

Carl Pickhardt (1908-2004) was an American artist known as a pioneer of the shaped canvas. He called his abstractions “Free Form,” sculptural paintings.

Pickhardt grew up in West Newton, Massachusetts, and attended the Boston Latin School during his high school years. He studied at Harvard University, graduating in 1931, and then entering Harvard Business School. At this time, he also began studying drawing with Harold Zimmerman, who was an influential art teacher of Boston Expressionists Jack Levine and Hyman Bloom. Pickhardt left business school to become an artist and focus, over the next five years, on his study of drawing with Zimmerman. Pickhardt began as a social realist artist in the 1930s and 40s, making paintings and prints of urban, working-class people like newsboys, shop-workers, and housecleaners.

In the 1950s, Pickhardt began to develop the abstract language of his mature work. According to artist Will Barnet, a long-time friend and studio-mate in New York City, Pickhardt’s first Free Form canvases were landscapes. From there he evolved into pure abstraction without horizontal or vertical references. Pickhardt’s shaped paintings were made seven years before Frank Stella’s first experimentation with “deductive” pictorial structure and shaped works, and nine years before Kenneth Noland’s lozenge-shaped chevron paintings.

The Free Form paintings are also referred to as “Heart Symbol” paintings and are meant to be exhibited from any angle and position. Pickhardt considered the paintings’ asymmetry to reflect an “astronautical” experience, where one is not limited by gravity or a set position. He also referenced how nature, and the body’s symmetry, is often disrupted or slightly irregular. Within his free form shapes are linear forms and patterns. The internal forms and the external shapes, along with the surface textures of the paintings, exist in constant dynamic tension.

Pickhardt exhibited his realist works with Jacques Seligmann Gallery, New York; and later, his abstractions, with Doris Meltzer Gallery, New York. He was the subject of a retrospective exhibition in 1991 at the Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA. More recently, Sotheby’s San Francisco presented the exhibition “Carl Pickhardt: Free Form,” in 2018. His works are held in the collections of major institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Harvard University’s Fogg Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Brooklyn Museum.