

Trees and Barns (Bermuda), 1917 Charles Demuth (American, 1883-1935)

Charles Demuth reduced buildings and trees to delicately colored planes and reassembled them to create a new composition.



As a young artist in Paris in the early 1900s, Demuth saw how the paintings of Pablo Picasso and other Cubist artists were turning the art world upside down with their fragmented forms and multiple points of view. After returning home, he visited the island of Bermuda, where pastel-colored buildings nestled among leafy trees. The clean lines and angles of the local houses and barns provided the perfect subject matter for Demuth's first experiments with Cubism.

Watercolor over graphite; 9-15/16 x 14 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase Fund, BMA 1950.49

What fragments of buildings do you see?

- Walls, windows, and roofs are presented as an arrangement of flat angular planes.

What parts of trees do you see?

- Curving lines of tree trunks and scalloped edges of foliage are an important part of the abstract composition.

What aspects of the Cubist style did Demuth adopt?

- Non-essential elements are eliminated.
- Shapes of barns and trees are reduced to interlocking planes enlivened by curved forms.
- Fragments are reassembled so that the buildings are no longer seen from a single fixed perspective.
- Muted tones are favored. (However, instead of using the muted tans and grays of Picasso, Demuth chose light pastels typical of Bermuda.)
- The dense part of the composition is concentrated in the center, letting the outer portions of the composition thin out towards the edges of the paper.

How did Demuth combine pencil drawing and watercolor wash to create his painting?

- Demuth sketched the original underdrawing in pencil. (Light pencil lines are still visible on the outer edges of the image.)
- He superimposed light washes of color in blue, yellow, red, green, and brown.
- He used chalk and/or salt and blotting technique to provide texture.
 - Chalk produced a grainy quality.
 - Salt sprinkled over wet paint absorbed the water leaving a mottled texture.
 - Blotting paper removed unwanted color, creating subtle variations in the surface.
- He used pencil lines to sharply define the edges of his planes.
- He allowed some white paper to remain unpainted as an intrinsic part of the composition.