

Chapter 14 - MOUNTAIN AND HOUSE: Icons of Modernism in the Art of C. S. Price by Roger Hull, PhD, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon

Clayton Sumner Price is known for his sensitive paintings of animals and their connectedness to, their embodiment of, the universal flow of life. As Roger Saydack has written, "a pair of animals, often horses, sometimes deer or wolves, is a recurring image in the painting of C. S. Price. An older, protective creature is linked with a younger companion, new to life, full of feeling, eager to learn and to live." In other works, such as those illustrated on this page, animals are equal partners cooperating with a human being, as in the case of Price's teams of horses working together to plow fields or pull wagons loaded with hay. In his attention to and respect for animals, reflecting his early life as a cowboy on the frontier, Price relates in some ways to Franz Marc, the early twentieth-century German painter who helped establish the



The Hay Wagon, 1936, Oil on canvas, 28 x 34 in.,
Portland Art Museum, Oregon, Museum Purchase:
Helen Thurston Ayer Fund, PAM 42.8



Plowing, ca. 1925, Oil on canvas, 30 x 35 3/4 in., private collection of
Arlene and Harold Schnitzer, Photo by Gary Wilson Photo/Graphic

Munich avant-garde group *Der Blaue Reiter*. As Price later would, Marc depicted animals with pantheistic reverence, seeing them as integral to what Price would call "the one big thing" or "the big feeling." Animals embodied a oneness with the cycle and circle of things that human beings had lost.

Less frequently discussed but also central to Price's imagery are mountains and houses, often in combination with each other and with animals. Mountains and houses, like animals, were key images in the German Expressionist *Blaue Reiter* movement, particularly in the work of Marc's older contemporary Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian-born co-founder (with Marc) of *Blaue Reiter*. My essay will focus on the mountain and house as subjects

of profound interest to Price and to modern painters in general, beginning with Cézanne, continuing with the Cubists, and transformed by nature-based Expressionists such as Kandinsky. By drawing on this tradition of modern art's interest in archetypes - mountain and shelter, as well as animal life - Price welded modernist painting as it took root in the Pacific North-west in the 1930s and 1940s to late nineteenth and early twentieth century roots in Europe. And as a friend and mentor of Oregon artists such as Charles Heaney and Amanda Snyder, Price helped establish a mystic modernism that paralleled but significantly differed from the "Northwest Mystics" at work in Seattle in the same period. Artists such as Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, and Morris Graves were inspired by Asia rather than Europe, the misty environs of Puget Sound rather than the inner North American West that Price knew from his early days on the ranges and in the hills of Wyoming and Canada.

In 1927, two years before he moved to Portland from California, Price made a Christmas card (top) to send to his friends and family members. It is a simple blockprint that sets forth several of Price's iconic images –



C. S. Price Christmas Card, 1927

animals, hilly landscape, and house. In the upper portion of the composition, the house on the left and the silhouetted animal on the right are balanced on either side of the summit of the hill. House and horse are given equal emphasis and to a degree are presented as a unified emblem: the line of the sloping roof is continued by the line of the horse's back. A second horse, directly below the house, is a foundation



The Mexican Cart, ca. 1920, Ink on paper, Collection of Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, Gift of Frances Price Cook



Horse, Wagon, and Man, 1923, Ink on paper, Portland Art Museum, Oregon, Bequest of Sybil Emerson, PAM 83.18.1

element for the structure. Animals and domicile are in equilibrium; these animals and this house are elements in a domestic setting and system, the world of human beings and animals interwoven and linked.

This balance is implied in numerous other early drawings and prints by Price, as in the ink drawing *The Mexican Cart* (above) in which a horse-drawn cart in the foreground is balanced by a cluster of vernacular buildings behind and above the horse and cart. Other drawings of horse and cart omit buildings entirely, but the subject itself reinforces our awareness

of Price's concern with the interdependence of horse and humanity, of animal life and human life. In *Horse, Wagon, and Man* (previous page, bottom left), the harnessed horse stands patiently to the left, the man stoops to adjust something near the wheel of the wagon, which in its own way is an architectural construction.

One of the earliest surviving paintings of houses by C. S. Price is the untitled *Riverscape* from about 1912, seen here. In a scene recalling French Barbizon painting, especially the work of Charles Daubigny, Price uses a rich palette of reds, greens, tans, and ochres to render a cluster of architectural structures. Lining the river, they are perhaps boat-houses or fishermen's shanties. They are painted loosely but solidly, with a strong sense of geometric form, in the spirit of French Barbizon paintings, those by Corot as well as Daubigny. The setting is pastoral not mountainous, but the jumble of shanties and the rolling hills beyond the river are parallel and continuous visual segments of the composition. A brushily painted tree hyphenates the houses and the hills. Some twelve years later,



Untitled (Riverscape), ca. 1912, Oil on board, 8 1/4 x 12 in.,
Collection of Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette
University, Salem, Oregon, Gift of Frances Price Cook

in about 1924, while living in Monterey, California, Price again visited the subject of house, hill, and water. The painting is entitled *Coastline* (bottom left), and in this case the water is the Pacific Ocean, the hills are the headlands of the California coast, and the house is an end-gabled structure in the lower left quadrant. As in the Barbizon-like riverscape, architecture and nature share the same palette. The tans and slate grays that comprise walls and roof also comprise the rocky escarpment and bleached grass. But in this work Barbizon painting is less the ancestry than the art of Paul Cézanne. One thinks of his *The Bay, from L'Estaque* (1886; The Art Institute of Chicago), in which cubes of architecture are massed to form a sculptural relief of walls, roofs, and chimney stacks set against the Bay of Marseille and its mountainous far edge. *L'Estaque* on the Mediterranean and the Monterey vicinity on the Pacific are very different settings, and Cézanne's and Price's paintings are in great contrast with each other. The parallel is that Price, like Cézanne, is interested in mass and monumentality of form. Both artists work with the interplay of natural forms such as trees, rocks, and mountains with architectural forms such as houses, stacks, and sometimes roadways.



Coastline, ca. 1924, Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 50 in., Hirshhorn Museum
and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of
Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966, SI 66.4172, Photo by Lee Stalworth