



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

FRITZ WILHELM WINOLD REISS (1886–1953)

*Portrait of Sari Patton*

Pastel on Whatman board, 30 x 21 1/2 in.

Signed (at lower left): WINOLD / REISS

Executed in 1925

RECORDED: “German Painter’s Harlem Exhibit of Colored Subjects: Reiss Seeks to Stir Art Interest in Negroes, *New York Evening Journal*, March 30, 1925, illus. // Jeffrey C. Stewart, *Winold Reiss: An Illustrated Checklist of His Portraits* [Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Portrait Gallery, 1990], p. 40 illus. as “Seated Woman” // Teresa A. Carbone, *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties* exhib. cat. [Brooklyn New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2011], pp. 105, 108 fig. 81 illus. in color

EXHIBITED: 135th Street Branch, New York Public Library, March 1925, “Recent Portraits of Representative Negroes” // Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Dallas Museum of Art, Texas; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, 2011–12, *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties* // Munson-Williams-Proctor Art Institute, Utica, New York, May 15–October 9, 2017, *Roaring into the Future, New York, 1925–35*

EX COLL.: the artist; to his estate until the present

French modern art made a dramatic entrance into on America in 1913 at the famous Armory Show in New York City. In that same year, German twentieth-century art also arrived, with no fanfare, in the person of Winold Reiss, who disembarked from the *S. S. Imperator* on October 29, 1913, at Ellis Island in New York harbor. (The most accessible discussion of Reiss remains Jeffrey C. Stewart, *To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss*, exhib. cat. [Washington, D. C.: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1989]. A very useful overview of Reiss's career is contained in *The Journal of the Cincinnati Historical Society*, 51 [Summer/Fall 1993], number 23, *Queen City Heritage: Cincinnati Union Terminal and the Artistry of Winold Reiss*.) Reiss was already twenty-seven years old when he came to America, thoroughly educated in a rigorous and inclusive heritage of German art that reflected decades of central European modernism.

Reiss's father, Fritz Reiss (1857–1914), had trained as a landscape painter and portraitist at the renowned academy in Düsseldorf. Working as an illustrator, and proficient in watercolor as well as oil, Fritz Reiss moved his family, in the 1899, to Freiburg, a small village in southwest Germany near the Black Forest, so that he could paint honest portraits of local peasants. This choice reflected a prevailing spirit of romantic nationalism in the fine arts, architecture, and literature that was expressed in arts and crafts movements across Europe. Two of Fritz Reiss's sons followed their father into art. Hans became a sculptor, immigrated to Sweden, and eventually joined his brother in America. Winold's first art teacher was his father. In 1911, Reiss went to Munich where he studied with Franz von Stuck at the Academy of Fine Arts and with Julius Diez at the School of Applied

Arts. Von Stuck was an influential art nouveau artist, designer, sculptor, and architect whose graphic style tended toward imaginative symbolism. Diez was master of mural painting who gained renown for his commercial poster designs executed in the Jugendstil manner. While Reiss absorbed stylistic influences from both of these men, perhaps the most lasting lesson was the freedom with which German fine artists crossed genres, working in the fine arts and the applied arts as circumstances warranted, without prejudice to their standing in either field. This permeable boundary, a characteristic of German arts and crafts practice, was also championed by John Ruskin and William Morris, in England. While his European versatility enabled Reiss to support his family in America, it ultimately hampered his full acceptance as a fine artist.

Reiss was proficient in graphics, fabric design, interior decoration, mural and poster art, as well as landscape and portrait painting. When he first arrived in America he established himself across a broad range of these interests, working in illustration, poster design, interior decoration, and as a teacher. His first major interior commission, the Busy Lady Bakery in New York City (Stewart, p. 30 illus.), strongly recalls the design work a decade earlier of Josef Hoffman in Vienna and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow. While fellow German immigrants were among Reiss's first commercial patrons, by 1915 he had been invited to lecture on the German poster at the Art Students League in New York. Anti-German feeling accompanying America's entry into World War I derailed some of Reiss's projects, but still, in 1914 and 1915, he designed covers for *Scribner's* magazine.

None of this, however, was what had drawn Reiss to America. The story goes that he came to America to live out his childhood fantasies. Like many other German boys, Reiss had been

captivated in his youth by tales of the American “wild west” widely circulated in the imaginative accounts of the German author Karl May. Reiss had also read, in translation, the works of James Fennimore Cooper. Numerous explanations can be put forth to explain Reiss’s emigration to America in 1913. The combined reasons must have been compelling enough to leave behind a pregnant wife (she and his son, Tjark, born in December 1913, joined him in America in 1914). These reasons included, no doubt, the war clouds over Europe, the increasing militarism of German society (Reiss’s brother Hans, was a pacifist) and the large number of artists already working in Germany. Still, for Reiss, America meant the Indian.

In January 1920, Reiss realized his dream of traveling west to Indian country. He went with a student to the Blackfoot Reservation in Browning, Montana. Thus began a relationship with Native Americans that lasted all of his life. Reiss produced thirty-six portraits of Blackfoot Indians in the winter of 1920. When he exhibited these in New York in 1920, at the E. F. Hanfstaengl Galleries, they were purchased as a group by Dr. Philip Cole, a native of Montana. In October 1920, Reiss made a sketching trip to Mexico, painting portraits and landscapes. As he traveled, Reiss’s style began to reflect the influence of the aesthetics, color palette, and patterns of indigenous American visual culture. He blended this into his now hyphenated German-American vocabulary, reaching for an artistic language expressed in the most universally accessible terms that would convey the respect he felt for all his subjects. The final major influence on Reiss’s style came in 1921, when, taking his eight-year-old son with him, he made his only return trip to Germany, where he visited his mother and sister. From September to the following May, Reiss traveled through Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia. In Oberammergau, he made nineteen portraits of actors in the passion plays. In Sweden, he sketched country people; and in Germany, returning to his

paternal roots, he drew thirty-eight Black Forest residents. As importantly, he visited Munich and Berlin and saw the work of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) artists, whose fidelity to life as it is seen and to the social conditions of the people confirmed him in his own objectivity. Stewart (p. 44) suggests that Reiss was also influenced by seeing the work of Max Beckmann (he later had a 1924 Beckmann monograph in his personal library). When Reiss returned to America he produced a series of “imaginatives”, composite images of New York (and sometimes specifically Harlem) nightlife that recall Beckmann’s style. Reiss’s work, however, steered clear of the anger and direct political engagement of the German artists. He found positive energy in his city scenes and high spiritual values in his pre-industrial, pre-capitalist peasants.

One of the most notable aspects of Reiss’s modernism, and a point on which he emphatically parted ways from artists who prized unintelligibility as proof of aesthetic virtue, was that for Reiss his art could only be successful insofar as it found patrons to support it and a public to understand it. Reiss’s modern interiors were cheerful and welcoming; his portraits of marginalized populations—native Americans, Mexican peasants, and Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the offshore Georgia Sea Islands, invariably expressed the theme of a commonly shared human dignity.

In New York, Reiss managed twin pursuits, becoming an influential teacher while maintaining a separate studio practice for his own work. He designed many well-known and well-loved commercial interiors, including, notably the chain of Longchamps restaurants in New York City and the splendid ballroom of the Hotel St. George in Brooklyn Heights. His Indian portrait work became part of the national visual culture when he acquired as a patron, Louis Hill, the owner of the Great Northern Railroad. In 1927, Hill purchased Reiss’s entire summer’s work, fifty-two portraits of

American Indians. The relationship with the railroad proved long lasting and multi-faceted. The Great Northern used Reiss's Indian portraits to illustrate months in its annual promotional calendars. Reiss's designs also adorned the railroad's menus, posters, and other promotional materials. Meanwhile he exhibited his work at the National Academy of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Los Angeles Museum. In 1933, Reiss completed his designs for murals in the Cincinnati Union (Railroad) Terminal. These murals, threatened with destruction in 1972, were saved after a public hue and cry. Some remain in the former railroad station, now a cultural center, while others have been reinstalled at the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport, where they remain highly prized.

*Portrait of Sari Price Patton* is one of a series of large-scale pastels that Reiss created in connection with his work for the special Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine, March 1925. The magazine, published from 1921 to 1952, was an offshoot of *The Survey*, a progressive professional social work journal. Editor Paul Kellogg intended that the new publication would "engage the attention of a wide audience by use of graphic and literary arts in partnership with the social sciences, to catch the eye and heart as well as the intellect (as quoted by Cara Finnegan, "Social Welfare and Visual Politics: The Story of Survey Graphic," [<http://newdeal.feri.org/sg/essay.htm>] from Clarke Chambers, *Paul U. Kellogg and The Survey: Voices for Social Welfare and Social Justice* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971], p. 105). In 1924, Kellogg had commissioned the journalist (and later, novelist) Katherine Anne Porter, who had traveled in Mexico, to guest edit a special Mexico number of *Survey Graphic*. Porter had met and traveled with Winold Reiss in Mexico in 1920, and she enlisted him to provide illustrations for her edition of *Survey Graphic*. The following year, when Kellogg engaged Dr. Alain Locke, a Harvard-educated Howard University professor of philosophy

to create a focused number on Harlem, Reiss presented a natural choice for the graphic component. In all, Reiss contributed five of his “imaginatives” and thirteen portraits, which were included two illustrated features, “Harlem Types” (pp. 651–54) and “Four Portraits of Negro Women” (pp. 685–88). In the introductory text to “Harlem Types” Locke introduced Reiss as “a master delineator of folk character by wide experience and definite specialization. . . . He is a folk-lorist of the brush and palette, seeking always the folk character back of the individual, the psychology behind the physiognomy” (p. 653). *Survey Graphic*’s “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” sold out two printings and was such a resounding success that later in the year Locke edited his own anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. A founding and defining document of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke’s book featured a cover designed by Reiss as well as “imaginatives” and seventeen portraits inside. In a letter of December 31, 1925, Reiss wrote to Locke:

I have to tell you again how much I liked to work with you and I only wish that we will have once an occasion in which we can prove just to all our ideals . . . It would make me very happy if my effort in helping your noble work would really be a small seed in the vast land that still has to be ploughed Do not forget that you can always find me ready if you need help in your idealistic undertakings (as quoted by Stewart, p. 62 from Locke Papers, Howard University).

Reiss’s relationship with *Survey Graphic* (and with Paul Kellogg in particular) continued to be a valuable source of patronage. Reiss published work in the magazine again in 1926 for a special issue on Asians in America; in 1927 for a discussion of the Georgia Sea Island Gullah population; in 1929 for an issue on Germany; and again in 1931 and 1936. In 1941 and ’42 he contributed cover illustrations, the latter in November of 1942 revisiting the issue of race, “Color: The Unfinished Business of Democracy,” with an essay by Alain Locke. Reiss’s work appeared in *Survey Graphic* again in 1945 and 1948.

*Portrait of Sari Price Patton* is very much of a piece with Reiss's work for the 1925 *Survey Graphic*. Little is known about the sitter. Reiss's portrait of her is, in fact, the best source of information. She is the epitome of chic—a strikingly attractive, light-skinned young lady, tastefully coiffed and elegantly dressed in keeping with the latest standards in refined jazz-age beauty. In this portrait Patton presents to the world a serious and self-possessed mien, very much a representative of the elite strata of Negro society, a group that was widely expected to generate the leadership that would lead the American Negro to an approaching future of legal equality and equal economic opportunity. The little more that is known about the sitter offers a contrast to the mood of the portrait. She has been identified as the “social secretary” (Beverly Lowry, *Her Dream of Dreams* [Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2003], p. 437) to A'lelia Walker, daughter of Madame C. J. Walker. Madame Walker, born Sarah Breedlove in 1867 into rural southern poverty, took the name of one of her husbands, Clarence Joseph Walker, added Madame for the exalted sound of it, and raised herself from abused orphan to multimillionaire through the discovery and marketing of hair products designed for Negro woman. Madame Walker was a tirelessly energetic entrepreneur who built a beauty empire, led civic and political activities and funded numerous philanthropic endeavors before her death in 1919. She left behind her adopted daughter, Leila, who took the name A'lelia in the early 1920s. A'lelia's salon ambitions had nothing to do with entrepreneurship and everything to do with society. She spent her considerable inheritance in establishing herself as the doyenne of an alcohol-fueled (this during Prohibition) social salon that attracted uptown and downtown artists, writers, musicians, professionals and assorted society folk to a glittering good-time circle that revolved around her. A'lelia Walker was a large woman who commanded attention through her famous fortune, good nature, generosity, flamboyant lifestyle and exotic dress. Reiss's *Portrait of*



*Sari Price Patton* suggests a young woman with a much more measured approach to the business of life. Teresa Carbone (p. 105) identifies Patton as the “hostess” of A’lelia Walker’s salon, and quotes Bruce Nugent (writer, artist, actor, friend of Langston Hughes, 1906–1987) to the effect that Patton lent the premises a “stiff dignity.” It is not clear how long Patton worked for Walker, nor are there any verified details about her personal or professional life, particularly after Walker’s death in 1931.

Reiss’s artwork in *Survey Graphic* and in Locke’s subsequent anthology established him as the visual messenger heralding the “Harlem Renaissance” to a wide and predominately white audience. But that was by no means Reiss’s sole contribution to this cultural upheaval. Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was a graduate of the University of Nebraska, teaching high school art in Kansas City when he decided to pursue a serious career in art. Arriving in New York City in 1924, he saw Winold Reiss’s portrait of the internationally acclaimed concert singer Roland Hayes on the cover *Survey Graphic* and contacted Reiss, asking to study with him. Reiss took on Douglas as a student and “questioned Douglas’s untiring devotion to academic painting and suggested that instead of joining the ranks of realist painters, he look to African art for design elements that would express racial commitment in his art. . . .” (*Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, exhib. cat. [Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers: New York, Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987], p. 110). The style that Douglas devised, “geometric symbolism,” blended influences from African sculptures and masks as well as currents from contemporary Europe, cubism and so-called “primitivism,” filtered through Reiss. Douglas’s early work is strikingly similar to Reiss’s “imaginatives.” As Reiss’s protégé, Douglas contributed art to Locke’s 1925 anthology. Douglas went on to become the iconic artist of the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1951, Winold Reiss offered a selection of his Harlem portraits as a gift to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where Aaron Douglas had founded and still presided over the Art Department.

The gift prompted a letter from Douglas to Reiss in January 1952:

It was certainly one of the great moments of my life when you told me you were planning to present a collection of your "New Negro" portraits and Sea Island types to Fisk University. In its impressiveness it was a moment comparable to the time I first saw one of your magnificent drawings of a Negro head on the cover of *Survey Graphic* more than twenty-seven years ago. It was similar, also to the feeling of elation I experienced when you consented to take me as a student in your school. . . Your pictures, over and above the fine aesthetic values, will hold a special meaning for us here. Yours were among the very first representations of contemporary Negro peoples executed with sympathy, dignity, enthusiasm and understanding (as quoted in Stewart, 1989, pp. 122–23 from Reiss papers, private collection).

In addition to the Harlem portraits in the collection of Fisk University, Reiss portraits of Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. DuBois are in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

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