

## ***WILLARD NASH***

(b. 1898 Philadelphia, PA - d. 1943 Los Angeles, CA)

**Media:** Oil; watercolor; gouache; conté crayon; charcoal; lithography; etching.

**Exhibitions:** (selected) Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe 1921; Biennial Exhibition of American Painting, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1932, 1934; “Abstract Art in America” exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art, New York 1935; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center 1938; Los Angeles County Museum 1939; Los Angeles Art Association 1941.

**Collections:** (selected) Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.; Denver Museum, CO; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe; The San Francisco Museum of Art, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### **Reference:**

Nestor, Sarah and Robertson, Edna, *Artists of the Canyons and Caminos, Santa Fe, The Early Years*. Santa Fe, NM: Peregrine Smith, Inc. 1976.

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

“Willard Nash, Painter.” Santa Fean Magazine, October 1981.

During his lifetime, admirers of **Willard Nash** frequently referred to him as “the American Cézanne”. Like the French Post-Impressionist Cézanne, Nash created form with color and did wonderful work with shadows. Prior to his arrival in New Mexico, Nash painted in a formal, academic style learned while studying at the Detroit School of Fine Arts. However, under the tutelage of Andrew Dasburg, a fellow Santa Fe artist and frequent painting companion, Nash learned the principals of Cézanne’s pictorial structure including the use of contour line as a form of dynamic expression. Critics throughout the country recognized Nash's superb color sense. Interestingly, in 1931 famed Mexican artist Diego Rivera hailed Nash as one of the six greatest painters of the United States.

Nash initially visited Santa Fe in 1920 to sketch and research color for a mural commission in Detroit. When he completed the mural in 1921, Nash returned to Santa Fe. Here he would live and work for the next fifteen years. By the end of Nash’s first year in Santa Fe, a greater brilliance and feeling for luminous color began to characterize his canvasses and the classical construction methods of Cézanne became apparent in his work. Nash was only 22 years old at the time.

In 1921, Nash, along with fellow Santa Fe painters Jozef Bakos, Fremont Ellis, Will

Shuster and Walter Mruk formed *Los Cinco Pintores*, Santa Fe's first modernist art group. The five young painters, all under the age of thirty, considered themselves the radical young avant-garde artists of Santa Fe. In December 1921 the *Cincos* held their inaugural exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. Bold color became the unifying characteristic of their work. As one art critic noted "these men believe in color and are not afraid to use it. Upon entering the galleries, visitors are greeted with a great shout of color that's almost stimulating."

Tagged with the label "modernist" mainly for exhibition purposes, the *Cincos* actually painted in several genres and in a diverse array of styles. Critics stated that "Nash can hardly be classed as a modernist, yet he is not bound by academic or classical traditions, and there is a freshness about his work that is very pleasing." (El Palacio, September 1921). The only one of the group who had a patron from the East, Nash received a check every month while he painted in Santa Fe. Not having to constantly scramble for money, Nash never faced the dilemma of having to paint a sellable work over painting his own vision. Nash could please himself, and did so by exploring formal problems, lightening his palette, and experimenting with Cézanne's handling of landscape. In the late 1920s critics often noted the presence of Picasso in Nash's works; especially prominent in his watercolor nudes. However, Cézanne remained the dominant influence in his works even as his paintings became predominantly abstract.

Nash received national critical acclaim for the works he exhibited in the two biennials of American Painting at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932 and 1934, as well as in the "Abstract Art in America" exhibit at the Whitney in 1935. In 1935 his productivity began to suffer and he left Santa Fe to teach in California. According to Nash, "I went into a self-imposed exile in Los Angeles. I always considered myself a Santa Fean, and my deepest hope is to some day pick up where I left off." He never did. While his contemporaries such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove, who exhibited with Nash at the Whitney, became famous American artists, Nash's brief and promising career was ended by tuberculosis at the age of 44. A memorial service was held for Nash at the Holy Faith Episcopal Church in Santa Fe and his ashes were spread over Sun Mountain, the rounded mountain close to Nash's Santa Fe home, which he and his fellow *Cinco* Pintores had painted so often.