

Tales of Hofmann

For the emerging community of painters in New York, the triumph of fascist rule in Europe—horrifying enough on every level—eventually began to have day-to-day immediacy. An exodus of painters, writers, poets, and free-thinkers of all stripes, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, began leaving a European continent that seemed increasingly to resemble a large-scale prison camp. New York City was a natural point of arrival for these refugees. And this is where a large contingent of European painters found refuge.

Hans Hofmann was one of those refugees. He was born in Germany in 1880 and moved to Paris in 1904. He had been personally acquainted with Matisse, Braque, and Picasso. Hofmann was a significant painter in his own right, but his main legacy became that of a legendary art teacher, conducting classes in New York City and at the bohemian enclave of Provincetown on Cape Cod.

Hofmann's teachings were undergirded by a strong theoretical base, notably his "push-pull" concept. The principle he taught emphasized the canvass's flatness—one of Abstract Expressionism's conceptual pillars—and put a premium on creating movement and depth by means of contrasting forms, textures, and colors. Each color, Hofmann postulated, should be answered by a counterforce. A change in one color on the canvas generated a change in the other colors.

Hofmann's theories were not synonymous with inflexible dogma. He gave his many students room to breathe, to find their individual voices. There was also a vital component of

spirituality and affirmation to his practice. He was unafraid to wax rhapsodic: “Your empty paper has been transformed by the simplest graphic means to a universe in action. This is real magic.”

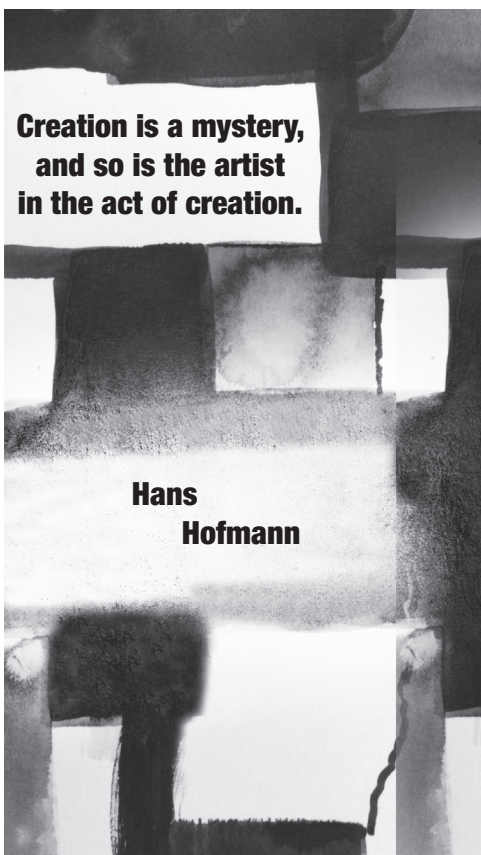
Hans Hofmann taught Helen Frankenthaler, Larry Rivers, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell—some of the biggest names in Abstract Expressionism. (Another student was Robert De Niro, Sr., the father of the legendary actor,

who had a long but obscure career as a painter.)

Hofmann had a dual role. He was renowned as a teacher of extraordinary prowess, and he himself was a forceful painter. Some of his works utilized a drip technique later made famous by Jackson Pollock. Not surprisingly, Hofmann was captivated by the Cape Cod seascape, rendering it in paint, ink, watercolor, and even crayon.

His paintings, like those of some other AbEx painters,

wander into the realm of Color Field, an offshoot of AbEx. Landscape, too, is an important element in the Hofmann oeuvre. Indeed, there is an almost dizzying eclecticism to his painting, as if he were trying to imbibe each and every painterly motif that was expressed via Abstract Expressionism. Hofmann’s painting output is generally accorded a second



tier in reviews of his influence; the teaching slot overshadows the painting slot, which is not quite fair.

Hofmann was an integral part of Abstract Expressionism but, to an extent, not of it. He was quite older than the others, distinctly foreign, and not inclined to hang out and drink with his fellow artists. His painting was certainly crafted with sophisticated AbEx motifs, but there was an exuberance to his work that is rare in the Abstract Expressionist oeuvre: a beautiful, lush symmetry to *The Golden Wall* (1961) and an almost carnivalesque buoyancy to *Shifting Planes* (1947). *Fragrance* (1956) manages to be exactly that—fragrant—as if one has wandered into a field of flowers or blossoms.

The playwright Tennessee Williams, another denizen of Provincetown, knew

Hofmann personally and loved his work. “Hans Hofmann paints,” Williams wrote, “as if he could look into those infinitesimal particles of violence that could split the earth like an orange. He shows the vitality of matter, its creation and its destruction, its angels of dark and of light.”

“We hear, smell, and touch space,” Hofmann declared, giving voice to the true sensory experience of crafting not just visual art, but writing, music, and all art forms.

World War II in Europe commenced in September 1939. Within a year, France was under Nazi occupation. The idea of creating a new, American school of painting, independent of Europe, took on entirely different connotations under the horrible circumstances of a world at war. Paris, the

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—Tennessee Williams

epicenter of the art world, was effectively shut down. American painters coalesced, more and more, into a distinct contingent. With Europe cut off, the Americans were *forced*, in a sense, to coalesce into that distinct contingent.

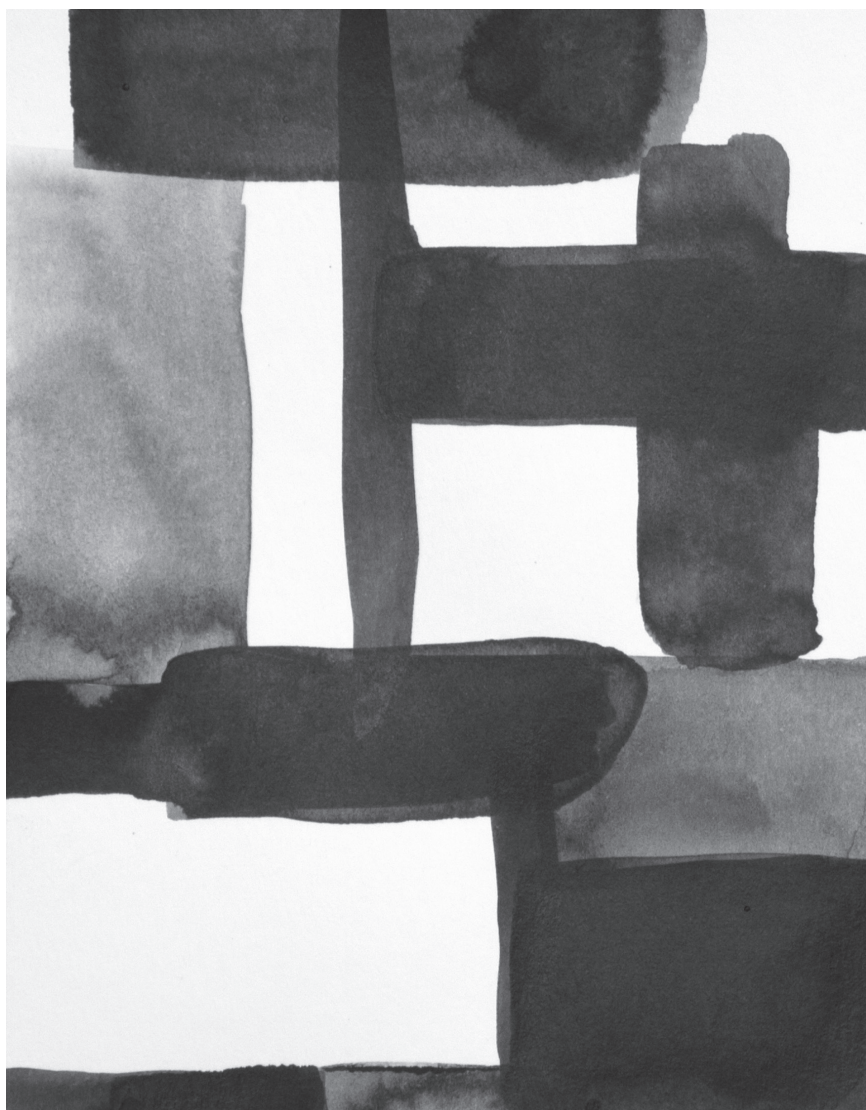
Among the influx of refugees arriving in New York was the flamboyant American expatriate Peggy Guggenheim, of the cultured, philanthropic Guggenheim family. Her father, Benjamin Guggenheim, had inherited the family mining fortune but perished aboard the *Titanic* in 1912. She was one of those unconventional, moneyed Americans who lived abroad, embracing the role of patron of the arts. In the Paris of the 1920s, she had presided over her own salon, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and the French writer, artist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau.

Guggenheim had been married to the German Surrealist painter Max Ernst and had an abiding interest in painting. Blessed with deep pockets, she took it upon herself in 1942—now in the haven of New York City—to open a small gallery, choosing a name both audacious and prophetic: Art of This Century. The gallery opened to a great deal of publicity, but the ride was not exactly smooth. During a visit by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, one of Guggenheim's friends imitated Mrs. Roosevelt's distinctive, upper-class falsetto—unaware that the first lady herself was still in proximity. "Mrs. Roosevelt, evidently amused by his behavior," Peggy Guggenheim related, "turned to him smiling, and bowed."

Guggenheim set to work exhibiting the iconoclastic painting talent that was taking shape during the 1940s: Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt. She was especially enamored of the distinctive work of Jackson Pollock, who was garnering attention both for his innovative art as well as for his unstable, alcohol-fueled behavior. Pollock, Peggy

Guggenheim grew to feel, was the greatest painter since Picasso. It was a view that was not, to say the least, universally shared.

As hyperbolic as that pronouncement may have sounded, Guggenheim was in the right ballpark. Jackson Pollock certainly became the most famous painter since Pablo Picasso and the first American painter to achieve true celebrity status (as well as notoriety). And with that celebrity and notoriety, Pollock yanked Abstract Expressionism into the limelight.



What is an artist?

“Well, I don’t know what an artist is—but I know what makes an artist: I do know that only the man equipped with creative instincts and a searching mind is destined to become an artist. As an artist I do know that only the highest exaltation of the soul will enable the artist to transform the deepest and the weightiest of his experiences into a new dimension of the spirit that is art.

**Creation is a mystery,
and so is the artist
in the act of creation.**

Every great work is a new reality—but it is the life’s work of an artist that creates a new dimension of the spirit. The life’s work of an artist is ‘the work of art...’ It includes the whole behavior of the man, his ethical standards, and his awareness of his creative responsibilities.

Talent is everywhere—it does not make the artist. It is often a handicap because it invites cleverness, which always chooses the easier side of life.”

—*Hans Hofmann, 1949*