David McCosh (1903-1981)

David McCosh, an important Oregon painter and influential teacher, was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1903. He spent a year studying liberal arts at Coe College in 1922 and a year later began six years of study at the Art Institute of Chicago, from which he graduated in 1926. In May 1927, while a graduate student at the Art Institute, he won the prestigious John Quincy Adams Fellowship, which enabled him to travel and paint in Europe during the winter of 1927 and most of 1928.

In 1930, while he was painting in Oyster Bay, Long Island, on a Tiffany Foundation fellowship, McCosh met Anne Kutka, a gifted young painter who was also a Tiffany fellow. The two were married in New Mexico in July 1934.

McCosh began teaching in 1932 at the Art Institute and at the Stone City Art colony in Iowa, a summer program organized by his friend Grant Wood. In November, 1934, he accepted an appointment at the University of Oregon, where he taught painting, drawing, and lithography until his retirement in 1970. McCosh died in Eugene in 1981.

While McCosh invested energy and thought into his teaching, painting was the focus of his life. His style changed over his long career—from the post-impressionism of his student days, to the earthy, midwestern regionalism of the 1930s, to highly original Oregon landscapes that had a directness and sense of personal discovery. Despite the style, all of his paintings were based on careful observation. “Learning to paint,” McCosh said, “is learning to see—not to recognize only familiar things.”

For McCosh, new places invariably meant new and fresh “situations,” as he called them, to discover, but his greatest inspiration came from the Oregon landscape. *Night Drawings*, a series of studies of complex landscape situations, addresses fundamental questions: How do I know these things? How do I see them? With carefully placed marks and calligraphic lines, McCosh recreated his visual experience of the dense and entangled vegetation of the Northwest forest, at times deliberate and meticulous and at other times quickly moving with energy and emotional engagement.

McCosh created his most successful paintings when his close analysis of a subject resulted in an empathetic understanding of its essential character. In his late work in particular, he explored the potential of painting to create meaning as poetry and music do, not through a literal description of the world but through the creation of a work of art that states the essence of an experience in a form everyone can share.

McCosh’s work has been included in exhibitions at many museums and galleries, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Maynard Walker Gallery in New York, the Seattle Art Museum, the Portland Art Museum, and the University of Oregon Museum of Art. During the 1930s and 1940s, he was commissioned to paint murals for the 1933 International Exposition in Chicago; at post offices in Kelso, Washington, and Beresford, South Dakota; and for the National Park Service in Washington, D.C. His teaching schedule affected how much time and energy he had for painting, and among his students are influential artists and teachers, including Craig Cheshire, Nelson Sandgren, Tom Hardy, Harry Widman, Rudy Autio, Mark Clarke, and Margaret Coe.

The Jordon Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon holds the McCosh papers and a large collection of his work.

Anne McCosh established the Schnitzer Museum's David John McCosh and Anne Kutka McCosh Memorial Museum Endowment Fund in 1990 to preserve and promote the understanding of David McCosh's work and to support other Museum programs.

Written by Roger Saydack

Further Reading:

Cheshire, Craig "The Sketchbooks of David McCosh." Eugene: University of Oregon Museum of Art, 1994.

McCosh, David, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art.
http://jsma.uoregon.edu/collections/americas-regional-art/david-mccosh/default.aspx.

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