

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
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WILL SHUSTER

(b. 1893 Philadelphia, PA – d. 1969 Santa Fe, NM)

Media: Oil; watercolor; etching; fresco murals

Education: Electrical engineering at the Drexel Institute Philadelphia PA; painting with J. William Server in Philadelphia.

Exhibitions: (partial list) Fine Arts Museum, Santa Fe 1921; Los Angeles County Museum 1923; “American Art Today” exhibition at New York World’s Fair 1939.

Collections: (partial list) Brooklyn Museum, New York; Delaware Art Center, Wilmington; Fine Arts Museum, Santa Fe; Newark Museum Association.

Murals: (partial list) “Voices of the Sipophe,” “Voices of the Water,” “Voices of the Sky,” “Voices of the Earth,” all completed in 1934 for the Fine Arts Museum, Santa Fe.

Reference Material:

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

Dispenza, Joseph and Turner, Louise, Will Shuster A Santa Fe Legend. Museum of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1989.

Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, Artists of 20th – Century New Mexico, The Museum of Fine Arts Collection. Museum of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1992.

Will Shuster arrived in Santa Fe on February 29, 1920 from his childhood home of Philadelphia. Unlike many artists who came to New Mexico during that time, Shuster did not come out of a sense of artistic conscious but rather for the fine climate. While serving in the first World War, Shuster was exposed to a toxic mustard gas that caused him to suffer from pulmonary tuberculosis. His doctor gave him the option of either remaining in the East and perhaps living for one more year, or moving to a high, dry climate in the West where he had a good chance of dying of snake bite, old age or bad whiskey. Shuster opted for the west.

Upon arrival, Shuster and his wife found lodging at a boarding house on the corner of San Francisco and Jefferson Streets, and there over the next few weeks, they met a string of artists, writers, and refugees from the East like themselves. One of them was the

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famous Ashcan School painter John Sloan. Over the poker table at the boarding house Sloan and Shuster began a warm friendship that would last more than thirty years.

Shuster explored painting while studying under J. William Server before the War, however, it was John Sloan who encouraged Shuster to become serious about painting. Although Shuster was never formally a student of Sloan's, he was a keen observer and considered Sloan his mentor. Many of Shuster's more highly-regarded works are clearly informed by Sloan's lively realist style. As Sloan's prodigy, he developed into a commendable etcher and his oils represent a carefully groomed talent for animated brush work akin to that of this mentor.

The year following his arrival to Santa Fe was a busy one for Will Shuster. He progressed through pencil and charcoal sketches into painting and back into drawing, capturing charming scenes from his life and stunning portraits in oil. By the end of the summer he had accumulated dozens of good canvases to show. In the fall of 1921 Shuster along with Jozef Bakos, Fremont Ellis, Willard Nash and Walter Mruk, founded Los Cinco Pintores, Santa Fe's first modernist art group. The five young painters, all under thirty, considered themselves the radical young avant-garde artists of Santa Fe. In December of 1921, Los Cinco Pintores held their inaugural exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. In what was characteristic of their work, an art critic noted that "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."

Although tagged with the label "modernist" (mostly for exhibition purposes), it is clearly evident that Shuster never seriously accepted the modernist idiom into his work. Perhaps he flirted briefly with expressionism or decorative abstraction, as in *The Eagle Dance*, which Shuster painted in 1922 as part of a series of flat abstract pictures of Indian subjects. The series was particularly admired by his fellow Cincos for their style of representation. However, rather than continuing to speculate upon the artistic possibilities of this direction in painting, he returned to a romantic, realist vein in which there frequently appeared a muddy black patina, as though the surfaces were mellowed by age.

In Shuster's fifty year career as an artist, he drew heavily upon local customs and ceremonies as subjects for his art, so it seems only fitting that he played a part in creating one of Santa Fe's most popular rituals. Perhaps the most well-loved and well-known Shuster creation is *Zozobra*, the giant, 20 ft. paper puppet of Old Man Gloom, whose annual burning signifies the exoneration of last year's sorrows and the beginning of hope, celebration and Fiestas. Originally created by Shuster in 1926, *Zozobra* has become one of the symbols of Santa Fe and a part of the colorful legacy that Will Shuster created as "a Santa Fe legend."

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