

Hans Hofmann Biography

Hans Hofmann created a distinctive primordial world of color and light. He realized that in painting, unlike in nature, cause and effect are reversed: on canvas, color creates light. Hofmann wrote, "Every color emanates a very characteristic light," and the special luminosity and radiance of his paintings are proof of his claim.

Along with other painters of his generation, Hofmann moved from representational and narrative paintings towards abstraction, where the basic elements of a picture-space, line, color, light, scale, shape, and texture assert themselves as the primary aspects of a work. Abstraction does not mean, however, the disavowal of the human touch. In our culture, almost everything around us, visual imagery included, is produced by technologies that do not require human intervention. Painting (and sculpture) are the last handmade objects, and Hofmann makes certain that we are aware of this in his art. He is truly Homo Faber, Man the Maker, composing and controlling what we see and letting us know how he has made it. He creates agitated textures and vibrating surfaces by poking and prodding the pigment, making the paint ooze, and sometimes caressing the surface lightly with a loaded brush. Whether Hofmann splashes paint onto the canvas, or brushes it in heavy impasto, he turns the surface into a seemingly living witness to his manipulation of paint.

Hofmann lived to be 86 years old, and his biography reads like a capsule version of the history of twentieth-century art. Born in 1880 in a small town near Munich, he attended school in the Bavarian capital, which at the time was a sparkling center of culture, home to Thomas Mann, Richard Strauss, and Lovis Corinth. Wassily Kandinsky, who arrived there in 1886, called Munich a "spiritual island." Although Hofmann had scientific talent and had made a number of useful inventions while still in his teens, he decided upon art school, and moved to Paris in 1904. For ten years, he immersed himself in the artistic life of the city whose artists-Picasso, Braque, Gris, Matisse, and others-changed the history of art. In 1905, he witnessed the color explosions of Matisse and the Fauves at the Salon d'Automne. He sketched beside Matisse, and became a close friend of the Cubists' great colorist, Robert Delaunay. Though none of the paintings from his Paris period survive, it was there that Hofmann developed his influential theories.

Hofmann was also very much aware of Franz Marc and Kandinsky in Munich, where he returned at the outbreak of World War 1. There, in 1915, he opened his own art school. Before long, it achieved an international reputation as the place to learn new approaches



to painting, and attracted, among others, young American students such as Louise Nevelson and Alfred Jensen.

Destined to play a critical role for the University Art Museum was another of Hofmann's American students, Worth Ryder. Ryder, who later became chairman of the Art Department at UC Berkeley, invited Hofmann to teach at Berkeley in the summer of 1930. Another of his students, Glenn Wessels, accompanied Hofmann to Berkeley and served as his interpreter and the first translator of his theoretical writings. Hofmann came back to Berkeley the following summer. In 1931, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco gave him his first solo exhibition since the one held in Berlin in 1910.

In appreciation of his time in Berkeley and in response to his close contact with his former students, over three decades later—in 1963—Hofmann made the substantial gift to the University of California of forty-seven paintings and funds towards housing them. This generous gift, accepted by the Regents of the University on the enthusiastic recommendation of President Clark Kerr, became a compelling reason to hasten the construction of the museum building itself. As the founding director of the new museum, I was privileged to assist Professor Erle Loran, another of Hofmann's former students, in selecting pictures from Hofmann's studio for the collection.

By the summer of 1931, Hofmann was well aware of the danger Nazism posed to artists and intellectuals, and decided to remain in this country. He took a teaching position at the Art Students League in New York, where a year later he again opened his own school. His combination of modern art theory and the freedom he granted his students made Hofmann arguably the most important art teacher in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s—the years when this country assumed preeminence in art. For art students in America, he offered exposure to the latest advances in European art from someone who had firsthand knowledge of both Picasso and Matisse. Among his students were the painters Burgoyne Diller, Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Larry Rivers. There were also the artists who later invented the "Happening"—Allen Kaprow and Red Grooms. And there was the most important critic of his day, Clement Greenberg, who derived much of his formalist theory—that painting defines itself by its own purely visual properties of flatness, shape, and color—from Hofmann's teachings.

An early painting in the collection, (1936), gives an idea of Hofmann's work at this time. Bold, even brash, this picture pushes the color rhythms of Matisse and the Fauves to a new intensity (at first glance there seems to be too much red). Having absorbed the structural lessons of Cézanne and Cubism, Hofmann here loosens form to let color determine structure. Color creates space as well: the visually advancing and receding colors are basic to his often-cited "push-pull" principle, whereby a visual back and forth in space results from forms and colors reacting to one another.

When the Surrealists fled Europe during World War II and settled in New York, Hofmann had the chance to re-evaluate their work, along with Picasso's. He created paintings such as (1944), a grotesque and ferocious Dionysiac female figure. In paintings

such as (about 1942) and (about 1943), he experimented with the spontaneous invention and automatic response of the Surrealists with a free flow of random drips and spatters resulting in calligraphic webs of paint. Similarly, (1944) consists of pools of pigment poured and dripped onto the canvas with little premeditation. By welcoming chance effects, Hofmann introduced the aesthetic of controlled accident into his work and his teaching.

This new approach to the picture plane-using free and intuitive methods depending largely on the gestural energy of the artist-replaced the Cubist grid to such an extent that Hofmann's work of the early 1940s foreshadows Jackson Pollock's technique of dripping paint on the canvas. It may even have exerted a direct impact on the younger artist. After experimenting with the drip technique, Hofmann proceeded to other explorations, such as imprinting his own hand onto a canvas of freely painted color blotches (1947). With this symbolic as well as very immediate gesture, he brought the interaction between artist and medium into highly active discourse. The term "Abstract Expressionist" was, in fact, first applied to the work of an American painter when Hofmann's work was shown at Betty Parsons' Mortimer Brandt Gallery in 1946.

In his works of the 1950s, Hofmann reasserted his European modern sources: Fauvism, with its brilliant color, and Cubism, with its planar structure. In a picture such as (1954), he joins his earlier use of oversized, pointillist flecks with large, clearly structured color rectangles, creating a pulsating texture of accented brushstrokes that seem to contradict the flat planes of pure color. The result is an almost voluptuous equilibrium of color and form. With paintings like (1958), (1958), (1959), (1960), (1962), (1962), and his largest work, the monumental (1961), Hofmann continued in this mode of combining hard-edge, oblong forms with reckless, loosely brushed areas. He created a visual tension between impulsive gestural areas and floating geometric forms. Rectangles seem to advance and recede against the ground, inducing a dynamic back and forth in space that epitomizes Hofmann's "push-pull." In a way, Hofmann produced a synthesis of Fauvism and Cubism. Or, in terms of the younger generation of American artists, a synthesis of the gestural painting of Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Franz Kline, and the color-field painting of Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman.

Unlike most of the New York painters, however, Hofmann did not work in series nor cultivate a single, signature style. Each painting was a new discovery. Some paintings, like (1956), lack all geometric form and consist instead of freely painted blasts and splashes. Yet in this work, spontaneous passages seem to form a target-like configuration on the lower left and a bird with a huge wing on the right. The images could not have been premeditated. Hofmann told the critic Harold Rosenberg when discussing this picture, "For this you need to be in the rarest of states." (1960), another unequivocally Abstract Expressionist work, recalls by its title the flotsam and jetsam deposited on a beach after a storm on Cape Cod, where Hofmann spent summers teaching from 1935 onward. It is revealing of Hofmann's experimental approach that this spontaneously painted picture appears in the same year as the thoughtfully structured Goliath, and just a year before the thinly painted, monochromatic Agrigento.

A strong binary aspect runs throughout Hofmann's work: a synthesis of the age-old contrast between Apollonian and Dionysiac, classical and romantic, disciplined and intuitive, rational and impulsive. Such forces are made visible, palpable, in Hofmann's coherent and often brilliant amalgam of force and counterforce, of "push and pull."

In the last years of his long career, Hofmann slowed down not at all. He alternated between making heavy, painterly works such as (1961) or (1963), and pictures where paint is applied sparingly and geometric forms are relinquished altogether. Paintings like (1964) and (1964) suggest a lighthearted sense of airy openness and delight. On the occasion of the Hofmann retrospective in 1963 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, my former colleague there, William C. Seitz, spoke of "the beauty, the profundity and monumentality" of Hofmann's paintings and, above all, of "the purpose for which they were painted-delectation." It is this affirmation of the joy of existence that we discover in Hans Hofmann's work, and that, along with his formal explorations, has inspired and challenged countless artists. With its collection of works by Hans Hofmann, the Berkeley Art Museum plans to keep his powerful vision before the eyes of generations of artists to come.

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<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/collections/findingaids/bampfa-hofmann.ead.html>
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