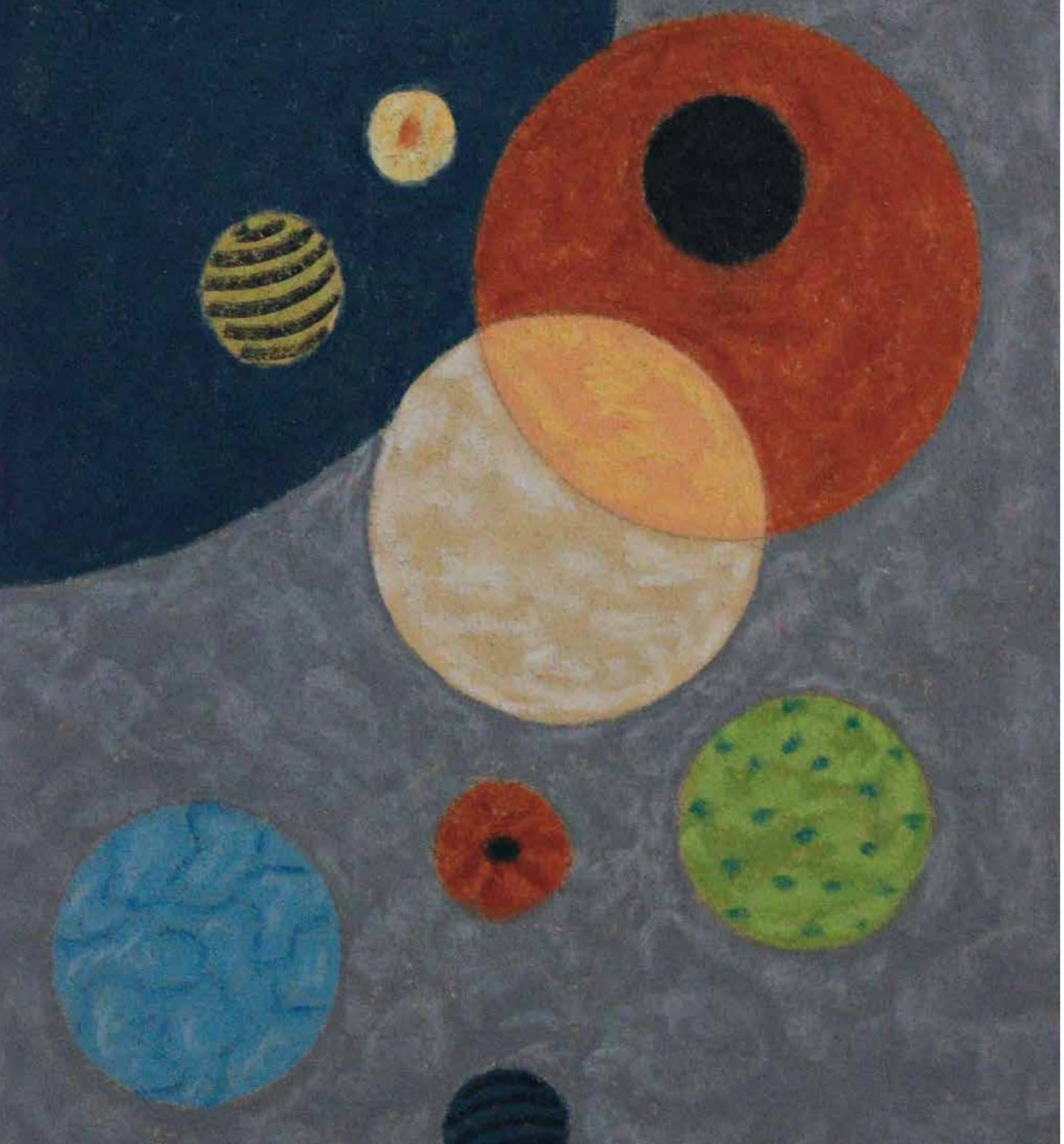

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Art and Soul

How a little-known group of New Mexico painters helped change the art world

BY NANCY ZIMMERMAN

Despite its relative isolation, New Mexico has been home to more than its fair share of artists and artistic movements over the years. But while most people know of the more famous artists and alliances that put the state on the artistic map—Los Cinco Pintores of Santa Fe and the Taos Modernists among them—one group remains relatively obscure despite its contributions in bringing nonobjective and abstract art into the mainstream during the years leading up to World War II. Although its existence was short-lived, that group brought together some of the art world's bright lights for a brief but influential period of artistic experimentation and philosophical exploration.

The year was 1938. The unsettling drumbeat of impending war in Europe had the world on edge as Hitler invaded Austria and began eyeing Czechoslovakia. In the U.S., the slow but steady ascent from the depths of the Great Depression was temporarily derailed by a new recession. Uncertainty and fear were becoming endemic, with political institutions here and abroad struggling to adjust to rapidly unfolding events. The time was ripe for a new consciousness to emerge, one that would assuage the dread and revive America's celebrated optimism, but it wasn't likely to come from the Establishment, which dealt with matters of policy and politics. As is often the case, it needed to come from the world of art, which transcends barriers of language and culture to reach people everywhere with its universally understood expressions of truth.

That inchoate longing for some kind of connection to an overarching consciousness permeated even, or perhaps especially, the remoteness of New Mexico, where artists reveled in the isolation and physical beauty of a region that inspired both reverence for the spiritual world and experimentation with color and form. Out of this creative environment came a new approach to painting, one that sought to connect with a more spiritual, universal force through evocative geometries, lines, and color, led by a group of painters whose nonobjective and abstract works departed from the representational bent of the traditional art world. They called themselves the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG), and they produced a manifesto that clarified their purpose and announced to the world their adoption of a distinct set of values.

The gist of the manifesto was the group's stated goal "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." Another aim was to defend and promote the often-reviled abstract and nonobjective art that ran counter to the prevailing aesthetic and philosophy of the time. The TPG members had been impressed by the works and words of Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian that were shaking up the art establishment elsewhere, and they were influenced

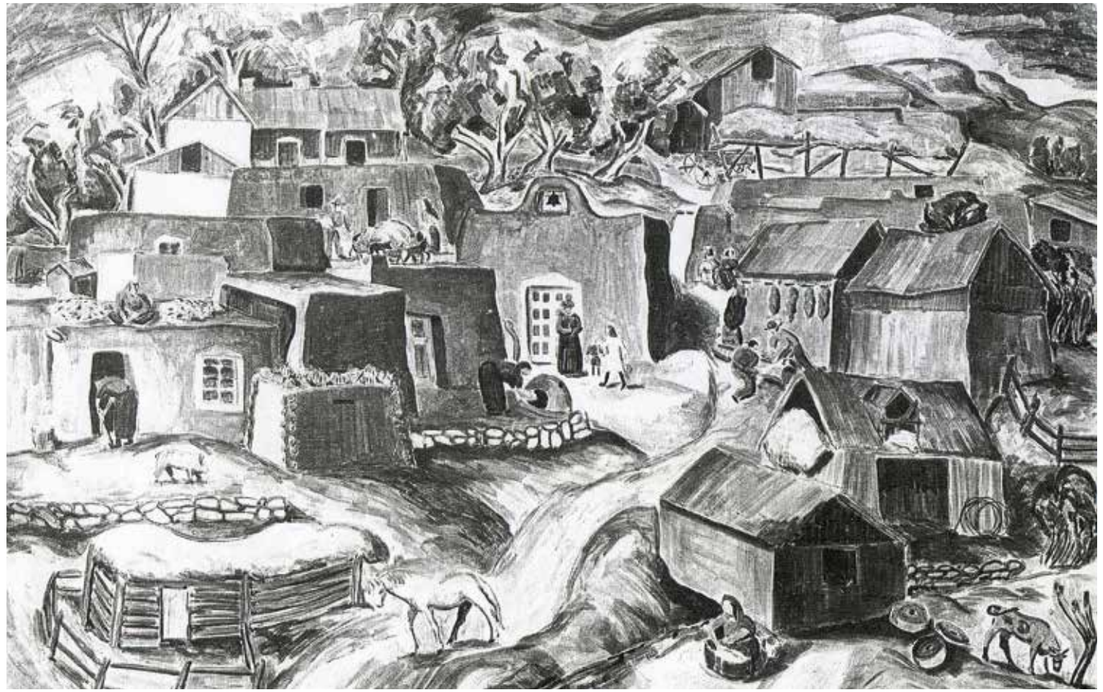
> "Art will unify all humanity. Art is one—indivisible . . . Art is the manifestation of the coming synthesis."

strongly by the philosophical concepts of Theosophy, Zen Buddhism, and Dynamic Symmetry. By banding together and giving their overlapping philosophies and styles a name, they hoped to help each other find ways to exhibit their art and exert their influence on a scene that routinely resisted their nontraditional approach to painting.

Thus it was in early June of 1938 that painters Raymond Jonson and Emil Bisttram officially founded the TPG during a meeting at Bisttram's home in Taos that brought together a varied group of painters. Also present at the meeting was Dane Rudhyar, a Paris-born avant-garde writer, musician, composer, astrologer, and philosopher who had studied Theosophy and Buddhism and who, along with Jonson, was a principal author of the TPG manifesto. After much discussion, the group selected the term "transcendental" to represent them because of its universal sense of shared values that eschewed such concepts as religion, politics, fashion, and commercialism in favor of promoting a sense of the sublime, of connecting to the realm of the spirit. While likeminded in their philosophies, the group was an eclectic bunch, with differing painting styles, and not all of them lived in New Mexico the entire time, although the core group did.

Cofounder Jonson (pronounced Jones-son) had left Chicago for Santa Fe in 1924, leaving behind his career as a set designer and lighting innovator whose groundbreaking work had achieved worldwide recognition. Jonson studied art from an early age while growing up in Portland, Oregon, but it was in Chicago that his intellectual and spiritual appreciation of art developed. There he met Nicholas Roerich, the Russian-born painter, writer, archaeologist, teacher, and Theosophist who had studied Eastern religions and whose influential work to preserve art and architecture during times of war earned him several nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize. Roerich and Jonson joined forces to launch Cor Ardens, an international association formed to hold unjuried art exhibitions, establish museums to house permanent collections of members' work, and promote dance, drama, literature, and musical composition. As that group's first president, Jonson gained experience in organizing artistic alliances that would later help him establish the TPG in New Mexico.

In addition to Roerich, Jonson's other main influence during his Chicago years was Wassily Kandinsky, whose book *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (currently reissued as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*) laid out a theory of relationships between colors and emotions and offered a rationale for abstract art that Jonson found inspiring. He brought that inspiration with him to New Mexico, where his figures, still lifes, and landscapes began to morph in the direction of abstraction.



COURTESY OF THE PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES

LEFT: COURTESY OF THE PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES. RIGHT: © THE RAYMOND JONSON COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO ART MUSEUM

Emil Bisstram self-portrait, 1935. Right: Raymond Jonson in Taos, 1938. Opposite: A Lumpkins mural created for the Laboratory of Anthropology, 1934, when he was transitioning from representational work to a more abstract style. Previous spread: *Untitled* by Emil Bisttram.

Cofounder Emil Bisttram followed a similarly circuitous route to New Mexico. Born in Hungary in 1895, he immigrated to America with his family at age 11 and eventually pursued a career in commercial design, opening the first freelance art service for advertising agencies in New York when he was just 20 years old. At the same time he studied art in the evenings at the Art Students League, the New York School of Fine and Applied Art (eventually renamed Parsons School of Design, where Bisttram later taught art), and the National Academy of Design. He was particularly taken with the concept of Dynamic Symmetry, a natural methodology using mathematics to create geometrical designs, also referred to as the Golden Mean. He was invited by Roerich to teach at the New York Master Institute of United Arts of the Roerich Museum, which promoted the idea of shared values among music, painting, sculpture, ballet, and drama. Roerich's motto was: "Art will unify all humanity. Art is one—indivisible… Art is the manifestation of the coming synthesis."

Bisttram first visited Taos in 1930, where he went to unwind from the stress of New York and the shock of the recent stock market crash. Like so many artists before and since, he was entranced by the area's physical beauty. That same beauty confounded him in his efforts to paint, however, as he wrote: "Whenever I tried to paint what was before me, I was frustrated by the grandeur of the scenery and the limitless space, but above all there was that strange, almost mystic quality of light."

He returned to New York, and in 1931 was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study mural painting, which led him to Mexico to learn from renowned muralist Diego Rivera. He came back to Taos in 1932 to settle permanently, initially doing as other artists had done upon arriving there: painting Native Americans and local architecture. But his work gradually became less representational and more abstract as he experimented with form and color, influenced, as Jonson had been, by the works and writings of Kandinsky. He founded the Taos School of Art, adopting a curriculum that emphasized the concept of Dynamic Symmetry, which, he said, "releases the imaginative power, liberating the creative forces toward a final unquestionable order." The following year he founded the Heptagon Gallery, the first commercial art gallery in Taos.

Unlike Bisttram, who had grown up in a New York City tenement and struggled to pursue his painting while earning a living as a commercial artist, TPG founding member Lawren Harris enjoyed a privileged upbringing in Ontario, Canada. His family's wealth allowed him to focus on painting, studying in Canada and later in Berlin, where he was exposed to the works of Kandinsky, Gauguin, and Cézanne as part of a sophisticated curriculum that included philosophy. As his interest in philosophy—and Eastern thought in particular—grew, he was drawn to Theosophy, a movement that seeks direct knowledge of the mysteries of life and the nature of divinity.

Harris worked as an illustrator for *Harper's Magazine*, among other

publications, and he organized sketching trips with fellow artists who were to become Canada's Group of Seven, an alliance of painters who were inspired by the sublime Canadian landscape and who sought to express its primeval spirit. At this point Harris's work was evolving toward a more abstract style that was described in the *Toronto Star* in 1928 as "Transcendentalism . . . despairingly beautiful and inhuman."

He showed his art in the Société Anonyme's *International Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Brooklyn Museum, organized by Katherine Dreier, who was also interested in Theosophy and believed that art had a role to play in humanity's spiritual development.

In early 1938, when Harris moved to Santa Fe and met Jonson, his broad knowledge of Theosophy meshed well with the views of the other artists, and he joined the ongoing dialogue that soon gave rise to the TPG.

Agnes Pelton, another TPG member, was born in 1881 in Stuttgart, Germany, to American parents. After the death of her father in 1890, she and her mother moved to Brooklyn, where she studied piano. She enrolled at the Pratt Institute at age 14 and began studying art, and upon graduation continued private art studies with two of her Pratt instructors. After a year in Italy, where she studied Italian painters and life drawing at the British Academy in Rome, she embarked on a series of paintings she called *Imaginative Paintings* that drew on her explorations into the effects of natural light in the outdoors. When artist Walt Kuhn, who organized the famed Armory Show of 1913, saw her work, he invited her to show two of these paintings in the exhibition.

Pelton visited Taos in 1919 as a guest of Mabel Dodge, and her work at the time concentrated on realistic portraiture and landscapes. By 1921 she had begun painting abstractions, and she exhibited her work at the Argent Galleries in New York in 1931 and in 1933 at the Museum of New Mexico as part of the *Santa Fe*

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***Triangle* (1940) by WIlliam Lumpkins, who blended geometric shapes with organic ones to produce works that evoked emotion and rhythm through color. Top: *Untitled*, oil on board, by Florence Pierce, 1952. Her use of color and form created a sense of motion within the painting. Opposite bottom: *Awakening (Memory of Father)*, oil on canvas, by Agnes Pelton, 1943. Opposite top: *Oil #2* by Raymond Jonson, 1942.**

The TPG's yearning for a purity of purpose and style yielded a stunning array of paintings, apolitical in content but responsive to the political zeitgeist of the time.

Fiesta group exhibition, along with Jonson. Having moved to the Palm Springs area, she embarked on a study of Agni yoga, an offshoot of Theosophy promoted by Roerich. By this time she was carrying on a regular correspondence with Jonson, who had been thrilled to include her work in the group show. Although she embraced abstraction, she continued to work in a representational style as well, mounting 14 solo exhibitions and participating in 20 group exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad from 1911 to 1936. Pelton remained in California despite her membership in the TPG, but her work was eminently compatible, both stylistically and philosophically, with that of the other members.

Pelton had been introduced to the TPG by Rudhyar, a close friend. While living in Taos and Santa Fe, Rudhyar also met Jonson and the two hit it off. Rudhyar was a key participant in the founding of the TPG and one of the vice presidents of TPG's nonprofit promotional arm, the American Foundation for Transcendental Painting, although he wasn't a member of the painters' group. He wrote articles and gave lectures to bolster the group's goal of introducing the concept of abstract art to a larger public, and he also took up painting himself, putting the TPG principles to work in paintings that were based on their nonobjective and spiritual goals.

The only native New Mexican in the group was William Lumpkins, also a member of the Rio Grande Painters group. Lumpkins achieved renown both as an artist and an architect, pioneering solar adobe architecture and cofounding the Santa Fe Art Institute. Born and raised on a ranch in Clayton, he was somewhat incongruously introduced to Zen Buddhism as a boy by one of the ranch's tenants, who had traveled extensively in Asia. Lumpkins began studying architecture at the University of New Mexico, but Zen philosophy remained a strong influence.

His first foray into abstract painting came in 1930, when his new friend Stuart Walker taught him the concept of using color as a means of expressing emotions. Walker had transitioned from representational paintings of Southwestern subjects to abstracted landscape studies based on color, rhythm, and design, developing a style that combined geometric figures with organic ones. Walker would also join the TPG, as would Lumpkins's friend Robert Gribbroek, who had studied with Bisttram at the Taos School of Art; it was Gribbroek who first introduced Lumpkins to Bisttram. Lumpkins met Jonson in Santa Fe when his daily walk to work at the Works Progress Administration, where he served as an architect, took him past Jonson's home, and the two struck up a friendship.

Despite his achievements as an architect, Lumpkins also painted continually, his abstracted watercolors garnering him increasing acclaim over the years. In a review of his 1987 retrospective exhibition published in *Artspace*, his naturalness and spontaneity were lauded:

"The quiet greatness of his work seems to have come to him simply as a part of his metabolism. It was this quality of ease and spontaneity which also set him apart from the other members of the [TPG] . . . Perhaps, as much as anything, it is Lumpkins's study of Zen which links him to . . . expressionist attitudes toward spontaneity."

In addition to Lumpkins's friend Gribbroek, whose geometrical forms and intense color play distinguished his nonobjective work, the Taos School of Art supplied other TPG members as well. Prominent among these was Florence Miller Pierce, at 19 the youngest member of the group. A native of Washington, D.C., Miller Pierce studied art at the Studio School of the Phillips Memorial Art Gallery (now called the Phillips Collection), where she learned of Bisttram's Taos School of Art. She spent the summer there in 1936, then returned to Washington to study at the Corcoran School of Art. There she met artist Auriel Bessemer, a devotee of Theosophy who introduced her to that discipline's principles. She returned to Taos and enrolled in Bisttram's school, where she met and married fellow student Horace Towner Pierce. Miller Pierce described her art from that time as an attempt "to delve beyond the bonds of matter."

Florence and H.T. Pierce left New Mexico in 1940, relocating first to New York and later to Los Angeles, but they maintained their membership in the TPG. Miller Pierce's work evolved from drawings to abstract paintings based on floral and shell-like shapes suspended in space, using two or three contrasting colors that emphasized the relationships within the space. In later years, after moving back to New Mexico, she honed a technique using poured resin after a serendipitous accident;

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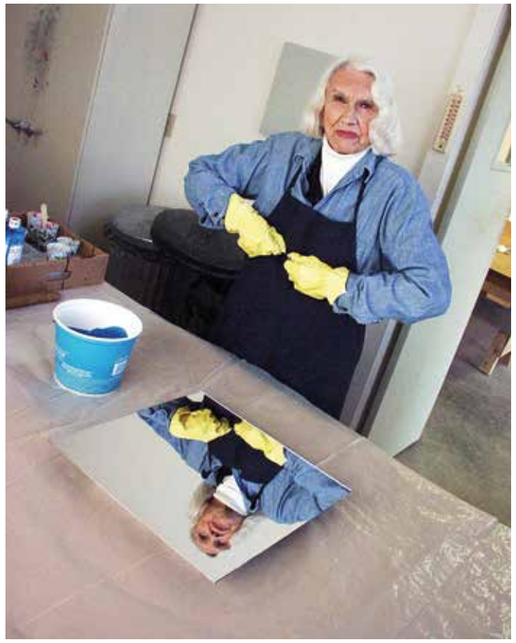
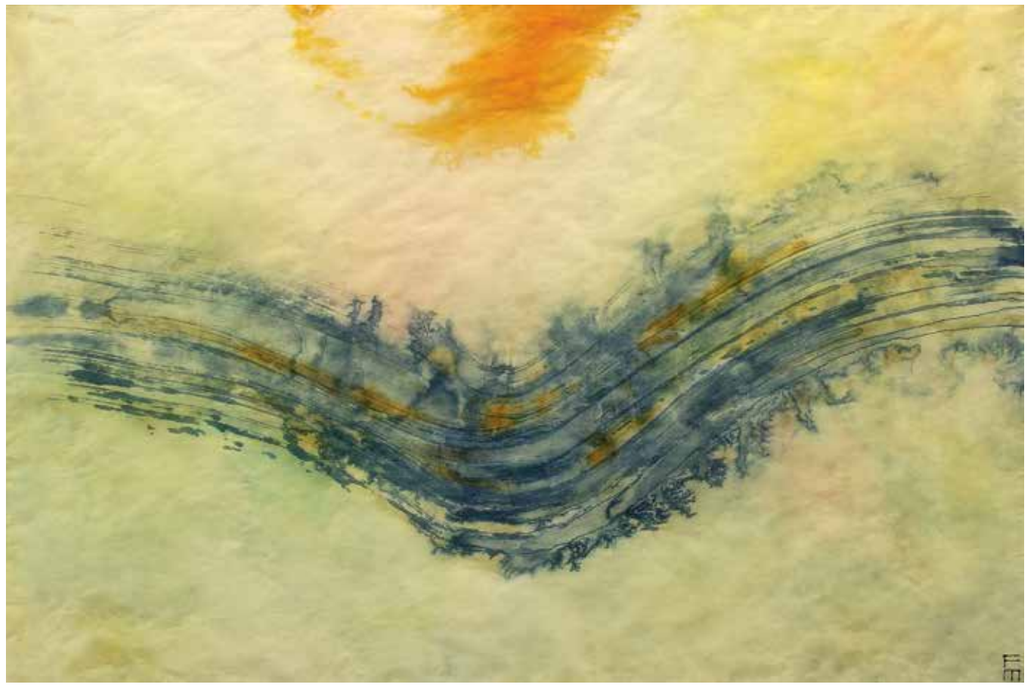
Dynamic Equilibrium **by Dane Rudhyar, from his *Archetype* series, 1947–48. Rudhyar was instrumental in the founding of the TPG and helped write its manifesto.**





Untitled by Florence Pierce, sumi ink. Top left: *Untitled* by Emil Bisttram. Top right: Florence Pierce at work in her studio in the 1990s.
Opposite: In *Untitled* by Ed Garman, 1942, geometric shapes are arranged to create a thought-provoking internal dynamic.

she spilled some resin onto a sheet of aluminum and was transfixed by the resin's translucent quality. She continued using this technique for the rest of her life, demonstrating the depth and complexity of Minimalism in her luminous creations.

Colorado-born H.T. Pierce, for his part, achieved recognition for the 30 airbrushed watercolor studies he created for an animated film, *Spiral Symphony*, in 1939. Exhibited in 1940 at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Lumpkins called the works "a real breakthrough," and composer Leopold Stokowski created a score to accompany them. They brought the project to Disney Studios, which used several of the techniques in its film *Fantasia*.

The last member to join the TPG was Ed Garman, who grew up in the coal country of eastern Pennsylvania. After graduating from high school in 1933, he moved west to escape the fetid air and enrolled at the University of New Mexico, where he was deeply affected by the area's open spaces and magical light. Like Jonson, he studied theater design, developing an abstract style that used light and space to bring emphasis to the actors' movements. He employed this same technique in his landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, finding new expression in abstraction. After reading Kandinsky's book, he was further inspired, writing: "I realized how these theories heightened the direction I had chosen to investigate and develop toward the modern ideal in painting."

The TPG was successful in introducing people to abstraction and nonobjectivism, mounting shows at the 1939 New York World's Fair and the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco, and in 1940 at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later called the Guggenheim). But that momentum was interrupted by America's entry into World War II in 1941, and the group officially

disbanded in 1945 as the members dispersed. Yet despite the alliance's small size, geographic isolation, and short lifespan, all the artists except for Walker, who died in 1940, went on to enjoy long and prolific careers while maintaining the philosophical underpinnings that had brought them together in the first place. The obscurity of the New Mexico art scene at the time notwithstanding, these were accomplished, well-respected artists whose talents brought them national and worldwide acclaim and helped to make abstract art more accessible to the masses.

The TPG's yearning for a purity of purpose and style yielded a stunning array of paintings, apolitical in content but responsive to the political zeitgeist of the time, with an energetic essence that did indeed transcend the stultifying conformity of the era and which remains relevant today. Although the group rarely painted together, the camaraderie born of shared philosophy as well as the excitement of living on what was still the frontier bound them to one another in profound ways. The most important of these was their spiritual affinity and their belief that art could be a conduit to the divine, that the very act of creating it releases the power of the spirit and can change the world. By exploring that power through line, form, color, and light, they sought to transform the language of art and thereby restore the spiritual equilibrium that would heal society's strife. In a world apparently gone mad, they strove to transcend the material realm, connecting with the oneness of spirit that underlay their philosophical approach to painting. Then, as now, divine truth as experienced through art functioned as a transformative force; the work of the Transcendental Painting Group offers us a pathway to understanding the universal force that unites us all. ❁