

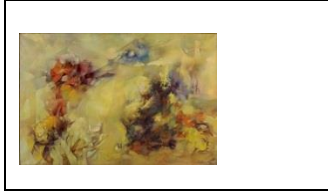
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## Title of Object

Tempest in Yellow

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Dorothea Tanning

**Country:** United States

**Date of Object:** 1956

**File Created:** 6/26/2017

**Accession Number:** 2007.44

**Author of File:** Kathleen Steiger

**Material/Medium:** oil on canvas

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Paintings

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 1/3/2018

**Culture:** American

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## Tour Topics

Women Artists, Highlights of World Art – 20th century, Surrealism, imagination, abstraction, women

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

- We often speak of Landscapes or Seascapes or even Cityscapes. In the mid 1950's Tanning's work started to look like a looming realm of the unknown, the sheet-scapes forming in the corner of the canvas engulfing the two-dimensional world into a multi-dimensional mind-space of hide-and-seek. Can you see any figures hiding in *Tempest in Yellow*? What could they be?
- Michelangelo in the late 15th century spoke of his concept that hidden figures 'trapped' in blocks of stone can be perceived and liberated by genius. As you look closely at this work by Tanning see what figures you can find emerging from her "sheet scape".
- What do you think the artist had in mind when she named this piece "*Tempest in Yellow*"? The *Tempest* by Shakespeare tells the tale of a ship swept away in a storm and the survivors who find themselves on a magical island inhabited by and exiled king and his daughter and spirits (Caliban and Ariel). What do you see in this oil painting that reminds you of that play?
- "My work is about the enigmatic; it's about leaving the door open to imagination. You see, enigma is a very healthy thing, because it encourages the viewer to look beyond the obvious and commonplace. I have always liked to create images wherein the viewer sees something else every time he looks at them."

That's what I'm asking from the viewer." --Dorothea Tanning – Take a second look at this work and discover something new. What did you find? What could it mean?

- How would this painting change if it were “Tempest in Blue”? Or “Tempest in Red”? In Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, Ariel says,

“I told you, sir, they were red-hot with drinking,  
So full of valor that they smote the air  
For breathing in their faces, beat the ground  
For kissing of their feet—yet always bending  
Towards their project. Then I beat my tabor,  
At which, like unbacked colts, they pricked their ears,  
Advanced their eyelids, lifted up their noses  
As they smelt music. So I charmed their ears”

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### Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

- In the mid 1950’s Tanning’s work started to look like a looming realm of the unknown, the sheet-scapes forming in the corner of the canvas later overtook Tanning’s paintings, engulfing the two-dimensional world into a multi-dimensional mind-space of hide-and-seek. They were sometimes called “dream spaces” inhabited by vague forms. (Thompson)
- (from *Insomnias*) “as if shifting poses in some incomprehensible ritual, the naked female anatomies in *Insomnias* mostly disappear into a color storm without revealing themselves as full tangible entities. “
- (from *Insomnias*) “Covering and uncovering seem to be at issue in remarks about emergence made by Tanning during a 1974 interview with the French Critic Alain Jouffroy: ‘I’ve been trying for a long time to deal with the figures that emerge on the canvas. Tanning’s remarks about her painted figures emerging from the canvas vaguely recall Michelangelo’s well-known concept that hidden figures ‘trapped’ in blocks of stone can be perceived and liberated by genius.
- (from *Insomnias*) Tanning’s ability to visually describe a “limitless expanse of possibility” is first evident in her early jewel-like work. It continued to shape her work of the mid-50s, even as she turned away from precise renderings and toward a looser and more abstract language in paintings that conjure a prismatic, faceted world. Works such as *Insomnias* (1957) address the aesthetics and philosophical concerns of postwar abstraction without yielding their intense engagement with psychological narrative.
- (NYT Obit) But in the mid-1950s Ms. Tanning broke from the mirror-like precision of narrative Surrealism to take up what she called her “prism” paintings, later renamed “*Insomnias*.” These are enigmatic canvases in which bodies and body parts, barely discernible visages and biomorphic forms float in dream spaces generated by fractured planes and diaphanous scrims.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

- My work is about the enigmatic; it's about leaving the door open to imagination. You see, enigma is a very healthy thing, because it encourages the viewer to look beyond the obvious and commonplace. I have always liked to create images wherein the viewer sees something else every time he looks at them. That's what I'm asking from the viewer. --Dorothea Tanning (From Thompson, Introduction)

From: *Dorothea Tanning's pincushion to serve as fetish and the exploitation of surrealism* By Leslie Thompson:

Leading to the *Insomnias* series, Tanning's paintings of the early 1950s reveal an artist searching for a balance between a figural mode and the speed of gesture, between the possibilities of narration and an autonomous force of impulse. Eventually Tanning learned how to diffuse the contours of the body, creating an idea of corporeality based on imagination. She transformed her compositions into kaleidoscopic worlds of her consciousness. One can view the artist's move towards abstraction in her 1954 painting *Nue Endormie* (Sleeping Nude) in which a strange cloud or sheet-like apparition begins to swallow the nude female. Like a looming realm of the unknown, the sheet-scapes forming in the corner of the canvas later overtook Tanning's paintings, engulfing the two-dimensional world into a multi-dimensional mind-space of hide-and-seek, as seen in *La Mal Oublié* (The Ill Forgotten), 1955, and *Tempête en Jaune* (Tempest in Yellow), 1956. *Insomnias* (Insomnias), completed in 1957, marked a turning point in Tanning's career. Conjuring feelings of obsession, anxiety, and agitation, insomnia, the inability to sleep, sometimes induces hallucinations and other forces of dreaming. In this painting (Fig. 4), figures dissolve into a storm of color, their bodies not fully tangible. Light shimmers, ricocheting and reflecting, creating a "sky" of folded light. Within the folds of this "sky," figures gradually emerge. In the effect of veiling and diluting the figures enveloped by shadow and light, critics have associated the bodies with thoughts, the thoughts induced by insomnia.

Mia stories - MARCH 11, 2016

- Women at work: Dorothea Tanning
- Check mate. With those words, artists Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst struck up a 34-year relationship over a game of chess in Tanning's New York City studio.
- A self-portrait, *Birthday*, had caught Ernst's eye. It shows her in a hallway full of open doors, her blouse open, revealing her chest, winged chimera squatting on the floor in front of her, like a pet. It was catnip to Dada pioneer Ernst, who swung by her studio in 1942, looking to collect works by surrealist women painters, and spotted it on an easel.
- As Tanning put it, "It was snowing hard when [Ernst] rang the doorbell. Choosing pictures for a show ... he was a willing emissary to the studios of a bouquet of pretty young painters who, besides being pretty, which they couldn't help, were also very serious about being artists."
- The couple lived in Sedona, Arizona; Paris, and the French countryside. All the while, Tanning painted surrealist images, made soft sculpture, and, in time, became a published author of poetry, two memoirs, and a novel. She lived to be 101.
- In 2007, Mia acquired her *Tempest in Yellow* painting, created in 1956 when she had turned away from surrealism's typically precise rendering and toward a looser, more suggestive style. She called these new

works “prism” paintings, and later “insomnias,” dream spaces inhabited by vague forms.—Tim Gihring, written with Diane Richard, Mia editor

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

No label online.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

*Dorothea Tanning’s Pincushion to Serve as Fetish and the Exploitation of Surrealism* by Leslie Thompson, Master’s Thesis, Texas Christian University, 2009:

<https://repository.tcu.edu/bitstream/handle/116099117/4199/LThompson.pdf?sequence=1>

Obituary: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/arts/design/dorothea-tanning-surrealist-painter-dies-at-101.html>

Mia Stories: Women at Work: Dorothea Tanning: <https://new.artsmia.org/stories/women-at-work-dorothea-tanning/>

(Photo of Tanning, 1955, from Mia Stories)



*Dorothea Tanning: Insomnias: Paintings from 1954 – 1965* with text by Charles Stuckey and Richard Howard, Kent Gallery, 2005