

Chapter 7 - REGIONALISM TO ABSTRACTION: A spiritual evolution

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A key figure in Oregon painting, C. S. Price's skill and innovation embodied modern ideals while also paying homage to the Northwest landscape and regional imagery. Price's work parallels a major shift in American art from the traditional, illustrative conventions exhibited in his earliest paintings, to the modern and increasingly abstract approach that characterizes his later work. Early in his career, Price illustrated Western scenes of cowboys, horses, and the landscape of the American West. As he matured, his work increasingly focused upon texture, the relationship between figure and landscape, and the ability to build forms using broad planes of color. This shift is visually evidenced in his later works, many of which were executed as federal commissions for the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, and the Federal Works of Art Project, the FWAP. Price's work during the period of the 1930s is particularly interesting, in that it is the era when his previous experiences in life and art coalesced and he turned toward abstraction as a means to express his concept of nature. By using his WPA artwork as a link, it is easy to trace Price's artistic development from a cowboy artist on the Wyoming range to the fully formed modernist he became in Portland.

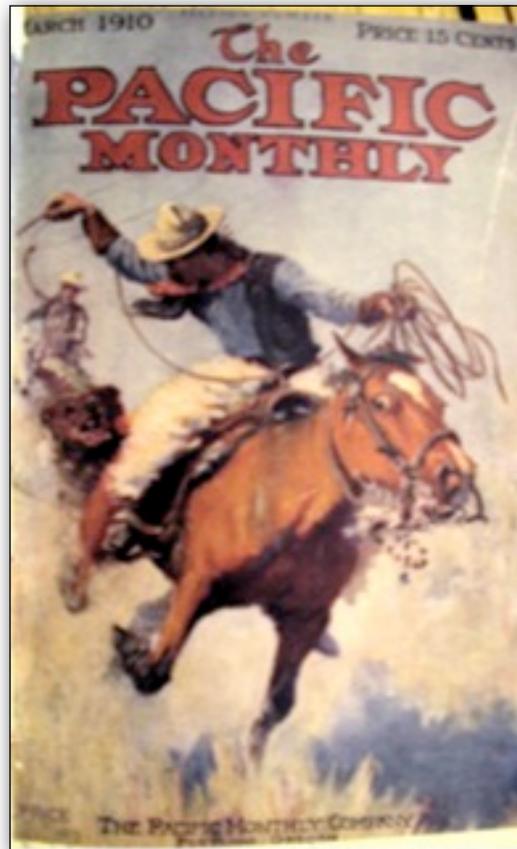
In addition to his artistic talents, Price was known by many to be a highly spiritual man. He was always in search of the "one big thing." In his work

he was able to capture, and communicate to the viewer, subtle and introspective sensations. Price aimed to portray emotions, the majesty of the natural world, and the tangibility of figures. While Price endeavored to recreate nature in his art, his concept of nature had less to do with reproducing an image than it had to do with recreating a physical sensation. Through experimentation with textural, spatial, and compositional qualities, Price strove to create a three dimensional experience upon a two dimensional surface.

Clayton Sumner Price was born in Iowa in 1874. He worked at ranching and tending cattle as his family moved out West, first to Wyoming and then to Canada. His coming of age on the frontier was a solitary experience that informed the rest of his life. The inspiration he gained while driving cattle through the landscape of the West served as the basis of his art even after he settled in Portland. Western

iconography, specifically with regard to the natural world of animals and landscape, is a mainstay in Price's work, even if the manner in which they were depicted had evolved.

Price soon gave up ranching in favor of a career as an artist and moved to Portland in 1909 where he took a job illustrating stories with Russell-like images for Pacific Monthly, the forerunner of what is today known as Sunset magazine. Price contributed to Pacific Monthly for two years, dur-



Cover of The Pacific Monthly,
by C. S. Price, 1910
Photograph by the author

ing which, the magazine published 48 of his illustrations. He utilized his familiarity with the Western experience to satisfy those intrigued by such themes as pioneers, cowboys, and the Wild West. The cover illustration from March 1910 (previous page) in which two cowboys attempt to rope a bear is a prime example of Price's work from this period. Although he was no longer working directly from nature during this time, he drew from his intimate knowledge of the West and infused his imagery with a sensitivity that prefigures his later work.

Ever since attending school in St. Louis, Price vacillated between ranching and art. By 1915 Price had moved to California, where he remained, first in San Francisco and then in Monterey, until moving to Portland a second and final time in 1929. Price was first exposed to modern art movements, specifically modern French painting, at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition

which was held in San Francisco from February 20 through December 4, 1915. The modern offerings at the exhibition, which included work by van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cezanne, expanded Price's awareness of modern art and inspired his attempts to express his perception of the world in paint. The Monterey community in which Price lived from 1918 - 1929 was a rare West Coast enclave of artistic creation and exploration. There Price became friends with two influential groups of artists, the Monterey Group, of which Price was a member, and the Oakland-based Society of Six. He, like his colleagues, interpreted the modern influences to which they were exposed, and showed an increasing interest

in loose brushwork, broad areas of color, and the juxtaposition of planes.

Works such as *Coastline* allude to the influence of modern French artists, Cezanne in particular. Price is less concerned with reproducing the landscape and more interested in experimenting with the way he can structure his image and build form with color. His landscape is not made up of natural and geographical features, but instead consists of a mass assortment of colors. Not concerned with such formal issues as perspective or

rational space, he refuses to rely on traditional sources of light and shadow to convey depth and color variation. His singular focus in portraying the essence of the California coast is upon the layering and juxtaposition of color. In addition to the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition, Price had seen Cézanne's work in San Francisco at the California



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 Stalsworth

Palace of the Legion of Honor's Inaugural Exposition of French Art, held 1924-25, concurrent with his painting *Coastline*. Price completed several commissioned sets of works in the years following his move to the Northwest. Of particular interest among his commissioned works are four paintings at Beach School in North Portland, and a pair at Timberline Lodge, located about 60 miles East of Portland on Mount Hood. These paintings demonstrate not only Price's immense skill as an artist, but also his evolution during the 1930s. These six federally commissioned paintings relate thematically, effectively demonstrate the artist's growth and were done within a relatively short period.