

Christian Martinus Susseg Midjo

April 8, 1880 — December 29, 1973

Professor Midjo, native of Trondheim, Norway, taught drawing and painting at Cornell for thirty-seven years, from 1909 to 1946. He died in Malvik, Norway, at the age of ninety-three. He is affectionately remembered by students of that era and by many friends as a most stimulating and demanding teacher, a dedicated and imaginative painter, and not least, as a complex and fascinating personality.

At an early age he commenced to draw and paint strange compositions based on impressions received while endlessly sailing in all weathers in and out of the wildly romantic fjords around Trondheim in a small boat, either alone or with his younger brother Arne, who later became a sea captain and an American citizen, serving in the United States Navy in World War II. Throughout his long life Midjo's painting was to reflect his early sensitivity to the more awesome aspects of nature, the feeling of eerie light and glacial spaces peculiar to the land of the midnight sun. The lonely wanderer, wayfarer, navigator, or mountaineer was to become for him in later years a recurrent theme.

At the age of eighteen he was awarded the Gregus Jacobsens Legat, a scholarship offered by the Norwegian government for five years of art study abroad. He chose to work at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where he achieved distinction, receiving in 1903 a diploma and medal from the hand of King Christian IX, as well as money for further travel and study.

A few years later he was appointed an instructor at Cornell on the recommendation of Professor Olaf Brauner, then chairman of the Department of Fine Arts and one of the first practicing artists to hold a post in an American university.

Bringing with him the European tradition that included a fastidious and elegant appearance in the studio, Midjo was an immediate success. He was known as a man of few words; actually at that time he was a man of few English words who found that a radiant smile and an eloquent gesture or two went quite far as teaching aids. The students became accustomed to Midjo's occasionally seizing a large brush and rapidly finishing their paintings before their eyes. Accustomed to great loyalty on the part of his students, he grew to expect it, but was surprisingly tolerant of nonconformists. He was an enthusiastic and resourceful teacher.

With his wife, the former Alcinda Cummings, a talented and accomplished violinist, he lived for a time in a converted church in Bainbridge, New York.

In these early days Midjo's blithe spirit and sense of humor endeared him to his friends and their children, whom he entertained with stories and antics worthy of a great clown. He had in his repertoire a delightful performance on imaginary skis in which he pretended to lose one ski with ludicrous consequences. He did excellent impersonations including a memorable one of a very drunk Charlie Chaplin.

But Midjo's real energies were devoted to his painting, at which he worked incessantly, striving to clarify his ideas and climbing to new heights of discovery as the light was revealed. Having had successful one-man shows in Hamburg, Washington, and the Addison Gallery of American Art at Andover, Massachusetts, he turned his back on the world of exhibitions, dealers, museums, and critics, painting only to please himself and becoming increasingly difficult to please. He habitually destroyed those paintings of his that did not meet his exacting standards.

He did figure compositions, landscapes, still lifes, and a great many portraits. He painted the portraits of Professors Harry Porter Weld and Edward Bradford Titchener that hang in Uris Hall; George Lincoln Burr, whose portrait is in the White Historical Library; Professor Alexander Drummond; Professor Frederick Marcham; and Dr. Anders Wedborg of the University of Stockholm. He also painted a portrait of Jerome "Brud" Holland, then a Cornell football player who later became a university president and ambassador to Sweden. Other portraits include those of Mrs. Frank Morse, Mrs. Richard Robinson, Mrs. Martin Samson, Sr., and "Dean" Carman, for many years the custodian of White Hall, then the location of the College of Architecture. The Telluride Association owns six western landscapes painted by Midjo while he was artist in residence at Deep Springs College, California. A large and colorful painting by Midjo of shore birds hangs in the town hall of Cayuga Heights. Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Dannenberg of San Francisco, who are avid collectors of Midjo's paintings, have donated several of them to Father Flanagan's Boys' Home in Boys' Town, Nebraska, to create a memorial to the artist.

After retirement, Midjo went to California, spending six years at Oakland and later moving to Sacramento, where a friend from Cornell days built him a studio. In 1961 he returned to his native Trondheim and made his home with his brother Arne, who also built him a studio. He continued to paint until the last year of his life, though he remarked from time to time, "The light is not what it used to be."

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