



Angular detail of *Self Portrait*, circa 1917, lithograph, size unknown.

Henry Varnum Poor: Commemorating 125 Years

by Ron Michael, Curator,
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Seeking Beauty

Henry Varnum Poor is an important name not only for those interested in the history of Kansas or American art, but for those who celebrate bountiful lives. Determined to follow his own path, he was committed to a life based on unadorned pursuits and a constant search for beauty. He once wrote to friend and fellow artist

Birger Sandzén, “I want to make beautiful things so as to make our living as beautiful as possible.”¹ Developing and using his multi-faceted talents, he also lived a life of great variety. At various times in his life he combined one or more professions as an artist, craftsman, builder, writer, teacher, organizer, administrator, evaluator and more. He was the perennial “jack-of-all-trades,” or perhaps more appropriately, a “renaissance man.” Just within the arts he explored a vast array of differing media – oils, watercolors, ceramics, pastels, drawings, frescos, etchings, lithography, woodworking, textiles, and illustration. He seemed to turn everything he touched into art. Perhaps nowhere is this better evident than the house he designed and constructed near New City, New York. Dubbed Crow House it was conceived as a place of comfort for his family – away from, but still accessible to, the bustling metropolis of New York and other Eastern cities. As he continued to write in his letter to Birger Sandzén, “The joy and satisfaction in making the house has been tremendous, and the future work of carving and painting our huge beams and stones will be great. ...where humans live in swarms like ants I don’t think wholesome, beautiful living is possible. This city, with its miles of skyscraping apartments degrades human beings.”²

Poor’s character was vital to his creativity and he lived as if it were all intertwined. Because he sought a simple, elemental existence filled with beauty, his art reflected those qualities. A defining statement illustrating this facet is in a passage from a book he wrote of his experiences with the War Artists’ Unit during the Second World War. As he sketched and painted activities related to the military and local peoples of Alaska, he had the opportunity to show some of his sketches to a pilot temporarily grounded in Kotzebue. The pilot “looked through my little sketchbook, studying every drawing and shaking his head in wonder. ‘So few lines and there it is,’ he said. ‘It’s wonderful to see things I know set down in such simple direct language.’ I have never had a more beautifully expressed compliment.”³



Crow House construction showing the archway from the kitchen into the living room

Characteristics

Physically and personally, Henry Varnum Poor was an impressive individual. He had the rough-edged qualities of a plainsman mixed with the sophisticated aspects of a cultured academic, and a lot in between. One writer described him in 1929 as “a snub-nosed husky from the sun.”⁴ Author and New York neighbor Ben Hecht continued in that vein: “a well muscled Kansan with a blond squarish face. He had the snub nose and twinkling glance of a Tolstoy *moujik* [peasant]. . . He walked gracefully and

worked like a cart horse”⁵ Evidence of his strength is recalled by his son Peter, remembering that his father, much like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, had come to the assistance of a neighbor’s worker whose tractor had upset atop him. With the worker trapped, Poor put his shoulder against the machine and leveraged it enough for the worker to be removed, burning himself in the process.⁶ Another account was related by artist Alex Katz, who studied under Poor at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Katz claimed the 62-year old Poor threw a fellow student, and former football lineman, like he was paper during a match of leg wrestling. He worked his way through the male student body – finishing off with mammoth weightlifter Joe Adams.⁷ Poor developed his physical strength early as a youth traipsing along the Smoky Hill River in Kansas, climbing trees, and pursuing the normal activities of a country boy. After the family moved to Kansas City, he also participated in organized sports, later becoming a collegiate high jumper at Stanford University. His fondness for tennis increased with age and he often played matches with neighbors along South Mountain Road in New York.⁸

Legendary actor and producer John Houseman (with whom he often played tennis) called him “a strong, gentle man, an athlete who retained his physical grace and power in his work and in his life.”⁹ Early in life, on his draft registration card prior to WWI, he answered the standard questions that he was a “teacher and artist” at the San Francisco Art Institute; and was tall, of medium build, with blue eyes, light colored hair and not bald.¹⁰ After reaching age 79, a doctor’s report described him physically as “a healthy appearing well-nourished elderly male. There is diffuse erythema [redness of the skin] and diffuse scars on the nose, cheeks. There is no pallor. He is comfortable in the chair during interview. He gets up from the chair with ease using his right leg as a principal lever for lifting his weight. He walks with an essentially normal gait and without pain at the knee. Height 69 inches, Weight 184 pounds.”¹¹



Self Portrait with Amaryllis, 1934, oil on linen, 32 x 28 inches. Wichita Art Museum , Gift of Peter Poor, in memory of his father, the artist Henry Varnum Poor.



Henry Varnum Poor beside the door to his studio at Crow House in 1920

Apart from Poor’s physical attributes, Hecht noted that Poor “had the secret of living without effort. No echoes of any outside world were around him.”¹² Another writer called him “a pioneering kind of man who will shape his own environment as he wants it without too much counting of the cost.”¹³ Richard Porter, who has written the definitive dissertation on Poor to date, concurs with many of those reflections and describes him as “a man of uncommon intellectual capacity” who read widely and voraciously. He was sophisticated and intelligent – “a big, brusque American sportsman with the soul and sensitivity of a creative genius.”¹⁴

Beyond these qualities, Poor had additional traits that stand out and give his character more interest and complexity. Although one of the leading American artists in the 1930s, he remained modest throughout his life. There were times when he believed he hadn’t received his due, but these were tempered by his desire to avoid the spotlight. In an unpublished biography of Poor, author Monroe

Stearns wrote that “as he [Poor] grew older he stubbornly refused to push himself into any kind of recognition. ‘Keep the prices low,’ he would tell gallery owner Frank Rehn, who advised him that higher prices on his work would make him seem a more important figure.”¹⁵

In addition to Poor’s physical feats, Alex Katz was drawn to his appearance as a man in pale clothes who dressed contrary to the art instructors he was accustomed to – with their tweeds, blue shirts and plaids. “He was the best dressed artist I had seen,” Katz recalled¹⁶ In contrast to this, his relatives in Chapman, Kansas, were often befuddled by his complete disregard for his appearance when visiting his hometown and family members. Cousin Mary Klein recalled when he wandered around town “re-visiting childhood scenes, he was always his rumpled, paint-streaked, unpretentious self.” She also remembered her sister asking her mother “if he is such a famous artist, why does he dress like that?”

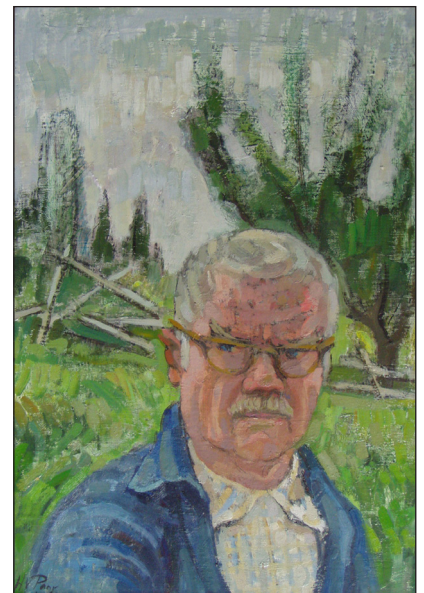
Her mother replied “Because he is a famous artist, he can dress any way he pleases.”

Klein also relates the story of another cousin in Iowa who happened to be visiting a new mall and was riding down the escalator, “at the bottom, gazing up at the busy shoppers, stood a shabby fellow she took at first for a street person.

“That poor old man!’ she thought. But when she got closer, she recognized Cousin Henry who was in Iowa to give some kind of seminar at the university.”¹⁷

Although savvy with money (his father was a banker), Poor had a disregard for financial excess and extravagance. As noted earlier, he maintained reasonable prices on his art. He also charged moderate prices for the houses he constructed. His wife Bessie lamented this fact for a home he was building for well-known cartoonist Milton Caniff. She felt he was not charging enough for his services, nor acting in he and Bessie’s best interest. Finally, exasperated by her reproaches, he wrote her a letter stating, “We live well enough considering that we really try to live for something else than making money. If the Caniffs are making and spending a lot of money, what do I care? That’s what they work for, and I don’t envy them.”¹⁸

Poor also was fond of everyday chores and culinary activities. He enjoyed working in the yard and growing flowers, especially peonies. His battles with the ever-expanding brush around Crow House often made it into his later journals, but there is always a sense of satisfaction in cutting things back and shaping the landscape. In dining, he enjoyed taking wine with his meals and Jack Daniels before supper.¹⁹ Bessie did the bulk of the cooking at home, but he would often prepare meals when away or left alone. One account is particularly insightful into his approach to dining on his own. An unannounced visit by Sidney and Joan Simon to Poor’s farmhouse in Maine led to suspicions that he was preparing a meal for someone special, other than his wife. They noticed from the window that the table was covered with a tablecloth his mother had made, his own hand-made tableware, and lighted candles. When they knocked, he answered and proceeded to produce a freshly prepared lobster. Upon questioning he responded to their inquiry of why such an elaborate affair: “You’ve got to keep your standards up, especially when living alone.”²⁰



*Self Portrait, 1962, oil on board,
26 x 18 inches. Birger Sandzén
Memorial Gallery, gift of the artist.*

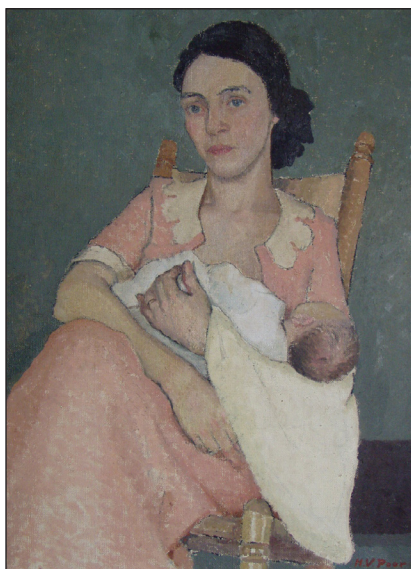
Overview of the Artist’s Life

Characteristics demonstrate interesting aspects of a personality, but it’s helpful to have basic facts to help bring depth to an individual. Henry Varnum Poor was born in Chapman, Kansas on September 30, 1887. Many sources, and even the artist himself, chronicled the date as 1888; however, census records and the Chapman newspaper confirm 1887.²¹ As a child growing up on the Kansas prairie, Poor developed a passionate love for nature and the outdoors, thanks in large part to the

influence of his maternal grandfather, Simeon Graham. Of Irish descent, Graham came to Kansas after prospecting for gold in California and serving as a scout during the Civil War.²² He established his family in Chapman and eventually taught his grandson the ways of the prairie – including how to make grasshopper and cornmeal pones and baked Prairie Hen.²³ In 1896 the Poor family – consisting of his industrious father Alfred James (who came from Andover, Maine, and was a nephew to the founder of Standard and Poor's), artistic mother Josephine Melinda (Graham), brother Herbert and sister Eva – moved from Chapman to Kansas City, Missouri. A. J. Poor, a grain dealer and banker, made the move on account of his increasing business interests and membership in the Kansas City Board of Trade. While in Kansas City, the younger Poor attended one of the earliest Manual Training Schools established in the United States, learning drafting, carpentry, and other industrial arts. He frequently returned to Chapman until moving in the summer of 1905 with his mother and siblings to Palo Alto, California, so that his older brother could enroll in Stanford University. A. J. Poor remained in Kansas City.

Henry Poor graduated from Palo Alto High School and entered Stanford University in the fall of 1906, initially majoring in economics before switching to art his junior year. In addition to his involvement in academics, he learned to fence and was a member of the track team and Gymnasium Club. In 1910 he graduated Phi Beta Kappa and began a bicycling trip through Europe with his former art professor, Arthur B. Clark. Prolonging his stay there, he studied at the Slade School with English Impressionist Walter Sickert and others in London. He also viewed the Grafton Gallery exhibition featuring the work of Cézanne, Manet, Gauguin, and a host of other Post-Impressionist artists. Their work, together with Sickert's influence, altered his perspective on painting. It led him to appropriate the Post-Impressionists' philosophies and techniques in his ensuing work. He also spent time in Paris, studying both at the Académie Julian and independently with several artists.

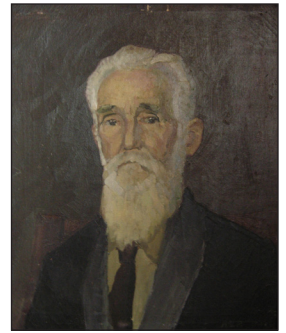
After completing studies in France, Poor accepted a one-year temporary position at Stanford in 1911. At its conclusion, he married fellow student Lena



***Mother with Sleeping Baby* (Lena Wiltz and Josephine), 1913, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 22 inches. Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Gift of Oscar Thorsen.**

Wiltz and moved to Kansas so he could manage his parents' farm some four miles north of Bonner Springs and also advance his work as an artist. While there, daughter Josephine was born. In the fall of 1913, he accepted a permanent position back at Stanford and remained there until the spring of 1916 when his position was eliminated by the College president.

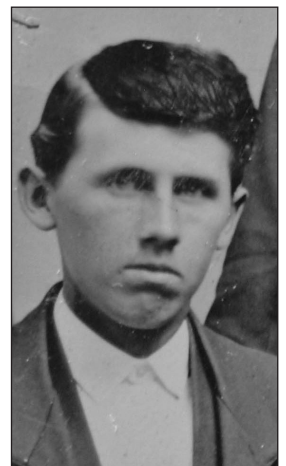
Out of work, but still a productive artist, Poor and his young family moved north to San Francisco where he eventually resumed teaching at what would become the San Francisco Institute of Art. While his art career began to flourish, his marriage was dissolving. Once reconciliation became improbable, he began seeing Marion Dorn, a former student from Stanford. Much to his chagrin, he was drafted in 1918. While serving in France as a regimental artist with the 115th Engineers, he completed paintings, drawings and lithographs of his fellow soldiers, superiors and wartime activities. He remained in France following



***Simeon Graham* by Henry Varnum Poor, circa 1912, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. Private Collection**



Josephine Melinda Graham, circa 1882



Alfred James Poor, circa 1878

the Armistice, finally returning to San Francisco in June 1919. With his divorce from Lena Wiltz final, he married Marion Dorn and the couple headed east to New York in hopes of more success with their individual careers.

Life in the city proved a daunting prospect and the couple purchased land along South Mountain Road near New City, New York. Soon afterward, Poor began constructing a home. For over a year he worked primarily on his own to build the living room, kitchen, bedroom, and studio based on the architecture he had seen in France. The house was largely made of local stone and hand-hewn timbers, and included a large fireplace, flying buttress and a steeply pitched roof. It became known as “Crow House” after the crows that congregated to watch Poor work.

Once settled, he exhibited his recent paintings, drawings and etchings at the Kevorkian Galleries in New York City. After only a few paintings sold, he decided to try working in ceramics. Many of his early techniques mirrored those used in Cretan/Persian pottery, of which he had recently seen examples at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He originally intended to produce inexpensive, unsigned work; but realizing the impracticality of this approach, instead focused on personalizing the pieces and spent more time developing each work. Throughout his career he did not take on assistants, preferring to work alone, and his ceramics generally sold as quickly as he could make them. They were characterized by sgraffito designs drawn through cream-colored slip applied to local clay bodies. Oxides and glazes enhanced and added color to the clay surfaces. Over the years, he made functional pottery, sculpture, architectural elements, fountains and tile murals.

While busy developing his ceramic work, he also began constructing houses for friends and associates living along South Mountain Road and in the New City region. Not long after he finished Crow House, Ruth Reeves, a well-known American textile designer, asked him to build a home for her. Additional future clients included playwright Maxwell Anderson; actors Burgess Meredith and John Houseman; cartoonist Milton Caniff; and friends Jules Billig and MacDonald Deming.

Also in the 1920s, Poor remarried for the final time. He was divorced from Marion Dorn in 1923 and two years later married Bessie Freedman Breuer, an established writer and editor. Bessie had a daughter, Anne, whom Poor adopted, and in 1926 they had a son, Peter.

After working extensively in ceramics throughout the decade and exhibiting at the Montross



Bowl, 1947, ceramic earthenware, 6 x 14 x 14 inches. Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Gift of Timothy A. Johnson in honor of the 50th Wedding Anniversary of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Vivian Johnson.



A Painter and His Wife (Self Portrait with Marion Dorn), 1920, oil on canvas, 24 x 26 inches. Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Greenough Trust Collection.

Galleries and the American Designers' Gallery as one of its founding members, Poor traveled with his family to France for an extended stay in 1929. While there, he resumed painting. By the mid-1930s his paintings drew as much attention as his ceramics. New York critics such as Murdock Pemberton and Edward Alden Jewell championed Poor's paintings, placing his work at the forefront of American artists. Reviewing an exhibition in 1937, Jewell wrote in the *New York Times*: “For my part, I will pit Henry Varnum Poor against any living artist anywhere, yes, and against a lot of artists who have laid aside their brushes, quite confident that he can hold his own.”²⁴

Also in the early 1930s, he began experimenting with traditional fresco painting. This eventually led to mural commissions for the Justice Department,



The Hudson River at Bear Mountain, 1932, oil on board, 15 x 20 inches. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Museum Purchase: Carnegie Fund Grant, 1935.

Interior Department, the Main building on the Pennsylvania State University campus, and the Courier-Journal Building in Louisville, Kentucky.

In 1938 his increasing reputation facilitated a commission for him to illustrate Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, published by the Limited Editions Club. He later also illustrated *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London.

During the Great Depression Poor became deeply involved in the organization and operation of the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts. He participated as an artist and juror. After America entered World War II in 1941, he helped artists become involved in the war effort. He authored and illustrated a book, *An Artist Sees Alaska*, recounting his

travels along the Alaska coast as a visual art war correspondent. He later wrote and illustrated a book on ceramics titled *A Book of Pottery: From Mud Into Immortality*.

Poor was generally reluctant to serve as a teacher following his time at Stanford and in San Francisco, but he did accept several positions in later years. He was appointed Instructor in painting and drawing at Columbia University and was a guest teacher at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center during the summers of 1937 and 1938. In 1949, he was named painter-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome and in 1962 taught at the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa. His most dedicated efforts as an instructor, however, came in 1946 when, along with Willard Cummings, Sidney Simon and Charles Cutler, he founded the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Poor remained busy as an artist, instructor, and arts advocate. His artwork no longer achieved the recognition it had in the 1920s and 30s, but he continued to be a major influence in American art, exhibiting extensively and being honored with numerous retrospectives. He generally split his time between his home in New City, New York, and a summer residence near Skowhegan. Additionally, he spent extended periods in Truro, along Cape Cod in Massachusetts, at Marco Island in Florida, and along the Cuban coast before the American embargo in the 1960s.

As an artist, Poor emphasized directness in his work. He continually fought to find a balance, as he described it, between "Material and Spirit (or artistic intention)."²⁵ Birger Sandzén described his approach to art in a 1939 letter to his daughter: "Mr. Poor's art shows great variety of subject matter, still life, landscape, figure and portrait. He paints simply and directly and does most of his work in one continuous effort without retouching. He tells his pupils. . .to 'paint what they see and simply put one color next to the other, finishing as they proceed.' Henry Varnum Poor is an honest, unsophisticated realist, very modern in his vision, but without any complications of surrealism, expressionism, or any other -isms. He has a great gift and the simple directness of his art has considerable charm."²⁶

The last years of his life were spent primarily working in ceramics and pastels. He died from a heart attack on December 8,



Early Spring (Trees Against the Sky), circa 1940, oil on board, 36 x 24 inches. Ulrich Art Museum, Gift of Anne and Bessie Poor.

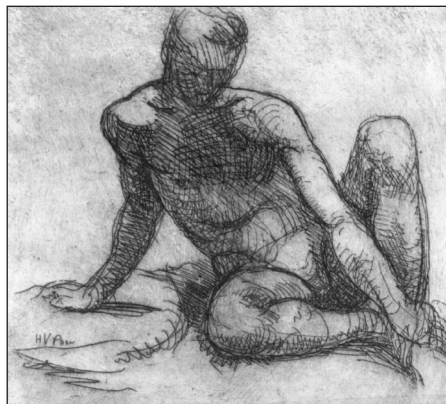
1970. News of his death was relayed in papers, magazines and journals throughout the country and he was buried in Mt. Repose Cemetery near Haverstraw, New York.

Henry Varnum Poor's Philosophies Related to Art and Working Methods

Over his lifetime Henry Varnum Poor developed and maintained sound, fundamental principles that he adhered to in creating art. His ideas evolved, but continually exemplified reasoned thinking. Early in his career he aligned himself with the Post-Impressionists, later he fell in line with ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, and eventually came to identify with the Realists. He also was not shy in publically discussing his stance on art and often published articles and books reflecting his philosophies. As is often the case with long living artists, many of his initial ideas seemed radical, but over time became out of step with the ever-changing art world. In hindsight it appears he was most aligned with the nation's art scene in the 1930s.

First and foremost, Poor felt an artist should look to nature for inspiration and subject matter.

Quality artwork should not be purely decoration, but rather reflect what could be observed in the natural world. He particularly clung to this idea in his paintings and two-dimensional works. His pottery reflected a decorative tendency, but realistic imagery remained in the forefront.



Untitled Male Figure, circa 1917, etching on paper, 4 3/8 x 5 inches. Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Greenough Trust Collection.

As he grew older, he became concerned about the lack of tradition in contemporary American art. He felt that it was being replaced by influences that did not carry the weight of an entire culture.²⁹ Like many artists active in the early part of the 20th century, he hoped to be involved in the development of an American tradition in art but also realized that new movements were continually on the rise. He wrote "The great cultures of the world, and also the most universally eloquent artists, have been the product of and part of a tradition. Without this common language you have Babel, and loudness of their voices and the assertiveness of their styles."³⁰

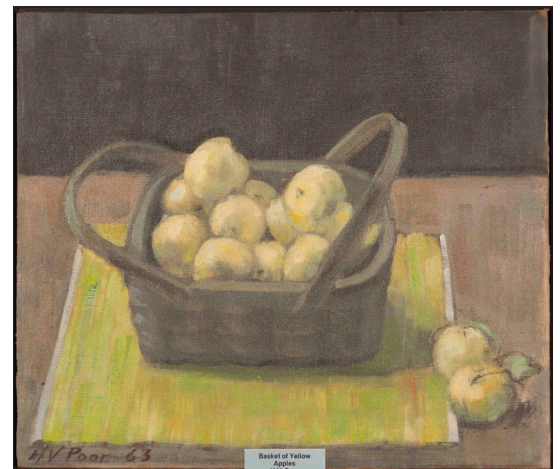
Delving deeper into how Poor's thoughts on art



Still Life (Apples with Blue Compote), circa 1917, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Gift of Oscar Thorsen.

As noted earlier, he felt quality artwork required a balance between "material" and "spirit." Once either the material or spirit became overly dominant in a work, the resulting object lost its visual integrity. In 1958 he wrote "The ratio of the parts in the duality is very shifting. The material can be all important; or the spirit, the intention of the creator can completely swamp the material. I think the most eloquent works of art are those in which you are always conscious of both."²⁷ Along the same line, he found perfection in artworks particularly "irritating" and never hesitated to exhibit pieces with condition issues if he felt their design was strong enough.²⁸

As he grew older,



Basket of Yellow Apples, 1963, oil on canvas mounted to plywood, 17 1/4 x 20 inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art, Gift of the artist.

changed over his lifetime, it's imperative to examine his writings. In conjunction with a San Francisco exhibition in 1917, he laid out key elements he sought as an artist:

Every true artist must have as the backbone of his work the idea of service. He must feel that if he succeeds the world will have been enriched by his work. . .

Great work is only built upon the refusal on the part of its creator to accept limitations. . .

The young artist of today who scorns the meaning of new art movements and declares the old is good enough for him, is a fool. . .

Our artists may know more about anatomy and more of painting techniques [than the Egyptians], but techniques may cover up the real thing and blind a whole generation to what is essential. And the more we add to the technical baggage of art, the more difficult it is to keep from obscuring the fundamentals. . .

The real artist of today is a man born with the love of form and color, who longs to express himself with these.³¹

These early writings reflect Poor as an artist committed to breaking the mold of what he saw as sensational technique-driven works that focused more on the application of paint than the importance of subject matter and careful observation. Similar to artists that inspired him, such as Giotto and Cézanne, he wanted to paint directly and honestly. These same sentiments, but with renewed optimism, are contained in his statement for his first New York exhibition in 1920:

The America that I knew several years ago seemed a barren place for an artist. The finest values seemed swallowed in materialism. The free live forms of art were non-existent for people surrounded by machine made comfort only wanted some form of sweetened literalism for their sentimental pleasure. I thought I hated America.

A year ago I was part of the stupid horror that brought the youth of my generation together on the soil of France. With more mature eyes I saw again the people and country that I had lived nine years before and while I loved it still, I found there too what I hated in America. And I found that I was stamped with a race, that I was American, and that there is something large and moving that is America. So I knew that as I lived life I loved America – for its potentialities.

So I have come from the West to live and work in the East, for I want to know America. What American art is and what it can become, deeply concerns me.³²

By 1940, Poor had become a potter, then again a painter, and finally a jack-of-all-trades. His views continued to grow and fostered a deep appreciation of what it meant to be an American artist:

The first difficulty is that we want everything fine for ourselves, and see no reason in the modern world why everything before our eyes cannot be our proper heritage. I think it can be and is. Our art is young and particularly in youth we much accept no limitations – the years will impose them soon enough and then we should not accept them with too much grace.

In this struggle of a greedy and healthy youth to absorb anything, our national traits and traditions will gradually, and only after the event, be clear.

Mistrust any self conscious American scene.

Mistrust the talk about artists having to come out of their ivory tower and keep contact with life. It seems to me that now, in America, the more rare and infinitely more difficult thing is to keep enough detachment, and so to be able to make some reason and order out of the infinitely varied life with which even the most retiring is brought into constant and confusing contact.³³



***The Blue Pitcher*, 1912, oil on canvas, 30 x 23 inches. Private Collection.**



***Mother and Child*, circa 1913, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches. KSU, Beach Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Stone.**

By the 1950s, Poor became united with a group of artists intent on fostering representational artwork. The group was disenchanted with the emphasis by major American art museums on abstract and non-representational art. Members of this group eventually developed a publication to air their grievances. Known as *Reality*, the journal contained articles reflecting their opinions. Poor was a leading contributor. In the inaugural issue he wrote about the group's origins and position:

I was for simply saying that we believed in, and loved the "Object," the "Image." That we were all objective painters and so, conversely, we thought non-objective painting was a blind alley. But we found that what we were most "against" was not any way of painting, but the forces in our art world that threw things out of balance. Museums and critics were so quick to surrender all the values that we felt were permanent, and thus were making of our profession a thing of cults and fads, and obscurity and snobbery.

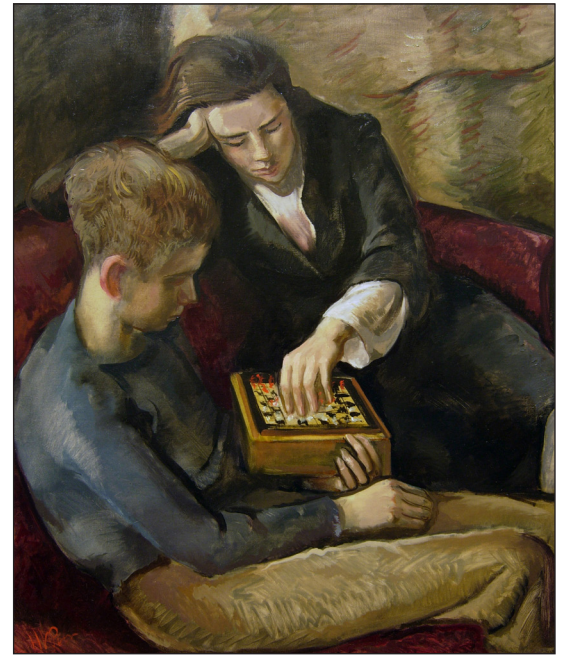
So, like liberals in a free society, it is easier to state what we are against than what we are for. We are for the maintenance of values and liberties that we already have. To restate them means reviewing the whole history of art, or making generalizations that seem like clichés. We are against all forces that set up false values, that substitute obscurity for clarity, and that imperil our true democracy.³⁴

Finally, the most concise expression of Poor's philosophies are related in *A Book of Pottery: From Mud Into Immortality*, published in 1958. In it, he covers most of the material included above with characteristic clarity and directness.

In technical terms as an artist, he was not fickle or obsessed with slick processes. He determined the best method to achieve a desired outcome and tailored his methods to realize it. By no means lazy, he was demanding of himself and spent untold hours in the studio or wherever opportunities presented themselves. He was a supreme innovator and could manufacture tools and materials from scratch. One of the best examples comes from *A Book of Pottery*:

I will describe the potter's wheel I made when I started to do pottery. Now it may seem primitive to the point of affectation, but remember this was 1920; there were no "artist" potters' wheels and kilns on the market that I knew of and I had no money to buy them anyway. Maybe I have exceptionally strong atavistic instincts, too. I had never seen a potter throwing on a wheel, but I had seen those early unglazed Cretan cups and bowls at the Metropolitan Museum and knew that if those primitive people could do such things so could I. And I had to find some way of earning a living through work that I loved to do.

In a junk yard I found an old washing machine flywheel, weighing twenty pounds and measuring about thirty inches in diameter, with a 1 1/2-inch core for a shaft. In the woods, after much looking, I found a white oak stick about forty inches long and two inches in diameter with a sharp crook in it. I cut and



***The Chess Game*, 1939-40, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches. Wichita Art Museum, purchased with funds donated by Marvin Bastian in memory of his wife, Bobbie Bastian.**



Henry Varnum Poor at his wheel. Photograph by David Corcos Levy, circa 1968

trimmed the end near the crook. So trimmed, it fit into the 1 1/2-inch core of the flywheel.

Then I set a long, round-headed screw into this tapered end of my shaft. I cut a deep, flat groove at the most offset point in the crook, about five inches over the flywheel, and another groove about five inches below the top of the stick. Then I made a solid frame of 2x4's, calculated to fit my shaft, with a dented steel plate for the sharpened screw to revolve on, flat leather straps for fittings around the oak shaft, and a top with two notched boards supporting the shaft at the groove five inches below the top.



Wall Planter, circa 1930,
earthenware, 13 x 10 x 5 inches.
Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery,
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Stone.

When I had the shaft mounted, firmly held, and running smoothly, I cast a plaster head ten inches in diameter over the squared end of the shaft, and while the plaster was still soft, revolved it and timed to run truly and accurately. On this wheel I learned to throw, and on it for ten years I earned my living.³⁵

Though pottery showed many of his innovative tendencies, painting was not alien to them. Instead of relying on pre-stretched canvas, Poor used nearly any surface as a support. Early in his career he often employed a heavy, inexpensive jute material akin to burlap. Later he moved to better canvas and occasionally linen, but plywood, hardboard, canvas mounted on wood, etc. became standard. Additionally, he often made his own frames, which were painted and decorated with sgraffito incising.

When drawing, he incorporated a variety of materials and is quoted as saying his favorite instrument was a matchstick dipped in India ink.³⁶ He often created mixed media works using ink, pastels and any other material he deemed appropriate.



Self Portrait with Gun, 1934,
oil on canvas mounted to board,
38 x 30 inches.

Wichita Art Museum, purchased using
the Burneta Adair Endowment Fund.

As previously noted, when searching for subject matter, Poor looked to nature, especially things closest to him that he knew best. Landscapes were derived from local motifs he traversed often, or that he experienced through travels. He often sought areas lacking grandeur, with a simple abundance of foliage or characteristics that stimulated his interest. When creating portraits, he chose subjects close at hand, most often family members or himself. While living in California and Kansas, his wife, child, parents, sister and extended family became principle subjects. One of the first works submitted to a major national juried exhibition was a snapshot-like painting of his mother holding a simple blue pitcher.³⁷ On several occasions he painted his sister Eva and her son Charles. He also extended sittings to include his immediate circle of friends.

Once divorced from Lena Wiltz, Marion Dorn made her way into his portraits, including a strong work of the artist and his wife.³⁸ Following their breakup, Poor found long-lasting subjects in his third wife and their children. He placed Bessie, Anne and Peter in everyday settings, participating in daily activities, with their changes over the years reflected in many of his pieces. He also painted friends along South Mountain Road and other well-known celebrities who entered his life.³⁹

Self-portraits became a staple of his art. At one point he reflected on the number he had painted versus those done by Rembrandt – Poor felt he hadn't done as many.⁴⁰ The earliest known self-portrait is in the collection of Stanford University and was completed in 1911, not long after his graduation.⁴¹ He continued painting himself in various settings and situations. Perhaps the most perplexing and charming

is *Self Portrait with Gun* now in the collection of the Wichita Art Museum.⁴² One of his later self-portraits was exhibited and donated to the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in 1963.⁴³

Watching Poor at work in his studio must have been fascinating. Friend and neighbor John Houseman compared him to an athlete, in constant motion and balanced on the balls of his feet.⁴⁴ Peter Poor, who posed for many of his father's portraits, described the sittings as quiet affairs, with his father scarcely uttering a word during the sessions. They were often long sittings, and he recalls the deep, penetrating look his father used in analyzing him throughout the process. This look is also evident in his self-portraits. Rarely did Poor work from photographs, preferring instead live models. On a humorous note, he was often dissuaded by his wife Bessie from doing portraits of women as she often felt they did not flatter the sitter – he was too honest with his brush.⁴⁵

Throughout his life, he rarely looked back at what he had accomplished. He preferred to forge ahead with new ideas and the feeling that he was doing his best work at any given time. On numerous occasions he wrote that, after so many years, he was finally learning to paint.⁴⁶ He also encouraged others artists to push forward. In *An Artist Sees Alaska* he describes a young waitress in Nome who was reluctant to sell a fine wood carving:

“Did you see my wood carving of an Eskimo head in Poletti’s window?” she asked.

“My God! Another artist,” exclaimed Joe [Jones]. I [Poor] had noticed the wood panel, and it was very well done.

“Yesterday an officer wanted to buy it for two hundred dollars and I wouldn’t sell it. I like it. It’s the best thing I’ve ever done. Do you think I should sell it?” she asked in a rush.

“Two hundred dollars? That’s a lot of money. Sure, sell it. Don’t hang on to what you do. Keeps you from doing any better.” I spoke as a professional to an amateur.”⁴⁷

Henry Varnum Poor’s Legacy

At his equinox, Henry Varnum Poor was one of the most recognized and respected figures in American art. Biographer Monroe Stearns wrote in 1975 that Poor was “famous for his work, loved for his personality, universally respected for his artistic integrity, and incalculably influential through his teaching and writing about art.” He continued:

Henry Varnum Poor currently enjoys an equally great posthumous reputation, especially among young persons, for the unpretentious self-reliance he preached and practiced. The steadfastness of his attitude that working with bold originality but in a tradition is essential to all great art has survived the chaotic confusion in the art scene of the mid-twentieth century to become again a valid and viable point of view for present-day creative spirits.⁴⁸

Since Stearns’ bold pronouncement, Poor’s recognition has waned and his fame has been eclipsed by some of his contemporaries, but he continues to be a recognizable name in the art lexicons. Over the years there has been limited, but noteworthy and rich scholarship. Special recognition is reserved for Stearns unpublished biography; the dissertations of Richard Porter and Linda Steigleder; and the major exhibition in which they were involved at the Museum of Art (now the Palmer Museum of Art) at Pennsylvania State University in 1983. The published catalog broke new ground and continues to serve as the major resource regarding Poor. Caroline M. Hannah has taken over as a leading proponent of the artist’s efforts and continues to bring scholarly attention to his work. Additionally, smaller articles have helped maintain the flame. Hopefully, this trend will continue to be expanded upon in future years.

In the end, most artists understand that their work will have more lasting power than they themselves. It is fortunate that many of the nation’s leading museums still retain and exhibit examples of Poor’s creative output. Just within his native Kansas and neighboring states well over 100 works of art are found in public and private collections.⁴⁹ The majority are not permanently on view, but most are included in periodic exhibitions or available for viewing with advance notice.

After Poor’s death on December 8, 1970, artist Red Grooms wrote to his daughter Anne:

I called Bill on business last night and he broke the news to me – it seemed so unlikely I almost asked “are you kidding?” Henry dead? He couldn’t do anything like that, he wouldn’t know how. But he did know how and I am sure he did it well. Bill said he just lay down, smiled and died. I can see the smile (that marvelous sly indulgent smile), the dying part was Henry’s little joke on all of us. We were silly to imagine he would live forever.⁵⁰

Indeed, Henry Varnum Poor has been dead for over 40 years, but because of his extensive, vital and unique output, a part of him is still living. In a sense, it will live forever.

Notes:

- ¹ Letter from Henry Varnum Poor [hereinafter HVP] to Birger Sandzén, February 14, 1921, in which Poor also enclosed 5 snapshots of the construction of his home on South Mountain Road near New City, NY. Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery Archives [hereinafter BSMGA], Lindsborg, KS.
- ² Letter from HVP to Birger Sandzén, February 14, 1921.
- ³ HVP, *An Artist Sees Alaska* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1945), p. 229.
- ⁴ “Potter Poor,” *Time*, April 1, 1929, p. 38.
- ⁵ Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 404.
- ⁶ Author’s phone interview with Peter Poor, February 2, 2012. HVP sustained a severe burn mark on his shoulder as a result of the incident.
- ⁷ Alex Katz, “Henry Varnum Poor,” *Henry Varnum Poor Paintings*, James Graham and Sons exhibition catalog, New York, November 4-27, 1999, p. 6.
- ⁸ Peter Poor interview, February 2, 2012.
- ⁹ John Houseman, *Run-Through* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 89.
- ¹⁰ Poor’s 1917 Draft registration card, www.ancestry.com
- ¹¹ Report of Dr. Richard H. Freyberg, M.D., December 29, 1966 in *Henry Varnum Poor papers 1873-2001* [hereinafter *HVP Papers*], Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [hereinafter AAA-SI], Washington, DC (reels 633-634).
- ¹² Hecht, p. 404.
- ¹³ Ernest Watson, “Henry Varnum Poor,” *American Artist*, 17, March 1953, p. 26
- ¹⁴ Richard J. Porter, *Henry Varnum Poor, 1887-1970: A Biography and Study of His Paintings*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 1983, p. 14.
- ¹⁵ Monroe Stearns, *Henry Varnum Poor*, manuscript for a biography, 1976, pg. 301. *Monroe Stearns research papers on Henry Varnum Poor, 1938 – 1975*, AAA-SI.
- ¹⁶ Katz, p. 6
- ¹⁷ Mary Klein, letter to Museum People, May 7, 2000, BSMGA.
- ¹⁸ Stearns, p. 243.
- ¹⁹ Stearns, p. 410.
- ²⁰ Stearns, p. 385.
- ²¹ “Local News,” *The Chapman Courier* (Chapman, Kansas), October 7, 1887.
- ²² Dorcus Knight, “Pioneer History of the Graham Family, as Told By One of Its Members,” *Chapman Advertiser*, May 12, 1932.
- ²³ *HVP Papers*, AAA-SI, (reels 633-634).
- ²⁴ Edward Allen Jewell, “Paintings by Poor in One-Man Show,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1937, digital edition.
- ²⁵ Henry Varnum Poor, *A Book of Pottery: From Mud to Immortality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958), pp. 28-30.
- ²⁶ Birger Sandzén letter to Margaret Sandzén, July 13, 1939, BSMGA.
- ²⁷ HVP, *A Book of Pottery*, p. 28.
- ²⁸ HVP, *An Artist Sees Alaska*, p. 22.
- ²⁹ HVP, *A Book of Pottery*, pg. 34 and *Henry Varnum Poor 1954*, Skowhegan Lecture Archive – Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME.
- ³⁰ HVP, *A Book of Pottery*, p. 34.
- ³¹ *Oakland Tribune*, March 18, 1917, p. 24.
- ³² Kevorkian Galleries exhibition catalog March 17 – 28, 1920. *John and Mary Mowbray-Clarke Papers 1901 – 1925*, AAA-SI, (reels D169 & D169A).
- ³³ HVP, “Roots that Grow,” *Magazine of Art*, December 1940, p. 666-667.
- ³⁴ HVP, “How This Group Began,” *Reality*, Spring 1953, p. 6. *Raphael Soyer Papers 1933 – 1989*, AAA-SI (digitized collection).
- ³⁵ HVP, *A Book of Pottery*, pp. 54-55.
- ³⁶ Watson, p. 29.

³⁷ Peter Hastings Falk, *The Annual Exhibition Record of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts 1876-1913*, (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1989), p. 385.

³⁸ Collection of the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Lindsborg, KS. Listing included in Kevorkian Galleries exhibition catalog March 17 – 28, 1920, *John and Mary Mowbray-Clarke Papers 1901 – 1925*, AAA-SI, (reels D169 & D169A).

³⁹ Among others, Poor painted portraits of Theodore Dreiser, Wharton Eschrick, John Houseman, Margaret Perry, Waldo Peirce, Ruth Reeves, and John Steinbeck,

⁴⁰ *HVP Papers*, AAA-SI, (reels 633-634).

⁴¹ *Portrait of a Young Man as an Artist (Self-Portrait)*, 1911, oil on canvas, 23 1/4 x 19 3/8 inches, Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University.

⁴² *Self Portrait with Gun*, 1934, oil on canvas mounted to board, 38 x 30 inches. Wichita Art Museum, Museum Purchase, Burneta Adair Endowment Fund.

⁴³ *Self Portrait*, 1962, oil on board, 26 x 18 inches, Gift of the Artist, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery, Lindsborg, KS.

⁴⁴ John Houseman, *Henry Varnum Poor: An Artist Remembered*, (Pennsylvania State University Audio Visual Services, 1983), videocassette.

⁴⁵ Peter Poor interview, September 2, 2011.

⁴⁶ HVP letter to Charles Pelham Greenough, September 15, 1962, BSMGA.

⁴⁷ Poor, *An Artist Sees Alaska*, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Stearns, introductory note p. b.

⁴⁹ The largest holdings are found at the Wichita Art Museum; Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art in Manhattan, KS; and Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in Lindsborg, KS. Smaller but still extensive collections are those of the Emprise Bank Collection in Wichita, KS; Hillstrom Museum of Art in St. Peter, MN; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, MO; Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, KS; Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita, KS and the Walker Art Center in Garnett, KS. Institutions having up to three works include Bethany College in Lindsborg, KS; Chapman Area Preservation Society and Chapman Library in Chapman, KS; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs, CO; Des Moines Art Center in Des Moines, IA; Hutchinson Art Association in Hutchinson, KS; Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Art in Denver, CO; Alice C. Sabatini Gallery in Topeka, KS; Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln, NE; Wichita Center for the Arts in Wichita, KS; and the World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, MO.

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