

University Galleries' Permanent Collection

EDUCATOR RESOURCE

Gertrude Abercrombie

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Gertrude Abercrombie (b. 1909, Austin, Texas – d. 1977, Chicago) was a Chicago-based oil painter most known for her Surrealist/Magical Realist portraits and landscapes. The life of the party and lover of jazz, Abercrombie was known in Chicago as the “queen of bohemian artists” (Seaman, 2017. Pg. 28). She was the daughter of traveling opera singers Lula Janes and Tom Abercrombie, who eventually settled in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, where Abercrombie remained for most of her adult life.

Abercrombie earned a bachelor's degree in Romance Languages from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She briefly studied figure drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as commercial art at the American Academy of Art in Chicago. After her death on July 3, 1977, much of Abercrombie's work was donated to museums and other not-for-profit organizations per her last will and testament (Weininger & Smith, 1991. Pg. 34). Abercrombie's work is included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Lewistown, Lockport; The Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee (Karma, n.d.).

ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

Abercrombie's paintings are open-ended and ambiguous, rendering familiar objects mysterious and bizarre. Regularly revisited motifs—a vast and desolate landscape, the full moon, a solitary woman, sparse interior spaces, cats, a single dead tree, doors leading to nowhere—weave an allegorical web of Abercrombie's physiological and psychological experiences. In a 1977 [interview](#) with the Chicago-based radioshow host Studs Terkel, Abercrombie stated that she considered all of her work to be “biographical in a sense, but kind of dreamy” (Seaman, 2017. Pg. 31). The otherworldly quality of her work is emphasized by her use of a muted and often ominous color palette.

THE MAGICIAN:

Recurring subjects and themes from Abercrombie's work coalesce in her late painting, *The Magician*. A solitary female figure stands rigid, presiding over purposefully arranged objects placed along the surface of a marble-topped table. To her left sits an owl perched on a branch while an ever-present cat lounges on her right, both peering forward at the viewer. The woman's outstretched hand rests on the tabletop near a small shell, suggesting the potential for retreat, shelter, safety, or self-imposed confinement. Contrary to Abercrombie's lived experience and discordant internal narrative, this scene depicts a carefully curated space with each item residing in its assigned location, performing as directed.



Gertrude Abercrombie, *The Magician*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 24.5 x 25.5 inches. Collection of University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, Illinois State University.

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

- How does Abercrombie's artwork make you feel? What about the work makes you feel this way?
- Select one of Abercrombie's paintings from the [permanent collection](#) and describe the subject matter and composition. Why do you think Abercrombie chose to include these objects, figures, and spaces, and to arrange them as she did? Based on these observations, what do you think the artwork is about?
- In what ways are these three paintings similar? How are they different? Consider the subject matter, composition, formal qualities, and mediums.
- Analyze the female figures in *Owl on the Moon* and *The Magician*. Describe their body language, clothing, and location. What do you think the figures are thinking? Feeling? Taking into account that Abercrombie considered her work to be autobiographical—stories about her life—what do you think the artist was going through when she painted these? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How many references to magic can you find in Abercrombie's work? What characteristics or qualities does an object require to be considered magical?
- Abercrombie personally selected frames for each of her paintings. Describe the relationship between each frame and the artwork it accompanies. In what ways do the frames impact the way you “read” each work?

Gertrude Abercrombie

OWL ON THE MOON:

In this scene, Abercrombie depicts herself as a gaunt, dark-haired woman in a vast and uninterrupted landscape. Her arm is outstretched—a gesture repeated in many of her paintings—pointing toward a lifeless white tree, indicating a desire for connection. A piece of paper lies on the ground behind the woman and reads “BUG,” perhaps a reference to Abercrombie's failed attempts to connect with those around her. Presiding above the tree is the forward-facing owl as seen in *The Magician*, but instead of a branch, it is perched high on top of a pink full moon.

INTERIOR:

Inspired by a small painting of a 1930's interior purchased by Abercrombie's friend Rickey Austin, *Interior* possesses a dreamlike quality indicative of Surrealist works with a touch of the uncanny and all-too-familiar seen in Magical Realism. Although Abercrombie was known for hosting bustling music-filled parties surrounded by friends, she was prone to loneliness, depression, and self-doubt. The restricted and sparsely populated space of *Interior* serves as a metaphorical self-portrait, reflecting Abercrombie's internal strife (Weininger & Smith, 1991. Pg. 9-10). A closed and hingeless door symbolically illustrates her feelings of isolation, emphasized by the clouds contained within the frame of a solitary window, suggesting a visible but inaccessible world beyond.



Gertrude Abercrombie, *Owl on the Moon*, 1948. Oil on wood. 16 x 18 inches. Collection of University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, Illinois State University.



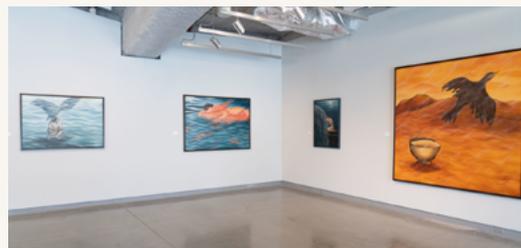
Gertrude Abercrombie, *Interior*, 1939. Oil on canvas. 29.25 x 43.5 inches. Collection of University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, Illinois State University.

Related works in University Galleries' Permanent Collection:

- [Mark Forth, *Temptation*](#)
- [Wonsook Kim, *Moon Dance*](#)
- Janet McKiernan, [The Split Second](#)
- [Seymore Rosofsky, *The Couple*](#)

Related works in University Galleries' Past Exhibitions:

- [Janet McKiernan's *Magic Theater*](#), 1987
- [Mark Forth and David Hodges: *Fractured Tales from the Heartland*](#), 1992
- Wonsook Kim: [Lines of Enchantment](#), 2016 and [Wonsook Kim](#), 2019



Installation view, *Wonsook Kim*, 2019. This one-day exhibition of Wonsook Kim's paintings and prints was organized in conjunction with the naming ceremony for the Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts and the Wonsook Kim School of Art.



Janet McKiernan, *The Split Second*, 1985. Oil and resin on canvas. 36 x 24 inches. Collection of University Galleries, Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, Illinois State University.

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VOCABULARY

ALLEGORY

a story with a hidden meaning

COMPOSITION

the arrangement of visual elements in an artwork

CONTEMPORARY

something that belongs to the present or current time

CONTEXT

the situation in which something happens

FORMAL QUALITIES

refers to elements and principles of design such as line, shape, color, balance, movement, contrast, and unity

MAGICAL REALISM

an art movement inspired by the strange, inexplicable, and wondrous aspects of life, often explored by skewing perspective or juxtaposing unlike things (The Art Story, 2021)

MEDIUM

materials used to create an artwork

SUBJECT MATTER

what is being depicted in an image or artwork

SURREALISM

an art movement concerned with harnessing the imaginative potential of the subconscious

THEME

recurring ideas, materials, or subject matter

REFERENCES

Karma. (n.d.). *Gertrude Abercrombie*. Retrieved from <https://karmakarma.org/artists/gertrude-abercrombie/bio/>.

Seaman, D. (2017). *Identity unknown: Rediscovering seven American women artists* (pp. 28–31). Bloomsbury USA.

The Art Story. (2021). *Magic Realism Movement Overview*. Retrieved from <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/magic-realism/>.

Weininger, S., & Smith, K. (1991). *Gertrude Abercrombie*. Illinois State Museum.

K-12 ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to brainstorm in small groups, "What makes something magical?" Invite groups to share their ideas with the class. Introduce Abercrombie's artwork and discuss ways she has suggested that the items, objects, and figures in her paintings hold magical powers. Prompt students to individually or collaboratively create an item that contains magic of some kind. The item could be from real life (like Abercrombie's) or could be something entirely fantastical. Then, use a windowsill, shelf, table, or other surface—similar to Abercrombie's selections—to provide a setting for the objects. Have students document and describe the power their items hold and how, when displayed together, the pieces interact to add to the magical story.
- Introduce the concepts of symbolism and allegory to students through a story example. Then, choose one of Abercrombie's paintings to focus on and ask students to describe what they see in the artwork. Write student responses on the board for reference. Then prompt students to imagine how each aspect of the artwork, such as the color, subject matter, and composition work together to tell a story. Advise students to consider what each symbol—object, item, or figure—in the artwork might stand for and how the context in which these symbols are placed suggest feelings, relationships, and experiences. Engage students in writing a short story or a poem about what they believe is going on in the painting.
- As a class or in small groups, analyze Abercrombie's paintings in University Galleries' [permanent collection](#). Look for examples of how Abercrombie has distorted perspective, juxtaposed unlike objects, and explored themes such as alienation, mystery, and the subconscious. Then, guide students in researching the development of key concepts within [Magical Realism](#) and [Surrealism](#). Ask students which movement they think best categorizes Abercrombie's work and why. Prompt students to create an allegorical artwork based on their own experiences that incorporates key concepts from one or both of these movements.
- Friends with Jazz musicians such as [Dizzy Gillespie](#), a daughter of opera singers, and a musician herself, Abercrombie was surrounded by musical influences. Analyze Abercrombie's paintings imagining what sounds and rhythms the colors, subject matter, and compositions suggest. Prompt students to write or sample a song in response to an Abercrombie painting of their choice.
- Read the titles of Abercrombie's works in University Galleries' [permanent collection](#) and the dates the paintings were created. Ask students to describe how Abercrombie's work changed or remained the same over time. Prompt students to consider the subject matter, style, color palette, and application of paint. Then, individually, in small groups, or as a class, research events occurring when each work was made. Ask students if they can identify references to these events within Abercrombie's paintings.
- Gertrude Abercrombie often wore a witch hat and painted herself wearing it as well. Ask students if they have an article of clothing (hat, necklace, shirt, coat) that holds meaning for them. Prompt students to create a painting, drawing, sculpture, or photograph that resembles the article of clothing. Then have students alter the item to visually describe the importance it holds for them.