FRITZ WILHELM WINOLD REISS (1886–1953)

*"Montana Red" Shy*

Pastel on Whatman board, 39 x 26 in.

Signed (at lower left): WINOLD / REISS

Executed about 1931

RECORDED: Jeffrey C. Stewart, *Winold Reiss: An Illustrated Checklist of His Portraits* [Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1990], p. 34 illus.

EXHIBITED: Squibb Building Art Galleries, New York, January 10–February 1, 1935, no. 64 // Hockaday Museum of Art, Kalispell, Montana, June 2–October 18, 2005, *Winold Reiss: Artist for the Great Northern* // Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, April 12–June 8, 2018, *Winold Reiss will not be classified,* pp. 24, 25 illus. in color

EX COLL.: the artist; to his estate, 1953 until the present

One morning in January 1920, Winold Reiss stepped into the frosty air outside of a hotel in Browning, Montana. Speaking through an interpreter, he introduced himself to Turtle, a Blackfeet Indian living on the nearby tribal reservation, explaining that "I had come all the way from Europe to make the acquaintance of my Red Man Brother" (as quoted by Lillian E. Prussing in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 22, 1928, p. 83). This was more than a polite introduction. It was, in fact, the truth. The trip West in 1920 marked the first realization of Reiss's lifelong passion for painting the Native American. From 1920, until his last trip in 1948, Reiss produced hundreds of portraits of Native Americans, most especially members of the Blackfoot Confederacy living on both sides of the American-Canadian border that runs through contiguous tribal lands in Northern Montana and Alberta. Reiss loved the Blackfeet and they reciprocated his affection. They made him an honorary member of the tribe calling him "Beaver Child," a reference to his dedication to his work. After the artist's death and cremation in 1953, Reiss's son Tjark, heeding his father's wish, sent his ashes to Montana where, after a traditional Blackfeet mourning ceremony, Reiss's friend, Bull Child, scattered the artist's ashes over a hillside on the Blackfeet reservation. (For a concise examination of Reiss's work among Native Americans, see Scott J. Tanner, *Winold Reiss: Native American Portraits*, exhib. cat. [Seattle, Washington: Frye Art Museum, 2000].) The path that led Winold Reiss from Karlsruhe, Germany, to Browning, Montana, offers a study in the universality of art cutting across cultural, ethnic, and national borders.

French modern art made a dramatic entrance into 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 sailed into New York Harbor onboard the *S. S. Imperator* on October 29, 1913. (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 Stewart's essay in *The Journal of the Cincinnati Historical Society* 51 (Summer-Fall 1993). Reiss was already twenty-seven years old when he came to America, a fully formed artist, thoroughly educated in a rigorous and inclusive heritage of German art that reflected decades of central European modernism.

Fritz Reiss (1857–1915), Winold's father, 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, the elder Reiss moved his family, in 1899, to Freiburg, a town 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. Fritz Reiss's two sons followed their father into art. Hans (1885–1968) became a sculptor, immigrated to Sweden, and, in 1923, joined his brother in America. First taught by his father, in 1910, Winold went to Munich where he studied with Franz von Stuck at the Academy of Fine Arts and 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 a master of mural painting, best known for distinctive 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 a defining element of the English Arts and Crafts Movement as championed by John Ruskin and William Morris. While his European

versatility enabled Reiss to support his family in America, it ultimately hampered his full acceptance as a fine artist in the more hierarchical world of American art.

Reiss was a creative artist in graphics, fabric design, interior design, and mural and poster art, as well as in 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. Fellow German immigrants were among Reiss's first commercial patrons, and, for many years thereafter, Reiss cultivated a loose network of German-American patrons and colleagues. By 1915 he was enjoying some modest success. In 1914 and 1915, he designed covers for *Scribner's Magazine.* In 1915 he also guest-lectured at the New York Art Students League on the topic of the German poster. In that same year he completed his first major interior commission for the Busy Lady Bakery in New York City (Stewart, p. 30 illus.). That work strongly recalls the design work a decade earlier of Josef Hoffman in Vienna and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow. Later in the decade, however, anti-German feeling accompanying America's entry into World War curtailed some of Reiss's projects.

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 fanciful accounts of the German author Karl May. Reiss had also read, in translation, the works of James Fenimore Cooper. Numerous explanations can be put forth to explain the timing of Reiss's emigration to America in 1913. The combined reasons must have been compelling enough to leave behind a pregnant wife. (Henriette and their son, Tjark, born in December 1913, joined Reiss in

America in April 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 1920, income from his design for the Crillon Restaurant in New York City (owned by Otto Baumgarten) enabled Reiss to fund his long-desired trip to the American West. Reiss's decision to visit the Blackfeet tribe in Northern Montana appears to have been serendipitous. He had become friends with H. V. Kaltenborn, then an assistant managing editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (and later a pioneer broadcast journalist). From 1915 to 1919, Kaltenborn led summer tour groups under the aegis of the *Eagle* to locations around the American West. In 1919, the *Eagle* group went to Glacier National Park and the Blackfeet reservation. According to an unpublished memoir by Kaltenborn's wife, Olga, who also wrote for the *Eagle*, "When our painter friend, Winold Reiss, saw Hans's war bonnet and our Indian pictures, *he* decided to go to Glacier Park and paint these fine, strong-faced people" (as quoted from Olga Kaltenborn, "Of Love and Life," manuscript in the Hans von Kaltenborn papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin). Working quickly, Reiss produced thirty-six portraits of Blackfeet Indians in the two weeks he spent with them. When he exhibited these in New York in March, 1920, at the E. F. Hanfstaengl Galleries, they were purchased as a group by Dr. Philip Cole, a Montana native.

Later that year, 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 with eight-year-old Tjark as his companion, he made his only return trip to Europe. He visited his mother and sister in Germany, and traveled through Holland, 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 (1884–1950). (Reiss later had a 1924 Beckmann monograph in his personal library.) When Reiss returned to America he produced a series of "imaginatives," compositions using the angular forms of buildings and human curvilinear contours as a point of departure for more formal investigations of geometry and rhythm. These works, some in graphically dramatic black and white, others in vibrant color, pulse with a jazz-age vitality that embodies both cubist and art deco impulses. Their designs owe much to Reiss's work in poster art. They 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 more traditional images of 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—were not images of "otherness." On the contrary, they 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, the splendid ballroom of the Hotel St. George in Brooklyn Heights in 1930, and, in the following decades, numerous locations for the chain of Longchamps restaurants in New York City. Meanwhile, he continued to show his Indian portraits in venues across the country, including the National Academy of Design in New York, the Salons of America, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art. In 1930, the architects for the projected Cincinnati Union (Railroad) Terminal invited Reiss to submit mural designs for the decoration of the vast interior space. He won the commission and the completed Terminal opened in 1933 with Reiss's spectacular mosaic murals explicating the history of Cincinnati in the panorama of America's development. Threatened with destruction in 1972, these mosaic murals were saved after a public hue and cry. Some remain in the former railroad station, now a cultural center, while others initially reinstalled at the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport, have recently been moved to the Duke Energy Convention Center in downtown Cincinnati. Over the years, Reiss's murals, beloved as public art, have become a focal point of Cincinnati civic pride.

After his trips to the American West, Mexico, and Europe, Reiss spent the latter half of the 1920s documenting the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance both in portraiture and in Harlem-inspired

"imaginatives." In the course of a few years, Reiss painted memorable portraits of such stalwarts of the Harlem Renaissance as Langston Hughes (Stewart, *Checklist*, p. 16 illus.); Paul Robeson (p. 19 illus.); James Weldon Johnson (p. 17 illus.); Dr. W. E. B. DuBois ( p. 15 illus., all National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.); and Zora Neale Hurston (p. 16 illus., Fisk University Museum of Art, Nashville, Tennessee), among a host of others, some prominent and others ordinary African Americans. He also took on a young, African-American aspiring artist as a student, Aaron Douglas (1899–1979). As Douglas's teacher, mentor, and champion, "Reiss 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. [New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. for the 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." Douglas went on to become the iconic artist of the Harlem Renaissance.

Through all of his involvement with African Americans, Reiss bided his time until he could return to the West. His opportunity came in 1927. In 1925, suffering from hay fever, Hans Reiss decided to look for work in Glacier National Park. Armed with a letter of introduction from the ever faithful Kaltenborn, he went west and found himself, in the summer of 1925, working as a mountain climbing guide for Louis W. Hill (1872–1948). (This account is found in Scott J. Tanner, "A Biography of Winold Reiss: the man who created the Great Northern Railway's Blackfeet Indian Portraits," in *The Great Northern Goat* [June 1996], pp. 6–7). Hill was the President of the Great

Northern Railway and son of its founder, James J. Hill (1838–1916). In 1910, Louis Hill had been instrumental in gaining the designation of part of the Blackfeet territory as Glacier National Park, at the same time that the railroad built a string of hotels in northern Montana intended to incubate and serve a tourist industry facilitated by rail travel. Hill was also prescient in being acutely aware of the positive effects of advertising and visual branding. The railroad employed the slogan "See America First" and used an image of a mountain goat standing on a boulder and silhouetted against the sky as its distinctive trademark. When Hill encountered Hans Reiss, his special project was the construction of a splendid new hotel, the Prince of Wales, located just across the border in Waterton, Canada, at the northern end of Lake Waterton in the Canadian Waterton Lakes National Park. (Today, the two national parks abut each other and together form Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park.) The Prince of Wales was, not accidentally, beyond the jurisdiction of American Prohibition. Hans Reiss suggested to Hill that he might want to sponsor his brother, Winold, to come to Montana to paint Blackfeet Indians. Shown Reiss's earlier work, Hill immediately understood in the portraits of the Blackfeet, the opportunity for a strong graphic presence for his advertising campaigns as well as original art for his mountain hotels.

After a series of negotiations Reiss returned to Montana in the summer of 1927, with 13-year-old Tjark for a companion. This time he was well-funded, with ample time and resources to devote to Blackfeet portraiture and particular, to details of costume that had been sacrificed to time constraints in 1920. Reiss's portraits, painted in the course of multiple visits over the next twenty years were widely disseminated by the railroad on menus, posters, playing cards, and promotional calendars, becoming familiar evocations for generations of Americans of the tribal cultures and native territories of the Indians of the western plains. Louis Hill purchased Reiss's entire 1927 summer's

work, fifty-two portraits of Blackfeet Indians. These formed the substance of a 1928 art exhibition sponsored by the Worcester Museum of Art in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a catalogue essay by Kaltenborn. In the ensuing years portions of the Hill Collection traveled to the gallery at Wanamakers's Department Store in Manhattan, the Brooklyn Museum, the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Minneapolis Museum, and, in 1929, to Munich, Germany. In 1935, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of Glacier National Park, the Railway sponsored the publication of a lavish full-color, folio-sized book of Reiss Blackfeet portraits, "dedicated to the Blackfeet: Heroic Indians of the Plains, whose noble spirit will live as an inspiration to all who meet them with an open heart."

Reiss's relationship with the Blackfeet and with Montana endured. He returned there whenever he could obtain sponsorship from the railroad. He was there in the summers of 1928 and 1931. From 1934 through 1937 he ran a summer art school in Glacier Park. After a hiatus, Reiss returned to Montana in 1943, '44 and '48. Although the vast majority of Reiss's portrait subjects in the West were Native Americans, painted to satisfy his railroad sponsors as well as his own interests, he was always alert to the opportunity to record unusual characters. And so we come to "Montana Red," whose family surname was, improbably enough, "Shy." Reiss himself described the circumstances of this portrait.

> And there is Montana Red who appears by first approach fierce and dangerous. A man trained from early youth to handle a gun and consider it his best and only friend, Red is quite a character in present Montana and has quite a few daring escapades to his credit. He was born in Texas in the '80s. When he was a lad of thirteen he drove some long horn cattle for the Bridle Bit outfit from Texas to Wyoming and landed afterwards in Montana. The country appealed to him. He loved the rolling prairies with the blue rockies bordering them on the east and the wild untamed life of settlers and Indians [sic]. Is it surprising that he rustled cattle, that he was shot in the knee and for three days layed [sic] helpless in the prairies until

> somebody found him. When told afterwards that he would never be able to move his knee again he had it set in a bent position so that he would still be able to ride. That is Red, daring courageous, a horse and the wide open spaces. A man from Glacier Park village talked behind his back [and] offended him, so Red rode his horse into Mikes Place, the dance hall, and shot up the town. It sounds like a movie but it happens to be true. Everybody who knows Red can understand it. I wanted Red to pose for me. They told me where he lives. One early morning I went there. A tiny little hut, I knocked, the door opened – a bed a stove a chair, no room to move. A dead chicken on the footend [sic] of the bed some coffee steaming on the stove. No wonder – Reds [sic] castle big enough for sleeping, his living room is the open. Red posed for me, I talked to him and strange enough I saw more than his fierce appearance. I saw a look in his eye, so blue and boylike [sic], so young and unspoiled that it thrilled me. There it was again—the realization—the West and his [sic] man [sic] and the fine women who have born and raise them—ironlike truthful and unspoiled wonderful America (transcript from a handwritten text in the archives of The Reiss Partnership).

Reiss's portrait captures the complexity of the man. He does indeed look fierce, and his hand is on his pistol. But he does not look mean. In the background, Reiss has faintly painted a sketch of the main street of Glacier Park Village. We see Mike's Dance Hall, with the word faintly over the door "Saloon." A horse is tied up outside. Winold Reiss was neither anthropologist nor politician. He was an artist. But his portraits unfailingly conveyed his admiring and empathetic respect for his subjects and for the culture that was their contribution to the diversity of the human species.

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