

THE EARLY ABSTRACTIONS

Will Henry Stevens



Untitled No. 502

oil on board
30-1/2H x 26-1/4W
Signed "Stevens '37"

cover

Untitled No. 1805

pastel
25-1/2H x 19-3/4W
Signed "Stevens '39"

THE EARLY ABSTRACTIONS

Will Henry Stevens

Will Henry Stevens (1881-1949) was a pioneer of abstract painting in the South. From the mid-1930s to the end of his life, his sensitive, often lyrical non-objective paintings constituted an important portion of his creative output.

This exhibition features Stevens' earliest abstract experiments created between 1937 and 1939. Close, sometimes complex color harmonies, a sense of movement and growth and floating organic forms are found. In new and surprising ways, they sometimes echo the trees, leaves, rocks, roots, streams and mountains seen in his many landscapes.

A poetic sensibility and a deep love of the natural world characterized his works from the beginning. Faceted forms in his paintings reflect a muted response to the intellectual concepts of cubism after the Armory Show of 1913. It was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, that he began to experiment with improvisation and abstraction. At that time, he saw the works of Kandinsky and Klee and became acquainted with theosophical concepts from the recently translated work of the once widely popular, now obscure, ideas of Russian theosophist, Petyr Ouspensky (1878-1947). In these, he recognized ideas and feelings already inherent in his own work, a search for the spiritual and universal.

The body of ideas that shaped early abstract artists in Europe and America had an important influence on Stevens and formed his work. In October 1936 he exhibited several abstract and non-objective paintings. A reviewer described one as showing "no concern with the actual forms and colors of nature. It is a symphony of shapes and colors, the total effect of which is to convey to the spectator the emotion which the painter felt after a long and evidently pleasant association with the subject — highways."¹ Did this painting have forms suggesting speeds experienced on a modern highway? Or landscapes seen in glimpses? Technology and nature conjoined?

This October 11, 1936 review is apparently the first which explicitly identifies some of Stevens' work as abstract. Three related modes were identified. The first represented "heightening and harmonizing the colors of nature and reinforcing natural shapes," essentially realistic. The second, "the rearrangement of the visual aspects of reality into a new unity, more abstractly poetical and rhythmic than the first, and built around a wholly subjective theme." The reviewer knew that Stevens, who felt a kinship with the transcendental and Oriental, had been creating semi-abstract works, subjective interpretations of what he saw, for some time. The third was the new experimental non-objective.

Continually productive, Stevens steadfastly worked in these three subtly related modes from 1936 to his death in 1949. He moved easily from painting non-objective and subjective paintings to essentially realistic works, seeing all of them as representing the same body of thought and expression.

Beginning in the years 1909-1920, several artists — Kandinsky and Mondrian in Europe, and a few Americans, Dove, Hartley and O'Keeffe — sought to break away from traditional forms of representation in order to attain new expressions of depth and emotion, to convey universal, cosmic, often mystical truths at a time when the world was becoming increasingly complex, technological, scientific and materialistic. Though shaped by many of the same ideas, the subjective interpretations of each artist were different.²

Both Kandinsky and Mondrian were directly influenced by theosophy. The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, promoted a mixture of Western occult traditions, 19th century American spiritualism and Eastern religious ideas in an effort to see a universal harmony underlying the apparent chaos of the contemporary world.³ In 1912 Kandinsky wrote his influential essay, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst (On the Spiritual in Art)*, drawing upon theosophical concepts. The Americans were initially inspired by the visionary work of Albert Pinkham Ryder and the writings of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, works that stressed the primacy of nature. Around 1912-1914 they became familiar with Kandinsky's ideas.⁴ Even so, it was almost two decades before the abstract and visionary works of these artists, and others such as Klee, were readily accepted and widely known. It was not until this time that Stevens was emboldened to paint in a non-objective manner.

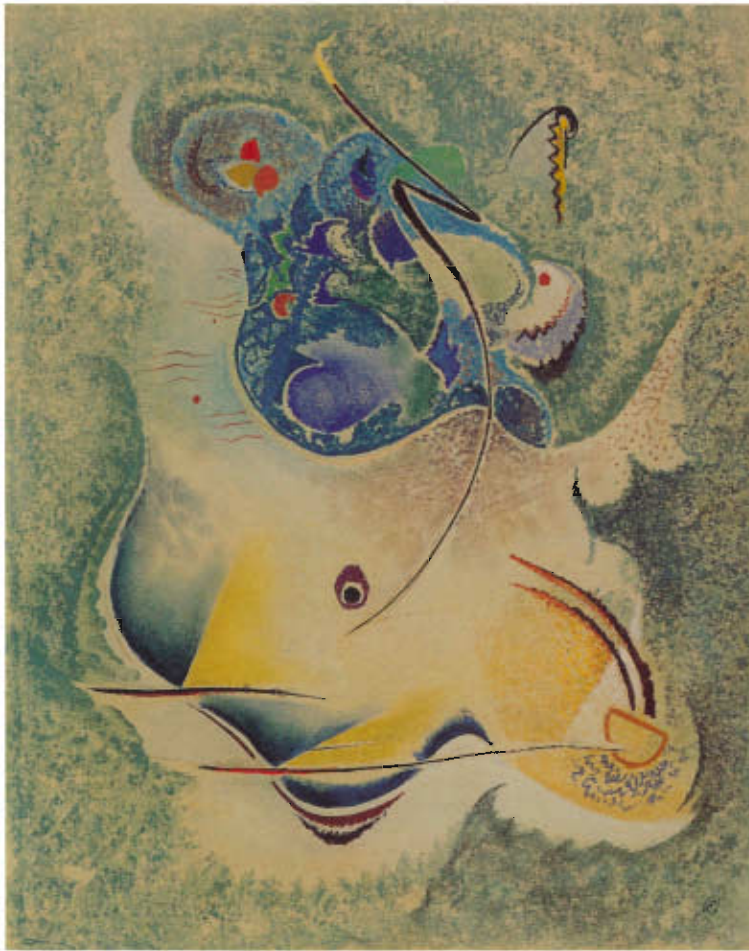
Stevens was a quiet man with a wry sense of humor, who wrote little about his work. A good listener, he enjoyed the companionship of scholars and writers. Some of the experiences and ideas that shaped his particular route to abstract painting can be traced.

Stevens read Emerson and Thoreau as a youth and discovered Whitman at fifteen.⁵ These authors reinforced his childhood delight in nature, when he spent hours exploring the countryside near his home in Indiana. Trained at the Cincinnati Academy of Art, he lived in New York around 1907-1908. There, he prefaced the brochure for his first one-man exhibition of landscapes in 1908 with a

Untitled No. 576

watercolor
18H x 15-3/8W
Signed "Stevens '39"





Untitled No. 558

mixed media

20H x 16W

Signed "Stevens '39"

quote from Emerson's seminal essay, *Nature*. He cherished a memory of an encounter with Ryder that year, who told him that he had a gift, was a poet and should continue to paint in his own way.⁶

In New York Stevens found a mentor and kindred spirit in Van Dearing Perrine. Then known as the "Thoreau of the Palisades," Perrine sought to capture the majesty of the cliffs along the Hudson.⁷

After 1910 Stevens returned to his home in Indiana, then moved to New Orleans in 1921. Summers were spent in the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains, and each year he visited New York for several weeks.

He certainly knew of the 1913 Armory Show as Perrine was in it, but there is no evidence that he saw it. From 1913 on, Kandinsky's works were occasionally shown in America. In 1921, 1924 and 1926 a few works by Klee — described by a critic as "a poet of the picture-space" — were shown.⁸ Stevens undoubtedly also knew about the International Exhibit of Modern Art of 1926-1927 organized by Katharine Dreier and the Société Anonyme.⁹ Here, eight works by Klee and six by Kandinsky were among the best represented. Dreier's selections were shaped by her philosophy, "an idiosyncratic permutation of the mystical teachings of theosophy."

In 1930 the Museum of Modern Art held a Paul Klee exhibition, an artist with whom Stevens felt a special affinity.¹⁰ Bernard Lemann, a friend and academic colleague, recalled that sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s,

he and Stevens saw works by Kandinsky and Klee in New York. Both were excited and perplexed. They were not alone. Despite occasional exhibitions, modernism was still a "struggling stepchild," drawing mixed reactions from critics and public alike.¹¹

Stevens did not necessarily have to go to New York to see new art for there was a lively local art scene in New Orleans. In February 1931, for example, the Arts and Crafts Club exhibited "The most modern of French Painters." Included were works by Andre Masson, whose automatic paintings played an important role in the development of surrealism and abstract expressionism. Deemed "wild" by some, it excited others, "it is . . . the expression of today . . . The world is vibrating to a new rhythm." There was pardonable pride because the exhibition came directly to New Orleans, even before New York.¹²

Stevens' friends remembered a period when he was much interested in Ouspensky.¹³ He owned the 1929 edition of *Tertium Organum, The Third Canon of Thought, Key to the Enigmas of the World*.¹⁴ This was translated in 1920 by the artist-critic Claude Bragdon, a colleague of Perrine.¹⁵ Thus Stevens may have been familiar with theosophical ideas for some time. This now obscure work enjoyed surprisingly wide currency in artistic and intellectual circles in the 1920s and 1930s. Diffuse and densely argued, it is more easily dipped into than read through. It seemed to create a synthesis between "certain liberating implications of the new mathematics with the very old affirmations of the mystics."¹⁶

Ouspensky wrote that the phenomenal world, with colors and sounds familiar to all, was a means for understanding the noumenal world, the underlying structure or hidden forces of the world. And that "Only the fine apparatus which is called the *soul of the artist* can understand and feel the reflection of the noumenon in the phenomenon . . . and sense the vivid emotionality the manifestations of which constitute (to us) inanimate nature."¹⁷

This suggests how Stevens may have arrived at the decision to include totally non-objective painting in his work from 1936 onwards. Lemann, who shared an enthusiasm for theosophical ideas and Eastern philosophy, described how Stevens applied these ideas in his paintings: ". . . the landscapes are studies of natural phenomena that can be used as

a basis for abstracting and purifying his idea as an approach to the Universal Order; and conversely, the non-objective type of picture may serve as an exercise for attaining greater clarity of vision in interpreting the order of nature . . . He shifts from one to the other from day to day. Actually they are two facets of a single body of thought, inseparable in his mind except for the sake of rough classification."¹⁸

Stevens' abstract works invite contemplation. He seldom gave titles to his work, and viewers are free to assign meanings and qualities they sense as they meditate on them. In this exhibition, one can ponder the ways varied color harmonies and ephemeral forms achieve a wholeness or unity. Several paintings are arguably influenced by Kandinsky's improvisations, yet the more disciplined compositions and color harmonies are clearly Stevens'.

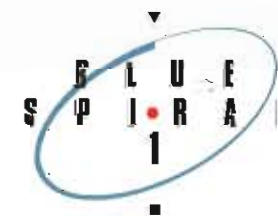
Whimsy, fantasy and a touch of the surreal enter into several compositions where seemingly cosmic globes and floating dream-like objects are freely mixed. Here, there is closer affinity with Klee. Non-objective paintings were a liberating experience for Stevens. There seems to be a joy in the surprises and the play of shapes, patterns and colors. Curvilinear forms, ameoba- and leaf-like forms, all suggesting the life forces of the earth, are mingled in still other works.

Scholars have now traced the manner in which different artists, Stevens included, have sought the spiritual in art during the first half of the twentieth century. Having mapped out these trends, something of the freshness of feeling — a liberating sense of discovery — felt by this generation of artists and writers may now have been lost. In 1986 a literary friend of Stevens' wistfully recalled the artist, who died in 1949, "He didn't talk much about art — he did it. Stevens was seeking to say something that goes beyond realism. At that time we were all seeking this in the arts — we thought we would find it."¹⁹

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Untitled No. 1732
oil on board
22H x 30W
Signed "Stevens '39"



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Asheville, NC 28801

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Untitled No. 618
mixed media
19H x 24-3/4W
Signed "Stevens '39"

Untitled No. 620
mixed media
19H x 24-3/4W
Signed "Stevens '39"

¹Frederic Jochem, *New Orleans Sunday Item-Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1936. Jochem was a colleague who taught in the Art Department of Newcomb College, Tulane University, New Orleans, where Stevens had been teaching since 1921.

²The international matrix of ideas Stevens was to find so compatible were examined in considerable detail in a major exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Paintings 1890-1985*, sponsored by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, Maurice Tuchman, organizer, New York, 1986. Stevens is discussed, 127-128, as one of several American artists outside the Stieglitz circle in New York who created their own versions of non-objective painting.

³Ann Davis, "Theosophy," in *The Dictionary of Art*, Grove, vol. 30. New York, 1996.

⁴Charles Eldredge, "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley," in *The Spiritual in Art*, 113-129. All three were associated with Stieglitz's gallery.

⁵Bernard Lemann, "Will Henry's Nature. The Pictorial Ideas of W. H. Stevens," unpublished manuscript, 1948, 14 and 18.

⁶Lemann, "Stevens," 25; Stevens also told this story to his students. J. Poesch interview with Florence Swann, June 23, 1986.

⁷Lolita L.W. Flockhart, *A Full Life. The Story of Van Dearing Perrine*, Boston, 1939. 201 and 216-219.

⁸Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950*, Boston, 1992. 10-32; Stevens is discussed 86-88. Carolyn Lanchner, *Paul Klee*, New York, 1987, 86. James Johnson Sweeney, "Introduction," in *Paul Klee, Paintings, Watercolors, 1913 to 1939*, ed. Karl Nierendorf, New York, 1941, 13.

⁹Ruth L. Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition. Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America*, Studies in Fine Arts, The Avant-Garde, Vol. 20, Ann Arbor, 1982. 15-25, 51-52 and 97-98.

¹⁰Interview with Eugenie Chevanne Schwartz, June 7, 1986; she recalled that Stevens spoke in affectionate terms of Klee, "almost as if he were a friend."

¹¹Joan M. Lukach, *Hilda Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art*, New York, 1938. 44, 46-49, 81-85, 140-145. Works from the Guggenheim collection of non-objective art were shown in America from 1929.

¹²Sally Noel Mayfield, "Exhibit of French Art Called 'Wild'," unidentified New Orleans newspaper, February 1, 1931, in Historic New Orleans Collection, MS 247, Arts and Crafts Club, Folder 444, and other clippings in this file.

¹³Interview with Harold Lee, former Professor of Philosophy, Tulane University, Sept. 8, 1985.

¹⁴This was still in the library of his daughter, Janet Stevens McDowell, in 1986. Stevens also owned Ouspensky's *A New Model of the Universe, Principles of Psychological Method in Its Applications to Problems of Science, Religion and Art*, 1931.

¹⁵Bragdon wrote a 1924 article, "Van Deering [sic] Perrine. A Painter of Light," *Arts and Decoration* 21 (May 1924), 14-16.

¹⁶W. C. Blum, "A Key to the Enigmas of the World," *The Dial* 69 (Sept. 1920) 309. *Tertium Organum* went through at least ten printings between 1922 and 1945.

¹⁷Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 230.

¹⁸Lemann, "Stevens," 57.

¹⁹Interview with Captain F. M. Radford, June 7, 1987.