

Charles Demuth of Lancaster

Herbert S. Levy

The writer of this paper is neither artist, critic, scholar nor historian — merely a practicing Lancaster lawyer with an unbounded admiration for Demuth.

While he was not privileged to know the artist he became early aware of him and saw him walking slowly, and it seemed painfully, many times on the streets of Lancaster. His early awareness was a result of a conversation with his mother in which he told her of a grade school companion who, although a hunchback, had become a fine painter in spite of his infirmity. That reminded her of a classmate of hers, a boy who was lame, and so delicate that he was seated with the girls in class to avoid injury from the horseplay of the boys, and whose art work was a delight to everyone. As luck would have it, this boy was seated at a double desk with her and soon she was doing the arithmetic which he so cordially detested in exchange for his doing the painting at which she was so inept. This happy situation was short lived for detection was swift and separation final. His mother said that he was shy, very kindly and eager to help anyone who would ask him, and stoutly maintained that Charles Demuth would be world famous, an assertion he was inclined at that time to doubt, and it was with considerable surprise at first and with mounting gratification that he clipped article after article of laudatory comment from papers and periodicals about Demuth and sent them home to acknowledge to his mother

The community of Lancaster has exhibited great pride down through the years in its distinguished sons, and has preserved their memories in substantial and significant ways. In the fields of military endeavor, politics, statesmanship, education, science, music, business, medicine and law such names as Hand, Reynolds, Buchanan, Stevens, Foster, Burrowes, McCaskey, Fulton, Brecht, Hensel, Hershey, Atlee and Mayser, to mention but a few, have been suitably enshrined, and will always be remembered. It may, therefore, seem remarkable that there is a native son of Lancaster whose contribution to American culture is as profound and outstanding as those of any Lancastrian to any field, but whose achievements and stature are almost wholly unknown, and are completely unmarked in the place where he was born, lived, created and died. That man is Charles H. Demuth, Lancaster's preeminent artist.

Anyone desiring to see a Demuth painting may do so in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art; in Philadelphia at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Barnes Foundation; in Chicago at The Art Institute of Chicago; in Columbus at The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts; in Washington, D.C. at The Corcoran Gallery of Art and The Phillips Collection, in Baltimore at The Baltimore Museum of Art; in Boston at The Museum of Fine Arts; in Worcester at The Worcester Art Museum; in Buffalo, at The Albright Art Gallery; in Los Angeles in The Los Angeles County Art Museum; in Denver at The Denver Art Museum; in Wichita, in The Wichita Art Museum and in Rochester at The Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. Demuth's paintings hang in these places and many others in company with the foremost artists whom he admired greatly, and are household names such as Rembrandt, El Greco, Cezanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Whistler, Gauguin, Beardsley, Blake, Fragonard and Picasso. They are to be found in Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, Yale Art Museum, the Carpenter Gallery of Art at Dartmouth College, the Rhode Island School of Design, and in the galleries of leading art dealers such as Duveen's, Wildenstein, Downtown and Durlacher. The mere enumeration of these famous owners and exhibitors of our artist is eloquent of his recognition and acceptance as a painter of highest quality on a national plane. Despite this, however, there is nowhere in Lancaster where a member of the general public can see a Demuth painting. All of the relatively few in the community are privately owned.

Anyone desiring to read about Demuth's work will find a wealth of critical analyses and discussions by the leading critics and scholars in the art field in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The New York Sun*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Philadelphia Public Ledger*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Chicago Times*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Christian Science Monitor*; in leading art periodicals such as *Dial*, *The Arts*, *The Art News*, *Partisan Review*, *Creative Art* and in national magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Time*, *Look*, *Life* and *News Week*. Of especial interest are the studies of the artist in a monograph by Albert E. Gallatin in 1927, by Henry McBride in his "Charles Demuth, Artist" in the catalogue of the Demuth Exhibition published by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1937, by James Thrall Soby in his volume "Contemporary Painters" published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1948 and by



CHARLES DEMUTH

Sculpture by Arnald Ronnebeck

Andrew Carnduff Ritchie in his article "Charles Demuth" in the Catalogue of the Demuth Exhibition published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1950.

One of the best evaluations of the artist was given by Stuart Preston, art critic for the New York Times, in an article in 1958, as follows:¹

"Every now and again, in the sturdy ranks of American artists, there crops up an exotic growth, an orchid among the wild flowers. Such an one was Demuth

Demuth is as prized by collectors as any American artist of this century. And no wonder. If, in the sly and delicate gaiety of the figure studies, there are echoes of Firbankian giggles, the flower studies demonstrate his fastidious taste and virtuosity with the medium. Baudelaire, the champion of the dandy as artist, would have delighted in Demuth, of whose flowers and flower-like figures he might have written, as he wrote of Ingres, that he fastens upon their slightest beauties with the keenness of a surgeon, and follows the gentlest sinuities of their line with the humble devotion of a lover.

Some artists, like Demuth, come out of the blue and vanish without leaving a trace on their successors. Call him an Immaculate, a Precisionist, a Cubist or what you will, he followed no school and he has no imitator. He was unique, distinguished and great — and bids fair to remain so."

What may appear at first blush to be our incomprehensible ignoring of a transcendent genius, however, may not be so remarkable if we consider what we know of Charles Demuth's life, personality and relationship with the community, and the character of the painting he did. Let us consider the first category.

It would be hard to conceive of anyone who had deeper roots in the soil of Lancaster than Charles Demuth. He was born at 109 North Lime Street, this City, on November 3, 1883, of a family which has been part of the community scene continuously since 1736 and which has operated its famous tobacco shop, the oldest in America, since 1770. Charles lived most of his life at 120 East King Street, Lancaster, next to the tobacco shop, created many of his masterpieces in that house, and in the delightful garden which was then in its glory, and he eventually died there on October 23, 1935.

Lancaster's colonial and industrial buildings, its church steeples, its theatres and its markets provided the subjects of many of his most celebrated paintings. The John W. Eshelman Co. grain elevator on North Queen Street is preserved forever in the monumental picture "My Egypt" permanently displayed in The Whitney Museum. The magnificent Trinity Lutheran Church spire on South Duke Street is reflected again and again in Demuth's architectural paintings. The Colonial Theatre on North Queen Street was the source of many of his vaudeville pieces, and the eggplants, squash, pears, peaches, corn, tomatoes, plums, zinnias, cyclamen, daisies, roses and iris grown in Lancaster County and in his own garden were used for his superb still life compositions.

Had Charles Demuth lived he would have been 82 years of age. Since contemporaries, and others, who knew him are presently in Lancaster and elsewhere, and since he is dead a little more than a quarter of a century,

it would be reasonable to suppose that it would not be too formidable a task to prepare a reliable biography. Nothing could be further from the truth. While we know certain basic facts beyond doubt, there are long and important periods of time about which our knowledge is fragmentary or nonexistent. Demuth wrote few letters, and kept no diaries or journals. He had no biographer during his life, was not given to personal confidences, and was retiring and self effacing where the local public was concerned. As his close friend and classmate, Rita Wellman said² "Charles Demuth paints in Lancaster. He does nothing else there. When he feels he wants to see people he comes to New York. After three or four days of seeing people he decides it is time to go back to Lancaster. He is not home loving nor anti-social. Lancaster fits and when something fits it is a good idea to keep to it if you have work to do." Obviously, the full chronicle of his life can be told only after the most painstaking and patient investigation, which necessitates the ferretting out and interviewing of people all over the country who may have known, or knew about the artist, sorting out facts from fiction, reconciling anything contradictory, and pursuing many avenues of inquiry only to find that the ultimate facts are locked either in an untrustworthy memory or in death. This gigantic project is presently being undertaken by a highly talented graduate student at Ohio State University and until such scholar, or someone working similarly, completes the task there will be no definite work on Demuth, and much of the artist's life will remain shrouded in mystery.

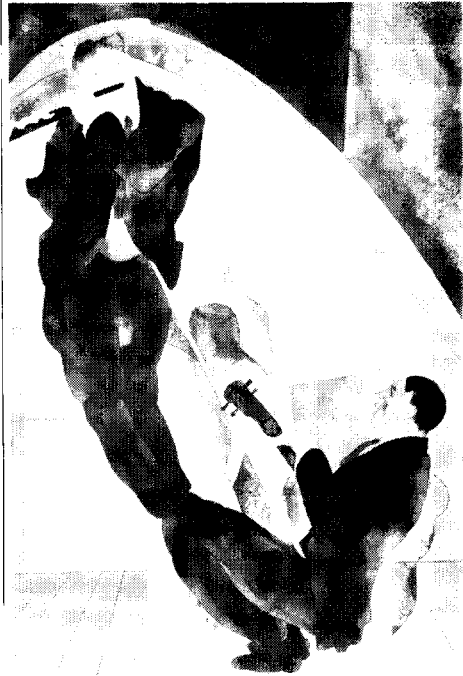
What do we definitely know of the artist? We know that from birth he was quite frail and delicate, and that at the age of four, either through accident or disease, he was lamed for life. Unfortunately he was born with a noticeable cast in one eye. We know that because of his infirmities, his family, particularly his mother, Augusta, who was an indomitable bulwark for him all his life, encouraged his interest in art, and did not insist on a career in the family tobacco business. We know that he was well trained in general subjects in our public schools, and in Franklin and Marshall Academy, and that, thereafter, he was further trained in art at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia, and in the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts. The faculty at the latter place had such eminent instructors as Anschutz, Chase, Breckenridge and McCarter, so that our artist, far from being self-taught, was given the benefit of the best obtainable academic education in the graphic arts.

Miss Helen Henderson, a classmate and close friend of Demuth, in a brilliant paper before the Lancaster Junior League in 1947, has given us a vivid impression of Demuth in his art school days. She wrote³ "In the realm of art, the period (when we were in school) was immensely fertile. To speak only of local art, the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts produced a prodigious amount of talent. Not all of it matured. Much of the fruit fell before it ripened, but out of this abundance there rose occasionally a great star, and one might almost say that Charles Demuth was the greatest star of the galaxy. I wish I could make you see him as he was in those earliest days, of his appearance as an art student in Philadelphia. Slender, and of medium height, he walked with a limp which he never allowed to hamper his activities. He walked, danced, swam, did all these athletic



AT MARSHALL'S (1915)
Water Color
The Museum of Modern Art, N. Y.

VAUDEVILLE MUSICIANS (1917)
Water Color
The Museum of Modern Art, N. Y.



IN VAUDEVILLE (1917)
Water Color
The Barnes Foundation

things as well or better than other boys. His bearing was distinguished. He always dressed in perfect taste. He had the richest of coloring — a clear olive skin, strange, very black eyes, the pupil undistinguishable from the iris — thick, glossy, raven black hair — hands like no one else — thin, nervous, alive with character. In short, he was a genius and looked it. . . .”

After art school came Paris. It was the hub of the artistic universe overflowing with genius, artistic revolt and exoticism, and it was there in 1911 that Charles Demuth, aged 27, went to live for extended periods until the War of 1914 finally drove him home in the spring of that year. What did he do in Paris? We know that he enrolled for a portion of the time at the Academie Colarossi, Academie Modern, and Julien's, but he seems to have painted very little. In fact, Gertrude Stein tells us he was much more interested in writing plays. On the occasions when he could afford it on his modest allowance, Demuth would frequent the cafes and night spots of Paris to listen to the endless, spirited and provocative discussions of the Bohemian set on the arts. He knew Ezra Pound, Jo Davidson, Marcel Duchamp, and Steinlen, among others, and soon became familiar with the then revolutionary painting of Matisse, Cezanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Pascin and Braque. The controversy over neo-impressionism and cubism was at its full height, and Demuth was fascinated, especially with cubism's clear cut rhythmic cones, cubes and cylinders which he adopted later in his architectural paintings. The only thing to mar the perfection of Demuth's life in Paris appears to have been the increasing discomfort of the disease which had a little earlier afflicted him, but had not been diagnosed, and was later fatal to him — diabetes. Before the days of insulin, this condition was agonizingly painful, and his few letters to his mother give us some hint of his suffering.

Back from Paris in 1914, in Rita Wellman's words⁴ “With more paintings in his head than in his luggage.” Demuth held his first one man show early in 1915 in New York City. The site was the Daniel Gallery and the owner of this Gallery, Charles Daniel, a genial Irish ex-saloon keeper, turned art dealer through the necessity of having to dispose of certain canvasses of a painter-patron taken in payment for whiskey, was extremely important in Demuth's introduction to the public. Daniel was highly sympathetic to the efforts of unknown artists, and had a talent in the recognition of good ones which was little short of inspired. He gave his artists good publicity, and he sold their pictures, an excellent relationship for Demuth which existed until 1925, when Daniel disappeared from the art world unexpectedly to be heard of no more.

The 1915 Show at the Daniel signaled the beginning of Demuth's recognition as a major artist at the early age of thirty-two. From that year through 1925, with the exceptions only of 1919 and 1921, the Daniel Gallery regularly had a one man show of his new paintings. The Pennsylvania Academy in Philadelphia frequently exhibited his works. There were shows at the Intimate Gallery in New York, and he was sponsored in numerous exhibitions by the famous photographer and master promoter, Alfred Stieglitz. The distinguished critic, Henry McBride, of **The New York Sun**, became a devoted admirer, and his Jovian pronouncements were a powerful force in enhancing Demuth's stature. His paintings sold well, and were sought, both by discriminating dealers and collectors. Highly fa-



View of East King Street about 1936. Domain yard and garden at foot of picture. Bausman Building is on north side of street at left side of picture. Excelsior Hotel is next. Tall building in center is Empire Hotel with Maennerchor to its rear along Grant Street.

avorable critical estimates of his work by our most eminent critics in leading magazines, periodicals and newspapers mounted in an ever swelling stream. Although in 1927 Albert E. Gallatin deplored the fact that, despite his virtuosity, no work of Demuth's hung in a public museum or art gallery, by the time of his death, eight years later, he was in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan, Whitney and Modern Museums of New York, and The Phillips and Corcoran galleries of Washington, the Philadelphia Art Museum, The Boston Art Museum, Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, the Worcester Art Museum, and The Barnes Foundation.

While the great preponderance of Demuth's work was done in Lancaster, he painted also in New York, Provincetown and Bermuda between 1915 and 1934. In New York he was a habitue of Greenwich Village and many of his night club and some vaudeville pieces had their genesis there.

Provincetown, during the summer months, between 1918 and 1934, with its heavy influx of Greenwich Village people, its charming bays, glittering beaches and rapidly changing seas and skies, delighted Demuth and he never tired painting them. Bermuda in 1916 and 1917 with its colorful buildings, rooftops and fresh landscape was an artistic challenge which the artist readily accepted.

In 1935, after fifty-two years crowned with artistic success, and afflicted with physical suffering, Charles Demuth died. He had confined

himself more and more to his home and his visits elsewhere had virtually ended. Henry McBride in speaking about his last years says⁵ "The whole place — the house and garden — gave one the impression of a secure retreat and all the more so with Demuth there — against his proper background. During all my acquaintance with him he was seriously ill and he seemed to be working as in the interim before the sentence of death could be carried out upon him. His malady was diabetes and after a while the insulin treatments appeared to make him almost a well man, but he himself always knew his limitations. In one of my visits to Lancaster, as we were looking through some portfolios in his unpretending but excessively neat studio, I asked him why he did not again attempt some of the figures that had interested us all so much a number of years previously, and with a peculiar and somewhat acid smile he said "I simply haven't the strength."

In summing up, McBride said

"We gave Charles a career which is astonishingly creditable to us and in spite of physical handicaps which would have overcome most men, I think upon the whole it was a happy one. He had that comfortable sense of being accepted in the right quarters—of being on terms with the painters among his contemporaries whom he admired. An artist has no success comparable to that one. It is satisfactory, of course, to be mentioned favorably in the newspapers. It is even more satisfactory to have purchasers come knocking at the studio door, but the moment in which a Perugini admits that a Raphael knows how to paint is the moment an artist lives for. Demuth won this particular brevet comparatively early."⁶

As stated, it is a virtual impossibility to tell with particularity what Demuth did, the people he saw and the places he went except in certain isolated cases. We know that he was friendly with many of the leading figures in American arts and letters, such as the authors Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, the playwright Eugene O'Neill, the painters John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keefe, George Luks, John Sloan, Marcel Duchamps and William Glackens. He frequented the Golden Swan, usually called "Hell Hole," a Greenwich Village saloon which was the gathering place for the Hudson Dusters (a well known group of hoodlums), the Bohemian set and a group of chronic alcoholics. Eugene O'Neill, who lived there for a time, used it as the setting for "The Ice Man Cometh." He was often at Webster Hall, rowdy home of the "Masses" Ball and many "lost generation parties." He went to Baron Wilkins in Harlem which was the source of some of his most accomplished night club paintings and he was at home at the old Hotel Brevoort, Hotel Lafayette, and the Palace Theatre in New York. But details of his precise relationship with the people he knew, or with any particular group are wholly lacking.

What sort of person was Charles Demuth? Emily Genauer, the distinguished art critic of the "New York Herald Tribune," has this to say⁷

"In the early thirties one used occasionally to see his slight, frail figure (he limped a little and he had long been ill with diabetes) in the Galleries, particularly at Steiglitz. Many of his close friends and associates are still very actively on the scene. Their reports of him vary. One gathers that Demuth was a great wit, elegant, serene, intellectual, deeply serious about his art, invariably correct in his manner — or that he was a self-centered, difficult truculent snob. It depends on whom one asks."⁷



BOWL OF PLUMS (1929)
Water Color

TREE FORMS, No. 3
Water Color
*The Art Institute of
Chicago (Alfred
Stieglitz Collection)*



If one had asked Miss Helen Henderson to whom reference was earlier made, the late Mrs. John E. Malone,⁸ who was before this Society in 1948, or Mrs. Josephine K. Foltz, who presented a paper to Lancaster's Philosophic Society in 1958, all three of these highly accomplished ladies would have said, as they did in their penetrating and sympathetic portraits of the artist, who was also their close personal friend, that he was a man of an extremely retiring nature, complete modesty and great sensitivity, considerate, gentle and kindly. In the words of Miss Henderson⁹ "He was of the most charming simplicity. He never threw his weight around in later years when he had reason for self satisfaction, but was affectionate and sweet." Mrs. Foltz has told us¹⁰ "The Demuth Motto means, either courage or humility and Charlie had both, surmounting his handicaps with courage and no complaint, never asserting himself at the expense of others — or indeed at all — and never seeking acclaim He was warm and friendly and human and that is the way I shall always remember him — Lancaster's artist." In the same vein the celebrated artist Marcel Duchamp, his close friend and frequent companion, tells us that

"He had a curious smile, reflecting an incessant curiosity for every manifestation life offered. An artist worthy of the name, without the pettiness which afflicts most artists, worshipping his inner self without the usual eagerness to be right. Demuth was one of the few artists whom all other artists liked as a real friend, a rare case indeed."¹¹

EGG PLANT AND PEARS (1925)

Water Color

Boston Museum of Fine Arts





*St. John's German Reformed
Church, Mulberry and Orange
Streets, Lancaster, Pa. Razed 1964.*

An interesting characterization of him was made by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, Curator of the Modern Museum of Art, at the time of the great Demuth retrospective in 1950. He wrote

"Demuth was an aesthete. Perhaps because he was always in comfortable, financial circumstances and probably because he had a quite sheltered existence during his childhood in Lancaster — his health was delicate and he was also lame — he never felt called upon to battle for any 'cause'. Furthermore, his pictures seem to have sold moderately well from the beginning and this in itself saved him from any possible embitterment — if he had been of a nature to feel bitterness. I do not mean to suggest that he was a creature of sweetness and light. No one was more worldly than he. He had the typical aesthete's love of good clothes, good food and drink and gay company. But, like all great aesthetes, there was some iron beneath his dandified exterior and when he had enjoyed the flesh pots sufficiently in New York or Paris, his favorite haunts, he would return to his home in Lancaster and apply himself to his painting."¹²

The Philadelphia artist, George Biddle, saw him as

"a man always a little satiated with life, wanting so much more out of it than painting, yearning perhaps for the sort of debauchery through which he could float with absolute refinement, indulging indeed in his most intemperate excesses with a sense of perfection and artistry. Hypersensitive, sensuous and sophisticated in his tastes, he had explored the shadowy depth of life and tasted the forbidden fruits of the night. But, while such pleasures had dulled his sunny charm and appetite for life, they had not warped him."¹³

What of his likes and dislikes? According to Rita Wellman

"Demuth has no particularly violent dislikes, unless it be argument. . . . He likes horses, movies (Charlie Chaplin and Marlene Dietrich), wine, Marcel Duchamp, swans, Doego deRivera, Marcel Proust, prize fights, Robert Locher. He does not care for domestic pets nor for small children nor people who talk about art. He prefers the wooden and plush era to the Monel metal and leather one, and cannot be enthusiastic about the creations of any modern decorator except Djo Bourgeois. Locher is his friend, but he admires his modern work less than his earlier work. He does not understand women nor classical music. He knows flowers."¹⁴

It would be interesting to know who told Miss Genauer that Demuth was "a self-centered, difficult, truculent snob." Reading of a very substantial number of articles about him and conversation with many persons who knew him revealed nothing in that vein. We have no doubt that the reports were received, as the critic says, but we have a very strong feeling that the contrary reports were in the overwhelming majority.

So what then is our portrait of the artist? Unquestionably it is that of a supersensitive, sensuous and sophisticated person, who neither deprecated his own abilities nor felt any inclination to pontificate when he had reason to do so. He was without false modesty, popular acclaim meant nothing to him and he could not have cared less as to what the average man thought about him or his painting. He did not suffer fools gladly. He was possessed of all of the strengths and weaknesses of the aesthetic temperament.

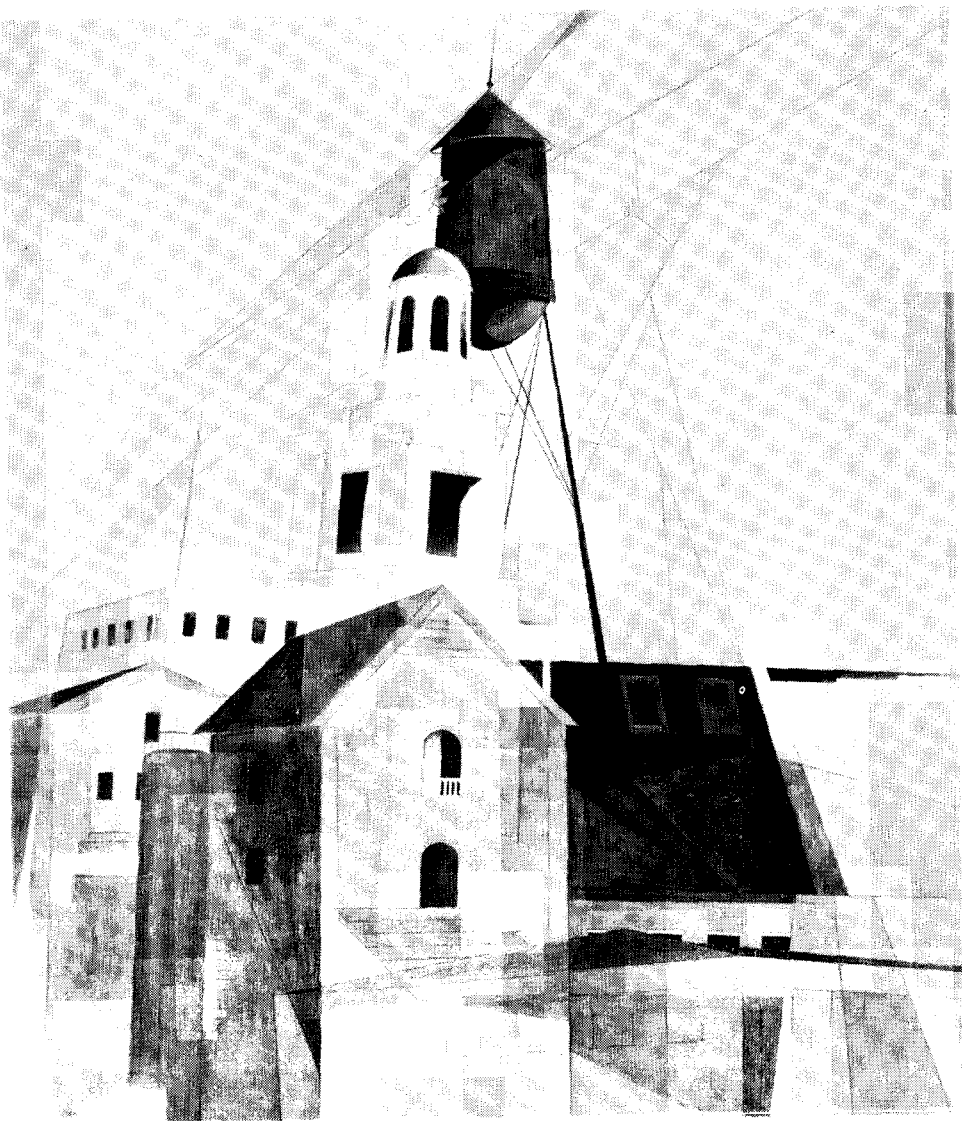
It must be borne in mind that for many years artists were set apart from the generality of people and more often than not regarded with suspicion if not downright hostility even though masked beneath a pretense of respect and esteem. Consequently artists of all kinds tended to look for true understanding and appreciation among others of their class and to develop a private language, almost a whole private culture for artists only.



BUILDINGS LANCASTER (1929)

Tempera

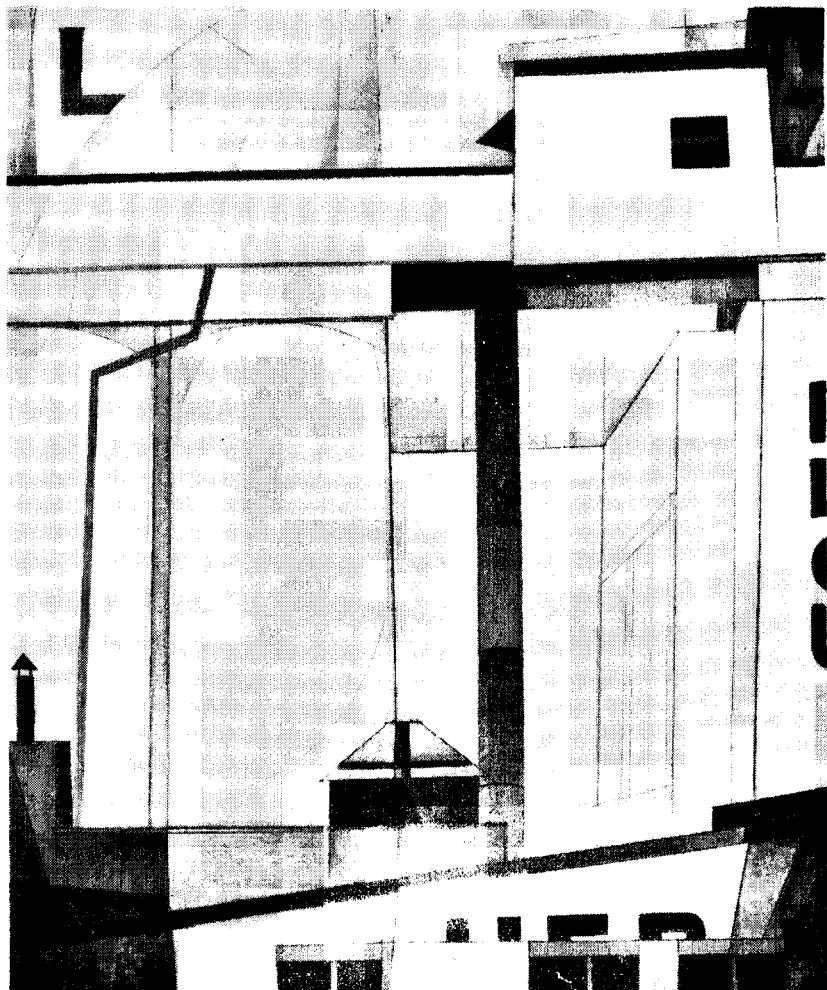
Whitney Museum



*Church Mill No. 1, South
Prince Street, with its
Philip Benedict weathervane.*

NOSPMAS M. EGIAP (1929)
Tempera
The Downtown Gallery, N. Y.

Buildings at Eshelman Feed Company, Lancaster, Pa.



Unquestionably Demuth shared this form of isolation. But apart from that, Demuth's own temperament and proclivities contributed in larger measure to the failure of the public to become familiar with him and his work. Whatever might have been his relationship with his intimates and his peers, his public image was entirely other. Remote, inaccessible, somewhat forbidding and wholly unconcerned with the average man there was strong reason why Demuth never became known to those outside his own selective circle. His was definitely not a personality which appealed to the masses.

It is conceivable that, even despite Demuth's non-gregarious nature, wider recognition might have been accorded him in Lancaster if his work were easily understood and of popular appeal. These things cannot be said of Demuth's art.

Although Demuth lived through World War I, the depths of the depression and the violent social and economic turmoil that characterized those years, there are no reflections of this in any of his pictures. No scenes of social, economic or political conflict or upheaval are depicted by him, nor is anything doctrinaire to be found in any of his paintings. He never felt called upon to take up the cudgels for or against any cause or any person. He believed that art should have no political, social or religious message. "Art for art's sake" was his philosophy, and he followed it all his life. He did not paint on large canvases with the panoramic grandeur of many of the leading artists who preceded him. Nor did he employ the riotous colors or pyrotechnic brush work of many who followed. Small still lifes of fruits, flowers and vegetables, chaste architectural studies of colonial and industrial buildings and churches in the cubist style, vignettes of intimate stylized vaudeville, circus and night club life, illustrations for certain of his favorite novels such as James' "Turn of the Screw" and Poe's "Masque of the Red Death", poster portraits of close friends and representational land and water scapes were the things he painted in prodigious quantity. Despite all his physical infirmity, his known work is over one thousand items in water color (his favorite medium), oil, tempera and gouache. Such delicate and sophisticated subjects as we have listed above are not calculated to stir wild enthusiasm or widespread excitement in the general public.

Demuth is definitely not an artist for the masses and the bases of his appeal, and the feelings he inspired in even the most initiate and knowledgeable of his admirers are quite diverse.

Andrew Carnduff Ritchie found that¹⁵ "there is a sinister suggestion about the flower paintings in some mysterious way — that they are flowers of evil and not the innocent blossoms you were led to expect." In the figure pieces he found "an even more explicit suggestion of decadence, not to say evil about them" than he did in the flowers. The acrobats and circus performers did not leave the critic Ritchie with a feeling of light hearted gaiety. The features of the performers are too inane and the contortions uncomfortably ridiculous, imparting a disturbingly sinister quality. To Ritchie this quality reflected not only a personal morbidity on Demuth's part but "a sensitive and subtle account of the cynicism and disillusionment that marked the years before and during World War I, a disease which finally

ZINNIAS, LARKSPUR AND
DAISIES (1928)

Water Color

*The Museum of Modern
Art, N.Y.*



erupted into the dizzy abandon of the so-called jazz age."¹⁶ On the other hand Henry McCarter found that "the flower pieces of Charles Demuth are serene. All precautions for purity have been taken. No thought of the 'disaster of war' has been allowed to enter in. Sin, corruption, malice, terror — mistakes of any kind are unknown to them."¹⁷ And Emily Genauer found the vaudeville and circus pieces to be "a collection of stylized paintings related in a manner to Cezanne, to Steinlen and to Toulouse-Lautrec, fashioned with exquisite skill, and are nothing more than the witty satires and superbly composed sketches they seem to be with nothing sinister, decadent or evil about them."¹⁸

It would be fair to say that the appreciation of Demuth paintings is, in all but the exceptional case, an acquired one. In that connection the admonition of the artist himself is most appropriate. He observed

"Paintings must be looked at and looked at and looked at as they (I think the good ones) like it. They must be understood, and that's not the word either, through the eyes. No writing, singing, no dancing will explain them. They are the 'nth whoopee of sight, a watermelon, a kiss may be fair, but after all have other uses.' 'Look at that' is all that can be said before a great painting, at least by those who really see it."

The Lancaster public unfortunately has had no opportunity locally to "look at and look at and look at" the paintings of Charles Demuth, and has



*Cigar factories and
tobacco warehouses of
Lancaster*

not had a sufficient opportunity therefore to familiarize itself with their superb artistic qualities, and to learn to prize them. He can never be popularized through the media available to the writers of fiction, poetry and music and his appeal for some time to come will be to the eclectic.

Since Demuth's death, his reputation and stature have continued to increase throughout America, and indeed internationally. In 1937, the Whitney Museum held a retrospective exhibition of 122 of his paintings which received enthusiastic critical acclaim. In 1950, the Modern Museum's retrospective of 158 paintings met with the same reception. The Phillips Memorial Gallery of Washington, D.C. exhibited 56 pictures in 1942. His work appeared in 1955 in a special exhibition of paintings by American and French Modern Masters at Wildenstein Gallery in New York in company with Picasso, Chagall, Soutine, Matisse, Shahn and many others. His painting "My Egypt" was in an exhibit in India in 1953, sent by the United States Office of War Information, to combat Communist propaganda, in exhibitions in five European Countries in 1955 and in Russia in 1959, again for the same purpose.

Museums from coast to coast are anxious to acquire Demuth paintings and even unfinished paintings and line drawings. At a public sale at Parke-Bernet Gallery in 1955, Demuth paintings in the McBride Collection brought excellent prices. In October 1957, the first of the two public sales at the Parke-Bernet Gallery, 83 paintings brought substantial prices and in February 1958, 86 pictures were sold with the same results.

At the latest offering of his work in a sale at Parke-Bernet Gallery in 1961, which included many other well-known artists, two water colors own-

ed by the Elsie Everts Estate, Lancaster, brought the highest prices at the sale, over artists such as Graves, Dufy, Gris, Leger and Pissaro. The director of the Gallery was quoted as saying that Demuth paintings are like gold chip stocks and if the two earlier sales had been held in 1961 the amount realized would have been double.

While Demuth has not captured the popular imagination or acclaim of this community this does not mean that he has been wholly neglected here. There have been three local exhibitions of his paintings — one in January of 1941 at Franklin and Marshall's Fackenthal Library under the auspices of the Lancaster Junior League (26 pictures), one in January of 1948 at the same place under the auspices of the Lancaster County Historical Society (29 pictures) and one in November of 1962 at the Lancaster County Historical Society building and under its sponsorship (22 pictures). These exhibitions were well attended and well reported by the local papers and it is hoped that they will be followed by many more at frequent intervals and that some of Demuth's paintings may be publicly owned and on display in our community in the very near future.



MACHINERY
Tempera

*The Metropolitan
Museum of
Art, N.Y.*

In summation and conclusion the words of James Thrall Soby are particularly appropriate.

"Demuth was born in 1883 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and lived there nearly all his life in the old brick house at 120 East King Street. His art reflects this security and permanence, not in its subject matter so much as in its subtle, aristocratic air of sanctuary and withdrawal. One sometimes senses in his work the absolute negation of Whitman's proud boast 'I was the man, I suffered, I was there.' Demuth was an artist, he was tormented by incurable illness, but he mostly stayed at home in Lancaster or Provincetown and waited for experience to come to him, his imagination an exquisite trap, fixed, waiting, exerting an enormous power of attraction . . . his life centered in his room and he recalled or imagined there everything needed for his art. And because he did not chase after sensation his art is never out of breath, it has the relaxed, yet sharp manner of genius at home, protected and certain and free of strenuous pose . . . He understood the exact strength of fragility, and in his watercolors he remains to my mind one of the finest artists our century and country have produced."¹⁹

FOOTNOTES

1. **The New York Times**, May 31, 1958
2. Rita Wellman: "Pen Portraits"
Charles Demuth, Artist **Creative Arts IX** December 1931 pp 483, 484.
3. Helen Henderson:
"Charles Demuth" paper read before the Junior League of Lancaster, Nov. 10, 1947.
4. Rita Wellman: "Pen Portraits"
Charles Demuth Artist **Creative Arts IX** December 1931 pp 483, 484.
5. **Charles Demuth, Artist**, Catalogue Whitney Museum of American Art, 1937.
6. Rita Wellman: "Pen Portraits"
Charles Demuth Artist, **Creative Arts IX** December 1931 pp 483, 484.
7. Emily Genauer: **The New York Herald Tribune**, March 12, 1950.
8. Mrs. John E. Malone, Lancaster County Historical Society III Nov. 1, 1948.
9. Helen Henderson: **Charles Demuth** paper read before the Junior League of Lancaster, Nov. 10, 1947.
10. Josephine K. Foltz, paper read before Lancaster Cleosophic Society, April 25, 1958.
11. Marcel Duchamp **A Tribute to the Artist** Catalogue of Demuth Exhibition, Modern Museum of Art, 1950.
12. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, **Charles Demuth** Catalogue of Demuth Exhibition, Modern Museum of Art, 1950.
13. George Biddle: **The Yes and No of Contemporary Art**, Harvard University Press, 1948.
14. Rita Wellman: "Pen Portraits"
Charles Demuth Artist **Creative Arts IX** December 1931 pp 483, 484.
15. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, **Charles Demuth** Catalogue of Demuth Exhibition, Modern Museum of Art, 1950.
16. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, **Charles Demuth** Catalogue of Demuth Exhibition, Modern Museum of Art, 1950.
17. **Charles Demuth, Artist**, Catalogue Whitney Museum of American Art, 1937.
18. Emily Genauer: **The New York Herald Tribune**, March 12, 1950.
19. James Thrall Soby **Contemporary Painters** Museum of Modern Art, p. 9 1948.