

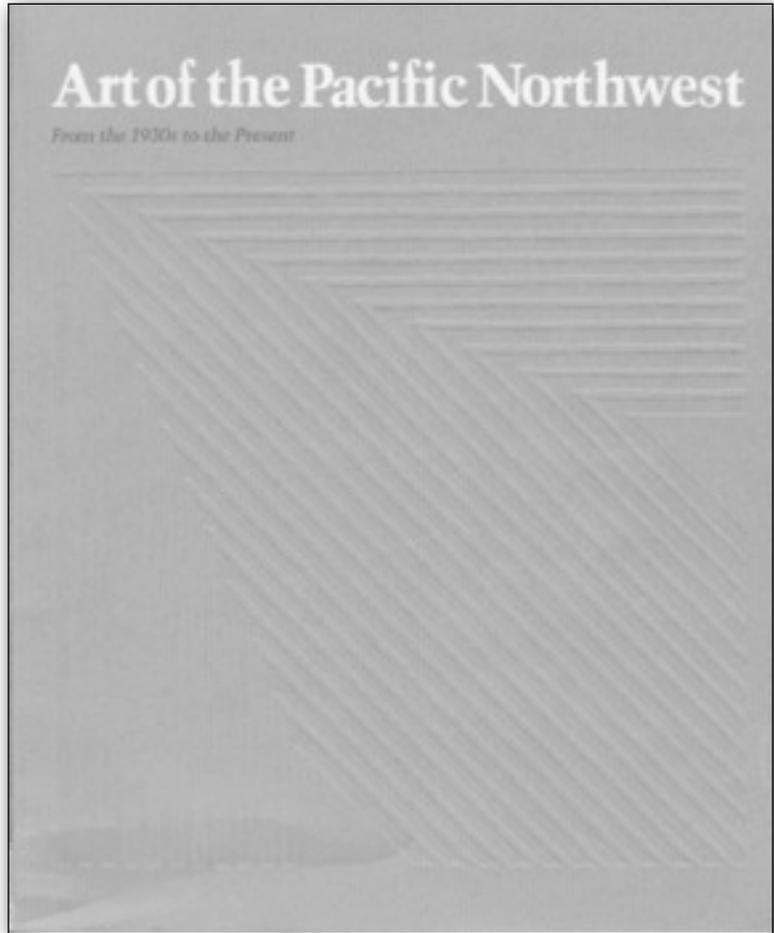
Chapter 13 - ART OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Excerpt from *Portland and Its Environs* by Rachel Griffin

The following are excerpts from a chapter written by Rachael Griffin titled **Portland and Its Environs, The Early Art Community**. It is quoted from a book published in 1974 for the National Collection of Fine Arts by the Smithsonian Institution Press, City of Washington. This book is currently out of print.

In 1929 when Clayton S. Price, former "cowboy artist," went to Portland, Oregon to stay until his death in 1950, he found no circle of artists such as he had known in Monterey. To the contrary, there were very few independent, practicing painters or sculptors. Some of the few, however, found themselves drawn, as time passed, to this remarkable and unpretentious man. A group of close friends, artists and non-artists, began to form around him. They were affected by his profound seriousness about art, his intensive, unrelenting search for his own "way," and also by the truths he had found in the then less fashionable eastern philosophies. Besides he was a likable, simple, down-to-earth man, self-reliant and Spartan in his daily life. Price's work during the next two decades was to gain steadily in depth and mastery. The Work Projects Administration (WPA) would be, for him, a releasing and stimulating influence, providing materials in generous amounts, especially the large canvases on which he created the powerful paintings which seem to unite man, animals and the earth - always a central preoccupation with Price - in massive, deep-toned shapes. In his last years, these solid forms would loosen and dematerialize; a mysterious and spiritual quality, not seen earlier in his work, would enter it and dominate. Very late in life, his work began to be nationally recognized. Interest in it has continued to grow.

Price was fifty-four when he went to Portland; he had left behind him the cowboy illustrations with which he had started his career in art and was also drawing away from the rapid ingestion of modern masters that had followed his conversion to "serious" painting in California. He could have found no better place than Oregon for that in-



creasingly inward exploration to which his art turned in the last decade of his life. By comparison with other West Coast cities, Portland was, and is, a quiet place; for artists it was noncompetitive, because there were no financial rewards in those early years. It was a congenial atmosphere for Price, and he did his best work there.

Assumptions on the exact effect of the visual environment on the artist and his work are highly speculative. But one can safely say that it does have an effect - it affects us all, sometimes with considerable intensity and with far-reaching results in our lives. Obviously artists respond to their surroundings; and those who use imagery draw from some aspect of their environment, either present or remembered ... Portland itself,

inland from the sea, lies in a river valley, spreading out on both sides of the Willamette River. All is green, rounded, soft, except that, dominating the eastern horizon, is Mount Hood, a majestic snow peak. Farther to the north is Mount Saint Helens, also snow covered through most of the year. As Louis Bunce once said, nature "flows up the streets" in Portland.

Portland was settled by farmers and businessmen who must have noted the domestic ability of the area. They formed a community which claimed, in the 1880s, to be the third richest city per capita in the world. Among the cities on the West Coast, Portland was the earliest, by decades, to develop a cultured leisure class that lived in considerable luxury, traveled to Europe regularly, and formed collections of art purchased in Paris or New York.

Members of this group founded the Portland Art Association in 1892, gave the property and constructed the building in 1905, underwrote the salary for the first teacher in 1908, and continued to support the museum and its school, if somewhat meagerly, for many years ... There was certainly no other significant art activity, and the position of the museum and school was well established by 1928 when Price arrived. Its influence on the small art community in a city of almost 300,000 - was enormous.

The leadership of this tiny operation in a far western city was remarkable. Miss Anna B. Crocker, director of the museum from 1909 to 1936, and Harry Wentz, teacher (in that word's largest meaning) from 1910 to 1941, employed their lives totally and without hesitation for art, communicating its values in the earnest and joyous belief that nothing is more important than art, and that the study of it is educative in the loftiest and fullest sense. Miss Crocker established a foundation of discriminating standards for the young museum, stimulated the minds of students, showed a remarkable openness to modern art, and provided a setting that made the inspired teaching of Harry Wentz possible. He imparted his love of nature and his knowledge of it, his respect for craftsmanship and his own skill in handwork, and, above all, a belief in the intuition - the individual sensibility - when this was supported by continuous mental and manual effort. He was himself a practicing artist, but his teaching gradually absorbed his own work. C. S. Price exerted a similar moral leadership (for such it

must be called) on the group that surrounded him. For those three, art had the attributes of a calling, and a most noble one, well worth a lifetime of effort and study without external rewards - a view that was more widespread, no doubt, when so little was to be gained from the practice of art. In any case, they were the foremost figures in art in Oregon, and from them flowed, one can safely say, the attitudes to art that formed the intellectual and spiritual environment in which most students and artists worked in Portland. That is, a serious artist could hardly be working there in the 1920s and 1930s without responding either to the influences emanating from the museum and its classes, or to C. S. Price and the group who admired him and frequently visited his studio.

Some of Price's group had studios in the same building. Among them was Charles Heaney, who, like Price, made no overt motions toward "success" or recognition. Nevertheless, his work, which has taken several fairly separate and independent paths, established him solidly as one of the noteworthy artists of the region. Heaney's heritage from Price is seen less in his paintings than in his way of life and his attitudes toward his work, toward art.

The art of the Runquist brothers - Arthur and Albert - is always thought of together because they lived and worked together, showed their paintings together, and almost always used the same small, almost square format. Born in 1891 and 1894, they complete the small group of artists, including Price, Heaney, and Amanda Snyder, born in the nineteenth century. Amanda Snyder, like Heaney, was a friend of Price's, and her paintings and collages, especially of birds, show that she responded to his thought and, to some extent, to his style ...

Price, Heaney, Wentz, and the Runquists all grew up in the West. They hardly expected to make a living at their art and they did not, at least not until very late in life. None of them married. They were not group men; they were individualists, able to make a hard choice and live by it, not much troubled by the lack of external supports. It is doubtful that any of them ever thought of going to New York or any other big city to become better known. Nevertheless, they - especially the younger artists - were interested in what was going on in art in New York and Europe and kept