

Street Quartet, 1990

Paul Keene, b.1920
acrylic on canvas
H.54 x W. 52.25 inches
James A. Michener Art Museum
Purchased with funds provided by Ann
and Joseph Gardocki



Biography

Paul Keene was born on August 24, 1920 in North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He attended his first art class when he was nine years old at the Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia, and at that time he realized he wanted to be an artist. He continued taking these art classes until he graduated from Central High School in 1938. Keene received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1947 and his Masters of Fine Arts in 1948 from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. Prior to going to college, in 1941, he enlisted in the army. He served in the Air Corps in several bases, included Tuskegee. After college, from 1949 to 1951, Keene traveled to Paris, France, studied at the Academie Julien, and became a part of Gallery Huit. He exhibited with Pablo Picasso and Fernand Leger at the Salon de Mai. In 1952 and 1954 he took courses at the Centre D'Art in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, through a Whitney Fellowship. From 1964 to 1968 he taught at the Philadelphia College of Art. From 1968 through 1985 he taught painting and drawing at Bucks County Community College and served as art department chairperson there for three years (1977–1980). In 1971 Paul Keene worked with Neil Lieberman to create the Martin Luther King Freedom Memorial in Philadelphia at the Fairmount Park Art Association, 59th Street Baptist Church. Keene has exhibited in various museums, including the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, The Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

What is a quartet?

A quartet is a group of four musicians or singers. Have you ever listened to a quartet sing before? You can find a street quartet in the lower part of this painting. Music has been a large part of Paul Keene's life, and he has been interested in the blues and jazz since he was a young boy. As a child, he was inspired by songs during church services. As a teenager, he waited with his friends to see jazz musicians playing in the clubs in Philadelphia. To Keene, jazz is a rhythm and a unique language. He even created a series of paintings in the 1980s focused on jazz music. Keene believes that to succeed as a fine artist "the work must sing out, and the viewer must hear it." He admires the great jazz musician Miles Davis. Keene states that Davis could "create a picture in your mind with his music." Have you ever listened to



jazz music before? If you haven't, try it! Close your eyes and listen to the sounds. How would you describe it? What kind of instruments do you hear? How does it make you feel?

Wow, Paul Keene uses some bright colors in this painting! Why did he do this?

Paul Keene likes to use bright, bold colors in daring ways in his paintings. This use of color creates a sense of energy in the work. Color can be a powerful element in a work of art, and artists can use color in expressive ways. Sometimes color can just describe what an object looks like, or it can symbolize something or convey a certain emotion. What kinds of colors is Keene using? Where is he placing the warm and the cool colors? What kind of feeling do you get from the colors being used? If the colors in this painting changed, how would its mood change?

What did Paul Keene use to make this painting?

Keene used acrylic paints to make this painting. Acrylic paints are different from oil paints in a couple of ways. Acrylic paints are water based, meaning you can add water to the paint to make it thinner. Oil paints are oil-based, and they are much greasier. They require mixing pigment with special oil, like linseed oil, to make them thinner. When you clean brushes that have oil paint on them, you often have to use a paint thinner, like turpentine. With acrylic paints, you can just use water. Acrylic paints also dry much faster than oil paints. If this painting was done in oil paints, it may have taken a couple days to dry! Paintings done with acrylic paints usually dry in under an hour. Paul Keene not only uses acrylic paint to create his artwork, but he also uses collage with paint in some of his more recent works. To create these collages, he sometimes takes sketches he has made, prints, and colored paper, and incorporates them into a new composition. He re-works these collages until he feels that he has gotten them right.

If this painting were a piece of music, what would it sound like? Why do you think so?

When you look at a work of art, you can describe it using adjectives, like calm, bright, energetic, and quiet. You can also compare visual art with music. Try it! Look at this work closely. Try comparing the colors to musical elements. Is the red loud? Strong? Is the blue quiet and calm? Is the work giving you a fast rhythm or a slow rhythm? How? Is the mixture of colors giving you the impression of many sounds, or do you only hear one sound? Use your imagination! What kind of sounds or music is the quartet singing? Write down all the describing words you can think of. If you can, choose a piece of music that you feel goes with this painting. Next, do the opposite—listen to a music selection of your choice and then create a painting in response to it.

This painting looks like it's broken into different windows.

Keene has separated this painting into a grid, with the largest square on the



top left of the painting and four rectangles on the bottom part of the painting. There is also a narrow rectangle on the right side of the painting. If you look at other works by Paul Keene, you may see that he uses this grid form in those as well. It's almost as if he is creating paintings within a painting. Breaking the painting into these shapes helps create a balance in the work. Imagine if you took one of the rectangles away. Would this work be balanced? Why or why not?

Learn More

The activities “Street Beats” and “Colors and Symbols in Art” will inspire you to learn more about Paul Keene and create some works of art. Read these activity sheets below.

It looks as if this painting has three different parts. Is this the same as a triptych?

It does look like the painting has three separate sections.

Paintings with three parts were often called a triptych. Triptychs were most commonly used during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They were altar pieces that were made of three painting that were hinged together. The hinges allowed the painting to be closed. Usually the outside of the painting, which would show when it was closed, would be decorated. Look at the *Ghent Altarpiece* on the webmuseum in Paris, www.ibiblio.org. It is a masterful triptych created by Jan Van Eyck in the Netherlands in the early 1400's.

Today the word triptych means more a painting that has three scenes in it. Each section usually has a story that connects the three parts. Two artists that have made this sort of painting are Max Beckmann at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, www.uiowa.edu, and Francis Bacon at the Tate Museum London, www.tate.org.uk. Can you tell what the story might be that would connect the parts in these paintings? Can you invent a story of your own?

Related Images

Read more about Paul Keene on the website of the Senior Artists' Initiative in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at www.seniorartistsinitiative.org. If you look at several images of Paul Keene's work, you can see other grids. How many can you see in each painting?

Many Bucks County artists also use grids in their paintings; what makes their artwork different than Keene's works? Look at John Foster's *Gridded Windows and Doors*, Edie Wells Bristol's *Siena*, and John Foster's *Ned's Cigar Store*. These paintings and more can be seen on the Bucks County Artists' Database at www.michenerartmuseum.org.

A grid is not the only geometric form used by Keene. He also uses circles that sometimes surround the person, or often are almost hidden in the background.



Look for the circles in Paul Keene's *Orpheus Series* at www.michenerartmuseum.org.

Musicians were often the subject of Keene's artwork. Edouard Manet painted his version of a French *Street Singer* in 1862. It is on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, at www.mfa.org. Picasso also painted his version of musicians in *Three Musicians*. It is on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, www.philamuseum.org. How are these artworks similar? How are they different?

Related Links

Why would Keene, a Philadelphia painter, feel a connection to jazz? Isn't jazz more connected to New York City, or New Orleans?

Philadelphia has a rich musical heritage dating back to 1830 with trumpeter Frank Johnson. The Philadelphia jazz story developed around a multicultural mix of African American, Jewish, Slovak and Italian musicians. It is a style that is continually changing, and is found in many different forms from church music, where Marian Anderson started, to dance music and the Dorsey Brothers, to clubs. When radio became popular, jazz became known to a far greater number of people. Some other famous jazz players from Philadelphia are Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Billie Holiday, and John Coltrane. Explore jazz in Philadelphia on the website www.explorepahistory.com.

Philadelphia jazz has traveled all over the world. Listen to the Philadelphia Jazz Orchestra in Italy and to a series of interviews of important Philadelphia jazz musicians on You Tube.

Think About!

The English poet John Keats, in his poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn* said, "Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter." What do you think? Do you think the musicians are probably good, even though we can't hear them?

If *Street Quartet* had sound, what kind of music do you think the quartet would be singing? Would it be your favorite music?

If you could update this painting, what sort of music would the quartet be making? How would they be dressed?

