

Paul Missal (1941–)

By Leslie Pugmire Hole

Paul Missal is a classically trained artist who influenced decades of art students after moving to Oregon in the 1970s. He is a co-founder of the cooperative Blackfish Gallery in Portland, a longtime instructor at the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), and an active exhibitor who is gifted in portraiture.

Missal was born on February 21, 1941, in Brecksville, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. As a child, he played cornet in the school band but was slow to discover his artistic talent. He later recalled a day in church, aided by the “miracle” of new glasses, when he had an epiphanic moment of the power of color and texture, watching the resplendently robed priest lift his arms heavenward as light streamed in from the colorful windows.

While attending Ohio State and John Carroll Universities, he found that the academic life was not to his liking, and he took an art class to see if art school would be a suitable alternative. “It was as if someone set me in a dark room and flipped on the light switch,” Missal remembered. “You saw everything fresh, things you never noticed before.”

Missal studied for five years at the classically focused Cleveland Institute of Art before pursuing a master’s degree at Yale University (1968), where the focus on contemporary art made him feel like a fish out of water. Nonetheless, he saw Yale as an opportunity to learn new styles and techniques. It was also during this time that Missal developed an allergy to turpentine and had to teach himself how to paint with acrylics, a water-based medium that even his teachers did not know how to use.

After finishing his degree, Missal returned to Cleveland and taught at the Cooper School of Art in New York City. In 1972, he accepted a position at Portland’s Museum Art School (now the Pacific Northwest College of Art). It was a good time to arrive in Portland. The art school was small and staffed by esteemed teachers, and the city was waking up to its potential as an art-infused metropolis. Soon after his arrival, Missal was taken under the wing of senior faculty instructors Harry Widman and George Johanson, who encouraged him and helped him settle into his position as an instructor of drawing, painting, and design.

During the 1970s, Missal delved into his teaching, which included many portraiture classes because of his classical training, and his own art, which by then focused on still life and narrative subjects. He purchased an old feed store in rural Wilsonville in order to have space to paint, teach, and exhibit. The barnlike structure came in handy, particularly when he painted an almost life-sized draft horse. Missal created *Pete: Study of a Belgian* on a dare from an artist friend, who said Missal should create more art that represented Oregon. The large painting is now in the collection of the Portland Art Museum, along with another that Missal considers his best, a still life of white cups on a black background. “I exhibited it at Blackfish,” he said, “and I was so afraid someone would buy it that I put an enormous price on it. I guess it gives me something to shoot for, realizing I’d done something so good.”

By the late 1970s, Missal and a group of artist friends were deep into the throes of creating Blackfish Gallery, now one of the country’s longest-running artist cooperative galleries. The innovative gallery is less sales-focused than commercial galleries are, and members introduce the work of both fledgling Portland artists and members.

In the ensuing years, Missal has shown his work throughout the region and has painted many high-profile portraits of notables, such as Governor Robert Straub and Hallie Ford—the namesake for the art gallery at Willamette University. He is represented in several museums and galleries, including the Portland Art Museum and Blackfish Gallery, as well as in public and private collections.

Now professor emeritus at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Missal is retired from fulltime teaching. As of 2021, he was conducting outside workshops and evening classes through PNCA’s Continuing Education Department. Just prior to the pandemic, Missal had a fifty-year retrospective show at the Blackfish Gallery, where he continues to exhibit new work.

Sources

"Paul Missal, online collections." Portland Art Museum.

"Painter Paul Missal," Oregon Art Beat, 2009. Video.

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