As one of the originators of Abstract Expressionism, Richard Pousette-Dart shared with his colleagues, Baziotes, Gottlieb, Newman, Pollock, Rothko, and others, a deep interest in searching for new means of artistic expression relevant to the modern age. Pousette-Dart viewed art as a constantly evolving quest for deeper understanding.

During the 1940s, he began to explore ambiguous and elusive forms in his painting. In his search for a new language of expression, he continually transformed his images through the use of simultaneity and complex layering of pigment on the canvas.

Pousette-Dart came from a culturally sophisticated family. His father, Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, was a painter, art director, and writer who wrote books on Robert Henri, Maurice Prendergast, and Winslow Homer. Nathaniel also collected African and South Pacific tribal art as well as American Indian artifacts. From childhood, Richard had an opportunity to examine these pieces and to read about their origins. His library still contains numerous studies of tribal art, some that he acquired and others that he inherited from his family. His mother, Flora Pousette-Dart, was a musician and a poet.

Pousette-Dart was active in the New York art milieu from 1937 until his death in 1992. Throughout the 1940s and the '50s, he participated in many important gatherings of the Abstract Expressionists, including lectures and meetings at Subjects of the Artists, the school organized by Baziotes, Hare, Motherwell, and Rothko. In 1950, he was part of the three-day conference for artists at Studio 35. Characteristically, he participated by asking penetrating questions, rather than making grand pronouncements. During these years, Pousette-Dart frequently met with Rothko and Newman at the East Fifty-Ninth Street Automat in New York, where they had animated discussions about art.

It has been noted that Pousette-Dart was a friend of the painter, John Graham, and was in agreement with Graham about the importance of African tribal art. He owned Graham’s painting Blue Abstraction, 1931, and Graham had given him an inscribed edition of his book, System and Dialectics in Art. Pousette-Dart’s interest in Graham, however, was selective. The two were opposite personalities; Graham was an extrovert and raconteur while Pousette-Dart was quiet and contemplative. The former believed that the artist must unite “three elements: thought, feeling, and automatic ‘écriture’.” The latter believed that unity of thought and feeling could be achieved through the intuitive process.

Like the Surrealists and Graham, Pousette-Dart used archetypal images inspired by tribal art. In many of his works, the theme is transformation itself. For example, in Primordial Moment, 1939, birds are transformed into myriad biomorphic forms, each evolving into another in a continual process of revelation. Pousette-Dart believed that tribal arts were generative and life enhancing. This view contrasted with that of the other Abstract Expressionists, who largely regarded tribal art as suffused by terror.

Lowery Sims has noted that his painting Desert of 1940 (pl. 12) “evokes a ritualistic Native American sand painting.” The organic forms of Desert suggest imaginative transformations and the positive forces of nature.
Pousette-Dart’s philosophy embraced the Surrealists’ interest in archetypal form. He rejected their notion of the aesthetics of conflict, because he had a deep belief in Eastern concepts of unity. Within his work, one finds the resolution of such opposites as form and space, id and ego, male and female as expressed in the painting *Figure*, 1944–45 (pl. 29). In this painting, the unifying quality of the grid adds order to the free-flowing, biomorphic forms.

During this period, in the late 1930s, Pousette-Dart began carving small brass sculptures, many of which were inspired by tribal, European, and Asian art. The brasses embody significant forms that appear in his paintings, drawings, and sculpture throughout his work. He completed a large bronze sculpture, *Woman Bird Group*, 1939 (fig. 1), which is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C. In the
1950s, he began constructing wire sculptures, which were exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery. His interest in sculpture continued throughout his life, and in 1990 he completed a monumental bronze door for the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Like his parents, Pousette-Dart was interested in Transcendentalism; his interest was unique among the Abstract Expressionists. His family library contained the complete works of both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson’s credo “trust thyself” paralleled Pousette-Dart’s belief in the individual’s powers of self-discovery. Emerson, like Pousette-Dart, was deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy and believed that great truths come by intuition and that they come “unbidden.” Similarly, Pousette-Dart believed that his paintings reflected life as a “continuum with infinite possibilities.” His technique of painting layer upon layer of pigment resulted in the continual emergence of new, “unbidden” forms.

*Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental*, 1941–42 (pl. 1, pp. 8–9) is a summation of Pousette-Dart’s aesthetic. It is a seven and one half by ten foot canvas painted with many layers of pigment. This painting was the first large Abstract Expressionist work. It was so large that Pousette-Dart’s dealer, Marian Willard, was unable to exhibit it. The large scale of the work encompasses the view-
Curvilinear forms dominate the painting, including spirals, circles, vortices, helixes, and plumes. These shapes suggest fields of energy, cosmic events, planetary orbs, and other celestial imagery. They spin, pulsate, and seem to create kinetic force as they expand and contract. In the continuum of this visual field, positive and negative spaces meld. As in Vincent van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, 1889 (fig. 2), *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* is a painting in which the interwoven spirals express cosmic energy. Like van Gogh, five decades earlier, Pousette-Dart reveals hidden forces that connect seemingly disparate elements.

During the 1940s, a grid underlies much of Pousette-Dart’s work. Its consistent appearance allowed him to balance form, no matter how complex, in order to achieve harmony within a state of flux. Pousette-Dart’s interest in the infrastructure of Cubism with its implications of constant metamorphosis differentiates him from many of the other Abstract Expressionists. The curvilinear images of *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* are painted on such a grid with many layers of pigment. Pousette-Dart noted, “Layering is analogous to life itself.”

Music was another reference for *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental*. While the term “symphony” suggests the grand orchestral scale of the painting, the music most admired by Pousette-Dart was Johann Sebastian Bach’s fugues. A fugue is a composition created for a number of voices or instruments; its theme is presented by one voice before being developed or varied by others. Bach’s fugues contain polyphonic themes that are remarkable for their density, continuity, and complexity. This aesthetic deeply inspired Pousette-Dart’s painting.

World War II, the most important event of the generation of the 1940s, had a strong influence on the Abstract Expressionists. Pousette-Dart’s
response to the war is seen in three powerful paintings: *The Atom, One World*, 1947–48 (fig. 3); *The Boundless Atom*, 1941–43 (fig. 5, p. 14); and *Crucifixion, Comprehension of the Atom*, 1944 (pl. 31). While these paintings expressed an extreme horror of war, they emphasized his belief that humankind can transcend its instinct for violence.

*The Atom, One World* is usually interpreted as the artist’s condemnation of the atomic bomb used in World War II. Its imagery speaks to the effects of nuclear destruction, war, annihilation, and the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

*Crucifixion, Comprehension of the Atom*, is a work that reveals the artist’s concern with science and its potential as either a creative or destructive force. Against a black background, vibrant yellows, soft blues, and glowing white pigments emerge. These biomorphic images suggest living forms, symbols of both human origins and of eternal life. A white oval with radiating lines, which could be interpreted as atomic fission, ambiguously suggests both the constructive and annihilative uses of atomic energy. Pousette-Dart’s belief that science is closely linked to art and to moral issues, parallels Thoreau’s writing that the “poet would turn science into ‘con-science,’ a moral knowledge,” and that “every poet has trembled on the verge of science.”

Pousette-Dart was interested in electrical currents and radio waves (unseen forces) that span the universe. These interests led him to become an amateur radio operator and a collector of old mechanical devices: clocks, lenses, music boxes, gears, wheels, and old typewriters (fig. 5). His fascination with the camera and the transformative process of film as he developed it, led him to become an accomplished and experimental photographer. “I love photography,” Pousette-Dart said, “because to me it is the miracle of something coming up out of the unknown.” He noted that through photography he came to realize that all form is made up of points of light and that everything has a molecular structure. In his painting, the creation of form through points of pigment reveals his awareness of the molecular structure of the atom. More work needs to be done on the extensive body of photographs created by the artist.

While Pousette-Dart’s interest in science plays a role in some of his art, it is particularly evident in *The Edge*, 1943–45 (fig. 4). In this painting, the edge becomes a fragile point of balance between objects that are in constant flux. He extends this concept into one of overall metamorphosis, writing “still edge of all motion, contained/edge of mutation and transformation/edge of eternal birth & genesis of all forms,” connecting the idea of the edge to the generative forces of the universe.

Pousette-Dart read many Western philosophers, such as Bergson, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard, among others. He was also deeply interested in Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and the Bhagavad-Gita, philosophies that differentiated him from many of the other Abstract Expressionists. These philosophies paralleled his own belief in intuitive discovery as a continual process and emphasized that enlightenment is inherent in everyone; it is an insight that he believed transcended common boundaries of thought.

He met D. T. Suzuki, who was one of the most prominent scholars to bring Zen Buddhist ideas to American artists and intellectuals during the mid-twentieth century. Pousette-Dart and Suzuki both lectured at the Union Theological Seminary in 1952, and they met on later occasions to discuss their ideas. For Suzuki, the Chinese characters for “skylike” represented a key principle that he translated into the notion of “a boundless state of unity through time and space in which the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity are abandoned.” Pousette-Dart’s art paralleled Suzuki’s concepts through a concern with simultaneity and the unity of all life forces.
2 Interview with Evelyn Pousette-Dart, Suffern, New York, October 9, 2004.
10 Interview with Evelyn Pousette-Dart, October 9, 2004. Works that Pousette-Dart titled "fugue" include Fugue (1940), Fugue Number 2 (1943), and Fugue Number 4 (1947).
11 Interview with Evelyn Pousette-Dart, October 9, 2004.
15 Interview with Evelyn Pousette-Dart, October 9, 2004.
19 Lowery Stokes Sims, "Ciphering and Deciphering," p. 17.
20 Interview with Evelyn Pousette-Dart, October 9, 2004.
21 Ibid. Two Abstract Expressionists with deep interests in Asian thought were Ibram Lassaw and Ad Reinhardt.
22 Suzuki primarily influenced artists thought of as a generation later than Pousette-Dart. They include the Beat poets and composer John Cage who passed Suzuki's ideas on to Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and others.