

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
CONSULTATION | SALES | APPRAISAL

THOMAS DUNCAN BENRIMO

(b. 1887 San Francisco, CA – d. 1958 Taos, NM)

Media: Oil; gouache; ink.

Education: Studied briefly at Art Students League, New York.

Selected Exhibitions: Artists' Guild, New York City, 1936; Art Institute of Chicago, 1947, 1952, 1953; Carnegie Institute, 1948-49; San Francisco Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1950; Paris Museum of Modern Art, 1954; Guggenheim Museum, 1954; San Francisco Museum of Art, 1954; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955; Denver Art Museum, 1955-57; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1956-57; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1983; Fort Worth Art Center, Texas, 1958.

Selected Public Collections: Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; Harwood Foundation of the University of New Mexico, Taos; Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe; Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

Awards: Art Director's Award, Fortune Magazine, 1939; Purchase Award, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1952; Prize, University of Illinois, 1952; Prize, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1956.

Selected Bibliography:

"Tom Benrimo," exhibition catalogue, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, 1973.

"Avant-Garde Painting & Sculpture in America 1910-25," exhibition catalogue, Delaware Art Museum, 1975.

Broder, Patricia Janis, *The American West, The Modern Vision*. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1984.

Thomas Benrimo was one of the few twentieth-century artists who succeeded in translating a personal mystic vision of the American Southwest into Surrealist imagery. He developed a symbolism that enabled him to paint the dreams and fantasies that for him expressed the essence of the life and the land of New Mexico. His Surrealist paintings explore not only the power and the mystery of the land – the vast, alien desert and the towering barren mountains – but also the relationship between the land and its inhabitants.

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
CONSULTATION | SALES | APPRAISAL

Benrimo was born in San Francisco in 1887. Although his formal education ended with the fourth grade, he had tremendous intellectual capacity and independently studied anatomy, history, archaeology, physics, engineering, aerodynamics, music, literature and philosophy. Drawing came naturally to him and he sketched from a very early age. The Benrimo family lost their home and all of their possessions in the historic earthquake and fire of 1906 and moved to New York City to start a new life. The train trip to New York offered Benrimo his first view of the Southwest, and he was deeply impressed by the stark form and beauty of the American desert.

During his first years in New York he designed sets and costumes for numerous theatrical companies, including the New York Drama Society. In 1913 he visited the Armory Show, where for the first time he realized that the means of expression in art could have far greater importance than the subject represented. Inspired by the show he painted initially in an energetic style derived from Cubism. In these early canvases, there is a sense of violence and chaos, of dispersed and unrelated forms being pulled together into an order. One thinks of the artist's violent memories of the disaster which displaced him and his family. Over the next twenty years, however, Benrimo devoted his time largely to commercial illustrations, and in 1935 took a position teaching commercial design at the Pratt Institute. But he was eager to leave New York and begin a new life as an independent painter, and in 1939 he ended his highly successful commercial career, married, and moved to Taos. It was at about this time that he began experimenting with Surrealism. Thus, four years after Andre Bréton issued his Surrealist Manifesto, Tom Benrimo became the first Surrealist artist in New Mexico.

Artists came to New Mexico for several reasons. Benrimo wanted to remove himself from the demands of metropolitan artistic pressures. He wanted to achieve an individual evolution that is almost impossible to do in major art centers such as New York City. Isolating himself from the avant-garde allowed him a quite individual development within the major movements known to modern art. He questioned and extended movements that had their impetus in Europe. In his works, he examined physical, philosophical and psychological questions extrapolated from international art historical awareness. He was regional without being a regionalist.

During his first ten years in Taos, Benrimo experimented with Cubist techniques and designs and completed a series of Surrealist paintings of the area. Initially he reacted to the potent force of New Mexico's unlimited space in a Daliesque manner. Clearly delineated but incongruous forms were brought together to create fantastic imagery which incorporated details drawn from his past life in the theater and his later life in sight of the Taos mountains. These paintings were undoubtedly enigmatic to the residents of New Mexico when first seen, for no other painter in the region had used this style of

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
CONSULTATION | SALES | APPRAISAL

expression – often a play of associations incorporating New Mexican motifs in fragmentary and dislocated form. In Benrimo’s paintings the desert is a lifeless wasteland. Yet superimposed on this world of rock, sand, and sky is a human melodrama enacted by members of three cultures – the Pueblo Indians, the Spanish-Americans (especially the Penitentes), and the Anglos. The men and women are isolated in a hostile environment, and the structures they have built – an adobe house, an artist’s studio – are suspended in limbo.

Benrimo’s art never became repetitive, for by 1950 he had lost interest in three-dimensional form and anything even bordering on illustration, and began to experiment with nonobjective painting. During the last decade of his career, he devoted his full energy to abstract art. Benrimo intensified his search for a more personal style, and by the time of his death in 1958 had achieved a forceful form of expression. In these paintings, subtle geometric elements retain a suggestion of the stage as he used an interplay of transparent planes, played upon a vaguely-seen theatrical backdrop. Considered one of New Mexico’s major contemporary artists, Benrimo has been honored with numerous awards and one-man shows. “What might be called my philosophy of art,” he wrote, “is extremely simple and can be expressed by quotation from Charles Norman’s William Shakespeare: ‘There are no movements, only artists.’”