

Hofmann unforgettable as artist,

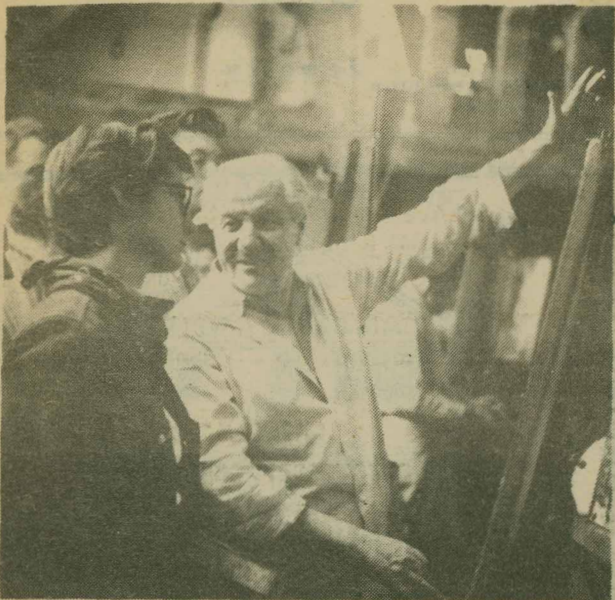


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Hofmann as teacher

By John Russell

The late Hans Hofmann, a pioneer of abstract expressionism, is best remembered in Provincetown as the art teacher who brought European aesthetic thought to America, and left an indelible impression on thousands of the town's artists.

Hofmann's methods were sometimes unusual. He would take a student's drawing and radically correct it, at times even ripping it in two, while the rest of the class looked on. Then he'd juxtapose the two halves so the lines no longer met and say, "This is tension."

Once a student asked Hofmann what the secret was to the corrections he made on his students' drawings.

"Ah, yes, there is a secret," Hofmann said. "But you must find it for yourself. It does not belong to me." Under his guidance, many did.

Between 1904 and 1914, Hofmann lived in Paris, supported by a wealthy patron. There he met and befriended many of the leading figures of modern art, like Picasso and Braque, and participated in the cubist activities of those years. Later, as a teacher in both New York and Provincetown, he conveyed their ideas to his students.

"He was a marvelous teacher," said Fritz Bultman, a lifelong friend of Hofmann's. "The essential thing was that he got you to 'see,' to see in terms of space."

Besides Bultman, artists such as William Freed, Lillian Kiesler, Lee Krasner, Lillian Orlowsky, Paul Resika, Judith Rothschild, Myron Stout and Tony Vevers, to name but a few, all studied with Hofmann sometime between 1933 and 1958, when he directed the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Hofmann's birth, the Provincetown Art Association has opened a special exhibit entitled, "Hans Hofmann as Teacher: Drawings by His Students." The show is being guest curated by Cynthia Goodman who first organized it for New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it hung from January 23 to March 4, 1979.

Born in Germany in 1880, Hofmann opened his first American School in New York in 1933, and a year later arrived in Provincetown to rent the cavernous studio barn on Miller Hill Road used for many years by another teacher and artist, Charles Hawthorne, who died in 1930.

Years later, Hofmann would say it had been his destiny to fill the void. He returned here to teach for 25 summers.

Drawing was essential to Hofmann's teaching methods. Through it, his students learned how to translate a three-dimensional object onto a two dimensional surface, yet still retain its sense of volume. He would set up an elaborate still life or engage a model, then have his students depict it. They drew in many media, though charcoal was the most common.

The drawings in the show run from a very representational nude by Jan Muller, to Myron Stout's purely abstract work, with many stops in between. There are also photographs of the period, including one of "Fat Susie," "a model at Hofmann's Provincetown school."

"Hofmann felt that composition had to be mastered in drawing before the student could become 'absolutely sovereign' in painting," said Goodman, "and he used student work to illustrate his theories."

All the drawings in the show bear the mark of Hofmann's own hand. During class, he would occasionally walk amid the easels arrayed about the studio. If he noticed a drawing that was misdirected or lacking energy, he would take the student's charcoal and alter it.

The drawings contain many of Hofmann's annotations, such as triangles that emphasize the importance of a particular plane, or zigzags and arrows to indicate the direction of force in a composition.

"Most teachers marked, but not as much as that," said Orlowsky. "He transformed it. You'd have a drawing and he would show you how to turn it into art."

Orlowsky's male figure study, circa 1940, shows a triangle Hofmann drew on the chest of the figure to indicate that the area needed to be reworked. She recalls once bringing him some drawings to criticize.

"He said, you're going to get it real fast," said Orlowsky, "and I stayed there for 10 years."

Hofmann as a teacher was not distant or awesome. He spoke to each student sympathetically, though his exact words are often hard to decipher. Hofmann spoke his native German and also French, learning English as a third language. He was partially deaf due to a street fight in Paris when he was young, so he never heard English correctly. As a result, he spoke with a misplaced accent, often mixing languages, though he had a large vocabulary.

Hofmann didn't lecture excessively, believing the student must learn by doing. In place of words, he used his hands. Often he would take a student's hand and draw a whole line with it on the paper. In more extreme cases, if he saw a lifeless drawing, he would tear it to illustrate how to put tension into the figure.

Some students, like Lee Krasner, were dismayed by this tactic, to say the least. During a night class in New York, she had just finished a drawing and anticipated Hofmann's approval. When he saw it, however, he tore it into four pieces. Though angered by this, Krasner and others accepted it as part of the learning process.

"He would say, you have to learn that you can't just put something down, then leave it there," said Myron Stout.

teacher

"You have to put it down, then destroy it, so you can recreate."

When "Hans Hofmann as Teacher" was at the Metropolitan, Nat Halper suggested to the Provincetown Art Association that it would be an ideal show to have in Provincetown. The board of trustees agreed and arranged with Goodman to bring the show here. She expanded the original number of drawings by about 20 to include more Provincetown artists.

Speaking of Halper, Annabelle Hebert, director of the art association said: "He's been a great help to me. It was his idea and enthusiasm that pushed us to get the show."

During Hofmann's summers on the Cape, Fritz Bultman was perhaps closer to him than almost anyone. In 1935 Bultman left New Orleans to enroll at the American School in Munich. Looking for an apartment, he accidentally met the teacher's wife Miz Hofmann who had a room to let, which Bultman took.

Hofmann was not there. He was in New York at the time then, having left the Munich school he founded and ran since 1915, because Hitler had made life difficult for all "degenerate" modern artists.

When Bultman finally met Hofmann in New York two years later, he tried to impress upon him the danger Miz

Hofmann was in, and that Hitler was not just an opportunist "rascal" who would soon vanish.

"That was the difference between them," said Bultman. "Hans saw the reality of the visual, whereas Miz was a person totally aware of the real world of politics." Miz Hofmann finally left Germany in 1939 on one of the last boats out before the outbreak of World War II.

Later Hofmann would say of her: "If it hadn't been for Miz, I could have never had a career as an artist." It was she who gave him support and the strength to create.

Hofmann had assimilated cubist ideas and the Fauvist's use of vivid color, though no matter how abstract his paintings appeared, they were always based on nature. He insisted upon this. It was in Provincetown that he spent many hours outdoors. Often he would load his easel and paints into his car and drive out to Highland Light or to the dunes to paint.

The landscapes he did here in the late 1930's and early 1940's have been gathered by Goodman into a second show now at the Provincetown Art Association, courtesy of Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York. Entitled "Hans Hofmann: Provincetown Landscapes," it features a selection of vistas in and around town, such as views of Commercial Street, seascapes, Hofmann's garden, as well as a self-portrait.

"The whole idea in having Hofmann's own paintings was to show him not only as a teacher, but also as an artist," said Goodman. "To my knowledge, they have never been shown as a group in Provincetown."

There was a span of time, though, in the 1940's when Hofmann was attracted to "automatism" as practiced by Jackson Pollack, and consequently drew away from nature. Pollack would take a paint-soaked brush, and using his entire body, would with a sweep of his arm or flick of his wrist, throw the paint onto the canvas. He felt

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