

ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

GRADE 8-12: ABSTRACT & FIGURATIVE ART



GRACE HARTIGAN (1922–2008)
FANTASY FOR LEGS AND FEET, 1965

Oil on canvas
On loan courtesy of the Art Bridges Foundation

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Grace Hartigan (1922–2008) was an American painter, art educator, and contributor to the Abstract Expressionist School of Art. Unlike many artists of her generation, Hartigan never adopted a signature style. Hartigan drew inspiration from art history, medical illustrations, everyday life, pop culture, and poetry, using bold colors to blend abstract and figurative elements in her work. From the beginning of her career, Hartigan sought to navigate modern art on her own terms. “No rules” she insisted, “I must be free to paint anything I feel.”

Hartigan was born in Newark, New Jersey, the oldest of four children. After graduating from high school, she was unable to afford college and married at a young age. Hartigan and her husband embarked on a journey to pioneer in Alaska, but ultimately made it only as far as Los Angeles. There, Hartigan began studying art, though financial challenges soon surfaced, and she became pregnant.

Following the outbreak of World War II, Hartigan's husband was drafted, and she took a job as a mechanical draftsman at a new Wright Aeronautical factory while taking night classes at the local engineering college. There, a colleague introduced her to art of the French painter Henri Matisse, sparking her lifelong interest in modern art.

Deeply influenced by artists such as Jackson Pollock, William de Kooning, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, Hartigan combined abstract brushstrokes with figures and other recognizable elements, positioning her work within the Abstract Expressionist movement. However, her artistic approach was unconventional and did not adhere to a single style. Instead, she moved between abstraction and figuration, challenging the expectations of art at the time. As Hartigan expressed, “I want an art that is not ‘abstract’ and not ‘realistic.’”

Hartigan used the name George when exhibiting until 1954, in homage to 19th-century women writers like George Eliot (Marian Evans). She did so in response to the greater value placed on men's work and to reflect her belief that identity is many-sided. Hartigan's career set a precedent for the recognition of women artists in high-profile art movements. Her prominence in Abstract Expressionism reflected a quiet defiance against traditional gender roles, aligning indirectly with the broader theme of individual freedom.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Grace Hartigan's *Fantasy for Legs and Feet* blends figuration and abstraction, highlighting her expressive approach while pushing the bounds of the art world's expectations. By rejecting artistic labels that separate abstract and figurative art – traditionally viewed as opposing practices – Hartigan's work both reflects and challenges the artistic conventions of her time.

Many associate Hartigan with the second generation of Abstract Expressionist artists, who were shaped by experiences of World War II and the cultural climate of the Cold War, using abstraction as a powerful form of emotional expression and artistic freedom.

Fantasy for Legs and Feet exemplifies Hartigan's challenge to the idea that art must be either abstract or figurative. In the painting, her bold, expressive brushstrokes guide the viewer's eye through vivid, jewel-toned colors and textural shapes that form fragmented human limbs and a face. Hartigan combines figurative imagery with Abstract Expressionist techniques, refusing to be constrained by the artistic and social expectations of mid-century art.

ARTIST QUOTES

"I want a surface that resists, like a wall, not opens, like a gate."

"I want an art that is not 'abstract' and not 'realistic.'"

"I must be free to paint anything I feel."

"Well, I think the thing is that I'm a restless artist. As soon as I know how to do something, I get bored and I want to do something else"

"Well, I've said this before, but you've no idea what it is to see something that's in the world for the first time. I was just stunned by Pollock's work and even more so in his studio. No one had ever done a painting out of drips, for one thing. The expansiveness - now I'm used to large field paintings, and they look a little small almost, but then they were just gigantic. We were engulfed by them."

"Of course, there is a point of view that you're supposed to make one painting your whole life, and I've never been able to go for that. Make it in different colors. Same painting in different colors."

KEY TERMS

<i>Abstract Expressionism</i>	an art movement that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s comprising of unconventional techniques and styles that express and evoke strong emotions without using recognizable imagery
<i>Abstraction</i>	art that does not attempt to depict visual reality or clearly identifiable subject matter; instead, it emphasizes elements such as color, shape, line, and form
<i>Action Painting</i>	an art technique that focuses on the process and the artist's physical engagement with the work, involving spontaneous applications of vigorous and bold brushstrokes
<i>Cold War</i>	the geopolitical and ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union in terms of military and technological might lasting from 1947–1991
<i>Composition</i>	the arrangement of shapes, colors, and other elements in a work of art
<i>Figurative Art</i>	art that references the real world, particularly the human form, while allowing for interpretation, distortion, or emotional expression, ranging from realistic to semi-abstract
<i>Imagery</i>	a way of using visual symbolism to evoke a mental image or other type of sense impression
<i>Landscape Orientation</i>	an orientation that is wider than it is tall, where the horizontal dimension is greater than the vertical dimension

<i>Medium</i>	the material or substance an artist uses to create an artwork, though it can also refer to the type of artwork created
<i>Modern Art</i>	art made from the 1880s to the 1970s that moved away from realistic and traditional styles, emphasizing experimentation with new techniques, themes, subjects, colors, and materials to allow for artistic expression
<i>Painting</i>	a work of art made by using a brush or other tool to apply paint to a surface
<i>Portrait Orientation</i>	orientation that is taller than it is wide, where the vertical dimension is greater than the horizontal dimension
<i>The Soviet Union</i>	a socialist country that existed from 1922–1991 that became a rival superpower to the United States after World War II

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Artists have long served as an early warning system for global challenges, using their work to provoke awareness and dialogue about pressing issues facing humanity. Recently, this role has expanded to include reflections on Earth’s fragility, outer space ambitions, and humanity’s place in the cosmos.

Through their creative expressions, artists highlight themes of technological advancement, environmental impact, and ethical implications of space exploration, urging society to consider the broader consequences of our actions on both Earth and beyond.

During the Cold War, the United States (US) embraced its role as a global superpower. The US and the Soviet Union competed for military supremacy, but the two nations also vied for influence in art and culture.

American intelligence agencies and diplomats took an interest in American artists, recognizing that the US’s cultural influence could be as powerful as its military might. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department promoted some artists and jazz musicians who served as exemplars of free expression seen as unique to “the West.”

Abstract Expressionism emerged in the climate of the Cold War as a distinctly American art movement and quickly gained worldwide recognition, with art exhibitions funded in part by the federal government. Color Field painting, Pop Art, and Minimalism also grew in popularity. Thomas W. Braden, Secretary of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 1948–49, joined the CIA in 1950 to lead its cultural activities. He later told *The Saturday Evening Post* that American art “won more acclaim...for the US than [Secretary of State] John Foster Dulles or [President] Dwight D. Eisenhower could have bought with a hundred speeches.”

Grace Hartigan was an Abstract Expressionist artist whose work and career were deeply influenced by the cultural and political climate of the Cold War, even as she navigated tensions between artistic expression and societal expectations.

As with other Abstract Expressionists, Hartigan’s work became part of the cultural movement that the United States used to assert its cultural superiority over the Soviet Union. Abstract Expressionism emphasized artistic freedom, allowing artists to create without restrictions through practices such as action painting.

Hartigan's work was exhibited internationally, contributing to the cultural diplomacy efforts of the US government and private organizations. These exhibitions were meant to demonstrate the vibrancy and innovation of American art as part of the ideological battle with the Soviet Union.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

Begin this art lesson by looking at and discussing about the artwork together for 10 to 15 minutes.

CLOSE-LOOKING Invite students to look closely and quietly at the artwork.

OBSERVE Invite students to share observations about the artwork.

ASK

- *What is going on in this painting?*
- *What do you see that makes you say that?*
- *What details seem important in this work?*
- *What does it remind you of?*
- *What colors does the artist use and how do they interact with each other?*
- *What feelings are evoked from the artists' use of color?*
- *What do you notice about the balance between abstract and recognizable elements in this painting?*
- *What do you think the artist is trying to communicate by combining abstraction and figuration?*
- *Why do you think an artist might choose not to fully commit to one style of work such as fully abstract or fully realistic?*
- *How does this painting challenge your idea of what a painting "should" be?*

DISCUSS USE [20 Questions Deck](#) for more group discussion questions about the artwork.

LEARN MORE

- [Museum of Modern Art: Grace Hartigan](#)
- [10 things to know about Grace Hartigan](#)
- [Oral history interview with Grace Hartigan, 1979 May 10](#)
- [Museum of Modern Art: A distinctly American style](#)

ABSTRACT SCRAP PAPER COLLAGE

ABOUT THE ACTIVITY After discussing *Fantasy for Legs and Feet* by Grace Hartigan, students are invited to create their own art with the freedom to work abstractly or incorporate figurative elements. This activity examines the role art can play in cultural propaganda by allowing students to begin with creative freedom and then introducing constraints around shapes and designs. Through this process, students reflect on what it means to create freely and how limitations can influence artistic expression.

TIME FRAME 60 minutes

MATERIALS Ruler

Colored paper

Pieces of scrap paper

Scissors or X-Acto knives

8.5" x 11" cardstock paper, 1 sheet per student

DIRECTIONS

1. Share the quote below with students: "I want an art that is not 'abstract' and not 'realistic'" - Grace Hartigan

2. [5 mins] Using a ruler, draw a large square on a piece of paper. Cut the large square window out of the paper to create a simple frame, called a viewfinder.

3. [20 mins] Invite students to gather various sheets of colored paper. Cut up the colored paper into various shapes and sizes. Consider trimming the scrap paper into geometric shapes or more organic shapes. After cutting up the colored and scrap paper, encourage pairs of students to share what emotions are evoked with each color. *What colors are you drawn towards? Are there any colors you avoided? Do the colors or shapes remind you of anything? Do your colors tell a story or send a message?*

4. [5 mins] Take a blank piece of cardstock or colored paper to be the base of the collage. Gather the paper pieces in an assortment of sizes and shapes. Layer various pieces onto the base paper. If students are struggling, encourage them to gently shake the paper bits in their hands then drop them onto the paper.

5. [3 mins] Use the viewfinder to find different compositions by moving the viewfinder around on top of the collage.

6. [2 mins] Encourage students to pair share what they've made.

7. [15 mins] Have students repeat the process again but this time, constrain students to use only five paper pieces, including one rectangle and one circle. Ask students to share how this changed their approach.

8. [10 mins] Place the finished collages around the classroom. Students walk around the classroom and appreciate each other's work. *What do you notice about what your classmates have created? What similarities can be found across the collages? What differences?*

ASSESSMENT

Students will be assessed based on their participation in the discussion, completion of the two projects, and art presentation to the class.

For more teaching resources, visit <https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/programs/for-educators/online-resources/>

This educational resource at the Anchorage Museum is made possible with the support of the Art Bridges Foundation.

