Chapter Seven: The Classroom as Studio

Hans Hofmann

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) is widely recognized as an important contributor to the midcentury movement of abstract expressionism. This unique American movement, often referred to as the New York School, featured artists Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline, among others. Although stylistically the individuals involved differed from one another, the movement derived its name from the emotional intensity associated with the imagery (Daichendt, 2008). Achieving international success as a painter by the late 1940s and 1950s, Hofmann exhibited around the world with the advent of his popularity as an artist. Despite critical success as a painter, he is often remembered as a great mentor and teacher. Although many abstract expressionist artist taught to some degree, Hofmann's commitment to teaching stands apart. His development and practice of bringing art-making and artistic experience directly into the classroom is a distinct signifier of his role as an artist-teacher.

Hofmann's involvement in the arts started as a young man in Germany, studying and following early art movements such as Secessionism (a development of Impressionism), Neo-Secessionism, and Cubism (Sutherland, 1989). Working through these early modern art movements and philosophies himself, Hofmann discovered his own perspective and modern language. This progression, most likely full of frustrations and breakthroughs is the experience he could use for opening new vistas for aspiring artists seeking to understand the modern language of the abstract artist. Making a breakthrough allows one to make great art; reflecting upon it and articulating the discovery to students makes for great teaching. Embracing both is difficult enough; combining and reorganizing enterprises where they become indistinguishable is a creative act worth celebrating and modeling.

A contemporary of Matisse and Picasso, Hofmann did not hit his stride as an artist until much later in life. A full generation older than the other Abstract Expressionists, such as de Kooning or Pollock, he does not always fit nicely into the art historical category (Wilkin, 2003), but rather he builds from Matisse and Picasso, as his flattening of space and

experimental abstraction offer successes and failures. Of all the philosophies Hofmann encountered during his early years, Cubism appears to be the major force for seeing the world in new way. The application of abstraction to the real world is a language Hofmann developed through his entire life. Applying this to teaching becomes special. The experience he gained from the European avant-garde was carried forward to the classroom as theories like Cubism allowed Hofmann to abstract the real world, pushing his art making and teaching to new heights. As an idea was developed in his studio, students solved similar problems and acted as a laboratory, which Hofmann reapplied to his own paintings.

As an artist-teacher, engagement with the art world is essential. Contemporary artist-teachers read art journals, visit museums and galleries, and converse with others involved in creative enterprises. As a young painter, Hofmann engaged a number of influential artists in cafes, schools, and galleries, including Picasso, Braque, Léger, and Matisse (Sutherland, 1989). These experiences were important, as they allowed the young Hofmann to see and experience the life of an artist, something he later modeled for his own students. Without an engagement with the larger art field, it is difficult to speak a language of relevance.

Despite Hofmann's success as a painter, his role as a teacher sometimes out shined his artistic contributions. Teaching opportunities in California and New York drew him away from Germany. The first of many opportunities opened in the summer of 1930 to teach at the University of California, Berkeley, at the Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles in 1931, and then again at Berkeley. In 1932 he accepted an invitation to join the Art Students League in New York City. By teaching in a number of institutions across the United States and Europe, Hofmann's educational philosophy was developed by his artistic practices. A teacher of artists, many students sought his guidance to learn the modern language he offered. Notable artists who studied with Hofmann include Burgoyne Diller, Ray Eames, Helen Frankenthaler, Red Grooms, Lee Krasner, Frank Stella, and Louise Nevelson. Although it is not prerequisite of an artist-teacher to train artists, the type of student attracted to Hofmann's philosophy speaks to his pedagogy of leading folks to a practical modern language for artists. It was not long before Hofmann opened his own school of art in New York City in 1933, appropriately named The Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, located at 444 Madison Avenue. (After several relocations, Hofmann's school settled in Greenwich Village, at 52 West 8th Street.) Simultaneously facilitating creativity and discipline, Hofmann's classroom served as an area of investigation for teacher and student alike.

As a European in the United States, Hofmann brought a modern aesthetic quite different from the traditional American art academy. The academic style or influence was passé to Hofmann. Instead, he desired freedom in his art and teaching. Newbury (1979) interpreted this unique perspective as instructing rather than training or directing students. Modern life and thought advanced beyond the Renaissance techniques of perspective, and Hofmann sought new rules for the modern language. This language included developing and exploring spatial tensions, plasticity of the two-dimensional canvas, and using color as an expressive agent (Sutherland, 1989). This development consumed Hofmann's thinking

process. This is evident because his artistic growth benefited the development of his teaching philosophy. Working through many of the early modern movements and styles, Hofmann drew upon a wealth of art-making experiences that he brought into the classroom.

Hofmann the Artist

Hoffman's art, although abstract, was rooted in the real world. His compositions progressed over his lifetime from a postimpressionistic style to the semiabstract and the geometric abstract planes associated with his later work. He was born a year before Picasso and lived a decade longer than Jackson Pollock, an illustration to demonstrate the many art movements he lived through (Flam, 1990). Still life work from the 1930s is the best representation for displaying a cross section between the real object and abstracted shapes and colors. Combining geometric shapes derived from actual objects with bold hues, Hofmann's canvases started to vibrate, as the juxtaposition of size became the focus in the 1940s. Shape, color, and plane are constant touchstones in describing Hofmann's aesthetic, as one attempts to engage the flat surface. Hofmann's oeuvre of painting demonstrates the importance of the natural world, yet his abstract compositions delineate from the real world with nods to the figurative and landscape painting traditions. For close to fifteen years Hofmann did not paint but instead drew constantly as he claimed to sweat Cubism out (Greenberg, 1961). It was in the mid 1930s that he began to paint again and in the 1940s when he finally committed himself to abstraction (Greenberg, 1961).

This progression in style is characteristic of Hofmann's insistence on the importance of simplification in abstraction. Despite simplifying the form, a reading and universal message could still be experienced. The canvas or picture plane was a two-dimensional surface requiring an alternative approach for engaging with nature. Hofmann speaks of art making like magic:

> The artist's technical problem is how to transform the material with which he works back into the sphere of the spirit. This two-way transformation proceeds from metaphysical perceptions, for metaphysics is the search for the essential nature of reality. And so artistic creation is the metamorphosis of the external physical aspects of a thing into a self-sustaining spiritual reality. Such is the magic act which takes place continuously in the development of a work of art. (Hofmann, 1967, p. 40)

Elements of line and hue reacted to one another in a mystical fashion. Depending upon their placement, the meaning and reaction occurs. The artist could develop sensitivity for these relationships but in Hofmann's case, cubism appears to play a major role in abandoning academic art education. As his philosophy progressed beyond formal

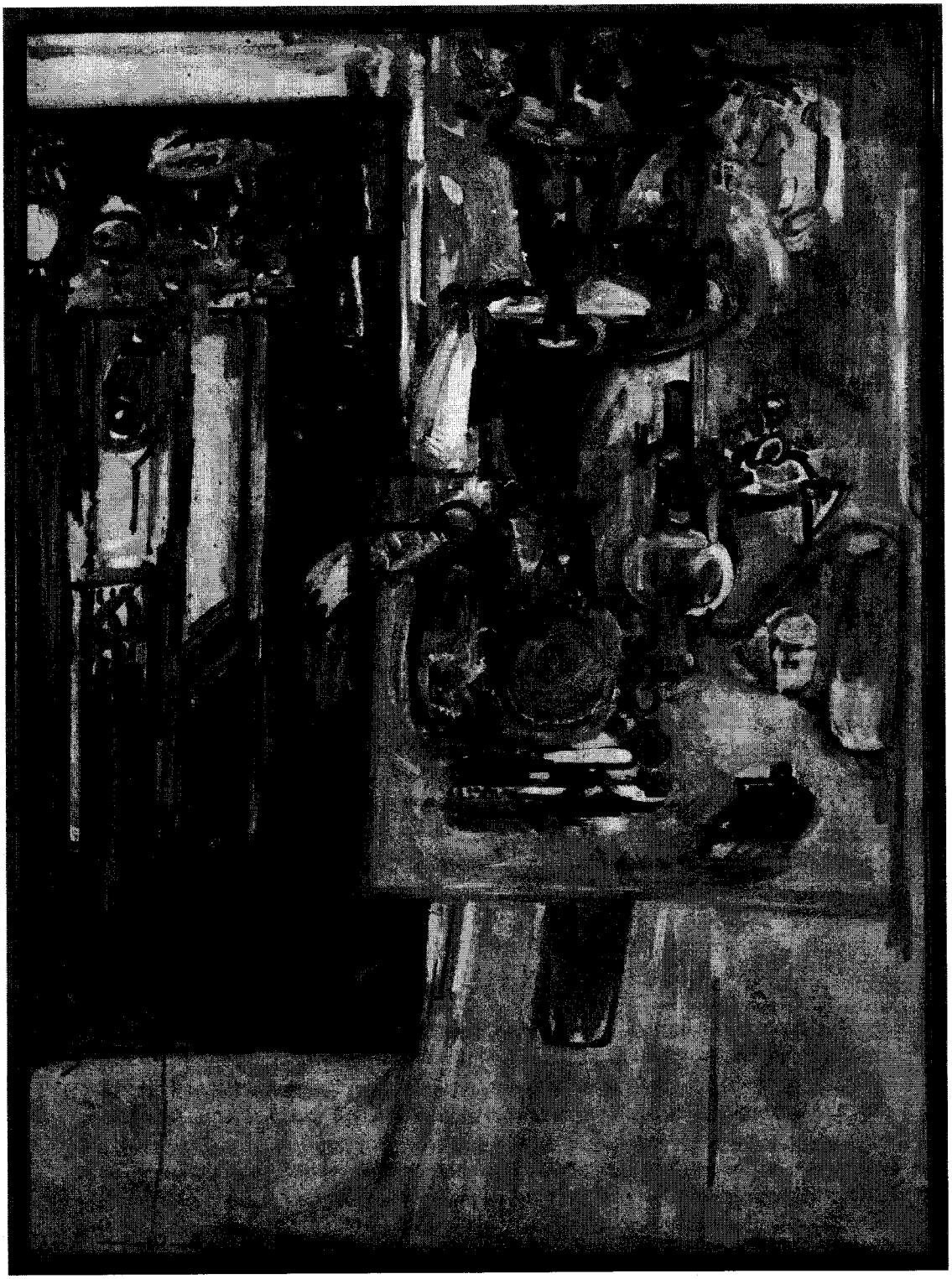

Table with Teakettle, Green Vase and Red Flowers, 1936
Hans Hofmann
Oil on Plywood
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
Gift of Hans Hofmann

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relationships, Hofmann used the formal element of line to create and isolate shapes. These forms began to represent expressions of rhythm and movement (Sutherland, 1989).

Hofmann (1967) stresses the importance of the plastic creation in his painting. Plasticity, according to Hofmann, is the transference of three-dimensional qualities and experiences to a two-dimensional surface. However, the plastic creation also involves expression. This two-dimensional plane must also communicate the real-world experiences in an emotive language. A combination of expression and space, Hofmann did not expect the theory to be learned quickly:

> The layman has extreme difficulty in understanding that plastic creation on a flat surface is possible without destroying this flat surface. But it is just this conceptual completeness of a plastic experience that warrants the preservation of the two dimensionality. (Hofmann, 1967, p.43)

Hofmann addresses space through poetry:

> Space and the Picture
> One cannot see space-
> one can only sense space-
> Since one cannot see space-
> one can also not copy space-
> and since one senses space only
> one must invent the pictorial space
> as the finale of a pictorial creation.
> Therefore one must be inventive in using
> the pictorial means:
> the Line, the planes, the points
> these are the architectural means
> with which to build up space as
> experienced-
> experienced by the senses
> and not only perceived by physical vision
> because vision and space experience
> together
> create a inner vision
> in the junction and by relation of a multiple physical
> experience
> with a psychic reaction
>
> (Hofmann, 2008)

Hofmann's theory is understood best in comparison to the traditional art methods advocated by the academy. To achieve depth on a two-dimensional surface, an academician would advocate the use of shadows through tonal gradation. By adding tints and shades to hues, one could represent dark to light. In comparison, Hofmann's depth was created on the two-dimensional plane, which did not mimic space. Hofmann states:

> My aim in painting as in art in general is to create pulsating, luminous and open surfaces that emanate a mystic light, determined exclusively through painterly development, and in accordance with my deepest insight into the experience of life and nature (Kuh, 1990, p. 128)

Although success came late, he was recognized as a painter of importance from critics and the art field (Greenberg, 19610. The first Hofmann retrospective was held in 1948 at the Addison Gallery of Art in New York City. At the age of 68, Hofmann was primarily known as a teacher, and through this exhibition many of his works were seen for the first time (Sutherland, 1989). However, it was not until the 1950s when Hofmann's strongest images representing his theories emerged.

Hofmann the Teacher

Hofmann began teaching in 1915 in Munich and ended his teaching career in New York in 1958. A constant feature of the curriculum was his knowledge of the modern art world and its permeation into the classroom. The art and artists who influenced Hofmann extended beyond his philosophies of art making. The gallery and museum exhibitions featuring outstanding examples of modern art were an extension and integral aspect of his pedagogy (Cho, 1993). Cho (1993) claims these students would visit exhibitions of Leger, Van Gogh, de Chirico, Lipchitz, Calder, Gorky, and Kandinsky. Through extending his classroom into (New York) city, artists were introduced to the masters of European modernism. The exciting exhibits that continued in the 1940s and 1950s were integrated into his teaching.

By no means did Hofmann reject the masters of the past. In fact, Michelangelo and Rembrandt are both cited as using a push and pull theory to accomplish monumentality and universality in their work (Hofmann, 1967). The forces at work in the masters, although not abstract, produce experiences that are physical and spiritual. Cézanne is also singled out as an artist who uses color to push and pull forces across the two-dimension canvas. His images then pulsate and exhale a liveliness that displays sensitivity to these decisions.

Modern techniques—including cubist space, Fauvist colors, and assemblage—were all incorporated into Hofmann's teaching (Cho, 1993). A merging between traditional and self-expression, Hofmann students were encouraged to traverse individualistic styles.

This is apparent when comparing past students (Louise Nevelson and Larry Rivers). While demonstrating or lecturing on the modern art movements, Hofmann desired his students to see. It was a classical format with a new philosophy.

The frustration of balancing both teaching and art making is a contemporary issue that plagued Hofmann as well. He states: "I don't think my long years of teaching have hurt my work too much. They have only taken up my time. I taught for so long—too long" (Kuh, 1990 , p. 125). Although teaching was a vital outlet it also hampered his production at times. Hofmann brought the studio into the classroom, but it appears the classroom sometimes took precedence over teaching, a dangerous balance that can darken and cause the spirit of the artist-teacher to drain.

A Philosophy of Teaching

Hofmann was a one-man academy. Bringing his own experience as an artist into the classroom, his education and practice are both highlighted in his teaching processes. Hofmann's art practice is tied very closely to his own education in this respect. Hofmann's later images are highlighted, as they signify the pinnacle of his painting philosophy, but his early painting provides evidence for his growth and developing thinking process.

The growth he experienced as an artist and the intangible qualities aided his development. Progressing through a number of styles, Hofmann was placed in a unique situation to push students into the modern art world at a much quicker rate compared to the lengthy process he progressed through on his own.

> "When Hofmann criticized a drawing, he sat or stood in the very position from which the student observed the model and made his points directly on the student's drawing. Sometimes he "really got into it" – then the drawing would undergo a storm of corrections taking as long as ten minutes, and the end result was a complete Hofmann drawing. Sometimes, to make a point about shifting planes or to clarify space relations, he would ask the student's permission to tear the whole paper in pieces which he then reassembled with tape and thumbtacks. When a student painted in class, Hofmann, undaunted, would ask for the brushes and the palette and would paint directly onto the student's painting. It was unusual for anyone to object to these drastic procedures. We had been well indoctrinated to regard the process, not the product, as primary" (Kahn, 1982, p. 22).

As many teachers realize, learning a concept or process on one's own can be a cumbersome and lengthy process, yet also rewarding. As one teaches himself, he can encounter a much more complex understanding of the concepts or processes studied.

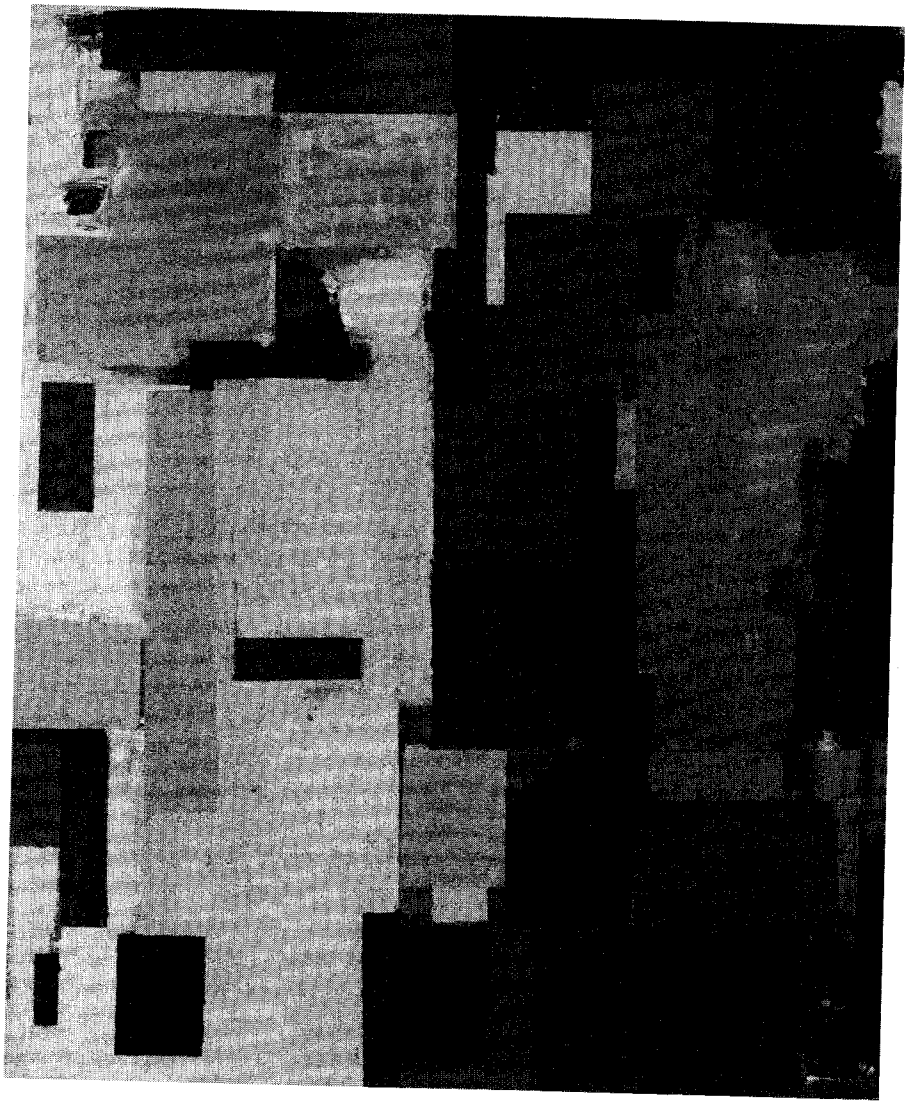
Experimenting and probing are part of this process as Hoffman's canvases demonstrate examples of successes and failures (Wilkin, 2003). As Hofmann experimented with the modern language of painting, he developed an intimate understanding of the subject. Teaching refines ideas and the teacher is the one who benefits the most from the practice (Anderson & Wark, 2005). Through the process of gathering materials, designing, and teaching, the instructor constructs the information before dissemination. The results are evident, as Hofmann continued to be sought by American artists hoping to also understand his discoveries. "Painting has many problems but the foremost is the synchronized development of both form and color" (Hofmann, 1957, p.54), which was a notion he aimed to understand in the created realities on canvas. These incompatible developments could be interwoven to create a synthesis (Hofmann, 1957).

"Push and pull" was an expression by Hofmann that described an important aspect of controlling the surface of the picture. Expanding and contracting forces were prompted by the push and pull theory as a dynamic energy presented itself as the planes react to one another. Hofmann's arrangements of multicolored geometric shapes control the two-dimensional space as plates of color shift and shimmy. Basic forms compose the majority of the forms he uses. Referred to as planes, these squares, spheres, and geometric shapes are linked to the basic building block of nature (Newbury, 1979). This experience is successful when the planes are in constant tension and thus relating to one another. Lines also aid this process as it moves in and out of the plane. They create planes and add to the movement as the individual elements interact.

This philosophy developed over many years, and his willingness to share and model it within the classroom signifies Hofmann's teaching as an art process. The forces of push and pull were of central concern in his artwork and his teaching. Writing about it and practicing the philosophy further refined it to a spiritual understanding:

> The forces of push and pull function three dimensionality without destroying other forces functioning two dimensionality . . . To create the phenomenon of push and pull on a flat surface, one has to understand that by nature the picture plane reacts automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received; thus action continues as long as it receives stimulus in the creative process. Push answers with pull and pull with push . . . Exactly the same thing can happen to the picture plane in a spiritual sense. (Hofmann, 1967, p. 44)

"Search for the real" a phrase and title of Hofmann's 1967 text was used to test the ideas from his analysis of the picture plane. It serves as evidence of the real formal relationships and real world Hofmann observed and abstracted on canvas. Writing several essays and continuing his teaching practice despite moving locations and countries is significant. The tenacity and resilience of Hofmann's message illustrate his commitment and belief in



Equinox, 1958
Hans Hofmann
Oil on Canvas
University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum
and Pacific Film Archive
Gift of Hans Hofmann

his educational philosophy. His hope was not to confine but rather to free students armed with knowledge. Rather then copy nature or explore it as a scientist, Hofmann desired his students/artists to communicate through their artwork a deeper level that examines the way nature effects our sensibilities (Newbury, 1979). This stimulation was intellectual, adding a conceptual layer to abstract painting. It was a belief that the picture communicated something rich and meaningful beyond harmonious arrangement of colors.

Negative space or distance between planes also contributes toward the experience. The rules and guidelines are not linear and appear emotional to someone outside the experience. It is a difficult process to measure, yet noticeable and qualitative. Best described as experiential, the creation of three dimensions on the two-dimensional

plane is a struggle for every student artist. Hofmann states:

> Being an artist and being a teacher are two conflicting things. When I paint, I improvise, speculate, and my work manifests the unexpected and unique. I deny theory and method and rely only on empathy or feeling . . . In teaching, it is just the opposite. I must account for every line, shape, and color. One is forced to explain the inexplicable . . . (Seckler, 1951, p. 64)

Despite the inherent differences between art making and teaching, Hofmann (1967) believed art is ruled by an order. While the creation of this order is quite different than facilitating it, a similar philosophy permeates his thinking process. Beyond a style, Hofmann hoped students would understand his philosophy for how a painting worked. A lifelong learner, Hofmann's patience and experience are important aspects of his teaching.

The Artist-Teacher

Hofmann's greatest strength as a teacher and the factor that led so many aspiring artists to his classroom was his ability to bring the studio into the classroom. This ability differs in relation to artistic practice. Sutherland (1989) writes that Hofmann's growth as an artist paralleled his growth as a teacher, and that he was an artist-teacher because of his willingness to bring the art-making experiences into the classroom. The discoveries made in the studio were something to be shared. The life of the artist was not divorced from teaching but rather enhanced teaching and vice versa. Art was ruled by an order and Hofmann believed one could teach this harmony and order. Wilkin (2003, p. 16) writes:

> The pictorial dynamism that Hofmann strove for in his work and strove to elicit from his students was not merely a personal conception of Cubist structure, but a visible metaphor for the opposing forces-real and metaphysical, spiritual and pictorial, emotional and practical- that animated existence and made humanity human.

The Hofmann household was, according to Wilkin (2003), akin to walking into one of his paintings. Bright and bold colors were affixed to objects and parts of the house. The subject matter for his paintings was his context for living. Demonstrating a commitment to color and it effect on the senses, the color of the floor in contrast and relation to a chair or rug quite possibly had the same effect on Hofmann as a painting.

The forces between Hofmann's art making and teaching were very real. Pulling his thinking back and forth, the mixed emotions and experiences involved with teaching combined with the complex decisions involved in composing paintings represent a

juxtaposition of intentions that complement one another and in the case of Hofmann, both his teaching and art making affected a number of viewers and students.

Having a teacher who also modeled the process of being an artist is an important attribute. Students in Hoffman's school did not graduate with an accredited degree. Instead, they left with a notion of what is a modern artist and an increased sensitivity for quality.

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Balance was instrumental for Hofmann's progression as an artist-teacher. Teaching encompassed a majority of his early career. The time spent with students and his instruction was important for personal development as an artist. Working through ideas with students and encouraging them to find their voice, Hofmann further developed his own art as well. Nothing refines ideas and thoughts better than teaching and explaining them to others. The process of teaching pushes individuals to think through curriculum in a critical fashion that otherwise may be overlooked in independent study. Several aspects of the Hofmann's pedagogy highlight an ongoing process of self-critique for art making and teaching.

Hofmann states:

> Art teaching has a meaning for America, and should be more general and more significant. The problem of civilizing this enormous country is not finished. The teaching of art must be directed toward the enrichment of the student's life. The teacher must be a guiding personality for the student, and develop his sensibility and his power for "feeling into" animate, or inanimate things, with sympathy . . . The problem of art teaching is not limited to the problem of artistic development itself, but includes the problems of how to produce artists, comprehending teachers, art understanding in general, and art enjoyment in particular. (Hofmann, 1967, p. 56)

Hofmann thought of himself as a painter who had to teach to practice his ideas independently (Wilkin, 2003). Interestingly, except for a few short tenures in California and New York, Hofmann's teaching experiences were also independent. His schools were not part of a larger degree-granting institution. The independent nature he desired for his painting career was also reflected in the organization of his schools. The fact that good teaching requires a great deal of time and effort to prepare and expend in the classroom, it is easy to understand Hofmann's desire to devote more time to his craft. However, it is impossible to ignore the influence this teaching had on his art making. A combination of intellectualism and emotion, Hofmann's artwork is powerful on many levels (Pearl, 2006). The ideas explored in the studio also manifested in his teaching; the studio was his school, and he brought that sensibility to his students as their teacher.

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