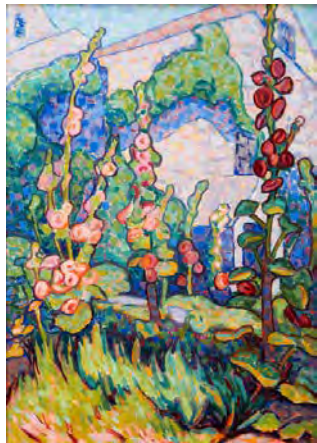


Modernist Contrarian

AMERICAN PAINTER and printmaker Blanche Lazzell (1878-1956) spent a lifetime dedicated to the pursuit of abstraction. A new monographic exhibition at the Bruce Museum tracks her unique approach and career. “Blanche Lazzell: Becoming an American Modernist” remains on view through April 27, 2025.

Born in West Virginia, Lazzell received a degree in art



from West Virginia University before studying variously, both at home and abroad. She took courses at the Art Stu-



dents League alongside Georgia O’Keeffe and studied in Europe during an extended visit from 1912-1913. Lazzell, who was born partially deaf, spent most of her life feeling at odds with the world. Never married, she positioned herself, in her own words as “contrary and particular.” But it was in her time in Paris that she “felt at last in [her] element.” Early works, like the abstracted natural scene in *Hollyhock* (1917), see her embrace a flattened sense of space, an abstracted annota-

tion of form, and a bright Fauvist palette—one she would continue to embrace across her career.

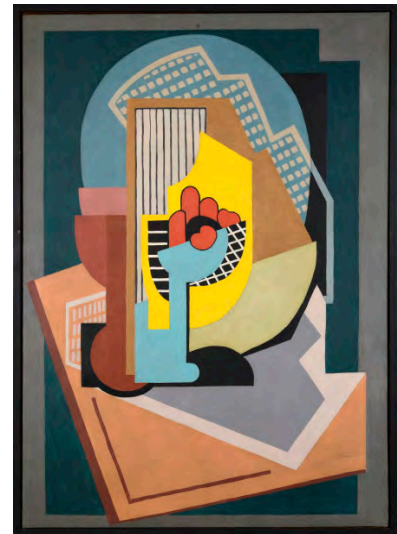
While Lazzell first encountered Cubism during her first trip abroad, she craved a more direct education in the mode. During a second trip from 1923-1924, she

studied under Ferdinand Léger, André Lhote, and Albert Gleizes. In *Painting X* (1927) the artist adapts Cubist metonymy and the look of collage for her own ends. The numbered title not only indicates Lazzell’s sustained inves-



tigation of a single subject but also reveals her belief in musical composition as a parallel for abstraction. She once compared a composer’s “arrangement of sounds” to her own harmonic handling of color and shape.

Perhaps Lazzell’s ultimate achievement as an artist was her masterful invention using white-line color woodcuts, a new American technique she



first encountered in 1915 in Provincetown, Massachusetts. After carving into a soft block of wood, she inked and transferred individual sections to create subtle almost painterly areas of floating,

translucent color. The white-line format also allowed her to focus on the contours rather than the forms of her subject matter. Later works such as *The White Petunia* (block cut in 1932, printed in 1954) and *Planes II* (1952) show her mastery of the technique. The latter also documents her continued investigations of Euro-

pean derived approaches; here the shifting planes reference the “push-pull” technique of friend Hans Hofmann.

Over her career, Lazzell inventively reframed European avant-garde modes to suit her own creative goals. She was an unfettered maverick dedicated to the pursuit of abstraction. In her own words, “[My art] will be my own or nothing.”

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