

Submitted by Mary Samuels

Even tho this object is in Art Adventure, the information needed updating and adult emphasis:

## 2011 Made in America

Grace Hartigan, American (1922- 2008 )

Billboard, 1957, oil on canvas, 1957, G375

**Introduction:** Billboard was painted by the artist as her personal expression of the frenetic activity of New York City in 1957, a time when American art was coming into it's own. Grace Hartigan said, "I want an art that is not abstract nor realistic. I have found my subject; it concerns that which is vulgar and vital in modern life, and the possibilities of its transcendence into the beautiful".

**Historical Context:** Following WW II, the United States emerged as a world power. New York replaced Paris as the world's art capital. Artists sought to establish an identity for American art over and above the old European standards. They chose contemporary American life as their subjects: movies, comics, food, advertising, traffic, billboards and television that reflected all the affluence, technology, consumerism, tension and unrest of the times. Abstract Expressionism dominated American and world culture throughout most of the 1950's . The artists of this movement rejected the idea of realistic subject matter and sought instead the emotion within. The movement became a rallying point for the nation. In the Cold War of the 1950s, the United States saw itself as culturally and morally superior to Europe and the protector of Western civilization from communism. Promoted as a uniquely American art form and strongly identified with individual freedom of expression, abstract expressionism both shaped and was the product of a new national consciousness.

**Biography of the Artist:** Grace Hartigan was born in New

Jersey, the oldest of four children. Her family lived in poverty. Grace was bedridden at age 5 with pneumonia. During her long recovery, she developed an inner life of imaginative play and taught herself to read and draw. She married at 17 and the couple moved to California where a son was born. When her husband was drafted into WW II, Grace stayed in CA, began training as a mechanical draftsman in an airplane factory and studied painting at night. She writes “ In 1948 I divorced Bob, gave my son to his father’s parents, asked my boss to fire me so I could collect unemployment compensation, found a loft in New York’s Lower East Side and dedicated myself to being an artist”(she felt her bohemian life would be destructive for her son). She soon met Jackson Pollack and Willem De Kooning. They accepted her as an artist. Her first show was in 1950. When the Museum of Modern Art included her in a show “12 Americans” which traveled throughout Europe, her paintings were bought by museums and collectors.

Hartigan is considered the second generation of Abstract Expressionism. Following De Kooning, she applied action, or gestural, painting techniques to studies of the human form. But her work evolved as she continually sought a balance between abstraction and realism. She studied the old masters, like Goya and Rubens, painting them from reproductions. By 1960 the reaction against Abstract Expressionism began. Hartigan moved to Baltimore and everyday objects and landscapes became her subjects. In 1965 she became the artist in residence at the Maryland Institute’s Graduate School of Painting. Hartigan was an unwitting precursor to the “pop” movement by transforming the presumably base elements of American life to the level of art.

**Key Points:** 1. Grace Hartigan ‘s work shatters any pre-established concept of balance, symmetry and representational order. Her paintings venture frankly into chaos....but within this breakthrough is the most determined search. There must be an

order to impose on this chaos for as she said “ without this rage for order, how can there be art?” Hartigan uses many kinds of lines and brush strokes to put order into **Billboard**....straight, curved, diagonal, thick, thin, jagged etc. She used wide and narrow strokes to contain the tension of the painting.

Oil paint is the basic artistic material of the post-Renaissance tradition. Hartigan used it throughout her life but found new ways to manipulate the medium.

2. Color is a primary concern in **Billboard**. Hartigan saw the work as a formal challenge in color manipulation. She began by choosing ads from Life magazine. She cut them out and pinned them on a wall in the form of a collage and painted the paper they were placed on the color purple. Then she began to paint. At first, the images in **Billboard** were much closer to the original ads. She would paint them in thin washes and then would pin on a color sample. If the color worked, she would paint it on. Hartigan manipulated the color to make all parts of the canvas appear to come forward equally so no area would appear to recede in space. Note the many areas of reds embedded in greens and reds embedded in blues. It is difficult to make both the red and green appear to be in the same plane when they are next to each other. She achieved this by balancing the intensity and size of the color areas.

3. It took Hartigan a month to do this piece but she wanted it to look as if it had only taken an hour, as she wanted its spontaneity to shine through. The only emotion she wants to elicit from the viewer is a joy of life. She did not consider her work to be social commentary but felt the piece reflects the energy and pace of New York City in 1950s.

**Questions:** 1. This painting is called **Billboard**. Describe things you have seen advertised in a billboard. We often see a billboard from inside a traveling car. How does that affect your perception?

Now let's look closely at this painting.

2. What objects do you see in this painting? Try to find the following: Ipana tooth paste smile, tube of toothpaste, wine bottle and glass, Dole pineapple, peaches and whipped cream, an apple with a bite taken out, piano keys, lime jello, figure from a soup ad, oranges (a diagram is in the Art Adventure set 'American Sampler')

3. The style of this painting is sometimes called abstract expressionism but Hartigan wanted it to be both abstract and realistic. What about this painting is realistic? What about it is abstract?

4. Grace Hartigan believes that "you should be able to enter a painting like a promenade-that you should be able to walk in anywhere and walk out anywhere" If you could walk around in this painting, where would you go? Why?

Information Sources: MIA library file on Hartigan, is extensive... Walker Art Center has 2 of her paintings

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