

**IN THE FOREGROUND:
OBJECT STUDIES**

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“A PICTURE OF RESILIENCE”:
ASHLEY LAZEVNICK ON
CHARLES DEMUTH’S *RED POPPIES***



Charles Demuth, *Red Poppies*, 1929.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Henry and Louise Loeb, 1983.

Season 2, Episode 5
Recording date: August 4, 2021
Release date: January 25, 2022

Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Ashley Lazevnick, assistant professor of art history at Converse University in South Carolina, reveals how Charles Demuth and his watercolor *Red Poppies* from 1929 pictures how vulnerability may still be resilient, as expressed in a contemporaneous poem by William Carlos Williams that also meditates on loss.

Ashley Lazevnick

We are looking at a watercolor still life by the American artist Charles Demuth entitled *Red Poppies*, completed in 1929. Four poppies unfurl before our eyes, nested within a thicket of olive green stems and prickly leaves. A circuit of attention moves from the bud of one stem to the partially open, fully blossoming and weathered forms of each of the other poppies. As our eye moves around the circle of the flowers life, it is inevitably arrested at the very center where a drama is unfolding. Around a gray pupil-like eye, three jet-black petals flute out, enveloped by majestic petals of various graded red tones cusping, unfolding in intricate patterns. As if springing to life before our eyes, the central flower unexpectedly appears fully formed. It's a brilliant burst of animacy—in spite the fact that poppies are traditionally symbolic of death.

Red Poppies is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I encountered it in 2017, in the midst of my research on the early 20th century artistic movement known as Precisionism. Demuth is typically included in this movement for his stark, monumental renderings of factories and buildings. But I was interested in a more poetic side of Demuth's precision, some elusive or melancholic dimension to his art that is eminently on display in his late watercolors. In conventions of Western art, still life is the lowest-ranked genre, one that purposefully avoids events of the world and focuses instead on the

intimate and prolonged encounter between an artist and the humble things recorded in the privacy of a studio. But I'm curious about still life's grander ambitions.

Looking at *Red Poppies* today, I wonder at the solace that a simple still life might afford a viewer in a time of upheaval or uncertainty, something like we've experienced this year during the pandemic, or when Demuth completed that work in 1929, on the eve of a stock market crash that would launch the country into the Great Depression. At that time, Demuth was home-bound in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, battling diabetes, which would claim his life six years later. For an artist who led a richly social life within the most prominent avant-garde circles of his generation, an artist who found kinship in the homosexual circles of New York, Paris, and Provincetown, returning to his mother's sparse townhouse in Lancaster was a mixed blessing. What kind of comfort can art give in these circumstances? Can still life move beyond one person to touch on the wider world, even if resolutely takes itself out of that world?

In earlier still lifes, Demuth typically featured a fluid and transparent application of watercolor, darker backgrounds, and plentiful grey lines. He was known for his combination of cubist and features techniques. But red poppies shows a firm handling of graphite, combined with opaque layers of watercolor. Here the artist's signature techniques have been condensed and reduced; dispersal and centrifugal motion have been harnessed. Upon each pedal or slender stem are collected a bricolage of angular fragments, fractured colored planes, and linear striations. So the flowers look somehow hard and soft at once; or as one critic put it, Demuth's forms are fragile without being indecisive.

Fragility captures the way in which the delicate petals are encrusted and crystallized into a frozen permanence, which I read as a protective gesture, to transform something weak into that which is impenetrable. It's not a stretch to think of the work on view in New York in the 1930s as a meditation on the very purpose of art, as the country faced an economic depression with widespread scarcity that soon literalized the need for conservation that it illustrated.

It offered viewers a picture of resiliency, of perseverance crafted from the most basic things. Demuth never explicitly dwelled on political themes in his art, as many artists would do in the 1930s. Rather, his focus on still life resonates with poets such as Wallace Stevens, who saw art as a method of self-preservation, claiming that it is the violence within that protects us from the violence without; as Stevens wrote, “It is the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality.”

[musical interlude]

Another poet who was an interpreter of Demuth’s art was his friend William Carlos Williams. The intimacy between Demuth and Williams is recorded in memoirs and letters, as well as the playful exchange of art that they produced for one another. Their creative back and forth comes to an end in “The Crimson Cyclamen,” an elegy that Williams compose the year after Demuth’s death. Although the poem purports to be reflection on a different work, passages of it speak directly to *Red Poppies*, since it tracks the erotic growth and death of a potted flower. A passage from the second stanza of reads: “It is miraculous / that flowers should rise / by flower / alike in loveliness — / as though mirrors / of some perfection / could never be / too often shown — / silence holds them — / in that space. And / color has been construed / from emptiness / to waken there.”

It's remarkable how Williams captures the creation of nature and art as equivalent in their manufacture of simple miracles: the blooming of a flower and the emergence of something out of nothing, just as watercolor, or poetry, awakens from emptiness. And thematically both *Red Poppies* and “The Crimson Cyclamen” are a confrontation with the artist’s death, but they depend on wildly different strategies. Whereas Demuth’s late style became increasingly tight and controlled, Williams’ expression over the course of the poem literally becomes unbound, with stanzas alternating between fourteen and two lines, and I read

this as an enactment of Williams' own grief and the fraying of the logic which artificially kept his thoughts together.

In his most brilliant passages, Williams confuses the flower—which clearly represents Demuth's own vulnerable body—with the artist's handling of graphite and watercolor, tropes that stand in also for the intellect and passion. Here's another passage: “answering / ecstasy with excess / all together / acrobatically // not as if bound / (though) still bound / but upright / as if they hung // from above / to the streams / with which / they are veined and glow — / the frail fruit / by its frailty supreme.” So Williams, too, finds strength in frailty, frailty that is a passion only fleetingly glimpsed in the artwork's revealing, like the sudden shock of the central poppy before our eyes keeps moving.

Rather than seeing *Red Poppies* as an illustration of Demuth's biography, pointing us back to its origins, I think Williams is dwelling on how the work quite literally opens up towards a feature that is unknown, yet utterly familiar, and its cyclic repetitions. The creation of such an art can only come through the artist's restraint, for his passion is excessive and let loose, but also somehow contained, not as if bound, though still bound. Here's what's so valuable in Williams' poem, the lesson that he helps us see: that is still life like *Red Poppies* is a gift to the viewer. It comes from the artist's private meaning, but is made powerful to us only by standing on its own, detaching itself from the artist, and persisting on.

Caitlin Woolsey

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Community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.