

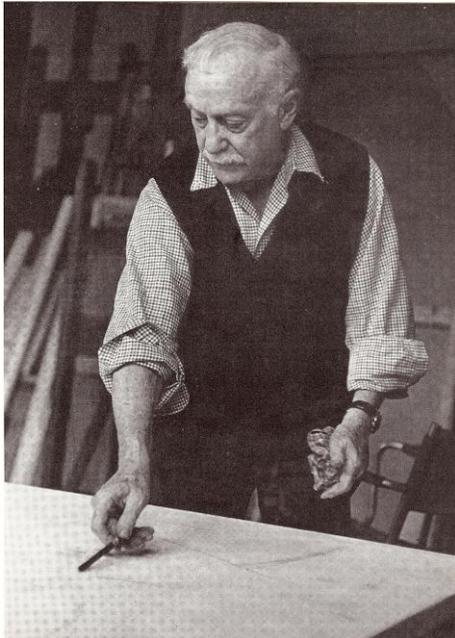
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Paul (Harry Paul) Burlin

(American Painter, 1886-1969)



Paul Burlin was born in New York in 1886. He received his early education in England before returning to New York at the age of twelve. He worked for a short time as an illustrator under Theodore Dreiser at *Delineator* magazine, where he was exposed to Progressivist philosophy and politics. He soon grew tired of commercial work and enrolled at the National Academy of Design. There, he received a formal education and refined his technical skills; though he later dropped out to pursue his artistic studies more informally with a group of fellow students. He was also a frequent visitor at Alfred Steiglitz's '291' gallery.

Burlin achieved a great deal of early artistic success. He visited the Southwest for the first time in 1910. Paintings from this visit were received warmly

in New York and exhibited in a 1911 exhibition. As a result of his early success, he was the youngest artist (at twenty-six years of age) to participate in the 1913 Armory Show – the revolutionary exhibition of avant-garde European work that can be credited with introducing modern art to the United States and stimulating the development of modernism in America. There, Burlin's work was exhibited alongside works by such artists as Picasso, Monet, Cézanne, and Duchamp.

Later that year, Burlin returned to the Southwest to live. With the images and ideas of the Armory Show still prominent in his mind, Burlin was impressed and moved by what he described as the 'primeval, erosive, forbidding character of the landscape'. In 1917, he met and married Natalie Curtis, a prominent ethnomusicologist specializing in the songs and chants of the Hopi whose 1907 *The Indians' Book* is still a classic study of music and poetry. Like many other modernists of his time, Burlin was fascinated by "primitive" art. While still in New York, Burlin was profoundly affected by the African tribal art that he saw at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, as well as the Marius de Zaya collection of African sculpture. His frequent visits to Stieglitz's gallery '291' also exposed him to Picasso's 'primitive' work. Once in

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the Southwest, Burlin became intensely interested in Native American art and culture. Visually, Burlin was drawn to the color and abstract geometry of Native American designs. Contemplating the abstract decoration of Indian pottery, he observed that “by contrast all other picture-making seemed like story telling trivia. These disturbing factors – none of which had anything to do with ‘representation’ were the vague beginnings of an esthetic credo...” Emotionally and intellectually, Burlin was influenced by the spirituality of the Southwestern Indian cultures, which inspired a preoccupation with symbols and myth that remained with him throughout his career. During his time in New Mexico, Burlin painted landscapes and portraits of Indians which varied from relatively conventional to increasingly expressionistic, with a strongly Fauvist-influenced color palette. At this point, Burlin’s work was ‘defined’ by ‘the contrast between early modern European art and the visual and spiritual influence of the Pueblo Indians plus the harsh Southwest landscape’ (Wedell 2007; 1).

Burlin’s time in New Mexico had a profound impact, not only on his own work, but on the development of modernism throughout the Southwest. According to University of New Mexico art historian Sharyn Udall, Burlin was the first Armory Show participant to reach New Mexico, and that fact, coupled with his confident handling of local subject matter, made a definite impression on newcomers [Marsden] Hartley and B.J.O. Nordfeldt...It is clear, moreover, that Burlin’s stature as the first modernist painter in New Mexico was unquestioned; his was the pivotal role in introducing fauve and expressionist modes to the art of New Mexico” (Udall 1984; 28).

Though living in New Mexico, Burlin maintained contact with his colleagues in New York and exhibited his work at New York’s Daniel Gallery. As a result of a 1916 visit to the Colorado Fuel and Oil Company in Pueblo, CO and through his exposure to the New York modern scene, Burlin also became familiar with the ‘machine aesthetic’ – the artistic possibilities of industrial scenes. Burlin’s experimentation with almost abstract depictions of industrial machinery with subtle anthropomorphic imagery can be seen in much of his work of this time period. A selection of these industrial works was shown in a 1919 exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to a violently negative critical reception.

For much of his life, Burlin felt a profound ambivalence about American art, admiring its vitality, energy, and freedom from the ‘aesthetic baggage’ of European art (Sandler 1961; 5), while remaining wary of what he considered its crudeness and ignorance of the past. In 1921, Burlin and Natalie moved to Paris as part of an exodus of expatriate artists responding to what Burlin called a ‘palsy of the spirit’ in America after World War I, exemplified by the hostile reaction to his abstract work and other modern art. In Paris, Burlin arrived at the geographical locus of modern art. He studied European abstract artists, working with the Cubist Albert Gleizes, and further developed some of the intellectual and symbolic elements that he had begun in the Southwest. Later that year, Natalie was killed in an automobile accident, setting Burlin ‘emotionally adrift’. He returned briefly to the Southwest, but found little comfort or ‘nourishment as an artist’ there. He continued to live in Paris until 1932, when he moved back to

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the United States in the midst of the Great Depression to work for the WPA. During this time, Burlin's work tended toward social-realism, experimenting with political and urban themes. Throughout the war, Burlin employed themes of war and persecution, drawing much of his inspiration from Picasso's war paintings.

Throughout the 1940s, Burlin's work became less dependent on subject matter and more and more preoccupied with the expressive possibilities of shape and color. During this time, he began to develop his characteristic style of merging abstract expressionistic forms with metaphysical subjects and ideas. By the 1950s, he had moved almost entirely into abstract expressionistic work. His work was increasingly focused on mythological themes and deeply influenced by more abstract artists, such as Kandinsky and Picasso. His work also became increasingly autobiographical. It was at this time that Burlin began to lose his eyesight, a theme that recurred prominently in his work for the rest of his life.

Burlin's paintings from the last decades of his life are filled with energy and movement, restlessness and cacophony, balanced with technical mastery and clarity of vision. They exhibit Burlin's unique combination of the symbols and spiritual themes that he discovered in the Southwest with the artistic style developed through his time in Europe. In these works, 'the world of natural appearances [is] completely swallowed up in the vehemence of the painting' (Sandler 1961; 8). According to Burlin, 'We live in an age of treacherous, harrowing notions of mutability, death and decay...All of the old realities have dissolved...all rigidities of form disappear and enter into a new metamorphosis'. This metamorphosis of form and reality is manifested in shape and color, which 'destroy visual reality and...shape themselves into a reality of their own'.

Burlin exhibited throughout his career, including the 1930 'Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans' exhibition and the 1944 'Art in Progress' show, both at New York's Museum of Modern Art. He was a member of the American Congress of Artists and was active in both the Provincetown Artists Colony and the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He was represented by several prestigious New York galleries during his lifetime, including Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery and the Grace Borgenicht Gallery. He taught at the Art Students League of New York, the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center, the University of Wyoming, Washington University at St. Louis, and the Art Institute of Chicago, among other institutions. A prominent retrospective of his work was sponsored by the American Federation of the Arts at the Philadelphia Art Alliance and the Whitney Museum in 1962, and his work is included in the collections of museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of New Mexico.

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