

Chapter 18 - ART MUSEUM & GALLERY SHOWS, CURATOR COMMENTS ABOUT C. S. PRICE ART

Ever “wake up” suddenly to discover somewhat shamefacedly that the pleasant, modest fellow next door was a national celebrity?

This is the way many Portland residents felt when Clayton S. Price, Oregon artist, died the other day and they thus became aware of his genius for color and his uncanny comprehension of modernist painting.

Others, fortunately, were well aware of Price’s work, of his ability to ‘see through the eye’ and to reproduce what he saw and felt on the canvas.

His paintings grace the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Portland and Seattle Art Museums, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, and the Encyclopedia Britannica collection of contemporary American painting.

Art students sought and prized his friendly advice. And the fact that he first felt the creative artistic urge when he was 5 is proof enough that he recognized his star and followed it steadfastly all through the years.

Thus like many another great artist, Clayton Price comes belated into his own. The things of beauty he wrought continue to speak for him. That’s recognition enough for any man.

The preceding text is quoted from the **Oregon Journal** newspaper, May 5, 1950 in an article titled “**Clayton Price, for 70 Years a Painter.**”

C. S. Price had one man and group art museum and gallery showings from 1925 until his death in 1950, and exhibitions of his art continued after his passing. In this chapter we look at these shows and present selected comments from museum curators, critics, gallery owners, and newspaper writers. Readers are encouraged to read the source documents listed at the end of this book for more detailed analysis because of space limitations here. Note that some group art shows with C. S. Price works are not mentioned here and are not listed in the chronology section, with two ex-

ceptions. There was a C. S. Price one-man show at the Beaux Art Gallery, San Francisco, in 1925. Another one-man show of Price’s work was held at the Berkeley League of Fine Arts, Berkeley, California in 1927.

Two Price works (*Mt. Hood* and *The Black Boat*) were included in the third annual exhibition of the Society of Oregon Artists in 1929, held at Meier and Franks Burlington House Galleries. Two other Price works (*Winter* and *Front Street*) were included in the “Oregon Artists” at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1943.

These quotes are from the “C. S. Price Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings 1920-1942”, (February, 1942) by the Portland Art Museum.

“...Price is vastly different from the boy who drew the life of the ranges. In his youth he was concerned with the appearance of things down to the minutest detail. As a mature man he believes still in the value of careful observation and accurate drawing, but his concern is with the truth that hides behind the appearance. This “felt nature of things” is the ultimate goal of the artist, and he believes that it can be reached by study. A person must feel the essence of the object, regardless of what he, as an individual, may feel about the object. A tight and careful drawing may be a part of the study. Finally one reaches something behind the form. The ‘experiments’ are all efforts in that direction, sometimes successful, sometimes not, but always they reflect the authenticity of the search.”

“‘Experiment’ is the word that occurs most often when talking with Price about his painting. He never seems to think of a canvas as a finished piece of work, but rather a record for his own satisfaction, of an experiment in a certain direction. Even where the subject matter is often repeated, as in the horses, each version is felt as a new experience. In no painting by Price is there suggestion of a formula, a short cut to a finished picture. The final painting is

of so little concern to the artist that dozens of his best have been scraped away or painted over.”

The next main show was presented by **Reed College** in Portland, Oregon in 1947. The comments that follow are from the catalog prepared for the show titled “Sixteen by C. S. Price.”

“The style of Price’s work has developed slowly and more or less steadily from realism toward abstraction over the years, but at all times it has remained very close to nature. The newest paintings of Mr. Price, though very far removed from realism, still take as their subject matter the horses, cattle, birds, and mountains which have been his favorites for years. James Thrall Soby, the eminent (New York) art critic, says of Price’s style that ‘his square blocking of forms probably derives from his interest in abstract painting, which he practices upon occasion. The appeal of Price’s paintings is above all Expressionistic Romantic, proceeding from the richly worked pigment and resultant rough sincerity of his compositions’”

And, concerning this show at Reed College, **Lloyd Reynolds** (Associate Professor) wrote in the Reed College Notes (Feb., 1948) the following:

“During Price’s youth and young manhood, when he sketched and painted on the cattle ranges of Wyoming, Montana, and Canada, his style was realistic; he strove to portray the total visual experience of the men and animals in the desert environment. This early work shows exact observation and masterful skill in noting simply and directly the many visual details. The drawing is always certain and the color pure. Although he knew Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell, and painted very much the way they did, Price was dissatisfied even then with the limitations of this style. He was familiar with the painting of the plains Indians and felt that it had meanings that were lost to realism. In 1915 he went to San Francisco and during the winter saw an exhibit of modern French paintings at the Palace of Fine Arts. In 1918 he was again in the Bay region and formed a friendship with Piazzoni, an in-

structor at the California School of Fine Arts. He became acquainted with Matthew Barnes, Armin Hansen, Henry Varnum Poor, Ralph Stackpole, and Ralph Pearson. These men were dissatisfied with the old literal styles of realism and they discussed eagerly the theories of the post-impressionists. The First World War was breaking down the old walls and international cultural influences were again to be felt. In these years Price became familiar with classical Chinese painting; and like the work of the plains Indians, it showed that there was possible in painting, a greater reality than that of cataloging superficial details. The groupings of Price and his friends at Monterey, their discussions and experiments, led to work that aroused but little public interest. The prevailing popular attitude was that Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin were unable to draw and were ignorant of painting technique. But the small group of men at Monterey, isolated though they were, had the satisfaction of mutual confidence and faith in their searching, and they gained encouragement from one another in their struggles to forge the mediums of new vision.

“Returning to Portland in 1929, Price continued his experimentations. In those years he carved small figures of human beings and animals in pine. The carvings were simplified by the cutting tools, and thus details were eliminated. Arranging these among the folds of his paint rags, he used them as subjects. These landscapes with figures were thus simplified to begin with. After many years of close observation and realistic drawing and painting, he could add details wherever needed, but the aim was even greater simplification. Distances were diminished, planes were made more massive, aggressive and recessive colors were relied upon for depth, rather than aerial and linear perspective; and rich impasto, broken color, and rough textures of thick paint replaced the earlier meticulous drawing with diluted pigment.

“I should like to digress for a moment in regard to the beauty of oil paint in and for itself. In watching a painter at work I have

frequently felt that the colors in his palette were far more beautiful in their hues and textures than the colors in his canvass. The gain in creating and organizing the image of the picture often seemed a poor compensation for the deadening of the color that took place in the process of painting. In Price's work, the colors seem to retain the pure brilliance and richness they had when juxtaposed on his palette."

Price's first one-man show at a New York art gallery was in 1949 at the Willard Gallery in New York City. He was honored with brisk sales of his paintings, a small gallery catalog, and praise by New York art critics.

C. S. Price died on May 1, 1950 and the Portland Art Museum held a one-man memorial exhibition in June of 1951 honoring his life's work. We quote extensively here from the catalog that the museum prepared for that event, by **Harris Prior** of the museum staff, followed by Priscilla Colt:

"The range of subjects in the paintings (by Price) is limited. He does not repeat the clichés of a vanished Wild West for public consumption; he does not paint specific events of drama and conflict. Rather, his subjects have a generic quality. Action is subdued; drama played down. His works are quiet, yet implicit with meanings and emotional overtones. Even the cowboy, found infrequently in his work, becomes a farm worker, rather than the dynamic ruffian of the 'Westerns.'

"Animals are the chief persons in these paintings. The life of the cowboy can be a lonely one, and animals can fill some of its emptiness. His horses, cattle, pigs - animals of the ranch - are God's 'critters,' patient, contemplative, long-suffering, like the majority of human beings. Their enemies, the wolves and coyotes, are outcasts, furtive and hunted, but to be pitied; for they suffer from cruel hunger, and persecution by men. The early sketch of a coyote mourning over its dead pups (1908) pulls at one's heart. But overt grief such as this is seldom found in Price's works. Conflict and cruelty had no place in his code. Wars among human beings he found almost inconceivable.

"Through his work and personal example he gives the lie to the long-standing Eastern belief in the depravity of the frontier. His was a gentle, forgiving nature, strong in love of his fellow men; and his animals were perfectly adequate as symbols to express this feeling. Consider the frequent repetition of the motifs of the mare and foal



Coyotes, 1908, 3 7/8 x 5 3/4 in., Portland Art Museum Library, Oregon, private collection, PAML N14 N

and the cow and calf throughout his life. Are these not symbols of maternal love as clearly as the motif of the mother and child itself?

"Price's people are usually shown at work. They don't hunt, fight, frolic, or carouse; they drive cattle, saw wood, pitch hay, follow the plow, even pan for gold. Often they are half-concealed, modest, self-effacing, like the artist himself. Work is one of the simple, hard realities of life to a man like Price.

"Only the Indians among men are shown in full view. The Indian is a kindred spirit. In Price's day he, too, had been domesticated, like the animals. Yet he bore his yoke with dignity and patience, as is shown so well in the great mural '*The Huckleberry Pickers*'.

"Unlike the typical 'western' paintings, Price's works are charged with feeling. In the 'western' all details must be 'correct' and nothing essential to the story may be omitted. It says to the spectator, 'Here are the facts; you make up your own mind.' The artist is a reporter, remaining neutral as to any emotional implications. The arrow about to be shot by the Indian may or may

not pierce the heart of the pioneer the next instant. One never knows the outcome.

"In the paintings of Price's mature period, there are no details, only essences. They say, 'Here is the spirit of the thing and the way I feel about it. Look long and it will move you, too.' Feeling is the thing, not fact but feeling, deep in the soul of mankind; love, fear, humility, patience, grief, joy, devotion, and other nameless emotions which only the right combination of subject and form can evoke.

"To find this form was Price's lifelong search. The evolution is always toward greater monumentality; from small to larger scale, from linear to tonal treatment, from deep space to relief-like depth, from the impressionistic brush stroke to the broad troweling of the palette knife. The detailed naturalism of 'Western' painting is banished forever from his canvas. Even in his early works there is never any crowding. Always he includes only those things essential to the basic idea or feeling. As a result, there is no obscuring of the telling gestures, the characteristic silhouettes, the alert attitudes of the figures, which Price was so skillful in abstracting from nature. The feeding horse, the sucking colt, the cow chewing its cud, the reclining calf - all are reduced to potent symbols.

"Recollected in the tranquility of his later years, the themes take on ineffable meanings so close to the core of life that they call forth an instinctive response even in the untrained observer. This is evidenced by the large number (at least 60) of owners of his paintings in and around Portland, many of whom collect no other artist.

"In the work of the last ten years, he reaches his profoundest expression. Form and subject are joined to a mysticism which, latent in his earlier works, now rapidly unfolds. The Far Northwest has a way of stimulating this. For others have reacted in a similar way to the mountains, the forests, the fogs, and the cold waterways of the region. Intrigued also by the art of the Northwest Indians and of the Orient which he could see in Portland in

originals and reproductions, he begins to rework the old themes and to introduce a few new subjects. The animals and birds become dematerialized and ghost-like. Dream animals, and ascetic heads appear. Color becomes muted; forms vague. He turns his mind inside out onto his canvas. Ceaselessly painting, scraping clean, and starting again, he slashes through all surface appearances, until form and feeling fuse to his satisfaction.

"Always a serious painter, as Price approaches the end of his life his works become heavy with portent. The buzzard appears, the symbol of life, which is renewed through death. No longer the 'West,' but the Far Northwest, is in these works. There at last, in Oregon, Price consummated his lifelong struggle to evoke the unutterable universal theme, the primordial emotion, the monumental form, and a glimpse of the world to come."

Next we present quotes from **Priscilla Colt**, Portland Art Museum Curator, as they were printed in the museum catalog for the memorial exhibit in 1951.

"One wonders what specific beliefs lay behind these (Price's) restrained but deeply religious conceptions. Apparently Price's religious philosophy never took the form of a neatly conceived or verbalized theory. It seems to have evolved from an innate and inviolable goodness and a life often hard, but never embittering. Insistent on the universality of religion, he was tolerant to all its forms. He was well versed in the literature of Christian Science, the Bible, the life and writings of William Blake, and Chinese philosophy. He believed profoundly in the value, for himself at least, of the contemplative renunciatory existence, and felt it was his role as an artist to observe life and to reflect upon it.

"People came to Price's simple studio living quarters in great numbers, so that he was never a recluse; but he was, especially in late years, reluctant to participate actively in the everyday affairs of the world. Throughout his life he was shy, fiercely independent, oblivious to material