

Emily Farnham Remembers Hans Hofmann

BY DEBORAH J. CARR

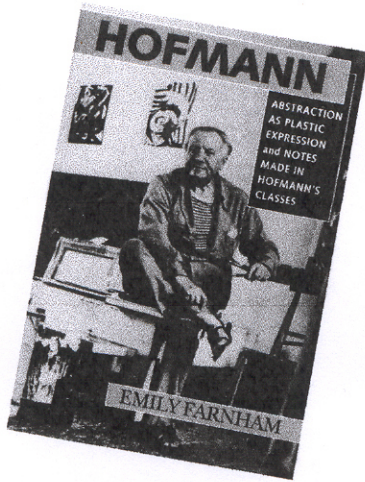
"Art leads to a more profound concept of life, because art itself is a profound expression of feeling. The artist is born, and art is the expression of his overflowing soul. Because his soul is rich, he cares comparatively little about the superficial necessities of the material world; he sublimates the pressure of material affairs in an artistic experience."

— HANS HOFMANN

In her new book *Hofmann: Abstraction as Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes*, Emily Farnham reflects on her classes with Hans Hofmann, one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, whose style was an inspiration for Abstract Expressionism.

A fixture on the international art scene at the turn of the century, Hofmann met and was influenced by Picasso, Braque and Matisse while he was studying in Paris. He emigrated to New York in 1932, when the environment in Munich became increasingly hostile to artists and intellectuals. Peggy Guggenheim arranged his first exhibition in New York, which was held at the Art of This Century Gallery in 1944.

The Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts opened in New York in 1934, and from 1935-1958, his summer school in Provincetown was a mecca for artists on the Cape. In his catalog essay for *The Provocative Years: 1935-1945*, Gerome Kamrowski noted that "The Hofmann School in Provincetown had the intense studio concentration balanced with the sensual pleasures of the Cape . . ." During a time when most artists were skeptical of the validity of abstract art, the Hofmann School attracted



collectors, critics, writers, dealers, galleries, and other art schools and artists to Provincetown.

Hofmann confronted prejudice about the meaning and understanding of abstract art and transcended misconceptions about the way it could be taught. Lillian Orlosky, who curated the 1990 exhibition, said in her catalog essay, "By demonstrating how volumes and planes move in and out of space on their own axis to create a new and pulsating phenomenon on the picture plane, Hofmann was able to make the artist aware of the existence of positive and negative space and of their equal importance. What Hofmann called the 'Search for the Real' guided the artist's intellect and emotions toward a greater pictorial expression and heightened artistic experience."

Emily Farnham, who is now in her 80s, was 17 years old when she began her art studies at the Cleveland School of Art, and later earned her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at Ohio State University. She witnessed some of the major art developments of the 20th century, and during her years in Provincetown was a part of one of the world's most renowned art colonies.

An active, vibrant and gracious woman, she has had a distinguished career as a painter, writer and art historian. She was invited to join PEN, an association of prominent writers and editors, when her biography *Charles Demuth: Behind A Laughing*

Mask was nominated for a National Book Award. She studied with Hans Hofmann in New York and in Provincetown, and reminisces about those days as if they were yesterday. She returned to live in Provincetown almost 20 years ago, and has been working on this book for the last five years.

Hofmann was the last, and she says, the most effective of the 24 art teachers with whom she studied. Hofmann's teaching was essential to her understanding of abstract art and pivotal in her stylistic transition from realism to expressionism. Dr. Farnham's book is a scholarly and affectionate account of her days as a Hofmann student. Her discussion of Hofmann relies on personal experience as well as scholarly perspective. Her description of the development of painting from the Renaissance to the early 19th century, to the abstract painting of the early 20th century, puts Hofmann's painting and teaching in a historical context.

Farnham's book presents many original notes from Hofmann's classes 50 years ago: "He had us draw the same still life day after day until we finally 'saw it.' It is fantastic to understand what happens if you continue to draw the same thing. You finally see the essence. It is no longer realistic, but it becomes an abstraction. There is a beautiful relationship between planes, shapes, color spots."

Emily Farnham attributes her ability "to see well" to her years of study with Hofmann and believes that "learning how to see" could take a lifetime, but Hofmann's teaching techniques, and his own theory of art encouraged his students "to see."

She writes, "Hofmann developed his theory of plasticity to help painters manipulate pictorial means (prints, lines, planes and colors) so as to produce this duality of space and flatness. Plasticity, in his theory, refers to the lively movement of compositional flat areas toward and from