Figuration/Abstraction: Fairfield Porter/Willem de Koonig

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Wright State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/art

Part of the Art and Design Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons

Repository Citation

https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/art/55

This Program is brought to you for free and open access by the Art and Art History at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Art History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.
The work of Fairfield Porter defies classification partially due to its directness and seeming simplicity, which masks an undercurrent of complexity and mystery—even ambiguity. The term “American Realist Painter,” so often attached to Porter’s name, only adds to this difficulty in that the context of Porter’s development as an artist was a setting of varied styles and influences. Even among the artists of the past that Porter admired—Velázquez, Rubens, and Vuillard, to name a few—variation is prominent. Much has been said about Porter’s initial stance as a maturing artist in the 1940s and ’50s as being *au rebours*, or against the grain. As a representational artist, his work seemed to defy the then-prevalent critical focus of painting, Abstract Expressionism in particular. In a 1952 correspondence with Lawrence Campbell, however, Porter listed Willem de Kooning, the leading practitioner of that movement, among his influences.

I am painting now under the influence of [Herman] Rose. Last winter I painted under your influence, then one picture under the influence of Jane Freilicher. A year ago it was Bill de Kooning. They would probably all look the same to you.¹

Though Willem de Kooning pioneered the abstraction of the New York School in the 1950s, he, like most early abstract painters, developed from figuration and the tradition of Western art in general. Most critics would agree that he never completely left the figure, and that all of his work either directly or indirectly alludes to the figure, the landscape, or nature. At the very least, de Kooning’s evolution from figuration to abstraction is as formally consistent as his Dutch predecessor, Piet Mondrian.
Like Porter, de Kooning had little patience with statements made by Clement Greenberg and other critics of the '40s and '50s which suggested that the figure was no longer a subject for serious painting. Also like Porter, de Kooning drew inspiration from many different sources—mostly within the traditions of European painting, past and present.

The current exhibition aims to compare and contrast a selection of paintings, drawings, and prints by these two distinctive artists. The focus is on what I perceive as a shared attitude regarding the essentials of image making—especially the painted image—despite the stylistic differences between the two. Each artist drew from a heightened sense of place. Meeting first in New York City in 1939, each developed there, and later migrated to the eastern end of Long Island. Both the social and physical aspects of their personal surroundings mattered a great deal. And the figure, its structure and its inherent complex meaning, mingled consistently with the formal issues of painting for both artists throughout their careers.

Specific parallels in terms of these visual attributes include color, a strong interest in shape, and a love for the fast-moving, gestural mark. The yellow ochres and dusty pinks, so characteristic of de Kooning’s pallet, predominate in Porter’s as well. Their interest in shape, while deriving from different sources, underscores each artist’s concern for surface. For de Kooning, this grew out of his interest in collage, the Cubist and Surrealist artists of the early 20th century, and the early influence of Arshile Gorky. A good example of this inclination is found in his 1942 painting, The Acrobat. Likewise, Porter seems to see shape as fundamental, as the building blocks of an image, and his sources are as diverse as Matisse, Bonnard, Freilicher, Rivers, and Katz. His 1971 lithograph Girl in the Woods, and 1964 painting Woods and Rocks, are among several of Porter’s works in the exhibition that exemplify this stance. Porter and de Kooning both liked to move quickly across the surface in drawing and in painting. There are many paintings or sections of paintings by Porter that bring to mind the term “action painting,” a term associated with de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionists.

It is curious that these emphases comprise a visual vocabulary equally suited to abstraction or representation. “Figuration” is the more appropriate term for these particular artists as the word embodies an essential characteristic of their efforts, transcending the issues of style.

David Leach
Curator of the exhibition

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude for all those who helped to make this exhibition possible. First and foremost, to all the lenders of art works, private collectors and museums, go my heartfelt thanks. As some private collectors wish to remain anonymous, I will include here only the contributing museums and galleries, though to all those referred to directly or indirectly under Lenders to the Exhibition, please accept my sincere thanks.

Within the museums lending works to this exhibition, I would like to mention several individuals. I extend my thanks to Ida Balboul, research associate, 20th century art, of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for her patient assistance in selecting works by each artist from that collection. At the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., thanks go to Judith Zilczer, curator of paintings, and Phyllis Rosenzweig, associate curator, for their guidance and prompt response, as well as Margaret Dong in the Office of the Registrar. To Alicia Longwell, registrar at the Parrish Art Museum, I give my thanks as well not only for these particular loans, but for allowing me to view their entire holdings of Porter works back when I first started to plan this exhibition. Last, but certainly not least, I am grateful to Alexander Lee Nyerges, director of The Dayton Art Institute, and senior curator Dominique H. Vasseur for the loan of the great Porter in their collection shortly after its return from a previous loan.

With respect to the contributing galleries in New York and the individual collectors they represent, additional thanks go to Andrew Arnot and Eric Brown at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Betty Cuningham at Hirshlj & Adler Modern, Michael Rosenfeld and Halley Harrisburg at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, and Elisabeth Ivers at Pace Prints. Lending works that are owned by clients or that are in the process of being sold is a tricky business, and I appreciate the support of each of the above. Again, I am most grateful to all of the lenders to this exhibition.

Figuration/Abstraction would not have been possible without public funding support, as well as the generous assistance of a number of individuals. The University Art Galleries at Wright State University greatly appreciates the funding we received from the Ohio Arts Council, as well as the grant we received from Culture Works in Dayton, which allowed us to produce the CD-ROM interactive catalog that accompanies this exhibition. I would like to thank my colleague Ron Geibert for his patience and expertise regarding this component.

My final warm thank-you goes to the private individuals, here in Dayton for the most part, who have lifted my spirits with their most generous financial contributions toward this project. They include individuals who have a long history of support for the arts in and beyond the Dayton area. Many are collectors themselves, and many have also given of their time and talents to the benefit of Wright State University in the past. Our thanks go to Mr. and Mrs. Burnell Roberts, Dr. and Mrs. Ludolph van der Hoeven, Mr. and Mrs. J. Gordon Rudd, and Mr. and Mrs. Robert Stein, all past members of the Community Advisory Board of the University Art Galleries. To Mrs. Wallace Johnson and her good friends, Dr. and Mrs. Eugene B. Cantelupe, we also extend our deep gratitude. Eugene Cantelupe, dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Wright State University from 1971 to 1984, was a member of the Department of English and the Department of Art and Art History during those years, and it is a personal pleasure to have him directly connected with our program again in this manner. And finally, with love and gratitude, I thank my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph F. Leach, for all their support and gracious assistance with this exhibition. Thank you all for your financial contributions as well as your continued enthusiasm for the arts.

David Leach
CHECKLIST FOR THE EXHIBITION

FAIRFIELD PORTER

1. **White Tree Stump.** 1961.
   Oil on canvas, 24½ × 20".
   The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York
   Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

2. **View of Studio with Elm Trunk.** 1962.
   Oil on canvas, 24 × 22".
   The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York
   Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

3. **Young Man in a Doorway.** 1959–60.
   Oil on canvas, 67 × 45½".
   The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York
   Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

   Oil on canvas, 14 × 19".
   The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York
   Gift of the Estate of Fairfield Porter

5. **Jerry on a Stool.** 1957.
   Oil on canvas, 38 × 20½".
   The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
   Bequest of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1993

6. **Donald Schrader.** 1962.
   Oil on canvas, 30 × 28".
   The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
   Bequest of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1993

   Pen and ink on paper, 9 × 12".
   The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
   Gift of Mrs. Fairfield Porter, 1979

8. **Sketch for “Sunrise on South Main Street”.** 1973.
   Pen and ink on paper, 11 × 14½".
   The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
   Gift of Mrs. Fairfield Porter, 1973

   Pencil on paper, 11 × 14".
   The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
   Bequest of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1993

10. **Still Life with White Boats.** 1968.
    Oil on canvas, 20 × 20".
    Private Collection, Florida
    Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

11. **Spruce and Birch.** 1964.
    Oil on canvas, 22 × 24".
    Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

    Oil on canvas, 14 × 18".
    Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

    Oil on canvas, 45 × 45".
    Private Collection, Pennsylvania
    Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

    Pencil on paper, 12 × 17".
    Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

    Oil on canvas, 24½ × 22".
    Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York
16. **Breakfast in Maine.** 1954.
   Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 × 35" 
   Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York

17. **Self-Portrait.** 1968.
   Oil on canvas, 59 × 45 3/8"
   The Dayton Art Institute, Ohio
   Museum purchase with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and various matching funds. 1973

   Charcoal on paper, 12 × 18"
   Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York

   Ink on paper, 8 1/4 × 10 3/4"
   Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

20. **Untitled (View Through Interior Window).**
    undated.
    Ink on paper, 9 × 5 1/4"
    Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

    Pencil on paper, 20 × 14"
    Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

22. **Untitled (Portrait in Profile).** undated.
    Pencil on paper, 17 × 14"
    Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

23. **Untitled (Coastline).** 1962.
    Pencil on paper, 8 3/4 × 10 3/4"
    Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

24. **Southampton.** c. 1955.
   Pencil on paper, 15 × 20"
   Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

25. **Untitled (Seated Woman Reading with Lamp).** undated.
   Pencil on paper, 17 × 14"
   Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

   Three color lithograph, 22 1/4 × 30"
   Private Collection, Dayton, Ohio

27. **Sun and Sea (Blue Sunrise).** 1975.
   Four color lithograph, 30 × 22 1/4"
   Private Collection, Dayton, Ohio

28. **The Dog at the Door (Boo Boo at the Door).** 1971.
    Seven color lithograph, 30 × 22"
    Private Collection, Dayton, Ohio

29. **Girl in the Woods (Green Girl) (Under the Elms).** 1971.
    Seven color lithograph, 32 1/4 × 24 1/2"
    Private Collection, Dayton, Ohio

30. **The Christmas Tree (Interior with Christmas Tree) (Interior).** 1971.
    Seven color lithograph, 29 1/4 × 22 1/4"
    Private Collection, Dayton, Ohio

31. **The Table.** 1971.
    Six color lithograph, 32 × 23 1/2"
    Private Collection, Dayton, Ohio
WILLEM DE KOONING

32. Studies of Men. c. 1939.
   Pencil on paper, 11 × 13¼"  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
   and the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984

33. Study for Seated Man  
    (Self-Portrait). c. 1939. 
    Pencil on paper, 14¼ × 11¾"  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
   and the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984

34. The Acrobat. c. 1942. 
   Oil on canvas, 35½ × 25½"  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
   Gift of Thomas B. Hess, 
   in memory of Audrey Stern Hess, 1977

35. Figure in Landscape No. 2. 1951. 
   Oil and pencil on paper, mounted on fiberboard,  
   33 × 15½"  
   Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
   Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
   Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

   Oil on paper, mounted on cardboard,  
   38 × 23¾"  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
   Gift of Longview Foundation, Inc.,  
   in memory of Audrey Stern Hess, 1975

37. Woman at Clearwater Beach. 1971. 
   Lithograph, 28½ × 40½"  
   Courtesy of Pace Prints, New York

   Lithograph, 28 × 37"  
   Courtesy of Pace Prints, New York

   Lithograph, 37 × 29½"  
   Courtesy of Pace Prints, New York

   Lithograph, 51½ × 37"  
   Courtesy of Pace Prints, New York

Produced by the Office of Public Relations  
256100/9507-389/AU95/3M
LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

The Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, Ohio
Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York
The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Pace Prints, New York
The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York
Private Collectors

Credits for cover photographs:

Left: de Kooning, Willem (1904– ).
The Acrobat. c. 1942.
Oil on canvas.
H. 35 1/2, W. 25 1/2 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Jerry on a Stool. 1957.
Oil on canvas.
H. 38, W. 20 1/2 in.
Signed and dated (lower left): Fairfield Porter 57.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio

The Ohio Arts Council helped fund this program with state tax dollars to encourage economic growth, educational excellence, and cultural enrichment for all Ohioans.