

Charles Demuth



I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, 1928
oil on cardboard, 35 1/2 x 30 in.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York



Self Portrait, 1907
oil on canvas, 26 1/16 x 18 inches
Collection of the Demuth Museum
Lancaster

The Artist

Charles Demuth

Born Lancaster, Pennsylvania 1883, died Lancaster 1935

Charles Demuth was born to a wealthy family and raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia on and off from 1905-08. He studied at Drexel Academy and continued to study for 5 years following in Paris. Upon returning to America, he worked as an illustrator for a magazine and taught art at Drexel Academy. In 1915, Demuth held his first one-man exhibit comprised of watercolor landscapes and flower pieces in a free and delicate style. Demuth never married and was homosexual. He was sickly as a child and for most of his life and developed diabetes as an adult. He was one of the first patients to be injected with insulin for treatment. Demuth worked in watercolor in the earliest part of his career. In the beginning of 1919, Demuth began to use two types of abstraction: one was soft, with symbolic forms, which were often enclosed in circular frames; the other was hard, encompassing flat, prismatic shapes, crisscrossing diagonals, and streams of light. He was a member of Alfred Stieglitz's Group of Five. He began to paint in oils after his treatment of diabetes began. He held great success in his own lifetime by consistently selling his artwork. At the end of his life, Demuth willed all of his unsold paintings to Georgia O'Keeffe because he had faith in her ability to get them before the public.

Art Movement

Precisionist

Charles Demuth had influences from many artists and worked in different styles. He used cubism's geometric simplifications and faceted, overlapping planes. The 'movement' of Precisionist was never an official movement; the artists never formed a group or issued a manifesto. However, this group experimented with highly controlled approach to technique and form, reducing their compositions to simple shapes and underlying geometrical structures, with clear outlines, minimal detail, and smooth handling of surfaces.

The Artwork

The Figure 5 in Gold

The painting itself is a tribute to his friend William Carlos Williams, and while it has no physical characteristics of Williams, his name and initials appear in the image (Bill, WCW, Carlos). Sidewalks

and buildings surround the tunnel like street. On the right is the truck's latter, below that, the red bar is the axle with two wheels or roaring sirens. Three number 5's in gold stand against the bright red rectangles. All of this is in homage to Williams' poem "The Great Figure." The poem speaks of a red fire engine racing through the city streets with the number 5 painted on it. The viewer can get a sense of the "rain/and lights" and the "siren howls/wheels rumbling" with the streaming diagonal lines in blues, blue-grays, and grays fan out like city lights.

Discussion Suggestions

Talk about portrait painting (how is this different?):

- *What do you first notice about the painting?*
- *How many 5's do you see at first glance? How many 5's are there?*
- *What colors did Demuth in this painting? What effect do the red and yellow next to each other have?*
- *How did Demuth create a sense of movement in the painting? What effect do the diminishing 5's and the diagonal lines have?*
- *What noises do you imagine when you look at the painting?*
- *Does this painting make you think of a city or a country? Of a factory or a farm? Of machines or fields? Why?*

Activity Idea

Create Your Own:

Pre-Activity (Things to consider **before** beginning the portrait):

- Read the poem by William Carlos Williams and study the painting by Demuth.

Activity:

- Look at the numbers and letters around you. What is their use, their shape, and color?
- Make a cut-paper collage with letters and numbers, Use the letters in your name, the numbers in your age or a number or letter you have seen on something you like (a shirt or ad).
- Use contrasting colors for letters, numbers and the other areas and shapes.
- Tell your friends about your number/letter design. Where did you see the letters and numbers? Why did you choose them?

Materials Needed:

- Scrap paper
- Construction paper/colored paper
- Pencils
- Scissors
- Colored pencils, crayons, watercolors, or pastels