

## YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

### Angles on Art

“New and Improved: Transformations in Art”

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*Transcript of Web feature*

#### Introduction

Hello, I'm Zoë. I'm a senior art history major at Yale, and I hope to go to medical school some day. Much of what I love about art is what interests me about medicine—learning about people. Discovering the human inspiration behind an artwork is the key that transforms the work from a simple object to a complex and meaningful experience. With this in mind, the theme of my tour is transformations in art. We will be looking at transformations that occur in subject matter, as well as more subtle transformations, such as in style, material, and philosophy.

**John Gregory (American, 1879–1958)**

*Philomela, 1922*

This small bronze depicts a moment from the Greek myth of Philomela, in which a young girl is raped and has her tongue cut out by her lustful brother-in-law. Taking pity on her, the gods turn Philomela into a nightingale to make up for the loss of her voice. Gregory has chosen to represent this moment of Philomela's transformation from woman to animal, and although the myth is gruesome, the bronze is especially graceful and peaceful. Gregory uses this dynamic of opposites to create a statue that, while small, has vitality and power. The owner of this bronze and a friend of the artist, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, was an outspoken and powerful member of the New York art scene in the 1920s and 30s. As an artist and patron at a time when the arts were dominated by men, I imagine the image of a woman in flight would have appealed to her personally. The theme of female transformation would have been particularly apt in 1922: only a few years previously, American women gained the right to vote.

*Neoclassical couch*

New York, 1820–30

After the American Revolution, American decorative arts were characterized by a departure from European traditions. The old imperial style was discarded in favor of a renewed interest in Grecian art, literature, and philosophy, fueled by recent discoveries of ancient ruins and lost manuscripts. This couch echoes the transformation from the European Rococo style to the new Neoclassical in its construction and ornamentation. Instead of a massive, dark, heavy design, the delicate piece looks as if it could barely support any weight at all. This particularly lavish article was made for an upper-class

family, as shown by the gilded wood, the fine paint and carving, and the abundant upholstery—at a time when cloth was one of the most expensive items. The function of the piece itself betrays its luxury—the couch was clearly made for fashionable lounging. But even the wealthy were practical with their possessions. The wheels on the feet of the couch made moving this item fast and easy, an indispensable feature for making the most of limited space.

*Relief depicting a human-headed genie watering a sacred tree*

Near Eastern, Assyrian (from the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud) 883–859 B.C.

This stone relief panel is one of the many that decorated the walls of the palace of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II. When he took the throne, Assurnasirpal commissioned a series of hundreds of these massive panels—an impressive transformation from the painted murals that traditionally decorated royal buildings. The rock itself is gypseous alabaster, an amalgam of different types of minerals and deposits. The irregular composition makes the stone difficult to carve: the intricacy and legibility of the panels is therefore a testament to the skill of the carvers. The genie depicted here would have been considered an important religious figure and seen as an intermediary between the king and the gods. He is using a cone and a bucket of pollen to fertilize a date palm. A desert food staple, the date palm was truly a “sacred tree” for Middle Eastern cultures from prehistory up to the present day. The fact that a genie is shown watering the tree—insuring a plentiful date harvest—signifies Assyrian prosperity and divine protection to any observer visiting the palace.

Frans Hals (Dutch, 1581/85–1666)

*Mevrouw Bodolphe, 1643*

Over the course of his long career as a portrait painter, Frans Hals moved from a bright palette and casual subject matter to formal works like this one. Despite the muted colors, the wealth and status of Mevrouw Bodolphe are described in the ornamental chair, the delicate lace edging on her handkerchief, and her fur jacket. Her age and possessions are presented in such a way as to awe the observer with her longevity and good fortune. But it is Mevrouw’s face that makes this work so arresting. Any portrait painter can capture a likeness; Hals is remarkable because he captures the interior life of his subjects. In this capacity, Hals is responsible for transforming the tradition of Dutch portraiture. The painting of Mevrouw Bodolphe suggests to me that this is a tough woman with likes and dislikes, successes and failures, and who is proud of her life’s work. Unlike contemporary artists of the time, Hals worked quickly and sparingly, using fast brushstrokes in single layers. This gives the painting a flat quality, making the figure seem to pop out of the background.

Piet Mondrian (Dutch, 1872–1944)

*Fox Trot B*, 1929

Piet Mondrian spent his artistic career exploring and expressing what he called “pure reality”: an attempt to understand the elements of perception by distilling the world around him down to its essence—certainly an ambitious transformation. He strove to reduce the complexity of form into its most manageable and essential pieces, and in so doing to capture the force of the world and everything in it. “The task of art,” he wrote, “is to express the super human. It is pure expression of the incomprehensible force that is universally active and that we can therefore call The Universal.” Mondrian experimented with artistic styles, moving from realism into cubism and impressionism. In 1917, he developed Neo-Plasticism, a style that incorporated only the most basic elements of representation. *Fox Trot B* is the result of this new style. Primary colors, black and white, lines and elementary shapes are the only tools used to transform a complicated universe of light and dimensionality into its building blocks, the purest forms an artist could hope to capture in paint.