



Understanding Hans Hofmann: Reflections by Sam Feinstein
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SAM FEINSTEIN, ARTIST AND WRITER, LIVED FROM 1915-2003. Beginning in 1949, he studied painting with Hans Hofmann, the renowned 20th-century painter and teacher (1880-1966), in Provincetown, Mass. His relationship with Hofmann developed into a collegial friendship. This book, *Understanding Hans Hofmann*, began life as a series of conversations between Feinstein and his son, Sascha Feinstein, recorded between December 1989 and January 1990. Nearly thirty years after those conversations took place, we are gifted with a volume of remembrances and insights into Hofmann's life, work, and convictions. The text of the original conversations have been edited and organized into chapters with thematic focal points. The unity between Hofmann's approach to teaching and painting is a persistent emphasis, as is the need to see Hofmann's work in relation to his root principles and personal nature. As the son states, "Our mutual goal for this book was to present several sides of Hofmann: teacher, painter, friend, critic, writer, and delightful abuser of the English language" (11).

For years, Hofmann was commonly regarded as a "great teacher [but] bad painter" (9). Although this has gradually been overturned, and the value of Hofmann's art increasingly understood, there remain gaps in the Hofmann literature. Sascha Feinstein states that "Even the best accounts of Hofmann and his painting fail to deliver a sense of who the man really was" (9), in part due to conceptual/theoretical emphases that obscure the relationship between his personality, humor and spirit, and the art itself. Despite Sam Feinstein's close involvement with Hofmann, his "retreat from an overly commercial art world" (10) meant that he removed himself from arenas where his understanding of Hofmann could have reached a wider audience. The conversations between father and son eventually served as the medium to bring these observations to light.

Hofmann's teaching is mainly addressed in the chapter titled "The Summer Classes." Sam Feinstein discusses how his understanding of Hofmann's teaching changed over time. At first, he strongly resisted Hofmann's approach: "his methods seemed to me to be the most imposed, absolutely dictatorial, arbitrary approach to the whole process" (16). This included drawing on top of the students' drawings, or tearing their drawings into four pieces and rearranging them. This "forceful and seemingly arbitrary approach to teaching [was one] that many students either misunderstood or were unable to get past" (14). As time went on, Feinstein

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came to understand Hofmann's teaching style to be based on valid principles, and partially motivated by the older artist's characteristically awkward English. Physical demonstrations, supplemented by verbal remarks, seemed the most direct and necessary method under these circumstances, however unnerving. (His often amusing and memorable struggles with English are recalled in the "Hofmannese" chapter, where Sam Feinstein mentions that Hofmann's own writings on art could be misunderstood, given his idiosyncratic word choices and resistance to revision.)

The "Summer Classes" chapter also introduces the reader to some of Hofmann's critical principles, particularly the interplay between space and form. He regarded it as essential to transform the two-dimensional space of the canvas into a work possessing three-dimensional force, rather than representing three dimensions pictorially. In response to the discoveries of Einstein, he regarded "space as form ... contain[ing] forces that ultimately made the forms that we see" (18). Forms are not merely static presences but contain "driving energies." His students attempted to grapple with this by, for example, "[shifting] forms across a flat rectangle to create pictorial space rather than illusionistic space, to create depth consistent with the flatness of the medium" (20). This extended to figure drawing, in which elements such as kneecaps or elbows were not regarded "as fixed locations but as accumulations of vital energies thrust outward by inner forces" (21).

This discussion is elaborated in the chapter, "Hofmann's Principles." These had to do with what Hofmann considered as "three kinds of natures": the nature of the individual artist, that of the encompassing world, and that of the art medium (72). Hofmann's commitment to the dynamic nature of two-dimensional space manifested, in particular, in what became known as his "push/pull" approach, where the interplay of planes and other forms evoked a sensation of backward and forward movement. "This would replace the old idea of perspective as being an illusion of distance" (74) and was complementary to the movement of the human eye perceiving different layers of depth. Sam Feinstein again emphasizes the difficulties Hofmann's English presented for some students; his teaching could be distorted, in that "a lot of what got repeated simply emphasized Hofmann's personality rather than his concepts" (71). This chapter also touches on a theme elaborated elsewhere, that of Hofmann's "two natures." In his work, he gradually found ways "to reconcile certain splits within his own makeup between what he called a dramatic, or lyrical, aspect to his nature versus what he called a scholarly side" (79). His active use of squares and rectangles, for example, were positioned in relation to freer "sweeps and flows of color" (37).

In the chapter, "The Film," Sam Feinstein discusses his work shooting the material for the documentary film *Hans Hofmann*, showing the artist at work teaching, painting, and discussing his ideas about art and the creative process. Although filming began in 1950, and the final script was developed in 1964, the first showing, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was delayed until 1998. Hofmann made a new painting, "The Window," during the process of filmmaking. Sam Feinstein discusses the painting, as an element in the documentary, from several perspectives. He describes the physical items in Hofmann's studio that served as the painting's material basis and details how Hofmann's process moved from direct repre-

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sentation to dynamic spatial relationships. He notes that, at the time "The Window" was painted, Hofmann "was still working with colored form rather than forming with color" (42). Feinstein compares it to the artist's later, more mature work, the painting "Rhapsody" in particular. These are both reproduced in the book's fine color plates, making it easy to follow the discussion. Feinstein points out that his film put emphasis on Hofmann's teaching principles, as exemplified through his painting activity, and compares it with other films about Hofmann, where Hofmann only appears to paint: "you can see from his brush that he's not doing anything" (44).

Sam Feinstein compares Hofmann's work with that of other painters, particularly the Abstract Expressionists with which he is often associated. He finds it "ironic that Hans Hofmann was being called 'the father of Abstract Expressionism,' only because he was so much older than the other young men practicing it" (58). Feinstein draws contrasts between Hofmann's painting and that of Kline and de Kooning, and does not regard Hofmann as an Abstract Expressionist. For example, in contrast with the latter group's typical relationship with the canvas, he quotes Hofmann (preserving his diction): "It is not what you do to the canvas. It's what the canvas does back" (95). Feinstein regards Hofmann's work as having much more in common with the Fauves, and perhaps unexpectedly compares the painter's work to that of Mondrian. Similarly, although Hofmann's "push and pull" has been discussed in relation to Cubism, "it actually related more to what Cézanne started with his planes of color" (75). These discussions are found in various chapters, particularly "In the Context of Critics and Painters," where Feinstein also reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of critic Clement Greenberg's evaluations of Hofmann.

Integrated with his reflections on the teaching, artwork, and principles of Hans Hofmann, Sam Feinstein also recalls a great deal about the artist's personal relationships and the scenes of his times. These are found in the chapter appropriately titled "Intimacy and Jealousy," as well as "An Opening of Landscapes," which centers on a 1953 show of landscape paintings done between 1936-1939. The chapter includes Feinstein's original catalog essay, and a brief review he wrote for that show.

In the conclusion, "A Final Look," Sam Feinstein states, "There is a direct, primal drive that comes through in [Hofmann's] work that is not simply gymnastic, not merely optical; it's a certain intensity, a life force" (105). Sascha Feinstein's presentation of his late father's memories and insights makes this clear and is a tribute to both elder men. He and the Provincetown Arts Press have done us a valuable service with this book.