

About the Artwork



Gordon Onslow Ford, *Constellations and Grasses*, 1957, Casein on mulberry paper, 38 x 56 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © Courtesy of the Lucid Art Foundation

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In Gordon Onslow Ford's *Constellations and Grasses* (1957), radiating concentric circles pulsate like stars amidst staccato dashes of pigment. Built up in layers, marks of white, black, cornflower blue, egg yolk orange, and olive green reveal Onslow Ford's interest in the natural world, the cosmos, and the spontaneous gesture. The combination of these elements results in a dynamic composition that vibrates with energy and expands outward beyond the confines of its frame.

Onslow Ford began his painting career in Paris with the Surrealists where he experimented with automatism, a technique used to make art without conscious control. Like other artists of the time, Onslow Ford wanted to access subconscious parts of his mind and liberate his imagination through these acts of improvisation. While living in San Francisco in the late 1940s, he became part of a group of artists called The Dynaton, who used automatic techniques to explore nature, subjectivity, and metaphysics. Curator Erin Stout writes about this group's art: "Brimming with imagery like stars, galactic spirals, and kaleidoscopic human figures, the work speaks to the dynamic nature of the universe and the potentialities of existence within it."¹³

In 1952, Onslow Ford met Zen master Hodo Tobase Roshi (1895–1982) and studied **calligraphy** with him for five years, which influenced his

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artmaking. To create new works, Onslow Ford used quick-drying paint to perform a kind of action painting inspired by a calligraphic rhythm. He even incorporated his own interpretations of Chinese and Japanese characters.¹⁴ These elements can be seen in the way Onslow Ford used his brush in this painting, from the swoop of the concentric circles in the constellations to the emphatic gesture of the parallel marks depicting the grass.



About the Artist

Gordon Onslow Ford



Gordon Onslow Ford in his studio on the Ferryboat Vallejo in 1956. © Courtesy of the Lucid Art Foundation.

About the Artist

“My painting is a form of meditation. For a day to have depth, I need to paint.”¹⁵

—Gordon Onslow Ford

Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003) was born in England to an artistic family. His grandfather, Edward Onslow Ford (1852–1901), was a successful sculptor. Gordon Onslow Ford also took painting lessons from his uncle. While still in his early teens, Onslow Ford’s family enrolled him at a naval college. He subsequently pursued a career as a naval officer until 1937, when he left the military permanently to become an artist.¹⁶

In the late 1930s, Onslow Ford became involved with the Parisian **Surrealists** and formed a close friendship with artist Roberto Antonio Sebastián Matta Echaurren (Matta) (1911–2002). Together, Onslow Ford and Matta explored **automatic processes** for creating artwork, techniques that allowed them to make art without conscious control. In one method, Onslow Ford poured paint onto the canvas, anticipating artists like Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011). He called this method *coulage* (from *couler* in French, meaning “to flow”).¹⁷

In 1941, Onslow Ford traveled to New York and then to Mexico where he met artist Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959), whose *DYN* magazine explored Paalen’s and other artists’ interest in Indigenous cultures of the North American continent. During this time, Onslow Ford’s artworks began to combine dreamlike and cosmic imagery with features of the landscapes he was seeing in Mexico.

Six years later, Onslow Ford moved to San Francisco, California. There he formed a group called The Dynaton with Paalen and fellow painter Lee Mullican (1919–1998). Dynaton is Greek for “the possible” and the word captures the group’s goals of exploring the nature of reality, creativity, and the imagination through experimental painting methods. In their work and writings, the Dynaton artists brought together and appropriated

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disparate cultural and religious traditions, including Eastern philosophies, Native American cosmologies, **shamanism**, Theosophy, and Surrealist theory. In an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art (SFMA) in 1951, the group exhibited their artwork alongside objects from their personal collections, including from **Olmec** and **Mayan** cultures. Onslow Ford's work during this time moved away from landscape though still featured the natural world. It embraced the spiritual and emotional in art. Dynaton members went their separate ways after the SFMA exhibition, but their ideas influenced Onslow Ford for the rest of his life.¹⁸

In 1952, Onslow Ford met Zen master Hodo Tobase Roshi and studied calligraphy with him for five years. He applied what he learned in calligraphy to create a kind of action painting.

Onslow Ford painted until 2002, focusing on outer space imagery with abstract forms. He died on November 9, 2003 in Inverness, California.¹⁹

View and Discuss

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Ask students to describe this painting thoroughly—its colors, brushstrokes, lines, and types of marks. Ask them what their associations are with its colors, forms, and lines.

Share the title of this artwork, *Constellations and Grasses* (1957). Tell students that the painting captures the two areas of subject matter that greatly interested Onslow Ford, the cosmos and the natural world. Ask students to describe how he portrays these two areas interacting in this painting.

Challenge students to hold an imaginary paintbrush in their hands and visualize making the marks they see in this painting. How do their bodies move—their wrists, shoulders, and waists? How does it feel to move like this?

Tell students that this painting was made in 1957 and that the artist, Gordon Onslow Ford, had been studying calligraphy since 1952 with a Japanese monk. Compare this painting to Japanese calligraphy (see <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/brush-writing>). Where do they see the influence of Onslow Ford's studies on this painting?

Onslow Ford discovered that “calligraphy—not writing about something but expressing yourself in line—was the way of talking about the spirit.” Western calligraphy is “done with the fingers and the wrist while Chinese and Japanese calligraphy is done with the whole body/mind.” He said that the paintings he made influenced by this tradition were “a form of meditation.”²⁰ Ask students to compare his description to their experience with the imaginary paintbrush. How would it feel to make marks with the “whole body/mind” and as “a form of meditation”? Are there any activities students do in their lives that achieve this?

Activities

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The Line, The Circle, and The Dot

Gordon Onslow Ford said he thought of “the line, the circle and the dot” as the “three elements at the root of art.” Before he studied calligraphy, Onslow Ford said, “I was making line, circle, dot elements in a rather mechanical way that did not have the blood and bones of calligraphy.”²¹ As a class, experiment with these elements. With ink and brushes, challenge each student to fill a large piece of paper with only dots. Start small, using just the wrist, and then ask them to move their bodies in new ways, using their shoulders, their waists, and even their legs as they make their dots. How do the dots change? How do their emotions or states of mind change? Try this same experiment with circles and then lines. (For inspiration for younger students, read *The Dot* by Peter Reynolds.)

Automatic Drawing

Calligraphy was not Onslow Ford’s first attempt to tap into different parts of his mind and body. Earlier in his life, Onslow Ford experimented with techniques invented by Surrealists in Europe in order to access his subconscious mind and relinquish conscious control from artmaking. For this activity, encourage students to test some of these methods through automatic drawing. Methods might include drawing with eyes closed, drawing with a non-dominant hand, crumpling a paper first and then drawing guided by the paper’s folds. What are some other methods students can invent to take conscious control away from the process? Ask students how it feels to not have complete control over what they produce.

Action Painting Methods

Onslow Ford anticipated many important approaches in artmaking that came after him. From his poured paint methods to his calligraphic marks, his work has similarities with later artists, such as Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline (1910–1962), and Cy Twombly (1928–2011). Like Onslow Ford, these artists sought spontaneous, intuitive ways of laying down paint. For this activity, ask students to pick one action painter or Abstract Expressionist to study. They should learn about their corresponding painting methods and then try the methods. How does it feel to make art with these methods? If students could invent a new method for making spontaneous, intuitive paint marks, what would it be?

Vocabulary

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Source: adapted from Merriam-Webster (unless otherwise noted)

Automatic processes: procedures that suspend the conscious mind to release subconscious images

Avant-garde: an intelligentsia that develops new or experimental concepts, especially in the arts

Calligraphy: artistic, stylized, or elegant handwriting or lettering

Duality: the quality or state of having two different or opposite parts or elements

Esoteric: designed for or understood by a limited circle of people with special knowledge or interest

Occult: of or related to matters regarded as involving the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them

Olmec: an ancient people of the southern east coast of Mexico who flourished about 1200 to 400 BC

Mayan: a member of the peoples speaking Mayan languages, a language family of Central America and Mexico

Patronage: the support or influence of a wealthy or influential champion of an artist or writer

Shamanism: a religion practiced by Indigenous peoples of far northern Europe and Siberia that is characterized by belief in an unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits responsive only to the priests or priestesses who use magic for the purpose of curing the sick, divining the hidden, and controlling events

Surrealist: member of a movement of European poets, painters, and filmmakers founded in 1924 called *Surrealism*. Their central idea was that the unconscious mind was the source of all imagination, and that art should try to express its contents. The unconscious, they believed, revealed itself most clearly in dreams.

Symbolist: one of a group of writers and artists in France after 1880 reacting against realism, concerning themselves with general truths instead of actualities, exalting the metaphysical and the mysterious, and aiming to unify and blend the arts and the functions of the senses

Synchromist (*adapted from Britannica.com*): member of an art movement begun by American painters Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright in 1913–14 that focused on color

Theosophy: the teachings of a modern movement originating in the US in 1875 and following chiefly Buddhist and Brahmanic theories—<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theories>—specially of pantheistic evolution and reincarnation

- 1 Zakian, Michael. Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature, Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995, p. 70.
- 2 Ibid., p. 70.
- 3 Ibid., p. 70.
- 4 Ibid., p. 15.
- 5 Ibid., p. 18.
- 6 Ibid., p. 11.
- 7 Middleman, Rachel, "Outlying Modernism: Agnes Pelton, Theosophy and Gender." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 66.
- 8 Ibid., p. 67.
- 9 Ibid., p. 67.
- 10 Gawboy, Anna. "Agnes Pelton and the Musicalization of Colour." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 72.
- 11 Middleman, p. 63.
- 12 Ibid., p. 66.
- 13 Didactic text for *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*, University of California, Irvine, Institute and Museum of California Art.
- 14 Capkova, Helena, "The Dynaton." *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*. Christopher M. Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James G. Mansell, eds. Fulgur Press, 2019, p. 103.
- 15 Wenger, Michael and Kaz Tanahashi. "Creation in the Instant: An Interview with Painter Gordon Onslow-Ford." May 1991. <http://www.cuke.com/pdf-wb2/91-2-fall-onslow-ford.pdf>, p. 39.
- 16 "Gordon Onslow Ford." *Guggenheim Museum Collection Online*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/gordon-onslow-ford>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Capkova, pp. 95, 98, 100.
- 19 "Gordon Onslow Ford." *Guggenheim Museum Collection Online*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/gordon-onslow-ford>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 20 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 39.
- 21 Wenger and Tanahashi, p. 38.
- 22 Kushner, Marilyn. *Morgan Russell*. Hudson Hills Press in association with The Montclair Art Museum, 1990, p. 132.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Kushner, p. 131–2.
- 25 "Morgan Russell Collection in the Museum of Modern Art Archives." 1999. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/Russellb.html>. Accessed April 2021.
- 26 Didactic text for *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting*, University of California, Irvine, Institute and Museum of California Art.
- 27 "Morgan Russell Collection in the Museum of Modern Art Archives." 1999. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/Russellb.html>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 "Morgan Russell. *Synchromy in Orange to Form*, 1914." *MoMA's Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925*. 10 Apr 2013. <https://inventingabstraction.tumblr.com/post/47625842703/morgan-russell-synchromy-in-orange-to-form-1914>. Accessed Apr 2021.
- 30 "Synchromy in Orange: To Form." Audio Stop. *Albright-Knox Art Gallery*. <https://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k195816-synchromy-orange-form>. Accessed Apr 2021.