

Louis Bunce: Dialogue with Modernism
January 21 – March 26, 2017
Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University

Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Louis Bunce: Dialogue with Modernism*, and offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of Louis Bunce
- To explore recurring subject matter and compositional elements in the artist's work
- To examine the artist's use of a variety of styles to respond to his environment
- To explore the role of place in the work of Louis Bunce

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss how the artist uses the parts and principles of art in his work.
- Identify stylistic characteristics of the artist's work.
- Discuss how the artist uses a variety of styles, from representational to abstract, in response to the natural terrain of Oregon.
- Explore their own responses to place through their artwork.

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

by Roger Hull, exhibition curator

Louis Bunce (1907–1983), one of Oregon’s major twentieth-century artists, was active from 1925 until his death in 1983—a span of time that saw major transformations in European and American modern art. The seismic shifts that occurred in international art-making inspired Bunce to create a body of work that responded to, engaged with, and often transformed the shifting currents of the avant garde. His was a creative life in direct dialogue with modernism.

Louis Bunce was born and spent his childhood in Wyoming, moving with his family to Oregon in 1920. In Portland, he attended Jefferson High School and in 1925 enrolled at the Museum Art School (now Pacific Northwest College of Art). After a year of study, he and his friend and fellow student William Givler traveled to New York to enroll at the Art Students League. There, Bunce met another student who had been born in Wyoming and hailed from the west. This was Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), and Bunce’s friendship with Pollock and other New York artists provided him with an enduring connection to the scene there.

In the 1930s, Bunce created art under the auspices of the New Deal programs and in 1938–1939 was an instructor and assistant director of the WPA Federal Art Center in Salem, where he met and married Eda Hult. In 1940, they moved to New York for two years. Louis painted for the New York WPA, cemented friendships with emerging New York avant-garde artists, and immersed himself in the burgeoning art scene.

Back in Portland during World War II, Bunce worked in the shipyards in support of the war effort and in 1946 joined the faculty of the Museum Art School. A charismatic if unconventional instructor, he taught and encouraged young artists who became key figures in Northwest modern art. He fascinated his students because he was a disciplined artist but also an engaging and inclusive conversationalist (often after hours in bars with students and friends), a connoisseur of fine food and wine, a stylish dresser, a womanizer who in turn magnetized women, and a lover of publicity—of being the talk of the town.

Bunce, who began his career by embracing Cézanne and concluded it with postmodern Romanticism, explored variations of *Pittura Metafisica* in the later thirties, Surrealism in the 1940s, nature-based adaptations of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s, and revisions of Pop Art and Minimalism in the 1970s. The work he created at the very end of his life is unabashedly Romantic. Paradoxically, he was a singularly original artist even as he explored and emulated many aspects of mainstream modernism.

Arguably, Louis Bunce was the major Oregon modern artist of the twentieth century—a claim that can be substantiated on the basis of his enormously skilled production in many styles and modes, his friendship with artists on the New York scene that provided links between the Big Apple and the Rose City, and the sheer force of his amiable, extroverted personality.

A SENSE OF PLACE: Three Works from the Exhibition

(Text excerpted from exhibition catalogue, *Louis Bunce: A Dialogue with Modernism*)

1.



Mary Randlett

Portrait of Louis Bunce (not in the exhibition)

1971

Gelatin silver print

10 ¼ x 9 ½”

Hallie Ford Museum of Art. The Bill Rhoades Collection. A Gift in Memory of Murna and Vay Rhoades.

My visual world is the West, in particular the largeness and dramatic variety of the Oregon country, from the greybound, hushed harmonies of the Pacific coast to the upheaval of black and white in the high plateaus...I seek an order which will reveal the inner life, the substance and pulse of space and light, which nature, in a surprising procession of form, color and rhythm, parades before my eye mind.

Louis Bunce

While Louis Bunce was inspired by the art of his time, he was also stimulated by the environments in which he lived and worked. There is a fundamental sense of place in his art, whether the low-lying river-split city of Portland, the Columbia Gorge as explored from Mosier, the Oregon coast as explored from Port Orford or Newport, the charred hillsides of the “Tillamook Burn,” or the desert interior of Oregon. Even as his art grew more abstract, Bunce embraced the visual as it occurred out the window and down the road as well as inside the spaces of art – museums, galleries and artists’ studios. He thus forged a body of work based on his own responses to diverse worlds richly viewed.

2.



Coast Highway

1934

Oil on canvas

18 x 22"

Mark Ross Gearhart Collection

In 1931, after studying four years at the Art Students League in New York, Louis Bunce returned to Oregon.

For Oregon artists, such places as the ocean beaches, coastal hills, and the Columbia Gorge were close-at-hand natural environments of the sort that Louis Bunce visited in Maine with other artists during his years at the Art Students League in New York. "I wanted to get back to landscape, devote myself to the bigness of the land, landscape forms, renewal" Bunce said, noting, [I] selected a different palette for Oregon. Viridian green and ultramarine, black green, dark underneath, dry, burned-out earth...ochres."

Louis Bunce spent time in the early 1930s in the deepwater-port town of Port Orford on the southern coast. In *Coast Highway*, he has chosen an elevated viewpoint, in this case the road meandering through brushily painted coastal hills and dales in a composition of curves and counter-curves. Broad, flattened land forms flirt with becoming abstract shapes in a way that anticipated the more complete merger of terrain and abstraction in Bunce's work in later years.

3.



Burned Land No. 2

1951

Oil on canvas

45 x 22 7/8"

Collection of Olivia Leiken Schmierer

Much of Bunce's painting of the 1950s is devoted to landscape and its abstraction, in works that evolved from segmented, **pictographic** compositions in the early years of the decade to increasingly fluid abstract compositions later in the fifties. For his subject matter and his inspiration for abstract pattern and texture, Bunce throughout the fifties referred to the landscape and topography of Oregon – the coast, the geological formations of Central, Eastern, and Southern Oregon, and the forests of the Coastal Range.

The inspiration for *Burned Land No. 2* was the so-called "Tillamook Burn," which in 1951 was well known to many Oregonians. According to Doug Decker, Oregon's immediate past state forester, "the Tillamook Burn was a catastrophic series of large forest fires in the northern Oregon Coast Range Mountains fifty miles west of Portland. It began in 1933 and struck at six-year intervals through 1951, burning a combined total of 355,000 acres (554 square miles)." For a generation of Oregonians whose lives were touched by the fires, "The Burn" also became a place, defined by the overall perimeter of the combined fires (as in "Let's drive up into The Burn to see if we can find some deer..." Or "let's drive up to the Burn to get ideas for paintings"). Louis Bunce and other Oregon artists painted their interpretations of "The Burn" in the early 1950s.

Burned Land No. 2 is typical of Bunce's abstractions in the early years of the decade with its segmented, pictographic composition. It is angular and **Cubist**, suitable for suggesting the skeletal trees and snags left after a devastating forest fire. Vertical in format, the painting's proportions accommodate the spindly shafts of denuded tree trunks that rise from the bottom edge of the work to the top. These are stylized splinters, forming a crystalline central core to the painting.

Using a multiplicity of shapes, textures, and marks, Bunce renders a variety of separate visual zones, clustering them to offer the viewer many focal points of interest. Overlaying the basic topography of the painting are dexterously rendered black lines of calligraphic curves that gracefully traverse and accent the angular passages of the work.

Burned Land No. 2 was exhibited in the Whitney Biennial for 1951-1952. The critic Henry McBride declared in a laconic review in *ArtNews* that Bunce was one of just nine artists in the sprawling exhibition "who jolted me out of my complacency." He described six of the nine as "abstract" and Bunce's *Burned Land No. 2* as "almost abstract" and evidence of Bunce's "ease and security in...usage of the new manner" of painting in the postwar period.

4.



Ravine No. 2
1953
Oil on canvas
45 x 32”
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

During the 1950s, Louis Bunce’s work evolved from segmented, pictographic compositions of the early years – as seen in *Burned Land No. 2* – to increasingly fluid abstract compositions later in the decade.

Bunce in the 1950s took a keen interest in painting abstractions of geological formations found not only at the coast and Coast Range, but also the rocky cliffs of the Columbia Gorge: densely composed arrangements of rounded shapes that evoke geological formation as well as artistic ancestry in Cubism – but with the language of Cubism made billowy and organic.

Ravine No. 2 is one of several paintings that bring the viewer into close proximity with rock faces (*Cliffside*, which is also in the exhibition, is another). There is an interplay of angular and curved components that references geological forms and the slit at the top suggests a spear of sky through the rock. The palette features zones of opalescent gray-browns and blue-greens, surrounded by soft grays and whites, with delicate black lines that pick out contours and accent particular areas. The massing of broadly painted zones, together with the delicate tracery of drawn lines, assures that the composition combines density and weight (geological qualities) with the speed and grace of calligraphy – bringing to mind prehistoric painting that animates the walls of caves with the fleeting touch of the human hand.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

Before the Museum visit

My visual world is the West, in particular the largeness and dramatic variety of the Oregon country, from the greybound, hushed harmonies of the Pacific coast to the upheaval of black and white in the high plateaus....I seek an order which will reveal the inner life, the substance and pulse of space and light, which nature, in a surprising procession of form, color and rhythm, parades before my eye mind.

Louis Bunce

Without giving students titles or information about the individual works, read the above quote from Louis Bunce and use the suggested discussions below for *Coast Highway*, *Burned Land No. 2*, and *Ravine No. 2*

- Describe what you see in the work.
 - What is your first impression of this work – subject matter, atmosphere, mood, etc.?
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (line, color, shape, form, texture, space, value), and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - Does this scene appear realistic? Why or why not? Is this a place you recognize, or is it similar to a place you have seen before?
- Read the title and the information about the work, noting that it represents a specific place or terrain in Oregon.
 - How does this influence your experience of the work? Do you see new things, make new connections? Do you think the title an artist gives to a work is important to understanding it? Why or why not?
- Compare and Contrast:
 - Compare and contrast *Coast Highway*, *Burned Land No. 2*, and *Ravine No. 2*. How are they similar? How are they different? How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, positive and negative space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis).
 - Exhibition curator Roger Hull observes that in *Coast Highway*, “Land forms flirt with becoming abstract shapes in a way that anticipated the more complete merger of terrain and abstraction in Bunce’s work in later years.”
 - Discuss the varying degrees of realism and abstraction in the three landscapes. (Abstraction means that natural forms and objects are not rendered in a naturalistic or representational way, but are simplified or distorted to some extent, often in an attempt to convey the essence of the form or object.)

- Have students analyze how Bunce has abstracted the individual landscapes. For each one, what has he chosen to include, omit, simplify or exaggerate and why? What appears to be the most important “essence” for the artist to convey in each example?
- Discuss the following quotes as they relate to *Coast Highway*, *Burned Land No. 2*, and *Ravine No. 2*.

I seek an order which will reveal the inner life, the substance and pulse of space and light, which nature, in a surprising procession of form, color and rhythm, parades before my eye mind.

Louis Bunce

Louis Bunce used landscape as a vehicle for abstraction, and, in turn, abstraction as a vehicle for responding to nature....

Roger Hull

At the Museum

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don’t try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at individual works and:
 - Describe what they see.
 - Describe how the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, positive and negative space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis).
 - Consider whether the depiction is representational, does it show a degree of abstraction, or is it non-representational (having no recognizable subject matter, such a person, a house or a tree)? Explain.
- Look for other subject matter in Bunce’s work (cityscapes, the human figure, still-life).
 - Compare and contrast two or three pieces within the same subject matter. How are they similar? How are they different?
 - Compare and contrast two or three pieces with different subject matter. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Look for elements of composition, texture, palette, and light-dark contrasts that recur in Bunce’s work, even in works that are different in theme and style.
- Look for Bunce’s use of delicate line that recurs in his paintings, and consider how it works to describe or define the more monumental forms within the composition.

- Exhibition curator Roger Hull states:

“Bunce was a masterful painter in the most basic, medium-centric terms of brushstroke and ‘touch’ – in the way he transferred pigment to brush, touched brush to surface, lifted the brush, and applied it again and in ongoing sequence of calibrated movements and gestures.”

and

“[H]e worked and reworked his surfaces, often scraping away sections that might be good in themselves, but not good for the whole...[The] seamless merger of nature and art, of terrain and painterly abstraction, [is] pure Louis Bunce.”

- In pairs or small groups, choose a work for discussion that you feel illustrates Hull’s observations and embodies the idea of a “seamless merger of nature and art, of terrain and painterly abstraction.”

Back in the Classroom

- As curator Roger Hull observed about the artist, “Even as his art grew more abstract, Louis Bunce embraced the visual as it occurred out the window and down the road...”
 - Have a discussion about your favorite places in Oregon, both “out the window,” like your own backyard or the street where you live, or “down the road” to places like the oceans and mountains.
 - Have each student name their favorite place in Oregon and choose five “visual” words to describe it.
- Create a landscape abstraction based on the view “out the window.” Make an 8 ½ x 11 sized “window” out of cardboard, and place it so that you can view a landscape through it.
 - Describe your view: the time of day, the weather, the light, the mood or atmosphere.
 - Choose 4-5 colors found in your view that you think are the most important.
 - Choose 4-5 shapes found in your view that you think are the most important.
 - Using cut/torn colored paper for collage, make colored shapes based on the colors and shapes that you chose above. Think about what parts of the landscape you want to include, omit, simplify or exaggerate and why.
 - On a piece of 8 ½ x 11 paper, arrange them into a simplified, abstract landscape that expresses the essence, the “feeling” of the landscape. Again, think about what you want to include, omit, simplify or exaggerate and why. Remember: the purpose is not to faithfully reproduce the original but to be creatively inspired by it.
 - Share your work and explain the choices you made in creating your landscape abstraction.

GLOSSARY

Cubist/Cubism One of the most influential visual art styles of the early twentieth century. Created by Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881-1973) and Georges Braque (French, 1882-1963) between 1907 and 1914, Cubism reduced and fractured objects into geometric forms, and emphasized the flat, two-dimensionality of the canvas.

Pictographic: Referring to the pictorial symbols found in prehistoric cave drawings; drawings more expressive of the idea of a person or thing rather than a detailed depiction.

RESOURCES

Hull, Roger, *Louis Bunce: Dialogue with Modernism*, 201. Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle.

Other places to see Louis Bunce's work:

http://willamette.edu/arts/hfma/exhibitions/library/2016-17/bunce_gallery_dialogue/about_louis_bunce.html

CONTENT STANDARDS

Visual Arts

Anchor Standard 1: Creating-Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Creating-Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 7: Responding- Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Responding – Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Responding – Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Anchor Standard 10: Connecting-Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Anchor Standard 11: Connecting-Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to making art.







