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John Ferren

(American Painter, 1905-1970)

John Ferren was one of the few members of the American abstract artists to come to artistic maturity in Paris. A native of California, in 1924 Ferren went to work for a company that produced plaster sculpture.

He briefly attended art school in San Francisco. Later he served as an apprentice to a stonecutter. By 1929, Ferren had saved enough money to go to Europe, stopping first in New York where he saw the Gallatin Collection. He went to France and to Italy. In Saint-Tropez, he met Hans Hofmann, Vaclav Vytlacil, and other Hofmann students.

When Ferren stopped to visit them in Munich, he saw a Matisse exhibition, an experience that was instrumental in shifting his work from sculpture to painting. In Europe, Ferren did not pursue formal art studies, although he sat in on classes at the Sorbonne and attended informal drawing sessions at the Academie Ranson and the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere.

Instead, Ferren said, he "literally learned art around the cafe tables in Paris, knowing other artists and talking." After this initial year in Europe, Ferren returned to California. By 1931 he was again in Paris, where he lived for most of the next seven years. Surrounded by the Parisian avant-garde, Ferren wrestled with his own idiom. His diaries from these years indicate far-ranging explorations from a Hofmann-like concern for surface to the spiritual searches of Kandinsky and Mondrian.

Although Gallatin and Morris were the first Americans to buy his paintings, Ferren associated with members of the Abstraction-Creation group rather than with the American expatriate community. He married the daughter of a Spanish artist, Manuel Ortiz de Zarate. Through this union he met the circle of Parisian-Spanish painters that included Picasso, Miro, and Torres-Garcia. With Jean Helion, Ferren wrote manifestoes against Surrealism, although he remained friendly with Max Ernst and Andre Breton, and illustrated books by Surrealist poets.

In Paris, he met Pierre Matisse, who in 1936 hosted a show of Ferren's work at his New York gallery. Following his divorce in 1938, Ferren returned to the United States. He attended American Abstract Artist meetings, but felt little of the frustration that had prompted the organization's formation. After Ad Reinhardt used Ferren's name on a pamphlet passed out on the Museum of Modern Art picket line, Ferren broke from the group.

During World War II, Ferren served with the Office of War Information in the North African and European theaters. By this time, Ferren had reintroduced the figure into his paintings without giving up abstraction, and following the war he turned to Abstract Expressionism.

In moving from geometric abstraction to the academically based figure and still-life paintings he did after the war, and finally to the freely painted expressionist work of his later years, Ferren searched for a way to express moral truth. Throughout his life, he viewed painting as a means of seeking the reality behind appearance.

His early appreciation of Kandinsky and a fascination with Zen that dated from his youth helped define the way he thought about painting throughout his life. He called art the "great common denominator between knowledge and insight," and said it should explore the intuitive---the spiritual, mental, social or psychological forces of life.

Biography appropriated from Mark Borghi Fine Art Inc, via AskArt.com