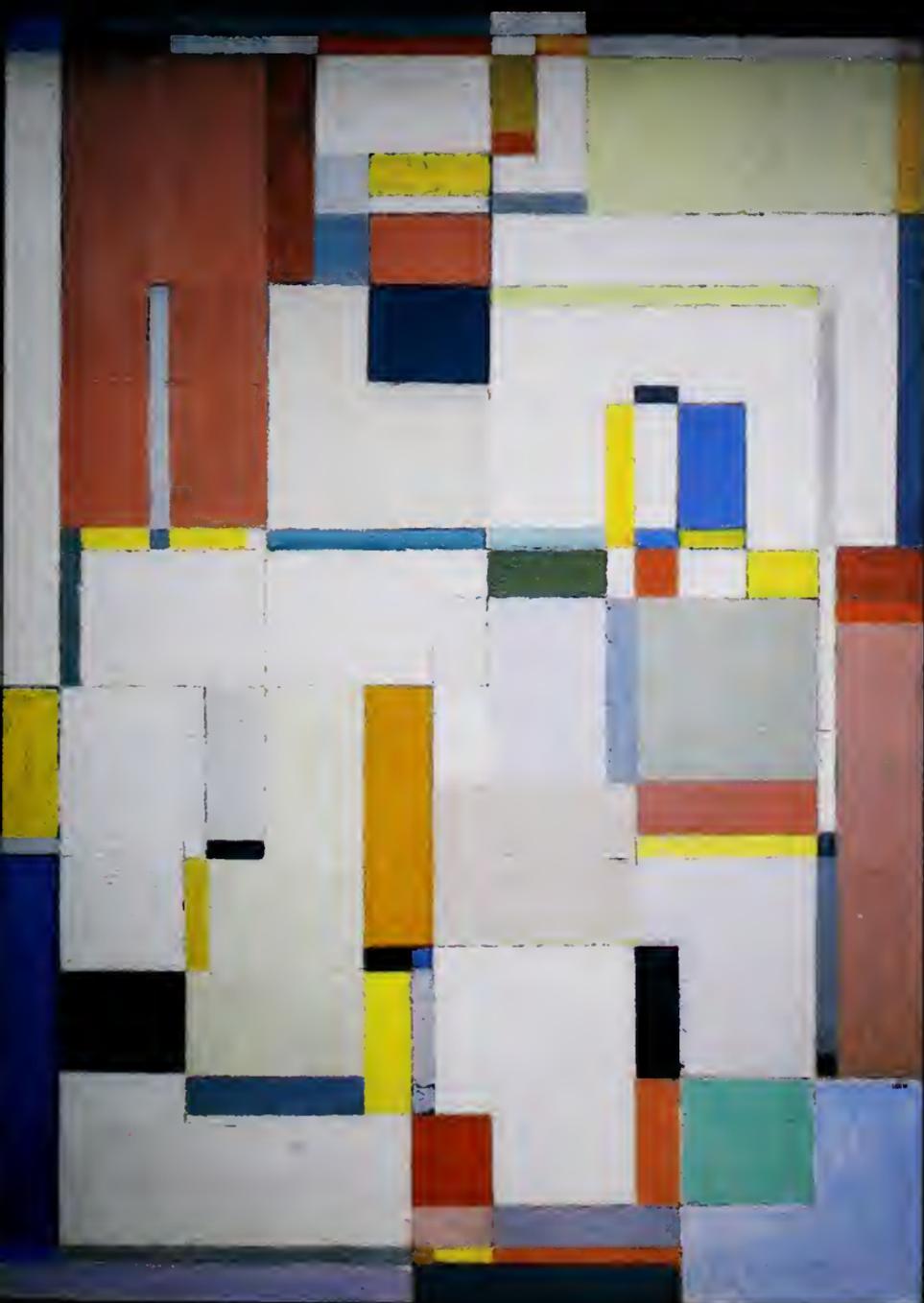


**Whitney Museum
of American Art**

**Downtown at
Federal Reserve Plaza**

**Between Mondrian
and Minimalism:
Neo-Plasticism in America**



Between Mondrian and Minimalism: Neo-Plasticism in America

December 6, 1991–
February 14, 1992

In the initial issue of the Dutch art journal *De Stijl* (1917), Piet Mondrian published the first of a series of essays describing his abstract, reductive concept of painting. The term he used was “de Nieuwe Beelding”—the new form or shape. Three years later, while in Paris, Mondrian expanded these essays into a book entitled *Le Néo-Plasticisme*, and this is the term that today designates one of the groundbreaking movements in the history of twentieth-century abstraction. The classic Mondrian Neo-Plastic compositions included only horizontal and vertical lines that delineated simple rectilinear shapes. Colors were limited to the three primaries — red, blue, and yellow — along with the “non-colors” black, white, and gray. One of the fundamental aims of Mondrian’s Neo-Plasticism was the production of a purely abstract art, that is, an art not derived from any source in nature or the visible, material world and, therefore, utterly devoid of representational allusions or reference to specific objects.

In America during the 1930s, Neo-Plasticism represented one option within a wide variety of modernist schools whose advocates carried on often heated debates about the definition and meanings of abstraction. Among American artists interested in European modernism, the rectilinear forms of Neo-Plasticism remained the most valid and convincing demonstration of an ever elusive pure abstraction — what Charles Shaw referred to as the “intrinsically plastic.” The achievement and intrinsic value of PURE FORM — as capitalized by I. Rice Pereira — were contentious issues among American abstractionists. Unlike other modernist styles, which accepted a broad range of forms, “Neoplasticism,” in Ilya Bolotowsky’s adamant definition, “totally avoids the appearance of figurative images, whether straight or ambivalent.” Similarly, Jean Xceron spoke of the Neo-Plasticist assertion of going “so far as to dispense with nature and life altogether.” For American artists who adopted the limited compositional vocabulary of Neo-Plasticism, any curvilinear forms, such as those common to Surrealist

creations, inevitably introduced figurative allusions to natural organisms. However, it was the Suprematist paintings of Kasimir Malevich, the later geometric compositions of Wassily Kandinsky, as well as the Constructivist works of the brothers Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner that presented the greatest challenges to Neo-Plasticism. Although these Russian modernist movements produced abstract art — art that made no reference to existing objects and invented rather than depicted forms — their configurations of isolated shapes against a neutral background could be perceived as generic objects floating freely in an anonymous space. “Suprematist paintings,” Ilya Bolotowsky wrote, “remind one of bird’s eye views of tremendous snowy landscapes with houses. This is an aspect that Neoplasticism avoids.”

The abutting lines and rectangles characteristic of Neo-Plasticism formed a composition evenly distributed over the entire picture surface. It was convincingly argued that, with such a design, any area within a painting could be read interchangeably as either object or space. This visual phenomenon was central to Fritz Glarner: “When the form area and the space area are of the same structure, a new aspect arises in which pure means can reveal their intrinsic expression....It is my belief that the truth will manifest itself more clearly through this new condition.” This refusal to define a shape as matter or void made the relative spatial relationships between forms — whether one shape lay in front of, behind, or alongside another — to some extent ambiguous. This is precisely the effect that Alice Trumbull Mason extolled: “I intend displacement and not the APPEARANCE of one color lying in back or in front of another. This is my intention because I am convinced that a work of Twentieth Century art should no longer imitate nature.”

Through such formal analyses, artists who advocated a Neo-Plastic style were able to claim a greater degree of abstraction than could be found in other modernist pictorial systems. Form, line, and color were not only liberated from material reality, but also sought to represent a new visual realm, a realm that did not exist outside the pictorial world. Surpassing the experiential distinction between space and form constituted, in Charmion von Wiegand’s words, nothing less than a “new vision” of “pure plastic art, abstract and non-objective.” What Mondrian painted “was not the creation of another reality but of another vision — the true vision — of reality.” With a comparable ecstatic abandon, Charles Biederman characterized Neo-Plastic form as “a new art, an art of these times and not of ANY other.”

Some American practitioners of Neo-Plasticism attempted to translate their reductive vocabulary into three dimensions, but they inevitably encountered problems with Neo-Plasticism’s willed ambiguity of forms and space. Nor could sculpture, by definition an object, accommodate Neo-Plasticist claims to a higher level abstraction through the eradication of the object itself. These perceptual and theoretical issues were

vigorously examined and rigorously disputed. Some artists sought to retain a non-objective pictorialism within sculpture by constructing relatively solid, painted columnar forms. From any particular vantage point, a different two-dimensionally conceived Neo-Plastic composition could be perceived. Sidney Gordin's three-dimensional exploration of "form and color relationships in space" translated Neo-Plasticism's two-dimensional obliteration of form-space distinctions into sculpture in a different way. In order to underplay the natural physicality of the object, he created sharply rectilinear works that clearly define the voids between sculptural elements, making space as palpable as material form.

Few if any artists active in America throughout the 1930s and subsequent decades exclusively or consistently adhered to rectilinear abstraction, much less to the austerity of a staunch Neo-Plastic style. As advocates of modernist abstraction in general, almost all the artists represented in this exhibition experimented with a wide range of European modernist styles — including Cubism, Futurism, Purism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Bauhaus design, Surrealism, and even Expressionism — often creating hybrids of the various movements. In the careers of some American Neo-Plasticists, the influence of other modernist movements is often limited to an early, experimental period during the 1930s, before Neo-Plastic issues became their primary concern. Other artists, however, worked in a variety of modernist styles throughout most of their careers. Still others eventually abandoned rectilinear abstraction for more Surrealist or Expressionist directions during the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, the practitioners of a Neo-Plastic style in America never formed an exclusive group or distinct school separate from the larger body of American abstract artists of the period.

This lack of definition and cohesion makes it difficult to isolate strict Neo-Plasticism among the various abstract and rectilinear styles which emerged in America during the 1930s. What can be asserted is that a fairly large and definable group of works was heavily inspired by, greatly indebted to, or even somewhat derivative of the art of Piet Mondrian and the Neo-Plastic style he first formulated. There is considerable testimony by American artists, such as Leon Polk Smith and Charmion von Wiegand, concerning their first exposure to the paintings of Mondrian. One of the earliest opportunities for Americans to view the work of Mondrian and other European De Stijl artists came in 1920 with the formation of the Société Anonyme, an exhibition association organized by Katherine Dreier to promote contemporary art in America, followed by the opening of A.E. Gallatin's Gallery (later Museum) of Living Art on Washington Square in New York in 1927. Twelve years later, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Painting (now The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) was founded.

In 1940, Mondrian himself immigrated to New York, where he lived until his death in 1944. Certainly his presence in America made his works more accessible — he had one-artist exhibitions in New York at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery in 1942 and 1943. However, the level of personal contact between Mondrian and American Neo-Plasticists varied widely. While most artists had only brief, largely public meetings with Mondrian, Harry Holtzman, who had made a virtual pilgrimage to Paris in 1934 for the express purpose of meeting Mondrian, was a close friend. Charmion von Wiegand was a devoted disciple of Mondrian's from the moment of their first meeting in New York and translated some of his essays into English. However, the paintings Mondrian executed in New York during the 1940s represented a significant departure from his early Neo-Plastic compositions in their more highly syncopated and densely delineated design. Some American adherents of Neo-Plasticism found these late works, with titles such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943–44), reflective of jazz rhythms and the cacophonous street patterns of New York. These allusions seemed to negate the insistent non-objectivity and purity of Mondrian's earlier abstraction. Others, however, interpreted such works as a license to freely experiment with the very foundations of Neo-Plastic composition.

Mondrian's original formulation of Neo-Plasticism was relatively strict and therefore exclusionary. The question arises, then, as to how far one can deviate from its tenets and continue to be considered a Neo-Plasticist. As practiced by the European group named after the journal *De Stijl*, founded to disseminate knowledge and understanding of the new art, Neo-Plasticism exhibited a variety of interpretations — and American advocates of the movement followed suit. Describing with confidence "my own version of *Neoplasticism*," Ilya Bolotowsky claimed that "*Neoplasticism* is still a living style. It is evolving but it is still *Neoplasticism*." Taken as a whole, no single defining characteristic of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic style — not the exclusivity of the horizontal and vertical, or the concomitant limitation to the right angle, or the chromatic restrictions to the primary colors and the non-colors — was left intact by American practitioners of Neo-Plasticism.

While maintaining recognizable formal links to Mondrian's art, some Americans even rejected the theoretical motivations that had prompted the reductive vocabulary of Neo-Plastic form. Charles Biederman, for example, criticized Mondrian's insistence on a pure abstraction "divorced from actual experience of nature." However, the purpose and meaning of Biederman's art is largely determined by the degree to which he took issue with the various principles of Neo-Plasticism. It is precisely this intimate and consistent involvement that defines him, as well as others, as practitioners of a Neo-Plastic aesthetic in America.

From numerous statements and writings of the artists themselves, it is evident that a concern with composition was central to American

Neo-Plastic aesthetic and theoretical discourse. Fritz Glarner assigned such titles as *Relational Painting* to his works, emphasizing the importance of the arrangement of forms. A call for rhythmic organization, the search for structural balance, the equalization of opposing forces, and the creation of an overall harmony among dynamic parts were inherent to the pronouncements of many artists. Charles Shaw avowed that "honest painting...embraces certain patent fundamentals. One seeks, for example, rhythm, composition, spatial organization, design, progression of color, and many, many other qualities in any aesthetic work." Characterizing her work as an "Architectural Abstract Art," Alice Trumbull Mason also expressed her interest in "making color, density, dark and light, rhythm and balance work together without depending on references and associations." Such convictions were repeated by Ilya Bolotowsky, who sought to "achieve unequaled tension, equilibrium, and harmony" in his painting. The establishment of an overall unity within the compositional structure of a canvas was generally the most insistent aesthetic mandate among American Neo-Plasticists. Harry Holtzman, for example, found value in "a unified or equilibrated presentation of spatial relationships," while Albert Swinden was moved by "the relationships between the particular forms and their significance as a unity." I. Rice Pereira perceived balanced, intersecting forms in her work as emblematic of the "relationship between the horizontal world of the senses and the vertical symbolic world of thought"; at this intersection, "a unity occurs."

Compositional unity and balance came to be broadly aligned by many American Neo-Plasticists with an idealistic sense of harmony in the world. Moreover, artists saw the annihilation of specific reference as a means to universal form. In language bordering on the reverential, I. Rice Pereira declared that "everything moves within a cosmic order," for which reason she wanted her painting to express the "Ideal or Absolute" and "a manifold of universal relations." Ilya Bolotowsky strove "to achieve the universal," an elusive goal which he proceeded to describe as "a Platonic idea or archetype of an ideal, harmonious relationship." In a similar vein, Harry Holtzman advocated the "comprehension of the object's significance and function as a tangible utility of universal meaning."

Although the expression of social and political ideals was certainly not limited to the Neo-Plasticists, it was they who consciously sought to conceptualize the relationship between a formal harmony in painting and a generally progressive worldview that promoted internationalism, condemned fascism, and embraced a liberal communality. Charmion von Wiegand championed the international: "abstract art formulated a new plastic language in which local, particular and national differences were gradually absorbed into a universal expression." When Ilya Bolotowsky recalled that he "came to prefer a search for an ideal harmony and order which is still a free order, not militaristic, not

symmetrical, not goose-stepping, not academic," he was eloquently opposing his art to some of the most horrific political realities of the twentieth century.

During the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, some saw the realization of such collective ideals in the social and economic revitalization programs of the New Deal. Providing art commissions and thereby a livelihood for a good number of American abstractionists, programs such as the Works Project Administration — particularly the mural project administered by Burgoyne Diller — required the collaborative efforts of teams of artists. Other organizations, such as the American Abstract Artists and the Federation of American Artists, revealed, in Diller's words, a "camaraderie, or more important still, a kind of interaction between artists and artists groups...that had not been witnessed before."

The promotion of common political, occupational, and economic concerns was never exclusively associated with Neo-Plasticism. However, many Neo-Plasticists were highly visible activists in the founding and leadership of these programs and organizations. It is within this context of a perceived continuum between artistic forms and political ideals that Jean Xceron insisted that art "is something more than the mere discussion of surfaces, lines and planes." Suggesting that purely abstract forms can have a connection to non-formal issues, he implies an agenda for social change. Burgoyne Diller succinctly claimed that "the painter felt he had a more important, more basic social and cultural relationship." He recognized that "you can't disassociate... art as something separate from life and living and responsibility, after all, what is art? Something that exists in you, a sense of awareness...."

It is somewhat ironic that Neo-Plasticism — the modernist style motivated by the desire to be utterly non-representational — should have acquired a broad social and political perspective. By mid-century, however, Neo-Plastic philosophy and art had come to be seen as too naively utopian, too stridently moralistic, too ineffectively idealistic. Today, a pursuit of the universal is discredited as another way of repressing the indigenous and ethnic, of rejecting difference and diversity.

But in the early 1960s, American geometric abstraction — Neo-Plasticism included — was given a new, if somewhat contrary, life in the form of Minimalism. Rejecting the pretension of embodying universals and absolutes, Minimalists dismissed the concept of relational painting or the necessity of composing one section of a work in a balanced relation to another. They adopted the regularity of the grid, systematically repeated identical forms, and mechanically executed objects in order to create an art that frankly stood for nothing other than

itself. It is again ironic that some among the hard-edge painters of the later Postminimalist generation used cursory rectilinear forms precisely for their capacity to make symbolic allusions and specific references. Today's attempts to investigate the potential meanings and functions of abstraction nevertheless continue to be informed and affected, often in an adversarial sense, by American Neo-Plasticism. Reinterpretations and reincorporations of its rectilinear, reductive forms remain a vital and ongoing tradition in contemporary art.

Karl Emil Willers

Works in the Exhibition

All works are from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth. Sight refers to measurements taken within the frame or mat opening.

Charles Biederman (b. 1906)

New York February 1936, 1936

Gouache on composition board, 29 15/16 x 21 3/16

Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 85.57

Study for Sculpture, New York, 1937

Color lithograph: sheet, 24 7/8 x 19; image, 14 5/8 x 11

Purchase, with funds from the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States Purchase Fund 84.14

Study for Sculpture, New York, 1937

Color lithograph: sheet, 22 7/8 x 15 7/8; image, 14 3/4 x 10 7/8

Purchase, with funds from the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States Purchase Fund 84.15

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981)

Study for Mural, Williamsburg Housing Project, New York, c. 1936

Gouache and ink on board, 16 1/4 x 29 1/2

50th Anniversary Gift of the Edward R. Downe, Jr., Purchase Fund, Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller, and the National Endowment for the Arts 80.4

Large Vertical 51/59, 1951–59

Oil on canvas, 95 1/4 x 40 1/2

Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. N.E. Waldman 59.48

Blue Rectangles, 1953

Oil on canvas, 34 x 42

Purchase 56.1

Black Red Diamond II, 1967

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 52 x 52

Purchase, with funds from Philip Morris Incorporated 68.26

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

First Theme, 1933–34

Oil on canvas, 30 1/16 x 30 1/16

Purchase, with funds from Emily Fisher Landau 85.44

Second Theme, 1938

Graphite and crayon on paper, 12 1/2 x 12 3/4

Purchase, with funds from The List Purchase Fund 79.5

Untitled, 1944

Collage on board, 15 x 15

Purchase, with funds from the Mr. and Mrs. M. Anthony Fisher

Purchase Fund, Martin and Agneta Gruss, and the Felicia Meyer Marsh

Purchase Fund 82.21

Third Theme, 1946–48

Oil on canvas, 42 x 42

Gift of May Walter 58.58

Group 2, #1, 1961

Collage of graphite, paper, and crayon on paper, 7 5/8 x 6 1/2 (sight)

Gift of Judith Rothschild and the Herbert and Nannette Rothschild

Fund, Inc. 76.2

First Theme: Number 10, 1963

Oil on canvas, 72 x 72

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum

of American Art 64.26

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)

Relational Painting, 1949–51

Oil on canvas, 65 x 52

Purchase 52.3

Untitled, 1959

Lithograph: sheet and image, 20 x 26

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph J. Singer 73.11

Tondo No. 54, 1960

Oil on masonite, 48 diameter

Collection of Richard S. Zeisler

Study for Tondo, 1962

Pastel on paper: sheet, 20 1/2 x 13 1/8; image, 11 1/2 diameter

Purchase, with funds from The List Purchase Fund and the Charles

Simon Purchase Fund 80.44

Color Drawing for Tondo, 1964

Lithograph: sheet, 25 7/8 x 20 1/4; image, 18 1/2 diameter

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert C. Lee 66.105

Recollection, 1964–68

Unbound book of fourteen lithographs: sheets, 14 1/4 x 22 1/2 each

Purchase, with funds from the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Fund

77.83.1–14

Sidney Gordin (b. 1918)

Drawing, c. 1942

Graphite on paper, 10 15/16 x 8 1/2

Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 84.67

April 1953, 1953

Painted steel, 64 x 47 1/2 x 34 1/2

Gift of Raymond J. Learsy 84.71.2

Deflections, 1953

Painted steel, 16 3/4 x 58 x 15

Gift of Shirley and Menahem Lewin 75.28

Construction, Number 10, 1955, 1955

Painted steel, 36 x 41 1/2 x 27

Purchase 56.10

Harry Holtzman (1912–1987)

Untitled, c. 1936

Watercolor and graphite on paper, 7 3/4 x 8 5/16

Purchase, with funds from The Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, Inc., and the Drawing Committee 91.4

Michael Loew (1907–1985)

Interchangeable Forms, 1953

Oil on canvas, 45 x 32

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 63.30

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904–1971)

Pale Column, 1956

Oil on canvas, 15 x 22

Gift of Emily and Wolf Kahn 74.1

Memorial, 1958–59

Oil on composition board, 36 x 28

Gift of Jonathan Alden Trumbull 59.22

Suspension Points (Surface Winds), 1959

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 1/8

Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.31

I. Rice Pereira (1902–1971)

Oblique Progression, 1948

Oil on canvas, 50 x 40

Purchase 48.22

Heart of Light, 1954

Oil on canvas, 49 3/4 x 29 3/4

Gift of Miss Sylvia Carewe 61.43

Landscape of the Absolute, 1955

Oil on canvas, 40 x 50

Gift of Richard Adler 56.15

Abstract Composition, n.d.

Graphite on paper, 10 13/16 x 13 15/16

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 78.12

Abstract Composition, n.d.

Graphite on paper, 14 7/8 x 18 1/2

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 78.13

Charles G. Shaw (1892–1974)

Plastic Polygon, 1938

Oil on wood, 38 1/2 x 23 1/2

Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 82.5

Leon Polk Smith (b. 1906)

N.Y. City, 1945

Oil on canvas, 47 x 33

50th Anniversary Gift of the Edward R. Downe, Jr., Purchase Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts 79.24

Albert Swinden (1899–1961)

Sketch for Mural, Williamsburg Housing Project, c. 1936

Gouache on board, 11 x 21 3/4

Purchase, with funds from the John I.H. Baur Purchase Fund and the M. Anthony Fisher Purchase Fund 81.1

Study, 1945

Gouache on paper, 15 x 12 1/4 (sight)

Gift of the American Abstract Artists 62.45

Study for *Introspection of Space*, 1948

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, 14 x 17 3/4

Gift of an anonymous donor 78.106

Introspection of Space, n.d.

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40

Gift of the Herbert and Nannette Rothschild Fund, Inc. 63.70

Charmion von Wiegand (1898–1983)

Untitled, 1946

Gouache on paper, 28 1/2 x 24 1/2

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Feinberg 69.112

City Lights, 1947

Oil on canvas, 32 x 24

Gift of Ruth Stephan Franklin 68.56

Triptych, Number 700, 1961

Oil on canvas, 42 1/4 x 54 overall

Gift of Alvin M. Greenstein 62.39

Jean Xceron (1890–1967)

Composition 273, 1945

Oil on canvas, 40 x 32

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 63.35

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