

## A STATEMENT ON HENRY VARNUM POOR AND THE EXHIBITION

With interest in American art between the two world wars at a peak and the current generation of realists thriving, the time is right to re-examine the multifaceted career of a man who was regarded as one of the most important artists and teachers of his generation. That Henry Varnum Poor's work continues to be of interest to a wide variety of people involved in the history, making and criticism of American art is demonstrated by the enthusiasm and support for a Poor retrospective expressed by Raphael Soyer, Isabel Bishop, Jack Levine, William King, Al Blaustein, Lloyd Goodrich and Clement Greenberg. All of them share with the organizers of the exhibition a desire to bring together in one place the best of Poor's work, much of it now inaccessible and scattered across the country. By doing this we hope to offer what Mr. Greenberg calls "a service to the life of art in this country in bringing his (Poor's) art to the attention of the public in a broad way."

Hardly another figure in American art approaches Poor's versatility. Beginning as a painter he turned to ceramics in 1920 and by 1929 had established an international reputation as a potter and as a creator of ceramic architectural ornaments and fixtures. These related to his passion for designing and building houses which began with his own house in 1920 in a rustic French style and ultimately included a dozen residences in his own concrete block and glass venacular for such patrons as John Houseman, Burgess Meredith, and Maxwell Anderson. To complement the sweeping interiors of these houses Poor created handcrafted furniture.

In the early 1930's Poor turned to fresco painting, a medium few Americans have mastered. His murals for the Department of Justice are among the best products of the Federal Arts Project. Composed for almost impossible architectural spaces, they won for him the commission for the Land Grant Frescoes at Penn State University, the bold imagery and creative composition of which received international acclaim in 1940.

All the while Poor continued to produce oil paintings of a wide variety of subjects, perhaps excelling in still-lives and figure paintings even though landscapes constituted a major part of his work. He drew endlessly either in ink, sometimes with a matchstick instead of a pen, or in pastels which he made himself. His shows at the Montross Gallery and later at the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery were well received by such critics as Henry McBride, Edward Alden Jewell, and Emily Genauer.

Poor was also a talented writer, publishing articles on art and art history throughout his life. He authored two monographs, including one on pottery which has always enjoyed a good reputation among ceramists. The eloquence and keen intelligence expressed in his writing, combined with his great personal warmth, brought him the admiration and friendship of artists as different in style and temperament as Marcel Duchamp, Edward Hopper, Abraham Rattner, Ben Shahn and Edwin Dickinson. When Raphael Soyer organized a group of realist painters who were concerned about the increasing dominance of abstraction in the early 1950s, they chose Henry Varnum Poor to edit their publication, Reality, A Journal of Artists' Opinions.

His intellectual approach to painting and design, so evident in his private journals and published writings, contributed much to his success as a teacher beginning at Stanford University in 1912 and continuing at The Skowhegan School which he co-founded in 1946. He later taught for several years at Columbia University and spent a year as painter in residence at the American Academy in Rome.

There is no simple explanation why an artist of Poor's stature and substance has slipped so far from public view and current favor, and perhaps, as Jack Leving suggests, no rational one. Although Poor was at least to some extent one of the victims of the tidal wave of Abstract Expressionism, there are other factors less easy to identify.

Surely one of them is the difficulty we have in classifying Poor's work. It belongs to no particular movement; conversely, it is neither as saliently unique as Hopper's nor as idiosyncratic as Benton's or Burchfield's. This has made for a lack of clear followers or adherents. Poor intellectually deplored Regionalism and American Scene painting, but his own work could be self-consciously American and overtly anecdotal. Ironically, these were the very qualities which tended to be admired before the War and Poor's pictures in that vein found their way into major museum collections and the pages of leading journals.

His best landscape, still-life, and figure paintings, like his pottery, are unpretentious but powerful, intimate yet impressive. These should form the basis of his reputation. The synthesis of an empirical approach to nature and a strong abstract sense of design in the interpretation of it which characterizes Poor's style recalls Cezanne whom he greatly admired as he did Matisse and Picasso. Beneath the all-American surface are European roots set down when he was a student in London and Paris.

It is significant that when Poor returned to serious painting in 1929, after a decade devoted to ceramics, he sailed for France. The antithetical combination of American frontiersman and continental sophisticate is evident in his work. The same characteristics may be seen in literary figures of his generation, such as Hemingway to whom Poor has been compared by many who knew him.

In bringing together five specialists to examine the various aspects of Poor's career under the general guidance of an eminent art historian who knew him well, the Museum of Art at Penn State plans to produce both a visually exciting exhibition and a catalogue which will address the many problems raised by the most versatile and occasionally paradoxical of artists. We are pleased to have an opportunity to offer the proper reassessment that the work and former stature of Henry Varnum Poor demand.