

OLIVER NEWBERRY CHAFFEE

1881-1944

Oliver Chaffee was born in Detroit, Michigan to affluent parents. His brother, Melzar was an accomplished violinist and his other brother, Walter, played the cello. Music permeated the Chaffee house from friends of his parents. Another influence in Oliver's life was his aunt Caroline who was an art critic, writer and world traveler. Upon his death, Oliver's grandfather left him a sizeable trust fund, allowing Oliver to follow his passion for art in relative comfort.

While it isn't known when exactly Oliver decided to become an artist, he entered the Detroit Fine Arts Academy in the late 1890's. His teachers there had both spent time abroad studying and exhibiting in European capitals. They were trained in the academic tradition and reflected a more conservative view of American painting. Access to the Detroit Museum of art, in 1908 Oliver to study ancient art as well as traditions of Western painting.

In 1903, Oliver Chaffee moved to New York and enrolled in the New York School of Art. There he studied with William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri. Both teachers encouraged experimentation and individuality. However, it was Robert Henri who was the first to denounce openly the academic tradition and immerse themselves in the reality of live. Chaffee also attended the Art Students' League where he studied with Charles Hawthorn. During the summer of 1904, Chaffee joined Hawthorne at his Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Hawthorne was one of the first teachers to advocate painting outdoors and held classes on a wharf or beach. He emphasized color over drawing. These outdoor lessons sharpened Chaffee's understanding of color and light.

Oliver Chaffee went to Paris sometime in 1906 and arrived during a time when the art scene was being shaken by a stream of new ideas and expressions. Exhibitions of works by Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin laid the foundation for the Fauves, who made their debut in 1905. "A precursor to Cubism and Expressionism, one of Fauvism's major contributions to modern art was its radical goal of separating color from its representational purpose and allowing it to exist on the canvas as an independent element. Color did not have to be true to the natural world." Chaffee created a self-portrait in 1906 that was influenced by Fauvism and possibly also by Matisse where he could have seen a self-portrait by the artist at the home of the Stein family.

Chaffee continued to experiment with Fauve colors and techniques while at the Academie Julian in 1908. The Academie had many art students, including Americans, who preferred it over the more conservative Ecole des Beaux Arts, because it encouraged diversity and individuality.

Chaffee's studies in Paris were also complemented by trips to other art centers, such as Florence and Amsterdam. While these large cities offered intellectual and artistic stimulation, his love of nature continued to be the main source of his work.

In 1908, when Oliver Chaffee returned to Detroit, the Detroit Museum of Art arranged a major exhibition of his works produced abroad. Unfortunately, of the 82 paintings shown, none was located after the show. They may have been among a large group of early works destroyed in his brother's house in New Jersey. A tremendous loss to both Chaffee and the art world. During the years that preceded the Armory Show of 1913, Chaffee continued to work and summer in Cape Cod where he met and married a young artist named Mary Cole.

During this time in the art world, the academic tradition that was perpetuated by the National Academy of Art, continued to dominate the artistic life. The movements that had stimulated and influenced Chaffee and other American modernists in Paris remained largely unknown in America. Alfred Stieglitz held shows in his small Photo-Session Gallery or "291" as it became known, and sponsored exhibitions of leading European modernists, thereby challenging Americans to look at the art of Cezanne, Matisse, Lautrec and Picasso.

Oliver Chaffee had discovered these artists during his studies and travels abroad and was very familiar with their work. He understood European modernism. Their works, particularly of Matisse, Andre and Cezanne, had a major influence on his early art. While Chaffee probably saw exhibitions at "291" he was not part of the group that Stieglitz championed.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art (The Armory Show) was held in New York on February 17, 1913. This exhibition introduced America to some of the most advanced expressions of European modernism, along with the Cubists. The European artists, such as Matisse, Andre Derain and Marcel Duchamp shocked American viewers, while the American modernists did not cause the same feelings. Most of the American modernists came from the "291" gallery, but there were others including Chaffee. This exhibit was enormous and a modified version of it traveled to Chicago and Boston, allowing some three hundred thousand people to view both European and American modernism art and changing the face of American art forever.

Shortly after the Armory show, Chaffee and his wife returned to Paris, where he continued to explore the new currents of art. While Cubism and variations of Cubism tended to dominate the art scene, Chaffee continued to probe the nature of color. The threat of war began to dominate the scene and many American expatriates, including Chaffee and his wife returned to America.

The outbreak of World War 1 accounts to a large extent the transformation of Provincetown from a quiet fishing village to the oldest art colony in the United States. Chaffee and Charles Hawthorne who had worked in Paris just before the war, most likely influencing other artists.

Oliver Chaffee and his family arrived in Provincetown in June 1914. Originally, they rented an apartment in a property that is now part of the site occupied by the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. Eventually they purchased a house at the west end of the village.

Unlike other art colonies that centered around a leader, Provincetown encouraged diverse attitudes and convictions. Conservatives worked alongside with champions of the avant-garde, of which Chaffee was a leader. Blanche Lazzell, one of Chaffee's students, recalls "Those were thrilling times. Even in war times there was gaiety. The artists had found a place in America all unspoiled, where they could do creative work."

Despite the furor of the Armory Show, Impressionism had become the leading art movement sanctioned by American art schools and academies. While Chaffee had abandoned Impressionism in Paris, he continued to work as a Fauve. Julie Heller says that "Chaffee was one of the most important and influential early modern painters".

Chaffee's expressive use of color that had been his preoccupation as a Fauve, culminated in 1919 in a series of the Blue Ridge Mountains that was closer in intensity to Kandinsky and Franz Mark, and even had some Cubist influences in trees and diagonal lines.

After civilians were allowed to travel back to Europe, Oliver Chaffee left for Paris in 1921. He and other artists found the city incredibly changed and marked by disillusion. Chaffee maintained an apartment in Paris, but went on extended painting trips and eventually settled in Vence. He loved the mountain villages and the Maritime Alps allowed for outdoor painting and sketching even during the winter. During the early 1920's Chaffee's work changed profoundly. Brilliant color gave way to subdued tonalities and structure, from either nature or architecture preoccupied him for around a decade. His oils became monochromatic and claustrophobic, while his watercolors, also monochromatic, contain an airiness and spontaneity.

Chaffee returned to the United States in 1923 for an exhibit of his work at the Montross Gallery in New York. His work was reviewed by Henry McBride, who while praising Chaffee for not "depending too much on the Cezanne method", lamented that foreign influences prevented American artists from a true realization of American art. Chaffee returned to France and again was drawn to the mountains and villages. His return to the rural area of France, ended his marriage with Mary Cole. In 1926 he married Ida Gilmore, a printmaker he had known in Provincetown. Chaffee once again began to explore the theories from Cezanne of space and structure. Oliver and Ida lived in Vence area until 1928.

Chaffee returned to Provincetown in the spring of 1928. His work which had a strong sense of structure, also showed a revived interest in brilliant color. Chaffee joined the moderns and “generously passed on the insights he had acquired” during his years and travels abroad.

Throughout the early 1930’s, Chaffee was preoccupied with representational forms within a Cubist frame. While he altered and repositioned these forms, he never completely abandoned reality. He used flat geometry and curves in the same works and in some, established a rhythmic flow. He became excited about the world of fantasy and loved the art of primitivism. He believed primitive art had a strong sense of design. Tribal art had a strong influence on Chaffee’s work in the 1930’s.

“Chaffee’s work of the last decade of his life is marked by unparalleled spontaneity and exuberance. As though seeing the world anew, he set out to create his own universe in which fantasy merges with visual reality.”

Chaffee spent his summers in Provincetown and Owl’s Head, Maine and winters in Ormand Beach, where nature continued to serve as the mainspring of his art. He exhibited rarely and often declined to show his works.

In a tribute to his friend in 1944, Hutchins Hapgood said “it is hard to separate Oliver Chaffee the artist from Oliver Chaffee the man. His art is singularly pure, childlike and yet naïve. There is in it the maturity of loveliness. Art may be defined as the quality of childhood maintained in mature years.”

Some think that Chaffee was a modern before Modernism was popular. He had a tremendous love of light and color.

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