

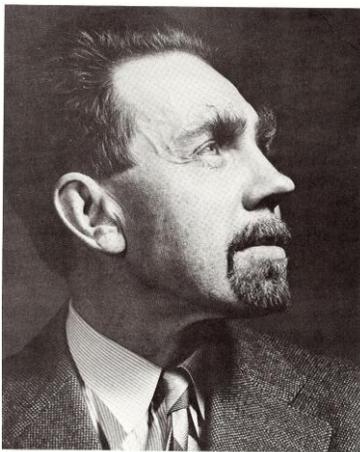
# PEYTON WRIGHT

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## Raymond Jonson

(American Painter, 1891-1982)



Born in Lucas County, Iowa, in 1891, Raymond Jonson received his early education in Portland, Oregon, where he was the first student to enroll at the Portland Museum Art School when it opened in 1909. In 1910, Jonson moved to Chicago to begin his formal art education at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. There, he studied under B.J.O. Nordfeldt, whose work and teaching had a profound effect on Jonson's artistic and intellectual development. He went on to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. Though Jonson moved to Chicago with the intention to pursue art commercially, he soon renounced commercial endeavors and devoted himself fully to the spiritual and philosophical possibilities of artistic expression. When the 1913 Armory Show came to Chicago, Jonson was fascinated with the new trends and ideas in modern art that he saw exhibited there. His interest in modernism was further

heightened by his discovery of Kandinsky's *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* in 1921.

After leaving the Art Institute, Jonson worked for several years at the Chicago Little Theater as a set and lighting designer. He spent two summers, in 1919 and 1920, at the MacDowell Art colony. In 1922, he paid his first extended visit to Santa Fe where, like so many of his modernist colleagues, he was profoundly influenced by the shapes and colors of the Southwestern desert landscape. He settled in Santa Fe permanently in 1924. Throughout the 1920's and 1930's, Jonson exhibited regularly in New York and Chicago. In 1934, he began teaching at the University of New Mexico, where he remained until 1954.

Throughout his life, Jonson was a powerful force for the development of modernism in the Southwest. According to Ed Garman, Jonson was never simply interested in his own work, but was always devoted to the development and preservation of art as a benefit to the entire community of his friends, colleagues, and students. At the University, he taught and influenced such prominent artists as Richard Diebenkorn and Agnes Martin. In 1938, along with Emil Bistram, he 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

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Towner Pierce. Jonson was also constantly devoted to exhibiting modern work and sharing it with the community. From 1927-1931, Jonson oversaw the creation of a “Modern Wing” at the Museum of New Mexico. In 1950, he founded the Jonson Gallery at UNM – the only space in the southwest where abstract and non-representational work was being exhibited at that time. There, Jonson was able to support the careers of many young modern artists by providing them with a space for the first exhibitions.

Though Jonson did not begin his career as an abstract artist, he was always fascinated as much by the expressive possibilities of painting as by the representation of material reality. The majority of Jonson’s work throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s is influenced in some way by notions of composition, and combinations of colors than with the physical world. These works are a kind of ‘exaltation of landscapes’ (Garman 1976; 66) in which the natural world is infused with order and rhythmic unity. In the late 1920s, Jonson began to turn entirely to abstraction. After this point, Jonson’s goal was to create ‘pure abstractions’, in which his final paintings retain ‘no items of detail or fact taken from the physical components of the ‘inspiration’ of the work (Ibid; 76). In this way, he could be free of the constraints of subject matter and focus purely on the expressive possibilities of composition and color. To Jonson, the ultimate goal of painting, which he pursued throughout his career with rigorous, single-minded devotion, was to portray the sacred rather than the earthly. ‘Jonson did not believe the sacred to be ‘beyond all reach’ nor did he believe it to be ‘the hopeless quest.’ He believed that art is precisely the vehicle by which is expressed the otherwise inexpressible’ (Ibid; 106).

In 1938, Jonson’s work was profoundly impacted by his adoption of the airbrush. With the airbrush, Jonson found that he could create uniformity of surface, transparency of shapes, and smooth and subtle variations of color that had never been possible before. With the widespread availability of acrylic polymer paints in 1957, Jonson was able to free himself almost completely from technical considerations and devote himself whole-heartedly to the configurations of colors and shapes for which his later work is best known.

Jonson exhibited throughout his career in Chicago, New York, and New Mexico. His work is included in the public collections of such museums as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of New Mexico.

The permanent collection of Jonson’s works can be viewed at The Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, 1909 Las Lomas, NE, Albuquerque, NM 87131. (505) 277-4967

## Sources

Garman, Ed. *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.