HENRY VARNUM POOR – (1887-1970)

Henry Varnum Poor had a prolific career that spanned a number of areas of the visual arts: painter, ceramist, architect, designer, furniture maker, sculptor, and others. While his formal training was in painting, he began making ceramics in the early 1920’s for financial reasons, but he soon appreciated that the process gave him total control of his work. His work took on a larger scale over time: both the frescoes and the tile murals that he was commissioned to make for public and private buildings are still much admired. Poor was also committed to art education, teaching first at his alma mater, Stanford University, and later at Columbia University, and founding the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and serving as its president. Poor authored several books and illustrated others. His home and studio, in an arts colony in the Hudson River Valley in New York, is being restored as a museum in honor of his work and art.

ARTIST’S STATEMENT – HENRY VARNUM POOR

“I started doing pottery for the pleasure of decorating it, having something entirely in my control from beginning to end, so that both the object and the images it held would be equally mine.”


RESUME – HENRY VARNUM POOR

1887 Born, Chapman, Kansas
1910 Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA; graduated Phi Beta Kappa Slade School, London, England
1911 Académie Julian, Paris, France
Resident Artist, American Academy, Rome, Italy
1911-1914 Instructor, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA
1915-1918 Instructor, California School of Fine Arts and the San Francisco Art Association
1918 Walter Purchase Prize, San Francisco Artist’s Association
1918-1920 Military service, World War I
1920-1970 Studio artist, New York, NY
1932 Harris Silver Medal, Chicago Art Institute
BIOGRAPHY – HENRY VARNUM POOR

Born in Chapman, KS, Henry Varnum Poor was the namesake of another well-known Henry Varnum Poor, the founder of the firm that would become Standard & Poor’s. The younger Henry Poor, however, was not interested in following in his great uncle’s footsteps but instead, to the disappointment of his family, pursued a career in the arts. Poor graduated from Stanford University where he majored in art, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. He then spent some time in England working under Walter Sickert at the Slade School. The exhibition of “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” at the Grafton Gallery had such a strong effect on him that he next moved to Paris to study at the Académie Julian with John Paul Laurens. Poor then returned to the United States, teaching art at Stanford, the California School of Fine Arts, and the San Francisco Art Association until being called into service in World War I. He served first in France and then on the art staff where he made drawings, paintings, and lithographs from the war.

After the War he moved to New York in 1920 where he had a one-man exhibition of his paintings and settled into a small art colony in the Hudson River Valley. He began working in ceramics at this time and for the next ten years spent most of his time as a ceramist. His motivation was partly financial as his paintings and drawings did not sell well, but also, he stated, “…for the pleasure of decorating it, having something entirely in my control from beginning to end, so that both the object and the images it held would be equally mine.”1 Unlike his paintings, his ceramics were popular, and by 1921 he was selling his work through Wanamaker’s in New York and soon was also represented by Newman Emerson Montross, a major dealer in the city. Poor’s pottery was exemplified by simple forms decorated with underglaze designs, most often using cobalt, manganese, copper and iron. The subjects he chose were the same as his paintings: human figures, landscapes, and still lifes, and the influence of his beginnings as a painter showed in the way he covered the ceramic piece fully, much as he would a canvas. Although the ceramic pieces themselves were far from perfect – cracks and warping were not uncommon – Poor embraced the defects rather than tried to correct them. From functional ware he branched out into tiles, furniture incorporating ceramics and large architectural commissions such as tile murals, bathroom suites, and dining rooms.

A return visit to Paris in 1929 encouraged him to once again take up painting. One of the outstanding pieces of work he did during the ensuing period is the Land-Grant Frescoes that he painted for Pennsylvania State University. The original piece was completed in 1940 and he was later engaged to extend the mural which he finished in 1949. The 1300 square foot mural
is a focal point in the Old Main building on the campus. He did not abandon ceramics, but he did, however, change his approach to decoration, adopting a simplified approach incorporating more open space than before. His subject matter also changed, using narrative, literary and humorous themes. While he tried to maximize the time available for his painting, he also continued to accept large commercial commissions, including objects for the Radio City Music Hall, a tile mural for the Post Office in Fresno, CA, and five tile murals for the Maurice Wertheim Memorial at the Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. Poor continued to be an active artist until his death in 1970.

Poor’s art career encompassed more than painting and ceramics. He worked as a designer, furniture maker, author, and illustrator. He remained committed to art education, founding the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and later teaching at Columbia University as a guest professor. He was a founder of the American Designers Gallery in New York, and his professional associations included the National Academy of Design and the National Institute of Arts and Letters among others. He also designed his home in New York along with those of other residents in the area, including Maxwell Anderson, Burgess Meredith, and John Houseman. Poor’s home, called Crow House, includes a main house in the style of a French farmhouse plus a mill house, studio, kiln yard and workshop. The house is now owned by a neighboring town which plans to restore the property and create a museum dedicated to Poor.

In addition to his public commissions of frescos and murals, Poor’s work is included in the collections of the Whitney Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Dallas Museum of Fine Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art among others.


**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY – HENRY VARNUM POOR**

Books and Catalogs


Periodicals


Raynor, V. “Exhibition at Rehn Gallery.” *Arts Magazine* 39 (February 1965): 64.


**Video and Other Media**


**GALLERY REPRESENTATION – HENRY VARNUM POOR**

James Graham & Sons, 32 East 67th Street, New York, NY 10065

**WEB SITES – HENRY VARNUM POOR**

[http://henryvarnumpoor.com](http://henryvarnumpoor.com)
Web site for Henry Varnum Poor with information on his former home, work

[http://moca-ny.org/insight.html](http://moca-ny.org/insight.html)
“CeramicsInsights” No. 2; announcement of gift of works by Poor with brief discussion of his life and work

[http://www.psu.edu/ur/about/frescoes.html](http://www.psu.edu/ur/about/frescoes.html)
“The Land-Grant Frescoes” painted by Henry Varnum Poor at Pennsylvania State University
http://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/bios/poor-bio.htm
Brief biography of Poor from The Phillips Collection web site

http://www.jamesgrahamandsons.com/artists/henry-varnum-poor
Biography of Poor on James Graham & Sons web site

Ask/Art web site with biographies of Poor, other material

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