



OBJECT of the **month**

November 2020

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Hi, I'm Janet, a Museum Guide at the Dayton Art Institute. Thanks for joining me for this Object of the Month.

I do realize that not everyone enjoys abstract art. But I think an understanding of the movement's history and objectives may shed some friendly light.

Consider the tragic events of the first half of the 20th century: their flu pandemic, the Depression, and two horrific world wars. Then, add the challenge for artists to constantly innovate, to create a new art for the 20th century. Several artists took up this challenge by creating works that were expressive, yet non-representational, meaning that imagery was often contorted if not altogether absent.

Imagine if pure color could recall an atmosphere, even a smell, or [if] a geometrical shape could bring back a memory of an event or a place. These new artists, known as Abstract Expressionists, were challenging nearly everything that had defined art up to that moment.

While many such abstract works were left “untitled”, here we will examine a work by New York artist, Norman Lewis, who does give us a title, namely, *Cantata*, which makes a clear reference to music.

Let's take a look. You may first notice the overall darkness of the piece, setting the stage. Have lights been dimmed for a concert? Then you may notice that short white streaks populate the canvas sometimes at abrupt angles. Then, a rainbow of colors come forth in small, staccato pieces: some vivid, some muted, but none careless.

As we look closely, we begin to find bits of recognizable imagery. Can you spot what looks like the golden bell of a horn near the painting's center? Wander down and you may notice shapes that remind me of laced men's shoes and the endpin of a bass fiddle nearby.

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On to the right of those shoes you should find the artist's signature and above that a small cluster of shapes that I think resemble feathers. Take a step or two back and magic begins to happen. You may notice that all these bits are actually contained and constitute forms—musicians, perhaps? Do you find any faces?

Personally, as the daughter of a jazz lover, I find this piece reminds me of a smoky jazz joint, late at night, where the air is full of lively and improvisational music. The colors and streaks embody the broken notes of lively syncopation, perhaps a little “double time”, a hallmark of the great John Coltrane.

Norman Wilfred Lewis, the artist of this piece, was a well-respected painter, scholar, and teacher who lived from 1909 to 1979. Lewis experimented early on with social realism, works that denounced the discrimination often perpetrated against African Americans. But by 1948, when *Cantata* was painted, his focus had clearly shifted toward celebrating his culture and his community.

The Dayton Art Institute is proud to have not one but two paintings by Norman Lewis on view in its galleries. I hope that you'll come see his work in our American Wing, gallery number 202. Thanks for tuning in.

END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) for full multimedia presentation.

RESOURCES

www.daytonartinstitute.org

www.americanart.si.edu

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