ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PATHS TO ABSTRACTION
1867–1917

EDUCATION KIT
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The exhibition
Curator Terence Maloon has secured representative works of more than 40 of the leading artists of the late 19th and 20th centuries including Whistler, Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, Munch, Gauguin, Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, Derain, Denis, Marc, Duchamp, Braque, Bonnard and Mondrian. These works are from 59 institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice; Museu Picasso Barcelona; Centre National d’Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou; Tate Modern; Tate Britain; Kunstmuseum Bern; J Paul Getty Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum as well as private collections.

Introduction
In the first decades of the 20th century, a radical new approach to art emerged almost simultaneously across Europe and in the United States: abstraction.

Abstraction was never a ‘movement’, it didn’t originate in one place, and it wasn’t practised by one cohesive group of artists. Instead, it evolved gradually, as artists experimented with colour, form and materials, calling into question some of the traditional functions of art – narrative and representation. The final decades of the 1800s saw a proliferation of artworks in which the figure or the landscape was – in increasing degrees – abstracted, distorted or simplified. The first purely abstract works were exhibited to large public audiences at the Salon d’Automne exhibition held in Paris in 1912.

The paths to abstraction were varied and unpredictable. In 1867, the London-based artist James McNeill Whistler began emphasising the ‘musical’ qualities of painting. In 1890 in Paris, Maurice Denis declared that ‘a picture is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order’. By 1917, many artists had abandoned representation altogether, while some moved freely between abstraction and figuration.

Whistler and his influence
In 1867, Whistler began giving his works ‘musical’ titles such as Symphony in white, Harmony in silver and blue and Arrangement in grey. He intended the titles to draw attention to aspects of painting that were customarily overlooked: colour, tone, shape and composition. Above all, Whistler encouraged viewers to look at rather than through the painting’s surface.

Of all his works, his Nocturnes were the most extreme, the most controversial and, ultimately, the most influential. These landscapes, painted in tones of grey or brown, are devoid of any picturesque, anecdotal and illustrative content. They are simultaneously empty and full, obscure and luminous, allusive and enigmatic.

In Paris, Whistler’s paintings were exhibited alongside those of the Impressionists. In London, where he spent most of his life, he was a key figure in Aestheticism, which emphasised decorative qualities over narrative or representation.

Although Whistler’s work was fiercely criticised, his reputation became immense. Georges Seurat, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondrian all made works in a Whistlerian idiom, as did artistically inclined photographers at the turn of the century such as Alvin Langdon Coburn and Edward Steichen in the US.

Guillaume Apollinaire, 1912
MONET AND CÉZANNE
French Impressionism – which developed from the 1870s – was a significant forerunner to abstract art. The Impressionists deliberately chose unexceptional, everyday motifs, with the result that their intense colours and vigorous brushwork gained in prominence. Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne made no effort to disguise the materiality of their paintings. They wanted to emphasise the unity and integrity of the entire image over any specifically descriptive detail. In subsequent decades, the pioneers of abstraction venerated these two artists as exemplars of ‘pure painting’. When the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky first saw Monet’s Haystacks exhibited in Moscow in 1895, he was struck by the ‘unsuspected power of the palette’ and the way in which ‘objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture’. Kandinsky admired the exact things that had provoked criticism by Monet’s contemporaries.

Cézanne – who had participated in the first and third of the historic Impressionist exhibitions in 1874 and 1877 – shared with Monet a way of simultaneously building up and breaking down images in discrete brushmarks, which they called taches. Both artists were identified by their admirers and detractors alike as ‘painters of the tache’. In Cézanne’s hands, the tache became a building block for intricate experiments in composition. His search for the interconnection of taches (he called them ‘rapports’) was laid bare in his watercolours, where the ground of the paper itself becomes an integral part of the composition.

NABIS
In 1888, in the company of Gauguin, Paul Sérusier created The talisman, a small, vibrant landscape in glowing reds, greens and blues. The painting caused a sensation when he showed it to his fellow art students in Paris, inspiring them to entertain the possibility of a new kind of art. They called themselves Nabis (the Hebrew word for ‘prophets’). The common features of the Nabi style were a frank use of non-naturalistic colour, stylisation in drawing and design, and emphasis on the picture plane – ‘the pure arabesque’ with ‘as little trompe-l’œil as possible’, in Denis’ words. Shunning the realism and naturalism of their contemporaries (including the Impressionists), they promoted an artificial and synthetic concept of art – in short, they became strongly inclined towards abstraction. Their ideas were applied equally to painting, decorative arts and design objects.

There were intersecting sub-groups of the Nabis who were bonded together by close friendship and ideological affinity. Denis belonged to a religiously inclined faction, whereas Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard and Félix Vallotton shared a worldly outlook that revelled in modernity and took its bearings from cosmopolitan city life. From the early 1890s onwards, Vuillard in particular developed a concision and rigorous formal integration in his work that is strikingly abstracted. A similar approach is evident in early paintings by Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky and Mondrian.

GAUGUIN AND THE PRIMITIVIST WOODCUT
In 1893 Paul Gauguin returned to France from his first, three-year sojourn in Tahiti. He turned his hand to a series of woodcut prints, as a way of popularising the imagery of his Tahitian paintings. In effect, he began a new and vital tradition in printmaking, reviving one of the most vital tradition in printmaking, reviving one of the most strikingly abstracted. His primitivist woodcuts, with their simplified forms and vigorous brushwork gained in prominence. Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne made no effort to disguise the materiality of their paintings. They wanted to emphasise the unity and integrity of the entire image over any specifically descriptive detail. In subsequent decades, the pioneers of abstraction venerated these two artists as exemplars of ‘pure painting’. When the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky first saw Monet’s Haystacks exhibited in Moscow in 1895, he was struck by the ‘unsuspected power of the palette’ and the way in which ‘objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture’. Kandinsky admired the exact things that had provoked criticism by Monet’s contemporaries.

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CUBISM

Cubism developed out of the creative partnership of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. They were inseparable friends, visiting each other’s studios almost daily, with the result that their work became virtually indistinguishable. Between 1908 and 1914, neither artist signed or dated his canvas on the front. As Braque explained: ‘In the early days of Cubism, Pablo Picasso and I were engaged in what we felt was a search for the anonymous personality. We were inclined to efface our personalities in order to find originality.’

Most historians of Cubism regard Braque’s 1908 paintings done at L’Estaque as a watershed. Features of the Cubist style came together for the first time: limited colour, a relatively even tonality, shaded facet-planes, linear scaffolding and rich, painterly textures in drifts of subtly modulated brushstrokes.

By 1910–11 Cubism had reached the brink of abstraction. The paintings and graphic works Picasso produced in Cadaqués in 1910 were notionally figures, landscapes, interiors and still lifes, but these objects were treated in a similar, apparently interchangeable manner. With minimal adjustment, a still life could become a figure, or a landscape a still life. Images had been pared down to a syntax that appeared to be quite independent of any subject.

Mondrian (whose early works are much indebted to Cubism) believed that Picasso and Braque had avoided the logical consequences of the style by not following its implications all the way through. In response to Cubism, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Fernand Léger, Mikhail Larionov, Robert Delaunay and others were prompted to take their final steps towards abstraction.

1912–17: THE LIMITS OF ABSTRACTION

By 1917, the most radical possibilities of abstraction had already been seized and the newly expanded parameters of modern art were set. There were paintings of extraordinary complexity or unprecedented simplicity, of lyrical exuberance, intellectual severity and the most whimsical playfulness. There were also works featuring completely novel materials and techniques, painstakingly ordered or randomly generated.

The year 1917 saw the publication of the Dutch magazine De Stijl, which made a compelling argument for the integration of abstract painting, sculpture, architecture and design. In March, the first Dada exhibition, held in Zürich, was notable for the predominance of abstract works: Dada (a movement that, internationally, included Hans Arp, Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp) and abstraction were initially synonymous.

In October, the Bolshevik revolution broke out in Russia and, for an extraordinary moment, abstract artists including Kasimir Malevich and Iván Kliun helped define the revolution’s ‘advanced’ style. As World War I drew to a close, in France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, Italy, Portugal and many other countries, abstract art was a well-established feature of contemporary cultural life.
**WHISTLER AND HIS INFLUENCE**

As the light fades and the shadows deepen all petty and exacting details vanish, everything trivial disappears, and I see things as they are in great strong masses: the buttons are lost, but the garment remains; the garment is lost, but the sitter remains; the sitter is lost, but the picture remains.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

**Nocturne in grey and silver, the Thames, c.1873**

oil on canvas, 44.7 x 60.3 cm

Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1947

**K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES**

**VISUAL ART:** *Identify* the colours you can see. What could the strokes of white paint be? What time of the day do you think it is? If you were on the bank of the Thames, what sounds and smells would you experience? *Discuss* how Whistler has simplified this scene.

Whistler was influenced by Japanese art. *Find* examples of Japanese prints and compare these to Whistler’s paintings. Whistler has blurred and flattened this scene. *Use* a viewfinder to plan a composition for a painting. *Experiment* with squinting your eyes to blur your vision.

*MUSIC:* Whistler believed that colour and form could have the same effects as music. *Listen* to different styles of music. *Select* a piece that complements this painting. How does this painting and music make you feel?

**HSE:** *Locate* the Thames River on a map of London. *Find out* how the Thames contributed to the development of London. *Discover* the types of transport and industries that occurred on the Thames at the end of the 19th century. Do any of them survive today?

**7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

The *Nocturnes* reflect a radical approach to composition and subject matter. Respond to *Nocturne in grey and silver, the Thames* and suggest why Whistler’s approach is radical. Why are these artworks referred to as ‘subjectless’ paintings?

Whistler challenged Victorian narrative painting and French Academic art, suggesting the viewer should look at a work of art and observe its effect and composition as opposed to looking through it, thereby only seeing the subject. How did this notion affect the way artists painted and how did it change the role of the viewer?

In March 1867, Whistler renamed his earlier paintings with titles that suggested music. Investigate these artworks and suggest why Whistler chose to associate music with his paintings. How does the act of renaming affect the viewer’s response? *Discuss* how this decision played an important part in the evolution of abstraction.

**MONET AND CÉZANNE**

A picture by Cézanne is a deliberately conceived object, isolated, sufficient unto itself, which finds its highest expression within the limits of its own frame.

Félix Vallotton

Paul Cézanne

**Banks of the Marne c.1888**

oil on canvas, 65 x 81.3 cm

Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 2008 with funds provided by the Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation, the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales, and donors to the Masterpiece Fund in joint celebration of the Foundation’s 25th anniversary and Edmund Capon AM OBE’s 30th anniversary as Director of the Gallery

**K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES**

**VISUAL ARTS:** *Describe* what is in the foreground, middle ground and background of the painting. *Note* the reflections in the water. Cézanne painted outdoors ‘from nature’. *Visualise* the weather conditions on the day this work was started. *Invent* a weather report.

*Observe* the individual strokes of paint on the surface of the canvas. Are they applied in a particular direction? *Discuss* how they add up to create a unity in the painting.

*Experiment* with painting a landscape with a similar colour palette and brushstrokes.

**SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY:** *Locate* the Marne River on a map of France. *Find out* about this region and its climate. *Create* a graph to show how it changes with the seasons. *Compare* the information you have collected to Cézanne’s painting.

**MATHS:** *Photocopy* an image of *Banks of the Marne* c.1888. *Count* how many geometric shapes you can find within this painting.

**7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

Analyse this painting and discuss its formal qualities. How does it differ from artworks created a generation before? In what way has Cézanne responded to and developed the ideas of his predecessors? What is the ‘tache’ and how did this revolutionise the way painters responded to the world? What role did Cézanne play in the path to abstraction?

According to curator Terence Maloon, avant-garde artists of the late 19th century such as Whistler, Cézanne, Monet, Manet and Degas ‘challenged the lowly status of the sketch’ and ‘harnessed the aesthetics of the sketch to higher compositional purposes’. Discuss this idea and consider how this affected the modern artists of the early 20th century.

Consider Vallotton’s quote above and discuss why he describes Cézanne’s art practice in this way. Do you think this is an accurate description of Cézanne’s approach? Analyse *Banks of the Marne* to justify your point of view.
NABIS
Had the Nabis wanted to make such a bold decision, abstract art could have been invented in 1895.
André Chastel

Édouard Vuillard
The doors 1894
gouache on cardboard, 50.8 x 41.6 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Felton Bequest, 1952 © Édouard Vuillard/ADAGP.
Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES
VISUAL ARTS: List the colours you can see. What is the mood of this work? How does the colour scheme suggest this mood? Imagine what the whole room looks like. Extend the image and design the rest of the room. Consider the colour scheme you will use.
Focus on the figure. What is the figure doing? Why has Vuillard placed the figure in the corner of the composition? Imagine the events taking place in this scene. Invent a scenario for what happens next.
ENGLISH: This is a view of an interior domestic space. Create a word bank for this painting. Write a story to accompany this artwork, including the figure, details you can see and your list of words.
MATHS: Count how many squares and rectangles you can see in this painting. Look around your classroom. Identify all the shapes you can see. Create a drawing of your classroom based on these shapes.

7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION
Respond to this artwork subjectively. What makes it intriguing and unique? How does the artist draw you into the composition? What effect are they trying to harness?
Research the Nabis. Name the artists and outline the influence they had on abstraction. Discuss the concepts and theories they employed in their artmaking. Develop a painting appropriating the stylistic intentions of this group. Source Maurice Denis’s ‘The definition of neo-traditionism’ from 1890. Discuss why the Nabis renamed their approach to painting and if this is a more appropriate term for this group.

GAUGUIN AND THE PRIMITIVIST WOODCUT
Wood engraving is by definition stylised and leaves as much to the imagination as it gives us to see; it is an advantageous means of expressing the visionary character of all perception...
Maurice Godé

Franz Marc
Tiger 1912
woodcut, 20 x 24.1 cm
Collection: Brooklyn Museum of Art, Ella C Woodward Memorial Fund

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES
VISUAL ARTS: Describe the types of lines used in this print. Observe how Marc has stylised the tiger and created the pattern of the fur. Research the process of creating a woodcut print. How old is this art practice? What types of wood can be used? Discuss the advantages of printmaking.
VISUAL ARTS: Select an animal that is symbolic to you. Draw your animal from memory. Use bold lines to simplify and stylise your animal. Transfer your drawing to scratch foam board and print a series of prints.
DRAMA: Imagine walking through the jungle and encountering this tiger. How would you react? Create a role-play about this encounter using the print as a starting point.
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: Compare and contrast the art of woodblock printing to mechanical reproduction. Explore the advantages and disadvantages of each practice. Write a procedure for one of the techniques.

7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION
As one of the oldest forms of graphic reproduction, the woodcut carries a primitivist aesthetic. What makes this approach appealing to artists exploring a new way of seeing? What effect are they trying to harness?
Franz Marc was interested in the essence of the subject, peeling back the layers to expose the spirit within. How does the graphic effect of the woodcut suggest this notion? Consider the artist’s attempt to simplify form, use repeated patterns and shapes as well as his treatment of space within the composition. Develop a critical study of this artwork based on your observations and research.
Research the use of the woodcut in other cultures. How does it differ from and also show similarities to Marc’s approach? Create your own monotone woodcut based on a similar theme. How does this process differ from other art-making you have explored?
THE EXALTATION OF COLOUR
...objects harmed my pictures.
Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky
Study for ‘Painting with white border’ (Moscow) 1913
watercolour, gouache, ink, 39 x 36 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1982
© Wassily Kandinsky/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES
VISUAL ARTS: List the colours you can see. Describe the variety of marks in the artwork. Reflect on how this artwork makes you feel. What do you think Kandinsky meant when he said ‘objects harmed my pictures’? Do you think this artwork was created randomly or carefully planned? Discuss your response in class.

Kandinsky wanted to create art that affected the viewer in a similar way as listening to music. Paint a series of small watercolour paintings while listening to music in class. Use colour expressively and layer your work. Review your paintings then select, title and exhibit the paintings you feel are resolved.

ENGLISH: Kandinsky was interested in creating art that conveyed emotions. Look at this work closely and consider the emotions it presents. Compile a list of adjectives to accompany this artwork. Write a poem in response to this artwork using your adjectives.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: Construct an experiment in class to test how people respond to different colours. Brainstorm a list of questions for the class to use in this research. Graph your results and present these to the class.

7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION
Kandinsky’s intention was to detach reality from the recognisable and enhance the concept of the spiritual. Discuss this notion with the class, drawing references from Kandinsky’s body of work. Using Study for ‘Painting with white border’ (Moscow) 1913 as evidence, argue whether Kandinsky has successfully achieved his aim.

Research and develop a case study on the Blaue Rieter group and its significance to abstraction. Consider the origins of this movement and the artists’ attempt to expand the concept of art. Describe the differences between Kandinsky’s improvisations, impressions and compositions. Find examples of each approach and discuss how each has played a significant role in influencing artists of the next generation.

CUBISM
The Cubist reflection consists essentially of stripping back all the proportions and ends up with projective, primordial forms like the triangle, the rectangle and the circle.
Paul Klee

Georges Braque
Glass of absinthe 1911
oil on canvas, 37 x 28.7 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1997
© Georges Braque/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES
VISUAL ARTS: Describe what you can see in this artwork and the colour range Braque has used. Reflect on the scale of the work. Would you have the same response if the painting was larger? Contemplate how this painting makes you feel.

Visual Arts: Set up a still life in class and draw the arrangement from different angles. Cut up your drawings then arrange several pieces in a Cubist composition showing multiple perspectives. Use pencil to work into your composition and define certain areas.

ENGLISH: Research the life of Georges Braque. Find out about the friendship between Braque and Pablo Picasso. Discuss how the artists supported each other’s vision for a new type of art. Use the information collected to write a diary entry for the day Braque created this painting. Describe the process he took to create this painting. Imagine how Cubism was first viewed by art critics and the art world.

MATHS: Photograph a still life from various angles (45, 90, 180 and 360 degrees) using a digital camera. Print these photographs and pin them up. Compare what can be seen from the various angles. Discuss how Cubist artists were aiming to show multiple perspectives.

7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION
Analyse this artwork and discuss Braque’s approach to painting a still life. Consider the structural qualities and the significance of the picture plane. What is the artist’s main concern and how does this artwork reflect Cubist theory?

In 1914 Mondrian wrote, ‘Cubism has taken a great stride in the direction of abstracting, and in this sense belongs both to our time and to the future: hence it is modern not in content, but in effect’. What do you think Mondrian is suggesting? Refer to particular Cubist artists and artworks to support your point of view.

1912–17: THE LIMITS OF ABSTRACTION

Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without ‘things’.

Kasimir Malevich

House under construction 1915–16
oil on canvas, 97 x 44.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1974

K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS: Nominate the focal point in this composition. Observe the strong use of diagonal lines and how they create a sense of movement. Cut out a range of coloured geometric shapes and arrange them into a composition that is pleasing to you.

Look closely at the texture of this painting. Can you see any brushstrokes? How do you think Malevich created this painting? Are we looking at an aerial view? Draw your own home from above, and simplify your drawing into shapes and lines.

MATHS: List the shapes you can see. What does this work remind you of? If this was a tower, do you think it could stand? Explain why or why not. Rearrange the shapes in this painting to construct a design for a tower that would be able to balance upright.

HISE: Research the technological developments that impacted on society at the beginning of the 20th century. Focus on changes in architecture and the types of buildings that have been designed to house a growing population.

7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Research Malevich’s art practice. Consider his influences, concepts and theories as well as his understanding of the real. How does the quote above suggest his approach to artmaking? Create a visual diary of his body of work. Develop a case study on your favourite painting and discuss your findings with the class.

Suggest how the audience of the time might have reacted to Malevich’s paintings. Would they have embraced or criticised abstraction? As part of today’s audience, how do you view Malevich’s practice? Discuss how his body of work is a reflection of early 20th-century thinking.

Where does abstraction go after the artists of 1917? Create an art timeline for the 20th century. Suggest how the paths to abstraction played a significant role in influencing artists of the mid to late 20th century.

Remember that before being a war-horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, a picture is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.

Maurice Denis, 1890