INSIDE Scottsdale Art Auction • SOA: Texas • Winold Reiss • Sheldon Parsons

Previews of Works For Sale at Upcoming Shows

APRIL 2018

128

WESTERN ART COLLECTOR

DISPLAY UNTIL 4/28/18

$7.95US $9.95CAN

04>

0 09281 01937 4

A Body of Work
ELECTRIC

WINOLD REISS eludes classification at Hirschl & Adler Galleries exhibition in New York.

BY JAMES D. BALESTRIERI

The new exhibition at Hirschl & Adler Galleries in New York takes its title from an interesting, and quite funny, article in the March 1931 issue of *Du Pont* magazine, the trade publication of the manufacturer of chemical compounds and coatings, that is titled "Winold Reiss will not be classified." As the author finds Reiss in his studio, he is teaching a class, preparing portraits, wrapping up illustrations, looking at swatches and samples for a hotel lounge, planning a new expedition to the West, and talking on the phone to his wife. He even gets a plug in for two of Du Pont's products: Fabrikoid, for upholstery, and Muralart, as a wall covering. The more you study Reiss, the more you see him as a Renaissance man in the tradition of artists like da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Cellini (the author calls Reiss "A Modern Cellini") who worked in many fields. But while he is well known among art historians, curators, dealers and collectors, it is curious that he is not better known to the American public at large. Because without any real stretch, Winold Reiss could be, and perhaps should be, to American art what Walt Whitman is to American poetry and letters. Reiss was not only open-minded, but relentlessly optimistic, painting portraits from Native Americans to Mexican revolutionaries and peasants, from the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance to fashion models, from artist friends to hobos he approached on the street, reveling in the diversity and seeing the dignity in every one of his subjects. A glance through Jeffrey C. Stewart's *Winold Reiss: An Illustrated Checklist of His Portraits*, which accompanied the 1989-1990 Reiss exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, will confirm the artist's multiform fascination with the human face and condition.

A very good place to begin to take in both the philosophy and artistry of Winold Reiss can be found in an excellent essay written by John Heminway to introduce the Thomas Nygard Gallery's 1997 Reiss exhibition, *Native Faces*. Heminway quotes Reiss' son, Tjark, "I can remember walking through Union Square on our way to Luchow's. Invariably, Dad would spot someone sitting on a bench or on the curb...Negotiations would begin...The first question he ever asked anyone posing for him, whether it was a fashionable New York society lady or somebody he'd found on the street, was their ethnic origin. It was important to him to know this background and he felt people should be proud of who they were. He had absolutely no racial prejudice. He defended every race, exalting in racial differences."

Despite there being no major monograph on his work—a serious oversight in American art history—the material facts of Reiss's life are readily available. He was born in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1886. His father, a painter whose subject was the German peasantry and landscape, was Winold's first teacher. Later, Reiss traveled to Munich, studying with Franz von Stuck at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and with Julius Diez at the School of Applied Arts. Between the two, Reiss received training across artistic disciplines and media, including interior design, textiles, mural painting, and printmaking, skills that would allow him to advance his career in numerous directions after he sailed for America in 1913.

Reiss brought the strong, often repeated patterns, long, curving lines, splashes of bright color, often termed "imaginative symbolism," that characterized Art Nouveau and the Jugendstil movement in European art but was acutely aware of newer currents, including cubism, that were taking Western art by storm.

Avoiding the horrors of World War I that would begin in 1914, Reiss met with early success in New York but suffered for a time once America's position and eventual participation in the war against the Triple Alliance became evident. But this idea of avoiding the horrors, of missing the war, is a formative one that shouldn't be overlooked. Pacifistic if not an outright pacifist, Reiss's positive, hopeful outlook, his ability to embrace and see the dignity in difference, might have taken the dark turn that influences much of modernism after the war. Compare Reiss's work, for example, with a quick internet search of images of the works of Max Beckmann or George Grosz and see the destabilization of the self, the struggle to maintain dignity, the feeling that, perhaps, dignity is a pose, a mask.

Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *"Montana Red" Shy*, ca. 1931, pastel on Whatman board, 39 x 26". Collection of the artist's estate; photo courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.


MIKE'S BAR
WINOLD REISS

Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *City of the Future, Panel I,* ca. 1936, oil on canvas, 46 x 101¼". Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.

Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *Chief Buffalo Hide; Bob Riding Horse and Chief Shot Both Sides; Mike Little Dog* [Triptych] 1927-28, gouache on illustration board, 30⅜ x 23¼". Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.

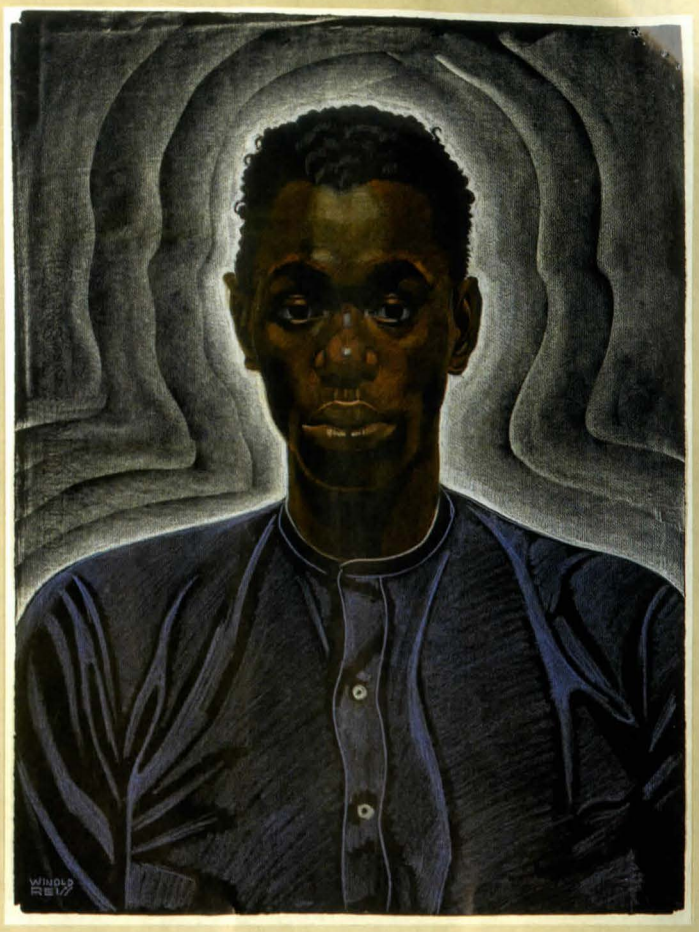
But why did Winold Reiss come to the United States in the first place? The one-word answer is: Indians. Infatuated, as so many German artists were, by Karl May's German-language dime Westerns and by the translations of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Reiss apparently expected to be met at the boat in New York by a war party and was disappointed when he was not.

But it wasn't until 1919 that Reiss headed to Montana, where he turned his amicability onto the Blackfeet, completing some 35 portraits in 30 days and earning the name "Beaver Child" for his assiduity when, on one of his many Montana sojourns, he made a member of the nation. A 1928 work, *Triptych Design for a Mural Commission*, a major work intended for the Chrysler Building but derailed by the Depression, combines portraits of Buffalo Hide, Bob Riding Black Horse, Chief Shot Both Sides, and Mike Little Dog, four Blackfeet elders, survivors of the last battles of the Indian Wars. The faces and hands of the men tell their stories, but Reiss dresses them in their brightest regalia as they sit and stand beside tepees that recount buffalo hunts and battles. The landscapes behind the four chiefs explode with pattern and color, a precursor to Pop Art, maybe, but also in line with 1930s animation. At right, Mike Little Dog looks at the story unfolding across the hide of the teepee. His right hand is curious, as if he is imagining himself holding a brush of some kind, as if he is an artist adding his story to the story on the skin. The maturation of Reiss' style, seen here in the *Triptych*, is discussed in the literature accompanying the Hirschl & Adler exhibition, "As he traveled, Reiss's style began to reflect the influence of the aesthetics, color palette, and patterns of indigenous American visual culture. He blended this into his now hyphenated German-American vocabulary, reaching for an artistic language expressed in the most universally accessible terms that would convey the respect he felt for all his subjects." When Reiss died, his widow sent his ashes to Montana. The Blackfeet honored "Beaver Child" and scattered his remains to the winds.

Reiss was a walker and hiker—what better way to find subjects than to encounter them on foot?—and in 1920, Reiss walked through northern Mexico, painting veterans of the Revolution and peons, people who, like the German peasants his father painted, were tied to the land.

Back in New York, Reiss took note of the artistic revolution taking place in Harlem and he began to document key figures in what has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *Blackfeet Girl (Sacred Bird Woman, Pauline Running Crane, Natoyepekzaki)*, 1943, pastel on Whatman board, 30 x 22". Collection of the artist's estate; photo courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.



Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *Short Haired Young Man in Collarless Shirt*, color pencil on black paper, 25 x 20". Collection of the artist's estate; photo courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.

Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *Original Painting for Cincinnati Union Terminal Mosaic Murals: Inks...Printing and Writing*, 1930-31, oil on muslin, 111 x 116". Collection of the artist's estate; photo courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.

Among many others, Reiss painted Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston. He also taught Aaron Douglas and encouraged the young painter to look to African art for inspiration.

The subject of *Short Haired Young Man in Collarless Shirt* isn't a celebrated poet or thinker, but you can see many of the hallmarks of Reiss' portraiture. Outlines of the young man radiate out like ripples, as if his likeness has been dropped into a still pond. Or, perhaps, despite his stolid expression, these represent the sitter's life force, his "body electric," as Whitman wrote, charging the very air around him.

Even as the Harlem Renaissance occupied him, Reiss began to incorporate aspects of cubism and other modernist practices in what he called his "imaginatives," untitled watercolors and drawings with parallel lines and curves, wild Art Deco cities of fantasy with jazz age rhythms. These are explorations, geometry meeting physiognomy in an architectonics of radiance that connects individuals with one another and with their surroundings. It will come as no surprise, then, that Winold Reiss was something of a futurist, almost a kind of sci-fi optimist and *City of the Future (Panel I)* offers a glimpse into Reiss's dreamlike vision in which beautiful design would unite the world.

This union of person and place comes together in the portrait of *"Montana Red" Shy*. Gunman, cowboy cattle rustler, a son of his soil, Reiss pictures him with his hand on his sixgun, his hawk-like eyes looking off. As the saloon he once shot up

Winold Reiss (1886-1953), *Untitled*, ca. 1925-30, colored pencil on paper, 19⅞ x 14". Collection of the Reiss Partnership; Photo courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.

appears behind him in a hazy, surreal dream, something about the bold, pink, candy-striped shirt—clean and pressed—hints at another side to the old outlaw who may have outlived his time.

Intelligibility, making sure his art read to his audience, whether that audience was looking at his portraits or having a drink at the bar he designed, was important to Reiss. Making sure that he wasn't condescending to those who looked at his work went hand in hand with his notion of human dignity.

Winold Reiss's vision is positive, communal and gregarious, running counter to the romantic myth (and it is a myth) of the solitary, alienated artist, ever at odds with society and its forms. As individuated as his portraits are, they are meant to connect the individual to humanity as a whole. For Reiss, there is no race other than the human race. This, Reiss' liberal yet patriotic vision, is the key to his artistic legacy; it is the reason for his relative obscurity and it is one of the best reasons to revisit him and his work. You can almost hear all the people Reiss painted, singing the words Walt Whitman wrote in *For You O Democracy* in electrifying unison:

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,

I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other's necks...

WINOLD REISS (ABOUT 1934). PHOTO BY W. TJARK REISS. COURTESY REISS ARCHIVES.