



Kenneth Rexroth
PAINTINGS

James S. Jaffe
Rare Books

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Introduction

KENNETH REXROTH (1905–1982) could probably have excelled at any art form—be it literary, visual, or musical—that captured his imagination. Largely self-taught and vigorously innovative, he was one of the most formidable poets, essayists, and translators of the twentieth century, a polymath whose interests ranged from Thomas Aquinas to American jazz, Buddhism to political activism, and beyond ad infinitum.

Although he is best known for his lyrical love poems, his delicate and affecting translations from Japanese, Chinese, and French poetry, and his literary and cultural criticism, Rexroth could write with equal authority about painters as different as Whistler, Turner, and Morris Graves, in part because his early life had been steeped in classical and modernist art.

As a young and inchoate painter, Rexroth studied at the Chicago Art Institute and married a talented artist, his first wife, Andrée Dutcher, one of whose paintings is offered in this catalogue. Together, they immersed themselves in the work of post-Cubist painters such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, with whom Andrée reportedly corresponded from her studio in San Francisco.



Self-Portrait

Gouache on paper, 12" wide x 13³/₄" high, ca. 1936.
Private Collection

Rexroth's earliest surviving oils from this period display a rich understanding of geometric abstraction, such as he had discovered in the works of the Russian Constructivists, the English Vorticists, the Italian Futurists, and particularly in the paintings of Piet Mondrian, among others, as well as a literary playfulness, an insinuated narrative or philosophical commentary, that can be seen in such works as "Hornpipe" (later titled "The Sailor") from 1937, and "Untitled Abstraction," circa 1926.

Rexroth was not alone among important authors who were serious about their painting. Rexroth either knew or admired other writers – Henry Miller, Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, Kenneth Patchen, e. e. cummings, Lawrence Durrell, just to name a few – who were sophisticated, prolific, and above all committed visual artists for whom the act of creating images in a variety of media – watercolors, oils, gouaches, and pastels – was crucial to their far-reaching visions and artistic places in the world.

As he became more and more committed to his writing, Rexroth continued to paint, although his art, while often still informed by modernist principles, moved away from the angular abstractions of the twenties toward the spiritual, organic, occasionally figurative work of the postwar period.

The walls of Kenneth Rexroth's rooms in San Francisco, and his home and library in Montecito, California, were covered with his art, often in his own hand-made frames. Regrettably, relatively few of these paintings survive. They were images he created over the course of an extraordinarily productive lifetime, and lived with from day to day, and year to year.

– *Bradford Morrow*

Leaving L'Atelier – Aix-en-Provence

Bare trees

Smoky lavender twigs

All the world

Receding horizontal grey blue panels

Ochre walls

Piebald pink tile roofs

Black jagged olive trees killed in the winter of great cold

Everywhere feathers of silver green new olive sprouts

Everywhere red brown plowed fields

Stubs of waiting vines

Hoarfrost on the dark purple plum buds

A black white and green magpie

In wavy flight

Under the morning moon

1] The Dignity of Jugglers Affected by Night



Wax, silica, and pure decorator colors on fiberboard, 13" wide x 18½" high, ca. 1925, signed "K. Rex" at the bottom-edge.

Rexroth's notes date the painting to 1925, and give the remark: "Cubist' colors as of the period", perhaps an allusion to Braque's palette. A man and a woman in profile turned towards each other, the painting recalls Francis Picabia's work with its rounded, curvilinear forms. The colors of the painting are monochromatic shades of gray brightening to blue, and beige deepening into black. For the 1981 UCSB retrospective, Rexroth gave the painting the title "Abstraction: The Dignity of Jugglers Affected by Night".

San Francisco Museum of Art label on the back, with title given as "Abstraction", dated "6/29/42".

Loose in frame, some light wear at edges, a few light surface marks, some small areas of surface loss (approximately ½ x ½ inch and ⅓ x ⅓ inch) at diagonally opposed corners, otherwise in very good condition.

\$5,000.00

2] Untitled Abstraction

Untitled abstract on Masonite (which Rexroth referred to as “Beaver Board”), 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ ” high x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ ” wide, ca. 1926, with a double frame (inner frame is glazed and by Rexroth, outer frame is contemporary and executed to style).

In 1944 Rexroth specified on the back of a photo of this painting what is the top and the bottom. He dated it “1926” and noted the colors: “blues, yellows on blue and blue green, white and black circles.” The composition uses Mondrian’s palette of primaries with black and white, and is a good example of Rexroth’s use of solar and lunar polarities (the white and black circles) combined with the magnet form, which also carries the association of musical notation (as in linked eighth notes). Rexroth was particularly interested in music because (like mathematics) its complex interrelationships are recorded in a precise, universal notation.

San Francisco Museum of Art label on the back, title given is “Abstraction”; date “in” is “6/29/42”. There is a remnant of another label on the back, the little bit of text remaining is illegible.

Some minor surface abrasion at top-edge (perhaps from the frame), otherwise in fine condition. \$10,000.00



3] Untitled Abstraction With Magnets



Wax, silica, and pure decorator colors on wooden board or Masonite, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ " wide x 18" high, ca. 1925-1930, signed "Kenneth Rexroth" in pencil, and framed by the artist. Undated and untitled.

This piece was given the date 1925-1930 for the UCSB Rexroth retrospective in 1981. A slightly North-of-the-centre white square is contained within a black magnet, with a red horizontal bar encasing the magnet, and a yellow magnet is poised at the bottom of the composition. The simple, flat geometrical forms are presented against a grey background. The magnets that appear in this piece are a recurring motif in Rexroth's paintings of this period, at times in fragmented or partial form, often used with geometric lines, shapes or grids, and contrasting tones or colors to suggest fields of opposing forces. Loose in the frame, some cracks in the paint, otherwise in fine condition.

\$10,000.00

4] Mountaineers

Wax, silica, and pure decorator colors on wooden board, 21½" wide x 16½" high, ca. 1936, matted and framed.

Most of Rexroth's compositions from the late 1930s through the 1960s register a shift from the magnet (transformed into a black moving line or decomposed) to all-over calligraphy to gossamer webs (calligraphic patterns interwoven with different colors) through which appears a diffuse radius of light or veiled iridescent area. Rexroth continues to use biomorphic or geometric forms as well as symbolic or representational figures. Black or white rectilinear designs (derived from Synthetic Cubism) soften. Expressionist use of linear patterns shows influences of Japanese sumi-e painting, Mark Tobey's "white writing", and the planar geometric explorations of Bradley Walker Tomlin.

San Francisco Museum of Art label on the back, title given is "Abstraction"; date "in" is "6/29/42". There's a fragment of another label present. In white chalk on the back is written: "1935 / Mountaineers".

Some tiny chips, and/or flecks, in the paint, perhaps the result of a bit of abrasion, with 14 or 15 tiny droplets of what appears to be paint in a contrasting color, a splash mark perhaps, otherwise in fine condition. \$4,500.00



5] Portrait Of My Wife



Wax, silica, and pure decorator colors on wooden board, 15⁵/₈" wide x 17³/₄" high, ca. 1936, with notes on the back in white chalk: "Marie Rexroth", and the date "1935" or "1936", framed by Rexroth.

A figurative painting of Rexroth's second wife, Marie (Kass) Rexroth. Rexroth's notes indicate the date and title of the painting, and include: "hair - orange, dress - green." Reminiscent of Matisse, the piece is not entirely representational, as the portrait shows distortions in the disposition of Marie's body (the angles of her legs and arms, the relation of Marie to the chair, and the chair to the room), and includes an abstract painting in the upper left corner, which carries a typical motif of Rexroth's work, a magnet turned on its side with two circles set in opposition. Cracks in the paint in a few places, few flecks out of the red paint of the hair, a couple of tiny chips in the black of the dress, otherwise in fine condition.

\$12,500.00

6] Hornpipe (The Sailor)

Wax, silica, and pure decorator colors on Masonite, 15⁵/₈" wide x 19⁷/₈" high, ca. 1937, framed.

Rexroth dated the painting 1937, indicated the orientation (top), and the palette: "red, yellow, blue, black, grey, white." The title, "Hornpipe" is written in the artist's hand on the verso of the painting. Rexroth also notes that another version exists in the collection of Sergei Chermayeff. For a 1973 exhibition of his works at Occidental College in Los Angeles, Rexroth retained the same dating and assigned the title "The Sailor." In the 1981 University of California at Santa Barbara Rexroth Retrospective, it was dated 1925-27. It is reproduced in letterpress on the cover of *Excerpts from a Life* (1981) and is dated "ca. 1929". Some tiny chips, and/or flecks, in the paint, perhaps the result of a bit of abrasion, otherwise near fine condition.

\$12,500.00



7] Abstract Drip Painting



Wax, silica, and color on fiberboard, 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ " wide x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high, ca. 1948-1958, unframed.

A note attached to the back of the piece in the hand of Carol Tinker (Rexroth's wife) signed and dated June 2011 reads: "This painting was done in the late 1940s in Europe. It is painted with wax, silica and colors. KR NEVER used oil paints." The theme of visionary ecstasy, reminiscent of Mark Tobey, is clearly present in this composition, painted during a period in which Rexroth became a practicing Buddhist.

Fine condition.

\$3,500.00

8] Abstract Pastel

Abstract in pastel on heavy paper, unfixed, 26½" wide x 20¼" high, ca. 1955, unframed.

Pastels became Rexroth's preferred medium throughout the 1950s and 1960s, at times combined with black ink and/or crayon. The play of light and color in the work of Venetian painters Tintoretto and Tiepolo, as well as Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, inspired Rexroth's work of this period.

Paper fragile, a few (3 or 4) approximately ¾ inch closed tears at the edges, a few old pin holes in extreme corners, a small area of dry adhesive at one edge (on the verso), approximately 1 inch high, 3 inches long, otherwise in very good to fine condition.

\$3,500.00



9] Untitled Still-Life



Masonite or fiberboard, 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ " wide x 24" high, ca. 1959, unframed.

Rexroth spent most of 1959 in Aix-en-Provence, where this painting is clearly set. A palette of white, yellow, terra cotta, purplish blue-black, brown, and silver/gray. A white bowl on a pedestal holds blackish-blue grapes and a peach. On the table covered with a dark brown cloth in the foreground is a bright-eyed fish, mottled with black, silver, gray, and yellow and on the wooden cutting board are cucumbers, eggplants, and a peach. Diagonally to the right is a large terra cotta wine decanter. The window view opens on to a lush meadow.

Fine condition.

\$7,500.00

10] **Untitled Still-Life** by ANDRÉE REXROTH (1902-1940)

Wax, silica, pure decorator colors, and watercolor on fiberboard, 7" wide x 8" high, ca. 1929 to 1933, signed "A. Rexroth" at the bottom right hand corner, unframed.

A Cubist still life with rounded objects in a style resembling Fernand Léger's and Juan Gris's Cubist works using a palette of white, gray, and earth tones (ochre, amber, taupe, terra cotta). Andrée Dutcher, a commercial artist from Chicago, married Rexroth in 1927. He encouraged her to pursue non-commercial painting and she in turn encouraged his writing. They painted together throughout their marriage and began exploring organic forms under the influence of Edward Weston in 1929. Unhappily married, they were divorced in 1940, the same year Andrée died of complications from epilepsy.

"The Downtown Gallery" label on the back, with the note, in pencil: "Still Life by Andrée Rexroth".

Fine condition.

\$4,500.00



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