

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
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KENNETH MILLER ADAMS

(b. 1897 Topeka, Kansas – d. 1966 Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Kenneth M. Adams, the last and youngest member elected to the Taos Society of Artists before it was dissolved in 1927, came to New Mexico three years earlier. Adams first heard of the art colony at Taos while studying painting under Andrew Dasburg at the Art Students League in Woodstock, New York. Dasburg, with whom he studied during the summers of 1919 and 1920 was perhaps the greatest influence on Adams' style and development. It was Dasburg who introduced him to Cézanne and the inventions made by Picasso and the Cubists.

A Kansan by birth, Adams was trained initially by George M. Stone, A Topeka artist. Later he attended the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York. In 1921, he went to Europe for a two-year stay. He spent several months painting landscapes in the south of France. Some of these early scenes, no longer stretched or framed, were found in the Adams estate after his death. They had a muted color scheme, which he eventually abandoned in New Mexico, but there was a blocked-out sense of form in them that was a harbinger of his later development. These landscapes were exhibited in Kansas and Missouri after his return to the States in 1923. A year later, Adams followed Dasburg to Taos.

Adams struck out against the prevailing popular taste of his time when he was yet a young man. As a student of Dasburg, he tested the basic tenets of cubism. Some he found useful, such as the deliberate analysis of forms as basic under-structure. Like many Dasburg paintings of 1920-1930, Adams' work showed a bias toward realism, but not the kind of realism practiced by the older generation in Taos. His was a simplified and unadorned style, somewhat related to the works of the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, whom he admired. When he used distortion, it was undertaken for pictorial purposes rather than as an indication of inner-directed expressionism. Adams' representations are freed from false sentiment and have deliberate references to direct tactile values. Of his former student, Dasburg wrote, "At no time have I known him to sacrifice human content for an abstract pictorial system..."

Taos affected Adams' vision profoundly. More than the other pioneer artists, Adams responded to the Spanish people of the area. Indian figures and the northern New Mexico landscape also had its place in his work, however he was particularly inspired by the work ethic imbued in the Spanish culture. Their seasonal, rural rituals or working in the irrigation ditches, planting, harvesting, and plastering their adobe homes fascinated him. Adams portrayed them with monumentality. The Adams style matured in Taos. It was

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here that he wove his own combination of influences together with his taste and sensitivities, to create a mode in the middle ground between the academicism of the early Taos founders and the abstraction that stemmed from Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists.

Another element that distinguished Adams from the other Taos artists is a body of work reflecting his lifelong study of the nude. He was a devoted and patient practitioner of drawing from life. The drawings are quite varied, not only in media – pencil, watercolor, Conté, or charcoal – but also in purpose. In some he rendered form in line and value with classic, academic prowess. In others he reduced form to basic cubistic shapes, but not rigidly or by formula. Still others are portraits and some are featureless torsos. His preoccupation was the creation of form in space – not storytelling or visual descriptions of detail.

Adams began producing lithographs in 1932 at the suggestion of B.J.O. Nordfeldt. He liked the technique and won prizes for such work as Doña Ascensione (The print Club of Philadelphia, 1932), The Miner (Midwestern Artists' Exhibition, 1938) and others. Later in life, Adams took to painting the flowers from his garden. Adams' flower paintings are mature work and in them his mastery of color is clear. His color is brilliant and in some areas is laid down with transparency. There is a fully realized form and texture in the flowers and there is an elusive quality about them of delight. The vibrant, healthy bouquets enchanted both the painter and the gardener. The somber note usually felt in his human subjects missing from the florals.

Adams painted workers, ethnic portraits, nudes and florals, and it is apparent that he connected on different emotional levels with each varying subject. Flowers gave him joy. Those who toiled gained his respect and it was his intellectual tendency to portray them as symbols of "The Worker." The nudes, over and over again, were solidly three-dimensional, in varied classic poses, they were often so sculptural one wonders that he was not a modeler in clay. However, he rarely reveals in his works the emotional response to his subjects as he does in his portraits of the Spanish villagers of Taos.

In 1938, a Carnegie grant brought Adams to the University of New Mexico as artist-in-residence, an association he continued until his retirement in 1963. In 1961 the National Academy of Design elected Adams to full membership as an Academician. Five years later, Kenneth Adams died of cancer in Albuquerque. Currently, his works are represented in many important collections, both private and public, including: the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center, Colorado; the IBM collection, New York; the Harwood Foundation, Taos and the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, to name a few.