FROM THE ARCHIVES: HANS HOFMANN: THE PEDAGOGICAL MASTER

By Irving Sandler

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Irving Sandler died on June 2, 2018 at the age of 92. A frequent contributor to A.i.A., Sandler was best known for chronicling the rise and the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism. One of his most significant articles for A.i.A., the impact of Hans Hofmann, who taught such artists as Helen Frankenthaler and Allan Kaprow, thereby influencing not only second- and third-generation Ab Ex painters but other developments in American art after 1945. Sandler highlights Hofmann's interest in the deep traditions of European art, and his belief that the best abstract painting continues its manner of modeling the world. "It was in this cubic quality, this illusion of mass and space, that the man-centered humanist tradition—or what could be saved of it—was perpetuated," Sandler wrote, summarizing a central tenet of Hofmann's teachings. The full essay, from our May/June 1973 issue, is presented below. In June we re-published Sandler's essay "The New Cool-Art," on the rise of Minimalism. —Eds.

As both a painter and a teacher Hans Hofmann played a germinal part in the development of advanced American art for more than thirty years. This article will deal only with his pedagogical role—a topic chosen with some trepidation, for to treat an artist as a teacher is often thought to demean his stature as an artist. The repute of Hofmann's painting has suffered in the past because of this bias, but no longer, since he is now firmly and deservedly established as a pathfinding master of Abstract Expressionism.

As early as the 1920s, many Americans, among them Carl Holty, Worth Ryder and Glenn Wessels, studied with Hofmann in Munich. Later, these and other early students became influential artist-teachers who transmitted Hofmann's ideas to their students who did the same in turn—through generations and in widening circles—so that Hofmann's approach continues to shape studio disciplines today, often without students or even their teachers knowing the source of what is taught.

Hofmann's impact was at its strongest from 1933 to 1958 when he ran his own schools in New York and Provincetown. In 1937, almost half of the charter members of the newly founded American Abstract Artists—virtually the entire vanguard of the thirties—had attended his classes. Moreover, during the 1950s, his ex-students comprised the

bulk of the so-called second generation of the New York School. If a teacher's stature is measured by the number of his students who achieve national and international renown in their own right, then that of Hofmann is without equal. In 1963, William Seitz of the Museum of Modern Art was able to select a show of outstanding quality consisting of works by fifty of Hofmann's ex-students.[1]

The direct imprint of Hofmann's aesthetics on his own generation of painters–the Abstract Expressionists–is difficult to gauge. None of the leading figures were enrolled in his classes. Moreover, the heavy, mystical tenor of his teaching on the one hand, and on the other hand, its emphasis on systematic picture-making and professionalism were at odds with a time when ideological precepts of any kind and notions of expertise were considered of little import, particularly when compared to painting as a metaphor of existential being.

However, Hofmann's ideas appear to have had some effect, at least on critics who acted to a degree as spokesmen for the Abstract Expressionists. Clement Greenberg wrote in 1945: "Hans Hofmann is in all probability the most important art teacher of our time. . . . [His] insights into modern art . . .have gone deeper than those of any other contemporary. He has, at least in my opinion, grasped the issues at stake better than did Roger Fry and better than Mondrian, Kandinsky, Lhote, Ozenfant, and all the others who have tried to 'explicate' the recent revolution in painting."[2]

Greenberg went on to say that he "owes more to the initial illumination received from Hofmann's lectures than to any other source."[3] Indeed, Greenberg's central thesis was anticipated by Hofmann's insistence that "the difference between the arts arises because of the difference in the mediums of expression, and in the emphasis induced by the nature of each medium [which] has its own order of being."[4] The other leading art critic of Greenberg's generation, Harold Rosenberg, held Hofmann in just as high esteem. In all likelihood, Rosenberg's conception of "action painting" had some roots in Hofmann 's idea of painting as "push and pull."[5]

The systematic and theoretical elements of Hofmann's teaching that put off the Abstract Expressionists were precisely those which had appealed to the vanguard of the 1930s. The earlier generation's need was to join the mainstream of modern art; to master the architectonic drawing of Picasso and the explosive color of Matisse; to learn how to make a modern picture–in a word, the basics. Hofmann could provide both the techniques and a convincing rationale for their use. Stressing the self-sufficiency

(indeed, the sanctity) of art, his theorizing was most attractive to the ideology-prone artists of the Great Depression who had grown disenchanted with politics and who desired to justify themselves in the face of Social Realist and Regionalist dogmas. As Sam Hunter wrote. Hofmann's students could not help but be bolstered by his "deep commitment to painting per se at a time when art was being devalued by social action."[6] In the 1950s, Hofmann appealed most to young artists who admired the older Abstract Expressionists but who put greater emphasis on "good" painting, on professionalism and traditional values.

What then did Hofmann teach? [7] To summarize briefly, the painter had to take into account at one and the same time three interacting factors: nature and its laws; the medium and its inherent qualities; and the artist's psychological, spiritual, intuitive and imaginative feeling into both. The main activity in Hofmann's classes was drawing from a live model or a still life. But the subject was not to be dumbly copied. "There are bigger things to be seen in nature than the object."[8] The problem was to translate the volumes and voids of visual phenomena into planes of color in accord with the two-dimensional nature of the picture surface. And then, the crucial action was to structure these planes into "complexes," every element of which was to be reinvested with a sense of space—depth or volume—without sacrificing physical flatness. To achieve this simultaneous two and three-dimensionality, Hofmann devised the technique of "push and pull"—an improvisational orchestration of areas of color, or as he liked to put it, an answering of force with counterforce. "The essence of my school: I insist all the time on depth. Suggestion of depth. . . No perspective [or modeling which violates two-dimensionality] but plastic depth." [9]

As his former student Allan Kaprow summed it up: Despite their diversity, "all paintings submit to certain basic laws. Each picture is an organic whole whose parts are distinct but relate strictly to the larger unit. Since the painting surface, being flat, is only a metaphoric field for activity, its nature as a metaphor must be preserved. That is to say, an exact balance struck between the planar uniformity of the canvas and the organic (i.e. three-dimensional) nature of the event set into operation on it. This, we found out, was not easy at all . . . so this part-to-whole problem occupied the class continually and further broke down into a study of special particulars of all painting; color, that is, hue, tone, chroma, intensity, its advancing and receding properties, its expansiveness or contractiveness, its weight, temperature, and so forth; and, in the area of so-called form, the way in which these act together in points, lines, planes, and volumes."[10]

Over the years, there seems to have been some change in emphasis in Hofmann's teaching. Earlier, he stressed drawing, using analytic cubism as a kind of basic grammar.[11] Indeed, Holty recalled that for a time in the mid-twenties, Hofmann "was so engrossed with the beauties of drawing then that he went so far as to remark on one occasion 'that once we had really gotten into the whole world of drawing, we wouldn't even want to paint for a long time.' Nevertheless his painting instruction was notable."[12] Kaprow, a student in the late 1940s, wrote: "Drawing was to painting as nature in the long run was to Art, a preparation and the source."[13]

Later in his teaching career, Hofmann was occupied more with painting as "a forming with color," the contrasting of planar color areas to create volumetric or "plastic" color, an approach that had its source in the art of Cezanne (always an exemplar to Hofmann). It must be stressed that the interaction of color was primary, the opposite of filling in linear diagrams with colors, producing a "bright Cubism," in which color was subordinate to drawing. (Hofmann's conception of "plastic" color differs from the "impressionist" color field ideas that dominated abstract painting in the 1960s. As I have written elsewhere, field painting now appears to be outworn. If this is so, then Hofmann offers a viable alternative, one reason perhaps for the renewed interest in him at this time.)

However, whether the emphasis was on drawing or color, Hofmann insisted that the painting be totally activated. As Greenberg remarked: "Klee and Soutine were perhaps the first to address the picture surface consciously as a responsive rather than an inert object, and painting itself as an affair of prodding and pushing, scoring and marking, rather than simply inscribing or covering. Hofmann has taken this approach much further than they and made it do much more. His paint surfaces *breathe* as no others do. . . . And it is thanks in part to Hofmann that the 'new' American painting in general is distinguished by a new liveliness of surface."[14]

In his classes Hofmann focused on the mechanics of evoking the third dimension, but that was only the means of achieving spiritual syntheses, for suggested space, not being a tangible pictorial property, was trans-material. The greater part of his writing is concerned such dialectics—a kind of aesthetic Hegelianism. For example, in 1932, Hofmann wrote that "the relation of two given realities always produces a higher, a purely spiritual third . . . [which] manifests itself as pure effect."[15]

Moreover, Hofmann's metaphysics conceived of a painting achieved by the push-and-pull process as a metaphor for the workings of the universe visualized as an organic

field of forces or motile galaxies (read "complexes"), all suspended in tension. At the same time, because of the implied movement, the picture could simulate "life." Hofmann's absolute faith in art as the revelation of spiritual and universal reality caused him to teach with powerful conviction, deeply impressing many of his students.

There are almost as many opinions concerning what was of greatest significance in Hofmann's teaching as there are ex-students. Certainly a considerable number were sustained most by his exalted cosmology—even believing it to be a kind of gospel. Others were not so impressed or understood it only vaguely, one reason being that Hofmann's English was not easy to grasp (and it has been said, neither was his German). However, nearly all claimed to have learned a great deal from his nonverbal demonstration of his principles. Glenn Wessels recalled that Hofmann's "teaching was broad. . . . But it was also carefully and exhaustively specific when it came to the particular problem of a particular piece of work which a student had in hand. H[ofmann]'s corrections and diagrams—his graphic-analytic sketches on the edges of the charcoal paper—were most vivid expressions of the detailed application of his broad principles to specific problems."[16]

As important to students was Hofmann's ability to criticize the work of each in its own terms—from within its intentions and premises. Richard Stankiewicz wrote: "I suppose the most remarkable thing to me about his instruction was his phenomenal capacity for sympathy and empathy with his students which enabled him to address each individual."[17] Bolstering this faculty of Hofmann's was his conviction that the "psychological" meaning of art was at least as important as the "plastic." In a talk to the American Abstract Artists in 1941, he said that the psychological content of a painting issued from the artist's attraction to particular pictorial elements, which if truly "creative" (one of his favorite words), could not be predetermined. Such empathy was so vital that it "surpasses the limits of construction and calculation. . . . I consider for this reason, every theory of art not of much value."[18] Greenberg observed: "Hofmann drummed into his students that science and discipline which have not become instinct are cramping rather than enabling factors."[19]

Hofmann's elasticity, his capacity to foster the personal qualities of his students' works, gave rise to a proliferation of styles. This had an added increment, as Michael Goldberg recalled: "There were so many different approaches to painting and drawing going on side by side and you had the feeling anything was possible—Hofmann created this feeling—how or why I couldn't describe—but it surely was the key to the

excitement of the school."[20]

Goldberg's remark points to another catalyst for intense creative work—the force of Hofmann's personality. The man was an attractive figure—robust and warm, enthusiastic, expansive and assured, able to play a commanding paternal role and simultaneously to treat his students as colleagues. Furthermore, he had the impressive aura of history. Born in 1880, Hofmann had lived in Paris from 1904 to 1914—the heroic decade of twentieth-century art; had been intimate with the innovators of Fauvism and Cubism; had learned of their ideas at first hand, possibly even contributing some of his own; and as early as 1915, had opened his first school in Munich, soon to become world famous.

Larry Rivers caught some of the quality of Hofmann's charisma in recounting that "When he came around to look at the work he was relaxed enough to beef up the timid hearts and pompous, blustering and egocentric enough to make every fiber of the delusions of grandeur puff and puff and puff up until you saw clearly your name in the long line from Michelangelo to Matisse . . . to Hofmann himself . . . he had a way of making art seem *glamourous* and meaningful and what is there in life that can compare with its glories etc. etc."[21]

Many students recalled that Hofmann's greatest contribution to their education was his ability to create a charged atmosphere, as Robert Richenburg put it, to transform "his classes into energy situations within which students were able to learn more from each other rather than from himself."[22] This gave rise to a strong family spirit which was perpetuated outside of the school situation. A manifestation of its intensity with the inauguration in 1952 of a cooperative gallery by a number of Hofmann's ex students —"the circle of the Hip," as Kaprow called them [23]— and named Hansa after their master. The gallery was a vital focal point of the second generation of the New York School. Its two directors were Richard Bellamy and Ivan Karp—additional testimony to the power of Hofmann and his students to attract and nurture remarkable people in the visual arts.

It should be mentioned that the Hofmann School had its share of deadwood—rich old ladies, who to their credit helped defray the costs of maintaining many students on scholarships, and loners who did not participate much in the activities of the school, mostly veterans of World War II who as artists considered themselves mature enough to pursue independent artistic careers but who were enrolled in order to qualify for the benefits of the G.I. Bill. There was, moreover, a negative aspect to Hofmann's

teaching, particularly in the 1950s. Despite the variety of styles in which his students worked, many—probably too many—tried to extend his own abstract modes, for Hofmann followed many directions at once. Yet only a few achieved personal styles, the rest lapsing into what Leo Steinberg called Hofmannerism. It appears that Hofmann's paternalistic side, though benevolent, could be so overwhelming that it curbed moves to independence or made the very difficult.

Aside from the matter of Hofmann's contribution to the artistic development of individual students or, indirectly, of their students, there remains the issue of hi more general influence on the evolution of American art, or on that slice of it (certainly the most important historically, if not the largest) created by his students, colleagues, acquaintances, and those who might only have been inspired by his writings and paintings.

Without question, Hofmann's ideas were a major impetus to avant-garde or venturesome art for some three decades. At the same time—and paradoxically—his native or, more accurately, conservationist, particularly on the second generation of the New York School. In this, Hofmann was related to de Kooning, and poles apart from Still and Newman and, to a lesser extent, Rothko and Pollock. Indeed, Hofmann and de Kooning considered themselves the heirs of European modernism (and it may be significant that both were born and had studied abroad). Their pictures, even at their most abstract, retain a sense of figure or landscape, of pictorial depth, of Cubist-inspired relational design and of painterly finesse—all of which can be considered traditional.

Hofmann encouraged professionalism; as Thomas B. Hess wrote, he "convinces his students of the existence of certain Platonic verities; there is such a thing as the Good Painting; a novice's efforts should aspire to it. . . . In the best meaning of the term,the Hofmann School is an Academy—a temple in which mysteries and standards are preserved."[24] Hofmann did value the always the spiritual and the free; yet as Kaprow remarked, if there was always the "premise that art could not be taught . . . its means and conditions could."[25]

Hofmann believed that his aesthetics had been practiced, whether consciously or not, by all great artists in the past, and to illustrate that in class, he analyzed reproductions of old master paintings, thus immersing his students in the stream of Western art. Moreover, his emphasis on drawing from the model, or at least with

nature in mind, probably helped foster a tendency toward figurative art on the part of many of his ex-students in the 1950s. In retrospect, this, appears conservative, although at the time, the participants felt themselves to be in the vanguard.

An even greater stimulus to traditionalism was Hofmann's insistence on pictorial volume and depth. To be sure, the Renaissance "box" was to be flattened, rendered modern, but then, the picture plane had to be made *cubic* (which as Vytlacil asserted in conversation must not be confused with Cubist).[26] It was in this cubic quality, this illusion of mass and space, that the man-centered humanist tradition—or what could be saved of it—was perpetuated. To my knowledge, this was not explicitly taught by Hofmann, but it was so implicit in his aesthetics that it probably exerted a powerful appeal.

Perhaps the best summary of Hofmann's radical-conservative influence was written by Kaprow: "We were also put in touch with a notion foreign to our soil until then that our work was a Destiny, but one that had a time-honored practical method, rigorous but clear, and in no way antithetical to the idea of the New. Thus, at one stroke we were confronted with a metaphysics and a technique, a sense of a living past and an involvement with the moment."[27]

Endnotes

1. The fifty artists in Seitz's show were: Robert Beauchamp, Nell Blaine, Cameron Booth, Fritz Bultman, Nicolas Carone, Giorgio Cavallon, Perle Fine, Jean Follett, Miles Forst, Mary Frank, Helen Frankenthaler, William Freed, Jane Freilicher, Paul Georges, Michael Goldberg, Robert Goodnough, John Grillo, John Haley, Paul Harris, Julius Hatofsky, Dorothy Heller, Carl Holty, Alfred Jensen, Wolf Kahn, Allan Kaprow, Karl Kasten, Albert Kotin, Lee Krasner, Linda Lindeberg, Michael Loew, Ede Loran, Mercedes Matter, George McNeil,Jan Müller, Louise Nevelson, Robert De Niro, George Ortman, Stephen Pace, Felix Pasilis, Robert Richenburg, Larry Rivers, Ludwig Sander, Richard Stankiewicz, Joseph Stefanelli, Myron Stout, Albert Swinden, Anne Tabachnick, Vaclav Vytlacil,
Glenn Wessels and Wilfred Zogbaum. At the time of the show, Seitz asked the participants to fill in questionnaires concerning Hofmann's contributions to their careers. This Hofmann Students Dossier, 1963, was of great value in the formulation of this article.

2. Clement Greenberg, "Art," The Nation, Vol. 160, No. 16 (April 21, 1945), p. 469.

3. Ibid., p. 469.

4. Hans Hofmann, “Painting and Culture” (as communicated to Glenn Wessels), Fortnightly, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 11, 1931); reprinted in Hans Hofmann, Search for the Real, edited by Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes Jr., (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1967), p. 57.

5. See Clement Greenberg, “Hans Hofmann: grand old rebel,” Art News, Vol. 57, No. 9 (January, 1959); and Hans Hofmann, Paris: Editions Georges Fall, 1961; and Harold Rosenberg, “Hans Hofmann: nature into action,” Art News, Vol. 56, No. 3 (May, 1957); “Hans Hofmann’s ‘Life’ class,” Portfolio and Art News Annual, No. 6 (Autumn, 1962); “Editorial,” Art News, Vol 65, No. 2 (April, 1966); “Homage to Hans Hofmann,” Art News, Vol. 65, No. 9 (January, 1967); “Hans Hofmann and the Stability of the New,” New Yorker, Vol. 39, No. 37 (November 2, 1963); and “Teaching of Hans Hoffman,” Arts, Vol. 45, No. 3 (December, 1970).

6. Sam Hunter, Hans Hofmann (New York: Abrams, 1963), p.16.

7. A comprehensive discussion of Hofmann’s aesthetics is presented in William C. Seitz, Hans Hofmann (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963).

8. Hans Hofmann, quoted in Frederick S. Wight, Hans Hofmann (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1957), p. 23.

9. Ibid., p. 24.

10. Allan Kaprow, “Hans Hoffmann” (Obituary), The Village Voice, Vol. 11, No. 19 (February 24. 1966), p. 2.

11. Glenn Wessels, Hofmann Students Dossier.

12. Carl Holty, Hofmann Students Dossier.

13. Kaprow, “Hans Hofmann” (Obituary), p.2.

14. Greenberg, “Hans Hofmann: grand old rebel,” pp. 29, 64.

15. Hans Hofmann, “Plastic Creation,” (translated from the German by Ludwig Sander), mimeographed typescript, p. 4; published in The League, Winter, 1932-33.

16. Wessels, Hofmann Students Dossier.

17. Richard Stankiewicz, Hofmann Students Dossier.

18. Hans Hofmann, Address delivered during the annual exhibition of the American Abstract Artists at the Riverside Museum, mimeographed typescript, Riverside Museum, New York, February 16, 1941, pp. 2-3.

19. Greenberg, "Hans Hofmann: grand old rebel"' p.29.

20. Michael Goldberg, Hofmann Students Dossier.

21. Larry Rivers, Hofmann Students Dossier.

22. Robert Richenburg, Hofmann Students Dossier.

23. Kaprow, "Hans Hofmann" (Obituary), p. 1.

24. Thomas B. Hess, "U.S. painting: some recent directions," 25th Art News Annual, Vol. 25, 1956, pp. 92-93.

25. Kaprow, "Hans Hofmann" (Obituary), p. 2.

26. Vaclav Vytlacil, Conversation with the author, New York, May 31, 1972.

27. Kaprow, "Hans Hofmann" (Obituary). p. 1.