

Joseph Mellor Hanson

December 10, 1900 — July 2, 1963

J. M. Hanson, painter and draftsman, was born on the family farm in the West Riding of Yorkshire, England. Art claimed him early; he began at fifteen. Evening drawing classes prepared him for the Halifax School of Art which he entered, as beneficiary of a McRae Scholarship, at nineteen and from which, a highly successful student, he graduated in 1924.

The years from 1925 to 1935 were spent in Paris, where he was first student and then assistant in the atelier of Othon Friesz. There were poverty and early frustration, but also there was personal development, and by 1928 he had progressed far enough to participate in the Salon des Indépendants and to present a one-man exhibition at the Galerie "Mots et Images." This was the beginning; he continued to paint and to exhibit throughout his life.

During these years in Paris Hanson was associated in one way or another with several of the more important men of the period, Andre L'Hôte, Fernand Léger, Jean Hélion, as well as Othon Friesz, and he formed friendships some of which lasted through the years. He was particularly closely associated with Amédée Ozenfant, acting from 1927 to 1935 as his assistant in the execution of murals and, as well, helping with the instruction of pupils in his private art academy.

In 1935 Hanson returned to England, and after a year in London he taught until 1938 in a small grammar school in Shropshire. In 1939 he settled in New York and from there, in 1945, came to Cornell. He was made Associate Professor in 1949 and was, at his death, Professor of Art in the College of Architecture.

Hanson painted from the beginning in a disciplined and highly controlled style the apparent simplicity of which is deceiving. His aims and his methods precluded a large output, but he worked unrelentingly and left behind him a body of distinguished works of art. Professor Paul Ziff has reviewed and appraised this work sympathetically and with great understanding in a monograph on the artist published by the Cornell University Press in 1962. Here one may find a record of exhibitions, which includes fourteen one-man shows and participation in many group exhibitions including, in the U.S.A., those of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Carnegie Institute, the Corcoran Gallery, and the Museum of Modern Art. The collection of the Museum of Modern Art includes a Hanson, and he is also represented in the permanent collections of the William Rockhill Nelson Galleries, the National Gallery of Wales, the Bankfield Museum, Halifax, England, and the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art at Cornell.

Those at Cornell who knew and worked with Hanson must surely find it gratifying that the major portion of the White Museum's collection of his works came to it as bequest of the artist through the terms of his will.

Hanson's presence meant, in itself, a great deal to his colleagues and to his students. He had a gift for friendship and a gentle and considerate understanding of the problems of the student. He had a great fund of technical knowledge and the ability to impart it, but he had also read widely, traveled far, known many people, listened with a cultivated ear to a great deal of music; and he was a modest man with inflexible standards. His students, though few knew any details of his life, became somehow aware of his value; they loved him and they learned.

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