

Anisfeld's American Legacy

by Charles Chatfield-Taylor

It has to be said that Anisfeld's influence on American art was minimal during the first decade of his life in America. His painting, while receiving wide publicity and generally favorable reviews, was often viewed as exotic and strange, and did not inspire imitation. It was completely alien to American traditions in painting, and for a long time, while it certainly created controversy and a great deal of interest, American critics struggled to interpret it. There were those, like Leila Mechlin, secretary of the American Federation of Arts,¹ who attacked his work as degenerate, and even subversive of the War effort, and those who rhapsodized over it as a brilliant evocation in paint of the Slavic soul. But the Nation magazine got it right: in its Nov. 1918 issue, it emphasized that his painting, while *almost barbaric* in its use of color, was *essentially modern, essentially international*.² It was only when other Russian émigré painters arrived in America - mostly in New York, that the public was supplied with a partial context in which to place Anisfeld, and even then, his staunch individualism and his insistence that he belonged to no particular school, continued to make it difficult to place him and interpret his work. Anisfeld's effect on American art (as opposed to his influence), was to continue a process begun with the Armory show of 1913: to stir up a somnolent, sometimes boring and insular art, by exposing it to the shock of European modernism.

Although Boris Anisfeld *always offends someone*,³ his paintings sold well, and were acquired by prominent private collectors and by well-known museums, and in the late teens and through the mid-twenties, Anisfeld became famous and fashionable, as the public grew more accustomed to his work, which was no longer seen as controversial.

Similarly, his work for the Metropolitan Opera and the Chicago Lyric Opera failed to have a lasting influence on the American musical theatre. His sets and costumes were much admired by both the public and the critics, who not infrequently noted that his creations far outshone the operas they were designed for, but they were too elaborate, too whimsical, too fantastic and wildly colorful to encourage imitation: there was no sudden upsurge of interest in doing the kind of work Anisfeld was doing for the theatre-it was simply not replicable. So, while Anisfeld's sets and costumes delighted audiences and astonished the critics, it cannot be said that his work transformed American stage-craft. One critic - whose remarks are typical - wrote enthusiastically about his sets for Xavier Leroux's opera *La Reine Fiammette*: *There are clashing color dissonances that positively thrill the optic nerve*.⁴ It was as if were a brilliant comet of stage craft, which flashed across the night sky, and then disappeared.

It was not until he moved to Chicago in 1928 and took up a teaching career at the Art Institute, that he began to have a direct and lasting influence on American art.

His connection with the Art Institute went back to 1919, when he was in Chicago beginning work on the sets for Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges*, and also teaching some summer classes in painting. He took the job as Professor of Advanced Painting at the Art Institute not only because it was one of the foremost art schools in the country, but because the job offered him financial and professional security. Before the 1929 crash which led to the Great Depression, he was already experiencing his own personal depression, as the Metropolitan Opera tightened its purse strings and his paintings ceased to find ready buyers. His long moment in the sun was nearing its end. It is not going too far to say that this job saved his life - and it was the mainstay of his life until his retirement in 1956. It permitted him to pass on to several generations of students the skills and knowledge which he had acquired in his own training, and in the course of his long and largely successful public career, while allowing him to continue to paint on his own account without having to worry about the pressures of the market. Thus, through Anisfeld, there is a direct link between the ateliers of Repin and Kardovsky at the Academy of Art in St. Petersburg, and his students at the Art Institute, and through them to 20th century American art.

His teaching methods were decidedly "Old World", and were not calculated to endear him to students who regarded the products of their delicate egos as precious and untouchable.

He taught the mastery of materials, the chemistry of paint, line and drawing, anatomy, and emphasized the importance of the use of color - the craft skills, which he deemed essential for an artist to master. Former students said that *Mr. Anisfeld was severe and almost unapproachable in the classroom in keeping with the European tradition.*⁵ Anisfeld did not believe that one could become a competent artist without learning and practicing these skills until they were second nature. Then, he taught, having *paid your dues*, you were equipped to go on to the next level, and express what was within you in paint. He did not foresee the time when one could forego this training, and yet be considered an artist. *The slipshod workmanship that came along with Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art were incredible to him.*⁶

This rigorousness put some students off. Nevertheless, especially in his early years at the Art Institute, when he was still fashionable and famous, his classes were very popular, and sometimes over-subscribed. This, despite the fact that he had no hesitation in taking a pallet-knife to a student's painting he found unsatisfactory, while ordering him to *do it again.*⁷

Because he was not completely articulate in English, he often taught by example, as in this small memory of a woman who watched him *dip his thumb in white paint, and outline an apple, which then jumped out of the canvas.* She also remembered that *he used the same palette, nine colors, the one he used all his life.*⁸

Anisfeld spoke sadly of the conditions under which many of his students labored: they could not live in their art as he had done as a student. ... *it is painful for me to see so many of my students at the Art Institute rush from school, not to their studios, but to run an elevator, (or) sell sheet music, and then have to deprive themselves of certain paints because they are too expensive.*⁹

*In pre-war Russia, he added, artists threw themselves into their work, and, not having to make it pay, they were able to give (it) their best.*¹⁰ He was referring, of course, to the system of patronage and state support for the arts in St. Petersburg in the early years of the 20 century. After WWII, the situation of many students at the Art Institute improved markedly with the passage of the GI Bill.

Some two thousand students passed through his classes in thirty years. Many of them became famous - Leon Golub, Jack Beal, Robert Indiana, Edgar Ewing, LeRoy Neiman, and others. If there was a common theme in the memories of his students, the famous and the not so well known, it is this: the force of his personal example of a life lived in art, and the dedication and discipline required to achieve it. LeRoy Neiman, in an interview with the critic and art historian F. Lanier Graham put it well: *In the beginning I was totally undisciplined. Haupers (another teacher at the Art Institute) and Anisfeld were important because they acted like artists, looked like artists, and felt like artists. They taught me the craft of painting, and also the notion of being totally involved with and dedicated to art; you need to know that the artist really exists, and is something beyond the picture itself.*

And he added: *The most important thing this wonderful old Russian mystic taught me was that I should paint from the heart. That's where everything should be coming from.*¹¹

Anisfeld's art stands on its own. His influence on American art through his students is substantial, and his personal example continues to inspire. That is no small legacy.

Notes:

¹ Leila Mechlin was violently opposed to Anisfeld's art, and initiated a sometimes ugly polemic in the press between herself and Anisfeld's supporters. This free publicity was used to great advantage by Max Rabinov, Anisfeld's agent, and by Christian Brinton, the principal organizer of Anisfeld's Brooklyn Museum Show of October 1918. However, Mechlin did succeed in preventing a scheduled exhibition of Anisfeld's works in Washington DC, Mechlin's power base.

² *A Russian Painter and the New York Watercolorists* in: *The Nation*, Nov. 16, 1918, pp. 595-6

³ James G Huneker in: *New York Times*, January 25, 1919

⁴ Huneker added *that one of Anisfeld's interiors appeared as subtly strange as a depraved sonnet by Baudelaire.*

⁵ Obituary for Anisfeld in: *New London Day*, January 14, 1974

⁶ *Ibid.*