

HANS HOFMANN, BERKELEY, AND NEW YORK

by Karl Kasten

Oil paint dries slowly, not by evaporation, but slowly, by oxidation beginning at the surface then finally forming a solid mass after some time.

Hans Hofmann taught me to paint with vigor, to use my arm as well as my hand, to use pigment as an expressive material, that is, to consider the manner in which color is applied—rapidly or slowly, in a thick or a thin impasto, etc. A painting reflecting Hofmann's concepts hangs in Gallery 18 in New York. It is quite large, 52 by 42 inches, the title is "Scepter." The New York painter, Norman Kanter, visiting my studio in Berkeley last year, saw this painting and invited me to show it in an exhibition at Gallery 18, which he had been asked to curate. I accepted with alacrity and told him the story of another painting, "Storm," similar in color and form to "Scepter" and completed the same year, 1960.

I had studied with Hofmann at his summer school in Provincetown under auspices of the "G.I. Bill" (a program for veterans of World War II). In 1961, I was invited to participate in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Hans Hofmann and His Students." I shipped "Storm." A week later, a call came from New York saying , "We regret that your painting cannot be hung because areas of the painting are not dry, please send another work." Then I sent "Scepter," it appeared to be totally dry. Again a call came telling me that it, too, had thick linear forms in which the skin was dry but could be broken and soft color underneath could be smeared. Both paintings were returned.

Hans Hofmann stands as fine artist and a great teacher, but no man stands alone. In his immediate past was Van Gogh with thick impasto painting, Gauguin with bright, abstract color, Cezanne, working with facets of color. There were the German expressionists– Beckman and Marc, the Viennese– Klimt and Kokoshka, the Bauhaus with Kandinsky and Klee. He gave up a promising career in engineering to study art in Munich and at 24 went to Paris for further study and became associated with Picasso, Matisse, and Braque and the colorists Sonia and Robert Delauney. With the outbreak of war in 1914, he was forced to leave and return to Munich. Due to a lung ailment, he was not drafted into the army and in 1915 established an art school which many veterans attended. His fame as a teacher of avant garde concepts spread, concepts of form which he had developed largely during his ten years in Paris. Americans went to Germany to study with him including Louise Nevelson, Cameron Booth, Vaclav Vytlacil, John Haley, and Worth Ryder.

Ryder was to play a major role in Hofmann's destiny. He had studied at the University of California in Berkeley, class of 1907. He left to study at the Art Students League in New York, then went on to Europe. He completed study with Hofmann in 1927 when he received an invitation to join the

art department at Berkeley. Three years later, he arranged for Hofmann's appointment to teach in the summer of 1930. That same year, Ryder was able to arrange for the appointment of two former Hofmann students to become regular faculty members, Margaret Peterson and John Haley. Erle Loran, who had studied with Cameron Booth in Minneapolis, came in 1936. Their work, influenced by Hofmann's concepts, formed what came to be known as the Berkeley School from 1930 to 1950.

Hofmann returned to teach again at Berkeley in the summer of 1931, then went to Los Angeles to teach at the Chouinard Art School. He decided with his wife, Maria, to remain in America. In 1933, he established his school in New York City which soon attracted students from around the country. The esteem in which he was held by the 1950s was reflected in the popular statement, "Most every painter who became a success in New York, either studied with Hofmann or their wives did."

Hofmann conducted a summer school in Provincetown where I studied with him in 1951. He was a large man, an easygoing person. When he learned that I had been a teaching assistant to Worth Ryder, he granted me special status and talked with me in confidence. He told me that in gratitude to Worth Ryder, who had initiated his coming to America in 1930, he and his wife planned to bequeath their entire estate to the University in Berkeley for the furtherance of art education. Fate had it that his wife pre-deceased him and he subsequently remarried, that plan was not to be realized. However, in honor of Ryder, in 1963, he made a gift of forty-five paintings and the sum of \$250,000, a fund that became the seed money for the construction of the University Art Museum, one of the finest in the country. In 1958, he gave up teaching and began to devote his full energies to painting. His theories are presented in a book of 90 pages, "The Search for the Real," which he wrote and was published in 1948. An excellent anthology, "Hans Hofmann," by Cynthia Goodman was published by the Whitney Museum in 1990.

The summer I spent at his school on Cape Cod was critical in my career. I learned to appreciate the meaning of his credo, "push-pull"; all areas of a composition should act in concert and present a unity. If one element of a composition, tended to "push" out of the picture plane, then another should "pull" it in. If one element is strident, like the intense red line in "Scepter," then another element, i.e., a color, shape, or texture, should hold it within the composition. He would expound on his theories in the morning sessions at the school which were devoted to drawing from the model in charcoal. All activity would stop when he entered the large studio and the students would follow him as he went from easel to easel giving critiques of each individual's drawing. To illustrate his points, he often would tear a drawing into rectangular pieces and reassemble them on the drawing board to explain "doss shifting." Another procedure involved his drawing a small picture plane on the student's work and show with arrows how form may have been made to move horizontally or vertically (these drawings are now collector's items). He would also use hand gestures to explain a point. He often said of my drawing "It needs more of ziss" moving his hands horizontally. The final day of class, he looked at my drawing and said, "It needs more of ziss" and moved his hands vertically!

After the late 1940s, more former Hofmann students, or New York artists showing his influence, were to join the Berkeley faculty- Glenn Wessels, Wilfred Zogbaum, Felix Ruvolo, and Sid Gordin. The department produced many artists who won distinction, among them were- Sam Francis, Elmer Bischoff, Ynez Johnston, Walter Askin, and Jay De Feo.