Art &ANTIQUES

DECEMBER/JANUARY 2017-18

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS

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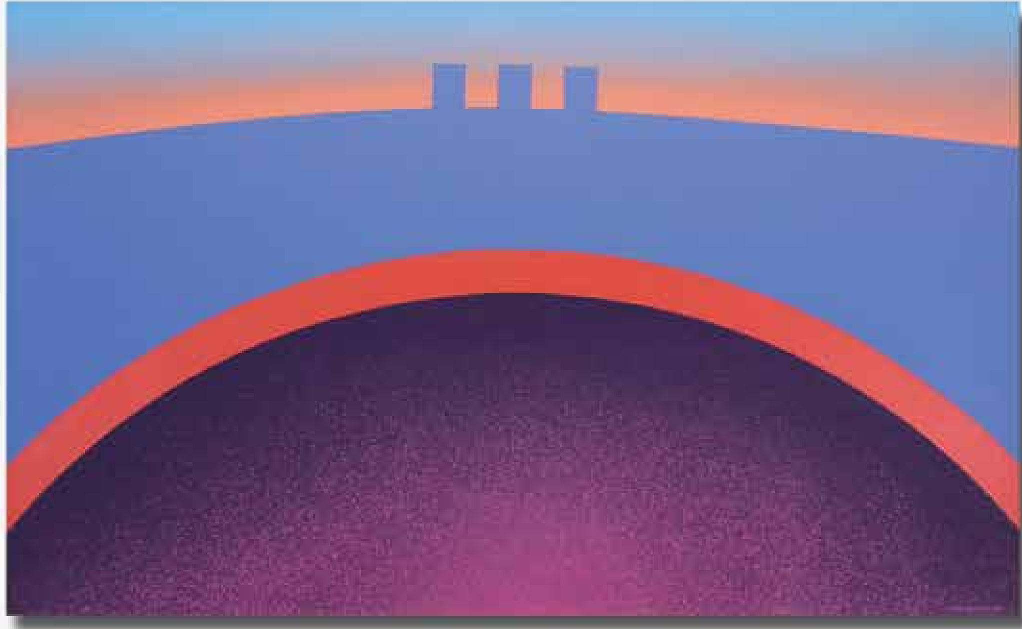

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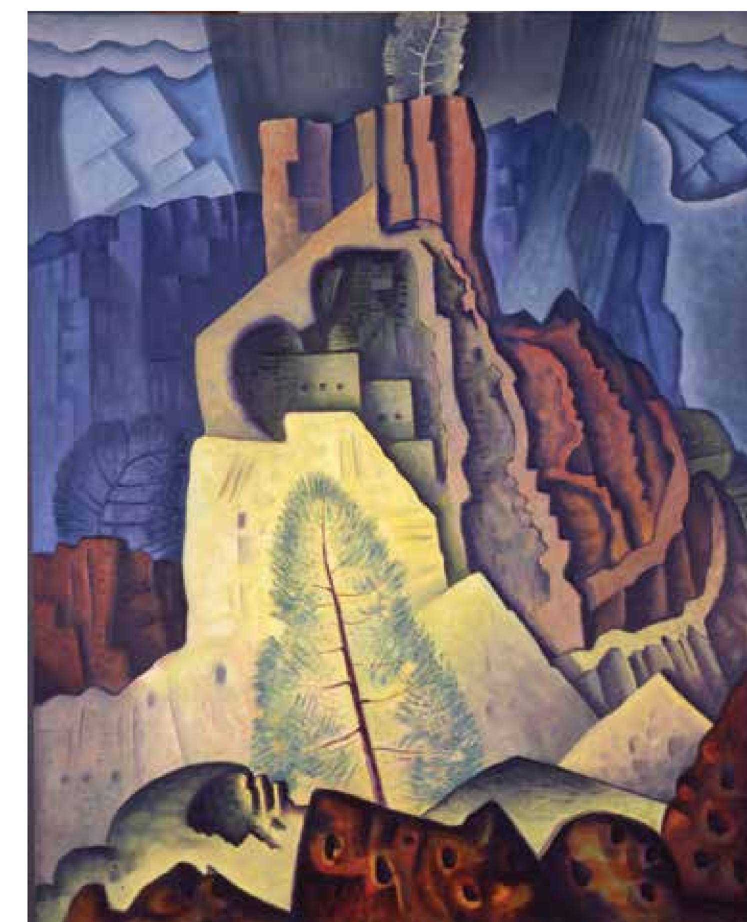
the Missionary

By John Dorfman

In his work as a painter and his vocation as a teacher, **Raymond Jonson** championed an unswervingly idealistic vision of modern art.

Raymond Jonson (1891–1982) was that true rarity, a great artist who is also a great teacher. As a standard-bearer for Kandinsky's ideas about abstraction, he strove to make pure form and color express universal ideas and emotions. Over a period of four decades, he inspired his students to pursue similarly lofty ambitions, without limiting their independence or creative freedom. As an arts administrator, he initiated a program of modernist art instruction at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and amassed a unique collection of artworks that served as an education in themselves for students and visitors, and that still stands as a testament to his vision.

Perhaps because he chose to live and work in New Mexico rather than in New York, Jonson's name is less well known than it otherwise might have been, but he occupies a firm position in the canon of American abstract painters. His mature work is instantly recognizable for its airbrush technique, by which he caused fields of color to seemingly float and blend, often serving as a substratum for more sharply-defined shapes and curving, curling lines of energy. Many of Jonson's abstract paintings have a distinct biomorphic quality, which they share with certain Surrealist work, though they are not Surrealist in either intent or feeling. On the whole, Jonson's work possesses a contemplative,



This spread, from left: Raymond Jonson, *Violet Light (The Artist's Wife, Vera)*, 1918, oil on canvas, 44 x 33 in.; *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, 1927, oil on canvas, 48 x 38 in.

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spiritual quality. They seem to speak of a world beyond the senses, a world of pure thought and feeling.

For Jonson, the achievement of this kind of abstract representation was worthy of a lifetime quest. He gave expression to his ideals in a 1948 lecture, characteristically not about his own work but about that of a fellow artist, Jean Xceron: "Today we find that painting has finally reached an eminence never before experienced. This eminence is that of absolute painting. It is on par with absolute music. As far as I know, painting never before our time has been creative to such an extent…this painting attains a means for arriving at pure structure and does not depend on objective facts of life. It is not interpretive, but creative." In this brief statement, which could serve as a précis of "non-objective painting," Jonson argued that true creativity requires turning away from the visible world and toward the world within, because only thus could one truly invent rather than imitate.

Jonson arrived at this point after a long journey though various artistic styles and goals. He was born in 1891 on an Iowa farm that belonged to his maternal grandparents. His father, who was of Swedish descent, was a Baptist preacher, and the family moved from place to place across the Midwest and West as he moved from congregation to congregation.

From left: *Portrait of a Painter (Self-Portrait)*, 1927, oil on canvas, 50 x 33 in.; *Southwest Arrangement*, 1933, oil on canvas, 45 x 20 in.

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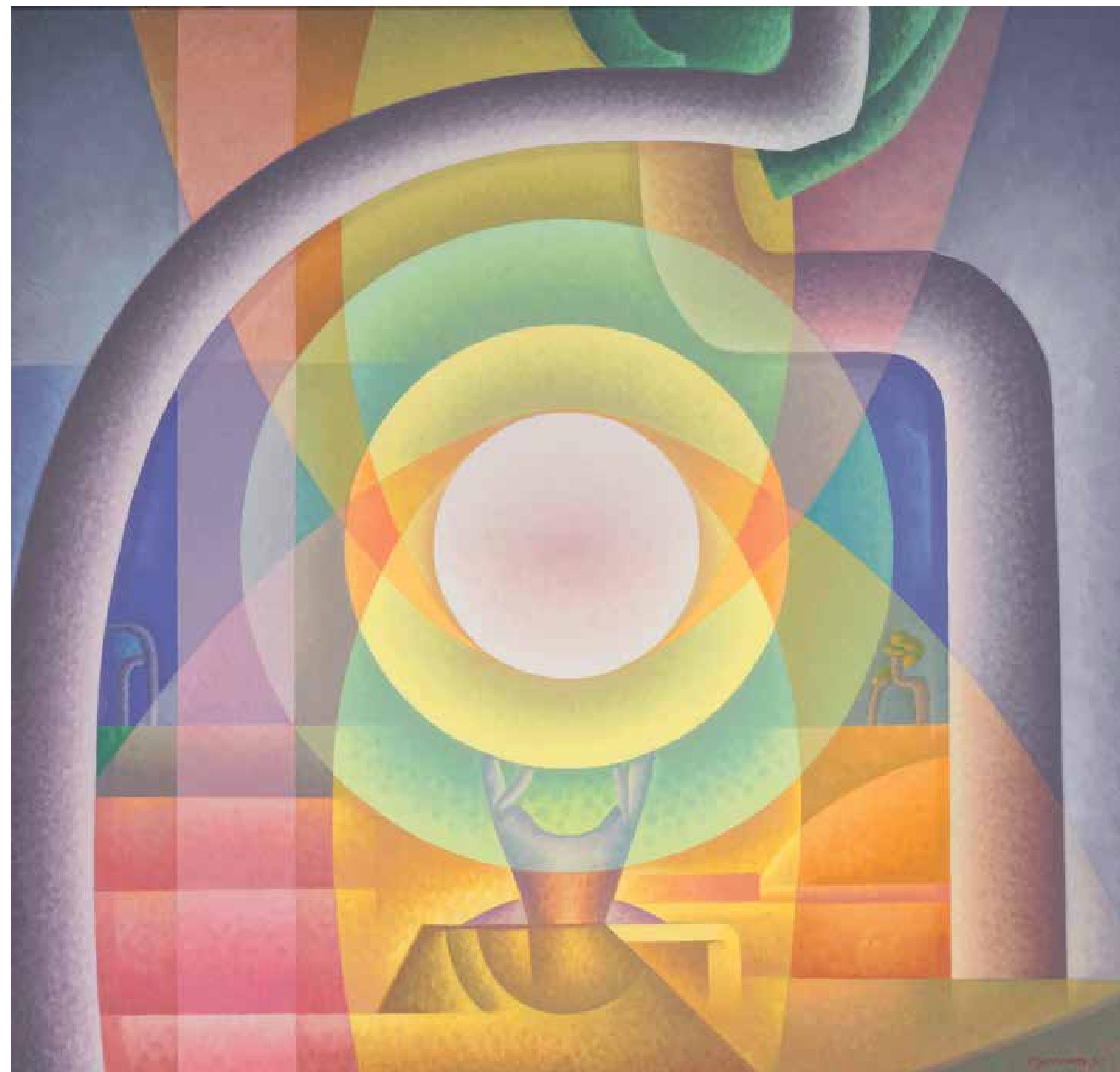

Time Cycle (Noon), 1930, oil on canvas, 36 x 38 in.

Eventually they settled in Portland, Ore. It was there that Jonson received his first art instruction, at the school of the Portland Art Museum. One cannot help but think that the spirituality of Jonson's approach to art and the missionary zeal of his art instruction owed at least something to his minister father. At the Portland Museum school, one of his teachers, Kate Cameron Simmons, had been a student of Arthur Wesley Dow, and this connection may have planted the seed of abstraction in the young student's mind.

At the age of 19, in 1910, Jonson went to Chicago to study at the Art Institute. Here the training was far more conservative than at the Portland school, which held with the Whistlerian "art for art's sake" philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement. At the Institute, Jonson drew from plaster casts of Classical sculpture and went through the standard academic curriculum, which emphasized technical precision. In 1911 Jonson breathed a little fresher air through his acquaintance with the artist B.J.O. Nordfeldt, who had just returned from a lengthy stay in Europe and introduced Jonson to Post-Impressionism. Another early influence was the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla, who had a show at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1911.

In 1913, Jonson's horizons were vastly broadened by the Armory Show, which debuted in New York and then traveled to Chicago.

As seen in Art &ANTIQUES

Time Cycle (Morning), 1930, oil on canvas, 33 x 38 in.

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It was a big leap from Sorolla to Duchamp, Matisse, and Picasso. All of a sudden, the budding artist had the latest developments in European modernism—Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism—right before his eyes. At the time, was working as a commercial artist to make ends meet, including doing fashion illustrations, but he soon found a job that arguably had as important an influence on his future as the Armory Show did. He went to work for an experimental theater as a set designer and general handyman. The Chicago Little Theatre had just opened in 1912, founded by an Englishman, Maurice Browne, who had connections with avant-garde theatrical figures such as Lady Gregory and funding from wealthy members of Chicago society. At the Little Theatre, Jonson enlarged his position to encompass poster design, lighting design (in which capacity he invented the nine-switch dimmer board, a key development in the field) and stage managing; he even did some acting. In the dynamic atmosphere of the Little Theatre, a revolutionary idea of what theater could be was being propounded—a move away from realism and traditional plot, the use of poetry, music, light, and abstract form together to create a unitary experience, and a minimalist aesthetic. Here was a laboratory for modernism more exciting than an art school. After just five years, the Little Theatre went bankrupt, but Jonson had taken from it what he needed. Among other things, in his airbrush paintings, which he began in 1938, one can see clearly the colored spotlights that he had pointed at the stage with his nine-switch dimmer two decades earlier.

Around 1920, Jonson came under the influence of two Russian artists, Kandinsky and Nicholas Roerich. After reading Kandinsky's *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (1912), Jonson called it "the greatest book concerning art that I have ever read." It was the anti-materialism of Kandinsky and his likening of art to music that most impressed Jonson. With Roerich, a painter, mystic, and enthusiast of Eastern religions who designed sets for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, Jonson had a more direct relationship. Roerich was living in the U.S. at the time, and under his tutelage an artistic group called Cor Ardens ("burning heart") was established, with Jonson as a founding member.

Disillusioned with the Chicago art scene and having found New York even more unappealing, Jonson decided to move to Santa Fe. Northern New Mexico was already well known among artists for its stunning scenery, pleasant climate, ancient cultures, and cheap real estate. Jonson was looking for an environment more conducive to contemplation, less materialistic, than what he was used to. In July 1924, he and his wife, Vera (whom he had married in 1916) bought land near Santa Fe and settled down there. The unearthly-looking landscape as well as local Native American architecture and symbolism began appearing in Jonson's paintings—such as *Earth Rhythms No. 3* (1923) and *Cliff Dwellings No. 3* (1927)—but the real effect of Santa Fe on the artist was more subtle. The longer he lived there, the more his art turned inward, away from representation and toward abstraction. Unlike the earlier generation of Taos School painters who had colonized the area, Jonson had no inclination to be a local-color artist.

He did, however, have a strong inclination to teach, and in 1926 he and Vera launched the Atalaya

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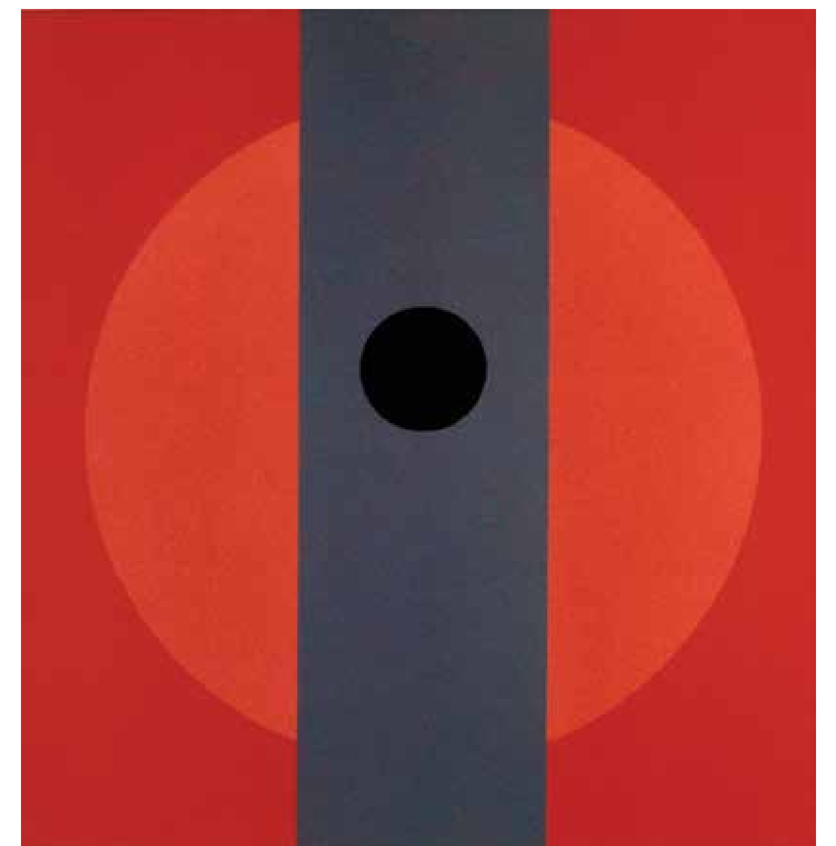
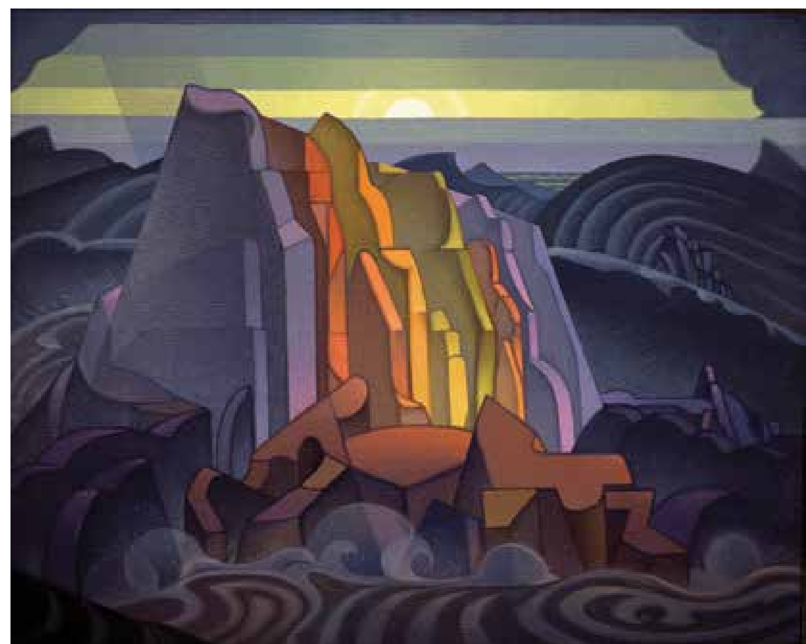
Clockwise from left: *Chromatic Contrasts No. 14 (Oil No. 8)*, 1943, oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in.; *Polymer No. 3, 1968*, acrylic on Masonite, 42 x 48 in.; *Polymer No. 8, 1966*, acrylic on board, 45 x 45 in.



As seen in Art & Antiques

Clockwise from top left: *Symphonic Portrait – May Van Dyke,* 1929, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 in.; *Biology* from the series "Cycles of Science," 1934, oil on canvas, 88 ¾ x 58 ½ in.; *Earth Rhythms No. 3,* 1923, oil on canvas, 32 x 40 in.



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Art School, with Jonson as the only teacher and Vera as administrator. It only lasted one summer before it had to be discontinued due to lack of sufficient enrollment, but Jonson's appetite for teaching was whetted. He continued to teach privately, until in 1934 he was invited to teach part-time at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. In 1938 he founded another school of his own, Arsuna ("art is one"), which was linked to Roerich's organization. Its motto was "Peace and Wisdom through Beauty—the one universal language." That same year, Jonson co-founded the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG) with fellow artist Emil Bisttram, which was dedicated to the practice of non-objective painting. Soon they invited other artists to join, including Ed Garman, Stuart Walker, Agnes Pelton, and the Canadian painter Lawren Harris.

During the 1940s, Jonson deepened his involvement with the University. He was devoting a great deal of time to teaching and getting a reputation as a major figure. Elaine de Kooning, who was a visiting professor there, wrote in 1961, "In his generosity, vitality and ability to stimulate other artists, Jonson is comparable to Hans Hofmann." One of Jonson's signal achievements was bringing actual artworks to the University so that students could have the kind of direct exposure that he himself had benefited from at the Armory Show. Jonson's so-called alcove shows, of which he curated 32, featured works by the TPG artists, Josef Albers, Arshile Gorky, and more, and their success inspired him to push for the creation of a permanent modernist collection at the University that would be set up in conjunction with a teaching gallery, a studio, and a storage facility. His powers of persuasion over the administration were such that in 1950, funded partly by the sale of his own home and partly by patrons and UNM, his dream came true. The Jonson Collection, as it was called, opened that year and is still in operation.

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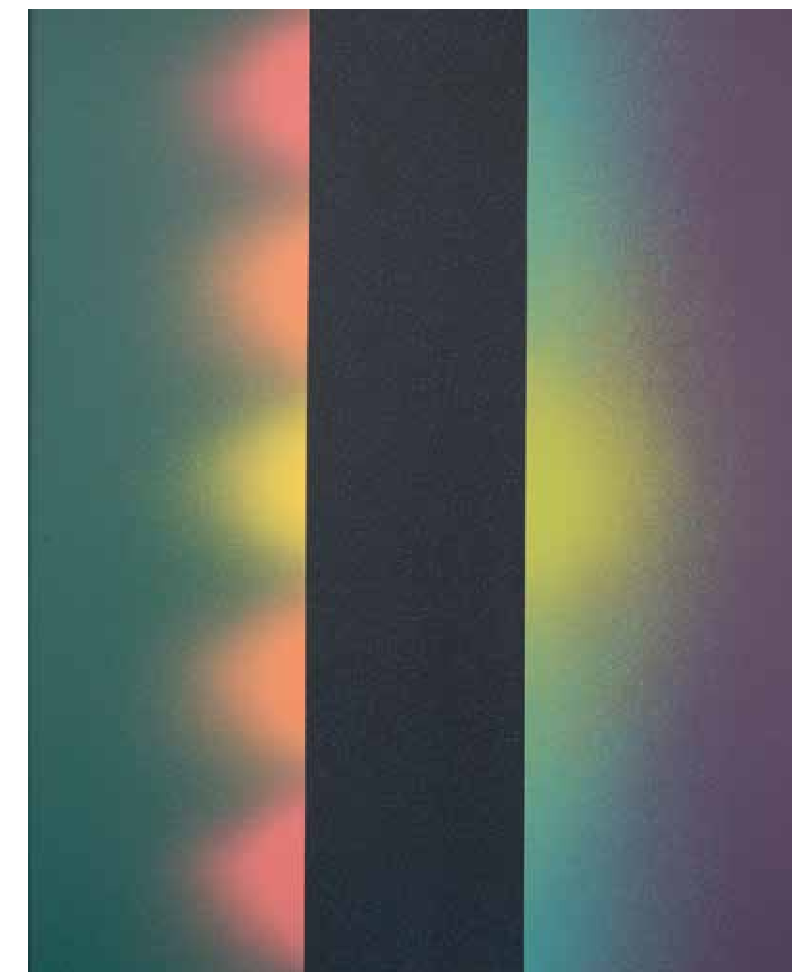
"Perhaps because he chose to live and work in New Mexico rather than in New York, Jonson's name is less well known than it otherwise might have been, but he occupies a firm position in the canon of American abstract painters."

From top: *Engineering* from the series "Cycles of Science," 1934, oil on canvas, 60 x 71 in.; *Polymer No. 11,* 1972, acrylic on Masonite, 45 x 36 in.



Jonson's most famous student was undoubtedly Richard Diebenkorn, who studied at UNM from 1950–52. Diebenkorn was a square peg who had trouble with any kind of authority and quarreled with many of his professors, but he and Jonson got along fine. Seeing that Diebenkorn's restless energy was distracting fellow students, Jonson found him a private studio elsewhere on campus and made sure that he graduated. Some 30 years later, Diebenkorn paid this tribute to his old teacher: "He taught us how to paint, not what to paint."