Frank Bowling
b. 1936; Bartica, Guyana

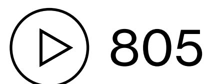
Dan Johnson's Surprise, 1969
Acrylic on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 70.14

In *Dan Johnson's Surprise*, three images of South America appear in a painterly wash that suggests an expanse of ocean. Frank Bowling, who was born in the then British colony of Guyana, made a series of paintings between 1967 and 1971 that combine abstraction with continental shapes in order to explore histories of colonization and the African diaspora. Working without a brush, he sprayed paint onto thinly paint-soaked canvases. He then used stencils to create the outlines of continents and countries that had been brutally and dramatically altered by the slave trade. Hard lines of blunt color draw attention to the periphery.

Dan Johnson's Surprise was included in the 1969 Whitney Annual—the precursor to the Biennial—shortly after Bowling moved to New York in 1966.

Discover the artist's ideas about maps.


805

Marcia Hafif
b. 1929; Pomona, CA
d. 2018; Laguna Beach, CA

72., March 1965, 1965
Acrylic on canvas

Promised gift of Beth Rudin DeWoody P.2018.1

Marcia Hafif made this painting in Italy, where she lived for nearly eight years in the 1960s between college and graduate school. Her works from this period feature certain abstract forms that allude to landscapes, music, or the body. For example, she characterized a hill-like curve—which here appears twice and inverted—as "a compact shape, archetypal, referring to the cave, the house, the home, safety, endurance, intensity." Hafif embraced an open-ended approach to abstraction that was grounded in observing the world, and the nature of painting itself.

Ellsworth Kelly
b. 1923; Newburgh, NY
d. 2015; Spencertown, NY

Blue Green Red, 1964
Oil on linen

Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum
of American Art 66.80

Ellsworth Kelly's abstract paintings are rooted in the world and lived experience. In *Blue Green Red*, he drew on the main colors used to mix the projected light of color television, which was a relatively recent invention at the time the work was made. Although direct in the symmetry of its forms, the painting's intense colors prevent the image from being easily apprehended. Instead of rehashing the representations seen on television, Kelly responded to the way technology changes how we see—and to the act of perception itself.

Explore this painting with art historian Darby English.

Morris Louis
b. 1912; Baltimore, MD
d. 1962; Washington, DC

Gamma Delta, 1959–60
Magna on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Glen Alden Foundation and the McCrory Foundation, Inc. 69.57

In Morris Louis's *Gamma Delta* brightly colored, poured ribbons of paint uncoil to the bottom edge of the canvas, leaving a void in the center. To make the work, Louis stained the canvas by diluting and pouring synthetic paints onto its surface, allowing the colors to spread and bleed. Critic and friend Clement Greenberg observed that color in Louis's paintings almost seemed "disembodied." Louis explored the technique for nine years, in response to the paintings of Jackson Pollock and especially to those of Helen Frankenthaler, whose studio Louis visited in 1953.

Alvin Loving
b. 1935; Detroit, MI
d. 2005; New York, NY

Septehedron 34, 1970
Acrylic on shaped canvas

Gift of William Zierler, Inc., in honor of John I. H. Baur 74.65

Alvin Loving once described geometric shape as "a sort of mundane form that could be very, very dull unless a great deal was done with it." For him, however, geometry ultimately became an arena in which to develop a dramatic color sensibility. Juxtaposing neon-bright pigments, he created the illusion that the painting's forms recede or advance relative to one another. At the same time, his use of geometric forms emphasized the flat surface of the canvas, from which a tension emerges between real and imagined space.

In 1969, Loving became the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

Learn about the use of geometry in this work.

801

Kenneth Noland
b. 1924; Asheville, NC
d. 2010; Port Clyde, ME

New Day, 1967
Acrylic on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 68.18

Describing the series of stripe paintings that includes *New Day*, Kenneth Noland stated: “The thing is to get that color down on the thinnest conceivable surface, a surface sliced into the air as if by a razor. It’s all color and surface, that’s all.” Applying paint with rollers and sponges along with traditional brushes, he created the effect of continuous lines of color. He left the canvas raw, allowing the stripes to sink slightly into its weave. As a result, the painting’s support and the paint itself almost seem indistinguishable—but their subtle differences can make the work appear to tremble and shimmer.

Miriam Schapiro
b. 1923; Toronto, Canada
d. 2015; Hampton Bays, NY

Jigsaw, 1969
Acrylic on canvas

Purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Harry Kahn 69.46

In paintings like *Jigsaw*, Miriam Schapiro explored how geometric abstraction could serve both formal and feminist concerns. Here, she experimented with the spatial effects of color, using hues in this painting that she described as "blinding and high keyed, enough so as to optically distort the form." Although she would not become explicitly associated with feminism until after 1971, when she advanced the Feminist Art Program with Judy Chicago at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), such early paintings contain oblique references to the body and gender identity. At this time, she often adopted geometries that resembled apertures and passageways evocative of the female body. If a human figure is implied in this painting, however, it is hard to read as male or female—a rebuke of the idea that gender can be simply defined and categorized.

Frank Stella
b. 1936; Malden, MA

Gran Cairo, 1962
Enamel on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 63.34

Frank Stella's *Gran Cairo* simultaneously puts forward two painterly values that are sometimes seen as competing with each other: rationality and seductive beauty. He based his symmetrical, linear compositions on the dimensions of his canvases, thereby emphasizing the structure of the paintings. "What you see," Stella once famously remarked, "is what you see." His use of color in *Gran Cairo*—with its predetermined palette derived from commercial paints and its strict arrangement of concentric squares—reinforces this impersonal sensibility. Yet it also reflects Stella's belief, which ran counter to that of Minimalist contemporaries such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, that beauty, visual energy, and pleasure should be fair game for abstract art.

Bob Thompson
b. 1937; Louisville, KY
d. 1966; Rome, Italy

Triumph of Bacchus, 1964
Oil on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee and
The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund 98.19

In *Triumph of Bacchus*, Bob Thompson borrowed compositional elements from Renaissance depictions of the Roman god of wine. He rejected descriptive clarity, however, substituting a vividly hued arrangement in which the figures' identities are left open-ended. In reimagining these historical sources, Thompson painted in a manner akin to jazz musicians' innovations, where improvisation was based on a thorough understanding of preexisting styles. Saxophonist Steve Lacy, a friend of Thompson's, referred to the artist as "jazz himself," explaining that "the way he painted was like jazz—taking liberties with colors."

Hear poet Stanley Crouch on this painting.

802

Emma Amos
b. 1938; Atlanta, GA

Baby, 1966
Oil on canvas

Purchased jointly by the Whitney Museum of American Art, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee; and the Studio Museum in Harlem, museum purchase with funds provided by Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee 2019.1a–b

In the early 1960s, Emma Amos began to create imagery that shifted fluidly between abstraction and representation. She was the youngest and only female member of Spiral—a New York–based collective founded by Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff in 1963 to consider art's relationship to civil rights. Amos resisted the idea of a singular Black aesthetic, which put her at odds with artists who insisted on direct, often figurative, depictions to address racial politics. As she later stated: "Every time I think about color it's a political statement."

Kay WalkingStick
b. 1935; Syracuse, NY

April Contemplating May, 1972
Acrylic on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 2018.138

At the center of *April Contemplating May* is a silhouette, a simplified self-portrait of the artist that emerges from the color blocking and framing her. Inspired by the sight of her shadow on the beach, Kay WalkingStick found a form that she felt could hold her multiple identities, as an artist, a woman, a mother, and an Indigenous person of Cherokee ancestry. Above her, there is a form that resembles a window; it is actually a painted reproduction of her work *Pieces of Sky* (1970), which she made in response to reports of pollution pouring into the air from a power station in Queens.

Hear how the artist describes this painting.

804

Helen Frankenthaler
b. 1928; New York, NY
d. 2011; Darien, CT

Orange Mood, 1966
Acrylic on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Elizabeth G. Weymouth 77.97

In *Orange Mood*, Helen Frankenthaler thinned acrylic paint to the consistency of watercolor in order to create large, curving expanses of color through which the weave of the canvas remains visible. Like Jackson Pollock, she placed her canvas directly on the floor and poured paint from above, largely without the aid of a brush. Frankenthaler used color as her painterly language, but she never entirely abandoned representation. Although the references can be subtle, her paintings consistently evoke nature. The undulating forms in *Orange Mood* relate to a simplified landscape, with zones of color recalling different emotional states. Hue and shape convey place and feeling. "I think of my pictures as explosive landscapes, worlds and distances, held on a flat surface," Frankenthaler once stated.

Alex Katz
b. 1927; Brooklyn, NY

Edwin, Blue Series, 1965
Oil and acrylic on composition board

Gift of the artist 98.45.1

For more than sixty years, Alex Katz has created paintings distinguished by their bold colors, sharp outlines, and subjects taken from his daily life. By simplifying facial features and using flat, unmixed colors in works such as *Edwin, Blue Series*, Katz emphasizes the form of the painting above its content. Here he has cropped the left side of the body, asserting the figure as a subject of abstraction. The painting depicts Edwin Denby, a modernist poet and dance critic as well as a close friend of artists, including Katz, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and Franz Kline. Katz credits Denby for his appreciation of abstraction. Refusing to reveal his subjects' personalities or interior life, Katz's paintings focus instead on technique and visual invention.

Josef Albers
b. 1888; Bottrop, Germany
d. 1976; New Haven, CT

Homage to the Square: "Wait," 1967
Oil on composition board

Bequest of Richard S. Zeisler 2007.81

This painting comes from Homage to the Square, a series Josef Albers developed from 1950 to 1976 that eventually encompassed more than one thousand separate artworks. Albers approached each of the Homages with meticulous consistency. He would select one of four set layouts, all of which were symmetrical and oriented toward the bottom edge. He then applied each color, in this work a range of oranges and reds, from the center out, using a knife to spread paint straight from the tube. Albers's technique allowed him to use the same form to create vastly different experiences, and to explore the distinction between "physical fact and psychic effect." Across the series, color combinations affect not only how we see individual hues but also how we perceive space and form, with some squares seeming to leap forward while others recede.

Richard Anuszkiewicz
b. 1930; Erie, PA

The Fourth of the Three, 1963
Acrylic on composition board

Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 64.4

Richard Anuszkiewicz, who studied with Josef Albers at Yale University from 1953 to 1955, composed this painting with only three colors. But the visual impact—as the title implies—opens beyond that simple arithmetic. Although working with relatively straightforward combinations of line and color, he created complex visual effects, including optical illusions, movement, and the impression of colors mixing. Here, a simple shift in a line's width impacts the intensity of color and how depth and surface are read. Marcia Tucker, a curator who included Anuszkiewicz in her exhibition *The Structure of Color* at the Whitney in 1971, pointed out in the catalogue that the artist had once "remarked that one 'test' of a color painting might be whether or not the structure of the work is lost entirely in black and white."

Sam Gilliam
b. 1933; Tupelo, MS

Bow Form Construction, 1968
Acrylic and enamel on draped canvas

Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Howard W. Lipman Foundation, and gift of the Ford Foundation Purchase Program and an anonymous donor, by exchange 2001.343

Beginning in the early 1960s, Sam Gilliam chose to pour paint directly onto canvas. In 1968, with works like *Bow Form Construction*, Gilliam's experiments with staining and folding canvas evolved into a series of draped paintings.

At the time, members of the Black Arts Movement were calling for African American artists to work in a figurative mode. They argued that Black artists should create meaningful and powerful depictions of people who historically had been denied them. In response, Gilliam said, "Figurative art doesn't represent Blackness any more than a non-narrative media oriented kind of painting, like what I do." His adoption of abstraction was less a rejection of the Black Arts Movement, though, than an avowal that other forms of making were equally relevant.

Artist Rashid Johnson explores Gilliam's radical gesture.

Robert Reed
b. 1938; Charlottesville, VA
d. 2014; New Haven, CT

Plum Nellie, Sea Stone, 1972
Acrylic and graphite pencil on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Hament Corporation 73.26

Robert Reed considered this painting a landscape. In it, a clearly defined rectangle of exposed canvas draws the viewer's eye to the middle of the painting. Bold purple strokes of paint jostle at the rectangle's sides. The work is part of Reed's Plum Nellie series, which was exhibited in his solo show at the Whitney in 1973. In addition to referencing its color palette, the title recalls the Southern expression "plum nelly." Reed remembered the phrase to mean "damn near," suggesting that his relationship to abstraction is as much about the process of getting there as it is about arriving at a destination.

Carmen Herrera
b. 1915; Havana, Cuba

Blanco y Verde, 1959
Acrylic on canvas

Purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 2014.63

Blanco y Verde is part of a series of compositions in white and green that Carmen Herrera made from 1959 to 1971. The broad expanses of white in these paintings seem to extend to the surrounding walls; the green triangles thus appear to be cuts into space. In diptychs such as this one, the seam between the canvases presents another division. Here the union of forms and surfaces conveys a structural tension that pushes beyond Herrera's investigation of line and color to probe the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional space.