

ART REVIEW: Painting's Journey Into Modernism Explored at Vered

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by Gabrielle Selz

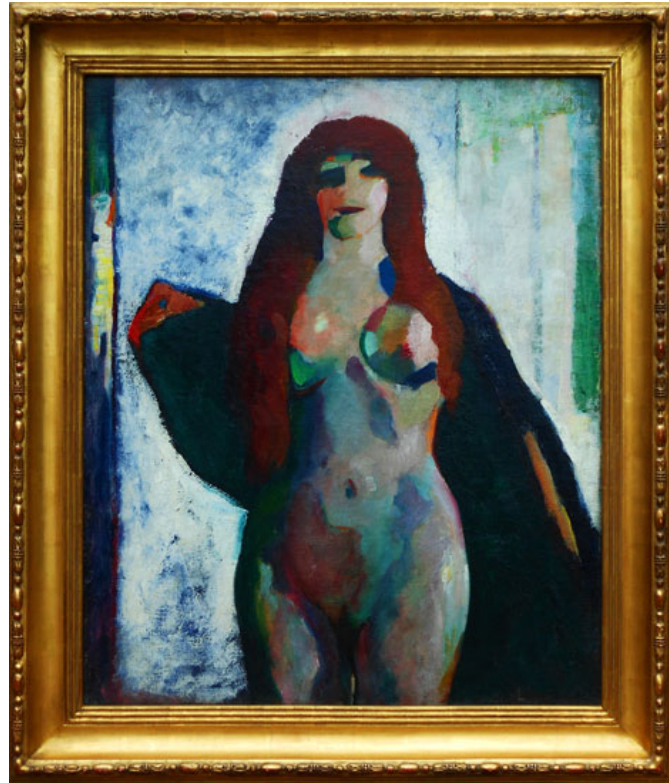
We often assume that new technology is the immediate tool of the artist, but this is not always the case. Take for instance the advent of photography in the 19th century. Seeing his first daguerreotype, the French painter Paul Delaroche declared, "As from today, painting is dead!"

How could painters of portraits and realistic landscapes compete with the precision and efficiency of this new contraption? The current show at Vered Gallery in East Hampton, "Color in Modernism," on view until October 30, grapples with this question. What was painting's place and, in particular, what was the role of color in the newly photographic world?

Spanning the first three-quarters of the 20th century, the show has a spectacular array of modern American masterpieces, from Arthur B. Carles to Helen Frankenthaler to name only two. Taken together, the works on view trace the break from inherited notions of perspective, modeling, and subject matter to an approach that placed a greater emphasis on representing emotions, themes, and various abstractions.

Arthur B. Carles, a pioneer of modern art in America, had studied with the master of Impressionist landscape, William Merritt Chase, before traveling to Europe in 1907 on scholarship. His *Standing Nude*, done only a few years later, displays the influences from his time abroad.

Though strongly tied to the Fauvist method of flattening space, simplifying form and employing color to reveal the subject, Carles's paintings almost prophesize Abstract Expressionism. His *Standing Nude*, with her blackened eyes and geometric target breasts, is a bold painting, guided by the artist's feeling and intuition rather than accuracy of depiction.



“Standing Nude (Nude With Red Hair)” by Arthur B. Carles, c. 1912. Oil on canvas, 39 7/8 x 31 inches. Contemporary Eli Wilner frame.

During the same period, John Singer Sargent was also painting in Europe and experimenting with Impressionist inclinations that had been sparked by his growing relationship with Claude Monet. Sargent was already recognized and acclaimed for his stylized portraits of high society, the most successful artist of this genre of the era. In these works he had dispensed with the more formal traditional technique of drawing and under-painting in favor of working directly on the canvas with a loaded brush.

In *A Landscape Study at San Vigilio, Lake Garda*, Sargent painted en plein air, like many of the French artists of the day, seeking to capture not just the landscape but also a moment in time and the transient quality of light. The painting’s central focus is the open space of golden light in the center, silhouetted by dark trees on either side. The effect is transporting; the landscaping itself takes on the romantic and spiritual quality of oasis unencumbered from the strictures of affluent Edwardian society.



“A Landscape Study at San Viglio, Lake of Garda” by John Singer Sargent, 1913. Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 inches.

The same year that Singer Sargent created his landscape study, the painter and newspaper artist John Sloan helped organize the groundbreaking Armory Show in New York, which introduced European modernism to American viewers. It is almost impossible today—without the immediate access capabilities of cell phones that capture images and send them instantaneously around the globe—to imagine the impact of that revolutionary show.

Americans, unless they could afford to travel abroad, had little contact with European art, let alone cubism, post-impressionism, and Fauvism. While the show shocked viewers and generated intense media coverage and curiosity, it also legitimized art’s capacity to deny, subvert and challenge the prevailing norms.

Part of the Ashcan school, a term he despised, John Sloan was first a newspaper artist before becoming a painter. His early work was keenly focused on the depiction of the energy of urban street life. In the Armory Show he exhibited two paintings and five etchings and took away new influences, the colorful palette of the Fauves and the stylized drawing of emerging abstract painters who were emphasizing form and line over objective three-dimensional reality.

During the mid-1910s, Sloan summered in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he began to move away from his urban scenes and dark colors, instead focusing on landscapes that employed a brighter palette and condensed distorted space. Though he still utilizes the textured quality of a post-impressionist brushstroke, his rocks, trees and hills are reduced to nearly abstract forms.



“Gloucester Garden” by John Sloan, 1915. Oil on Canvas, 20 x 24 inches.

Arthur Dove found his refuge from the hustle and urbanization of the modern age in nature. Widely believed to be the first American abstract painter, he was very close to Georgia O’Keeffe, who credited Dove’s work with being crucial to her developing style of merging the geometric with the organic, of using intensely colorful and dynamic forms.

For many years, while Dove lived on a houseboat on Long Island Sound, O’Keeffe would hang his paintings at Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery. Already in the 1920s, Dove was creating stylized landscapes, a method of illustrating in radiant colors and compressed space what he called “extractions.” These were paintings based on nature that recorded his deep poetic feelings.

If a photograph could capture an actual image, then Dove sought to depict its essence. In seeking to do what a photograph couldn’t, Dove and many of these artists were in turn fascinated by what was happening in photography. Of particular interest was how, when imagery was reduced to black and white, it then depended on form, shape, outline and various tonalities and differing shades of nuance to convey its meaning. *Dark Abstraction (Woods)* is a masterwork of linear structure, of a subtle but deep atmosphere that is rendered in dark greens and highlighted by triangles of yellow light.



“Dark Abstraction (Woods)” by Arthur Dove,
1920. Oil on canvas, 21 3/8 x 18 inches.

By 1937, when Armenian-American artist Arshile Gorky painted *Mother and Child*, many artists were fleeing Europe ahead of World War II and landing in New York. Gorky’s synthesized lyrical Surrealism with sensuous colors is viewed by many as the seminal bridge between Modern Art and Abstract Expressionism.

The artist’s traumatic past of personal tragedy is often reflected in his work. As a child he’d experienced the Armenian genocide and witnessed his mother starve to death in a refugee camp before emigrating to the U.S. In America he became an avant-garde art teacher, friend to de Kooning, and teacher of Mark Rothko. He drew from a repository of styles—adapting tendencies in cubism and surrealism to transform figures into biomorphic shapes and developing his own highly personal vocabulary.

Known for endlessly reworking his paintings, in *Mother and Child*, Gorky has scraped and sanded down his canvas to produce a richly layered surface of gold and lavender and Venetian red.

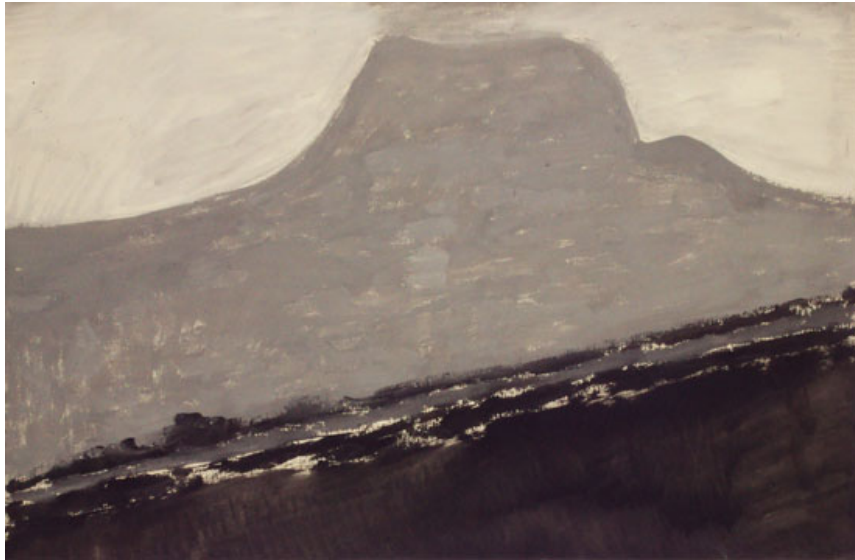


“Mother and Child” by Arshile Gorky, 1937. Oil on canvas, 47 x 36 inches. Signed: Arshile Gorky Foundation Catalogue No: JJ191.

Like Gorky, Milton Avery combined influences from Europe—in his case Henri Matisse’s simplified, colored shapes—with a more muted American Impressionism. Never entirely realistic nor completely abstract, Avery focused on depicting color and form that was grounded in a representational object.

For Avery, color was not used in the service of creating the illusion of depth. Instead he was concerned with the relationships of colors and hues. Often he worked with subtle variations of tonality, as in *Gray Mountain*, a depiction of a mountain in which the picture plane is almost entirely flat.

A harmony of gray oils that Avery has thinned down in places produces a soft almost watercolor effect. It was from Avery that Rothko and Newman learned the technique of washing thin paint onto large areas of single color. At the same time, *Gray Mountain*, with its horizontal strips, also owes much to Rothko’s rectangular work during the same period.



“Gray Mountain” by Milton Avery, 1962. Oil on Paper, 23 x 35 inches.

With his emphasis on color, Avery’s artwork was of particular importance to Helen Frankenthaler. Coming on Avery’s heels, Frankenthaler developed her “soak-stain” technique, in which paint thinned with turpentine is poured directly onto an unprimed canvas. The result is luminous washes of color that saturated the fabric to the point where color and material have finally become one.

Instead of reproducing a field, Frankenthaler, like Pollock before her, transformed the entire canvas into a field. In the '70s and '80s, the artist applied her breakthrough technique to watered-down acrylics. *Quattrocento*, a painting from this period, is composed entirely with color. Lush vibrant greens merge with subtle mauves and stabs of brilliant yellow. The translucent quality of the paint is the sole subject of this monumental work.



“Quattrocento” by Helen Frankenthaler, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 55.87 x 62.6 inches.

Though it's fair to say the use of color underwent a revolutionary expansion after the invention of the camera, and that photography did much to jettison the notion that a painting should be an accurate depiction of an object, a person or a landscape, I'm not sure I agree entirely with the thesis of this show.

It could be argued that Titian, Rembrandt and Tintoretto all used color for drama and to impart intense emotion—though of course, never traveling all the way into abstraction. What is interesting, and what this show does well, is to trace the journey color made toward becoming an end in itself.

BASIC FACTS: “Color in Modernism” remains on view through October 30, 2014. Vered Gallery is located at 68 Park Place, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.veredart.com.

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