

RETHINKING AMBROSE PATTERSON AND MODERN ART IN SEATTLE

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Art History  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

June 2010

“Rethinking Ambrose Patterson and Modern Art in Seattle,” a thesis prepared by  
Danielle Marie Knapp in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts  
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26 May 2010  
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## An Abstract of the Thesis of

Danielle Marie Knapp for the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Art History to be taken June 2010

Title: RETHINKING AMBROSE PATTERSON AND MODERN ART IN SEATTLE

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Joyce Cheng

In 1918, Ambrose Patterson (Australian, 1877-1966) arrived in Seattle, Washington after training in Paris and working in Europe, Australia, Hawaii, and California. Patterson founded the University of Washington's School of Painting and Design and instructed in the European academic method for nearly thirty years. Traditionally considered an Impressionist and historically remembered as the first modern painter to arrive in Seattle, Patterson continued to produce work based on European conventions of modernism long after his departure from the Parisian avant-garde. Patterson's experience is demonstrative of the artistic diversity and opportunities for European-trained artists in Seattle during the early to mid-twentieth century, which have often been overshadowed by the idea of a dominant Northwest School and the emerging construction of American modernism.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my sincere gratitude to Professors Cheng and Schulz for their help in the preparation of this manuscript. In addition, special thanks are due to Mr. Larry Fong of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art for introducing me to the work of Ambrose Patterson, and to David Martin, Matthew Kangas, Martha Kingsbury, Margaret Bullock, Joan Wahlman, and Jane Alexander for encouraging my interest in this topic. I am also indebted to the staff of the University of Washington Special Collections for their assistance during my research trip to Seattle, which was supported in part by a Marian C. Donnelly Graduate Student Travel Grant from the Department of Art History at the University of Oregon. Finally, I wish to thank my husband, my family, and my friends for their unwavering support.

In memory of Ambrose Patterson, who dreamed of “doing nothing but painting.”

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Why Ambrose Patterson?

In 1961, the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) held a retrospective exhibit to honor painter, printmaker, and University of Washington (UW) professor emeritus Ambrose Patterson, a central figure in Northwest art since his arrival in Seattle in 1918. Among the nearly one hundred works included in the show were oil and tempera paintings, watercolors, and woodblock prints that reflected the artist's diverse interests and extensive travels. Trained in the French academies at the turn of the century, Patterson became increasingly removed from his early avant-garde status after leaving Paris in 1910, though this did not prevent him from attaining success in his later career as he continued to be labeled "modern" by writers, critics, and peers. Patterson's experience is demonstrative of the artistic diversity and new opportunities for artists in Seattle in the early to mid-twentieth century and a revealing case study in how the European notions of modernism persisted in the United States even as American modernism overtook it in international importance.

Patterson's retrospective was held in the same year *Art and Culture*, a collection of writings by art critic Clement Greenberg, was published. Greenberg was the pivotal figure to define what "modern art" meant for America and by the 1960s his ideas were, as Portland Art Museum Curator Bruce Guenther stated, "the intellectual gauge against



which all things were somehow ultimately measured—one’s success, degree of rebellion, or distance yet to travel”<sup>1</sup>). With its emphasis on materials and process, American modernism was not historically-based; the modalities of European pre-Greenbergian modernism in which Patterson continued to work absolutely were.

In this modernism that existed before Greenberg—or any other American scholar, for that matter<sup>2</sup>—set out to define (and promote) their own view on the subject, Paris was the center of modern art and Impressionism was the first significant movement to be touted as “modern.” In the only monograph written on Patterson, art historian (and great-great-niece of Patterson) Jane Alexander included Tonalism, Impressionism, Japonisme, and Symbolism among his earliest influences.<sup>3</sup> Of all these, Patterson’s introduction to Impressionism at the turn of the century made the biggest impact, and the label of “Impressionist,” and therefore also “modernist,” would follow him throughout the remainder of his career. Later in life, when he was experimenting with styles other than Impressionism, he continued to be labeled “modern” even though that title had a much different meaning in Greenbergian America.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Wilkin and Bruce Guenther, *Clement Greenberg: A Critic’s Collection* (Portland: Portland Art Museum; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 131.

<sup>2</sup> Other notable American theorists on modern art were Alfred H. Barr, Jr. of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, who created the chart on *Cubism and Abstract Art* and who believed a broad understanding of all cultural endeavors was necessary to understand any individual artistic discipline, and Harold Rosenberg, who advocated gestural abstraction and believed that the Abstract Expressionists had brought about a radical break with past traditions by treating their canvases in a new way.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Alexander, *Portrait of an artist: Ambrose Patterson (1877-1966): From the Latin Quarter to the potpourri of Palamadom* (Melbourne: McClelland Regional Gallery, 1992), 9.

Given his Parisian training and his Impressionist status, when Patterson arrived in the Northwest in 1918 he was seen as Seattle's "first modernist link to Europe"<sup>4</sup> and "credited with bringing the international scene"<sup>5</sup> to the city. Within a year he founded the University of Washington's School of Painting and Design upon the invitation of University President Henry Suzzallo. Patterson's early leadership of the University's program ushered in an artistic climate that drew upon European ideas and aesthetics, a fact made even more apparent in the 1920s when Walter Isaacs, who was also trained in Paris and interested in European methods of instruction, joined the staff as the Head of the Department.<sup>6</sup> Patterson's friends and acquaintances during the formative years of Seattle's modernism included many important UW instructors, modern artists, museum and gallery administrators, and writers. Patterson and his second wife Viola, a Seattle native and artist herself, collected artwork from many of these individuals and regularly lent from their personal collection works by close friends (and more renowned modern artists) such as Mark Tobey<sup>7</sup> and Amédée Ozenfant<sup>8</sup> to regional and international art shows.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Brunsman, "Patterson: The Man and the Modernist," Exhibition Brochure for "Ambrose Patterson Modernist Painter and Printmaker," March 1-April 4, 1989, Carolyn Staley Fine Arts, Seattle.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Patterson's retrospective at the Seattle Art Museum was held jointly with a retrospective for Isaacs.

<sup>7</sup> Loan receipt from the Museum of Modern Art, July 6, 1962, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/12, University of Washington Special Collections.

<sup>8</sup> "Seattle Collects European Art," Seattle Opera Guild Newsletter, Dec. 3, 1960, Patterson Papers, 2563-003 1/1.

<sup>9</sup> Works by Kenneth Callahan, Morris Graves, Glen Alps, and Mark Tobey were also gifted by the Pattersons to the Henry Art Gallery.

Public sentiment for Patterson was very high in Seattle; many revered him based solely on his Parisian education and community role as the well-established academic (or, in early Seattle Art Museum employee Dorothy Malone's affectionate words, the "old, old timer"<sup>10</sup>). Reviews of his paintings and prints throughout his career, though often positive, were sometimes mixed. In a review published in *The Honolulu Advertiser* July 19, 1925, the critic wrote of Patterson's paintings (including images from his time in Washington, California, and Hawaii) that:

[His work] is not the carefully gone over stuff that ultimately gives us perfect form, and at times color too. [...] There is a natural consequence to this in his showing. Some of his pictures are not up to standard, as if the idea has slipped away before he got it down. But there are too many good ones to allow that thought to in any way affect one's admiration for him as an artist of ability.<sup>11</sup>

The prevalence of "good ones" is what sustained Patterson's nearly seven-decade artistic career despite the shifting nature of his work. As his career progressed and he made experimental departures from his impressionist style, critics took notice of his tendency to fleetingly use outdated modes of European modernism like fauvism, cubism, futurism, and orphism.<sup>12</sup> Patterson is represented in the collections of several Australian museums, the Seattle Art Museum, the Tacoma Art Museum, and the Henry Art Gallery,

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<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Ragen, Oral history interview with Dorothy Malone, Jan. 27, 1983, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>11</sup> Twigg Smith, "Ambrose Patterson's Paintings, on View Here this Week, Carry Conviction by their Rare Color," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, Fine Arts Section, ed. by Arthur A. Greene, July 19, 1925, Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/11.

<sup>12</sup> According to *Seattle Post Intelligencer* art critic Sally Hayman, "Most of Patterson's work seems to consist of pastiches of many major artists since Utrillo." Sally Hayman, "Patterson could turn out anything," *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, October 8, 1967, Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/11. Seattle Times art critic Jean Batie expressed the sentiment that "Patterson seems to have felt most comfortable with his turn-of-the-century ghosts." Jean Batie, "Patterson Paintings Viewed in Kirkland," *Seattle Times*, October 18, 1967, Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/11.

as well as smaller regional art galleries and private collections. A year before Patterson's death at the age of 89, he was honored with a special Commendation Award by Washington Governor Dan Evans on the occasion of the 1966 Governor's Invitational Art Exhibition at the State Capitol Museum. Though his failing health prevented him from attending the ceremony, Patterson was praised by Gov. Evans for his role as a "painter and teacher, whose devoted work of more than half a century has been an inspiration to all artists of the state."<sup>13</sup>

In looking closely at Patterson and rethinking his label as a "modern" artist, it is possible to see how he and other European-trained artists working in Seattle at this time kept certain European notions of modernism alive long after Paris was no longer the center for modern art. The interconnectedness of Seattle's earliest modern artists becomes increasingly apparent when retracing Patterson's steps in the city. The fact that Patterson and Mark Tobey, who Greenberg described as making "one of the few original contributions to contemporary American painting,"<sup>14</sup> were close friends and exhibited together often is even more interesting given their different views on art and different types of careers. It is not necessary to try to make an argument for whose art was "better" by any particular standard; rather, it is most valuable to see these interactions as evidence that there were never any clear-cut divisions between European modernism and American modernism in Seattle's own emerging modernism.

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<sup>13</sup> Exhibition Notice from 1966 Governor's Invitational Art Exhibition, State Capitol Museum, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/1.

<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Mark Tobey et al., *Mark Tobey* (Barcelona: Àmbit; Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1997), 20.

### Review of Scholarship

Information on Patterson's life and work is scattered and incomplete. Patterson's only biographer is Jane Alexander, the Gallery Director of the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery in Victoria, Australia. Her 1992 book, *Portrait of an artist: Ambrose Patterson (1877-1966): From the Latin Quarter to the potpourri of Palamadom*, provides information on Patterson's early biography, but it only covers his early training and career up until his move to Seattle: in total, the first two decades of his career.

Patterson's later accomplishments are sporadically documented in various newspaper articles, exhibition catalogs, and records from the University of Washington,<sup>15</sup> as well as in many books on Northwest artists of the twentieth century. Though many of Patterson's works are accessible in local and regional collections or available for study from photographs and reproductions he has no catalogue raisonné and it is difficult to achieve a clear understanding of the trajectory of his work without the benefit of viewing his pieces en masse.

Information on Patterson's five decades in Seattle can be found in the writings of Northwest art historians Martha Kingsbury, Margaret Bullock, Sheryl Conkelton, Barbara Johns, Laura Brunsman, and Matthew Kangas, among others. Though excellent resources, these texts and other writings on Northwest art often mention Patterson in passing as one in a list of names—as an example of European-trained modern artists or university academics—or only as a brief point of comparison to larger artists such as Tobey. Kangas, of all of these, appears to have spent the most time wrestling with

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<sup>15</sup> The University of Washington acquired Patterson's papers in 1972, 1976, and 1983.

Patterson's role in Seattle in the twentieth century; his acknowledgement of Patterson's contributions, while turning a critical eye to many of the works of art he produced, offers more complex commentary on Patterson than is available anywhere else but serves to further highlight the glaring omission of an in-depth consideration of Patterson in the historical dialogue on Northwest art. No one has looked solely at Patterson—no chapter in any book has been dedicated to him—beyond Alexander's writings on his early career.

As such, a review of the limited scholarship on Patterson makes him seem, paradoxically, a tangential figure while simultaneously proclaiming him one of the most important in the development of Northwest modernism. This is due in large part to the tendency for writers to repeat with great reverence the same "sound bites" on Patterson's legacy: his early affiliation with the Parisian avant-garde, his founding of the School of Painting and Design, and his relationships with Isaacs, Tobey, and others—without acknowledging the questions inherent in these details. How had Patterson essentially "fallen out" of the avant-garde circle of which he was briefly a contributing member in Paris? By what criteria had Patterson been deemed the first modernist in Seattle? How was Patterson's legacy shaped by the two new powerhouse cultural brokers in early twentieth-century Seattle, the UW School of Painting and Design and the Seattle Art Museum? What does a comparison of Patterson and Tobey provide for an understanding of how American modernism was constructed? How are contemporary art historians to understand Patterson's contributions in Seattle and by what definition of modernism is he still labeled a modern artist?

For a new perspective on Patterson and modern art in Seattle, it is necessary to return to his art and writings and to reassess his relationships with the important people and institutions of the Northwest. Several sources were crucial in reconstructing the time in which he lived and the different contexts in which he worked: the Smithsonian Archives of American Art's oral history interviews with Viola Patterson, original Seattle Art Museum employee Dorothy Malone, and artists George Tsutakawa, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson; reviews of Patterson's work by contemporary critics throughout his career; and the collection of Patterson's own writings and notebooks at the University of Washington.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LONG ROAD TO SEATTLE

#### International Beginnings

Ambrose McCarthy Patterson was born in Daylesford, Victoria in 1877 to an Irish mother and British father who had immigrated to Australia.<sup>16</sup> As one of thirteen Patterson children, the artist's early life was not particularly remarkable. Though Mrs. Patterson casually encouraged her son to learn piano and painting, Ambrose later wrote that "I don't know how much this contributed to my future interest in painting; at that time I don't think the idea of ART ever occurred to any of us, it was just painting."<sup>17</sup> He began pursuing art more seriously at the age of seventeen: a year-long apprenticeship with Paterson Bros., Decorators, in Melbourne in 1894 was followed by intensive, full-time study at the National Gallery School in that city. Patterson's time there was short-lived. The nearby Melbourne School of Art had been credited by a local critic as the only academic school that came close to rivaling the European academies in classroom structure.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, and the school's more relaxed atmosphere (which included an

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<sup>16</sup> Martha Kingsbury, Oral history interview with Viola Patterson, Oct. 22-29, 1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted in Alexander, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander explains that the school was promoted in an 1895 issue of the *Table Talk* and that, once enrolled, Patterson also took advantage of summer study at the school's country retreat just outside Melbourne. Alexander, 12.



emphasis on *plein-air* painting), Patterson began attending courses there provided by European-trained naturalists E. Phillips Fox and Tudor St. George Tucker.

However, no school in Australia could compare to the lure of training in Europe, and for all early twentieth century artists in the West, Paris represented the hub of artistic activity with its high culture, sophistication, and its role as the site of the major artistic developments. International students flocked to the city in the late 1800s to study at the most influential schools and ateliers and with the individuals who had shaped the first modern art movement, Impressionism, a generation earlier.

Patterson's initial trip to Paris was funded by his receipt of a family inheritance in 1898 on the occasion of his twenty-first birthday.<sup>19</sup> According to Patterson, in the years leading up to this point "the most revolutionary thing we knew was Impressionism, I don't believe I had even heard of Van Gogh or Gauguin."<sup>20</sup> Acting upon the advice of a friend, he immediately enrolled at the Académie Julian. The school, established in 1868, presented an important alternative to the state-sponsored, classically-inclined École des Beaux-Arts. The Julian not only allowed women to enroll but it also offered them the same course of study as men, which included classes in nude figure studies.

The school was modern indeed. A decade before Patterson arrived the influential artists' group known as the Nabis had formed there. Alphonse Maria Mucha and Robert Henri had both attended shortly before Patterson; Matisse would enroll in 1891.

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<sup>19</sup> According to Spencer Moseley, Patterson, who didn't speak French, learned the language quickly by repeatedly asking strangers on the streets in Paris for directions. See Spencer Moseley, "Patterson: Reflections," Exhibition Brochure for "Ambrose Patterson Modernist Painter and Printmaker," March 1-April 4, 1989, Carolyn Staley Fine Arts, Seattle.

<sup>20</sup> Ambrose Patterson, typed personal notes, Nov. 1, 1947, p. 5, Patterson Papers, 2568-001 2/4.

However, Patterson was less than impressed with the learning environment. Of his experience at the Académie Julian, he wrote that:

I had heard so much about [the Julian] that I thought I had better be on the safe side, and paid my fees for six months in advance, trusting to make sure of getting a place. I did not realize that Julian's was purely a factory. When you go there you have to buy drinks for everybody and sing a song to the crowd. After I had been there three weeks I realized that it was more like a music hall than a school of painting. Everyone yelled and sang till [sic] the professors came in. I cleared out of it and sought tuition elsewhere. I lost my money, but that was not so valuable as the time I would have lost by staying there.<sup>21</sup>

As an alternative course of study Patterson became a student at the Whistler School that had opened only a year earlier by American-born, British-based James McNeill Whistler and was operated by one of his former models Carmen Rossi, for whom the school was informally referred to as the Académie Carmen. As a student there Patterson found a more agreeable climate in which to develop his painting style and regularly met with fellow artists at the Café Procope for drinks and discussion. An American painter who studied at the school from 1899-1900, Mary Augusta Mullikin, wrote a brief article for the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1904 in which she recalled Whistler's two years of teaching at the Académie Carmen, repeating questions she claimed to have heard frequently following her period of study there: "Was there any real importance in Whistler's two years of teaching in Paris? Was it merely a fad with him and with the class that gathered around him in Carmen's studio?"<sup>22</sup> Mullikin defended his teaching style, but other students decried his insistence that they disregard any methods

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<sup>21</sup> Ambrose Patterson, as quoted in Art Institute of Seattle Newsletter, no date, Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/11.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Augusta Mullikin, "Whistler's Teachings," *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 17, 1904.

they may have been taught by previous teachers and conform completely to Whistler's expectations in the classroom and his own preferences in painting.

According to Mullikin her classmates at the Académie Carmen were mostly American, with several also coming from England, Ireland, and Scotland. Men and women had separate studios in which to work. She recalled also that Whistler visited the school weekly; his advice to students included a command to “see your picture on the palette” because “[t]here, not on your canvas, is your field of experiment, the place where you make your choices.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike most of the other art academies of Paris, Whistler's school emphasized the act of painting over drawing—a significant deviation from the status quo, which primed Patterson for his turn to Impressionism shortly after. Whistler's students worked from the same palettes (the colors chosen by Whistler himself) to copy works by Old Masters and by Manet; Patterson copied Manet's *Olympia* at the Louvre during this year of study, though the influence of the French proto-Impressionist would not immediately manifest as Patterson continued to paint in a more naturalistic manner for the next few years.

Though Paris offered many prospects for travel and study, just one year after his arrival in the city Patterson felt disillusioned<sup>24</sup> and left for new opportunities, traveling first to Montreal, Canada, and then New York City. He was able to find work in these cities as a newspaper illustrator, which sustained him for a short while. It was in New

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<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Mullikin.

<sup>24</sup> This was the first of several “dark periods” Patterson experienced in his early career; this recurring depression as a young man may have been the major contributing factor to his restless nature and tendency to move frequently.

York that Patterson crossed paths with a relative of his by marriage,<sup>25</sup> famed (and extremely wealthy) Australian opera singer Nellie Melba.<sup>26</sup> Melba, impressed by the young artist's work and resolve, gave him a check for \$200 USD and sent him back to Paris on orders to "be a gentleman and I'll see you through."<sup>27</sup> With the promise of financial support for five years, the artist returned to Paris in 1901 and immediately took up a studio and began classes at the Académie Colorossi and the Académie Delacluze.

The early works he had created in Australia and during his first period in Paris exhibited the naturalistic and dark qualities of tonalism, but as his exposure to Impressionist and other "modern" art movements increased, Patterson's work began to change in tone and in style. Light-filled compositions and broken brushwork became standard. He painted his homage to Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, titled *Interior: The Pewter Bar, St. Leger en Yvelines*, in 1904. Patterson's snapshot of bar staff is more naturalistic and jovial than Manet's detached barmaid; the titular Pewter Bar, located outside the city of Paris, enjoyed a more relaxed atmosphere than the working-class indifference of the Folies-Bergère, and that type of leisurely social environment appealed to Patterson. In the years after he created this work his brushstroke and color palette moved even further into what could be deemed impressionistic. Viola Patterson recalled in a 1982 interview with Martha Kingsbury that "having once seen [the Impressionists']

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<sup>25</sup> Ambrose Patterson's brother Tom Patterson was married to Melba's sister, Belle.

<sup>26</sup> Born Helen Porter Mitchell, Melba (1861-1931) was one of the most famous Australian entertainers of the Victorian age. She achieved international recognition as the prima donna of Covent Garden and was granted damehood of the Order of the British Empire in 1918. She is featured on the \$100 Australian note.

<sup>27</sup> As quoted in John Aikman Hetherington, *Melba: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Girous, 1968), 107.

use of light and color, [Ambrose] was simply lost to it.”<sup>28</sup> Though he adapted this method of painting, Patterson would steer clear of any social commentary in his works, a departure from the ways in which many of the Impressionist artists had deliberately chosen to underscore the reality of the working-class.

This shift would be the first of many changes Patterson would make in his painting style over the rest of his life, although it was arguably the most important in establishing his “modernist” sensibilities and possibly a contributing factor to Melba’s ending their financial agreement earlier than was previously promised. In 1903, just two years into the agreed five-year period of support, Melba withdrew her sponsorship of the artist without explanation. Tellingly, she had been introduced by Patterson to Hugh Ramsay, a more established Australian artist also studying in Paris, the year prior and had promised him financial support as well.<sup>29</sup> On a doctor’s orders Ramsay returned in August 1902 to Australia, where he was sent money from Melba to continue his work in his home country.<sup>30</sup> Ramsay’s departure weakened the presence of an identifiable and cohesive Australian group in Paris at the same time that Patterson was becoming increasingly involved with friends of all different nationalities. According to Viola, “He

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<sup>28</sup> Kingsbury, Oral history interview with Viola Patterson.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander discusses the working relationship between Patterson and Ramsey in her book. Though the two men had been generally congenial and even worked cooperatively in the past, their friendship became especially strained following Melba’s desertion of Patterson, who thought that Ramsay “got in some dirty work” against him to secure Melba’s patronage. See Alexander, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Because of the rising interest in modern (i.e., impressionist) art, Ramsay would have likely adopted a more “European” style himself in the following years had he returned to Paris, but his failing health kept him in Australia’s warmer climate until his death from tuberculosis in 1906 at the young age of twenty-eight.

had Russian painter friends, Polish, Dutch, Swedish, well just name it [...] he was very gregarious and made friends easily.”<sup>31</sup>

This association with new artists and the resulting international influences on Patterson’s work removed him even further from Melba’s interests. Melba, whose taste in painting was rather simple, likely preferred serene depictions of natural landscapes above any of the modern, daily-life scenes that had become popular among Patterson and his peers. According to Melba biographer John Aikman Hetherington, “a contributory reason for [Melba’s] abandonment of Ambrose Patterson was his adoption of a French painting style; she believed Australian artists should paint unmistakably Australian scenes in an unmistakably Australian way.”<sup>32</sup> Melba, who was notoriously overbearing with her friends and relatives, had the funds to buy what she liked, and she only liked those items that conformed to her precise artistic tastes.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his loss of Melba’s support in 1903, the year was still a remarkable one for Patterson due to his participation in the first Salon d’Automne. A reaction to the more formal and conservative Paris Salon, the exhibition was organized by painters Georges Rouault, André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Albert Marquet as an opportunity for more

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<sup>31</sup> Kingsbury, Oral History interview with Viola Patterson.

<sup>32</sup> Hetherington, 107. It has also been suggested that Patterson’s marriage to Englishwoman Margaret Jane Davies—without seeking Melba’s blessing beforehand— might have added to this rift. In her interview with Martha Kingsbury, Viola Patterson mentions this as a contributing factor to the loss of Melba’s patronage; however, the date of Patterson’s marriage to Davies is much later than the last known date of Melba’s financial support.

<sup>33</sup> In his biography of Melba, Hetherington recounted the ways in which the singer bossed and manipulated her family members, friends, and associates (p. 109-110). Her very particular tastes and controlling nature extended beyond paintings to her patronage of Australian designers House of Worth, for which everything they designed had to be explicitly approved in advance of production. See Anne Gray, *The Edwardians: Secrets and Desires* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2004), 242.

diverse work in painting, printmaking, sculpture, and the decorative arts to be recognized. Patterson and friend Rupert Bunny were the only two Australian artists to be included in this first Salon d'Automne and the influence of the Fauvist and Expressionist artists who participated in the show had a profound effect on Patterson, who credited Matisse with "perpetual invention" and the Fauvists in general with "*la hardiesse de la main* [the boldness of the hand]."<sup>34</sup> Patterson was elected a *Societaire* of the group the following year and exhibited in several of the subsequent annual Salons d'Automne until he left Paris in 1910.

The years leading up to Patterson's permanent departure from the city were marked with professional, though not financial, success. In 1904 the artist traveled to Spain to view works by Velazquez, whom he still greatly admired (Manet had made the same trip to copy Velazquez's masterpieces in 1865). Patterson's three months in Spain were spent soaking up the culture of artists, musicians, and bullfighters and sketching frequently. Travels to England, Ireland and other locations followed and Patterson experimented with new media beyond traditional oil painting such as the color woodblock printing techniques that he had learned from a Polish instructor in Paris in the early 1900s.<sup>35</sup> All the while he maintained an active interest in Impressionism and increasingly in Post-Impressionism as well.

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<sup>34</sup> Personal notebook titled "Quotations Notes," no date, p. 17, Patterson Papers, 2568-001 2/9.

<sup>35</sup> Viola could not recall the name of this instructor. Kingsbury, Oral history interview with Viola Patterson.

Patterson's work in the Salon des Independants in June 1908 showed, according to local critic Jacques Hermann, the recent influence of Cezanne on Patterson's style.<sup>36</sup> Although few works remain that clearly illustrate this link, Patterson's personal writings document his great esteem for the artist, whom he called a "master geometrician" characterized by "unremitting experimentation."<sup>37</sup> Patterson wrote that while in Paris he went from considering Velazquez, Frans Hals, and Hokusai to be gods to reserving that sentiment for Cézanne and the Impressionist Masters.<sup>38</sup> Despite the positive critical reviews and the sale of several works during this decade Patterson found himself in financial trouble and was unable to continue living in Paris. The two-year sponsorship from Melba had gone far in allowing Patterson to explore his options and grow as an artist, but had not been enough to sustain his continued livelihood in the city.

When Patterson left Paris in 1910, European art was just beginning to turn in the direction that would lead to a paradigmatic shift in modernism. Pablo Picasso had arrived in Paris in 1901 and painted his groundbreaking *Les Femmes d'Alger* in the summer of 1907. There is a story told of Patterson being such a serious and solitary worker during his time in Paris that he turned down repeated invitations to go out and meet some of the working artists in the neighborhood – one of which turned out to be the young Picasso; Patterson, later acknowledging the unfortunate missed connection, would

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<sup>36</sup> As discussed in Alexander, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Personal notebook titled "Quotations Notes," no date, p. 15-17, Patterson Papers, 2568-001 2/9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



remark “but who could see what [Picasso] would become.”<sup>39</sup> By the time Patterson left Paris, he had already created what would be arguably the most accomplished works in his oeuvre and, from that point on, became more and more removed from the avant-garde. However, his time in Europe accomplished three key things: First, it established his reputation – his exhibition history and Melba’s patronage gave him an air of celebrity for the rest of his life. Second, it established his repertoire. What he took with him from Paris would provide the foundation from which he would regularly draw as he continued to make art for the following decades, and would set a precedent for Patterson in which he would assimilate whatever artistic movement caught his eye. And third, when Patterson left Paris for good he had studied at no fewer than six of the major academies in the city and was well-versed in the European methods of formal art instruction.

Patterson was readily welcomed back to Australia since his Parisian training and his close association with modern artists immediately gave him artistic authority.<sup>40</sup>

Patterson became a founding member of the Australian Art Association and regularly showed his portraits, leisure scenes, cityscapes, and rural and coastal landscapes in their exhibitions. Local scenes of leisure such as *Bathing Boxes*, *Mornington*, painted in 1913, had mass appeal because of their pleasant subject matter and familiar locations (Ironically, this was very likely the type of painting that Melba would have preferred

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<sup>39</sup> Handwritten notes, no date, p. 2, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/4. See also Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/11.

<sup>40</sup> As a new member of Melbourne’s Victorian Artists’ Society, 105 of Patterson’s works were featured in a solo show in 1912. A review from this exhibition noted that “a feature of Mr [sic] Patterson’s work is his technique, it is particularly remarkable in his treatment of heads and of the figure generally, but he is also a colourist [sic] of the unconventional type, and does not scruple to use pigment experimentally.” As quoted in Alexander, 31.

Patterson have been painting ten years prior). In this particular example one can see how far Patterson's impressionistic brushstroke and interest in color had developed.

Patterson's skill at creating these idyllic images from life was undeniable, but his day job painting government and society portraits was unfulfilling, his financial situation was still dire, and his yearning for travel and new experiences returned.

Patterson and family left from the port of Sydney on a ship bound for New York in 1916. A stopover on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, along the way completely changed Patterson's plans. A friend from his days in Paris, Jimmy Wilder, made his home in Honolulu and offered Patterson his cottage as a place to stay during the next eighteen months. Hawaii was an exhilarating environment for Patterson; the vibrant Polynesian culture of the Islands was a fresh change from that which he'd experienced in Australia or Europe, while still providing the energy of the large cities in which he'd studied. It was here that he moved beyond the basic color woodblock printing that he had initially learned in Paris, using the natural scenery and the local customs as his subject matter. He also began to experiment with decorative compositions – perhaps a delayed response to the work of Alphonse Maria Mucha, under whom he'd also briefly studied in Paris, coupled with the strong presence of Asian decorative art motifs in Hawaii.

Patterson spent much of his time attempting to capture the dynamism of the local volcanoes and volcanic craters. A print such as Patterson's *Coconut Palms, Hawaii*, documents his fascination with the Hawaiian landscape and the simplicity of his early prints. In 1918 a San Francisco critic described Patterson's Hawaii printmaking as such:

[He] perfected a process of block printing which many artists and students of the graphic arts believe is in some way superior to the Japanese technique and which

retains all the essential qualities which have given superiority to the Japanese work... The superiority of the process lies in a softened effect and a diffusion of light comparable to that of an oil painting without the “slickness” of an oil canvas. In fact, the range of tint combinations allows a subtlety and delicacy of shading said to be obtainable in no other prints.<sup>41</sup>

Though in Hawaii he was surrounded by inspiring subject matter and encouraged by a receptive audience for his art, in 1917 he left for California, where his network of friends would allow him places to stay for a short while.<sup>42</sup> From August of that year until May of 1918, Patterson lived in San Francisco, becoming involved with the San Francisco Art Association and painting many pictures of the Northern California coast and the famous Monterey Cypresses. A promise of more freelance design jobs elsewhere contributed to his leaving California after less than a year. His next stop would be Seattle.

### Impressionism in the West

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Patterson was on the other side of the ocean beginning his study of European art, American art was at a crossroads. Impressionism surfaced in the U.S. in the late 1870s and grew more popular in the following two decades. Americans already had an established interest in all things French, so it was not out of character for this style, which grew out of the revolutionary, urbanized climate of late-nineteenth century France, to be adapted to the American sensibilities. In the midst of the changing cultural climate of the United States the Parisian-born style which emphasized the modern life, the spontaneous moment, and the authentic representation of light and color was a well-established as a “mode,” capable of

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<sup>41</sup> “He’s rival of Japanese in color art,” *Bulletin San Francisco*, April 2, 1918, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/10.

<sup>42</sup> A contributing factor to Patterson’s departure from Hawaii was the end of his marriage to Davies.

being repeated by any artist with the inclination to paint like an Impressionist, by the end of the nineteenth century. It was seen as a model that could be readily adapted to scenes of American life.

Upon their return from Europe American students often discovered that the agrarian communities they had left only a year or so earlier were rapidly becoming urbanized, industrialized centers, and the shifting nature of the “American city” was common subject matter for Impressionist artists in the United States such as Childe Hassam. The movement was so readily embraced that by the end of the nineteenth century Impressionism had become the preeminent, if not the standard, fare to be exhibited nationally.

By the time that Impressionism had secured its place in the U.S., the movement had long before reached its peak in Europe and could now only be viewed with a certain amount of detachment.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the masters of American Impressionism, rather than “joining” the French movement, embraced, appropriated, and modified the tenets of Impressionist paintings as they carried the movement into the twentieth century. In 1886, the final Impressionist exhibition in Paris opened almost simultaneously with an exhibit of French Impressionists paintings in New York that had been arranged by the influential art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, a symbolic event in the transfer of the Impressionist style from Europe to America.

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<sup>43</sup> This issue is discussed thoroughly in Ulrich W. Hiesinger, *Impressionism in America: The Ten American Painters* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag; New York: Distributed in the USA and Canada by the Neues Pub. Co., 1991), 11.

Though its stronghold was on the East Coast, Impressionism had a particularly enthusiastic and active following in California, fed by both the year-round moderate climate which allowed painters to work *en plein air* without limitation and the juxtaposition of awesome natural scenery and rising urbanization. In particular, the seaside towns of Monterey and Laguna Beach, populated with a large number of artists, were particularly suitable for Impressionist painting.<sup>44</sup> These artists' colonies were communities in which ideas flowed freely and were a large contributing factor in the development of an identifiable and homogenous style of "California Impressionism." The artist and teacher William Merritt Chase, who worked primarily in oils and pastels, relocated to Carmel in 1914 to teach. His influence was widely felt as the artists who attended his summer classes in the Impressionist method and painting *en plein air* dispersed to other parts of the region. Further north, Washington State lacked such influential Impressionist colonies and the presence of a European- or East Coast-trained teacher, and therefore did not experience the flourishing of a cohesive Impressionist style of its own.

*Point Lobos*, painted by Patterson in 1917, is exemplary of Patterson's application of Impressionist tendencies while in California. The work is characteristic of Patterson's sunny, color-drenched Impressionistic scenes. In this image, the rocky, grass-covered coast is depicted by soft short strokes of warm color. Rocks and clouds have both been imbued with pinks and violets. The gnarled tree on the right side of the composition has a

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<sup>44</sup> Oakland Museum; Laguna Beach Museum of Art; Crocker Art Museum. *Impressionism, The California View: Paintings, 1890-1930* (Oakland: Oakland Museum, Art Dept., 1981), 8.

gleaming pearlescent trunk. Even the shadows in the foreground, which give the impression of standing in the shade, are broken by white and gray lines. The paint has been dabbed on so thick that one can easily see the texture. When it was first exhibited, the critic reviewed it favorably, saying that “Lightness of color is most conspicuous in this picture. Here, by using shadow and cypress, the artist has succeeded admirably in bringing out the desired depth of expression which are so commonly lost in such light-colored pictures. The coloring is good and the picture is grand and refined.”<sup>45</sup> Later works would not have the same thickness of paint that characterized many of Patterson’s early impressionist scenes, though his interest in light and color would remain.

When Patterson eventually made it to Seattle, he was forty-one years old and relying on freelance jobs as an artist and designer. The work he was creating was predominantly landscapes and scenes of daily life, using this impressionistic brushstroke and colorful palette in his paintings. After California Patterson had planned to return to New York or go north to Alaska or Vancouver, British Columbia, but in Seattle he found a unique mix of cultural and natural influences from which to draw, and began applying his European style to the images he created of regional life there.

Patterson described his own work as “somewhat Impressionistic” and “definitely plein-air;”<sup>46</sup> and in articles and reviews he has regularly been labeled by his contemporaries and by critics as an Impressionist. However, his exploratory style and

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<sup>45</sup> “Now Open Mr. Patterson’s Exhibit Oil Painting, Block Prints, Watercolor Thirty-eight pieces in all,” no date, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/22.

<sup>46</sup> These sentiments are expressed repeatedly throughout Patterson’s own writings. See Patterson Papers, 2563.

regional influence prevented him from cleanly fitting into this category, a detail that was occasionally noted by observant critics; a 1929 *Town Crier* article stated that “Patterson at times shows the influence of the French Impressionists, [but] his work can hardly be said to adhere to any particular school or mode.”<sup>47</sup> The fact that Patterson, and many others painting well into the second half of the twentieth century, continued to be labeled “Impressionist” so far beyond the end of the original Impressionist movement was indicative of the persistent popularity of the Impressionist style long past the late 1800s.

Though Patterson made Seattle his new home—only returning to Australia once, in 1951, for a few weeks—his wandering nature did not quiet completely. Patterson continued to travel throughout the United States and abroad as his schedule would allow. Two particularly notable excursions, to be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, were his trips to Europe (1929-1930) and Mexico (1934).

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<sup>47</sup> *Town Crier*, Art Institute of Seattle, April 20, 1929, Patterson Papers, 2563-004, 1/11.

### CHAPTER III

#### A CITY “ON THE EDGE”

Seattle is a city of multicultural beginnings. Founded in the mid-1800s and named for Chief Sealth of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes, the young city by its very name lacked a declarative link to Europe or the East Coast like other nearby cities such as Portland and Vancouver did. The Northwest was seen as a sort of “cultural outpost”<sup>48</sup> – population was rather thin and the distance from the Pacific states to the Atlantic states was more than just geographical. Martha Kingsbury described Seattle at the beginning of the twentieth century as “on the edge between a nineteenth century past almost entirely constituted of pioneering and frontier activities, and a twentieth century urban future that would include participation in higher forms of culture.”<sup>49</sup>

The International Exposition of Modern Art, more commonly known as the Armory Show, had introduced Americans in New York to modern art in 1913, but the full effect of that shift in the artistic paradigm would not be felt for several years. Included in the Armory Show were paintings by such artists as Manet, Whistler, and Cézanne alongside works by Picasso, Braque, and Marcel Duchamp. Shocked American

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<sup>48</sup> Emily Ballew Neff, *American Painters in the Age of Impressionism* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1994), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Martha Kingsbury, “Four Artists in the Northwest Tradition,” *Northwest Traditions: Seattle Art Museum (June 29-December 10, 1978)*, organized by Charles Cowles and Sarah Clark (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1978), 9.



attendants of the show were confronted with works that did not fit their expectations of fine art.

The Armory Show's second stop, with only roughly half of the artworks from the original New York exhibition, was the Art Institute of Chicago. Tobey attended the exhibit at that time, nearly ten years before coming to Seattle. It is well-documented that he didn't glean any significant understanding from the works of art in the collection, which included Duchamp's much-publicly-maligned *Nude Descending a Staircase*.<sup>50</sup> It would not be until several years later that Tobey's modernist sensibilities would manifest; Patterson made a comment in his personal notebook following a meeting with his friend in 1944 in which the two must have discussed Tobey's eventual grasp of Duchamp's accomplishment after repeated viewings: "[Tobey] saw *Nude Descending Stairs* [sic], three times – impression different each time, picture remained the same, it was Tobey who had changed."<sup>51</sup>

The Seattle that Patterson met upon his arrival in 1918 was no cultural wasteland. The newly-formed Seattle Fine Arts Society and *The Town Crier*, a local publication started in 1910, were both promoting arts and culture in the city. As Seattle grew beyond its frontier town roots, European art of the late nineteenth century still seemed modern and relevant to many in the Northwest, despite their limited familiarity with it. Spencer Moseley, a close friend of Patterson and a biographer of Walter Isaacs, observed that "in

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<sup>50</sup> At the conclusion of the Armory Show the work was purchased sight unseen for \$300 by California dealer Frederic Torrey, who also collected etchings by Partridge and became a frequent correspondent with Tanaka from 1913 to the 1920s. Letters from Tanaka to Torrey, dating between 1913-1924 and covering a wide range of topics, are in the Research Collections of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

<sup>51</sup> Personal notebook titled "Quotations Notes," February 2, 1944, p. 29, Patterson Papers, 2568-001 2/9.

1900, the ‘modern art problem’ had not yet arisen in America. There was no deep disaffection yet between the artist and his society—or, if there was, few realized it.”<sup>52</sup>

Without many examples of fine European painting or sculpture in turn-of-the-century Seattle, Northwest artists had to depend on reproductions for study and on trips outside the region (or visiting teachers from other cities) for exposure to new ideas in art.<sup>53</sup>

Seattle’s population grew dramatically in the first two decades of the twentieth century and foreign immigrants accounted for roughly a quarter of the population by 1920.<sup>54</sup> The city’s relative proximity to Asia made the cultures of China, Japan, and Korea particularly accessible and appealing to Northwest citizens of European background; the “exotic” Asian art traditions were a large departure from the representational images of people and landscapes that were more familiar to Western America. Completed in 1893, the Great Northern Railroad provided the city with its first transcontinental connection and increased the ease and frequency of trading with Asia. The railroad industry had a dramatic effect on the Northwest as it brought both wealthy businessmen and immigrant laborers to the region. Along with the influx of Asian immigrants came a raised visibility of Asian culture that would become a key element in the development of Northwest regionalism.

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<sup>52</sup> Spencer Moseley and Truman Gervais Reed, *Walter F. Isaacs: An Artist in America 1886-1964* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1982), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Martha Kingsbury, *Art of the Thirties: The Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 15.

<sup>54</sup> Richard C. Berner, *Seattle 1900-1920 From Boomtown, Urban Turbulence, to Restoration*, Seattle in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Volume 1 (Seattle: Charles Press, 1991), 60-61.

Japanese-born Yasushi Tanaka arrived in Seattle in 1904 during the first major wave of immigrants to the city. He was eighteen years old. In Seattle Tanaka quickly learned English and immersed himself in library books on art and art history as he became an increasingly talented painter. In 1914 the Seattle Fine Arts Society sponsored the first of several shows of his work and Tanaka took up a studio and began offering classes in painting. His European-influenced works were exhibited in *The Japanese Painters Exhibition* in 1916.<sup>55</sup> Tanaka's position amongst the most modern Seattle artists of the time was cemented with his marriage to Louise Cann, whom he'd met at a lecture on cubism and futurism.<sup>56</sup> Cann introduced her husband to photographer Imogen Cunningham, whose images of nudes were critically praised despite their shock value for the more conservative art-going crowd, and Cunningham's printmaker-husband Roi Partridge.<sup>57</sup>

The city must not have been ready to embrace such a talent yet: Tanaka's showing of several artistic nudes in a show at the Seattle Fine Arts Gallery caused such a public outrage over the accused indecency that the artist moved to Paris permanently in 1920 so he could pursue his art in a more accepting community. An exhibition of one hundred paintings by Tanaka was staged on the occasion of his departure, though there is no record of whether Patterson attended this show.

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<sup>55</sup> Another artist who participated in this show was Kenjiro Nomura, who over twenty years later was a member of Seattle's Group of Twelve alongside the Pattersons, Isaacs, and Graves.

<sup>56</sup> This marriage caused a bit of a scandal since the Cornell-educated Cann, the daughter of Judge Thomas H. Cann, was an upper-class white woman and Tanaka was a Japanese immigrant.

<sup>57</sup> The couple had also studied in Europe prior to their marriage – Cunningham in Dresden in 1910 and Partridge in Munich and Paris from 1910-1914.

If the work Tanaka was making before Patterson ever arrived in Seattle can be satisfactorily deemed modern for its European influence and abstraction, then the work of a Seattle native must also be recognized. Louise Crow had studied under William Merritt Chase in Carmel, California, in 1914 and at the National Academy of Design in New York shortly after. She began exhibiting her Impressionistic paintings in California and Seattle in 1915 – two years before Patterson even left Australia. Her work gained a substantial following in Santa Fe and she moved there in 1918 to open a studio. Marsden Hartley, the modern painter whose work had been included in the Armory Show, commented on her 1919 showing at Santa Fe’s Museum of Fine Arts that “the indication in her works is as clear as a clearly sounding bell.”<sup>58</sup> From 1921-1925 Crow made the requisite trip to Europe to view the art in France, Germany, and Italy. She never returned to Seattle permanently.

Crow was not the only notable artist in Seattle who had been trained in the Impressionist method by William Merritt Chase. John Butler, also a Seattle native, had done his early study under the Whistler-trained artist Carlotta Blaurock. In 1909, Butler participated in Seattle’s Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition<sup>59</sup> (held on the grounds of the University of Washington) before heading to New York the following year. A trip to Europe followed soon after, where Butler studied in Paris and Munich. He returned to the United States in 1914 and enrolled in Chase’s summer courses in Carmel where he

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<sup>58</sup> As quoted in David F. Martin, “Louise Crow Boyac,” *Artifact* (September/October 1995): 29. Martin, of the Martin-Zambito Fina Art Gallery in Seattle, is an expert on Northwest art and has substantial knowledge of Tanaka, Crow, Butler, and Patterson, among others.

<sup>59</sup> Durand-Ruel had loaned a selection of French Impressionist paintings for display in this show.

studied alongside Crow; the two artists even shared a first-place prize awarded by their teacher.

Upon his return to Seattle Butler concentrated on landscapes and figural groupings and had a solo exhibition sponsored by the Seattle Fine Arts Society. His oil painting *Summer on Lake Washington* is indicative of the colorful works he was painting in the mid-1910s and is reminiscent of Patterson's leisure scenes from Australia. Butler became close with Tanaka, Cunningham, and Partridge but this friendly grouping was short-lived as Butler was sent overseas for military service, Tanaka left for Paris, and Cunningham and Partridge relocated to San Francisco at the end of the decade. Though he remained in Europe for several years after his tour of duty in the war Butler regularly sent back works to be exhibited in Seattle.

The presence of artists working in Seattle producing impressionistic, and thereby modern, works years before Patterson's arrival directly confronts the popular image of Patterson as the first modern painter in the city. It begs the question of why artists such as Tanaka, Crow, and especially Butler, who trained in Europe before returning to Seattle, are not given this title. In Tanaka's case, the issue may be rooted in his immigrant status or a perceived inauthenticity because he was self-taught; for Crow, perhaps her deepening connection to Santa Fe superseded Seattle's claim to her. Less clear is why Butler, whose leisurely figural groupings and landscapes were so similar to Patterson's interests at the time of his arrival in Seattle, is not recognized as the first modern painter in the city. It is utterly apparent that these individuals' contributions to the emerging

definition of pre-Greenbergian modernism in early twentieth-century Seattle have not been adequately accessed.

Following the end of World War I, a new network of roads was constructed across the Northwest, increasing accessibility to natural locales for the middle-class. Seattle artists were particularly smitten with their newfound freedom to easily escape from their urban surroundings. Patterson took advantage of the new roads to make regular excursions outside of Seattle—often traveling west to the coast or east to the flat, dry land of central Washington—to sketch in the outdoors. He would later also make these trips with wife Viola and friends such as Isaacs and Tsutakawa.

The American government stepped in to provide work opportunities for artists during the Great Depression. The Works Projects Administration, created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935 as an economic measure, provided a sense of identity, fellowship, and usefulness for artists in the Northwest; works created by WPA artists exhibited a strong pictorial quality and generally focused on images of American social realism. Patterson was commissioned to paint a mural for the Mount Vernon Post Office as part of the New Deal Post Office Murals project overseen by the U.S. Treasury Department after being selected from a competition in which 187 artists competed for the commission.<sup>60</sup> Artists were chosen anonymously by a panel of jurors; the subject matter was decided in consultation with the Post Office and community (depictions of local interests, genre scenes, and heroic events were the most popular). Titled *Local Pursuits*, Patterson's work was painted on canvas and installed in the post office in 1938. Though

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<sup>60</sup> Newspaper clipping, no date, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/11.

the social realist style of this image was reflective of the New Deal Post Office Murals committee's taste and was the most common approach for murals depicting vernacular themes in this decade, the most significant reason for Patterson's involvement in this particular project and, indeed, his choice of style as well, was a trip to Mexico four years earlier.

The Pattersons had traveled to Mexico to study fresco painting in 1934 on the invitation of American-Mexican artist Pablo O'Higgins, an old acquaintance from Ambrose's time in California whose regular assistance on Diego Rivera's large-scale projects was of great interest to the couple. During the trip Patterson made detailed notes on the methods of encaustic, fresco, and other mural techniques.<sup>61</sup> He also kept newspaper clippings about Rivera and Mexican artists whom he admired. Patterson would later paint two other murals – one in his home, a fresco scene titled *The Taxco Market* and a tempera mural, now lost, in the Penthouse Theatre of the University, though neither of those would be in the social realist theme.<sup>62</sup> A photograph of Patterson from 1950, taken by his friend Imogen Cunningham, shows the artist standing in front of the mural in his home.

When World War II broke out, life in the Northwest was dramatically affected. Most significant socially and culturally was the forced internment of Japanese-Americans

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<sup>61</sup> See Ambrose Patterson's personal notebooks, Patterson Papers, 2563-003 1/10.

<sup>62</sup> *The Taxco Market* was a scene from the Pattersons' trip to Mexico; this was the first true fresco mural painted in Seattle and Patterson taught the *buon fresco* technique to his Seattle students. The mural for the Penthouse Theatre was a circus scene featuring a fat lady, bearded lady, monkeys, lions and elephants, clowns and a circus band in the 25-foot rounded foyer of the building. Ruth Thomas, "Professor Painting Murals on Penthouse Foyer Walls," *Washington Daily*, no date, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/10.

living in Washington, Oregon, and California. The experiences of many Japanese-American artists, such as Paul Horiuchi (who lost his job and home when forced out of the city) and Patterson's former student Tsutakawa (whose family was interned despite his job as an instructor of Japanese language at a Military Intelligence School in Minnesota) during this troubling time would materialize in evocative artwork in the following decades.<sup>63</sup> The Seattle community banded together to encourage the continuation of arts and culture and assure the return of many displaced artists to the area at the end of the war.

The years after WWII saw an important change occur in modern art. Whereas the key movements of early modernism – Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism, et al. – originated with European artists, in the 1950s and 1960s the focus shifted to U.S.-born movements like Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism. Patterson, though aware of the new American modern movements, remained primarily interested in the European models.

Though no cohesive group of artists formed in these early years (nor did one dominant unified “school” or group form at any later time, for that matter), the emergence of two major categories of artist did become apparent. With the establishment of an art school producing fine artists trained in European methods (and promoting European modalities of modern art), a division between the self-taught and the academic artists was noticeable, though not always automatically divisive. The romanticized image

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<sup>63</sup> Horiuchi became friends with Mark Tobey in the 1950s and it was he who introduced Tobey to the Japanese medium sumi ink. Tsutakawa, who earned his MFA at the University of Washington before WWII, would eventually be hired to teach at the University of Washington.



of the naïve self-taught artist remained, but the European-centric, professionally-trained artists provided a new model for aspiring American artists to emulate: that of the formal academic participating in the modern art movement.

## CHAPTER IV

### ART EDUCATION IN SEATTLE

At the beginning of his career it is unlikely that Patterson ever expected to become a university professor. His invitation to found the University of Washington's School of Painting and Design came from President Henry Suzzallo, whom Patterson met via Dr. du Casse, a member of the Philosophy Department at the university.<sup>64</sup> At the time Patterson was doing freelance design projects in the city and teaching a few drawing and painting classes while operating out of a studio at the Odd Fellow's Temple, right above the Cornish School. Though the University of Washington had had a Fine Arts Department since 1914, a turning point came when, as Seattle historian Richard Berner simply put it, they "discovered that few students could draw."<sup>65</sup> It is not that early art educators lacked skill; there was just an absence of an effective model of pedagogy in both the public school and the university systems.

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<sup>64</sup> In her interview with Martha Kingsbury, Viola Patterson explained that Patterson and du Casse became friends shortly after Patterson arrived in Seattle because they both spoke French. There appears to be no definitive answer to why Suzzallo extended this opportunity to Patterson, though what might have set Patterson apart from other European-trained artists in Seattle at the time was his prior association with Dame Nellie Melba; this would have certainly given him an air of celebrity.

<sup>65</sup> Berner, *Seattle 1900-1920 From Boomtown, Urban Turbulence, to Restoration*, 96.

Though he did not have any formal credentials for teaching at a university,<sup>66</sup> Patterson was among many new professors appointed by Suzzallo, who five years into his reign as President was intent on building a strong faculty across disciplines that would meet his high standards. Rapidly increasing enrollment numbers necessitated that he hire instructors quickly to meet the needs of the university, particularly as a wave of young WWI veterans supported by the G.I. Bill applied for admission.

Late in 1919 Suzzallo requested confirmation from the University regents for twenty-two faculty appointments.<sup>67</sup> Though most of these individuals did not have the terminal degree in their fields, Suzzallo's hiring spree in this year had a lasting effect: in a faculty roster from 1945, nearly fifteen percent of the staff had been appointed under Suzzallo.<sup>68</sup> Many of these new instructors were UW graduates themselves, and this sometimes led to a feeling of insularity in the academic community. Patterson's well-traveled background and diverse life experiences, then, had likely been a great draw in hiring him for the position of Professor of Art.

The founding of a School of Painting and Design gave aspiring artists in Seattle an opportunity for formal instruction in the arts, an option that had not been so readily accessible previously. The only other notable art school in Seattle,<sup>69</sup> the Cornish School

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<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that this was neither uncommon nor problematic, since most artists hired to teach at schools before MFA programs were well-established across the country did not have the terminal degrees in their field.

<sup>67</sup> Charles M. Gates, *The First Century at the University of Washington 1861-1961* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), 157.

<sup>68</sup> 93 people out of a total staff of 704. Gates, 157.

<sup>69</sup> An argument could also be made for the School of Fine Arts, led by local impressionistic landscape painter Paul Gustin, but it was overshadowed by the founding of the UW School of Painting and Design.

(now known as the Cornish College of the Arts), had been founded by Nellie Cornish in 1914 and was offering innovative classes in music, dance, and the visual arts just as Patterson's university art program was taking off. Tobey came to Seattle in 1922 on the invitation to teach painting<sup>70</sup> at the Cornish School; though he did not stay on the staff for long, he later wrote of Miss Cornish that "She was one of the very first in the Northwest to preach the value of the cultural pursuits of man."<sup>71</sup> Cornish never made mention of meeting Patterson in her autobiography, but she did recall that "the years immediately preceding the First World War were marked by great excitement in the arts [...] These new ideas made themselves felt across the continent, and new artists began to appear in Seattle."<sup>72</sup>

Art education at the University of Washington gained further prominence when another such artist new to the area, Walter Isaacs, joined the faculty as the Head of the Department in 1923. Like Patterson, Isaacs was not a Seattle native, though he was an American; he was born in Illinois in 1886 and had studied at the Millikin Academy from 1904-1909 under William A. Varnum, who had himself been a student at the Académie

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<sup>70</sup> Butler was the first instructor of painting at the Cornish School. Prior to taking up the post he had been offering art class out of his own home and Kenneth Callahan had been one of his students. Butler's position at the Cornish School ended when he left for his military service in WWI. Callahan's recollection of his time with Butler was that: "He wasn't a very good artist, but he was a person that made you feel that nothing was more important than art. He made you feel that painting was an important thing to be doing. And I think he was very stimulating to students from that point of view." Sue Ann Kendall, Kenneth Callahan interviews, Oct. 27-Dec. 19, 1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>71</sup> Tobey makes this remark in his brief essay "A Tribute from Mark Tobey" included in Nellie C. Cornish, *Miss Aunt Nellie: The Autobiography of Nellie C. Cornish* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), 273.

<sup>72</sup> Cornish, 94-95.

Julian in 1901.<sup>73</sup> This was his personal introduction to the European methods of art instruction, though unlike most of the other serious artists of this time period—Patterson among them—who followed their art education at a respected institution with a trip to Europe, Isaacs instead went to New York to work at the Art Students' League in 1910. Following brief study at the Chicago Art Institute and a few design and teaching jobs, Isaacs had finally made a trip to Paris in 1920. As a student at the Académie Colorossi and then the Académie Moderne, he was exposed to the artwork of the Expressionists and the Fauvists over fifteen years after Patterson had exhibited alongside them at the first Salon d'Automne.

It was during Isaacs' time in Paris that he was recruited by President Suzzallo to lead the Department of Art and Design upon the completion of his European study. According to artist William Cummings, a contemporary of the Northwest School, “[Patterson’s] maverick personality... couldn’t conceive of a life enmeshed in campus politics and administrative bedlam” whereas “Isaacs was a drab, unimaginative man, a perfect department head, absolutely dedicated to use of the power of his position to reproduce itself continually, totally dedicated to building a bureaucratic institution.”<sup>74</sup> Isaacs' initial appointment to the position of Dean came by way of a recommendation to

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<sup>73</sup> According to the authors of *Walter F. Isaacs, An Artist in America 1886-1964*, “Although Varnum’s influence on Isaacs’ painting was apparently negligible, his own dual career as an artist and educator was common for an American painter and may have provided a model for Isaacs’ decision to become a painter-teacher.” Moseley and Reed, 12.

<sup>74</sup> William Cumming, *Sketchbook: A Memoir of the 1930s and the Northwest School* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 176.

President Suzzallo from a colleague at the university in Colorado where Isaacs had taught before leaving for Paris.

Isaacs arrived in Seattle in 1923, later explaining, “When I came to the University, I was what might be called an impressionist, a kind of conservative post-impressionist who was beginning to be interested in the modern movement.”<sup>75</sup> Like Patterson, Isaacs was a member of the lingering European traditions of modernism. The two had an affable working relationship from the very start. In 1925, while sharing a studio space near campus, they sat down together to paint one another’s portraits simultaneously—not an uncommon practice for art students but an activity that Patterson especially enjoyed and had also practiced in Paris with Hugh Ramsay. Isaacs’ painting of Patterson was included in the pair’s joint retrospective 36 years later, though Patterson’s of Isaacs was not.

In 1926 railroad magnate, art collector, and Cornish School trustee Horace C. Henry<sup>76</sup> made plans to donate his personal art collection, consisting primarily of French and American landscape paintings from the nineteenth century (including works by Winslow Homer, Childe Hassam, and William Merritt Chase), to the University of Washington. In doing so he initiated the founding of the first public art museum in the state of Washington.<sup>77</sup> Henry also provided the funds for the requisite campus building in

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<sup>75</sup> As quoted in Moseley and Reed, 24.

<sup>76</sup> Henry had moved to the Northwest in 1890 and his firm built the Great Northern line from Stevens Pass to Everett and Seattle in 1893. He began his art collection in the 1890s and helped organized the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909.

<sup>77</sup> To compare, the state of Oregon secured one of the earliest public art museums in the entire country with its founding of the Portland Art Museum in 1892.

which to house it, which was designed by École des Beaux-Arts-trained architect Carl F. Gould,<sup>78</sup> president of the Seattle Fine Arts Society and founder of the UW School of Architecture. The Henry Art Gallery opened in February of 1927, dramatically increasing the public's exposure to fine art and furthering the visibility of American Impressionists.

Isaacs went to Europe again from 1927-1928. For Isaacs, the return so soon after his first trip was a chance to further refine his methods and to visit Germany for the first time. The Bauhaus, which had only just been founded when Isaacs was first in Europe, was now a major model of art education and had replaced the École des Beaux-Arts in European importance. Isaacs was enthralled by its message of training artists for their industry and he took back to Seattle with him the desire to incorporate these methods of instruction into the program at UW. Patterson did not share his friend's enthusiasm for the Bauhaus' rigorous standards of "good design"<sup>79</sup> in his own work, but he welcomed its influence in the university program. The combination of the French academy model and the Bauhaus method of education made for a rigorous training ground for aspiring artists at the UW.

By this time the School of Painting and Design was well-established, with about a dozen faculty members providing instruction in a variety of media. 1930 saw the official change of the department's name from School of Painting and Design to School of Art to

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<sup>78</sup> Gould had arrived in Seattle in 1908. After founding the UW School of Architecture in 1914 he became increasingly involved in university building projects, including the UW Campus Plan in 1915 and the Suzzallo Library in 1922. His work was predominantly Art Deco throughout the late 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>79</sup> *Art of the Pacific Northwest: From the 1930s to the Present* (Washington: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1974), 81.

signify the presence of artists working in a wider berth of media. A third influential artist-professor, Helen Rhodes, represented an important point of departure from Patterson and Isaacs. Having been trained by Arthur Wesley Dow, whose 1899 publication *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers* encouraged a move away from teaching students to copy from life in favor of emphasis on mastery of the elements of art, Rhodes represented an interest in design principles and formal concerns.

Viola Patterson, née Hansen, didn't take any art classes until she was a graduate student in librarianship at the UW. Her first drawing class at the university was taught by her future husband; several more courses in studio art followed and the couple married in 1922. Viola recalled the manner in which the art professors would guide students' progress:

Most of the instructors would in one way or another invite their students to their studio, probably once a quarter or certainly once a year, and this was just general for—not all. [...] Mr. Isaacs did this for years, and many of the others did it in their own way. At least my husband did this; he'd been accustomed to this with his own professors in Paris. They had done this, or at least some of them had done it, not I think for the whole class, but with selected few that they thought showed promise.<sup>80</sup>

Despite Ambrose's influence in the beginning of her art education, Viola showed an individualistic slant that leaned more towards Tobey, with whom the couple had struck a friendship shortly after his arrival in Seattle and under whom Viola was instructed for a short period early in her career, and Isaacs, whose flattening of space appealed to Viola's interest in academic cubism. Viola, who remained more interested in formal issues during

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<sup>80</sup> Kingsbury, Oral history interview with Viola Patterson.



her life, became best known for her geometric maritime images and street scenes. However, there are examples available of Viola looking to her husband's work and techniques for inspiration. Ambrose published a small book titled *Hawaii – Twelve Woodcuts* following a brief return to Hawaii in 1925 to gather subject material for new prints. A comparison of these Hawaiian prints with Viola's 1928 linocut images from a trip to British Columbia very clearly shows Viola's appropriation of Ambrose's method of depicting positive and negative space.

The couple took a trip to Europe in 1929 for further study and enrolled in studio classes taught by Andre Lhote, a French artist who was heavily influenced by cubism. Lhote's school in Montparnesse was founded in 1922 and provided instruction in both nude and costumed life studies.<sup>81</sup> Curiously, Ambrose listed his study under Lhote whenever asked to provide a timeline of his formal training and included brief notes related to Lhote's teaching in his personal notebooks but Viola<sup>82</sup> later claimed that he never actually attended the class and would go out into Paris to sketch street scenes alone every morning instead. It's difficult to determine which version is correct, since it seems unlikely that Viola would forget such an important detail about the months she spent as a student there, but seems equally unfathomable that Patterson would lie about his involvement with Lhote. Regardless, this second trip to Paris only seems to have strengthened Patterson's commitment to the European method of instruction.

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<sup>81</sup> Laura Brunsmann and Ruth Askey, eds., *Modernism and Beyond: Women Artists of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1993), 21.

<sup>82</sup> In her oral history interview with Kingsbury, Viola Patterson says "no, no; [Ambrose] never did [attend Lhote's classes]" and describes the couple's daily schedule in Paris in which Ambrose would meet her each day after her class with Lhote ended at noon for lunch.

Though the prestige of an academic art program headed by European-trained artists was celebrated by many, some of the Seattle community was not quite ready for what it entailed. Isaacs, in a joint interview with Patterson published in the *Bremerton Herald* in 1960, recalled that in the early years of the department some community members were so outraged by the university's employment of nude models for figure drawing classes that they approached President Suzzallo about stopping the practice<sup>83</sup> – suggesting that not so much had changed in public responses to perceived indecency since Tanaka's nudes were condemned over a decade earlier. Suzzallo assured the concerned citizens that the models would indeed start wearing *something* – without letting them know that that “something” could be a hair ribbon or some other small unobtrusive accoutrement.

MFA graduate Tsutakawa remembered the university art instruction as “very academic,” entailing “one or two years of charcoal drawing from plaster casts, and then composition.”<sup>84</sup> Though he enjoyed Patterson's instruction, Tsutakawa claimed to have always felt that his teacher's work was not very consistent, clarifying that: “[Patterson] was doing all sorts of things, but he did it very well, I thought.”<sup>85</sup> Patterson was a popular instructor and students lauded his teaching style and his talent.<sup>86</sup> He was more suited to

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<sup>83</sup> As quoted in Moseley and Reed, 27.

<sup>84</sup> Martha Kingsbury, Oral history interview with George Tsutakawa, Sept. 8-19, 1983, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Patterson received several letters from former students, some decades after their education, thanking him and reminiscing about their experiences at the University of Washington. Some letters include: Maud Mae Clough, Letter to Ambrose Patterson, July 28, 1940, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/6; Michiko Ogami,

the role of attentive, nurturing teacher than Tobey, whose time at the Cornish School was relatively brief and whose attempt at teaching at UW in 1941 was even shorter.

Isaacs' major contribution to the University program at this time was his securing of three major artists for extended visits to Seattle during which each taught summer seminars: Russian-born sculptor Alexander Archipenko in 1936 and 1937, French painter Amédée Ozenfant in 1938, and Bauhaus designer Johannes Molzahn in 1940. The wartime environment of Europe was a hostile setting for contemporary artists whose works did not fit into the traditions deemed acceptable by the Nazi and Fascist regimes. Isaacs wished to offer artists he admired the opportunities to share their knowledge with an American audience. This was not an isolated occurrence specific to the Northwest and the presence of so many European modernists working in the University States had a profound effect on American art; Greenberg noted in his 1955 essay "'American-Type' Painting" that "This country's distance from the war was another favorable circumstance [for modernism], and along with it the presence here during the war years of artists like Mondrian, Masson, Léger, Chagall, Ernst, and Lipchitz, together with a number of European critics, dealers, and collectors. The proximity of these people, if not their attention, gave these new American painters the sense, wholly new in this country, of being in the center of art in their time."<sup>87</sup>

Especially notable for both Isaacs and Patterson was the arrival of Ozenfant, who had a Parisian education in drawing and the decorative arts and ran his own atelier,

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Letter to Ambrose Patterson, May 11, 1942, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/12; Esther M. Gingrich, Letter to Ambrose Patterson, January 12, 1966, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/8.

<sup>87</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 211.

l'Académie Ozenfant (which had been designed for him by friend Le Corbusier).

Ozenfant brought news of the current trends in France and expressed a particular interest in the theories of Purism and architectural design, which made a strong impression on UW students such as Wendell Brazeau (who was also later hired by Isaacs as a university instructor). Patterson, Isaacs, and Ozenfant, along with their respective wives, and Tobey became especially good friends and would maintain regular correspondence in the decades following their shared time in Seattle on topics ranging from philosophical questions to personal updates.

Patterson had long been interested in art history beyond just admiring the work of the Early Masters—Patterson seemed to have wanted to gain a truly solid understanding of the trajectory of art history. His notes for book ideas on the subject reveal multiple attempts to satisfactorily categorize historical artistic methods. Preparatory notes for a talk on Art Appreciation organized the “General Types of Composition” into five categories: Seurat (“highly intellectual”), Dufy (“the most uninhibited of all”), Turner (“painter of the infinite, [who] organized his paintings to achieve that sensation”), Pollack (“art appears to be that of chance”), and Mondrian and the Purists (“concentrated on the problem of the rectangle and the curve”).<sup>88</sup> In arranging the artists this way he made no particular distinction between how he considered the European and the American modernists.

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<sup>88</sup> Ambrose Patterson’s handwritten notes for a proposed talk on Art Appreciation, no date, Patterson Papers, 2563-003 1/7.

Guy Anderson later described how this interest in art history was not exclusive to Patterson among the university academics:

[...] several people out there, the Pattersons, and Walter Isaacs—they were all interested in the history of art. And though we were interested especially in things that extended more in the recent European school, beginning like 1875 and up through what would be called the modern art school, not only French but also German Expressionism and all of those movements, it was the thing to be alerted to.<sup>89</sup>

Like Patterson, Isaacs explored a range of subjects in his work. Although he started with the requisite portraits, still lifes, and landscapes of a properly-European-trained academic, he began moving away from these earlier genres in favor of a flattened image and the abandonment of perspective in the 1930s and 40s. Though he continued to also paint portraits regularly, Isaacs eventually developed his own recognizable style of figural groupings featuring expressive bodies often absent of faces. Patterson wrote of Isaacs in 1950, “Of all painters that I have known Isaac’s evolution has been in [...] a direction which might be called his own, if any artist could make such a claim.”<sup>90</sup>

Unlike Patterson, Isaacs published frequently on topics related to modern art; it could be argued that this was a greater strength of his than even painting since his methodical mind was well-equipped for unpacking these issues in writing. Isaacs was profoundly interested in the challenges that abstraction presented to traditional understandings of art. In his 1942 essay “Art in the Image of Man,” published for the *Washington Alumnus* newsletter, Isaacs made an impassioned argument that while

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<sup>89</sup> Martha Kingsbury, Guy Anderson interviews, Feb. 1-8, 1983, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>90</sup> Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/8.

composition must remain the foremost concern for painters, it must also be recognized that man's image is desirable and inevitable in painting.<sup>91</sup> He was also a regular contributor to the *College Art Journal*. In "The Place of Man in Modern Art," published in the Summer 1948 edition of this journal, Isaacs discussed the perceived loss of the "humanistic element" in abstract modernism, explaining that "it is quite natural that throughout history man should have given himself a prominent position in the art that he has created."<sup>92</sup> He clarified that although this human factor did not have to explicitly mean *figural*, artists always leave something of themselves on the canvas. "Art flourishes best," he wrote, "on familiar material."<sup>93</sup>

While Isaacs fretted about the problems presented by American modernism to the tradition of figural painting, Patterson seemed far less threatened by these new developments. Given his characteristic curious nature regarding all things new and different in art, he probably enjoyed it greatly. He mused in a personal notebook in 1952 that "Satisfactory non-objective art, to me, means just that! A contrived combination of beauty, interest, technique and luck, omitting but one thing – the object! The paradox of non-objective art is that with skill, taste, ingenuity and proper presentation an object is produced – the artist's product is an object nothing else."<sup>94</sup> In one statement he reduced

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<sup>91</sup> Moseley and Reed discuss Isaacs' essay in great detail in their book (p. 40), saying that "In a time when nonobjective art was gaining adherence and complete abstraction was one of the achievements of the modern movement, Isaacs' continued reliance on the figure perhaps required self-reassurance and explanation."

<sup>92</sup> Walter Isaacs, "The Place of Man in Modern Art," *College Art Journal* 7 (Summer, 1948), 278.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>94</sup> Personal notebook titled "Quotations Notes," April 29, 1952, p. 27, Patterson Papers, 2568-001 2/9

the artistic breakthroughs that had resulted in pure abstraction to a simple formulaic explanation.

Late in his tenure at the university, Isaacs became more concerned with the pedagogical issues that academic art programs such as the one at UW would encounter from increased interest in nonobjective art. The relevancy of classes in figure studies and other European academic methods came into question. Concerned with how this turn against the study of the traditional nude might dramatically change art education for the worst, Isaacs took it upon himself to write letters to many of the most prominent modern artists of the time—Picasso, Léger, Miro, Matisse, and Hofmann, to name a few<sup>95</sup>—and ask “Should life painting be part of an art school curriculum?” Though he never wrote the article in which he had planned to discuss the various responses, this anecdote from Isaacs’ time at the University of Washington highlights his unwavering commitment to the methods of instruction which he and Patterson implemented in the earliest days of their department.

Patterson, Isaacs, and their colleagues were in enviable positions for artists – their university jobs allowed them to create art without the pressure of commercial success to survive. Viola Patterson stated that her husband was quite content with this arrangement: “[H]e was in a happy position of fairly much enjoying teaching and being free from having to sell in order to earn enough to live on.”<sup>96</sup> Reviewing the full scope of Patterson’s career, with his many jumps from place to place, school to school, and artistic

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<sup>95</sup> A list of artists and copies of the responses Isaacs received are available in Moseley and Reed (p. 43-44).

<sup>96</sup> Kingsbury, Oral history interview with Viola Patterson.

style to artistic style, it is a wonder that he was so satisfied at the University of Washington that he stayed as long as he did. This came at a price, since this comfortable, supportive collegiate environment did not require Patterson to evolve to keep up with the new American-born modernism. For painters in Patterson's position, there appears to often be a tension between one's identity as an instructor and commitment to teaching and one's identity as an artist and commitment to personal artistic growth.

It was during his later years at the university, as he grew closer to his retirement age, that Patterson produced works of abstraction in greater numbers. Singularly such works are not so obviously disjointed from his oeuvre, but taking stock of the great many experiments he made during this period highlights the way he selectively shuffled through the "toolbox" provided by European modernism. However, no one seemed to mind that this was Patterson's *modus operandi*; if anything, he was the more successful for it. He exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum of Non-Objective Art in 1946 and in a 1948 show at the City of Paris' Rotunda Gallery in San Francisco with Tobey, Isaacs, Kenneth Callahan, Guy Anderson, and Hassel Smith.<sup>97</sup>

Patterson retired from the university in 1947 when he was seventy years old. He had held the position of Instructor of Art for nearly thirty years. In that same year Viola began teaching art at the University of Washington (and continued until 1966, the year that Ambrose passed away).<sup>98</sup> The painter-professor model that Patterson represented continued to thrive throughout the region as additional art-degree granting institutions

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<sup>97</sup> Exhibition brochure, City of Paris Rotunda Gallery, San Francisco, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/28.

<sup>98</sup> Brunsman and Askey, 20.



developed in Washington State. Despite the fact that the other public universities began offering programs in formal art instruction, the University of Washington remained the most influential throughout the mid-twentieth century, due in large part to Patterson's early influence there and the European methods of art instruction fostered by Patterson and Isaacs. In turn, Patterson's early leadership of the UW program at this pivotal moment assured his legacy, whether deserved or not, as the artist who brought European modernism to Seattle.

At the time of their retrospectives at the Seattle Art Museum in 1961, an article in the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* provided comparative commentary on the two artists that highlighted the way Patterson's technique contrasted with Isaacs':

While Isaacs discards the trivia of naturalism, Patterson heightens it, and while Isaacs is concerned with the use of colored shapes to create movement, Patterson is preoccupied with the radiance of color. [...] These sun-drenched paintings, sometimes achieved with brushings so small as to become texture, are often combined with an illusive [sic] quality of design – and are always gently executed. While Patterson approaches his objectives with a certain amount of tender precision, there is decision in the shorthand statements of Walter Isaacs. They produce a kind of classical abstraction just barely hinged on the well-known years of militant cubism.<sup>99</sup>

The dual blessing and curse of Patterson's and Isaacs' careers were their central roles at the University of Washington. Without the fortuitous timing of their arrivals in Seattle (especially in the case of Patterson), their long-term commitments to the university, and their international reputations so highly valued by the local community, neither man would likely have been remembered so highly in Northwest art.

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<sup>99</sup> Thelma Lehman, "Patterson, Isaacs show paths in art," *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, October 24, 1961, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/10.

CHAPTER V  
MODERN ART AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The Seattle Art Museum

As Patterson's circle of friends expanded beyond the university setting he found more and more opportunities for collaboration and experimentation. He never completely abandoned his interest in printmaking from his time in Europe and Hawaii, even applying for several patents related to his techniques, and in 1929 he co-founded the Northwest Printmakers Society with other instructors and students from the university to bring the medium more public exposure and to provide more opportunities—and professional recognition—for printmakers in the region.<sup>100</sup> This group sponsored an annual competitive exhibition that quickly garnered national attention as printmakers from across the country submitted entries.<sup>101</sup>

Patterson regularly exhibited in the Northwest Annual, a large juried show that was sponsored by the Art Institute of Seattle (formerly the Seattle Fine Arts Society; the organization changed its name in 1930) for several years before the Seattle Art Museum was founded. Tsutakawa recalled attending the show as a high school student in the late 1920s and seeing the works of his future teachers Patterson and Isaacs and Japanese-

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<sup>100</sup> Patterson sought out his friend Roi Partridge's advice on how to buy a good etching press. Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/15.

<sup>101</sup> Butler, who had discovered block-printing after his departure from Seattle, regularly sent his prints from Europe to be exhibited in the Society's shows.

American painters Kenjiro Nomura and Kamekichi Tokita on display. According to Tsutakawa, despite the fact that the artists' paintings were primarily representational and nothing as sensational what was being exhibited in Europe and New York at the time, all the critics and newspapers were "making fun of the modern art."<sup>102</sup> In the early years of Seattle's modernism, before a critical discourse on Northwest visual culture developed, public discussion on the arts centered more on the artists' connections to the community than on issues of aesthetics. Work from the Northwest was compared to work from the East Coast or Europe, since these were highly-respected models with which everyone was more familiar. Without a grasp of what was happening currently in contemporary art on the national scale, the Seattle public bestowed the title "modern" on anything that was new or different whenever a more appropriate, informed label couldn't be given.

The city gained valuable support for the arts—and modern art especially—with the founding of the Seattle Art Museum by Dr. Richard E. Fuller, President of the Art Institute of Seattle, in 1933. Dr. Fuller was a geologist and collector of Asian art who had traveled extensively throughout Asia, South America, Europe, and Africa. He and his mother, Margaret MacTavish Fuller, provided the funds necessary to found the museum and contributed their own Asian art as the starter-collection.<sup>103</sup> Building and opening a museum during a national depression is no easy task: though the Fullers donated the initial funds from an inheritance of \$250,000, the city of Seattle agreed to cover basic

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<sup>102</sup> Kingsbury, Oral History interview with Tsutakawa.

<sup>103</sup> Kingsbury, *Art of the Thirties*, 15.

operating costs.<sup>104</sup> Fuller took advantage of the financial climate to purchase many great works of art at low cost, making deals with collectors and art dealers to acquire works for his new museum quickly.

From the beginning the museum had an important collaborative tie to the University of Washington; the building<sup>105</sup> to house the collection was designed by Carl F. Gould, the prominent art deco architect and UW professor responsible for the Henry Art Gallery. Fuller and MacTavish Fuller had made several trips to many of the nation's foremost museums to gather ideas in preparation for this project.<sup>106</sup> They were clearly concerned with creating an institution that would have an authoritative presence to rival its more established counterparts despite its young age.

The museum opened its doors on June 23, 1933. At its start the museum boasted 1,926 objects in its collection. In the first six months after it opened to the public, 300,000<sup>107</sup> people visited the museum and there were thirty-seven changing exhibits shown in its facility. "When budding Northwest artists went to SAM," wrote Deloris Tarzan Ament, "they saw Japanese scroll paintings and intricate jade carvings, in the

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<sup>104</sup> Richard E. Fuller, *A Gift to the City: A History of the Seattle Art Museum* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993), 4.

<sup>105</sup> The Seattle Art Museum relocated to new building downtown in 1991; the former building was renamed the Seattle Asian Art Museum.

<sup>106</sup> Fuller, 6.

<sup>107</sup> Figure provided by the Seattle Art Museum. "About SAM: History" *Seattle Art Museum* [online]; available at <http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/AboutUs/History/History.asp>; Internet; Accessed February 14, 2010.

same way their New York counterparts saw classic European canvases.”<sup>108</sup> The Fuller Collection provided an alternative to the European model just at the time the UW School of Painting and Design was putting even more emphasis on the European method of instruction.

Along with examples of Asian art, visitors to the SAM also saw the work of emerging regional masters. From its inception the museum held monthly solo exhibitions of local artists’ work; this practice continued for the following decades with great regularity. Fuller appointed artist Kenneth Callahan to the position of Assistant Director in 1934 and promoted him to curator three years later. Almost from the start charges were leveled against Callahan as being too great an influence on Fuller, whose knowledge of modern art was decidedly limited at the museum’s beginning. Some accused Callahan of promoting his own friends’ works as potential acquisitions for the museum, a charge that Callahan countered by saying although he served an advisory role, “[Fuller] was the one who was in control.”<sup>109</sup>

Regardless of how Fuller made his decisions, he was the driving force behind the development of a collection rich with examples of local modern artists’ work until he stepped down as Director in 1976. In the early years of the Seattle Art Museum, acquisitions of contemporary regional art were often made from the monthly museum exhibitions. Fuller personally purchased many of the early modern acquisitions for the

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<sup>108</sup> Deloris Tarzan Ament, *Iridescent Light: The Emergence of Northwest Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press; La Conner: Museum of Northwest Art, 2002), 6.

<sup>109</sup> As quoted in Sue Ann Kendall, Kenneth Callahan interviews. Graves and Anderson were both also employed at the museum sporadically.

museum's collection. His directorship of the museum maintained this level of personal involvement for years, and his loyalties quickly became apparent as artists like Patterson, who had established ties to the museum, saw many of their works purchased for the collection. The museum's predecessor, The Seattle Fine Arts Society, had held a solo exhibition of Patterson's work in 1921, and the Seattle Art Museum organized solo shows in 1934, 1947, and the retrospective in 1961.

In his autobiography, Fuller credited "a cooperative board, a cooperative city government, and the generous support of many members, both in finances and in services, as well as a very loyal and able staff"<sup>110</sup> as the reasons for the success of the museum and his success as its Director. Certainly Fuller's unwavering commitment to his cause (in his four decades leading the museum, he never received a salary) was equally important. The museum had opened at a pivotal point in Seattle's history, particularly in regards to its citizens' engagement with the arts. A public discourse on the arts emerged as a central facet of Seattle community life as private interests of art-minded individuals were increasingly manifested into public institutions. As the museum grew, the community's social activities overlapped more and more with the developing cultural awareness of the city and newspapers began printing more regular reviews of the art shows and juried exhibitions put on by the museum.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> As quoted in Fuller, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Before art show reviews were regularly run in Seattle's newspapers, Callahan was one of the city's only critics and he recalled publishing reviews under fake names early in his career so as to make it appear that there were several writers engaged in the public dialogue on contemporary art: "I just used Larry Cross as the reviewer in the *Town Crier* so that the *Seattle Times* would have a reviewer and that the *Town Crier* would have a different reviewer. Because at that time, there was nobody else writing about art in Seattle

Patterson's involvement with the artistic community took an even more visible step in 1937 with the publication of *Some Work of the Group of Twelve*, a small book which featured the work and artist statements of Ambrose and Viola Patterson and Isaacs, Callahan, Graves, Margaret Gove Camfferman, Peter M. Camfferman, Elizabeth Cooper, Earl Fields, Takuichi Fujii, Kenjiro Nomura, and Kamekichi Tokita. Only lasting roughly five years, the group's self-identification was not meant to declare any particular allegiance to one style or goal; rather, it was an informal recognition of local artists who enjoyed sharing ideas and promoting the arts together. The personal nature of the artists' respective statements highlighted the fact that members of this assembly, though a "Group" in title, remained committed above all else to their own personal goals while maintaining an active interest in the work of their peers. In *Some Work of the Group of Twelve*, Isaacs (who, like Patterson, generally steered clear of the topical/social realist subjects favored by many Northwest artists in this decade) responded to the national popularity of mural painting in his artist statement, saying that "Our new mural art, with its emphasis on propaganda, will not succeed unless it retains the basic qualities of good painting."<sup>112</sup>

The Camffermans had been living on Whidbey Island since 1915 and participated often in the art shows and juried exhibitions in Seattle. At the small artist colony they started in Langley, they offered summer art classes for visiting art students. Margaret Camfferman had studied until Robert Henri in New York prior to coming to the

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and I thought it was better for art to have apparently two columns than just one." Sue Ann Kendall, Kenneth Callahan interviews.

<sup>112</sup> Frank McCaffrey, *Some Work of the Group of Twelve* (Seattle: Dogwood Press, 1937), 17.

Northwest. Her work followed in a similar manner to her French mentor until a 1932 trip to Paris for study under Lhote that stimulated an interest in cubism. Her husband Peter was a master of vivid, saturated color and abstracted forms; an even more impressive accomplishment considering the distance between the Camffermans' chosen retreat outside Seattle and the major centers of modern art. In 1933 The Museum of Modern Art organized an exhibit of "Painting and Sculpture from Sixteen American Cities" to recognize the contributions of American modern artists working outside New York. Each of the invited cities was asked to submit those works that were "the best... disregarding whenever necessary conventional opinion."<sup>113</sup> Works by Patterson, Isaacs, Kenjiro Nomura, Peter Camfferman, and Callahan represented Seattle in the show.

With Patterson's increasing national profile, he came to the attention of critics and writers outside the Northwest, such as Connecticut-based author Martha Candler Cheney. In a letter to Patterson, Cheney asked for his opinions for her forthcoming book on American painting and sculpture. She wrote, "What do you consider the most significant tendency which has developed in American art in the past quarter century since the Armory Show? What do you see as the future of American art? Is there any artist group working for the promotion of a vital twentieth century art? Or acting as a century from which younger people may receive inspiration or training?"<sup>114</sup> Though his exact answers were not reproduced in Cheney's 1939 book *Modern Art in America*, the author did mention him frequently in her discussion of Seattle's art, writing that:

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<sup>113</sup> Moseley and Reed, 34.

<sup>114</sup> Martha Cheney, Letter to Ambrose Patterson, no date, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/5.



Seattle has, for a quarter century, provided an active center for the art interests of the Northwestern states. Through the standard of instruction at the state university and the activities of the Seattle Art Museum, high ideals have been fostered. Ambrose Patterson and Kenneth Callahan had already been mentioned among the leaders. [...] The outstanding work exhibited by painters of the group that centers in Seattle is informed with a spirit of international modernism. It is more plastic and less conservative in subject and treatment than the painting of the east coast.<sup>115</sup>

With increasing public sentiment for the arts, Seattle's reputation as an emerging cultural center and its distinctive regional identity became nationally known during the 1940s; over the course of the following decade more Seattle artists were recognized internationally as they developed their own distinctive mature styles. Where once a split between the independents and the academics had existed, a more conspicuous break between those artists working in the old modes of European modernism and those artists in line with the new American modernism became more evident. Despite the stylistic and methodological differences between these groups, they socialized freely and often participated in the same exhibitions together.

Post-WWII in Seattle, a greater sense of community grew, influenced in large part by the emergence of commercial art galleries. A charge led by Zoe Dusanne, this was a particularly influential shift in the city since options for artists looking to sell their work had previously ranged from artist co-operatives and semi-professional galleries to art supply shops and department stores. Dusanne had lived in Seattle from 1911-1928 but moved to New York at the age of forty-four to pursue other opportunities. It was here that

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<sup>115</sup> The third artist Cheney discussed in this section on Northwest art was David McCosh, whom she describes as "beginning to produce fresh, vividly felt, and finely constructed scenes" at the time of her writing. McCosh was active in Eugene, Oregon after 1934 and was a prominent professor of drawing, painting, and lithography at the University of Oregon. Martha Candler Cheney, *Modern Art in America* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1939), 143-144.

she developed her connoisseurship. When the Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929, Dusanne attended its first exhibition and was introduced to the works of Picasso and many other modern artists. The burgeoning art lover immersed herself in the contemporary art scene of New York, studying the movements (particularly abstract expressionism) and meeting the artists working in New York. By the time she returned to Seattle permanently in 1942, she had amassed a personal collection of works by such artists as Picasso, Kandinsky, and Klee, and readily looked to add works by Northwest artists. She actively sought out quality works by both the academics and the independents. Dusanne's first exhibition, presented in her home in 1950, featured works by Ambrose Patterson as well as Viola Patterson, Callahan, Isaacs, Tobey, Anderson, Virginia Banks, Edwin Danielson, and Patricia K. Nicholson. Patterson's works were featured in a solo exhibition of twenty-nine works at Dusanne's gallery in 1960.

Dusanne's professional high expectations and promotion of Northwest artists paved the way for more commercial galleries to open in Seattle, while setting a high standard against which they would be critiqued. Around the same time the Seattle Art Museum had begun a series of lectures to bring important art historians and writers to the city, maintaining its own relevance within contemporary art. Now, artists both self-taught and professionally trained in Seattle had the opportunities for work to be shown at either a museum or gallery space and could expect that their works would be analyzed critically.

### The Making of a Modernist: Mark Tobey

The anonymous 1953 article in *Life Magazine* featuring Tobey, Callahan, Anderson, and Morris Graves titled “Mystic Painters of the Northwest” brought national attention to the four not just from art critics but from regular people who were enthralled by the image of four mysterious, solitary art gurus at work in Washington. This representation was a greatly exaggerated version of the reality, in fact, the Pattersons’ own home was a common gathering place for artists to compare ideas and discuss issues in modern art. Dusanne had actually been the one pulling the strings behind this article, as she had a friend, Winthrop Sargeant, who was a critic and writer for the magazine and she had much to benefit from the increased public profile of these artists.

Popular labels such as “The Big Four” and “The Northwest Mystics” supported an assumption that Seattle’s modernism could be defined by the work that these artists produced, and Tobey, older and more established than the others, was identified as a leader of the group. However accurate or inaccurate this claim may be, Seattle was increasingly believed to be the locus of a “school” of closely related artists whose strong reaction to a particular mini-climate, plus a heavy dose of Asian philosophy, resulted in works seen by outsiders to demonstrate a unique mysticism. Soon the idea of an identifiable Northwest School was a prominent feature in the national understanding of Washington’s art. It is worth understanding what led to this point in order to better appreciate Tobey’s role in shaping Seattle’s modernism.

Both Patterson and Tobey had already established themselves as working and exhibiting artists in the first two decades of their own careers before relocating to the

Northwest. Born in Centreville, Wisconsin in 1890, Tobey did not have any early formal art training beyond Saturday classes in watercolor and oil painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. Following years of freelance art and design jobs in various cities, he moved to Seattle in 1922 to teach at the Cornish School. He was moderately successful as a representational artist and drawing instructor, but these early achievements would pale in comparison to the artistic breakthrough Tobey experienced by the mid-twentieth century.

Despite the fact the Greenberg was, early in Jackson Pollock's career, the biggest celebrant of Pollock's abstract expressionism, in the aforementioned essay "American-Type Painting" he wrote, "it may be a chronological fact that Mark Tobey was the first to make, and succeed with, easel pictures whose design was 'all-over'—that is, filled from edge to edge with evenly spaced motifs that repeated themselves uniformly like the elements in a wallpaper pattern, and therefore seemed capable of repeating the picture beyond its frame into infinity."<sup>116</sup> But, before Tobey was painting all-over, he worked in many of the same genres as Patterson. His early works were primarily representational images of people, landscapes, and birds in the moonlight, several of which were influenced by cubism. *Death of a Clown*, one of the group of circus paintings that Tobey completed in the early 1930s, shows his skill in creating a unified scene; although representational, this particular work exhibits the energy and fluidity of line that would become central to his ensuing abstract works.

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<sup>116</sup> Greenberg, 217. In this same essay Greenberg discussed the way in which modernism, by its very definition, produces expendable conventions within each art discipline that must be discarded as soon as they are recognized.

Seattle's artists had a greater consciousness of Asian themes and media than was found in other cities of the Pacific Northwest, but Tobey, who began collecting Native American art while living in Seattle, was not singularly focused on the Asian aesthetic (and especially not so in his first few years in Seattle). Rather, he believed that the art of the region should be the result of Asian and American Indian influences instead of the European canon which was more appropriate for the east coast. Tobey was not formally opposed to European art (cubism and medieval texts were both influential to a degree in his own work<sup>117</sup>)—he was particularly fond of European Masters Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Cézanne, and Monet—but few similarities between these sources and his own work exist. One of the main reasons that the public, scholars, and critics attributed so much of his ingenuity to his international influences, and to China and Japan specifically, is because he regularly spoke about the significant influence of Asian aesthetics on his own work. Like Patterson, Tobey was a world traveler; his visits to Asia, Europe, England, and Mexico and his interest in world religions (he had converted to the Bahá'í World Faith in 1918) were deeply involved in the development of his aesthetic style and personal philosophy.

In 1934, at the age of forty-four, he embarked on a life-changing trip to Asia. He traveled to Hong Kong, Shanghai, and from there, to Kyoto, where he spent a month living in a Zen monastery, meditating and practicing calligraphy. Led by what he called the “calligraphic impulse,”<sup>118</sup> Tobey developed his distinctive technique of white

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<sup>117</sup> For a richer discussion of Tobey's interest in European art, see William C. Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 18.

<sup>118</sup> As quoted in Tobey, *Mark Tobey*, 69.

writing,<sup>119</sup> characterized by expressive, unintelligible marks across the canvas. The importance of calligraphy as an artistic tradition in Asia does not have a comparable equivalent in the United States; throughout the course of his career Tobey experimented with calligraphic styles and brushwork, pushing the boundaries of what was perceived as “Western” and “Eastern” art – and in doing so, inspired several protégés (most notably Graves, whom he had met while working on a WPA project in the late 1930s) to consider these influences as well. At the time when Tobey’s art career was gaining speed, the most prominent influences on early regional Northwest painters were still the tradition of landscape art (or themes related to nature and the environment) and Impressionism—in short, the type of work that Patterson excelled in producing.

Most of Tobey’s characteristic “white writing” works were painted in the 1940s or later. For Tobey, line became the way to convey energy, light, and vitality. He never abandoned his belief in the value of Asian art as a well of inspiration for American artists. In a 1958 essay published in the *College Art Journal* titled “Japanese Traditions and American Art,” Tobey mused that “I have often thought that if the West Coast had been open to aesthetic influence from Asia, as the East Coast was to Europe, what a rich nation we would be!”<sup>120</sup> During the 1950s and 60s Tobey became increasingly interested in a Japanese aesthetic. He became a close friend of Horiuchi, who provided Tobey a

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<sup>119</sup> The term “white writing” was first used to describe his work in a review published in *Art Digest* in 1944.

<sup>120</sup> As quoted in Wulf Herzogenrath and Andreas Kreul, eds., *Sounds of the Inner Eye* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 156.

sumi brush and instructions on painting with sumi ink.<sup>121</sup> Certainly it must be noted here that Horiuchi was a Japanese-American who had not lived in Japan since 1917 and was far more entrenched in the Seattle art community than in the arts of Japan. The Asian influence that interested Tobey was not the same as that which Patterson had encountered in Paris with Japanese prints and the culture of Japonisme. Patterson, whose introduction to Asian motifs was through a Europeanized lens, consistently rejected pure abstraction in favor of abstracted elements from the “style warehouse” provided by the Paris School and its related interests.

As Tobey’s white writing became more advanced, he was increasingly seen as an innovator. Even into his late years, he never stopped being interested in exploring new media and techniques (this was a trait common also to Patterson, in whose basement studio there were always a multitude of projects in progress, ranging from paintings and prints to experimentations in sculpture). Patterson was well aware of what developments Tobey was making in his art. Patterson’s 1953 tempera painting *The City* immediately brings to mind his friend’s white writing. Even the name of the artwork, which emphasizes the bustling activity and vitality of the urban landscape, does so after the same idea was expressed by Tobey in earlier works such as *Broadway* from 1936. Tobey’s pre-white writing *Broadway* more successfully captures the energy of the street with its crowding of lines and forms. Patterson’s image is just as convincingly an abstracted landscape. In this comparison one can see the forward-motion of Tobey’s

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<sup>121</sup> In Ament’s book she describes in great detail the interactions between Tobey and Horiuchi (p. 86).

artistic progress and the way in which Patterson began to respond to Northwest art in the same way he continued to respond to the European tradition.

In a review of the exhibit of Patterson's work at the Woodside/Braseth Gallery in the January 1993 issue of *Art in America*, art critic Matthew Kangas cited the exhibit as exploratory of Patterson's shifting styles, but lamented curator Laura Brunsman's situating of Patterson with Graves and Tobey, a comparison which Kangas deemed not at all favorable to Patterson. Most unfortunate, according to Kangas, were the works produced by Patterson between 1940 and 1955, during which the so-called Northwest Mystics were gaining momentum. Kangas wrote that Patterson's painting *Moving Shapes* was "an equally embarrassing stab at duplicating Tobey's calligraphic 'white writing,' all the rage at the time."<sup>122</sup> Patterson had signed his name twice on the work to accommodate either a horizontal or vertical format – a telling sign that he had either missed the point of Tobey's work entirely or, more likely, was just allowing himself to play with the "conventions" of this appropriated style. Perhaps Patterson was simply anticipating the orientation problem that was often encountered by Tobey's abstract works, which had occasionally been misprinted in newspaper reproductions.<sup>123</sup>

Tobey was an especially active member of the national dialogue on contemporary modern art. In 1949 he had been a participant in the Western Round Table on Modern Art, held in San Francisco and also attended by, among others, Marcel Duchamp and Frank Lloyd Wright. The intention of the meeting was to bring together the best-informed

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<sup>122</sup> Matthew Kangas, "Ambrose Patterson at Woodside/Braseth," *Art in America* 81 (January 1993), 111.

<sup>123</sup> In 1940, the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* and the *Seattle Star* both ran their images of Tobey's *Modal Tide*, winner of the Katherine B. Baker Purchase Award at the 26<sup>th</sup> Northwest Annual Exhibition, upside down.



modern thinkers of the time in hopes of opening a dialogue. An exhibition of modern works was held concurrently with the sessions; two of Tobey's works, *Electric Night* and *Mockers – 2* were included. Certainly the level of international success that Tobey attained (in 1959, he became the first American since James McNeill Whistler to win the Painting Prize at the Venice Biennale) had more to do with his legitimate place amongst the more innovative artists of the time than the constructed notion of his role in the supposed Northwest Mystics.

#### Patterson's Late Career

In a letter dated January 12, 1966, Richard Fuller wrote to Patterson: "I selected your painting *Summer* from the Museum's permanent collection [for the Seattle Artists' exhibit to be held in Kobe, Japan] as being most representative of you and your work."<sup>124</sup> The oil painting, which Patterson painted in 1952, is an explosion of color, vibrant in composition, with the overwhelming fullness of the flowers taking over the scene with their organic energy. *Summer*, which received such high acclaim, on a second look is not so different than the early *Point Lobos* that Patterson had painted 35 years earlier. The later work maintained the same interest in color and spontaneity that can be seen in Patterson's early works from California. Though his late years at the university had been characterized by more abstract works, Patterson returned to his beloved impressionistic style in the last decade of his life. He always considered himself an Impressionist.

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<sup>124</sup> Richard Fuller, Letter to Ambrose Patterson, January 12, 1966, Patterson Papers, 2563-001 1/17.

The most consistently celebrated feature of Patterson's work, by art critics, friends, students, and casual viewers, has been his emphasis on "sun-drenched" light and "radiant" color. Almost immediately into Patterson's post-Paris career critics began to offer up glowing words on his use of color; the accolades heaped on him in the early twentieth century are the same as the recognitions he received late in his life.<sup>125</sup> Isaacs' darker, more subdued paintings certainly paled in comparison to the bright scenes at which Patterson was so adept. Within the personal notebooks Patterson kept were many notes on color theory and he spoke often of wishing to attain an expert understanding of color.<sup>126</sup>

The works Patterson created late in life, many of which depicted scenes from his own house, captured the kind of sunny, light-filled environments that were plentiful in Europe, Australia, Hawaii, and California but not immediately available in the Pacific Northwest. Patterson accommodated for this by seeking out subject matter that provided its own multi-hued palette: gardens, flowerpots, and domestic spaces. He and Viola maintained a home and garden that, as well as serving as a social meeting place for friends like the Isaacs and Ozenfants,<sup>127</sup> also acted as a constant source of painting

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<sup>125</sup> Twigg Smith, on the occasion of Patterson's brief return visit to Hawaii in 1925, said of Patterson's showing, "Always it was color. He always saw color." Smith, "Ambrose Patterson's Paintings, On View Here this Week, Carry Conviction by their Rare Color." Moseley's exuberant description of Patterson's colors is especially congratulatory: "Color! Patterson was a colorist. Color made space, built form, touched the senses and the heart, bright and dull, heraldic color, local color, reflected color, induced color, and color for its own sake. His painterly touch adjusted a value, changed a warm to a cool, was as personal as a signature." Moseley, "Patterson: Reflections." Writing in 1990 for *Modern Art from the Pacific Northwest at the Seattle Art Museum*, Barbara Johns identified color as Patterson's *métier* (p. 5).

<sup>126</sup> Personal notebook titled "AP Notes – Europe 1929-30," Patterson Papers, 2563-001 2/8.

<sup>127</sup> The neighborhood near campus in which many artists resided was informally known as Seattle's Greenwich Village.

inspiration. According to Kangas in *Epicenter, Essays on North American Art*, “One way to reclassify Seattle painters [...] is to divide them into two groups: (1) those who related to the long rainy season (October – June) by darkening their palettes and thinning out their medium (tempera, sumi, etc.) and (2) those who perhaps looked more closely at the sun shining through the clouds and exulted in the extraordinary range of colors and light intensities which the city’s changeable, wet weather conditions accentuated.”<sup>128</sup> Patterson was certainly one of the latter.

One such work was Patterson’s oil painting titled *Interior*, which was commended for receiving the top award at the Seattle Art Museum’s 1959 Exhibition and featured in the 1960 national edition of *Prize-Winning Oil Paintings and Why they Won the Prize*. In horizontal format it depicts the wide interior of Patterson’s own living room using a predominantly cool-colored palette. A miscellany of furniture and belongings are present in the room, some of which are painted articulately enough to be recognizable (a rocking chair, a vase of flowers, a painting on the wall) whereas others are organic jumbles of line and color and form. Beyond the open windows in the corner of this room dashes of white and green appear to give the semblance of plants just outside. The scene is at once intimate and familiar.

The artist statement provided by Patterson for publication in this book reads:

The oil painting, *Interior*, the result of an instinctive impulse, was developed imaginatively with a free elimination of detail, and the stress of certain others, but above all the avoidance of too literal a statement. I wished, however, in spite of the liberties I have taken (technically) for *Interior* to express a certain feeling I

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<sup>128</sup> Kangas, *Epicenter, Essays on North American Art*, 323.

had of the subject, and I therefore regard it as a true representation of my living room.<sup>129</sup>

An explanation given by Leon Applebaum, one judge from the panel which awarded Patterson this prize,<sup>130</sup> claimed that in this work the artist expressed the “gentler natural aspects of the coastal Pacific Northwest,” citing the filtered morning light and the feeling of the region’s flowering that he identified in the scene. Another version of the same room painted by Patterson had a much warmer, almost garish, palette in comparison to the prize-winning blue-tinged *Interior*: evidence of Patterson’s experiments in color to achieve the desired look. Applebaum concluded his comments with this observation:

The painting is, I feel, firmly founded in European and American painting traditions. It appears to be seen through the eye, and constructed through the intellect of a painter conversant with past and current directions; and finally, although not a radical departure from the treatment of such a subject as, let us say, by Matisse, it is originally conceived and personally carried out... and has something of a ‘new’ contemporaneousness in its human suggestion and subject. It seems, indeed to be the work of a highly skilled, long-informed craftsman.

In Applebaum’s glowing review of *Interior* he sums up that running theme in the life and career of Patterson: the artist’s ability—and overwhelming tendency—to look to his European past and his Northwest present for inspiration in both subject matter and style. Tellingly, the reference to Matisse, who drew from nature as Patterson did, underscored Patterson’s foot planted so unrelentingly in the past.

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<sup>129</sup> Margaret Harold, *Prize-Winning Oil Paintings and Why They Won the Prize* (Nashville: Allied Publications, Inc., 1960), 84. Harold also quotes Patterson as saying he had a life-long dream of “doing nothing but painting.”

<sup>130</sup> According to Harold (p. 85), the other judges included Max W. Sullivan of the Portland Art Museum, Wendell P. Brazeau from the University of Washington, Robert Feasley from Washington State University, and artist James Lee Hansen of Vancouver, Washington.

Though Patterson was a prominent figure in Seattle's art scene and many artists who studied at the University of Washington have spoken of Patterson's influence on the department, there appears to be no record of Patterson as the key figure emulated by any one individual or group that went on to make significant contributions to Northwest Art, the way that Tobey was followed by Graves or Isaacs, to a lesser extent, by Moseley or Brazeau.<sup>131</sup> Tobey left Seattle permanently in 1960 when he relocated to Switzerland; Isaacs passed away in 1964. Patterson was still creating work and exhibiting up until his death in 1966. The first to arrive in Seattle, perhaps fittingly, was the last to leave.

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<sup>131</sup> Isaacs sent them both to study under Ferdinand Léger.

## CHAPTER VI

## EPILOGUE

It was not Patterson's intention, as evidenced by the works he created, to be the most forward-thinking artist of his time or to even make dramatic changes to those outdated styles of modernism which he so readily adapted to his own painting style. He was far more concerned with satisfying his own interests. Patterson operated like a mirror turned back toward the trajectory of modern art throughout his lifetime. He turned this mirror on himself, too, as he repeated motifs and styles in his own works decades after they'd first appeared in earlier paintings.

However, Patterson himself saw in his own work a very distinctive break from the European traditions he so admired. On the occasion of the UW Faculty show held in 1953, Patterson (who at that time had been retired for five years but was still exhibiting regularly) wrote that: "With me, the breach between an alleged realism achieved in the past and that reality of the picture now sought widens continually and I seek means to relocate my experiences to this end, and I enjoy the trial and error of the process."<sup>132</sup> Though Patterson used the toolbox of "expendable conventions" as described by Greenberg to create his works, he achieved great success for it because it was something that Seattle wanted. It was fortuitous that he arrived in the city at just the moment when it

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<sup>132</sup> Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/6.

was ready to promote the arts on a larger scale. Asked in a 1960 interview about his feelings on Seattle's increasing interest in original artworks, Patterson replied "For one thing, it has produced more good artists. When I came here, there was a handful of good painters. Today I could gather together in Seattle at least a hundred good painters."<sup>133</sup>

The benefit of viewing Patterson's body of work in retrospective, as has been done in three exhibits<sup>134</sup> since his death, is that it allows the viewer to see the great span of his career on its own terms, without attempts at parallel comparisons with other artists. Patterson's is the type of oeuvre that is less interesting when viewed with a focus on only aesthetics or formal issues. His work requires knowledge of the human element to be fully appreciated. Viewing Patterson's naturalistic *Burros in Mexico*, painted during his trip to the country in 1934, next to his frenetic watercolor *Puyallup Fair* from 1940, requires that the viewer know of Patterson's interest in the people, places, and movements that shaped his, and others', understandings of modernism at the time to fully appreciate what he accomplished.

It is paradoxical that an artist who started out so modern and continued to work in the vocabulary of European modernism for his entire career could end up so conservative in the eyes of Greenbergian-influenced art history. After the second retrospective of Patterson's work, Deloris Tarzan Ament commented that "possibly the rottenest luck an artist can have is to be thought too avant-garde, then too conservative, to be counted as

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<sup>133</sup> Jo Ann Davis, "Ambrose Patterson: Artist" *The Seattle Times*, April 10, 1960, Patterson Papers, 2563-004 1/11.

<sup>134</sup> These retrospectives were held at the Foster/White Gallery, 1979; Carolyn Staley Fine Arts, 1989; and the Woodside/Braseth Gallery, 1993.

significant.”<sup>135</sup> However, Patterson is an example of the type of artist that is just as relevant to the discussion of modern art as Pollock, Tobey, and “real” modernists. His role in Northwest modernism is indicative of the myriad influences from which a regional identity emerges. Many of the figures also later remembered as modernists in twentieth century Seattle would have been given other titles to reflect their dualistic way of drawing from both the historical traditions in which they were trained while responding to the modern environment in which they are working had more appropriate titles been available. The artistic diversity present within Seattle at this time, which has often been overshadowed by the idea of a prevalent “Northwest School,” is best served when viewed in the context of each individual’s unique contribution.

It is more exciting that so many different artists were at work in the city and communicating about issues in art than if one concrete, identifiable style or movement had overtaken the rest at this time. In Patterson’s work there is a window into this larger complexity—one that accommodated artists of diverse interests and talents and rewarded those such as Patterson who were able to carve out a niche for the type of work they chose to produce. This is a desirable symptom of a regional art community such as Seattle: artists will bring different things to that region and reflect their experiences in wildly different ways. Though it may be easy to look back on his career and say that Patterson “missed” modernism and never progressed beyond his early avant-garde associations, it was this adherence to his European modern interests that assured his

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<sup>135</sup> Deloris Tarzan Ament, “Patterson’s work takes on timely new luster,” *The Seattle Times*, March 1, 1989.



success. Perhaps it is best to judge Patterson by the definition given in Greenberg's last essay on modernism, "Modern and Postmodern," from 1979:

Contrary to the common notion, Modernism or the avant-garde didn't make its entrance by breaking with the past. Far from it. Nor did it have such a thing as a program, nor has it really ever had one -- again, contrary to the common notion. Nor was it an affair of ideas or theories or ideology. It's been in the nature, rather, of an attitude and an orientation: an attitude and orientation to standards and levels: standards and levels of aesthetic quality in the first and also the last place. And where did the Modernists get their standards and levels from? From the past, that is, the best of the past. [...] Being modern was a means of living up to the past.<sup>136</sup>

In this article, Greenberg identified these Modernists (he specified the capital "M" as a means of distinguishing them historically) as being backward-looking: Manet had looked to Velazquez (and later, Goya), the French Impressionists had looked to Manet, and many of the key figures at the turn of the century had looked to "that half-impressionist"<sup>137</sup> Cézanne. Patterson had looked to all of these and more, and always on his own terms.

In the forty-four years since Patterson's death, his involvement in Seattle has been relegated to brief mentions in texts on Northwest art that espouse the work of the many other artists with whom he associated. It would be valuable to have a more complete record of his output during the nearly five decades he spent in Washington (and even more valuable to have that record assembled soon, before those who knew him personally are no longer available to contribute) so that his complete body of work could be better understood and his place within the diverse and increasingly modern art community of Seattle could be more thoroughly appreciated.

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<sup>136</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Late Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 27.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

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