FAIRFIELD PORTER (1907–1975)

Twilight

Oil on board, 14 x 15 in.

Signed and dated (at lower right): Fairfield Porter 75

RECORDED: Michael Bonesteel, "Homage to Porter," *A Pioneer Press Newspaper (Chicago)*, April 9, 1987 // Mary Sherman, "A Mysterious Quiet," *Reader—Chicago's Free Weekly*, April 17, 1987, p. 36 // John T. Spike, *Fairfield Porter: An American Classic* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), p. 308 (checklist) // Joan Ludman, *Fairfield Porter: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings, Watercolors, and Pastels* (New York: Hudson Hill Press, 2001), p. 318 no. L950

EXHIBITED: Harbor Gallery, Cold Spring Harbor, New York, 1977, *Fairfield Porter (1907–1976)* [*sic*], no. 24 // The Arts Club of Chicago, 1984, *Fairfield Porter: Paintings and Works on Paper*, no. 30 // Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, 1985, *Fairfield Porter, 1907–1975*, no. 43 // Compass Rose Modern and Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1987, *Fairfield Porter: Pictures and Words*

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

Fairfield Porter was one of the twentieth century's most interesting, intelligent, and enigmatic artists. Although he was of the same generation as the Abstract Expressionists, and was good friends with many of them, especially Willem de Kooning, Porter was strictly a realist. A noted art critic who wrote for *Art News* and *The Nation*, Porter was also a conservationist, activist, and polemicist who opposed nuclear arms, pesticides, urban sprawl, and the Vietnam War. Porter's art and art criticism combine to form one of the most coherent and independent interpretations of art and art history that any American artist has ever advanced, and he stands today as one of the twentieth century's most prescient art observers.

Fairfield Porter was born in Winnetka, Illinois, a small suburb north of Chicago. His paternal grandmother had owned land in Chicago that eventually became its Loop area, which provided the Porter family with the financial means for a comfortable lifestyle. Fairfield's parents were literate and well educated. His father, James Porter, was an architect who designed the family's Greek Revival home, and his mother, Ruth, was a politically progressive woman who supported the suffrage movement and racial equality. Porter's family traveled extensively during his youth, so that by the time he was a teenager, he had been exposed to a wide variety of arts and ideas.

In 1924, Porter, like his father and grandfather before him, attended Harvard University. It was there that he received his first art education, although it had little direct impact on him. Following his graduation in 1928, Porter moved to New York and began taking classes at the Art Students League. Porter was eager to study there with various teachers who were also professional artists, such as Boardman Robinson and Thomas Hart Benton. However, Porter was soon disappointed by the curriculum at the League, which emphasized life drawing to the exclusion of painting. Porter later

recalled that he abandoned the league because,

> Nobody taught painting there. I mean you could paint if you wanted to. But they didn't know how to paint. There wasn't anybody in the League who knew how to paint. . . . I don't think anybody in America knew how to paint in oils at that time (interview with Paul Cummings, June 6, 1968, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., as quoted in Spike, *op. cit.*, p. 34).

In the 1930s, struggling to get his professional painting career off the ground, Porter tried his hand at progressive, social arts, painting murals and designing magazine covers for the Socialist party and other leftist organizations. He also made his first foray into art criticism, contributing an essay on mural painting to *Arise* in 1935. Despite Porter's many connections to, and sympathies with, various left-wing political factions in New York, he never identified himself as belonging to any one group. This was to be a recurring theme in Porter's life, in which he circulated freely among various social and intellectual groups and movements without ever committing himself completely to any one of them.

In 1938, Porter saw an exhibition of paintings and prints by Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard at the Art Institute of Chicago, an eye-opening experience which changed the course of his style of painting. Although the effects of seeing these pictures didn't fully materialize until later in his career, Porter cited Vuillard as the single greatest influence upon his own work. He recalled:

> Another reason I paint the way I do is that in 1938 we were living in Chicago and in the Art Institute in Chicago there was an exhibition of Vuillard and Bonnard, both of them. I had never seen so many Vuillards before or maybe so many Bonnards before. And I looked at the Vuillards and thought—maybe it was just a sort of revelation of the obvious and why does one think of doing anything else when it's so natural to do this (Cummings interview, as quoted in Spike, *op. cit.*, p. 62).

Porter understood his own work as an extension of the sensual and representational achievements of Vuillard, recording impressions at hand with a confident use of color and light. He eschewed traditional techniques of contour and form, and the inherent lack of spontaneity that follows, that he associated with artists such as Thomas Hart Benton. Thus, his pictures have a freshness and vitality similar to the abstract painters of his generation, but they are grounded in a less theoretical, more realistic approach. Porter's oil paintings are immediate, sensual impressions of the world immediately before him, unconstrained by any adherence to a particular theory.

Like many of the abstract painters, Porter appreciated the materiality of paint and its effects on the surface of the canvas. He painted with Maroger's Medium, an additive to oil paints that makes them more fluid and freely brushed onto the canvas. Although Maroger's was available commercially, Porter always preferred to make his own. His paintings have a rich surface texture that recall not only Bonnard and Vuillard, but also Diego Velázquez, whom Porter admired.

Porter's output during the 1940s was uneven, and he ultimately destroyed many of his works from this period once his career began to reach its full swing. It wasn't until the early 1950s that his career began to take off. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that Porter's son, John, born in 1934, suffered from some form of mental retardation similar to autism, which took many frustrating years to diagnose. In a 1958 letter to his friend, Arthur Giardelli, Porter explained:

> John was sick from birth with a mysterious illness that was never quite understood. . . . No psychiatrists or doctors seemed to know anything definite about him, and the result on me was that I really did nothing for about the first ten years of his life but try to somehow help him. This was a most frustrating experience, because I was trying to solve something for which there was no solution. Then it was only after that, that is after deciding, on advice

> from a psychiatrist, to send him to a foster home, that I began to have a career or life of my own (as quoted in Spike, *op. cit.*, p. 132).

Introduced by his friend, Willem de Kooning, Porter began to exhibit at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, which was known primarily as a venue for Abstract Expressionist painting. Porter's work, largely landscape pictures of the areas of Southampton, New York, where he and his family lived, eventually gathered a following of critics and collectors who otherwise had interest in non-objective painting.

It was during this time that the roots of Porter's career as a critic also began to grow. He took issue with contemporary art critics, including Clement Greenberg, George L. K. Morris, Wyndham Lewis, and other proponents of Abstract Expressionism, whom he saw as "manifesto critics" who imposed personal theories of art upon the work they reviewed. Porter felt about criticism as he did about his art: that it should be as free of dogmatic adherence to theory as possible, and that art should be considered on its own merits. Porter crossed swords with these writers on many occasions, and he often wrote to the publications that printed their essays to object to their points of view. However, he left the intellectual sparring out of his own essays. Porter's criticism is thoughtful and sensitive, and exhibits his encyclopedic grasp of art history and a depth and breadth of knowledge about contemporary art that few others shared. He wrote for *Art News* from 1951 to 1959, and *The Nation* from 1959 to 1961, when he stopped writing regular columns so that he could devote himself fully to painting. (For a thorough reading of Porter's art criticism, see Rackstraw Downes, ed., *Fairfield Porter: Art In Its Own Terms, Selected Criticism 1935–1975* [1979].)

Porter did his best work during the last fifteen years of his life. His style loosened somewhat, and he incorporated more abstract forms and colors and recorded a freer and more immediate impression of his subjects. In his lifelong pursuit of realistic, non-abstract subjects, however, Porter was far ahead of his time, particularly in painting portraits of his family and friends, a genre that wasn't taken seriously by the art world until years later.

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