

Clayton Sumner (C.S.) Price (1874-1950)

By Roger Saydack

Clayton Sumner (C.S.) Price, a pioneering American expressionist, made his most important paintings while he lived in Portland, from 1929 until his death in 1950.

Born in Iowa in 1874, Price was the eldest son in a farming and ranching family of ten children. When he was a young boy, his family moved by covered wagon to Wyoming and later to Alberta, Canada, where they filed homestead claims. Price helped with the farming and ranching work, becoming an accomplished carpenter, an expert horseman, a reliable plowman, and cattle hand.

His experiences in the vast country gave Price deeply held beliefs that he later expressed in his painting. The farmers and ranchers, the animals, the weather, and even the land itself seemed to share an underlying commonality or spirit that he called the “one big thing,” which he said he felt flowing through him like a strong emotion or a deeply held religious belief.

Price's mother encouraged him to try drawing as a way of expressing these thoughts and feelings, and he took to carrying a sketchbook and pencil with him, even in his saddlebags when he was herding cattle. He made drawings of the animals and men he worked with, which were striking for their honest and accurate depiction of character—drawings he kept with him for the rest of his life so he would not lose touch with the frontier experience of his youth.

A local rancher loaned Price the money to attend the St. Louis Museum School of Fine Arts during the academic year 1905-1906; it would be his only formal training. Price's father told him that if he didn't want a farming and ranching life, then he had better find work as a professional artist. So in 1909, Price left his family and took a job as an illustrator of western stories with the *Pacific Monthly Magazine* in Portland.

Price produced Charles Russell-like paintings of scenes from the magazine's pulp fiction stories, but he soon lost interest in the work. He left Portland in 1910 and spent the next eight years working on the farms and ranches his siblings had established in British Columbia and California in exchange for room, board, and space where he could set up an easel and paint.

In those years, Price's paintings were often representational studies of animals, with their strong forms sensitively set in their surroundings. In 1915, a painting of a cattle drive, with the cattle and cowboys spread across a broad Wyoming landscape, was exhibited in the American gallery at the Panama Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco, a considerable honor for a cowboy painter.

The exhibition was also important to Price for another reason: it included modernist paintings from Europe. He was especially impressed with Paul Cezanne, whose carefully constructed “realizations” recreated the experience of a landscape situation. Price said that these paintings showed him that he had to find a way to paint not just what he could see *with* his eyes, but what he could see and feel *through* his eyes.

In about 1918, painter Gottardo Piazzoni persuaded Price to move to the artist colony of Monterey, California, and begin painting full time. During his years there, Price's painting moved from the post-impressionism of Cezanne to a vivid, colorful expressionist style that startled the more conservative painters in the area and delighted young modernists such as August Gay, Armin Hansen, and Selden Gile.

In 1929, Price returned to Portland, where he lived in small, one-room studios in downtown office buildings with his painting supplies, a cot, hotplate, table, chair, and a few plates and eating utensils. Like the Chinese brush painters he admired, Price believed that if he approached painting with honesty and without ego, the paint would unlock something deep and universal. To achieve this, he eliminated all that was superficial in his life so he could focus on finding the essential through his painting.

The colorful modernism of his Monterey paintings evolved into a boldly sculptural style, often with muted, serene colors and images of animals or farming and ranching work. During the 1930s, he completed an impressive series of monumental paintings for the Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art Projects, including those that are now in Timberline Lodge, the Multnomah County

Library, Pendleton High School, and the Portland Art Museum.

In 1942, the Portland Art Museum gave Price his first retrospective exhibition, which attracted national attention. In 1946, his work was represented in the Museum of Modern Art's "Fourteen Americans" exhibition, which introduced Price, Mark Tobey, Arshile Gorky, and Robert Motherwell to the New York art world. Museums began to acquire Price's work—among them the Seattle, Portland, and Brooklyn art museums, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Detroit Art Institute.

In his seventies, Price's work became more daring than ever. He had developed an expressionist style that featured images that he seemed to find during the process of painting, scraping away, and then repainting his canvases. Price began a painting by laying some colors down, which he worked and scumbled about in an abstract manner without a preconceived image in mind. As the paint dried, he would scrape part of it off and add a new layer on top of the old, which he would work and then partially scrape away. He repeated this process until the rough, scumbled surfaces and broken colors that had built up on the canvas suggested an image of a pair of animals or a landscape or a biblical scene that he would then develop with great freedom and originality. The act of painting had become a meditation for Price, his way of participating in the one big thing.

Many Oregon artists—including Charles Heaney, Amanda Snyder, Albert Runquist, and Arthur Runquist—were profoundly influenced by Price. He died in Portland in 1950, and the Portland Art Museum presented a major retrospective of his work as a memorial in 1951.

C.S. Price may be Oregon's most important and influential painter. While he was nationally known in the 1940s, the art world changed dramatically after his death in 1950 and his relatively small body of work has often been overlooked. But he has never been forgotten, especially by painters who find meaning and inspiration in his work and in the model of his life.

Sources

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