

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

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

OLIVE RUSH

(b. 1873 Fairmont, Indiana; d. 1966 Santa Fe, New Mexico)

Media: Oil; watercolor

Education: Art Students League, New York; Howard Pyle School of Illustration, Wilmington, Delaware; Miller Class for Painters, Paris; Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C.

Exhibitions: (partial list) Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1905; National Academy of Design, New York, 1911; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1912; One-woman show, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, 1914, 1957, 1964; One-woman show, Art Institute of Chicago, 1925; Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 1927; Denver Art Museum, 1930; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1933; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1950.

Public Collections: (partial list) Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada; Indianapolis Art Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe; The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC; Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, NM; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA.

Murals: Santa Fe Public Library; New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, Biology Building; Florence, Colorado, Post Office; Pawhuska, Oklahoma, Post Office.

Honors: 1947, Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, Earlham College, Fairmont, Indiana.

Selected Bibliography:

Coke, Van Deren, Taos and Santa Fe The Artist's Environment 1882-1942. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1963.

Cuba, Stanley L., Olive Rush: A Hoosier Artist in New Mexico. Ministerial Cultural Foundation, Inc., Indiana, 1992.

Nestor, Sarah and Robertson, Edna, Artists of the Canyons and Caminos. Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1976.

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Olive Rush experimented with many styles of painting during her lengthy career as an artist. An independent spirit, she grew in daring as she progressed in years. However, her highly personal work always retained an element of sophistication from her study in Paris, while maintaining a refreshing spontaneity. Understatement was often used as an expressive means in her canvases. She held the firm belief that “things unseen are more important than crowded detail.”

Born on June 10, 1873, on her family’s farm in Grant County, Indiana, Miss Rush left home at the age of sixteen to attend the Corcoran Art School in Washington, DC. In 1894, she went on to New York and the Art Students League. Through the recommendation of her sketching instructor, Olive secured an entry-level position in 1895 as an illustrator at Harper & Brothers. Over the next twenty years she illustrated a number of books and her drawings appeared in leading American periodicals such as Collier’s, Scribner’s, and Good Housekeeping. Rush’s successful career in illustration allowed her to finance several trips to Europe where she continued her art studies. Her early canvases were traditional in style and reflected her academic training. Following her relocation from Indiana to Santa Fe, New Mexico after World War I, her output became more modernistic in style, embracing local Indian, Hispanic and animal subjects.

As early as 1914, Olive Rush accompanied her father, a great admirer of the West, on a trip to Santa Fe. The expansive landscape and the quality of the light in the Southwest were quite different from Olive’s native Indiana, and she quickly became enamored with the desert and its inhabitants. “When at last... [my father] brought me with him to his ‘West’ the reason for his abiding interest became clear, and I wished only to remain among those mountains and plains and peoples that to me were more familiar by far, through a lifetime of my father’s western tales, than were the countrysides of the east.” So impressed was she by the region that six years later she returned to make the old Spanish city her permanent home.

By 1925, Rush had produced a sufficient body of oils and watercolors on Native American and Hispanic subjects to organize her own circuit show. It was hosted by the Art Institute of Chicago, the Denver Art Museum and others. She noted in the catalog for the exhibit, “Artists are spiritual adventurers and the strange beauty of the southwest country, splendid and generous, lyric at one turn, dramatic at another, invites us to dare all things. Compositions are marvelously made before our eyes, offering lesson after lesson in form and color.” The reviewer for the Chicago Daily News called Rush “a poet looking for things of the spirit, rather than actualities.”

During the 1930s, Rush experimented with surrealism, and began to work in an abstract style. Initially, her abstractions were strongly influenced by Vassily Kandinsky, but in succeeding decades developed rich masses of deep colors to evoke the rocks and forest

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glens of her beloved New Mexico. During this period she frequently painted gracefully decorative pictures of young deer. A reviewer for the Washington Star (April, 1933) wrote: “Olive Rush in her watercolors is very subtle, imaginative... She suggests much more than she tells. When she paints animals... it is with almost mythical touch...” In the late thirties the artist developed a form of decorative cubism similar to Charles Demuth’s work. Later examples display bright, color-enlivened brush strokes applied to lush, imaginary landscape motifs, as the artist became aware of the liberating forces of expressionism.

Rush’s career spanned over six decades, and throughout her experiments with various painting styles her work always remained “intuitive” rather than directly visual. She often spoke of the spiritual qualities in her art: “When you walk through a gallery it is easy to know which pictures are painted from an ‘outer impulse’ and which ones, as Kandinsky says, are ‘produced by the stress of the inner need’! To follow the inner light, that is the one great essential need at all times.”