

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
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RAYMOND JONSON

b. 1891 Chariton, Iowa – d. 1982 Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Media: Oil; tempera; watercolor; polymer; etching; lithography.

Education: Chicago Academy of Fine Arts with BJO Nordfeldt; Art Institute of Chicago.

Exhibitions: (partial list) Art Institute of Chicago 1915; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, 1918, 1924 (one-man); National Academy of Design, New York, 1920; One-man exhibition at Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1922; Los Angeles County Museum, 1928, 1945; One-man exhibition, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, 1928; Denver Art Museum, 1936; Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1940; Cincinnati Art Museum, 1945; Philadelphia Art Alliance, 1946; Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1957; Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, TX, 1963; San Francisco Museum of Art, 1967.

Collections: (partial list) Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas; Arizona State University Art Collections, Tempe; Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; Los Angeles County Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe; Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Roswell Museum, New Mexico; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA; Vanderpoel Memorial Collection, Chicago.

Murals: The University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque; Eastern New Mexico University, Portales.

Selected Bibliography:

Garman, Ed, The Art of Raymond Jonson. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1976.

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

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

In the late 1920's, the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe set aside a special exhibition alcove for a group of painters who were locally called "The Modernists." Painter Raymond Jonson was among this group. A man who remained true to his singular artistic vision, Jonson has been called "A man of great industry and curiosity [who] has chosen an artistic path unique in New Mexico." (Van Deren Coke). One art critic wrote of him, "He has been a one-man task force for modern art isolated in New Mexico for

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more than forty years.” (Art News, 1960 Ed Garman, Jonson’s biographer and close friend wrote, “To those who know him only through his art, Raymond Jonson stands for a particular kind of painting. To those who know him as a person his name stands for a particular way of life, a life which has been satisfying to Jonson and meaningful to others as an example of single-minded devotion to an ideal.” The artist often referred to himself as an “evangelist” for modernist art in New Mexico and that “if our age leaves anything to posterity in art it will be the abstract.”

Jonson’s first extended stay in New Mexico took place in 1922, at the invitation of his poet friend, John Curtis Underwood. His spirit soared in this new environment, particularly struck by the grandeur of the mountains and the artistic possibilities he saw in the local landscape. He was pleased by the creative atmosphere of Santa Fe which seemed to him relatively contemporary in viewpoint. Two years later, at the age of thirty-three, he chose Santa Fe for his permanent residence.

Born in Iowa in 1891, Jonson grew up in Portland, Oregon. As a teenager, Jonson studied art at the Portland Museum School, and when he finished high school, went to Chicago with money saved from delivering newspapers. He took his formal art training at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied under the great American painter B.J.O. Nordfeldt, and later at the Art Institute of Chicago. According to Jonson, “Nordfeldt’s enthusiasm and vital spirit of experimentation had a genuine spark of what was then contemporary. This he instilled in me through his work and conversation.” Upon completing his education, Jonson spent several years working as the graphic art director of the Chicago Little Theater, and four years of painting which included a summer in Peterborough, New Hampshire at the MacDowell Colony before he came to settle in Santa Fe. He remained in Santa Fe from 1924 until 1949, and his influence on young artists there, and later in his classes at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque was enormous.

Jonson’s interest in theatrical stage design and lighting led him to study the creative possibilities of greatly simplified settings for contemporary and classical drama. This abbreviated stylization can be seen in his paintings of New Mexico during the 1924-27 period. During this period he focused on abstraction based on natural forms and carefully graduated arrangements of colored planes. These pictures were realistic in the sense that certain physical conditions were suggested, but he used the jagged quality of the mountains to develop a style of brittle clarity and repetition of similar shapes to vitalize his canvases. These free interpretations of nature had a basis in the work of Cézanne and Picabia, whose works Jonson was exposed to at the abbreviated version of the Armory Show exhibited in Chicago. The mechanistic and geometric quality of Jonson’s early images reflect the formal components of the local landscape as it is reduced to a diagram of lava and sandstone molded into streamlined shapes.

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Beginning in 1927, Jonson moved in the direction of schematic abstractions. Not all of these were hard-edge or truly geometric, and some are related in spirit to a European tradition akin to the work being done in Germany at the Bauhaus. Throughout the twenties and into the thirties, nature was rarely absent from his paintings. Jonson often traveled to his favorite places in New Mexico to do on-the-spot sketches. He learned to impose on the scenes his feelings, deep responses, and interpretations of the things depicted. More and more of the shapes lost their local identities as they were transformed to the needs of the painting. His Earth Rhythms series records a variety of reactions to the New Mexico terrain.

The Universe series, begun in 1935, and the Cosmic Theme series, started in 1936 indicate Jonson's departure from nature and landscapes, and ultimately his release from landlocked concepts. Long earthbound, the artist leaps into the cosmos. The paintings are open, airy, mysterious. Jonson wrote: "In regard to Cosmic Theme No. Three, it is primarily structural and not in any way naturalistic or imitative ... In regards to space the intention has been to create a painting space and not a realistic one..." By the late thirties Jonson had achieved a considerable body of works to which he felt he could apply the work "absolute," in which the design concept had come to a complete realization. He felt that he had developed a visual organization which eliminated sensations related to any type of external, objective experience. "The hope has been to arrive at a state of pure feeling; to create through the spirit rather than the physical; to deal with shapes, forms and color in such a way that they appear to expose the spirit of man rather than his physical being..."

In 1938 he began to use the airbrush in his work. There is nothing else like his airbrush paintings in this period of American art, and they represent a unique contribution to painting because of the successful combination of a modern mechanical device and an extraordinarily inventive imagination. The major benefit for Jonson was the sense of release, the new freedom which the airbrush provided. Using this method Jonson presented a uniform surface onto which he would add dimensions by his use of startling color juxtapositions. Often, optical illusion was Jonson's intention and his works stand out as among the best paintings in this vein. An intuitive painter, Jonson skillfully manipulated his elemental means in such a way to absorb the spectator. "Jonson narrows the gap between pure design and a highly refined purist aesthetic." (Van Deren Coke)

In 1957 a fully coordinated, stabilized, and complete line of acrylic polymer paints became available to artists. Their versatility, flexibility, rapid drying and permanence soon gained Jonson's enthusiastic acceptance. Watercolor and tempera were dropped immediately, and no oils were painted after 1960. Other than three lithographs in 1965, Jonson's entire subsequent production were in acrylics. If ever an artist found his true

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medium, Jonson did when he turned to the acrylic polymers. Completely free from technical worries and in full control of the medium, he could invent shapes in seemingly inexhaustible varieties, be as elaborate or austere as he wished, and revel in color from the mildest tonality to a crashing brilliance. The significant direction and final effects of Jonson's acrylic paintings is away from the intimate and introspective look of many of the earlier works. In contrast, due to a shift in the scale and a new attitude toward the use of his materials, these works achieve a monumental quality.

It is difficult to attribute any singular qualities to the vast and prodigious body of work Jonson left behind. Certain words come to mind that can be used to describe both the man and his canvases: design, spirit, simplicity, rhythm, luminosity. In his final years, Jonson proclaimed, "My life has been painting and painting has been my life." Indeed his works have become a symbol of unity and order that express what the artist made of his life both in body and spirit. Perhaps Ed Garman described Jonson's works best when he speaks of them in relation to music: "The paintings themselves have a singing quality about them, a subtle sound, a pitch, a tonal mood that is characteristic even in the most brilliant contrasts, the strongest arrangements of line and shape, space and mass. There is a glowing freshness and a poise; a peace-giving serenity that is musically on rest."