James Skidmore
Today I'm speaking with Andrea Meyertholen, author of *The Myth of Abstraction: The Hidden Origins of Abstract Art in German Literature*, published by Camden House. Andrea is Associate Professor at the University of Kansas, where she specializes in German and European visual culture and literature since 1700. Andrea, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

Andrea Meyertholen
Thank you. Thank you for this honour and this opportunity to speak with you today.

James Skidmore
You're welcome. Perhaps we should start with the basics: what is abstract art?

Andrea Meyertholen
This is kind of a funny question to start out with. I feel like you're thinking it's a nice softball question to ease us into the conversation, but it's actually a pretty difficult question to answer. It's hard. Abstract art is such a difficult term to define because it's so many different things to so many different people. I mean, I spent years of my life researching this project, and I can tell you that no two definitions were ever the same. Now, when most people talk about abstract art or when they think about abstract art, they tend to conceptualize pictures that aren't of something, so to say. Meaning that these pictures don't intend to deliver some sort of mimetic or exacting representations of the natural world – or perhaps even any representation of the natural world or perceptual reality. But even then, it's not so simple. Because abstract art is like this moving target whose definition can change depending on how you approach it, from what vantage point. You could take something like a piece of surrealist art from Salvador Dali [with] tigers leaping from pomegranates or those melting pocket watches, and we can say, well, that's absolutely not abstract because I recognize tigers, I see watches – those are objects in our reality, in our world. But at the same time, we could still call such a painting abstract because these dreamscapes aren't anything that we would actually encounter in reality. And the meaning of them [is] also going to be considered abstract because the meaning is arcane. And then you have someone like Picasso, who insisted that there was no such thing at all as abstract art because the artist is always starting from something, from something in our reality, even if the finished product doesn't bear discernible traces of our reality.

And then, if that weren't complicated enough, abstract art can be abstract in different ways. So it can abstract from reality in diverse ways, to diverse degrees on a continuum, and for diverse reasons. And this we see throughout my book. And I guess all of that is to say that there really is no one-size-fits-all definition for abstract art, and I don't attempt to develop one. And it's actually the opposite; in my book, I present several definitions of abstract art. And since each of my chapters examines a different type or modality of abstraction, we encounter abstract art as defined according to the circumstances and the character of each artwork or image. And because there are multiple types of abstract art and multiple ways to be abstract, so to say, there are also multiple starting points for abstract art as reflected in my title, The Hidden Origins – plural – of Abstract Art.

James Skidmore
Right. Yeah, that's an excellent point. I like that, that there's no one abstract art for all. And your point about Dali, that's especially good. "It looks familiar, but I've never seen a watch do that" or something like that. So that's an interesting way of putting it. I think, though, it's commonly accepted that abstract art began in the 20th century, in the early 20th century specifically. And as you point out in the opening

to your book, with the appearance of Wassily Kandinsky's Composition V, I think, in 1911. And then he had a companion essay on the spiritual in art, Über das Geistige in der Kunst. Now, I guess there are other contenders and I guess the historians of art debate as to when is the first [abstract artwork, or] who is the first abstract artist. But I guess your book is less interested in that debate than it is in showing that the German literature of the 19th century had anticipated abstract art. Do I have that right?

Andrea Meyertholen
Yeah. To your point about the emergence of abstract art in painting, and who would be the first inventor of abstract art in painting, Kandinsky is certainly the most well-known name, but there were on both sides of the Atlantic artists working independently of each other, coming out with abstract images and exhibiting abstract artworks around the same time. And then you also had a couple of female artists who are getting much-deserved press of late who had created or even exhibited abstract artworks well prior to Kandinsky and the first abstractionists in the early 20th century. Hilma af Klint created a cycle of abstractions in 1906, I believe it was, but she was already experimenting with abstract images in the late 19th century. And then there's an English artist, Georgiana Houghton, who in the late 19th century even exhibited abstract artworks, and she self-financed and put everything together herself. But the show was an absolute disaster because the public just wasn't ready to see abstract artworks and didn't know what to make of this, so it led to her financial ruin and it's a bit of a sad story. But what it ultimately comes down to is that whoever gets the title of the first abstractionist or the inventor of abstract art in painting seems to come down to who was the best marketer and who had the best publicity skills and self promotion skills. And that seems to have been Kandinsky.

But like you said, I'm not really interested in that story and getting into that debate. My point is looking at the story from a different perspective. So we're talking about the history of abstract art in painting. That story is, and understandably so, told from the perspective of painting. So it's a tale about painters and artists, and painting and artwork. And the narrative, in terms of identifying the points in which abstract art emerged, it emphasizes concerns specific to the medium of painting. So it tells a story that recounts the thematic developments and technical innovations of painting that lead up to the moment of abstraction in the early 20th century, when the first abstract artworks are exhibited; and it should be said that this is all just talking about the framework of Western art. But what I point out in the book is that, what's left unsaid by this story and thus left unseen, are all the images of abstract art that were invented prior to Kandinsky in modalities other than the visual arts. Abstract images were already in existence, but they were circulating in forms of literature as opposed to physical art. And my book examines three instances of such abstract images from German literature. And so we find there images described with words in literary works from the first half of the 19th century, which is what I'm looking at. Which is why I like to say that mine is not a project about the invention of abstract art per se, it's about the invention of abstract art in literature, specifically in German literature since 1800. And it also sets off to pursue [what is] kind of like this great mystery where, if abstract images and the idea of abstract art is already in circulation, if it already existed, why did it take so long until the early 20th century for artists to actually create abstract paintings and exhibit them as abstract artworks?

James Skidmore
Right, yeah. Because you use writings from three of the best-known German writers of the 19th century: Heinrich von Kleist's Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft, that famous essay from 1810; Goethe's poem Howards Ehrengedächtnis from 1821, and then Gottfried Keller's Der grüne Heinrich from 1855 – there was that second [edition later], so 1855 to the 1870s. And so I'm very

curious about how these works anticipated or described abstract art even though it didn't exist at that point, so to speak. And so I'm curious: how did you choose these works? How did that all happen?

Andrea Meyertholen
Yeah. As you say, these are three of the most famous authors in the German language tradition, so their names do carry some [inaudible 00:10:10]. But at the same time, they do, together, constitute this sort of trifecta that illustrates a key argument of my book, which is that certain conditions had to be met for abstract art to come into being in painting. And together, these three literary instances of abstract art put forth three crucial conditions for the invention of abstract art in painting. Namely, the need for a new form of art, an audience who's willing and able to engage with a new form of art, and then an artist who is willing to create new form of art and defend it as a legitimate art form. So each chapter discusses a different aspect needed for the emergence of abstract art. With Kleist, I analyze his article and also Friedrich's beautiful painting alongside it, and I discuss the necessity of a new form of art and how in Kleist's description of Friedrich's painting, he is describing how traditional frameworks are no longer adequate to express the feelings and concepts that he has within him. And so he reimagines Friedrich's painting without any frame so it's just this gaping void, like a monochromatic canvas. In my chapter on Goethe and looking at the poem, I talk about reception and consumption of abstract images. So the focus there is on an audience who's willing to entertain and engage with a radical form of art, looking at the eye and the imagination and the interaction between the two. And this is just perhaps the most unexpected origin of abstract art, I would say, given that Goethe was pretty conservative in his [inaudible 00:12:23], I imagine he would not be a fan at all of abstract art. And with Keller, I would be completely remiss not to include Keller, which is probably the most famous instance of abstract art in German literature. Whenever I spoke about my project with other Germanists, they would always be like, "You know, I remember this famous passage from Keller. Do you want to look into that? I believe I know what you're talking about." But there, I turned the attention to the artist, who is not an insignificant figure for the production of abstract art; for you need an artist who not only conceives of abstract art, but also recognizes it as such and is brave enough to present it and defend it as such.

James Skidmore
Tell us about that scene in Keller.

Andrea Meyertholen
So we find the title figure, der grüne Heinrich, Green Henry. He has all these dreams of becoming a landscape artist, not unlike Keller himself, and he's had no success and he finds himself at an emotional low point, this crossroads in his career, trying to figure out: where do I go next with myself or with my art? And then he's sitting up in his atelier and he just starts drawing and fiddling and letting the pen just meander on the canvas. And the passage just goes on and on, as you might imagine with Keller, but it's so beautifully written. And Keller is masterful with his prose and is really making the connection between Heinrich's mental state and what's happening in his mind, and how that corresponds to the emotions and the energy that's pouring out through his hand, through the pen, onto the canvas, into these lines. And this goes on for days. So you see that this is a form of expression, of self-expression that has, you can even say, a concrete meaning; because Keller very explicitly connects it back to the emotions and the thoughts that are just swirling around in Heinrich's mind. But when Heinrich is finally interrupted from these days of drawing by an artist friend, someone who just comes in and sees a bunch of scribbles and can make neither heads nor tails of it, makes fun of it, and ends up destroying the artwork.

James Skidmore
Yeah, Heinrich's friend disses him. [laughing]

Andrea Meyertholen
Yeah. And the artwork. [laughing] And then Heinrich takes off on a completely different direction in his life from then.

But it was just this point, too, where there was this potential for – in the novel and I'd say in life too – abstract art to be born; for people to recognize [that] this may not look like a landscape or look like a person, but this is a form of aesthetic expression that has a very real meaning and import to it. And then this is the question of the book, where, if images like that were circulating, if someone like Kandinsky or other artists, dilettants, or just your average reader is reading this as early as 1855, it's no secret. The book, as you said, had two editions, it sold well; this image is out there in no secret. Why was nobody making an image like this or a similar form of abstract art?

James Skidmore
Well, maybe because they didn't want it to be destroyed, you know.

Andrea Meyertholen
Right.

James Skidmore
Yeah. It's so negative in the book, right? When his friend arrives and gives him such grief about the painting – or about the doodling, I guess you could say.

Andrea Meyertholen
Yeah. And so the question is: what had to change in the mentality of society, of the artist, of the audience, of the culture, to where somebody could exhibit such an artwork 100 years later or less than 100 years later and it be recognized as a legitimate form of artistic expression?

James Skidmore
With the Kleist essay on Friedrich's Seelandschaft, what's interesting is when you look at the Seelandschaft, when you look at that actual painting, it's hard to make out that it's a Seelandschaft without being told it's a Seelandschaft. The title sort of suggests for you how to understand the painting. If you didn't have the title, you might not recognize that it's a Seelandschaft. Does Kleist talk about that in his essay?

Andrea Meyertholen
No, he starts in right away with it being a Seelandschaft. And in fact, the opening lines is he's imagining himself on the Seelandschaft, on the coast, looking out over this black expanse.

James Skidmore
Being a character in the Seelandschaft.

Andrea Meyertholen
Right.

James Skidmore
So what I'm trying to understand is, in the Kleist essay, how is that abstraction if he's still recognizing it as an object in reality?

Andrea Meyertholen
[inaudible 00:18:23] but he imagines the scene, the image where the Seelandschaft is no longer there, where he's at the edge of the Seelandschaft. And so what he's seeing before him is not a monk on a thin strip of sand looking out over the ocean. He's on the edge of the world, of the frame, looking out into a black expanse. So what he's seeing is only the expanse and not someone standing on the edge, on the brink of the expanse. Friedrich's painting already had dismantled a lot of the framework. The painting itself was highly controversial, and that to mixed views. Goethe, for instance, did not like this painting. He absolutely hated the painting and said it could be smashed over the edge of a table, even. Such strong feelings about the painting, though he started out very complimentary of Friedrich's artwork earlier on. So the painting itself already dismantled a lot of the traditional framework that people came to expect from your landscape art. And Kleist thought this was a very powerful image, but it could be more powerful. It still constrained him in certain ways. It still had some sort of framework in there, with the sea and the sand and the sky. And Kleist dismantles the entire framework and takes away the framework altogether, so what you're left with is this black, this void; basically what's a monochromatic canvas.

And so in the next chapter, I look at several instances of famous monochromatic artworks, from Kazimir Malevich's famous Black Square to Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. And I compare with what Kleist describes as abstraction that's coming from Kleist, to the sort of abstract art that was being created by these three artists to see to what extent they're doing the same things, abstracting in the same way, and for the same reasons. And through this process, I was also trying to understand myself: why did it take until the early 19th century from Malevich to come out with a Black Square? Or for someone then like Newman or Rothko with one of their massive monochromes, why did it take until the mid 20th century for someone to create a massive monochrome painting like that?

James Skidmore
Yeah, that's something your book does so well. Those particular chapters where we have this Kleist essay and trying to understand what would that mean to basically explode the form or to just do away with form in a way. And then you show, well, here are some examples of that from the era of abstract art – so from the 20th century, let's say – of the art that actually seems to be doing that. And that really makes Kleist's essay all the more powerful. Because you really understand then, I think, the import of that essay. And that, I think, is something your book does exceptionally well.

Andrea Meyertholen
Thank you. You use the word "explode" in exploding the frame for Rothko and especially Newman. What really influenced them and their artwork was the aftermath of World War II and the atomic bomb and having the world explode, the frame explode. And then for Newman, it seems like, [that translated to] what do things look like afterwards? And how do you experience that world afterwards?

James Skidmore
Yeah, is that ever interesting. So do you think that Kandinsky, Rothko, any of these artists who were abstractionists, abstract artists in the 20th century, do you think they would have known about this

German literature? Would they have had any connection to that? Are they disconnected somehow? How do we make that link between that literature of Kleist and Goethe and Keller and these abstract artists?

Andrea Meyertholen
See, the link you're talking about – it seems to be implicit in the question that the link is somehow direct or causal.

James Skidmore
Right. And you don't think it is?

Andrea Meyertholen
No. I mean, I think there are definitely links, but I don't think they necessarily have to be direct or causal. I can't say for certain that Kandinsky read the same literature and came to the same conclusions. But as I said before, the literature was out there. It's published. Just take the case of Keller and Heinrich again, it was out there for all to see. So I have to imagine that there were many artists and art critics, people interested in art, who read Keller's novel and came across that description. And whether or not that influenced them directly or not, that's something I can't say for certain. But I really elucidate another role that literature plays, where the links may not be so direct or causal. As I mentioned before, the book is pursuing this mystery of what prevented artists from painting what authors could and were already describing, to identify what forces and attitudes or even institutions needed to transform before what imagined in words by an author could be executed in paint by an artist and then exhibited. It's not just the idea of making the artwork; it's that people, including the artists, had to believe that a bunch of scribbles that Heinrich made were art and not just something my proverbial three-year-old could do. And I think literature played this crucial role in these transformations, in helping to change minds and spread ideas and spark new ideas. And so, while literary developments may or may not have had direct influence on the likes of Kandinsky, they did, I believe, lay crucial theoretical groundwork for an artist's creation of an abstract artwork. And they also helped to advance a cultural climate open and amenable to the public reception of an abstract artwork.

James Skidmore
Yeah.

Andrea Meyertholen
And in addition to circulating these ideas and providing inspiration, literature also played a crucial role in helping to explain to the public where the artist was coming from and how they, as spectators, could interact with such radical images that were perhaps nothing that they ever recognized. It's no coincidence that in the early years of abstract art, you have accompanying it, such as Kandinsky's treatise, this flood of manifestos and theoretical writings that describe what the artist is doing, what they're trying to express, [or] how they came to abstract art; so that the public knew how to approach it or understood why it was art. It's abstract art in itself, but if you just take a monochrome canvas, there's not necessarily a narrative or recognizable figures, and so there's nothing that tells the audience how to look at these pictures or what to think. And in the past, that was typically very prescriptive and conventional in that way. With abstract art, there's typically not a story being told through images. And so when you have instances of abstract art in literature and you have Keller or Kleist writing pages describing the artworks and how they came to being what they could express, this helped artists and

audiences both appreciate and understand new and radically different forms of art. And it help them understand why a bunch of scribbles could be a legitimate form of aesthetic expression, a legitimate aesthetic statement, and not just a toddler's art project.

James Skidmore
Yeah, the proverbial three-year-old, like you said. Your book does a very good job because you're not trying to write a history of abstract art, of course not; and so you're showing how abstract art has appeared in literature before the appearance of abstract art. And so that raises [the question]: how could that happen? But you make this extra case that the literature and these three examples create the conditions in which to receive abstract art or to perhaps not be shocked by it. But you're not trying to make a direct link between that and the emergence of abstract art in art history, in the art world. And nor should you, probably, right? And what's so interesting about it is that it's a wonderful example, I think, of how literature really can help us understand the world and can even anticipate aspects of human existence or of what human beings do on the planet. And I think that's what's so intriguing about it. It's such an interesting concept.

Now, books, of course, answer questions, but they also raise questions. What questions is your book raising?

Andrea Meyertholen
For me, a lot of questions. The book was a massive undertaking, giving that I was working with many dates and genres and different forms of media, different authors and artists and themes, and doing deep dives into each. But even then, I couldn't pursue every thread or go down every rabbit hole, though often I found myself in that rabbit hole and I had to pull myself back or edit it out of the book. I would really like to go back down some of those rabbit holes to answer some questions for myself regarding early instances of abstract art, such as with music. The connection between art and music is very powerful, very potent. And music plays an instrumental role, no pun intended, but it plays a key role – I guess key's not much better than instrumental. [laughing]

James Skidmore
It plays a role. [laughing]

Andrea Meyertholen
It plays a role in the emergence of abstract art. And certainly in the late 19th century, but also in the early 19th century. You have authors and other musicians being inspired and writing about the powerful music of Beethoven or Wagner in particular. I mean, Charles Baudelaire, one of Wagner's big fans, has this wonderful piece of fan mail, basically, that he writes to Richard Wagner, in which he describes to him in terms of painting what he feels when he hears Wagner's music. And those are his words. He literally writes to him: let me describe by analogy with painting what I feel when I listen to Tannhäuser or Lohengrin. And he says: I imagine this dark red seal that's pulsating, and then it transitions to pink, and there's this flash of white that streaks across the canvas. And I would just love to go back and research the role of music. And I'd also like to go back and retrace 19th-century symbolism backwards and see where that leads me.

Another question that this opens for me, something I'd like to pursue further, is the role of science in all of this. You mentioned the important role that literature plays in shaping our world and how we perceive the world. And art, too, I believe does this. And in my book, I talk a lot about the symbiosis

between art and literature and the two of them coming together. When words fail, you have art conveying images; and when images need explaining, you have literature to help in that capacity. And, [in] trying to understand this mystery of what took so long to get from page to canvas, I was surprised — or I really shouldn't be — [with] how important science was in making that leap, where often it was scientific advancements or developments that really precipitated this revolution in how people thought and how they saw the world and how they were willing to see the world. And so you had this double whammy of artists being inspired by the scientific developments themselves, but also artists and audiences seeing science as an aegis of legitimacy, of justification as to why this art wasn't something your three-year-old could do; but in many cases, there was a scientific reasoning behind it, whether or not it was something in new advancements or understandings of human physiology of the eye or invisible forces such as with X-rays or radio waves, sound waves, electricity. And so I would really like to pursue these questions of why it is that science is really the thing that transformed people's thinking for literature and art. Which I find an interesting question in light of today, [where] there's a lot of skepticism of science and in believing science. In this project, though, it seemed that science was that factor, that persuasive factor that helped abstract images make that leap from page to painting.

James Skidmore
Okay. Well, let's leave it there. That's a great note to end on, and it's been a very interesting discussion. Thank you, Andrea, for telling us about your book, *The Myth of Abstraction: The Hidden Origins of Abstract Art in German Literature*. Thank you very much.

Andrea Meyertholen
Thank you.