

# PEYTON WRIGHT

237 East Palace Avenue  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

800 879-8898  
505 989-9888  
505 989-9889 Fax  
info@peytonwright.com

## Hans Burkhardt

(1904-1994)



An extremely prolific artist, Hans Burkhardt remained relatively silent in the Los Angeles art world, choosing to let his artworks express his feelings and thoughts. A forerunner of abstracted, expressionist painting, particularly amid the more conservative Los Angeles figurative painters in the late 1930s, Burkhardt nonetheless based his experimentation on a solid artistic foundation. The order and balance in Burkhardt's compositions derive from his training as a draughtsman and his belief in the importance of underpinning painting with strong drawing skills. Following the advice of his mentor, Arshile Gorky, who had often directed the young artist, "painting is not more than drawing with paint," Burkhardt always created sketches in pencil, pastel, or ink before beginning a canvas in oil. As a result, his compositions exhibit a strong sense of structure and design,

even in their abstraction.

Burkhardt drew motifs from nature, internalizing them and creating a highly personal, abstract realization of the scene or event. In a 1974 interview for the Archives of American Art, the artist explained that for him paintings evolve out of emotions and ideas – a process not unlike the Surrealist's conception of the genesis of creative thought. Burkhardt recognized associations to things and people in nature. In his canvases, objects became symbols (for example, two nails transformed into lovers under a moonlit sky.) The symbolic and expressive content of these motifs derives from the artist's deeply felt humanism and compassion.

Born in 1904, in Basel, Switzerland, Burkhardt grew up in an orphanage. In 1924 he wrote to his father, who had immigrated to the U.S., and that same year he immigrated to America, finding work in the furniture factory where his father was employed. During the evenings Burkhardt studied art at Cooper Union. After a year at Cooper Union, in 1928, Burkhardt left to attend the new Grand Central School of Art, where he met Arshile Gorky. At this time, Gorky only had four pupils, one of whom was Willem de Kooning. Burkhardt and his mentor Gorky formed a fast friendship and the two later shared a studio for almost a decade. To support himself and his

# PEYTON WRIGHT

237 East Palace Avenue  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

800 879-8898  
505 989-9888  
505 989-9889 Fax  
info@peytonwright.com

family during the lean Depression years, Burkhardt continued to work as a furniture finisher. After a nasty battle with his ex-wife, Burkhardt relocated to Southern California in 1937. There he worked for a defense plant during World War II and for MGM studios.

During this time, Burkhardt's thoughts focused heavily on the ongoing war and he created numerous anti-war paintings and works dealing with the horror of the concentration camps, which might have reminded Burkhardt of his time spent as youth in the city ward. Throughout his career, the artist's commitment to decrying the evils of war continued, with paintings devoted to the Korean War, Vietnam, and even 1991's Desert Storm. Frequently missiles and bombs, bloodied bodies, and ravaged landscapes referenced the "collateral damage" that results from war. Burkhardt's numerous anti-war paintings are among his most critically celebrated works. However, following the war, the artist's outlook changed, and a new optimism engendered paintings that visualized the "dream of one world."

These years also brought Burkhardt considerable acclaim. Despite the lack of a cohesive artistic community (the artist lamented the close knit art circle he left behind in New York), he became involved with several community arts organizations in California. One such group was Artist's Equity, an organization that gathered under the premise of uniting artists across the United States. He also came into contact with a group of transplanted surrealists, such as Man Ray, Knud Merrild, and Eugene Berman. These artists no doubt encouraged Burkhardt's expressive sensibilities. During this period, the artist began to gain commercial support. He received his first one-man exhibition in 1939 at the Stendahl Gallery in Los Angeles, an event that was followed by yearly solo shows at the Circle Gallery, Los Angeles from 1940-1945. In 1945, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art gave him a purchase award for his contribution to the museum's annual exhibition.

With the resources gleaned from years of working in and owning his own furniture manufacturing business, in 1948 Burkhardt left for Mexico for two years to paint. There, inspired by the poverty that abounded and the religious landscape of churches and graveyards, he created "body and soul" paintings. Burkhardt explained how he adopted motifs from the outside world and translated them into his personal expressive idiom: "I didn't want to paint the churches the way they were. I created my own churches in their style." (1)

Although Burkhardt never graduated from college, on the recommendation of his friend Frances de Erdely, he was asked to teach art classes at California State University at Long Beach in 1958. From then on Burkhardt made a significant impact on developing California artists. He held regular teaching positions at University of Southern California, University of California Los Angeles, Otis College of Art and Design, and California State University at Northridge, among others.

In the late 1960s, Burkhardt's paintings took on more built up surfaces, creating the effects of scarring and wounding. He also began to add man-made objects to his canvases, fragments from the outside world. Some of these works, which included embedded skulls, were eloquent assemblages that called for social and political reform. In the seventies and eighties he had several one man shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976-77 and at the

# PEYTON WRIGHT

237 East Palace Avenue  
Santa Fe, NM 87501

800 879-8898  
505 989-9888  
505 989-9889 Fax  
info@peytonwright.com

Portland Art Museum in Portland, Maine in 1985. After a long, fruitful career, Burkhardt died in Los Angeles in 1994.

Throughout his career, Burkhardt remained a curious hybrid – a representational abstract painter, a draughtsman, and a committed humanist. His work appears in the collections of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco; the British Museum, London; the Corcoran Gallery of Art; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; the Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Kunstmuseum, Basel; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; and the Portland Museum of Art, Oregon.

1. Interview with Hans Burkhardt Conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom at the Artist's home in Los Angeles, CA, November 25, 1974 (Smithsonian Archives of American Art).

© Copyright 2013 Hollis Taggart Galleries