

Abstraction, n.d.

Charles Evans (1907–1992)
oil on academy board
H.20 inches x W.16 inches
Collection of the Bucks County Intermediate Unit #22



Biography

Charles Evans was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1907. He was a modernist known for his abstract style of painting. He studied at New York's Art Students League and Parsons School of Design, and later in Paris with Fernand Léger at the Académie Moderne. In 1930 Evans and his wife spent a year living in what was Paul Cezanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence, France. The following year, Evans purchased the old silk mill in New Hope and became involved in the area's modernist movement, joining the Independents in 1932. By 1935, he had begun to work collaboratively with Louis Stone, whom he had met in 1929 while studying with Hans Hoffman in Saint Tropez, and with Charles F. Ramsey. Together they taught art classes and worked on the Cooperative Painting Project. Every week, the three were joined by the abstract painter Lee Gatch in discussions at Ledger's Inn in Lambertville, New Jersey. In 1948 Evans cofounded the *New Hope Gazette* with Walter M. Teller. That same year he created set designs for St. John Terrell's Lambertville Music Circus. He also designed sets for the Bucks County Playhouse and Philadelphia's Playhouse in the Park. He later served as set designer for the Fred Miller Theater in Milwaukee and as artistic director for the Queen Elizabeth Playhouse in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Why did Charles Evans create his work with many different shapes, lines, and colors?

Charles Evans liked to explore abstract painting, which is a kind of painting that doesn't look realistic. He was known as a modernist painter, and he was influenced by the art community around him in the United States and in Europe. During the time Evans was working, other painters such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque were creating cubist works of art. He was also influenced by the artists Hans Hoffman and Fernand Leger. He tried to create works of art that were similar in style to those of the cubist artists Picasso, Leger, and Braque. Do the shapes and colors in this painting look like something that you recognize? What does this abstract artwork look like to you?

Did you know that Charles Evans painted with his friends?

Charles Evans joined other modernist artists in the Bucks County area in the early 1930s. When he moved to New Hope, Pennsylvania, in 1931, he met many different modernist artists. He began working with Louis Stone, whom he had met earlier, in Saint Tropez, while studying with Hans



Hoffman. In 1935 they began the Cooperative Painting Project. Another artist named Charles Frederick Ramsey joined them. These three artists created works of art together. They improvised in the process of making the artwork, letting the artwork evolve as they worked. They did not plan in advance or create a sketch of what the image would become. They signed their work Ramstonev. Have you created something with a friend or classmate? Was it easy or difficult? What were some of the challenges and rewards you faced?

What can you find in this work of art?

Charles Evans created this “abstraction,” breaking his composition into shapes, lines, and colors. It is up to us to look at the work and form our own thoughts and opinions about it. Many times, abstract art makes us use our imagination to figure out what the artist might be trying to say. Ask yourself some questions to guide yourself as you look at this painting. Write down everything you see. Then, ask yourself some more questions. Do the shapes look like anything to you? What are the dominant shapes? Is there movement in this work? What kinds of colors is Evans using? If you took away a color or a shape, how would the composition change? If you could hear sounds in this work of art, what would they be? What kind of feelings do you get from looking at this work of art? Are you happy? Sad? Angry? Why? Remember, there are no right or wrong answers! Spend some time looking at this work, and see what you discover!

Does a work of art have to look realistic to be considered a work of art?

Being an artist means you have the freedom to choose what kind of artwork you make, whether it looks realistic or abstract. Artists have the freedom to choose what technique they use, what medium they want to work in, and what subject they want to portray. Artists use different processes when creating a work of art, and they have different reasons for creating it. An artist who uses paintbrushes to create a realistic painting goes through the same steps as an artist who creates an abstract painting with the same kind of paint, but their reasons for creating their works might be vastly different.

When you are an artist, not everyone might like your artwork, because people have different likes and dislikes. For example, chocolate might be your favorite ice cream flavor, but your friend might like another flavor better. Just because you dislike a particular flavor of ice cream doesn't mean that flavor is bad—there are other people who do like it. The same goes for a work of art. As the viewers of artwork, it is up to us to carefully look at, respond to, and think about the artwork. Looking at a work of art for a while can bring you to a better understanding of it. Once you understand a work better, then you will have an educated opinion as to whether you think it is a good work of art. Do you consider *Abstraction* a good work of art? Why or why not?



Do we know when this painting was created?

We don't know when *Abstraction* was painted. Sometimes museums don't know when works of art were created because there hasn't been enough research done on the artist and his or her work. Based on information about Evans' life and his style of painting, we can guess when he created this painting. Also, special people like conservationists can tell the approximate date of painting by testing the paint on the surface of a canvas and seeing how old it is. They can even X-ray a painting to get more clues! When a museum displays a work with an unknown date, the object label says n.d. or "no date." Sometimes museum staff might know approximately what decade it was painted in. They might put "c." in front of a date, like "c. 1925." This "c." stands for "circa," which means "around."

Learn More

Create your own version of abstraction in a printmaking project, "Look Closer: A New Perspective," below.

This painting is called *Abstraction*. What does that mean?

Paintings that are called Abstract do not usually show an object, but are painted to show other things. Some abstract painters like to concentrate on color, while others like to concentrate on line, or maybe composition and balance. In the end the artist had to make a decision about all of these things. Does this sound very different than a painter that likes to create landscapes?

Charles Evans was also a set designer. What did he do in that job?

All the scenery, furniture, and props the audience sees at a play are called the set design. The set designer has to make what the audience sees match what the actors and actresses are saying and doing. To do this he works with the director to suggest the atmosphere, time and place of the action, and the style and tone of the play. He also has to be sure that the actors can move freely about the stage. Some directors like to have very elaborate set designs; others like to have the emphasis on the actors, without many props.

Evans was part of the Cooperative Painting Project. How did that idea get started?

The idea of each person doing a part of a painting grew out of French experiments in writing. The Surrealists Writers in France, including Andre Breton, Yves Tanguy and others, would each write a line of a poem. The writers did not know what the other person had written. The complete poems were then put together and published in a magazine called *Exquisite Corpse*. In painting, each artist would paint a section, and then all the sections would be put together to form a single painting. Cooperative projects have been used in painting, films, orchestra pieces, and graphic designs. Cooperative projects are still very popular with contemporary artists. You can see them on the website, *Exquisite Corpse*, at anexquisitecorpse.net.



Related Images

Yellow Extraction is another example of an abstract painting by Charles Evans. You can find it in the Bucks County Artists Database at the James A. Michener Art Museum at www.michenerartmuseum.org.

Another artist, Lloyd Ney, was painting at the same time as Charles Evans, also in Bucks County. His work is also in the Bucks County Artists Database at the James A. Michener Art Museum at www.michenerartmuseum.org. He had a very different way of creating an abstract painting. Can you see differences between his work and the work of Charles Evans?

There were many artists working in the abstract style. They used a variety of materials, colors, and approaches. Look at the abstract paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at www.metmuseum.org. Is there one particular kind of abstract painting that you like more than others?

Charles Ramsey and Louis Stone painted with Charles Evans in the Cooperative Painting Project. You can see the works of each one at the Michener Art Museum website, www.michenerartmuseum.org. Do the painters have the same style?

Related Links

This painting reminds some people of stained glass.

Often we think of stained glass as an art material used to make windows in places of worship. There are many examples of stained glass in public places that seem to be abstract art. Look at Marc Chagall's window for the United Nations at www.un.org, and Frank Lloyd Wright's window from the Avery Coonley Playhouse in Riverside, Illinois, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, www.moma.org.

Louis Comfort Tiffany is another artist and designer who is very famous for his work in stained glass. Besides lamps and other functional objects, Tiffany created some famous windows. Many of them are on display in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org.

