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HANS HOFMANN - HIS LIFE AND WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Hans Hofmann is usually not regarded as one of the most important members of the Abstract Expressionist movement. His name is not as familiar to the student as, say, Pollock or Rothko. Nevertheless, he was a central figure in the evolution of the Abstract Expressionist movement. His career as one of the most influential teachers of art of his time in America tends to overshadow his contribution as a painter. While it is true that the demands of teaching left him little time to paint, and so effected his productivity, he did manage to produce a substantial body of work over the years. The late paintings, which were done after he gave up teaching in the fifties, are among his finest works, and it is these works by which he is best remembered.

In both his painting and his aesthetic theories, Hofmann constantly sought to experiment with materials and ways of thinking about painting. The diversity and wide scope of his interests and his ability to utilize a broad variety of ideas through teaching, writing and painting, made him one of the most interesting and innovative figures of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

The following essay deals mainly with the paintings. Although it also includes biographical details, and details about the schools which he founded, it is primarily an attempt to trace influences on his work, and the development of these throughout his career as a painter.

EARLY LIFE

Hans Hofmann was born in Weissenberg, Germany in 1880. The Hofmann family moved to Munich six years later. The young Hans Hofmann developed an early interest in science and music; he was also interested in Rembrandt and Rubens, whose work he saw in Munich galleries. In 1898 Hofmann left his job in the Department of Public Works to enrol in the Moritz Heymann Art School in Munich. Munich was at this time a centre of artistic activity in Germany, and was host to native talents like Lovis Corinth and international names such as Kandinsky. Munich galleries exhibited French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works. Through the Art School and the galleries Hofmann became acquainted with a variety of styles and familiarized himself with the main European art movements. Some of the early works, such as his portrait of his wife, Miz, done in 1901, were executed in the School of Munich style of portraiture. Other works done during this period were in an Impressionistic mode. Even at this early stage in his career as a painter Hofmann was showing a willingness to experiment with new ideas and try out new approaches to painting. Few of his early paintings survived: only two 'Munich' paintings were brought to America by Hofmann, the 'Portrait of the Artist's Wife'(1901), and a double-sided 'Self-Portrait' and 'Still-Life'(1902), both of which were done in oils. Many of the early works were done on board, rather than canvas (although in the forties Hofmann began to use canvas for all his paintings).

Hofmann was encouraged by one of his teachers, Willi Schwarz, to experiment with Impressionist techniques. Schwarz also introduced Hofmann to Phillip Freudenberg, son of a wealthy businessman who became Hofmann's patron and provided the financial support which enabled Hofmann to go to Paris.

Hofmann went to Paris in 1904, where he lived until 1914. He continued his studies in Paris at the Ecole de la Grand Chaumiere (which Matisse also attended at the same time), and at Colarossi's. Paris was at this time a major centre of artistic activity. Cezanne was a central influence on French painting; he was later to be hailed as the 'father' of Abstract painting. The Italian Futurist's experiments with methods of representing motion had created some interest in Paris, and Picasso and Braque's attempts to break up forms, which came to be known as Cubism, would be a major international influence on art theories. Hofmann, through the cafe society and through the sketching classes he attended was able to discuss art with other students, and had the opportunity to meet central figures such as Braque, Picasso, Matisse and Leger. He became a close friend of Robert Delauney, whose experiments with Cubist forms and Fauvist colour came to be known as Orphic Cubism. Delauney possibly was the first to introduce Hofmann to Cubist theories. Through his meetings with various artists working in Paris, and no doubt through seeing contemporary works exhibited in

Paris at this time, Hofmann became particularly interested in Cubism and Fauvism. He began to make use of some of the new ideas he discovered in Paris in his own work. The influence of Fauvist colour in his earliest post-Paris pieces is evident, as is the use of Cubist structure of forms and planes. An untitled drawing in ink and collage of 1930, with its Cubist analysis of planes and non-static viewpoint (the subject, a head, is seen in front and in profile view simultaneously) is one of Hofmann's Cubist-orientated works (fig.1.). Cubism was an influence earlier in his work, however, when he attempted to combine Cubist structure with high key, Fauvist colour. Unfortunately,few works by Hofmann which were done in Paris survived because he did not return to Paris when war broke out (he was in Germany at the time).

Perhaps because of his stay in Paris during such an exciting period in terms of art developments he remained much more interested in French Schools of painting than in the more somber styles of his native Germany. The more exhuberant and experimental elements of French Schools seemed to suit Hofmann's temperament better. He was later to express the importance of his stay in Paris, saying that;

"France has fertilized the ideas of the whole world".[1]

There were, however, some German influences, which were sources for the formulation of some of Hofmann's aesthetic theories. He was interested in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theories on colour, had seen some of Kandinsky's work when that painter

was working in Germany, and he became familiar with Kandinsky's writings on art. He was particularly interested in Kandinsky's 'Concerning The Spiritual In Art'(1913). He also read Wilhelm Worringer's 'Abstraction And Empathy'(1908), and Adolf von Hildebrand's 'The Problem Of Form In Painting And Sculpture'(1893).

Even in his early years as a painter, Hofmann dealt with subjects in an exploratory and inventive manner. He began to utilize some of the Cubist's compositional devices and Fauvist colour in his own work, testing out how these ideas could work for him. From the earliest Impressionistic paintings, through the period of experimentation with Cubist form and Fauvist colour he began the process of experimentation which remained a vital element of his work throughout his life. Although few works remain from this period, later works from the thirties show the lasting influence of French styles. He would return again and again to these early influences. Hofmann tended to incorporate elements from a wide range of sources, which made up an increasingly larger repertoire of ideas which he could draw on when he needed to solve formal or structural problems in his work. His work retained the high-key, jubilant sense of colour reminiscent of Fauvism, and the formal elements of Cubism reappeared in the later work. The main effect, then, of his years in Paris was the laying down of the foundations on which he based his later theories, which were to combine ideas from a wide range of art movements. These ideas combined with, and qualified by Hofmann's own experience as a painter

would form the basis of his own theories. Some ideas which he formulated on the basis of his own experience were his 'push-and-pull' theory, and his related ideas on 'positive' and 'negative' spaces (which are discussed in the section dealing with his theories).

Hofmann's professional career was beginning. He exhibited work in several group shows in Germany, and in 1910 had his first one-man show in the Paul Cassirer Gallery in Berlin. In 1915 he opened his first art school in Schwabing, on the outskirts of Munich. When the war ended his school began to attract students from abroad, and the presence of American students helped to provide the contacts which would make it possible for him to get his first teaching job in America. Hofmann said that he opened the Munich School in an effort,

..."to clarify the then entirely new pictorial approach".[2]

Summer sessions of the school were held in the Alps, in Capri, St. Tropez and Ragusa, where students could explore the possibilities of landscape in their work. During the twenties his school expanded to accomodate more students. Hofmann had less and less time to paint, and began to make many drawings before commencing work on a painting, to work out the composition and form that the final piece would take. He worked on still-lifes, portraits and landscapes, and a few oil paintings were done during the twenties. One which survives shows Hofmann's interest in Cubist design and subject ('Green Bottle', 1921). Some of Hofmann's students in his first school included Louise Nevelson, Carl Holty and Ludwig Sander.

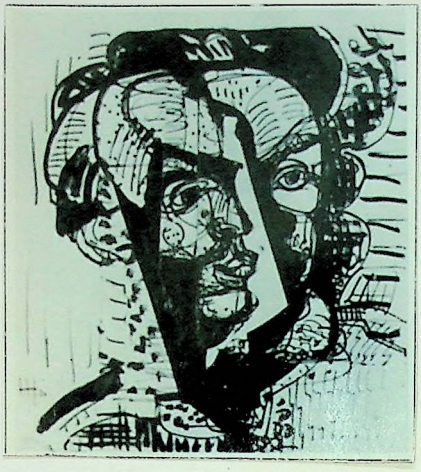

fig.1. 'Untitled'

Ink and collage on paper, 8x10⅜in.

fig.2. 'Apples'

Oil on canvas, 25x30in.

Hofmann first visited America in 1930, at the invitation of his former student, Worth Ryder, who asked him to teach a summer session at the University of California at Berkeley. Hofmann accepted the invitation and, due to the popularity of his first course at Berkeley, stayed on to teach an extra (six-week long) course. He returned to Germany that winter, but returned to California to teach again the next summer. Hofmann stayed in America and would become an American citizen in 1941.

footnotes

1 Cynthia Goodman, 'Hofmann' (New York, 1986)p.61.

2 Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York, 1986)p.12.

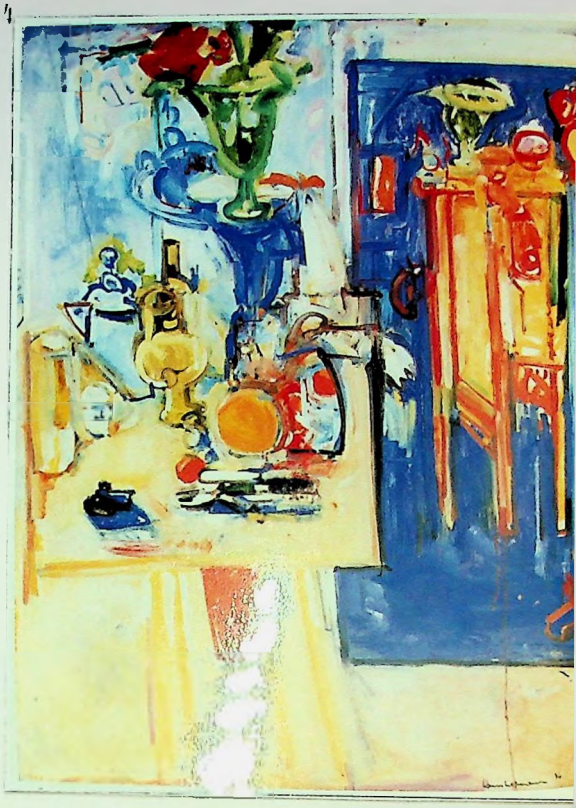

fig.3. 'Table with Teakettle, Green Vase, Red Flowers'
Oil on plywood, 54½x40⅝in.

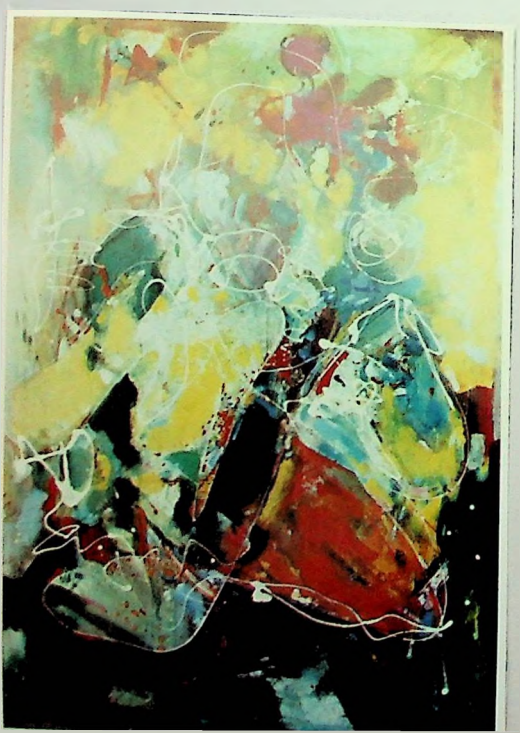

fig.4. 'Fantasia'
Oil, duco, and casein on plywood
51⅛x36⅝in.

THEORIES

In 1931, Hofmann completed his first version of ' Creation in Form and Colour: A Textbook for Instruction in Art'. A second version would be completed in 1934, and a third version in 1948. He found it useful to put his ideas down on paper, both in terms of communicating these ideas to his students, and in reaching a wider audience. The discipline needed to organize his theories on paper was also probably a useful exercise in terms of his own work ; no doubt he needed to write in order to clarify his ideas. With his duties as a teacher and his painting to consider, it took a considerable amount of self-discipline to find time to write. He wrote early in the morning before his classes started. Over the years he continued to refine and further qualify ideas expressed in 'Creation in Form and Colour..' He also wrote some essays for art publications and catalogues.

Influences on Hofmann's formal theories are varied in scope, and in different essays he referred to some of the painters who had the greatest influence on his thinking. Among these were Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Picasso and Cezanne. His stay in Paris, and his meetings with Picasso which had acquainted him with Cubist theories were central to his own theories about compositional structure. Cezanne's use of colour was of particular interest to Hofmann, who often quoted Cezanne,

..."when colour is fullest, form is richest" [1]

In 1950 Hofmann commented on Cezanne's contribution to painting,

> "Cezanne's revolutionary principles of composition brought nature as experience again under pictorial control. After a lifelong struggle Cezanne made the following aesthetical statement: 'All lies in the contrast'. This fascinating simple statement is indeed the birth of abstract art. From it have sprung Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Brancusi - in fact all of us. It meant to the artist - to give the most with the least - not the least with the most. It meant in creation to recognize the essential, and to separate it from the unessential and to create it with the least display of the means that serve as a medium of expression". [2]

Cezanne was obviously an important influence on a whole generation of painters, since he opened the way for the abstraction of forms, and was of interest to Hofmann, whose work often dealt with this problem of simplifying forms down to the essentials, of giving "the most with the least". The Cubist's theories had been an expansion on Cezanne's approach. The Cubist's break-up of forms into planes and use of multi-media and collage elements appealed to Hofmann, since he was always attempting to push his medium further and experiment with new ideas regarding composition and exploitation of his materials. Hofmann had also carefully studied Mondrian's essay 'Plastic and Pure Plastic Art' (1936), and was particularly interested in Mondrian's theories about composition, although he was less influenced by Mondrian's theories on colour. Kand-

insky's colour theories were of more interest to him, because they explored the psychological effects of colour and dealt with the spiritual aspects of the making of art.

In addition to combining theories from different sources, Synthetic Cubism, German Expressionism and Neo-Plasticism, he contributed ideas of his own, such as his theory of 'push-and-pull' and 'positive' and 'negative' space. His central theories are basically a combination of Cubist ideas and Fauvist colour. He determines structure mainly through colour (unlike the Cubists). In order to determine the structure of a composition through colour he also made use of forces of 'push-and-pull', illustrating it by using the example of the pressures operating inside and outside a balloon. His 'push-and-pull' theory derives from his view of space as a dynamic force. In 'Plastic Creation' (1932) he states that,

> ..."There are movements which swing into the depths of space, and there are movements that swing back out of the depths of space. Every movement in space releases a counter movement in space. Movement comes into the appearance primarily by means of a counter movement. Movement and counter movement produce tension, and tension produces rhythm".[3]

It is these movements and countermovements, in other words, spatial tensions, which produce the 'push-and-pull' phenomenon. He maintains that,

..."space is not only a static, inert thing, space is alive; space is dynamic. Space is imbued with movement: space vibrates and resounds and with it vibrates form to the rhythm of life".[4]

So, he sees space as a field of forces of contraction and expansion at work, with movement and counter movements resulting in tensions, due to the action of the forces of push-and-pull. It is these tensions which give a work its rhythm and vitality.

"The pictorial life as a pictorial reality results from the aggregate of two and three-dimensional tensions: a combination of the effect of simultaneous expansion and contraction with that of push-and-pull".[5]

Hofmann uses the plane as the main formal element in his painting, and the plane is subject to these forces of push-and-pull. In his essay 'The Search For The Real In The Visual Arts' (1948) he explains push-and-pull in depth. He states that push-and-pull forces work in a three-dimensional way, but do not destroy the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. Vertical or horizontal 'shifting' (his term) is important to the creation of push-and-pull forces, which means that planes move in the opposite direction to the stimulus received. The push-and-pull phenomenon also incorporates the notion of 'positive' and 'negative' spaces, which relate to the spaces both around and in objects in a composition. Positive and negative spaces are created by the opposition of planes to each other. His ideas on positive and negative spaces arise

out of the necessity to preserve the two-dimensionality of the picture plane, and relate to the Cubist conception of space. Hofmann says that,

..."We understand the 'vacancies' given us by nature - the unfulfilled space - as well as the objects to be actual volumes. So out of a feeling of depth, a sense of movement develops itself".[6]

So, the push-and-pull theory is related to positive and negative spaces on which a composition is built, and contributes to movement and rhythm within a work.

Colour is also a central element in his theories. Hofmann relates colour to form. His main essay on colour is 'The Colour Problem In Pure Painting - Its Creative Origin' (1955). In this essay Hofmann discusses the function of colour:

"In pure painting colour serves simultaneously a plastic and psychological purpose".[7]

'Pure' painting is that in which colour doesn't function as a tonal device to express volume in an illusionistic way, and which preserves the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. He goes on to discuss the related functions of colour and form:

"At all stages of the creative development, both colour and form develop, one through the other, into a reciprocal, compensatory relationship, in spite of the fact that each follows its own innate plastic laws".[8]

Hence, colour and form are dependent on each other to create structure.

In 'The Search For The Real In The Visual Arts' (1948), he refers to a range of painters of diverse traditions. Hofmann saw himself as being within a tradition of fine art, and uses the examples of Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Cezanne to illustrate his push-and-pull theory. He makes references to other painters with regard to his ideas about the role of the spiritual and metaphysical properties of art. One of his sources for these ideas on the spiritual in art is Kandinsky, whose essay 'On The Spiritual In Art' (1911) Hofmann was familiar with. Mondrian was also an influence on Hofmann, who, likewise was interested in breaking down forms into their simplest componants, and the influence of Mondrian can be seen in Hofmann's late 'Quantum' paintings. But it was Kandinsky's theories on the metaphysical and associative qualities of colour which were of particular interest to Hofmann, since they paralleled his own semi-mystical approach to the process of creating art. In 'The Search For The Real In The Visual Arts' Hofmann asserts that the spiritual is itself the vital ingredient in fine art, and distinguishes it from art of a lower order. So, Hofmann's theoretical approach is not as systematic as Mondrian's, whose writings, though of value to Hofmann, did not stress mystical qualities of art as much as Kandinsky's. Hofmann relies heavily on the notion of 'feeling into' a subject. An empathy with a subject is necessary in order to be able to capture a quality or essence of that subject on canvas. Hofmann

is concerned with the unseen 'realities' of a metaphysical nature which lie behind the physical properties of a subject. He regards these spiritual qualities as the underlying principles in the creation of an artwork. He maintains that the opposition of two physical facts

"creates the phenomenon of a higher order",[9]

and that the nature of this higher order is, in a sense, magic. He often rejects the use of a systematic formal approach in the creation of a work, making use of empathy or 'feeling into' the subject, using mental associations, subjective responses, and 'chance' or 'accidental' processes to arrive at a solution to the problem of representing a personal, spiritually motivated response to a particular subject.

His theories, though combining influences from various sources, work as a unit because they cohere into an interrelated set of ideas in which form, colour and subject matter are dependent on each other for meaning. What emerges strongest from his theories is the need for this empathy or 'feeling into' subject matter to be as important as the understanding of formal properties of a work, in order to create an artwork. Hofmann's knowledge of forms and functions of art is subjected to this principle of empathy. Formal devices are merely the means by which he creates a 'non-physical' effect, the tools by which he expresses his version of 'the real'.

In 'The Search For The Real In The Visual Arts',

he also discusses the use of colour to produce an emotional response. He relates the use of colour to his theory of empathy. He maintains that it is the presence of this spiritual element which distinguishes 'great' art from other art. He describes the medium as the physical carrier of the surreal, and asserts that the medium must somehow be elevated back into the realm of the surreal or metaphysical. He sees artistic creation as

> "the metamorphosis of the external physical aspects of a thing into a self- sustaining spiritual reality".[10]

He continues,

> "It is the multi- reflex of a particular thought with respect to an over- all idea that finally lifts an artistic expression into the realm of magic. In other words, it is the surreal content of the work that absorbs and overshadows the structure and the physical foundation. The spiritual quality dominates the material".[11]

Hofmann's ideas about the spiritual in art stem not only from Kandinsky's writings on the subject; they also have German sources, particularly Wilhelm Worringer, whose 'Abstraction And Empathy' Hofmann had studied, and are also related to the writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose theories Hofmann often quoted to his students.

The notion of the interdependence of forms is central to Hofmann's theories. He states this in his theory of push-and-pull forces where "movement and counter movement result in tension",[12] and in his ideas about structuring

a composition;

> "The relative meaning of two physical facts in an emotionally controlled relation always creates the phenomenon of a third fact of a higher order, just as two musical sounds, heard simultaneously, create the phenomenon of a third, fourth, or fifth. The nature of this higher third is non- physical. In a sense it is magic".[13]

These ideas show the influence of several art movements. The creation of this non- physical fact of a higher order shows the Surrealist slant to Hofmann's thinking, and parallels the Surrealist notion of using forms to create some kind of path to the unconscious mind. The analogy with music, which he often employs in his writings, is similar to Kandinsky's approach. Kandinsky's theories incorporated the idea of the relation of painting to music. An extract from Kandinsky's 'On The Spiritual In Art' shows the similarities in Kandinsky and Hofmann's thinking;

> "Form itself, even if completely abstract, resembling geometrical form, has its own inner sound, is a spiritual being possessing qualities that are identical with that form. A triangle...is one such being, with its own particular spiritual perfume. In conjuction with other forms, this perfume becomes differentiated, receiving additional nuances, but remaining in essence unchangeable, like the scent of a rose, which can

never be confused with that of a violet".[14]

Although the language is at times flowery (literally) it is clear how closely the two painter's ideas concerning the spiritual essence of art are aligned. Hofmann, like Kandinsky, stresses the non- transferable quality of some different art forms such as literature and the plastic arts; for example, he believed that when art becomes 'literary' it is transformed into a form of 'visual storytelling'.

Hofmann's spatial theories are based on Cubist aesthetics. He considers line as a further development of the plane, as a space divider, rather than something which in itself could create space. Likewise, the line created by edges of colour planes meeting creates colour intervals, and it is colour itself in this case which creates line. Like the Cubists he saw space as an arrangement of planes, and from this Cubist orientated conception of space developed his theory of positive and negative spaces, which interact to give a sense of movement and rhythm, and ultimately unity to a composition. He maintains that, in nature, space is always dynamic. He discusses these theories in his essay 'Plastic Creation' (1932), and also describes the means by which depth can be created while preserving the integrity of the picture plane. He says that depth can be created without resort to illusionistic devices. This problem is of central importance in Hofmann's own work as a painter, and is a constant factor in his writings. In 'Plastic Creation' he asserts that the

"form and space problem is identical with the essence of the picture plane".[15] He also stresses the interdependency of forms within a composition, and discusses the relationship of static and dynamic forms, existing in relation to each other, and defined by each other. He saw nature as "a unity out of opposites"[16] and regarded the laws operating in the production of a painting as similar to the laws operating in nature.

Colour is an important aspect of Hofmann's theories, and his main essay on the subject is 'Space Pictorially Realized Through The Intrinsic Faculty Of The Colours To Express Volume' (1951). In this essay he clarifies many of his theories on colour. He discusses colour intervals, which are created when edges of two sharp-edged colour forms meet. Colour planes are the fundamental unit of composition. Colour and form are interdependent. The relationship of colours to one another is also vital. Each colour has the power to influence the 'psychological meaning' of the colours around it.

He was also conscious of the relationship of colour to volume, and this was something he experimented with in his own work, particularly the late 'Quantum' paintings. He also related his use of colour to his views on the spiritual or mystical elements of painting, saying that in order for a painting to be successful, it should "light up from the inside".[17] Hofmann rejects the illusionistic method of modeling forms from light to dark, but perceives colour as vital to the formation of a composition.

footnotes

1 Cynthia Goodman, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.77.

2 ibid. p.110.

3 Hans Hofmann, 'Plastic Creation', cited in Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.38.

4 ibid.

5 Maurice Tuchman, 'The New York School - Abstract Expressionism In The 40's And 50's' (Greenwich, Connecticut,1965)p.83.

6 Hans Hofmann, 'Plastic Creation', cited in Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.38.

7 Hans Hofmann, 'The Colour Problem In Pure Painting - Its Creative Origin', cited in Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.46.

8 ibid.

9 Hans Hofmann, 'The Search For The Real In The Visual Arts', cited in Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.39.

10 ibid.

11 ibid.

12 ibid. p.40.

13 ibid. p.39.

14 Wassily Kandinsky, 'On The Spiritual In Art', cited in Kenneth C. Linsay and Peter Vergo, 'Kandinsky - Complete Writings On Art. Volume I' (London,1982)p.163.

15 Hans Hofmann, 'Plastic Creation', cited in Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.37.

16 ibid. p.36.

17 William C. Seitz, 'Abstract Expressionist Painting In America' (London,1983)p.69.

EARLY AMERICAN WORK

1931 marked Hofmann's first American exhibitions. He showed work at Berkeley (California) and in San Francisco. Works exhibited consisted mainly of drawings which were done at different locations around Europe while travelling with his students on summer sessions. Some Californian landscapes were also included. In 1960, in a letter to a friend, Hofmann commented on the influence of the Californian landscape on his colour, referring to "California's colourful saturated space",[1] and talked of the influence of California on his work, saying that his treatment of colour in a canvas he was working on

> ..."intended to suggest physical and spirited health as I have experienced it through my staying in California".[2]

The many drawings exhibited in the 1931 shows were an indication of Hofmann's need to prepare for a painting by first executing as many drawings as were necessary to establish a composition, and later on he continued to make several drawings before starting work on a canvas. Although Hofmann's drawings are competent, they are usually a working out of ideas for a painting, and it was during his busiest periods, when demands of teaching limited the time available to him to paint, that he produced most of his drawings and graphic works. It is possible to see in these drawings the compositional elements and arrangements of forms which appear in his canvases right through his work. The arrangements of horizontal and vertical planes, the rhythmical movements of space winding

through forms, the spatial patterns made by the positive and negative spaces are all elements which form the structure in his work. He never contradicts his own ideas about what is important to a vital composition in the work itself. The drawings show an awareness of the structure of space, and are good examples of his ideas about the tensions set up by forces of push-and-pull. His essay 'Creation In Form And Colour' was mainly built on his Fauvist and Cubist orientated ideas on colour and spatial relations, and even in this early work of the thirties it is already obvious that these are his main concerns in his own work.

In 1932 Hofmann was asked to join the Art Student's League as a faculty member, and this involved a move to New York. His courses, as with the Berkeley sessions, were well attended. Some students at this time included George Mc Neil, Burgoyne Diller, Lillian Kiesler, Mercedes Carles Matter, Irene Rice Pereira and Louise Nevelson. Hofmann was no doubt a welcome relief from the regionalism of some of the American teachers like Thomas Hart Benton. Hofmann was able to offer his students a first-hand knowledge of European Avant-Garde art, and was able to discuss in depth many of the ideas behind such movements as Cubism and Fauvism, in a more analytic and probing manner than any of the American artists who had not been to Europe and seen at first-hand artistic developments there. The Armory Show had helped to introduce European ideas into American art, although it was not really until the arrival

of European painters into New York during the war that any of the ideas behind the art began to be widely understood. Hofmann among others was instrumental in communicating these ideas to the painters, some of whom were to become the new generation of Abstract Expressionists. This new generation of American artists in the League were, for the most part, pulling away from American regionalism and gravitating towards the international art movements.

In 1933 he left the Art Student's League and opened the Hans Hofmann School Of Fine Arts on Madison Avenue. After several changes of address it settled permanently in Greenwich Village. Students drew from a model, and still-life arrangements were set up. Hofmann attended the school twice a week, and devoted one of these days to critique sessions with students, discussing work with them.

He continued his own work at his studio during this time. He did many drawings, and also experimented with watercolour. No doubt the speed of the medium allowed him to work out ideas rapidly. He later did a series of watercolours which he referred to as his 'free creations', and the purpose of these was to allow him to release his unconscious energies to create forms, which he could then incorporate into his other works on canvas (for example, many of the organic shapes in his work in the forties resemble the 'free creations'). He also painted in oils during this period, and the broad range of influences can be seen in this work. His 'Apples'(1932) is an example of his use of

lively Fauvist colour and Impressionistic brushwork (fig.2.). The subject matter and composition owe much to the influence of Cezanne and to Cubist spatial arrangements. Interiors and still-lifes were a favourite subject; they provided scope for experimentation with the representation of spatial relationships. In works such as 'Table With Teakettle, Green Vase, Red Flowers' (1936) Hofmann's forms become more fluid and loose than the earlier 'Apples'; paint is allowed to dribble down the canvas, horizontals and verticals become more obvious elements in the composition, and the curved shapes of vases and fruit against the straight edges of cutlery, table edges etc. give a strong rhythm that invites the eye to travel around and through volumes (fig.3.). Hofmann does not achieve this through illusionistic means. Instead he allows patterns made by positive or negative spaces to create a sense of volume and depth. The Impressionistic, tightly organized, small dabs of paint used in 'Apples' is replaced by broader brushstrokes, and it is the strong horizontal/vertical composition, reinforced by the placement of the interrelated shapes on the table which hold the structure of the composition together, rather than the treatment of the medium itself.

Hofmann also continued to work with landscape subjects in the thirties, and did some self-portraits and figure studies. The figure studies are linear and flatly patterned, and are strongly influenced by Matisse's work (Hofmann much admired Matisse), for example his 'Portrait Of Lillian O'Linsey Kiesler And Alice Hodges' (1938). The figure studies are tightly structured and rhythmically patterned,

as are the still-lifes and interiors. Hofmann's later work would become less reliant on line to create forms. In the late work colour itself is used to create lines and planes - colour becomes the means by which forms are constructed. The figures are solid and weighty however, and Hofmann shows a good understanding of volume and the relationship between planes, which is consistant throughout the later work.

Often colour is 'invented' in the interiors; he substitutes the actual colour of objects in a still-life set-up with a colour which will harmonize or offset another adjacent colour area. Hofmann is always conscious of the associative value of colours, and uses one area of colour to qualify or give meaning to another. In the 'Quantum' paintings colour is used in the same way, with each colour plane balancing another. He balances colour throughout areas of the composition, with large colour areas being echoed in other areas. Hofmann became more competent with colour as subject matter became less dominant. In the later paintings when naturalistic or figurative elements virtually disappear colour combinations are at their most violently exhuberant, and Hofmann's joy in the use of his medium pushes him towards the use of a combination of sparkling colour and expressive brushwork.

The self-portraits which Hofmann painted are, in my view, the weakest of his works. They are quickly executed and have a lively sense of movement and a good grasp of volume, but they show nothing of a personality on a canvas;

they are more in the realm of charicature. In fact, Hofmann often urged his students to exploit the possibilities for charicature in their work. Nevertheless, of all Hofmann's work, the portraits show the least insight into the painter's intentions, and the least sensitivity to the subject. Whether or not he himself was aware of this is uncertain, but very little portraiture appeared in his range of subject matter. He was at his best when responding to a landscape or still-life subject.

In 1935 Hofmann opened a school in Provincetown (Mass.), where he conducted summer sessions, lasting twelve weeks each summer. He continued to paint and to write, in addition to organizing these classes for the Cape Cod art community. Plans to go on a European trip with his students had to be cancelled due to the political unrest in Europe (his wife, Miz joined him in America in 1939). Many of the landscapes were inspired by the landscape at Cape Cod, where Hofmann had favourite spots which he returned to time after time to paint and draw. The same scenes were inspiration for a wide variety of interpretations of the landscape, often recognizable only by some landmark such as the school itself, which appeared in several compositions. He saw nature as an expressive, mobile, and energetic force. Colour and texture are an important element in his landscape work and these are as unrestrained and inventive as they are anywhere else in his work. He believed that the success of these landscapes depended on the artist's empathy with the subject, and his

fidelity to the nature of the medium with which he represented the subject.

The thirties for Hofmann marked a time when his ideas about art and his handling of the medium of oils began to mature. His love of experimentation with paint and pushing its limits (and thereby testing his own), begins to assert itself. This growing confidence in himself and curiousity about materials and processes which led him to experiment with a range of approaches to painting, and ways of looking at art, ensured his continued growth in ability as a painter, and as a communicator of ideas about painting. His ability to make use of ideas from a wide variety of sources testified to his open-minded approach, and to his liking for wrestling with difficult formal problems. For example, Hofmann throughout his work was seeking to create the maximum sense of depth in his work, while at the same time remaining aware of the necessity to maintain the integrity of the picture plane. His theories regarding 'shifting' planes (i.e. planes which do not overlap) are related to this problem of creating depth without resorting to illusionistic devices. Talking about this problem, Hofmann says that,

> "Overlapping always produces a realistic or naturalistic effect - it is still not yet pure pictorial realization....In pure plastic creation planes are not allowed to overlap but do shift 'under them' in relation to the picture surface and this in accordance with the realization of a plastic idea".[3]

So, Hofmann manages to go some way towards solving the problem by relating colour to form, by defining planes largely through colour, and the relationship of colours to one another. As he came to explore the possibilities of formal compositional elements further, his work became less reliant on the figurative subject.

footnotes

1 Cynthia Goodmann, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.83.

2 ibid.

3 Cynthia Goodmann, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.73.

DEVELOPMENT OF A STYLE

The forties were, for Hofmann, a time in which his confidence as a painter grew. His work took a new direction, and he seemed to be attempting to develop a more personal, individualistic approach to painting. His work became more painterly as he began to exercise more control over his materials. Also, the changeover from board to canvas as a painting surface in 1947 had an effect on his work, as canvas is a more sensitive and responsive surface on which to paint. Hofmann's paintings from this period have a more lyrical and sensuous quality than the earlier works.

While the influence of Fauvist colour and Cubist design was still an element of his work in the forties, a wider range of influences began to appear. Hofmann had a close familiarity with Kandinsky's work (he had stored some canvases for the painter in Munich), and with his writings. The increased fluidity of line and forms in his paintings undoubtably owe much to Kandinsky's 'Improvisations'. The Improvisations also relate to Hofmann's 'free-form' works. Kandinsky defined the Improvisations as chiefly unconscious, for the most part suddenly arising expressions of events of an inner character, hence impressions of 'internal nature'.[1] As 'impressions of an internal nature' the Improvisations relate to Hofmann's ideas about the importance of empathizing with a subject. Hofmann maintains that,

"We are nature .

What surrounds us is nature .

> Our creative means are nature.
> Nothing, however, will happen without the creative faculties of our conscious - and - unconscious mind".[2]

This statement shows how similar Hofmann's approach is to the metaphysical approach of Kandinsky, who says that three mystical necessities are central to the creation of art. These mystical necessities are; 1. Expressing what is particular to oneself. 2. Expressing what is particular to one's time, and 3. Expressing what is particular to art in general.

In 'On The Spiritual In Art' Kandinsky discusses abstraction from a subject, saying that,

> "The more freely abstract the form becomes, the purer and also the more primitive it sounds. Therefore, in a composition in which corporeal elements are more or less superfluous, they can be more or less omitted and replaced by purely abstract forms, or by corporeal forms that have been completely abstracted".[3]

Hofmann's work in the forties is less figurative than earlier work, often with subject matter suggested only by the title (e.g. 'The Wind', 'Spring'). He was attempting to describe something, whether physically or spiritually, about the subject, and trying to do 'the most with the least', to get at the essence of a subject. His abstraction of the subject was a means of empathizing with that subject, and of capturing its

essence.

Hofmann began to further explore the tactile qualities of the paint, his earlier work had dealt mainly with formal elements of composition and exploration of space and depth. He began to use the tactile qualities of the paint to construct depth and forms, often making use of automatist methods which had previously been used by the surrealists, many of whom had come to New York to escape the war in Europe. The Surrealists had some influence on painters in New York; as the Abstract Expressionists became familiar with Surrealist methods of working, they began to make use of some of these methods in their own work. Hofmann made use of automatist techniques in his canvases as a means to add another dimension to his work, both in terms of form and in terms of creating new tactile qualities in the paint. In his works of the early and mid-forties, such as 'Spring'(1944-45), 'Effervescence'(1944), and 'Fantasia' (1943), the use of these automatic processes, such as dripping, splashing and trailing paint across the surface of the canvas are used to enliven and to assert the picture plane, and gives a looser, more 'Free-form' element to his work. It relates to the watercolours known as the 'Free Creations', because, through the process of the application of paint in a 'non-painterly' way (e.g. dripping paint rather than applying it with a brush), it has the potential to create random or accidentally arrived at forms, and so is a device which, in theory, allows the unconscious mind to dictate the form. This freeing of the unconscious through the use of such methods of creating forms

is what the Surrealists maintained to be the important function of automatist processes. Hofmann made use of 'drip and splash' methods as a formal device also, to add spontaneity to a composition and to reassert the picture plane. This spontaneous quality had emerged earlier in a less deliberate way, in the still-lifes and interiors of the thirties in which paint is allowed to dribble down the canvas, and is retained as an element of the final piece.

Other elements of these paintings also indicate that they are not such a radical departure from earlier works. Linear elements in works from the forties, including the dripped lines hark back to his earlier treatment of planes in the still-lifes and interiors. A Surrealist bent in his thinking is indicated by his statement made in 1944,

> ..."to me creation is a metamorphosis. The highest in art is the irrational...incited by reality, imagination bursts into passion the potential inner life of a chosen medium, the final image resulting from it expresses the all of oneself".[4]

The 'irrational' elements inherent in the Surrealist's approach to painting would have appealed to Hofmann because they allowed for the freeing of the imagination, and were a means for the artist to empathize with the subject. This free and 'irrational' approach was far from the analytic approach of Cubism, and offered Hofmann new possibilities for exploiting the range of effects that could be created with paint.

The use of black and

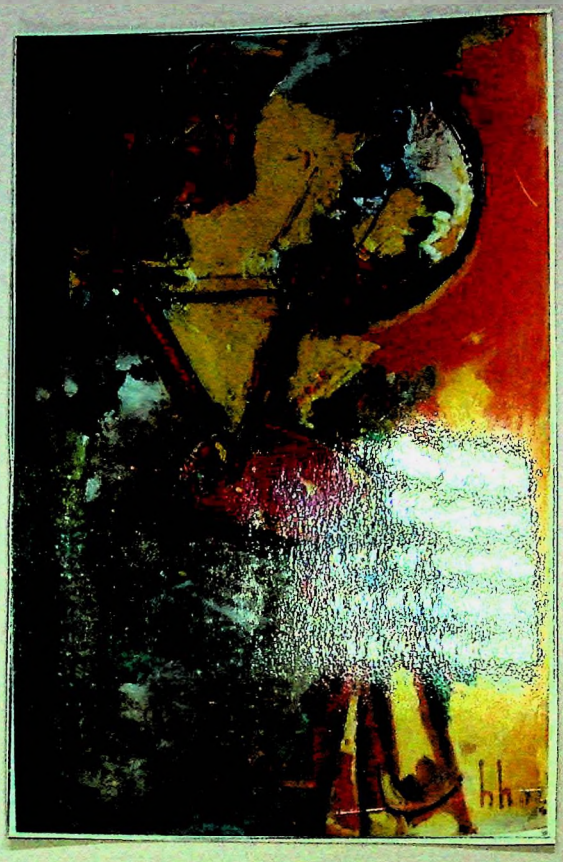

fig.5. 'Idolatress I'

Oil and aqueous media on upsom board, 60⅛x40⅛in.

fig.6. 'The Third Hand'

Oil on canvas, 60⅛x40in.

white trails of paint in works such as 'Spring' and 'Effervescence' serves as a linear element which is intended to add tension and unity to compositions (fig.4.). Other gestural, winding lines of colour are used in his later works as a means to make other areas of colour adjacent to them recede, for example thin trails or dabs of bright red on dark greens, to push the background green further back from the picture plane (e.g. 'Pompeii'(1959), 'The Third Hand' (1947)).

Hofmann admired Jackson Pollock's work (he had been introduced to Pollock by Lee Krasner in 1942, when she brought him to Pollock's studio to see his work). Like Pollock, and many of the other New York painters, Hofmann began to make use of mythological subject matter in his work. These invented figures also owed much in their form to Hans Arp's and Juan Miro's works. Hofmann was, like many other painters, an admirer of Picasso's work, and this painter was another major influence at this time. Hofmann's 'Idolatress I' (1944) is reminiscent of Pollock's 'Moon Woman' (which Hofmann had seen in Pollock's show in 1943) in the use of the semi-circular shape of the head, and the small crescent and triangular shapes which appear in this piece are perhaps inspired by Miro's animal-like forms (fig.5.).

Two main types of works by Hofmann emerge at this time. There are the more structured linear works like 'Idolatress I' and 'Ecstacy'(1947), which feature geometric and curved forms interlocked, constructed by painting blocks of colour, strongly delineated by

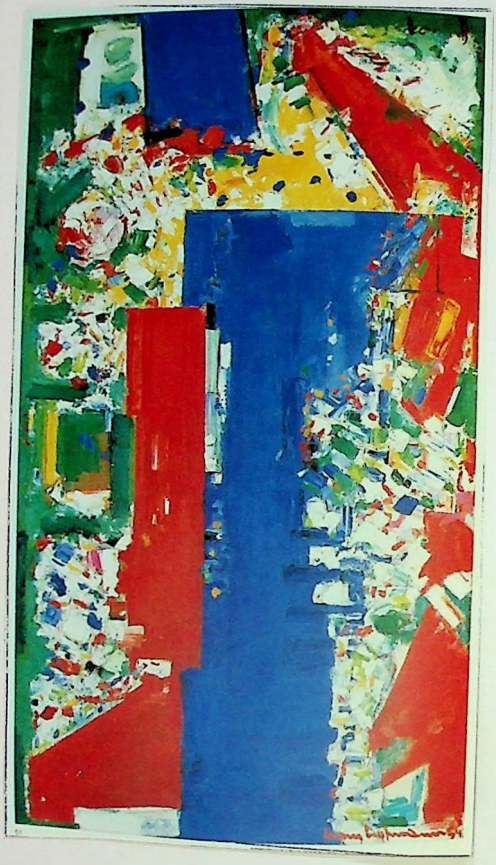

fig.7. 'Scintillating Space'

Oil on canvas, $84\frac{1}{8} \times 48\frac{3}{8}$ in.

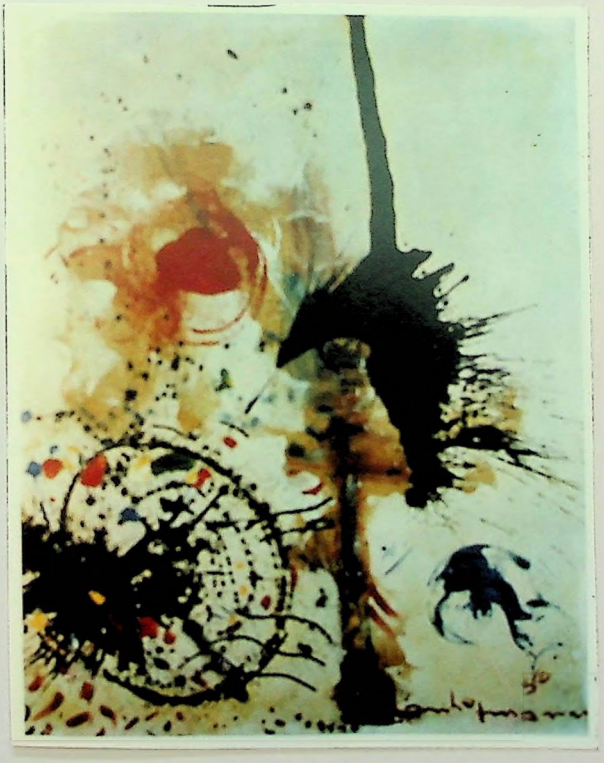

fig.8. 'The Prey'

Oil on composition board, $60\frac{1}{8} \times 48\frac{1}{8}$ in.

black and coloured outlines. There are also the less solidly constructed shifting forms of the 'automatic' paintings, which feature the tenuous dripped lines and heavy splashes of paint over the coloured background areas, which seem to merge into a hazy mass of Impressionistically treated dabs and scumbles of colour (e.g. 'Fantasia'). Often subject matter is denoted by titles such as 'Delight', 'Ecstacy', 'Flow Of Life', and 'The Secret Source', which provide the clue to the metaphysical or spiritual nature of the work.

Animal forms appear in work at this time, and his work takes on a thematic form quite often. Works may be inspired by an emotion ('Ecstacy') or by particular subject matter, as titles indicate ('The Wind', 'Amphibious Life', 'Animals In Paradise', 'The Fish And The Bird'). His work branches off from representational subject matter like the earlier landscapes and still-lifes, and he begins to deal with mythological and metaphysical images of an organic nature. He attempts to create his own repetoire of symbols and marks, much in the way that Miro or Pollock (in the 'mythic' works) do. This departure from representational approaches allowed him the freedom to experiment with form and movement, colour and surface, and allows his aesthetic sense (which Hofmann saw as an empathy) to guide him in the creation of a work.

The spontaneously executed paintings of the forties which make use of automatist methods are among the least successful of Hofmann's works, since he, to an extent, sacrifices

the solid compositional structure of earlier works in favour of this spontaniety. So, he ultimately arrives at poorly structured final compositions, which lack the sense of unity which the earlier works had. Greenberg comments in a 1947 review of a Hofmann show,

> ..."his pictures sometimes fly apart because they are organized almost exclusively on the basis of colour relations".[5]

The automatist, gestural approach freed Hofmann from many of the formal constraints imposed on him by his use of Cubist structure in compositions. The paintings in the forties were certainly more painterly and showed a deeper involvement with materials than the earlier works. His colour became more opulent and sensual than his work done in the thirties, and he began to rely more on the quality and texture of the paint to hold a composition together. In 'The Third Hand' (1947) Hofmann is conscious of the qualities inherent in the medium of paint and attempts to exploit the range of textures and forms which could be created (fig.6.). It is not one of his best paintings; its form is unresolved, but it is important as an example of the inventiveness of his use of paint, and his inquisitiveness about the possibilities of his medium. The looseness of the structure of the composition in 'The Third Hand', as in the automatist works, allows him the scope to investigate the limitations of his medium, and the range of mark-making devices he could use. He makes use of hand-prints, cross-hatched drawing on of paint, scumbled

areas of paint, broad gestural marks, figurative elements (such as the fish head, the circles of colour, and the hand prints) and the splashes and zig-zag areas of colour. Hofmann as always is concerned with transferring an energy onto the canvas, and in this he is successful, because the works done during this period are indeed full of energy and movement. However 'The Third Hand' seems to be an exercise in using paint and is unsatisfactory in its use of colour, which is muddied and overworked in areas. Other works like 'Ecstacy', 'Idolatress I' and 'Bacchanale'(1946) are more successful because of their solid compositions, combining arcs and curves with geometric shapes and use of well-defined areas of vibrant colour and pure pigmentation contrasted with areas of scumbled and muted colour. These works show more exhuberence and painterly qualities than the less tightly constructed works like 'The Third Hand' and 'Fantasia'. This is a central problem in Hofmann's work, often when handling of paint is at its best structure is weak, and vice versa. He would continue to work towards a resolution of this problem throughout his work, and the late 'Quantum' paintings deal most successfully with this problem of combining a strong compositional form with painterly handling of the medium.

The forties marked a period when Hofmann reached a level of recognition for his painting: previously, due to the fact that he had not exhibited many works in America, he was known primarily as a teacher and communicator of ideas, rather than a painter in his own right. In 1944 he had his

first one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art Of This Century Gallery, and he was received well by critics. Clement Greenberg commented on the work after seeing the Guggenheim show;

> "I find the same quality in Hofmann's painting that I find in his words - both are completely relevant".[6]

Works exhibited consisted of oil paintings and gouches, mainly landscapes done during the thirties at his Provincetown studio. He also showed in several influential group shows. In 1945 he showed in the 'A Problem For Critics' show, which also included works by Rothko, Pollock, Gorky, Gottlieb, Arp, Masson and Miro, and was an attempt to 'define' the Abstract Expressionist School, and he also showed in 'The Ideographic Picture' at the Betty Parsons Gallery. These exhibitions were important as an attempt to bring the Abstract Expressionists together in shows and to find some common ground or style which these painters shared. The term'Abstract Expressionism'was first used by the critic Robert Coates in regard to Hofmann's one-man show at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in 1946.

Hofmann's career as an American painter (he became a citizen in 1941) was taking off. He would continue to exhibit his work every year until his death. In 1949 he was the first of the Abstract Expressionists to have a one-man show in Europe; he exhibited at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in that year. During this time he was also busy with his teaching duties, and continued with his theoretical writings. In 1948 his 'Search For The Real And Other

Essays' was published, and in 1949 he helped to organize 'Forum '49', which was a series of lectures, debates and exhibitions, being held at the summer Provincetown school.

footnotes

1 Wassily Kandinsky, 'On The Spiritual In Art', cited in Kenneth C. Linsay and Peter Vergo, 'Kandinsky - Complete Writings On Art. Volume I' (London,1982)p.169

2 Maurice Tuchman, 'The New York School - Abstract Expressionism In The 40's And 50's' (Greenwich, Connecticut,1965)p.83.

3 Wassily Kandinsky, 'On The Spiritual In Art', cited in Kenneth C. Linsay and Peter Vergo, 'Kandinsky - Complete Writings On Art. Volume I' (London,1982)p.169.163

4 Irving Sandler, 'The Triumph Of American Painting, A History Of Abstract Expressionism' (New York,1970)p.147.

5 John O'Brian, 'Clement Greenberg - The Collected Essays And Criticism. Volume 2. Arrogant Purpose , 1945-1949' (London,1986)p.18.

6 ibid.

THE FIFTIES

By the 1950's Hofmann was well established and respected as a painter. His schools were doing well, and he continued his writing, constantly expanding on his formal theories contained in 'Creation In Form And Colour: A Textbook For Instruction In Art'. In 1950 he took part in a three-day art symposium at Studio 35 in New York. He was also one of the eighteen artists (including leading Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning) who wrote to the president of the Metropolitan Museum Of Art in New York, protesting at the provincialism of the jury of an exhibition of contemporary American art to be held there (the group were dubbed the 'Irascibles' by the press, and got good media coverage).

Although Hofmann was usually grouped with the Abstract Expressionists by critics (e.g. Coates and Greenberg), there were elements of his work which stressed his links with European traditions. For example, he tended to work, by Abstract Expressionist standards, on a fairly small scale, although his work often had a monumental quality which belied its physical scale. Also his use of vibrant, Fauvist colour was something of a departure from the moody and subdued colour many of the New York painters favoured. Although painters such as Rothko and de Kooning often made use of high-key colours, they tended to subdue them. For example de Kooning usually mixed colours either on the canvas or used colour in a tonal way by mixing white into it to

make it less transparent; Rothko subdued colour by either using dark hues or by washing colour thinly across the surface of the canvas to pull the eye into the area occupied by the colour. Still de Kooning and Rothko are similar to Hofmann in intention because they construct form as much through colour as line (they were both European). Hofmann was proud of his European roots, and considered Paris to be the focus of the most important ideas about art in the twentieth century.

Many of the techniques used in his paintings done in the fifties incorporate earlier styles of painting; the fragmented dabs of paint used in, for example, 'Scintillating Space'(1954), an 'The Garden'(1956) were an adaptation of his earlier Impressionistic style of the 1900's (fig.7.). The pigment itself is of central importance in the work of the fifties. Hofmann's use of rich, juicy, impastoed paint characterizes much of his work at this time. Colour is also often used in this fragmented, Impressionistic way, with colour scattered around different areas of the canvas (e.g. 'The Garden'). Hofmann first saw Soutine's work in the fifties, and admired that painter's treatment of colour, and he often used colour in the same way, dragging thickly pigmented areas of colour across the canvas, to build a textural, solid plane of colour. Some canvases, for example 'Fragrance'(1956), with its thick pigmentation and dabs of paint creating rhythmic, swaying forms are similar in treatment to Philip Guston's

later work. Hofmann's paintings of this period are energetic and opulently colourful, and titles are a good indication of the impression he wished to convey (e.g. 'Scintillating Space', 'Fragrance') and indicate the emotional intentions of the work.

In the fifties he began to deal more successfully with the problem of uniting a painterly and spontaneous quality with a solid compositional structure. The strong horizontal and vertical compositions which had appeared in the interiors and still-lifes of the thirties are again used and combine successfully with the vigorous brushwork and lively colour. 'Scintillating Space' is organized around horizontal and vertical forms. A long rectangle of blue takes up the centre of the composition, with a smaller red rectangle slightly overlapping it on the left side. Hofmann often used overlapping and 'shifting' forms to create a sense of movement in a composition. The opposition of these diagonals to the vertical and horizontal forms together with the energetic small dabs of paint, which are thickly pigmented and seem to be applied with a palette knife, overlapping the geometric forms, vitalize the composition and help to break up the large forms. Works done at this period are more mature in a painterly sense, and are more successful at meeting Hofmann's requirements of doing 'the most with the least' since they are a further simplification of and abstraction from forms. 'Scintillating Space' and 'The Garden' show a better grasp of formal problems of composition, rhythm

and movement, texture and colour.

Hofmann also worked on 'free-form' paintings in the fifties. These were a means of experimenting with forms and compositions, and allowed for an 'empathy' or 'feeling into' a subject. They relate to the earlier 'free-creations' of the forties. However, in the 'free-form' paintings of the fifties Hofmann uses automatic processes, dripping and splattering paint onto the canvas to create a sense of depth or space through which the forms move. The forms themselves may take on a symbolic and representational function, as in 'The Prey' (1956), which is constructed of splatters of paint which look like some kind of bird, and concentric circles made up of dots of paint arranged to form a target-like shape (fig.8.). These works, unlike most of Hofmann's work, are limited in colour and sparse in their use of pigment, in contrast to other opulently surfaced works of the fifties. Hofmann is undoubtably best as a colourist, and the richly coloured works of the late fifties pave the way for the 'Quantum' paintings of the sixties which are arranged on a horizontal/vertical compositional format with different sized rectangular areas locking together to construct the composition. The rectangle was a suitable device for Hofmann to use, since it satisfied his requirements. It avoided the problem of creating a sense of depth while maintaining the integrity of the picture plane; it allowed him to create a non-illusionistic depth

unlike, for example, old masters, who created depth through devices like one-point perspective and chiaroscuro techniques to create volume. It also allowed him to make use of his best skill, juxtaposing luminous colour and using advancing and receeding colours in combination to create planes at different depths, and using various sized rectangles to make colours harmonize and balance out in proportion to each other. A statement by Hofmann clarifies his approach to colour relationships;

> "Continuity of colour development is achieved through successful, successive development of the colour scales. These are comparable to the tone scales in music. They can be played in Major or Minor. Each colour scale follows again a rhythm entirely its own. The rhythmic development of the blue scale or the yellow scale,etc. The development of the colour scales spreads over the whole picture surface, and its orientation in relation to the picture surface is of utmost importance. The formal development of the work and the colour development are performed simultaneously. The colour development leads thereby from one colour scale to the other. Since every colour can be shaded with any other colour, an unlimited variation of shading within every colour scale is possible. Although a red can be, in itself, bluish, greenish, yellowish,

> brownish,etc., its actual colour-emanation in the pictorial totality will be the conditioned result of its relationship to all the other colours.
>
> Any colour shade within one colour scale can become, at any moment, the bridge to any other colour-scale. This leads to an interwoven communion of colour scales over the entire picture surface"...[1]

The idea of the interrelationship of colour scales to each other, and their physical and psychological effect on each other, becomes Hofmann's main concern in the late paintings. The analogy of colour scales to musical scales is related to Kandinsky's colour theories. In 'On The Spiritual In Art' Kandinsky discusses the 'metaphorical' and 'associative qualities' of colour, and states that the psychological effect of colour is linked to its associative function. Hofmann would have agreed with Kandinsky's principle of 'internal necessity', since this principle related to his own ideas about 'feeling into' the subject. Kandinsky says that ..."the harmony of colours can only be based upon the principle of purposefully touching the human soul".[2]

Hofmann's colour theories allow for empathy with the subject, ultimately his sense of colour is dictated by this principle of 'internal necessity'.

In 1956 Hofmann decided to close both his schools to allow more time to devote himself to painting.

However he continued to spend summers at Provincetown, where the landscape had been such a source of inspiration and a vital factor in his work. He recognized the fact that his work as a teacher had interfered with his productivity as a painter, and with the closing of his schools, he gained the opportunity to throw his full energies into his painting activities.

footnotes

1 Cynthia Goodman, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.110-111.

2 Wassily Kandinsky, 'On The Spiritual In Art,' cited in Kenneth C. Linsay and Peter Vergo, 'Kandinsky - Complete Writings On Art. Volume I' (London,1982)p.

THE LATE WORK

The rectangles which Hofmann had often used as the basis of structuring compositions, became in the late series of works which he called the 'Quantum' paintings, the sole forms with which he built the structure of a composition. He referred to them as 'Quantum' paintings because "a large area of colour would demand only a small area of another to be in 'perfect harmony'".[1] Using one geometric form, the rectangle, to construct a composition allowed him the freedom to experiment with colour and planes without losing sight of the unity or harmony of the piece, which earlier had been a problem at times.

Hofmann had read Mondrian's essays 'Plastic And Pure Plastic Art' (1936) and 'Towards The True Vision Of Reality' (1941), and was interested in Mondrian's theories concerning abstraction. Mondrian in 'Towards The True Vision Of Reality' discussed the notion of dynamics in painting, saying that,

> ..."When dynamic movement is established through contrasts or oppositions of the expressive means, relationship becomes the chief preoccupation of the artist who is seeking to create equilibrium. I found that the right angle is the only constant relationship, and that, through the proportions of dimension, its constant expression can be given movement,

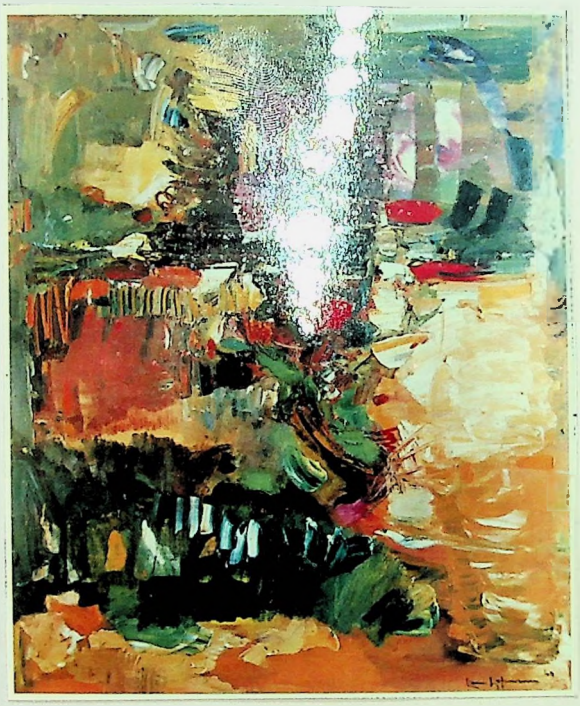

fig.9. 'In The Wake of the Hurricane'

Oil on canvas, 72½x60in.

that is, made living".[2]

Hofmann's theories of opposites, contained in his push-and-pull and positive and negative space theories relate to Mondrian's ideas about opposites creating equilibrium within a composition. Hofmann like Mondrian was 'impressed by the vastness of nature' and was 'trying to express its expansion, rest, and unity',[3] and so was concerned with setting up pictorial tensions, colour harmonies and balance in a composition. In the late paintings he begins to pull together elements of his painting into a harmonious unity, something which had previously often escaped him. The use of rectangular forms allows him to create fields of colour, and to make these colours interact in a lively and interesting way. He could concentrate on experimenting with the effect of scale on colour. In the Quantum paintings he tried to balance areas of different colours by opposing different sizes of rectangles against each other, and out of this juxtaposition create a sense of order and harmony. Hofmann also referred to these paintings as 'symphonic' works, because of the relationship of colours to one another. While, like Mondrian's Neo-plasticism the Quantum paintings make use of geometric forms, they are, nevertheless, quite different from Mondrian's work. Hofmann often contrasts blurred edges of forms with sharply-defined edges of other forms. Treatment of paint also varies, sometimes paint is washed on in thin layers,

or build up into a thick impasto. Colour is also treated very differently, two tonally similar colours may lie adjacent to each other so that they blend into each other or dissonant colours may be put beside each other to jar the eye and create a tension. Hofmann's conception of 'pure' colour is quite different to Mondrian's, and Hofmann uses colour to 'create light' as he states in the following extract from 'The Colour Problem In Pure Painting - Its Creative Origin' (1955),

> "Colour in itself is light. In nature, light creates the colour; in the picture, colour creates light".[4]

Hofmann goes on to discuss the function of texture and its relationship to colour;

> "Texture is the consequence of the general pigmentary development of the work, and becomes in this way an additional light-producing factor, capable of altering the luminosity of the colours in the pace of their development towards a colour-totality".[5]

Colour and texture are important in the construction of forms. Hofmann's opulent use of colour provides him with the scope to assert the spiritual or metaphysical content of his work. Though these are the most 'purely' abstract of his works, they were, according to Hofmann, inspired by nature, as other earlier works had been. He no longer felt it necessary to paint directly from nature; he maintained that he painted according to natural laws rather than slav-

ishly copying nature. He said that " I bring the landscape home with me",[6] meaning that he had dispensed with the need to paint from a particular scene to be able to express it or empathize with it on canvas. By using the rectangle as a compositional device he dispensed with the need to work from a subject. On examination of some of the titles of his work from this period his still strong affinities with subjects from the natural world can be seen, for example 'Morning Mist' (1958), 'Rising Moon' (1965), 'Silent Night' (1964). Colour was still inspired by nature, though the representational forms like the discs of yellow which had previously appeared in landscape inspired works are more often replaced by the geometric forms. The tactile and painterly qualities of the paint are exploited, and the format of rectangular shapes is not strictly adhered to. Often edges of a form are interrupted by dabs of pigment in some other colour, which appear to travel across from adjacent colour areas (e.g. 'Morning Mist' (1958)). Use of the paint itself is varied; thin washes of paint contrast with areas of densely painted or impastoed colour, which Hofmann used to catch the light hitting the surface of the canvas to create another dimension of depth. Often in the late works, areas of the background on which the rectangles appear to float are left white to show the bare canvas (e.g. 'Magnum Opus' (1962)).

Some of the late works are constructed in a more naturalistic manner, in the sense that they suggest natural forms more than the geometric pieces (e.g.

'In The Wake Of The Hurricane' (1960) (fig.9.) and 'Summer Bliss' (1960)). They are also more gestural and fragmented in terms of the way in which paint is applied and the colour organization. However, they still are constructed on the principle of the organization of colour into roughly rectangular areas on the canvas. The rectangular areas of colour are fragmented or broken up by the intrusion of other colours on them, and the absence of sharply delineated edges of the rectangular forms (e.g. 'In The Wake Of The Hurricane').

Hofmann tended to incorporate elements of previous works into whatever paintings he was working on; in some of the late work he again used drips and puddles of black paint against thickly painted backgrounds broken into several areas of colour (e.g. 'Burning Bush' (1959), 'Chimera' (1959)). These later dripped works are more integrated than those done previously. The black paint no longer looks like an overlaid pattern or travelling line, instead it has been integrated into the work and appears to be on the same plane, or intertwined with the main colour areas. This is achieved by either softening the edges of the black form, or by placing it on an area of dark or subdued colour. So, although Hofmann experimented with more geometric forms in his later years, he also continued to use methods like dripping, washing or splattering paint across the canvas - methods which were more gestural and Expressionistic. At times he combined the solidly constructed rectangular forms with looser, more painterly and gestural brushmarks and

washes of colour (e.g. 'The Castle' (1965).

The late canvases are the most exhuberant and vital of all Hofmann's works, in terms of their colour combinations and their technical accomplishment. His compositions, particularly his geometric pieces and the later semi-geometric, gestural works (such as 'The Castle') are noteworthy in terms of organization of forms, combinations of colours and execution of painting itself. Again the titles give clues about the emotional state he intended to convey ('Lust And Delight' (1965), 'Festive Pink' (1959), 'In The Vastness Of Sorrowful Thought' (1963)).

Dark, muted tones appear in the more gestural works; in 'Nocturnal Splendour' (1963) a shadowy black area covers almost half the canvas. Black and very dark, muted tones don't normally appear in the geometric pieces, except perhaps as a background colour (e.g. 'Heraldic Call' (1963)). The more loosely constructed canvases were perhaps done in reaction to the discipline of the Quantum paintings. The gestural marks in these works take on a caligraphic appearance. These marks are made with a brush and, like a kind of handwriting, thin out at the end of a curve. They are created in the same manner as some of the brushmarks sitting on the surface in other works (e.g. 'The Garden' (1956)). Now, however, they are isolated in space, existing in their own right as shapes floating on a white canvas, or on a thin wash of colour behind them (e.g. 'Joy

Sparks Of The Gods II' (1965)).

Some of the late paintings experiment with the idea of using thin washes of colour, and are an attempt to do 'the most with the least', creating the maximum emotional effect with a minimum amount of brushwork. In pieces like 'Polyhymnia' (1963) sharply edged rectangles float on the bare background of unpainted canvas. In 'Agrigento' (1961) the thin washes of paint, which appear to be applied with a thick brush are the only compositional element. Areas of bare canvas are left unpainted, and the thin tonal paint is unrelieved by the superimposed rectangles of bright colour which appear in other canvases (e.g. 'Polyhymnia').

Hofmann was attempting to simplify his forms, and the late works are an exploration into the idea of creating the most from the least, and simplifying down to the basic formal elements of composition. The monochrome canvases, such as 'Agrigento', lack the vitality of the opulently colourful, tightly structured Quantum works like the 'Combinable Wall I And II' (1961), but they do have a fluidity at times in pieces which combine rectangular forms with painterly gestural marks (e.g. 'The Castle' (1965)), (fig.10 and 11). Works like 'The Castle' show a sensitivity to the medium itself, and combine various ways of using paint to create a harmonious and vibrant composition.

Hofmann was not included in the exhibition of 'New American Painting' sent to Europe by The Museum Of Modern Art in 1959; perhaps this was an indic-

ation that his work was not always ranked as being among the best of American painting. In 1960, however, he was chosen, along with Philip Guston, Franz Kline and Theodore Roszak to represent America in the XXX Venice Biennale. His career as a painter was doing well; yearly sales averaged at about $200,000. In 1963 his wife, Miz, died. The next year he married Renate Schmitz, and began work on a series of eleven paintings which were dedicated to her, and became known as the 'Renate Series'. He also dedicated work to Miz - 'To Miz - Pax Vobiscum' (1964) and 'In The Vastness Of Sorrowful Thoughts' (1963). Several politically inspired paintings were done during the sixties. This was somewhat unusual for Hofmann, whose subject matter was always more motivated by the natural world. These paintings were 'Nucleus Blast' (1962) and 'To JFK - Thousands Die With You' (1963).

Since Hofmann had given up his teaching duties, his output of paintings had increased and his maturity as an artist developed. Although he was in his eighties the energy and vitality of his work did not diminish, and the late works are among the most imaginative and powerful of all his paintings. Hans Hofmann died in 1966, at the age of eighty-five.

footnotes

1 Cynthia Goodman, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.89

2 Piet Mondrian, 'Towards The True Vision Of Reality', cited in Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, 'The New Art - The New Life - The Collected Writings Of Piet Mondrian' (London,1987)p.339.

3 ibid.

4 Hans Hofmann, 'The Colour Problem In Pure Painting - Its Creative Origin', cited in Sam Hunter, 'Hans Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.46.

5 ibid.

6 Cynthia Goodman, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.77.

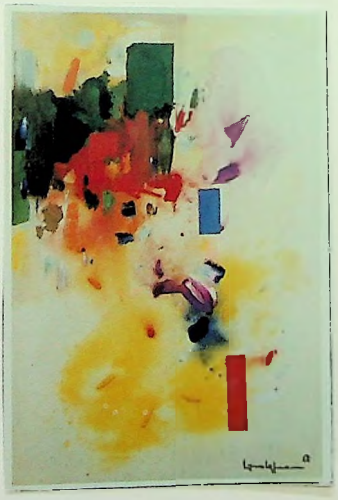

fig.10. 'The Castle'

Oil on canvas, $60\frac{1}{8} \times 40\frac{1}{8}$ in.

fig.11. 'Combinable Wall I and II'

Oil on canvas, overall, 84½x112½in.

CONCLUSION

Hofmann once said "As a teacher, I approach my students purely with the human desire to free them from all scholarly inhibitions. And I tell them 'Painters must speak through paint - not through words'".[1] While Hofmann's contribution as a teacher of art was considerable, his contribution to (and dedication to) painting was no less significant. His dual career as a painter and also a teacher and theorist, has led some to regard his role as a communicator of art ideas as his primary contribution to art. It is true that as a teacher he had a vital influence, through his students, on American painter's ideas about painting. Along with other European artists who came to America to escape the war in Europe he helped to introduce many European ideas to American painters, and helped to give them a deeper insight into the central ideas behind some of the Avant-Garde movements like Cubism and Fauvism. American painters would have been newly acquainted with these styles through the Armory Show of 1913. Previously American art had been oblivious to European developments, and remained academically inclined. The prevailing styles of the 1930's were the painting of the 'American Scene' and 'Social Realism'.

The range and scope of Hofmann's accomplishments as a painter and communicator of ideas, and the enthusiasm and energy with which he devoted himself to both his career as a teacher and a painter must be admired. Clement Greenberg lauded him as "the most important art teacher of our time",[2] and said of his painting that "it deals with the crucial problems of contemporary painting on its highest level in the

most radical and uncompromising way".[3] Greenberg's views on Hofmann's theories and painting weren't shared by all American critics at the time, however. Many of them were suspicious of Hofmann's ability to produce such a volume of work while coping with the demands of teaching. The sheer energy and range of Hofmann's artistic vision, however, ensured that there were some 'converts' to his work, like the critic Brian O'Doherty. O'Doherty commented on Hofmann's contribution to the Abstract Expressionist movement in a review of one of Hofmann's shows, saying that he had done to Abstract Expressionism,

> ..."what Cezanne did to Impressionism. As well as ending a historic era he helped begin, Mr. Hofmann, in these paintings, offers a new point of departure".[4]

Hofmann's painting was characterized by his love of experimentation. He was constantly seeking to find new ways of handling his medium, and throughout his career experimented with many methods of building composition, making use of techniques from sources as various as Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism. He contributed his own ideas about spatial relationships, such as his 'push-and-pull' theory and his theory of 'positive' and 'negative' spaces. He stressed the importance of simplicity in the construction of a composition. He made use of automatist techniques as a means of liberating the unconscious. The result of his experimental approach was a body of work which was consistently vibrant and inventive, and the range and scope of his work made Hofmann one of the most interesting painters of the

Abstract Expressionist movement.

footnotes

1 Maurice Tuchman, 'New York School, The First Generation' (Greenwich, Connecticut,1965)p.84.

2 John O'Brian, 'Clement Greenberg - The Collected Essays And Criticism. Volume 2. Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949' (London,1986)p.18.

3 ibid.

4 Cynthia Goodman, 'Hofmann' (New York,1986)p.103.

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