



ART
GALLERY
NSW

PATHS TO ABSTRACTION

1867–1917

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ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

TIMELINE
EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT

PATHS TO ABSTRACTION 1867–1917 TIMELINE

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.

Terence Maloon

Curator, *Paths to Abstraction 1867–1917*

TIMELINE KEY:

BLUE text indicates general historical world events.

BLACK text indicates events related to art.

1867

London-based artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) begins emphasising the ‘musical’ qualities of painting, giving his works ‘musical’ titles such as *Symphony in white*, *Harmony in silver and blue* and *Arrangement in grey*.

1871

Prussia defeats France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) leading to the unification of Germany and the rise to power of the Paris Commune.

1873



Nocturne in grey and silver, the Thames, c1873 by Whistler.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler
Nocturne in grey and silver, the Thames, c1873
oil on canvas, 44.7 x 60.3 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Purchased 1947

Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) paint side by side in the surroundings of Pontoise, France.

A stockmarket crash in New York triggers a severe international economic depression.

Christopher Sholes (1819–1890) invents the Remington typewriter and the QWERTY keyboard.

James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879) publishes *A treatise on electricity and magnetism*.

1874

The first exhibition of Impressionist painting is held at the Paris studio of photographer Félix Nadar (1820–1910), featuring works by Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Alfred Sisley (1839–1899), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), Pissarro and Claude Monet (1840–1926) whose painting *Impression: sunrise 1872* gives rise to the term ‘Impressionism’. The exhibition is derided by the public and critics alike.

1876

The second Impressionist exhibition is held at the Durand-Ruel Gallery, 11 rue Le Peletier, Paris. Twenty artists including Monet, Degas, Pissarro, Renoir and Sisley exhibited 252 paintings. The public and critical reception is no better apart from a review by the critic Louis Edmond Duranty (1833–1880), who perceived the artistic importance of their analysis of light.

Queen Victoria (1819–1901) is proclaimed Empress of India.

The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, led by Thathá ka Íyotake or Sitting Bull (c1831–1890), defeat a US Army regiment in the Battle of Little Big Horn, also known as Custer’s Last Stand.

Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922) patents the telephone.

A gas engine by Nikolaus August Otto (1832–1891) becomes the prototype for the modern internal combustion engine.

1877

The third Impressionist exhibition, boldly titled 'Exhibition of Impressionists', is held at 6 rue Le Peletier, Paris. It was to be the most significant of the three exhibitions, including work by Monet, Pissarro, Sisley and Cézanne.

Whistler completes *Nocturne: black and gold – the falling rocket*, continuing his exploration of the relationship between painting and music.

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) invents the phonograph.

1880

Edison patents the electric light bulb.

1883

Monet moves his studio to Giverny, France and begins a series of paintings of his gardens and ponds.

1884

Georges Seurat completes *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. His method, known as pointillism, in which individual dots of pure colour become optically mixed when seen from a distance, becomes a foundation for later artists whose interest is primarily the interaction of colour.

Hiram Maxim (1840–1916) invents the machine gun.

Charles Parsons (1854–1931) patents the steam turbine engine.

The first skyscraper, the ten-storey Home Insurance Building, is built in Chicago.

1885

Karl Friedrich Benz (1844–1929) develops the first automobile to run using the internal-combustion engine.

1886

Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) moves to Paris.

In Oslo, Norway, Edvard Munch (1863–1944) exhibits his picture *The sick child*, based on his sister's death, and receives a negative response from critics and his family.

1888



Banks of the Marne,
c1888 by Paul Cézanne.

Paul Cézanne
Banks of the Marne c1888
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

In Brittany, Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) and Émile Bernard (1868–1941) create bold, flattened forms separated by dark contours in paintings rendered in bright, unmodulated colours, drawing on Bernard's style known as Cloisonnism. This style, which they call 'Synthetism', aims to express the essence of objects, emotions and ideas beyond the visual world.

1888

In the company of Gauguin, Paul Sérusier (1864–1927) creates *The talisman*, inspiring his fellow art students to form the Nabis.

Gauguin and Van Gogh spend nine weeks living and working together in the Yellow House in Arles, France. The flat areas of colour in their work and change in emphasis from a strict depiction of reality to a fusion of the ideal and the real indicates a major development in the growth of abstraction.

George Eastman (1854–1932) launches the Kodak, the first camera to use roll film.

1889

The Eiffel Tower and Paris Métro are completed in conjunction with the Paris Exposition Universelle.

The 9 by 5 Impression exhibition opens in Melbourne. The exhibition, by 'Australian Impressionists' including Tom Roberts (1856–1931), Arthur Streeton (1867–1943), Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917) and Charles Conder (1868–1909), features paintings mostly done on cigar box lids of 9 x 5 inches. The artists' interest in capturing 'fleeting effects' and their fresh, sketch-like approach to painting inspired harsh criticism from Melbourne's leading art critic James Smith from *The Argus*.

1890

In Paris, Maurice Denis (1870–1943) declares that 'a picture is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order'.

1893

Gauguin returns to France from his first, three-year sojourn in Tahiti and begins a series of primitivist woodcut prints, beginning a new and vital tradition in printmaking.

New Zealand becomes the first country in the world to grant all citizens, including women, the right to vote.

1894

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) composes the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (Prelude to the afternoon of a faun), an orchestral work inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's poem of 1876.



The doors 1894 by Edouard Vuillard.

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

1895

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) first sees Monet's *Haystacks* exhibited in Moscow and is struck by the 'unsuspected power of the palette' and the way in which 'objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture'.

Cézanne begins a series of paintings of the landscape at Saint-Victoire, France. His method of dissection, simplification and reassemblage of the colour and form of the landscape as an abstract composition later influence the development of Cubism by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963).

Wilhelm Röntgen (1845–1923) produces and detects x-rays, for which he is awarded the first Nobel Prize in physics in 1901.

The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864–1948) and Auguste (1862–1954), hold their first public screenings of projected motion pictures in Paris.

1896

Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937) develops the wireless telegraph.

1897

Joseph John 'JJ' Thomson (1856–1940) discovers that atoms contain smaller particles now known as electrons, and were therefore divisible.

Henri Matisse (1869–1954) first visits Australian painter John Peter Russell (1858–1930) at Belle-Ile-en-Mer, an island off the Brittany coast, who introduces him to Impressionism and to the work of Van Gogh.

1898

Vienna Secession is founded by Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) and other artists. Exhibitions of modernist design are held in the group's building, designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867–1908).

1899

Aspirin, also known as acetylsalicylic acid, is patented by the Bayer drug company.

1900

The interpretation of dreams is published by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), followed in 1905 by *Three essays on sexuality*, leading to the development the new discipline of psychoanalysis.

German physicist Max Planck (1858–1947) formulates quantum theory, marking a turning point in the development of physics.

Kodak launches the Box Brownie camera, popularising photography and introducing the concept of the snapshot.

1901

The six separate colonies of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia form a federation, the Commonwealth of Australia.

Edward VII succeeds Queen Victoria as British monarch following her death.

1902

The film *A trip to the moon*, directed by Georges Méliès (1861–1938), opens in Paris.

Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) begins publication of the journal *Camera Work*, which will continue through 1917, promoting modern photography as a fine art.

In Australia the Commonwealth Franchise Act gives women in all states the right to vote, although women had been allowed to vote and stand for Parliament in South Australia since 1894 and in Western Australia since 1899. Indigenous Australians as well as people of Asian, African, and Pacific Island backgrounds were still largely excluded from voting.

1903

The Wright brothers, Orville (1871–1948) and Wilbur (1867–1912), successfully fly the first controlled gasoline-powered airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Autochrome Lumière, an early colour photography process, is patented by the Lumière brothers.

1904

Matisse and Picasso are introduced to 'primitive' art when they see three Yoruba figures displayed in the Paris studio of André Derain (1880–1954).

1905

A massacre of unarmed protestors in St Petersburg by the Imperial Guard of Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) triggers the 1905 Russian Revolution.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) formulates the Special Theory of Relativity.

The first exhibition of Fauvist art is held in Paris at the Salon d'Automne. Among the group are Matisse, Derain, Raoul Dufy (1877–1953) and Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958). On seeing the colourful paintings surrounding a sculpture by the Italian Renaissance master Donatello, the critic Louis Vauxcelles observed, 'Ah, Donatello au milieu des fauves!' (Ah, Donatello is found among the wild beasts!) The term Fauves remains associated with the group.

Die Brücke (The Bridge), a group of Expressionist painters and printmakers including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Erich Heckel (1883–1970) and Emil Nolde (1867–1956), is founded in Dresden.

In 1905, Stieglitz opens the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York, where he exhibits the work of photographers as well as European and American modernist painters and sculptors.

1906

Picasso begins to collect African artworks which influence the development of his work.

Matisse shows his ground-breaking paintings in the Salon des Indépendants in Paris; critics used the words 'abstract' and 'abstraction' to describe them.

The world's first feature-length film, *The story of the Kelly Gang*, directed by Australian Charles Tait, premieres in Melbourne on Boxing Day.

1907

Picasso visits the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and later completes his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (The prostitutes of Avignon), combining elements appropriated from Iberian motifs with a radical approach to the articulation of space. He meets Braque, beginning a relationship that will result in the development of Cubism, Analytical Cubism and Synthetic Cubism.

The Triple Entente is signed by France, the United Kingdom and Russia, an alliance that counterweights the one between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

A retrospective exhibition of the work of Cézanne, who had died of pneumonia the previous year, is held at the Salon d'Automne, greatly influencing the future direction of the avant-garde in Paris.

1908

Braque completes *Houses at L'Estaque* in which 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 (called *passages* in French).

The Ford Motor Company introduces the assembly line, leading to the mass production and affordability of the Model T Ford car.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) formulates the Quantum Theory of Light, completes the Theory of Special Relativity and proves that energy and matter are linked in the relationship: $E=mc^2$. (The energy content of a body is equal to the mass of the body times the speed of light squared).

1909

Kandinsky creates his first abstract paintings.

The Futurist Manifesto, by Italian poet Filippo Marinetti (1876–1944), is published in Paris in *Le Figaro*.

Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929) launches Ballets Russes in Paris.

1910

The journal *Der Sturm* (The Storm) begins publication in Berlin, promoting avant-garde art and ideas. It is especially known for its reproduction of Expressionist woodcuts and graphics.

Roger Fry (1866–1934) organises the exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* at the Grafton Galleries, London.

The first exhibition by the Jack of Diamonds group of Russian avant-garde painters includes works by Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich (1879–1935).

Cubism reaches the brink of abstraction. The paintings and graphic works Picasso produces in Cadaqués are notionally figures, landscapes, interiors and still lifes, but these objects are treated in a similar, apparently interchangeable manner.

1911



Glass of absinthe 1911 by Georges Braque.

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.

The paintings of Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980), a leading exponent of Austrian Expressionism, are included in the Hagenbund exhibition in Vienna. Critic Arthur Roessler (1877–1955) refers to them as 'massacres in paint'.

The Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group of avant-garde artists is founded in Munich. Members include Kandinsky, Franz Marc (1880–1916), Paul Klee (1879–1940) and August Macke (1887–1914). The group is united by a search for aesthetic forms through which to convey spiritual ideals.

Matisse paints *The red studio*, demonstrating his use of bright colours and variable perspective.

Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (1872–1928) reaches the South Pole.

1912



Tiger by Franz Marc

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

The first edition of Guillaume Apollinaire's (1880 – 1918) periodical *Les Soirées de Paris*, in which he announces the first appearance of abstract painting, is published.

Kandinsky publishes his artist's book *Klänge*, featuring his first completely abstract woodcuts, and *Concerning the spiritual in art*, in which he locates the origins of abstraction in mysticism.

Exhibition of Der Blaue Reiter group in Berlin at Der Sturm Gallery. Kandinsky and Marc publish *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*.

The first purely abstract works are exhibited to large public audiences at the Salon d'Automne exhibition held in Paris.

An exhibition by the Jack of Diamonds group in Moscow includes work by Kirchner, Heckel, Max Pechstein (1881–1955), Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) and Fernand Léger (1881–1955).

Czech-born artist Frantisek Kupka (1871–1957) exhibits *Amorpha: fugue in two colours* at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. The same year Kupka creates *Vertical schemes I*, which will later be described as the first purely geometric work in modern painting.

[The *Titanic* sinks after colliding with an iceberg in the North Atlantic, killing over 1500 people.](#)

The inaugural exhibition of The Section d'Or (Golden Section), a collective of painters and critics associated with Orphism, an offshoot of Cubism, is held at the Galerie La Boetie in Paris. Exhibiting artists included Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and his brothers Raymond Duchamp-Villon (1876–1918) and Jacques Villon (1875–1963), Juan Gris (1887–1927), Francis Picabia (1879–1930) and Léger. The opening address was given by French poet, playwright and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918).

Exhibition of work by Robert Delaunay (1885–1941) at Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin.

1913



Study for 'Painting with white border' (Moscow) 1913 by Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky
Study for 'Painting with white border' (Moscow) 1913
watercolour, gouache, ink, 39 x 35 cm,
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1982
© Wassily Kandinsky/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney.

The International Exposition of Modern Art (the 'Armory Show') is held in New York, introducing the modernist work of Matisse, Kandinsky, Brancusi, Picasso, Braque and others to America on a large scale. Duchamp's *Nude descending a staircase* creates a public sensation.

[Fights break out among the audience in response to atonal musical pieces by Arnold Schoenberg \(1874–1951\) and others at a concert in Vienna.](#)

A major exhibition of paintings by Aristarkh Lentulov (1882–1943), a founder of the Jack of Diamonds group, is held in Moscow. The exhibition has a significant effect on Russian avant-garde artists who absorb the Cubist principles of his work.

Malevich creates *Basic Suprematist element*, which he considers his first work to entirely abandon recognisable subject matter and to exemplify Suprematism.

Duchamp exhibits *Bicycle wheel*, an inverted bicycle wheel mounted on a stool. This is the first exhibition of a 'readymade', although he doesn't coin the term until 1915.

Apollinaire publishes *The Cubist painters*, which codifies the common objectives of these artists.

1914

Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977) makes his first film appearance in *Making a living*.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863–1914) and his wife in Sarajevo triggers World War I. Braque enlists in the French army.

Kandinsky returns to Russia.

1915



House under construction 1915–16 by Kasimir Malevich

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

Malevich launches Suprematism at the 0.10 Exhibition in St Petersburg.

Italian Futurists experiment with multimedia events.

Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922) in New York and Thomas A Watson (1854–1934) in San Francisco make the first transcontinental telephone call in the US.

Einstein formulates the General Theory of Relativity.

1916

Romanian-born poet Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) writes the founding manifesto of the Dada movement which begins in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire. Artists Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971), Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) and Hannah Höch (1889–1978) are among those associated with the movement. Appalled by the horrific destruction and carnage of World War I and the nationalism and materialism that produced it, Dadaists celebrate anarchy and irrationality in works of visual art and staged events.

At the Battle of Verdun, there are 976 000 French and German casualties. At the Somme, 1 215 000 Allied and German soldiers are killed or wounded.

1917

The first Dada exhibition, held in Zürich, is notable for the predominance of abstract works.

Duchamp exhibits *Fountain*, an upturned urinal signed 'R Mutt', at the Society of Independent Artists in New York. This work questions what it means to be an artist and what constitutes a work of art.

The Dutch magazine *De Stijl* begins publication, making a compelling argument for the integration of abstract painting, sculpture, architecture and design.

Tsar Nicholas II abdicates in Russia, leading to a provisional government that is, in turn, overthrown by the Bolshevik Revolution in October. Abstract artists including Malevich and Iván Kliun (1873 – 1943) help define the revolution's 'advanced' style.
