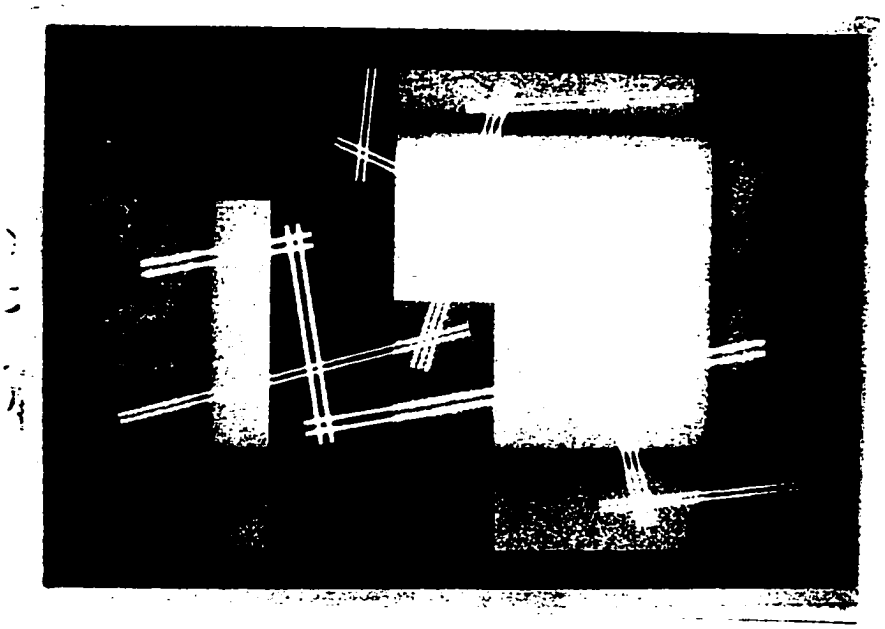

Plate 138 *Variations on a Linear Theme One (Watercolor No. 15–1948)*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

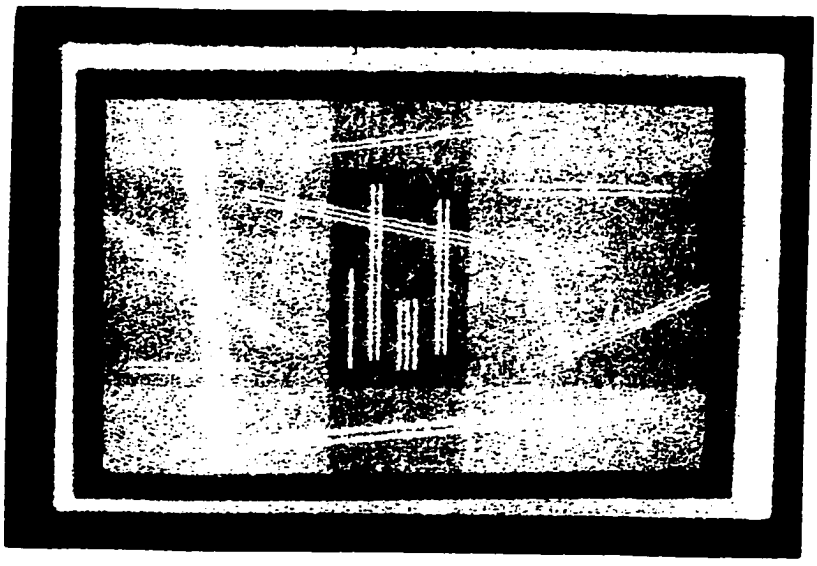

Plate 139 *Variations on a Linear Theme Two (Watercolor No. 16–1948)*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

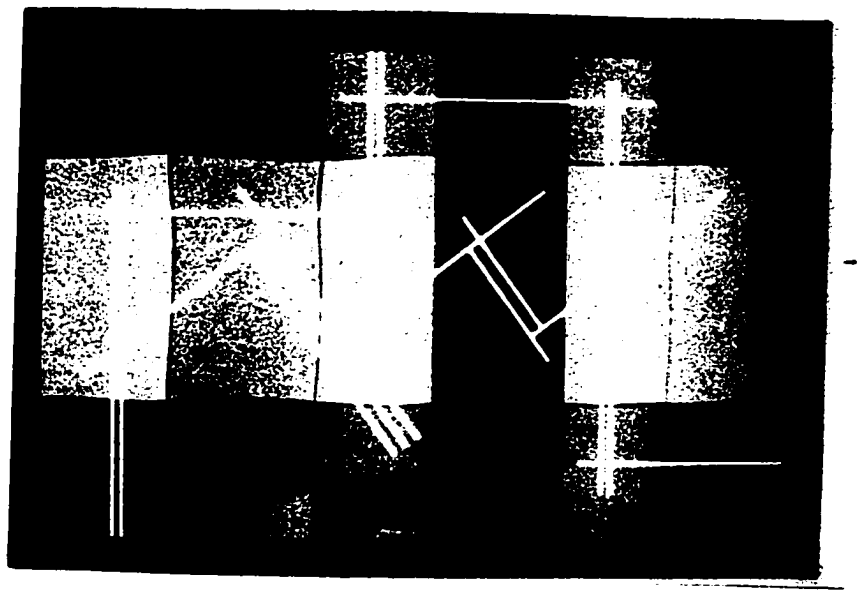

Plate 140 *Variations on a Linear Theme Three (Watercolor No. 17–1948)*, 22" x 35", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

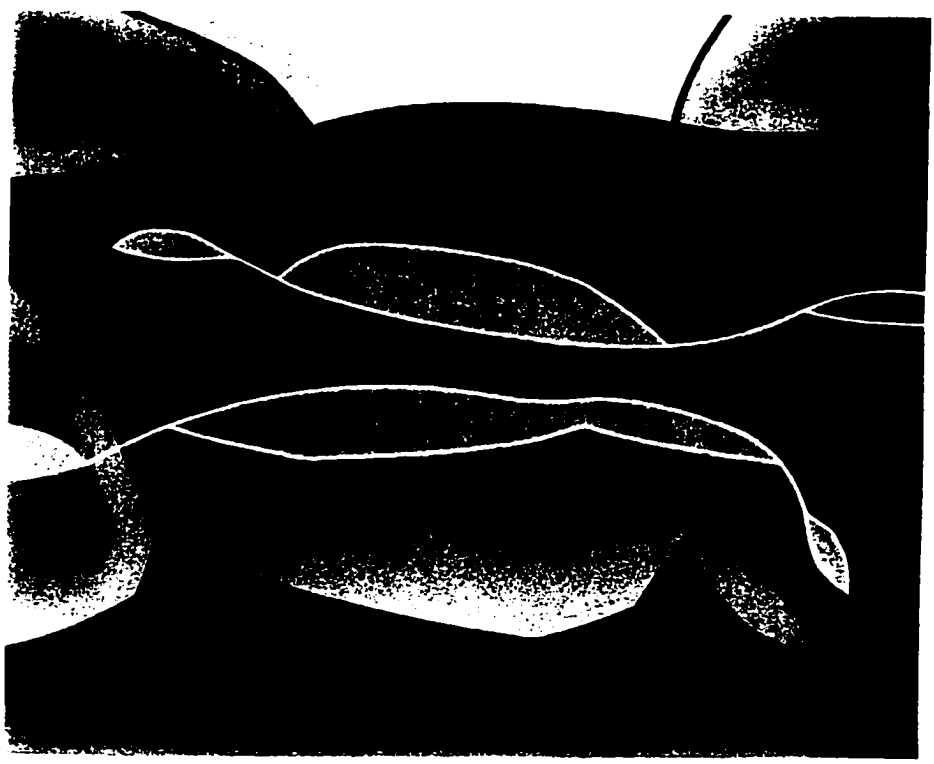

Plate 142 *Oil No. 6–1952*, 38" x 48", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

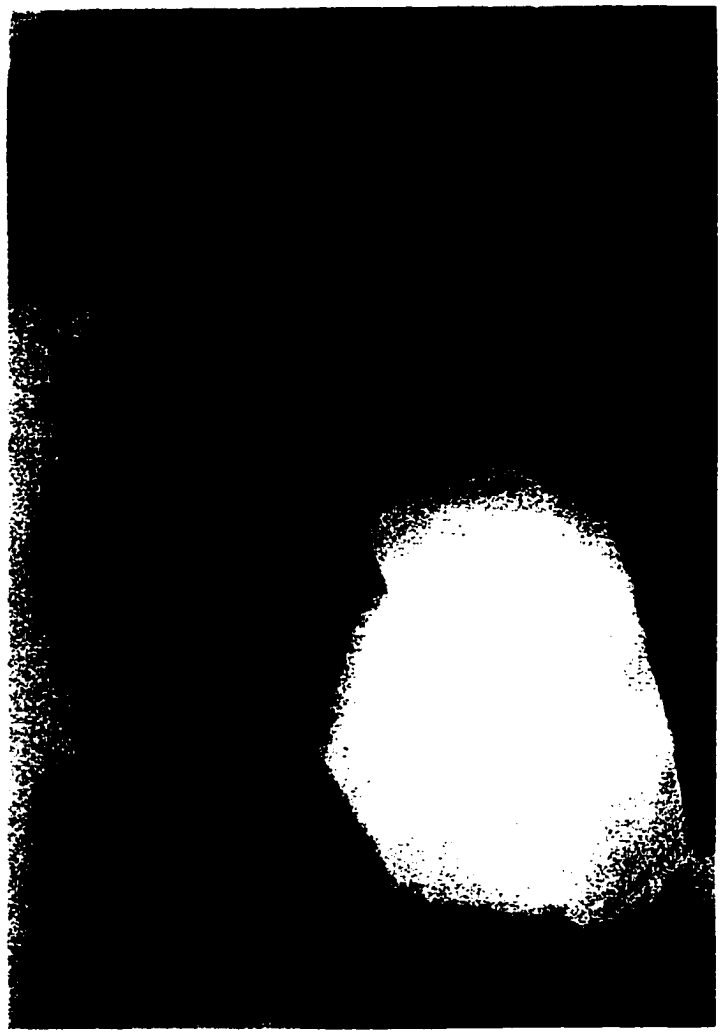

Plate 143 *Oil No. 6–1956*, 37" x 25", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

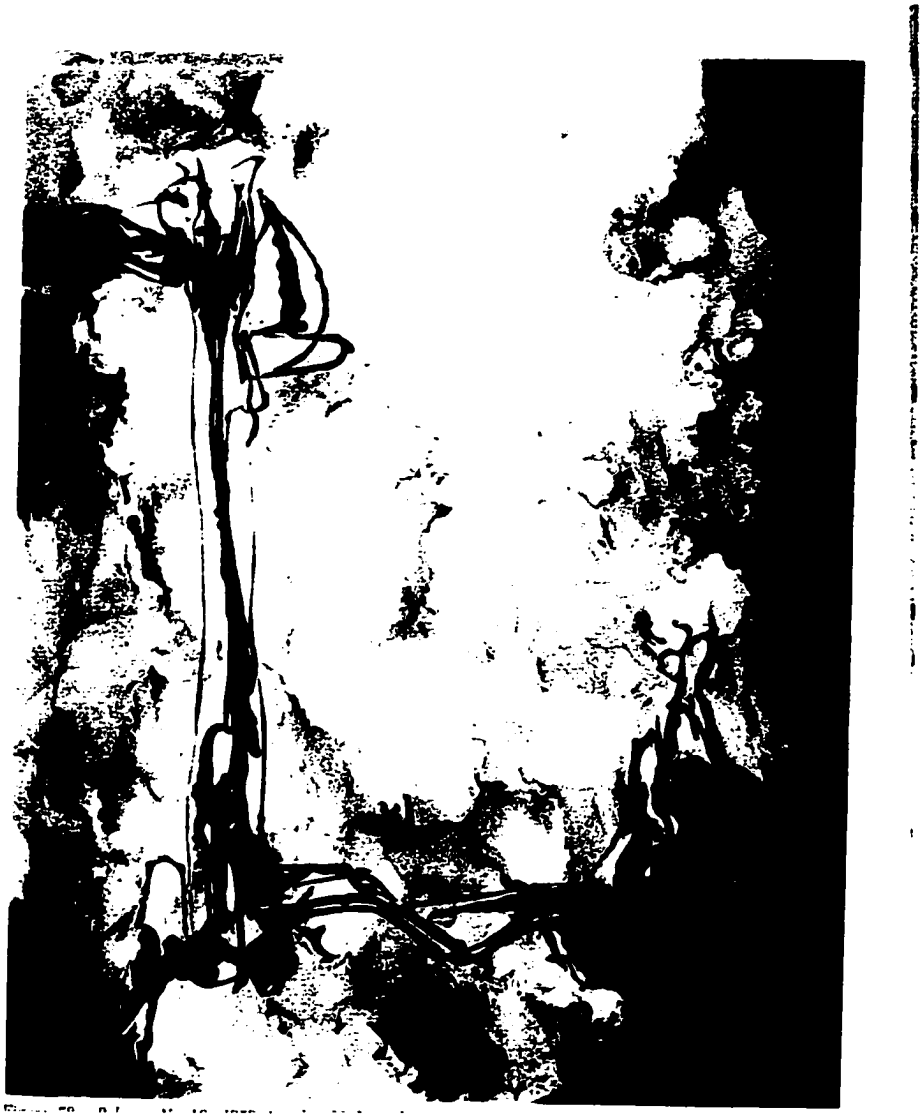

Plate 144 *Polymer No. 16–1959*, 30" x 24", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 145 *Oil No. 11–1956*, 36" x 21", private collection, Portland, Oregon.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Plate 146 *Polymer No. 29–1959*, 57" x 45", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

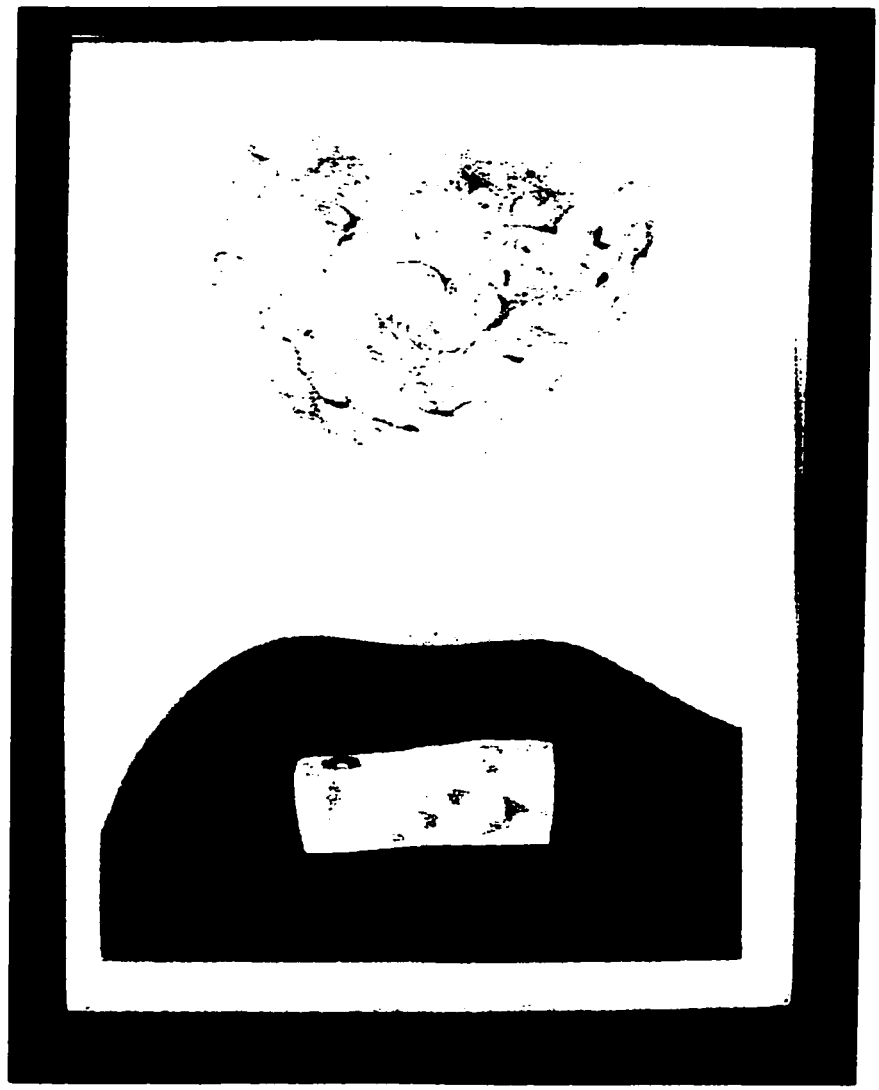

Plate 147 *Polymer No. 24–1962*, 27" x 19", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

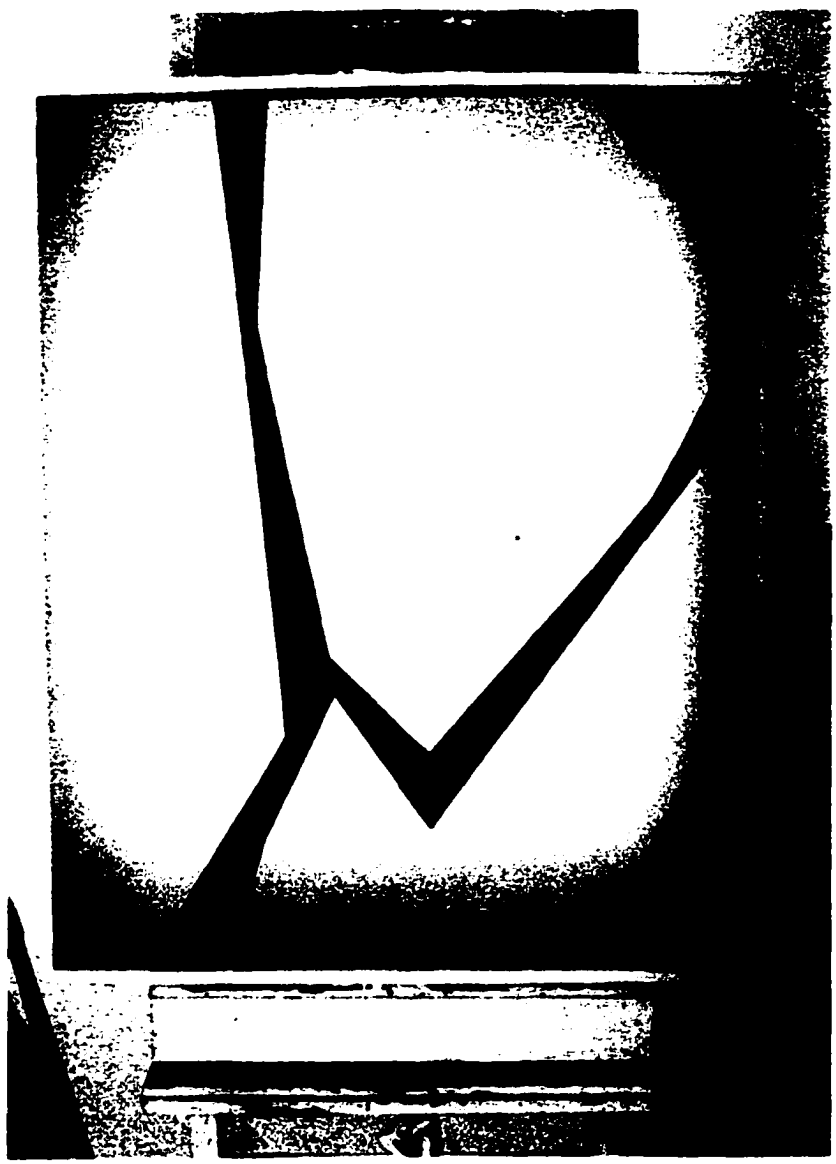

Plate 149 *Polymer No. 12–1961*, 45" x 36", private collection, San Diego.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

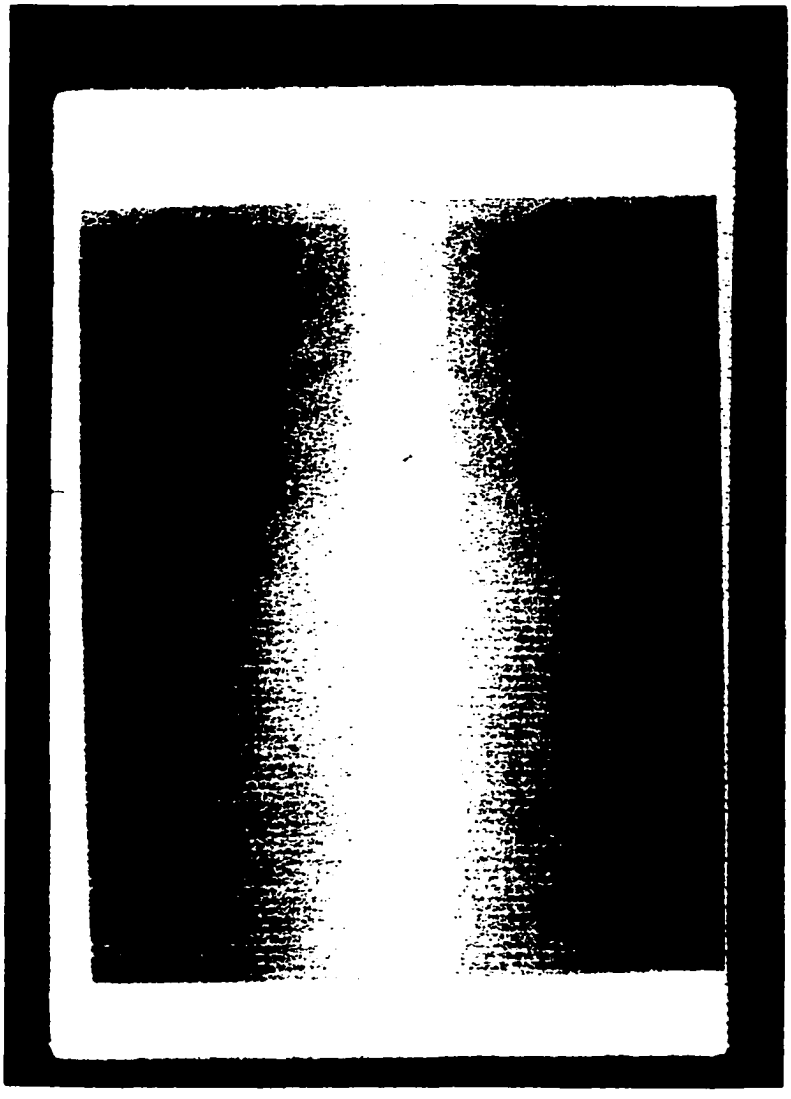

Plate 150 *Light–A Trilogy (Center) / (Polymer No. 11–1966)*, 42" x 33", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

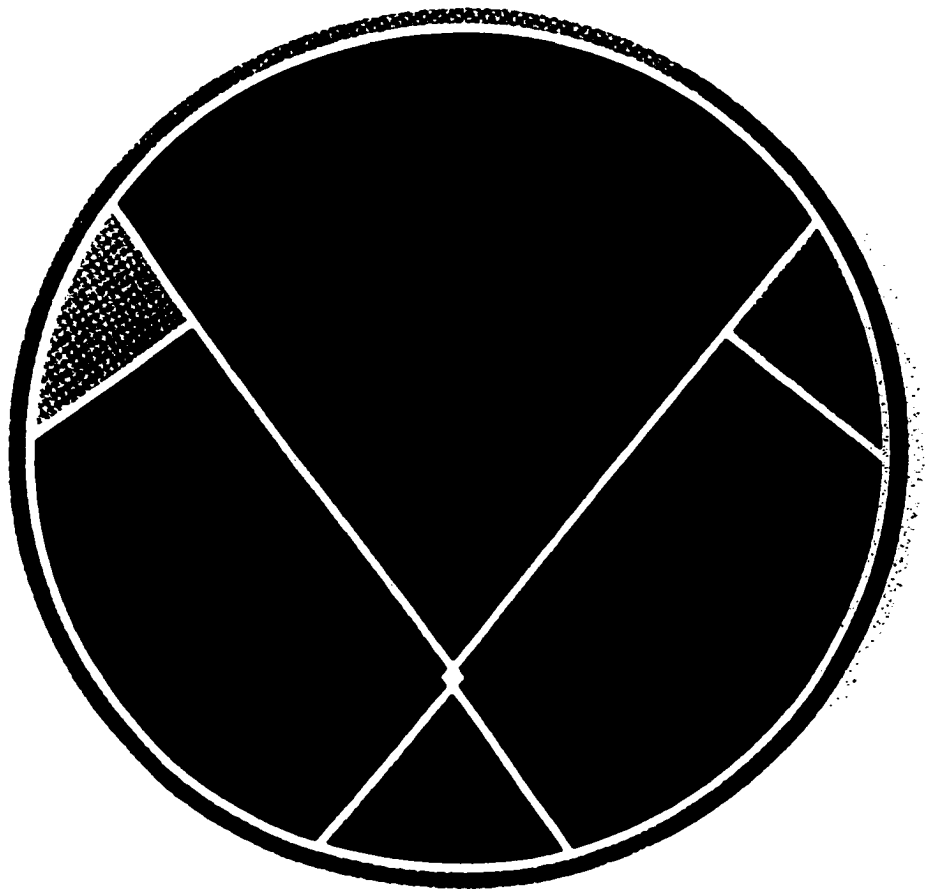

Plate 152 *Polymer No. 19–1969*, 47-1/4" diameter, RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

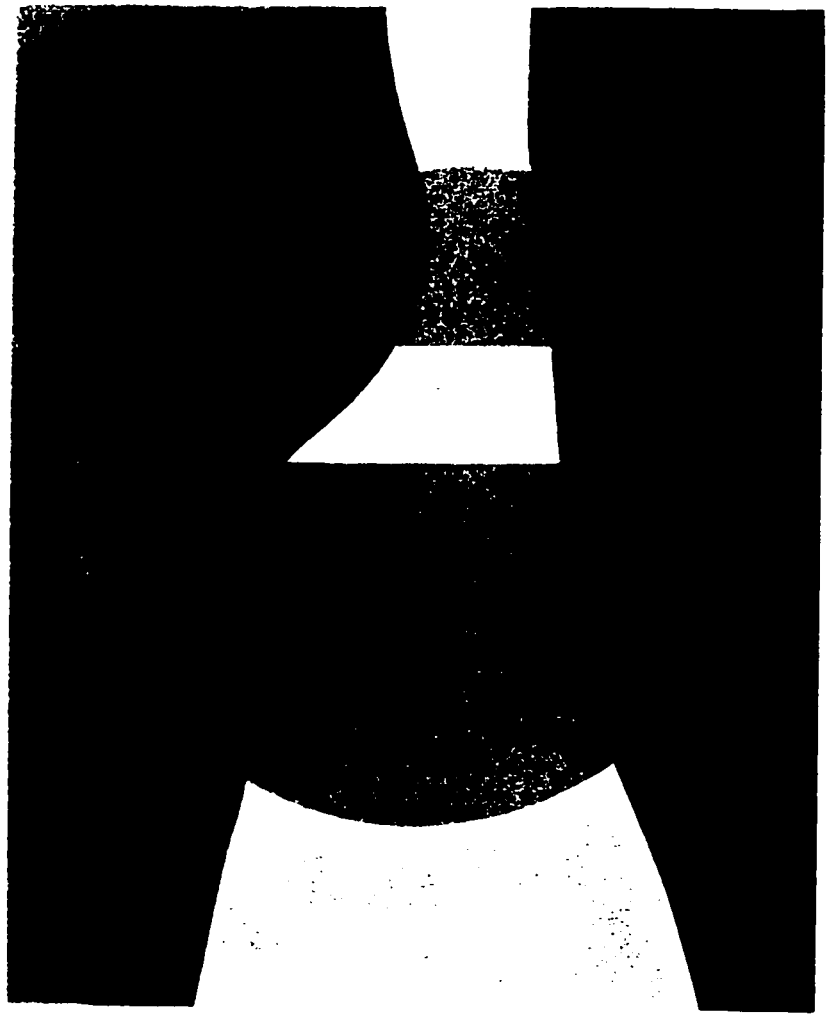

Plate 153 *Polymer No. 39–1970*, 48" x 39", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

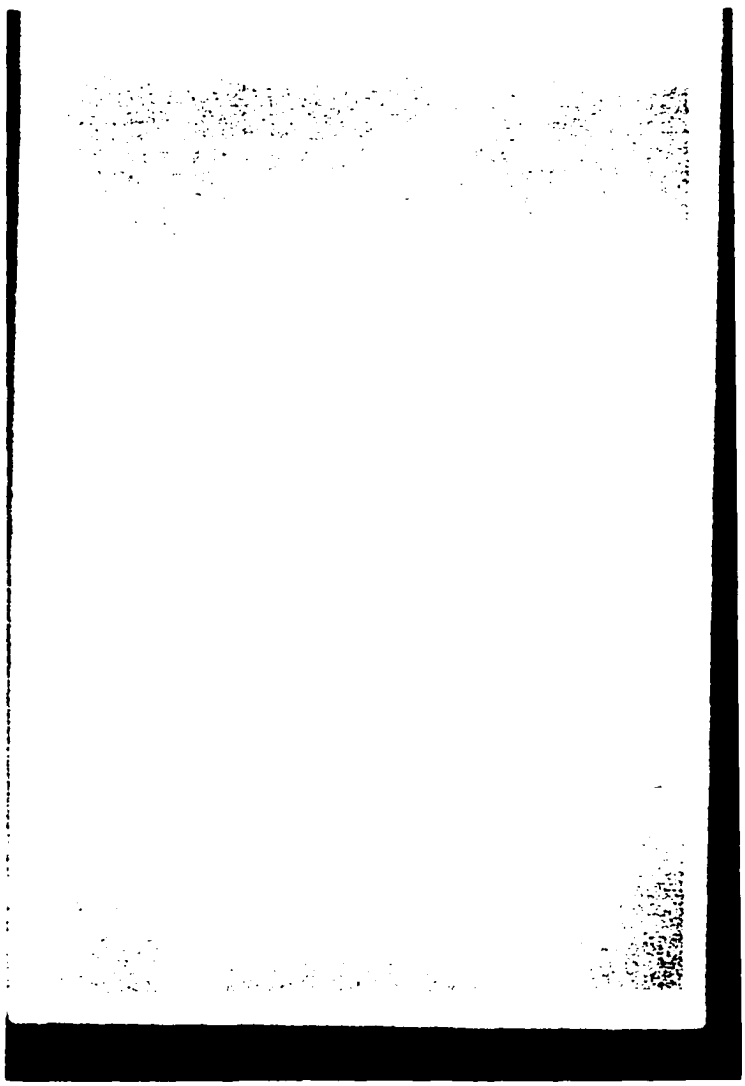

Plate 154 *Polymer No. 22–1970*, 48" x 33", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

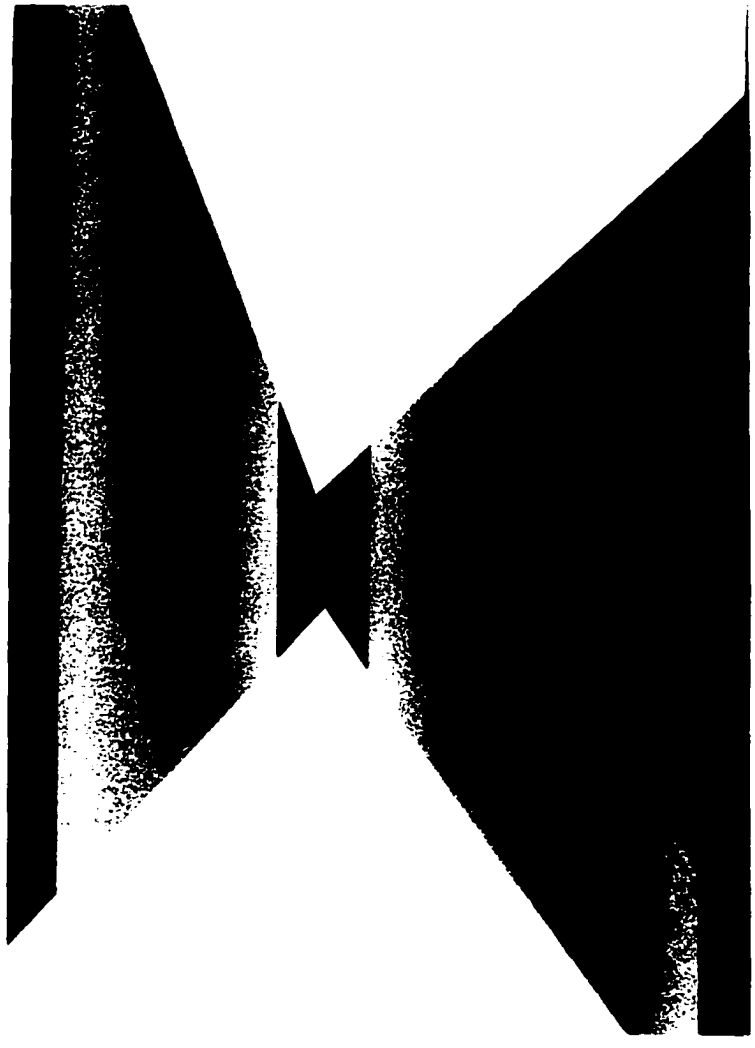

Plate 155 *Polymer No. 18–1973*, 48" x 33", RRC.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.