

An American artist

Paul Cadmus dies at 94

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The American artist Paul Cadmus died on December 12, just a few days short of his ninety-fifth birthday.

Though it would be fair to say that few would consider Cadmus a major figure of twentieth century art, he had a long and honorable career. A consistent exponent of realism, he is perhaps best known for some works dating from the 1930s.

Cadmus did not set out to shock his audience, but he nevertheless became the center of a noted controversy 65 years ago, after his painting “The Fleet's In” was placed on exhibit by the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC.

This work depicted—in the kind of exaggerated style which was a hallmark of Cadmus's figurative painting—uniformed sailors on shore leave, surrounded by prostitutes. The work has an almost cartoonish quality, but there is much more to it than that. The artist's view is both unflinching and friendly.

Navy officials were enraged by the painting. No doubt one part of the work that caught their attention was an apparent homosexual pickup in progress. They had the work pulled from the 1934 show of paintings produced by the Federal Government's Public Works of Art Project, which was later to grow into the Works Progress Administration.

Cadmus soon faced more difficulties. In 1935, when his “Coney Island” appeared at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan, Brooklyn businessmen threatened to file suit for defamation of the neighborhood.

The artist's first one-man show, in 1937, attracted more than 7,000 visitors. Cadmus became less visible in art circles in the following decades, however. This was certainly connected to his conservative style and his lack of interest in abstract expressionism and other postwar trends. “I have never been part of any avant-

garde,” he said.

Cadmus continued his work away from the limelight, favoring the egg tempera medium in his paintings, and also producing drawings and prints. He continued to work until the end of his life, and in recent years became the subject of renewed interest.

The attempted censorship of the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe some 10 years ago may have focused attention on attacks on homoerotic elements in art, although the work of Cadmus was quite different from that of Mapplethorpe.

In any case, new generations of museumgoers and those who followed the art world became acquainted with Cadmus's work. His “Seven Deadly Sins” cycle of paintings was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1995, and his “Sailor” series was shown at the Whitney in 1996.

Cadmus was part of a realist tradition. His father had studied with Robert Henri, a founder of the so-called “Ashcan School” of American painters who focused on urban subjects and the poor. Another painter whom Cadmus's work calls to mind is Reginald Marsh (1898-1954), who also studied at the Art Students League, as had Cadmus, and whose canvases of working class New York and its nightlife are evocative of the city.

Cadmus's circle of friends included many writers and artists, most of them gay, such as W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, E. M. Forster and George Platt Lynes. He was the brother-in-law of Lincoln Kirstein, the influential critic, art collector and cofounder of the New York City Ballet who died several years ago. It is not clear how much Cadmus shared of the reactionary esthetics of his brother-in-law, who was bitterly scornful of much of modern dance and abstract art.

The artist is survived by his companion of the past 35

years, Jon Anderson, who was the model for many of his figurative studies.



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