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Ary Stillman

(1891-1967)

Ary Stillman (February 13, 1891 – January 28, 1967) was a representational and abstract Russian-American painter born in Hresk near Slutsk, Belarus. He excelled in art as a youth, and after graduating from school he was accepted into the Imperial School of Art in Vilna.

Stillman immigrated to the United States with his family after less than two years at the Imperial School, landing in Sioux City, Iowa at the age of 16. He worked in a local jewelry store to help his family pay the bills, but spent every moment he could painting. After a short stint at the Art Institute of Chicago, Ary once again was on the move, relocating to New York City in 1919 at the age of 28. In New York, he studied at the National Academy of Design (the predecessor of what is now the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts).

Ary once again moved in 1921, this time to Paris, where he lived and worked for 12 years. He soon earned a reputation on both sides of the Atlantic for his atmospheric landscapes, as well as his elegant portraits of women. Traveling to North Africa and Palestine, Stillman also created watercolor portraits of individuals from various cultures.

He experienced commercial and artistic success in Paris, including a one-man show at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune and regular exhibits at the Salon d'Automne, Salon des Echanges (1932), Salone National des Beaux-Arts and the Salon de Tulleries. Although Stillman was certainly exposed to abstract art as well as the beginnings of the surrealist movement in Paris, he did not immediately embrace these new ideas, responding instead to the impressionists' experiments with light and atmosphere. While his work had been largely objective until the early 1930s, a careful study of his early art reveals the roots of his later abstract work and shows his interest in the artistic arrangement of shapes to convey a subjective meaning.

Ary Stillman returned to New York in 1933 as a successful and well-known artist.He worked for the easel division of the WPA Federal Art Project and became a member of the American Artists' Congress. Among other galleries, from 1935-1937 Ary exhibited at the Guild Art Gallery owned and directed by Margaret Lefranc. He participated in numerous exhibitions, and his art was well received by the public and the press. His work during this time became more subjective (although still representational), as he became more concerned with his interpretation of the deeper inner content of his subject and less interested with its objective outer form.

In the 1940s he joined contemporaries such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock in becoming part of the New York School. Stillman focused on smaller works, particularly on paper, and his intaglio experiments with inkless pens, in which automatic white lines only appeared after impressing charcoal or pastels across the paper, led to his own interpretations of Abstract Expressionism.

During the early 1950s Ary had a one-person show every year at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in New York City, but by the mid-1950s - after becoming almost blind in one eye and losing his treasured Manhattan studio to city developers - Ary became depressed. He couldn't seem to find the right environment to help him out of his depression, trying Paris, Majorca and New York. He spent much of his time in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and in 1957 he relocated to Cuernavaca, Mexico, moving back and forth between there and Houston, Texas, until his death a decade later.

Ary Stillman died in 1967. Upon his death, the Stillman-Lack foundation was found, in accordance with his instructions, to preserve his work and make it available.

In 2010 Columbia University received from the Stillman-Lack Foundation a collection of art works by Stillman, making Columbia the largest international repository of his works. Of the ninety painting and drawings donated to the University, twenty-five have been allocated as gifts to graduating doctoral candidates in the Department of Art History and Archaeology who are recipients of a Stillman fellowship. The remaining sixty-five paintings, drawings, watercolors, and prints are part of the University art collection, housed in and stewarded by Art Properties, Avery Library.