



CHARMION VON WIEGAND

25.3.-

13.8.2023

kunstmuseum basel





The New York-based artist Charmion von Wiegand (1896–1983) achieved considerable acclaim for her unique visual language from the 1950s onwards. Through her paintings and collages, she enhanced the conventions of geometric abstraction by introducing concepts of form and colour originating in Far Eastern pictorial symbolism. While the practice of abstract painting had been hitherto uncharted territory for the accomplished art critic, it was to become the gateway to her career as a painter. Intimately acquainted with the contemporary New York scene, she had already established a name for herself among the literary circles of the 1920s, and later, around 1930, as a foreign reporter in Soviet Moscow. In her capacity as art critic, she approached Piet Mondrian following the latter's arrival in the USA, subsequently becoming deeply committed to his "neoplasticist" ideas, which were to then serve as the focus of her own conceptual exploration of abstraction.

Her initial interest in the theosophical writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, prompted by Mondrian, and her fascination with esoteric thought during the first half of the twentieth century, eventually gave way over the course of the 1950s to her enduring interest in Tibetan Buddhism. As a practising Buddhist, from this time on her work was given over to the composition of an artistic vocabulary, which drew on form and colour as expressive vehicles for spirituality. At the same time, the purist, modern palette as found in the Western canon was to remain her aesthetic standard.

Charmion von Wiegand provides insights into the oeuvre of this exceptional, though largely neglected, twentieth-century artist who, from the outset of her career, had embraced and given pictorial expression to transcultural openness.

Arnold Newman, Portrait of Charmion von Wiegand, 1961
© Arnold Newman Properties / Getty Images.





Early Years as Correspondent in Moscow and as a Journalist in New York

Charmion von Wiegand undertook her first visit to the Soviet Union in 1929, after completing her studies in New York City and gaining initial experience in journalism. She was sole female correspondent for the New York-based media group Hearsts Universal Service in Moscow. Among other press organisations, she wrote for the English issue of *Moscow Daily News*, a Russian communist publication. Charmion von Wiegand's interest in the USSR centred on the tangible repercussions of the Revolution on people's everyday lives and in socialist propagandist art. Von Wiegand also captured her travel experiences in such paintings as *New Russia* (1929). When visiting Moscow, she met Joseph Freeman, editor of the New York magazine *New Masses*, a publication for which she also began to write. She returned to New York with Freeman in 1932.

1934

As journalist in the USA, she became involved in subsequent years in controversial discussions on the social position of artists and the role and significance of art in society. Charmion von Wiegand's especial concern was with the compatibility of revolutionary ideas in art and politics.

Leading North American socialist magazines such as *Art Front* and *New Masses*, were forums for discussions on the virtues of figurative over abstract art. Whereas *New Masses* was primarily Soviet-oriented, during the 1930s *Art Front* functioned increasingly as the mouthpiece for politically committed forms of art in the States. Von Wiegand was the magazine's sole female editor and one of its few female authors.

Understanding itself as an advocate for artists and champion of their social and economic security, *Art Front*, as the name indicates, brought art to the political fore. Von Wiegand's debut article for *Art Front* anticipated the American Artists' Congress, established to protect North American art and culture from the threats of poverty, war and fascism.

1940

Charmion von Wiegand reviewed several exhibitions and publications, to which belonged the pamphlet *Five on Revolutionary Art*, that referred to Piet Mondrian as a "true revolutionary artist."

Room 1





We must cease to be enslaved by expensive technical equipment; we must learn to convey the revolutionary message to masses in any medium that comes to hand.

Charmion von Wiegand, "David Alfaro Siqueiros",
New Masses (New York) 11, no. 5 (May 1, 1934): 18.

Criticism actually plays the first creative role in art. / The best critics have always been creators. / Through the critique, the artist achieves a necessary clarification, which enables him to take the next step forward in his creative work.

Charmion von Wiegand, "Playwright into Critic",
New Theatre 3, no. 4 (April 1936): 35.

This is the first time in American history that artists have organized on so wide a scale for the purpose of protecting their crafts, and culture in general, in a social situation fraught with danger.

Charmion von Wiegand, "American Artists' Congress",
Art Front (February 1936): 8.

If the forms of abstract art are to have relevancy for the future society, they must inevitably undergo profound changes during a period of social revolution.

Charmion von Wiegand, review of *Five on Revolutionary Art*,
Art Front (September–October 1936): 10.

Artists joined labor and radical protest groups, changed the content of their pictures to reflect the life around them, and like other affected trades and professions demanded economic relief from the government.

Charmion von Wiegand, "Can Art Sustain Artists?",
The Nation (New York: August 24, 1940): 152.

Reproduction of the May 1, 1934 cover of the New York magazine *New Masses*, Vol. XI, no. 5; Also in this issue appeared Charmion von Wiegand's article on the revolutionary Mexican painter and printmaker David Alfaro Siqueiros.

MURAL I

Enlarged and edited reproduction of the cover of the New York magazine *Art Front*, February 1936, with an illustration by David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974). Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

Room 1





Reproduction of Edward McKnight Kauffer's study for the cover of *Five on Revolutionary Art*, 1935, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

Reproduction of the front page of *The Nation* weekly newspaper, August 24, 1940. Charmion von Wiegand's article "Can Art Sustain Artists?" appeared in this issue. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Friendship with Piet Mondrian

1942

In 1941, Charmion von Wiegand came into contact with Dutch artist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), recently emigrated to the USA. Their relationship, which evolved over two and a half years until Mondrian's death on 1 February 1944, was in many ways decisive for both of them. Von Wiegand introduced the artist to New York society, wrote articles about his work, edited his writings and produced sketches of an early version of his painting *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (1944). Von Wiegand herself recounts their friendship in various essays and interviews; taken together, along with her unpublished diary entries of the same period, these provide fascinating insights into Mondrian's life and work in New York exile during the Second World War.

Mondrian entrusted von Wiegand with several handwritten notes, which helped facilitate greater insight into his works and thus provide her with the aesthetic and theoretical framework for a planned article. Von Wiegand sent him a typewritten version of these notes shortly afterwards. Upon publication in 1943, her article became the first authoritative American contribution to Mondrian's work.

While it is doubtful if all the European art expressions recently transplanted to our shores can survive when confronted by the robust virility of America, the art of Mondrian offers a new beginning. Between his work and the environment of our great cities there exists an unconscious but spontaneous affinity.

Charmion von Wiegand, "The Meaning of Mondrian",
Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, no. 8 (Fall 1943): 62.

Room 1





Suddenly I experienced the meaning of the plane, which I had only felt before dimly and instinctively but never really comprehended. [...] I had translated from your article that to really understand the new aesthetic, one must work in it. And another phrase: that the way lies open to all. And then you censured me severely that I was a writer and had no business to be painting.

Charmion von Wiegand, in her diary, ca. Nov./Dec. 1942.

Reproduction of a photograph of Charmion von Wiegand with Piet Mondrian's *Composition No.1* (1931) standing on the roof of her apartment building, New York 1941. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproductions of selected pages of letters from the correspondence of Charmion von Wiegand and Piet Mondrian. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproduction of an envelope addressed by Piet Mondrian, postmarked 8 December 1941. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproduction of a page of Charmion von Wiegand's typewritten manuscript "Pure Abstract Art" with Piet Mondrian's handwritten annotations, 1942. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproduction of excerpts from Charmion von Wiegand's handwritten notes on Piet Mondrian's concept of art. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproduction of Charmion von Wiegand's sketch for *The Relationship Machine*, 3 August 1941. Charmion von Wiegand dreamed of such a machine to apply Piet Mondrian's creative principles. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproduction of the calendar sheet with the entry of Charmion von Wiegand on the death of Piet Mondrian. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Reproduction of the title page of the catalog designed by Herbert Bayer for the exhibition *Masters of Abstract Art*, 1942, co-curated by Charmion von Wiegand, Helena Rubinstein's New Art Center, New York.

MURAL II

Englarged and edited reproduction of the page of a letter from Piet Mondrian to Charmion von Wiegand, 4 June 1941, recto. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Room 1





New Beginnings as Painter

A letter and diary entry dated October 1942 reveal Charmion von Wiegand's return to active painting; yet, when she spoke to Mondrian about having found a 'composition', his response was curt and dismissive.

Charmion von Wiegand remained undaunted by the lack of support from her spiritual mentor. Her paintings dating from this period feature curved lines and organic forms, which – very much in the style of Mondrian – she achieves with a colour palette of black, grey, white and the primary colours red, yellow and blue.

1946

Her earliest paintings, as *Ominous Form*, *The Nuptial Form*, and *Disparate Forms* (all around 1946) may show, were inspired by her dialogue with film-maker Hans Richter (1888–1976), and the scenographer Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965). In their work and scenography, both artists drew on elements from the organic language of forms found in nature. So-called “biomorphism” was a formative influence in the artistic and intellectual life of 1940s New York, its influence ranging from design and architecture to abstract painting.

In Search of New Perspectives

Charmion von Wiegand witnessed first-hand the impact of New York's dynamism on Mondrian's work. Her paintings, characterised by the latter's sensitisation to the potential for abstraction in urban space, attest to her engagement with Mondrian's oeuvre.

Vibrant metropolises were to become a dominant sujet and featured widely in North American art throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However, with their clearly socialist background and open interest in the artistic tradition of Europe, artists of the likes of Charmion von Wiegand were hardly regarded as representative of US-American art in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and were thus held in little esteem. By the end of the 1940s, however, von Wiegand had already begun broadening her own horizon of reference and, in so doing, reorienting herself at both personal and artistic levels.

Room 1 / Room 2





Enlarged reproduction of the inside of a folding card of the invitation to the exhibition *Charmion von Wiegand* with the lists of her works on display, Saidenberg Gallery, New York, April 22–May 24, 1952. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

1952

Charmion von Wiegand's pieces dating from the 1950s reflect the artist's search for other spiritual and metaphysical precedents. It was the cultural heritage and philosophies of East Asia that disclosed to her a valuable antithesis to the prevailing materialist and individualist culture characteristic of the West. She regarded painting henceforth as a locus of intellectual enquiry and expression, whereby her artistic production manifests the emergence of a new sensual and spiritual content.

In 1951, von Wiegand attended a lecture at the Church Peace Union in New York by author and Zen Buddhist Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870–1966), in whose lectures at Columbia University (1952/53) she subsequently delved deeply into philosophy of Zen.

Her reading of Taoist texts, especially the *I Ching. Book of Changes* (among the most ancient classical Chinese texts), sparked a remarkable surge in painterly productivity. She adopted the principle of the 64 hexagrams as elucidated in the text and their interpretative approach through the methodology of chance, as a set of precepts for the development of her original creative approach. In this way, she discovered her own artistically compelling solutions that were to substantively enrich her abiding interest in geometric abstraction.

1954

Charmion von Wiegand broadened the creative principle of the *I Ching*, a quasi-infinite system of combinatorics, by way of her study of Tibetan Buddhism. Initially, this was affected indirectly through her studies of the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of the Theosophical Society, as well as by close readings of ethnological travelogues.

MURAL III

Enlarged and edited reproduction of Charmion von Wiegand's notes on various models of the association of cardinal points with colors, 1954. The Estate of Charmion von Wiegand.

Room 2





Meditation as a Subject in Painting

In the years between 1955 and 1962, motifs inspired by depictions of the chakras (according to Indian teachings, the vital centres in the human body) became major motifs in Charmion von Wiegand's paintings. To this period belong the exhibited works *Region of the Unstructured Sound* (1955–61) along with the monumental *Triptych, Number 700* (1961).

1961

The artist's paintings of these years served to represent her inner perceptions and higher states of consciousness. In a letter to her friend, the painter Mark Tobey (1890–1976), she wrote: "I would gladly venture into the interior of a mandala and dwell there awhile." The paintings of this period clearly convey the significance of this remark. While, strictly speaking, these pieces are not mandalas, namely, sacred instruments of meditative technique. Yet with similar, formal-geometric and painterly resources, they do plumb the depths of the spiritual forms of mandalas.

The painting *Sanctuary of the Four Directions* (1959–60) was conceived in reference to the architectural ground plan of the Potala Palace in the Tibetan city of Lhasa, the ancient dwelling of the Dalai Lama. Here, von Wiegand also returns to Mondrian's palette of primary colours in which she explores the reciprocity of geometric architectural space, the physical interior of the system of chakras and the infinity of cosmic space.

Fulfilment in Tibetan Buddhism

Charmion von Wiegand began depicting Tibetan altars in the early 1960s. Her earlier conception of East Asian religions was derived primarily from her readings, and from lectures and talks by Western practitioners and authors. The works of the early 1960s attest to her in-depth engagement with Tibetan Buddhism, which was at the time just beginning to make inroads in the United States; and the public advocacy of the transmission of Tibetan culture was her ongoing mission. Commissioned by the American Federation of Arts, she curated an exhibition of Tibetan artwork in 1969. Von Wiegand became a board member of the first Tibet Center in New York, founded by Khyongla Rato Rinpoche (1923–2021), in 1973.

She went on to produce paintings inspired by the symbolism and instruments of Tibetan Buddhist practices. Such works as *Offering of the Universe* (1964) and *To the Adi Buddha* (1968–70) hark back to the specific symbology by means of which she gave painterly expression to her own spiritual insights

Room 3





and interpretations of the Tibetan altars. The bold, colourful forms in such works as *Offering the Universe* (1964) draw on representations of the “vajra”, a type of sceptre.

Charmion von Wiegand’s distinctive artistic approach and idiosyncratic style – above all, due to the shifts and upheavals in her biography and intellectual life – cannot be adequately grasped solely by way of conventional modernist criteria. Yet, in her late work she ultimately approximates a departure from one of the paradigms of autonomous Western art since 1800, namely, the liberation of the work from all religious ties. The portrayal of the sacred mountain Meru, as exemplified in her painting *The Ascent to Mt. Meru* (1962), is a prime example of her unique painterly approach to the universal notions of Tibetan Buddhism.

Interior painting starts with the sign. In its initial states, it is exorcism - a means of conquering the unknown. It is the oracle, the divination, the symbol of power, evolving from subjective states and moving towards their objective embodiments in a single plastic image. External painting has dealt with the external world of appearances. Together they form the two great categories of opposites in art.

Charmion von Wiegand, text of the exhibition invitation to a group show with Clarence Carter, Ray Johnson, Rita Simon, and Charmion von Wiegand at the Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, 1977.

1977

MURAL IV

Enlarged and edited reproduction of a detail of the invitation card to a group exhibition with Clarence Carter, Ray Johnson, Rita Simon and Charmion von Wiegand at the Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, 1977. Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

1978

Compilation with German subtitles of the US American cinematic portrait *The Circle of Charmion von Wiegand*, 43min (original version), Ce Roser (producer), Artists Video Archives, New York, 1978. Courtesy of Ce Roser.

Room 3





CHARMION VON WIEGAND
25.3.–13.8.2023
Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau

The exhibition accompanies
the publication:

*Charmion von Wiegand.
Expanding Modernism*
Kunstmuseum Basel,
Maja Wismer (ed.)

With texts by: Martin Brauen,
Lori Cole, Haema Sivanesan,
Nancy J. Troy, Felix Vogel.
Munich, 2021.

Also available in the museum shop:

Martin Brauen. *A Sameness
Between Us. The Friendship
of Charmion von Wiegand
and Piet Mondrian in Letters
and Memoirs.* Stuttgart, 2020.

Visit also:

*Charmion von Wiegand, Tibetan
Buddhism and the Kalachakra
Mandala*

24.7.–13.8.2023

Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau, foyer
During regular opening hours

In cooperation with the Namgyal
Monastery, Dharamsala in India,
a Kalachakra sand mandala
(Sanskrit: wheel of time) is being
created in the Kunstmuseum Basel.
Four monks in daily work realize
the mandala. The project is
accompanied by guest curator
Martin Brauen (author of the book
*Mandala: Sacred Circle in
Tibetan Buddhism*, 2009, among
others). From July 24, 2023, visitors
can follow the complex process of
creation. Finally, on the occasion
of the public finissage of the
Charmion von Wiegand exhibition
on August 13, 2023, the mandala
will be dissolved in a ritual
procession and handed over to the
river Rhine.

Exhibition and catalogue
are supported by:
Terra Foundation of American Art
KPMG AG
Vreni & Likas Richterich
Stiftung für das Kunstmuseum
Basel

Opening Hours
Tuesday–Sunday 10 a.m.–6 p.m.
Wednesday 10 a.m.–8 p.m.
Special opening hours
→ kunstmuseumbasel.ch/visit

Admission
All exhibitions & collection:
CHF 26, 13, 8
Collection & Charmion
von Wiegand: CHF 16, 8, 8
Tickets & Prices
→ kunstmuseumbasel.ch/visit

Kunstmuseum Basel
St. Alban-Graben 16 /
Telefon +41 61 206 62 62
info@kunstmuseumbasel.ch /
kunstmuseumbasel.ch
#kunstmuseumbasel

TERRA
FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART



