

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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THE FOLDING IMAGE:
SCREENS BY WESTERN ARTISTS OF THE
NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES
AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. November 17, 1983. The Folding Image is the first exhibition to examine the Western tradition of the folding screen from c. 1870 to the present. More than forty objects (most never before seen in this country) go on view March 4 through September 3, 1984 in the National Gallery of Art's East Building.

Michael Komanecky, Assistant to the Director at the Yale University Art Gallery, and Virginia Butera, formerly Assistant to the Director at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, selected the objects from more than 250 folding screens in public and private collections throughout the United States and Europe. Mr. Komanecky and Ms. Butera wrote the fully illustrated catalogue, published by Yale University Art Gallery.

Although some Oriental screens had been imported to Europe as early as the seventeenth century, it was not until the 1860s and 1870s---when Japanese objects of all kinds, including screens, became readily available in Europe---that major Western artists began to experiment with the screen format. Between 1860 and 1925 Sir Laurens Alma-Tadema, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, Paul Klee, Giacomo Balla, Franz Marc, Thomas Hart Benton, and Yves Tanguy produced one or more folding screens. This western tradition has continued nearly unbroken to the present day, with artists as diverse in esthetic approach as Lucas Samaras, Jack Beal, David Hockney, and Leon Polk Smith making folding screens.

While the folding screen originated in China, the Japanese invented a superior hinging technique for screens, which provided the artist with a continuous surface for decoration. A screen in the exhibition that reflects the early influence of Japan was made by James Forsyth in 1867 in England. This six-panel screen, presumably designed by William Nesfield, combines twelve vertical Japanese paintings of birds and blossoming bushes. Nesfield's ingenious use of oriental motifs in his skilfully carved and painted frame is a further allusion to the eastern origins of the folding screen.

The English designer William Morris also made folding screens. On view is his 1887 three-panel embroidered screen, made for Lady Carlisle from three separate wall hangings Morris did in 1860 for his own home.

The Nabi artists in France comprised the single most important and innovative group of screenmakers at the turn of the century. Among the screens by this group are Armand Séguin's 1892-1893 The Delights of Life and Maurice Denis' c. 1902 Screen with Doves. Séguin attempted to unite the four panels by compositional and narrative means. Maurice Denis' screen, even more than Séguin's, shows the artist's concern for choosing a composition that would be enhanced by the folding structure of the screen.

Paul Klee depicted five separate landscape views in the unusual five-panel Aare River Landscape screen of 1900. Klee chose to depict the scene in a non-continuous fashion to portray his own psychological state as seen in the impressions of the Aare River valley near his home. Almost seventy years later, Jim Dine also ignored the traditional notion of a continuous landscape composition, depicting vertically on five individual panels the sky, sun, grass, snow, and a rainbow in his 1969 Landscape Screen.

Thomas Wilmer Dewing was one of the few major American artists to experiment with the screen format in the last half of the nineteenth century. America's most prolific screenmaker, Dewing produced seven screens between 1896 and 1900, several of them in pairs in the traditional Japanese manner. His three-panel Morning Glories screen of 1900, in fact, was originally accompanied by the now lost three-panel pendant entitled

Cherry Blossoms. Morning Glories, like Dewing's other screens, is surrounded by a gilded frame designed by the American architect Stanford White.

Louis Comfort Tiffany was another American artist interested in the screen format. On public view for the first time since the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, his three-panel stained glass screen showing clematis, gourds, and grapes is a spectacular and rare example of Tiffany's screenmaking abilities.

In 1896 the Czechoslovakian-born artist Alfons Mucha began to frame his color lithographs as screens. The unique Four Times of Day screen from c. 1900 has a painted and gilded curvilinear frame designed by Josef Rous, a Bohemian sculptor. The frame harmonizes with the motifs in the patterned borders of Mucha's lithographs, and signals a departure from the traditional rectangular screen format. In the ensuing decades, relationships between a screen's image, its frame, and ultimately its surrounding domestic environment evolved dramatically.

The exhibition also includes a pair of screens by Antonio Gaudí, the only example of his work in the genre. Made between 1906 and 1910 for the Casa Milà in Barcelona, the screens consist of ten irregular, biomorphically shaped oak and glass panels. Not only were Gaudí's screens closely linked to the decorative details of the space that they originally inhabited, but they also anticipated the current trend to treat the screen as a functional type of floor sculpture. This approach is seen in Eileen Gray's c. 1923 Block Screen, made of lacquered wood blocks attached to one another by vertical aluminum rods. Her screen, like Gaudí's, is devoid of any image and functions as a semi-transparent space divider.

Franz Marc's only screen was done in 1913, probably for his own home. Its three panels, separated in the late 1950s and now in three different collections, have been reunited for this exhibition. The diminutive, brilliantly colored screen contains richly symbolic animal and rainbow imagery typical of the artist's interest in integrating man's existence in nature.

Ellsworth Kelly was one of the first modern American artists to do a screen. La Combe II from 1950, on view for the first time in the United States, is a small, nine-panel black and white painted screen depicting shadows from a railing on a stairway. The up and down configuration of the stairs is physically suggested by the folded structure of the screen in a fascinating combination of subject and object.

One of the most striking screens in the exhibition is the four-panel, double-sided Clearing Storm, Sonoma County/Oak Tree, Rain (1951/1970) by Ansel Adams. Adams, who has made photographic screens since 1936, considers this his master work in this genre.

Contemporary artists have shown a tremendous interest in the screen format. Jim Jacobs' Marble Canyon (1980-1982) recalls the Orient in its lacquer surface. Jacobs departs significantly from traditional approaches, however, by rigidly attaching the panels to one another so that they do not fold. The shape of the screen is thereby used to imply the motion of the Colorado River, whose image traverses both sides of the surface. Patsy Norvell's Jungle Wall (1981-82) is made of etched glass, with its panels conforming to the shapes of the leaves, depicted on them. By using glass, Norvell eliminates one of the primary functions of the screen: to provide privacy. Like so many contemporary artists, Jacobs and Norvell bring to the screen format a penchant for unusual media and structure.

After its premiere at the National Gallery of Art, The Folding Image will be seen at the Yale University Art Gallery from October 11 through January 6, 1985. The exhibition catalogue, made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, also includes an essay by Janet W. Adams which focuses on the history of the screen from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. Linda Ayres, assistant curator in the National Gallery's Department of American Art, has coordinated the exhibition at the Gallery.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer) or Carolyn Amiot, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, (202) 842-6353.