



PATHS TO ABSTRACTION 1867–1917

# ABSTRACTION

Remember that before being a war-horse, a nude woman,  
or some anecdote, a picture is essentially a plane surface covered  
with colours assembled in a certain order.

Maurice Denis, 1890

SYDNEY ONLY  
26 JUNE – 19 SEPTEMBER 2010

PRESS  
RELEASE

ART  
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NSW

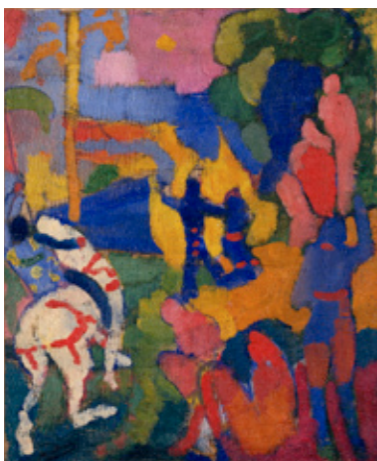




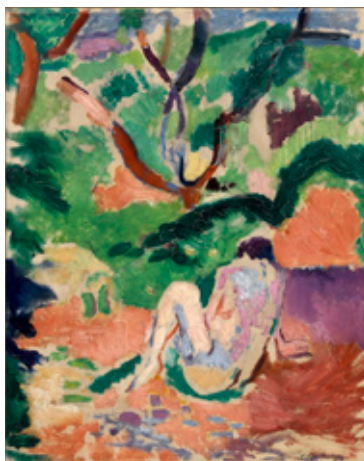
James Abbott McNeill Whistler *Nocturne: black and gold – the fire wheel* 1875



Paul Cézanne *At the water's edge* c1890



André Derain *Knight on a white horse* c1905



Henri Matisse *Nude in the woods* 1906

One of the most ambitious exhibitions the Art Gallery of New South Wales has ever undertaken, *Paths to abstraction* will include more than 150 pivotal works by some of the most influential pioneers of modernism, spanning 50 years when paintings, drawings and prints edged their way by degrees towards purely non-representational images.

Curator Terence Maloon has secured representative works of more than 40 of the leading artists of the late 19th and 20th centuries including Whistler, Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, Munch, Gauguin, Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, Derain, Denis, Marc, Duchamp, Braque, Bonnard and Mondrian among others.

These works are from 59 institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice; Museu Picasso Barcelona; Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou; Tate Modern; Tate Britain; Kunstmuseum Bern; J Paul Getty Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum as well as private collections.

In the first decades of the 20th century, a radical new approach to art emerged almost simultaneously across Europe and the United States: abstraction. Yet abstraction was never a 'movement', it didn't originate in one place, nor was it practised by one cohesive group of artists. So how had these artists arrived at such a convergence?

How had abstract art taken root so quickly?

*Paths to abstraction* explores the avant-garde movements and artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that preceded and paved the way for purely abstract art.

**1912** Non-representational paintings are first shown in a large, mixed exhibition in Paris. A senior member of the municipal council writes an open letter to the Ministry of the Arts protesting at 'the housing of such horrors in a national monument'. The controversy becomes so heated that the disputed works are shown on the Gaumont newsreels. But abstract art has its defenders as well. In February 1912, the poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire writes an article about it:

*If the aim of art remains what it has always been – to serve the pleasure of the eyes – then, from now on, art lovers shall be expected to find a different pleasure in art from the pleasure they procure from the spectacle of natural things. We are heading towards an entirely new art. It will be related to painting (painting as it has been conceived until now) as music is related to literature. It will be pure painting, just as music is pure literature.*



Hans (Jean) Arp *Self-portrait* 1912



Edvard Munch *To the forest* 1915



Sophie Taeuber-Arp *Vertical-horizontal composition* 1916



Patrick Henry Bruce *Painting* 1917-18

1917 The First World War is drawing to an end. The Russian Revolution breaks out. The jazz age begins. Abstract art is five years old. Many of its supreme masterpieces have already been created. The most radical implications of its various freedoms have been grasped and acted upon. The expanded parameters of modern art have been staked out. Abstraction is now an international phenomenon: in France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, Italy and Portugal, it has become a feature of contemporary cultural life. But how did this situation come to pass? What were its origins?

1867 James McNeill Whistler re-titles his paintings, giving them abstract titles. *Symphony in white no III* is the first work to be shown in public with this sort of title. From that point on, Whistler's titles serve to draw attention to the formal arrangement, the colour harmony, the tonality and mood of his pictures – in other words, he emphasises their abstract qualities. Whistler writes:

*Art should be independent of all clap-trap – should stand alone and appeal to the artistic sense of the eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it – devotion, pity, love, patriotism and the like. All these have no concern with it and that is why I insist on calling my works arrangements and harmonies.*

1867–1917 This is the period covered by the exhibition *Paths to abstraction*, a survey of the evolution towards an entirely non-figurative art. Although many of the artists who are featured never produced entirely abstract paintings, their work, in its time, demonstrated an unprecedented degree of abstraction, and was an inspiration to the first generation of abstract artists: Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Kupka, Larionov, Klee, Arp and Picabia, whose work is also featured.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler *Nocturne: black and gold – the fire wheel* 1875  
Tate, London, bequeathed by Arthur Studd, 1919 (NO3419)

Paul Cézanne *At the water's edge* c1890  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, gift of the W Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N Harriman (1972.9.1)

André Derain *Knight on a white horse* c1905  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1985 (1985.459)

Henri Matisse *Nude in the woods* 1906  
Brooklyn Museum of Art, gift of George F Of (52.150)

Hans (Jean) Arp *Self-portrait* 1912  
brochure for the second Moderner Bund exhibition, Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V., Remagen-Rolandswerth (T/Z 3066)

Edvard Munch *To the forest* 1915  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1974 (P152-1974)

Sophie Taeuber-Arp *Vertical-horizontal composition* 1916, Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V., Remagen-Rolandswerth (003.101)

Patrick Henry Bruce *Painting* 1917-18  
Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J Terra Collection (1999.21)

František Kupka *Discs of Newton (Study for 'Fugue in two colours')* 1912 (cover detail & p 4). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950 (1950.134.122)

Licensed by Viscopy 2010: Hans Arp/Bild-Kunst; André Derain/ADAGP; František Kupka/ADAGP; Henri Matisse © Succession H Matisse, Paris; Edvard Munch/BONO; Sophie Taeuber-Arp/ProLitteris





František Kupka *Discs of Newton (Study for 'Fugue in two colours')* 1912

HANS (JEAN) ARP  
GIACOMO BALLA  
PIERRE BONNARD  
GEORGES BRAQUE  
PATRICK HENRY BRUCE  
HEINRICH CAMPENDONCK  
PAUL CÉZANNE  
ALVIN LANGDON COBURN  
ROBERT DELAUNAY  
SONIA DELAUNAY  
MAURICE DENIS  
ANDRÉ DERAIN  
MARCEL DUCHAMP  
PAUL GAUGUIN  
ALBERT GLEIZES  
NATALIA GONCHAROVA  
WALTER GREAVES  
ERICH HECKEL  
ALEXEI VON JAWLENSKY  
WASSILY KANDINSKY  
PAUL KLEE  
IVÁN KLIUN  
FRANTIŠEK KUPKA

MIKHAIL LARIONOV  
FERNAND LÉGER  
JACQUES LIPCHITZ  
KASIMIR MALEVICH  
FRANZ MARC  
ALBERT MARQUET  
HENRI MATISSE  
PIET MONDRIAN  
CLAUDE MONET  
EDVARD MUNCH  
GABRIELE MÜNTER  
FRANCIS PICABIA  
PABLO PICASSO  
HANS RICHTER  
MORGAN RUSSELL  
GEORGES SEURAT  
EDWARD STEICHEN  
SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP  
FÉLIX VALLOTTON  
ÉDOUARD VUILLARD  
JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

## PATHS TO ABSTRACTION 1867 – 1917

26 June – 19 September 2010  
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Admission \$20, \$15 concession

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