

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
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B.J.O. NORDFELDT

(b.1878 Tullstorp (now Malmöhus), Sweden – d. 1955 Henderson, Texas)

Media: Oil; watercolor; etching; wood-block printing; lithography.

Education: Art Institute of Chicago; in Paris with Jean Paul Laurens at the Academie Julien; wood-block cutting and printing at the Oxford Extension College under Frank M. Fletcher in England.

Exhibitions: (partial list) One-man show of New Mexico themes, the Arts Club of Chicago, 1920; One-man show of etchings, wood-block prints, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1925; One-man show, Denver Art Museum, 1929; Whitney Museum, New York City, 1945; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1949; in the Twentieth Century Painters exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 1950.

Collections: (partial list) Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Ft. Worth; Anschutz Collection, Denver; Art Institute of Chicago; Biblioteque d'Art et d'Archeologie, Paris, France; British Museum, London, England; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Los Angeles County Museum; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe; National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; National Gallery, Sydney, Australia; Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.

Reference Material:

Coke, Van Deren, Nordfeldt the Painter. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1972.

Coke, Van Deren, Taos and Santa Fe The Artist's Environment 1882-1942. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1963.

Udall, Sharyn Rrohlfsen, Modernist Painting in New Mexico 1913-1935. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1984.

B.J.O. Nordfeldt has been the least publicized of the great American artists in the period of the emergence of modernism. He was recognized by critics as the equal of Marsden Hartley and John Marin, however, unlike these better-known artists, he rarely spent time in New York with art dealers and collectors. Consequently, as the critic Robert Coates wrote in 1956, Nordfeldt “never attained in his lifetime the recognition that was his due.”

Nordfeldt was born Bror Julius Olsson in 1878 in Tullstrop, Skåne in the south of

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Sweden. He later took his mother's maiden name, Nordfeldt, to avoid being confused with another painter (Julius Olsson) who had become well-known in Europe and America. Nordfeldt and his family emigrated to Chicago in 1891. One of ten children in a family of modest circumstances Bror worked several jobs while attending high school in Chicago, the most important being a job as a printer's devil and compositor for a Swedish newspaper. His employer at the newspaper noticed in Nordfeldt a natural ability as a sketch artist and advised him to enroll at the Art Institute of Chicago. While studying at the Art Institute, Nordfeldt's exceptional talents were recognized by one of his instructors who sponsored him on a trip to Paris in 1900 to further his studies in painting.

While in Paris he studied briefly at the Académie Julien. He left the school because like most art schools at the time, beginning classes were focused primarily on drawing, something in which Nordfeldt had already achieved a high degree of proficiency. In order to support himself, Nordfeldt set himself up as an art teacher. As an indication of his abilities at this time, he not only attracted students to his studio but his work was hung in Paris in the Salon des Artistes Français in 1901, which was quite an honor for a young, 23-year old artist from Chicago.

After less than a year, Nordfeldt left France and went to England to learn wood-block printing in the Japanese manner. At the time, few Americans had attempted Oriental wood-block printing. Artists often encountered great difficulty with this very technical and taxing method. Despite the difficulties involved, Nordfeldt, through the skilled use of his hands and an innate sensitivity to such a process, produced some splendid prints for which he received world-wide critical acclaim. Some would argue that his wood-block prints dating from 1900-1906 and 1915-1917 remain among his most important works. Their flatness, stylized line, and pure colors call attention to the picture surface and to the decorative patterns formed by the composition.

Nordfeldt's career as an artist inevitably underwent a number of changes in the half century and more he was active. How could it be otherwise for an energetic artist whose life spanned the period from late Impressionism through the fertile years of Abstract Expressionism? Throughout these many years he was influenced by the varied environments he encountered: Sweden, Chicago, Paris, London and New Mexico, and by a variety of masters: Whistler first, then Cézanne, and later Vlaminck. Though inspired by these men he continually drew strength as an artist from his belief in himself and an inherent talent for handling paint and evolving strikingly simplified compositions.

In the first half of his life Nordfeldt's paintings did not receive the recognition they were accorded in the latter part of his career. In the first two decades of this century Nordfeldt was best known as a printmaker and exhibited both woodblocks and etchings to great

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acclaim. He was awarded the silver medal at the International Print Exhibition in Milan, 1906; the silver medal at the San Francisco World's Fair, 1915; the Logan medal at the Chicago Institute of Art, 1926; first prize at the international exhibition of prints at the Brooklyn Museum in 1927; and the Members' medal of the American Society of Etchers, 1928.

Of course Nordfeldt continued to paint during this period and his reputation grew steadily as a painter as well as a printmaker. In 1911 he carried out a number of important portrait commissions. Dated between 1911 and 1913, all show subjects posed at dramatic angles against richly textured, neutral backdrops in a manner that suggests, but does not mimic, Sargent or Whistler. Otherwise, his paintings were not selling, a fact which did not concern Nordfeldt because his prints provided him with a suitable income to support his painting. In 1914, upon returning to New York from a trip abroad with no more than ten dollars in his pocket, he only needed to visit his print dealers and the next day his pockets were bulging with thousands of dollars.

Between 1914 and 1917, Nordfeldt spent four eventful years mingling with the avant-garde writers and artists in New York and Provincetown. During the Provincetown years, Nordfeldt developed a more efficient color woodblock printing method and continued to paint in watercolor and oil. Cézannesque elements predominated, but from time to time other influences appeared. For example, in *Figures on Beach, Provincetown* (1916) Nordfeldt's handling of the nude is similar to the work of Maurice Sterne, who was also painting in Provincetown that summer.

In 1919, Nordfeldt decided to take a one week trip to Santa Fe, already a thriving artists' colony. Attracted to the crisp light, bold colors and magical landscapes, Nordfeldt remained in New Mexico for the next eighteen years. From 1923-1924 he executed an important series of etchings. His subjects were Penitent rituals, Spanish-Americans and a few landscapes. During this period, Nordfeldt's style changed in response to his new climate and environment. Etchings like the c.1925 *Ranchos de Taos* depended less on soft, Rembrandtesque shading than had the 1915 New York City works, concentrating instead on broad areas of sharply differentiated planes. They were among the last prints Nordfeldt made and many consider to be his best in that medium. By 1926, he had given up printmaking entirely in order to focus on what he saw as the greater challenges of painting, and this he deliberately turned his back on the medium which for most of his career had served as his main source of income.

Nordfeldt's first painting in New Mexico was a buffalo dance. This colorful canvas of a traditional Indian ceremonial dance was followed by many other paintings of the Pueblo people, as well as a substantial number of portraits, still-lives and pictures of Spanish-Americans. One of the best of Nordfeldt's Indian pictures, *Antelope Dance* (c.1920) was

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painted after he witnessed the dance at San Ildefonso Pueblo near Santa Fe. Such paintings as Antelope Dance and the 1928 Thunder Dance achieve their forceful visual impact through a sinuous repetition of line and form, with waves of generalized figures set rhythmically against bold, even harshly hued masses of rock and clouds that are given a weightiness and volume nearly equal to that of the craggy mesas below them.

In the 1930s, just before a trip to Paris, Nordfeldt's preference for landscapes began to give way to a growing attention to still-lives with a Cézannesque flavor. Although he would continue to work in both genres, as well as with figure studies, until his death in 1955, most of his still-lives date from the 1930s and cluster around the Paris trip. The still-lives from this period show everyday objects in a dim, unremarkable light. Table tops are tilted upward to offer each fruit or fish or loaf of bread as directly and completely as possible, at the expense of traditional perspective.

Two Depression-era paintings, Minneapolis in Snow, 1933-34, and Road Kansas, 1934 show a move toward a broader treatment than had been seen in his Paris still-lives and other works of only a few years before. In them, color is quieter, convincing space is subordinated to almost flat patterning, and subjects are in service more to structural considerations. Nordfeldt's work of the mid and late 1930s grew increasingly formalistic and expressionistic. "The period of the thirties seems to have been one of change, of frustrations, struggles and discouragement..." wrote Emily Nordfeldt (Nordfeldt's second wife) in a brief memoir.

Although Nordfeldt won considerable recognition through the years from critics and museum directors, his pictures were never popular with the public. Some years in Santa Fe Nordfeldt did not sell a single painting. "While his stark and unromantic style had a limited appeal, he would possibly have sold pictures if he had played the 'game'. His tendency was to shy away from exhibiting his work to tourists and he was completely disinterested in taking part in the social life of Santa Fe that often resulted in sales of paintings to visitors to the community." (Coke) He once said, "If I could and live, I would not exhibit... The mechanics of contemporary showing are too false..."

In 1937, Nordfeldt left Santa Fe, convinced that he had to move east where he could find a gallery and make suitable connections. He moved to the quiet town of Lambertville, NJ, an hour and a half from New York City. The late 1930s were a time of great productivity for Nordfeldt, with more than 50 paintings made between 1936 and early 1937. In a letter to Nordfeldt's wife dated 1937, Museum of Modern Art director Alfred Barr wrote, "I went to see your husband's paintings on Saturday afternoon and was delighted with what seems to me the progress of his work. He seems to have left the rather dry, tight style of several years ago for a very rich and fluent handling."

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Nordfeldt spent the remainder of his years in New Jersey in self-imposed isolation. In the midst of his most intense artistic self-evaluation, he wrote to a friend in 1943 that he had “gone into silence.” During those quiet years, he continued to communicate through his canvases in his annual one-man shows in New York.

Unlike many artists, Nordfeldt continued to grow in inventiveness as he progressed in years. His late pictures are generally bright in color and increasingly abstract in form. During this time, he largely dispensed with the finer points of pictorial grammar while rephrasing the elements that make up his simple subjects. While his subjects did not change very much from what he had painted for half a century, they took on a new and deeper emotional quality. In the final ten years of his life, Nordfeldt developed a style in which he pulled from nature recognizable elements that could be modified to evoke a sense of mystery. In the deceptively simple canvas *Crows* (1952) he transformed birds into mysterious beings without their becoming sentimental or grotesque. He made of physical reality paintings that were classically ordered and often beautifully poetic. Even after he reached seventy-five, his indomitable spirit and active creative imagination continued to produce work of the highest level, until the time of his death in 1955. Nordfeldt died of a heart attack at the age of 77 in Henderson, Texas while returning home from a painting excursion in Mexico.

In 1956, examples of Nordfeldt’s semi-abstract oils and early prints were shown in a large memorial exhibition in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which honored Nordfeldt as one of five major American artists who had died in the previous decade.