FRITZ WILHELM WINOLD REISS (1886–1953)

Untitled

Ink on paper, 14 7/8 x 19 7/8 in.

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 disembarked on October 29, 1913 from the S.S. Imperator onto the dock at Hoboken, New Jersey. (The most accessible discussion of Reiss remains Jeffrey C. Stewart, To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss, exhib. cat. [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, no. 23 [Summer/Fall 1993]: “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 1890s, to a small village in southern 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 his follower, 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 stirred up by America’s entry into World War I derailed some of Reiss’s projects, but still, by 1919, he designed several 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 immigration 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, a pacifist, left Germany for Sweden in 1914); and the large number of artists already working in Germany. Still, for Reiss, America meant the Indian.

In 1919 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 summer of 1919. 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 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 Native 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 ethnic populations—Native Americans, Mexican peasants, Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as residents of the offshore Georgia Sea Islands—invariably expressed the theme of a commonly shared human dignity.
In New York, Reiss worked as a teacher, generally running his own schools. 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 Northern Pacific 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 Northern Pacific used Reiss’s Indian portraits to illustrate months in its annual promotional calendars. Reiss designed interiors for railroad hotels in the west and suggested decorations for railroad cars. 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.