

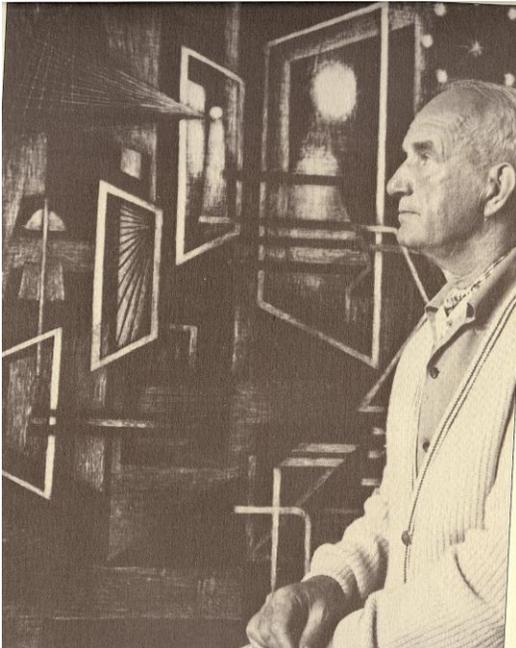
# PEYTON WRIGHT

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## Emil James Bisttram

(American Painter, 1895-1976)



Emil Bisttram was born in Hungary in 1895 and immigrated to America with his family in 1906. He began working with commercial art at a young age, first working as a lettering and cover designer for shops and catalogues before opening his own commercial art studio with three of his colleagues. While running his successful art studio, Bisttram pursued his study of fine art with night classes at the National Academy of Art and Design, the Cooper Union, Parson's School of Design and the Art Students League, where he studied under such well-known artists as Ivan Olinski, DeLeftwich Dodge, Howard Giles, and Leon Kroll. It was during this time that he first became acquainted with Jay Hambidge's artistic philosophy of Dynamic Symmetry - a methodology of proportion and design that influenced Bisttram's work throughout his career. In 1920, he began teaching at Parson's School of Design, where he remained until 1925. It was around this time that he was invited by the

Russian artist Nicholas Konstantin Roerich to visit his Master Institute of United Arts - Roerich's personal project to unify different art forms, such as music, dance, fine art, and drama. Roerich's mystical spirituality, interest in the occult, and philosophy of serving humanity through the arts were profound influences on Bisttram's own spiritual and philosophical development. Bisttram's fascination with mysticism and spirituality were also influenced by his discovery of Vassily Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art*.

Bisttram paid his first visit to Santa Fe in 1930. Shortly thereafter, he traveled to Mexico on a Guggenheim fellowship to study mural painting with Diego Rivera. In 1932, he settled in Taos. As a result of his new age philosophy and modern artistic ideas, Bisttram was received by Taos' community of traditional and regional artists with ambivalence. Nonetheless, Bisttram lost no time making his mark there. During his first year in Taos, he opened the Taos Art School, later known as the Bisttram School of Fine Art. He also founded Taos' first commercial art gallery, the Heptagon Gallery. In the next several years, Bisttram received several significant mural commissions, including one for the Taos Court House and another for the Justice Department building in Washington, D.C., for which he painted a heroic depiction of the liberation of women, a cause in which he believed strongly. Though Bisttram continued to paint representational

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works – particularly portraits and depictions of Native American ceremonies and dances which were strongly influenced by the Mexican muralists – his work became increasingly abstract. His development into abstraction was strongly influenced by Native American geometric designs and symbolism. Bisttram was particularly fascinated with the way Native American artists were able to depict the natural world using symbols.

In 1938, Emil Bisttram and his close friend, Raymond Jonson, co-founded the Transcendental Painting Group, a group of artists whose shared vision was to transcend material reality and advance the expression of spirituality in art through the creation of non-representational work. The Group included Agnes Pelton, Lauren Harris, Ed Garman, Robert Gribbroek, William Lumpkins, Florence Miller Pierce, Stuart Walker, and Horace Towner Pierce. Along with Pelton, Bisttram was particularly devoted to exploring spirituality through art. Bisttram believed that art had the potential to lead an individual to a transcendental experience by speaking in “an esoteric language more easily felt than explained” (Wiggins 1988; 9). Along with his mentors Kandinsky and Roerich, Bisttram never lost his conviction that an individual could discover transcendent truths about the universe through the practice of art.

Bisttram continued to be a prominent member of the Taos art community. In 1952, he helped to found the Taos Artists Association, along with artists such as Ernest Blumenschein and Joseph Fleck. He exhibited widely throughout his lifetime, including one-man exhibitions at the Dallas Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico Art Museum. His work is included in the collections of the Denver Art Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among other public and private collections.

*Sources and Further Reading:*

Wiggins, Walt. *The Transcendental Art of Emil Bisttram*. Ruidoso Downs, NM: Pintores Press, 1988.