Chapter 12 - C. S. PRICE, HIS PAINTINGS

by Janet Louvau Holt, Artist, Docent for Portland Art Museum

When docents lead tour groups in the Museum, they ask questions as well as discuss art, specific works, and the artists. As a docent, the first question I ask is, "What is the first thing you notice about this painting?"

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In the case of C. S. Price, the answers may include the following: " He uses a lot of paint." "I think he was a cowboy?" "He doesn't try to make it look like a photograph." My next question is usually, "What do you think the artist knew about, cared about just by looking at his work?" When we visit a museum or gallery, it helps us to understand more about the art when we ask ourselves such questions.

So, what is a painting? Painting may be defined as line, shape, color, composition, focal point, subject, but a painting is more than that, for it is an expression of the artist's interests, of the artist's times, what the artist cares about, knows about.

Clayton S. Price grew up having an active part in farming and ranching. Whereas he began his interest in art as an illustrator of the American West, he evolved into a modernist. Instead of crisp, carefully defined literal paintings, he used a palette knife to apply shapes, rich colors, often earthy colors, thickly applied. He was not concerned with the details, but with the big idea. Price was very much ahead of many of his fellow artists in terms of his abstraction of subject matter. He did a good job of expressing American freedom in his thinking and doing. He was more interested in responding to what was going on in his life as well as in his times. Yes, he was somewhat influenced by early 20th century modern trends coming from Europe, France in particular; but he did not feel bound by the artistic conventions of his day, whether they were American or European. He said, "Physical things are transitory; the spirit behind the form is permanent." This way of seeing and thinking makes Price's work interesting and compelling.

Horse Haven, ca. 1936, Oil on board, 16 x 20 in.,
Portland Art Museum, Oregon,
Bequest of Anselm Boskowitz, PAM 74.13.1

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His art most certainly reflects what he knew about. He developed a signature style with paint laid on freely, sometimes scraped off, but laid on in sweeping gestures. His subjects include cowboys, horses, cattle, hay wagons, Native Americans, landscapes, houses, boats. His paintings are as much about the act of painting as about the subjects. Often he painted from memory. Over the years, including those when he was a working rancher, he did many sketches of horses, deer, people, saddles, buffalo, lumberman at work, and so on. Drawing helps to put images into the mental computer to be pulled out when planning a painting. He also carved from wood small animals which he would arrange in front of paint cloths in order to form a composition from which to paint on canvas.

Old Houses, nd, Oil on canvas, 24 3/4 x 29 7/8 in., Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, U. S. General Services Administration, Photo by Mitchell Freifeld

Notice the simplification of shapes, the close-up views, the use of arbitrary color here and there in Price's work. It is this abstract quality that defines his work. Look at *Horse Haven* on the first page of this chapter and see the contrasts of light and dark and the curved shapes of the horses echoed in the hills. We know he is representing horses, but he is more interested in the overall composition than in showing the viewer every muscle, every detail. He has engaged the viewer's imagination even in his choices of colors. One horse is a medley of white, ochre, blue, brown. Another is mostly orange. We discover a pale blue horse in the distance.

In *Riders of the Range*[1] (below) the riders on their horses seem to be emerging right out of the hilly mounds of the landscape. They are coming right towards us, about to canter right out of the painting. It is Price's unique style of composition that viewers find fascinating.

Look at *Old Houses*[2] (left) and see how he has reduced the buildings to basic geometric shapes which dominate the composition. He has used thick dark outlines on the buildings and on the rocks. The composition is focused on those buildings and rocks, for the horizon with mountains in the distance is very near the top of the painting. Look at the colors. The buildings were probably not pink, reddish orange, blue, white; but he used colors arbitrarily to make the painting work as a painting and not as a photographic likeness. Price's use of colors sets the mood, but are we, the viewers, sure of what the mood may be? Think about it and try to define the mood. How would this painting affect you if the colors were mostly bright reds, oranges,

Riders of the Range, ca. 1933-34, Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 35 7/8 in., Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, U. S. General Services Administration, Photo by Mitchell Freifeld

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pinks or if they were dark, heavy blues, brown, blacks? Price seems to

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[1] On loan to the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, PAM L34.7, Lent from GSA Fine Arts Collection, FA 13137

[2] On loan to the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, PAM L42.9, Lent from GSA Fine Arts Collection, FA 10856