

FRANK MASON: A Passion for Painting



Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The University Museum

The Art Students 1983

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IUP TEXT PANELS
written by: Scott Mason

INTRODUCTON

“If you are looking for something to be brave about consider fine arts.” - John Ruskin

Ruskin’s quote strikes at the heart of Frank Mason’s philosophy toward life and painting. “Can you breathe life into them!” Mason often challenged his students when swiping loaded paint brushes across classroom canvases. His passion for learning and teaching remained central throughout his life and in the words of Columbia University art historian, James Beck, “He kept the light burning” for three generations of art students.

Mason attended LaGuardia High School of Music and Art but it was his enrollment at the Art Students League of New York where he found a true mentor under the guidance of Frank Vincent Dumond. Upon Dumond’s death in



Self Portrait of Artist with Palette and Large Sombrero c.1978

1951 Mason was elected by the students to become the new Instructor of Fine Arts at the League. It was in Dumond's classroom that Mason developed the type of critical thinking and technical skills that set him apart from other artists in the 1950s and 60s. A shifting art world began to value the novelty of art theory over the traditional principles of centuries old art, setting in motion the rising tide of modernism. Mason remained dedicated to the disciplines of traditional art throughout his life, which resulted in his position as an authority on the subject.

In the 1970s Mason's trained eye pitted him against the Metropolitan Museum of Art when he condemned the new restoration practices led by the conservator John Brealey. Rembrandt paintings that Mason had carefully studied for over three decades were returning from the



Indian Princess 1969

Met's restoration laboratory with alarming alterations. Layers of delicate glazes had been removed and Rembrandt's signature mark of vibrant colors had been diminished. Mason organized a march on the Met to protest these cleaning practices and was able to negotiate a brief moratorium. As aggressive restoration practices persisted Mason increased his efforts to spread awareness. They culminated in a movement with many others in the art world to protest the controversial cleaning of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

With Professor James Beck, Mason helped to form the non-profit organization "ArtWatch International" that continues to protect works of art to this day. While Frank will be remembered as a defender of the Old Masters his legacy as a prolific artist and inspiring educator will form his place in history.

HALLWAY ENTRY



Storm Over Peacham c.2005

When entering these gallery rooms please note that there is no chronological order to the display of these works of art. Instead, each room focuses on a common theme that was central to Mason's life. In this entryway the left hand wall is comprised of plein air landscape paintings that represent Mason's love for painting outdoors. On the right larger works of art

exemplify Mason's interest in the scholarship of ancient literature and religious teachings.

Mason hosted decades of summer landscape classes in Vermont. He urged students to capture nature in its most striking moments, whether before an approaching storm or during a quiet misty morning. Massing forms and balancing close tonal values were central to Mason's teaching. He would challenge students to avoid the pitfalls of photorealism in order to focus on the poetry of light as it reveals form through the filter of atmosphere. A unified cluster of trees might call attention to a single branch struggling to retain its autumn leaves or a mountain range reduced to a band of color narrows focus on a distant silo or church steeple.



June Breeze, Peckham 1979

GALLERY A – AMERICA

Throughout his life Mason drew inspiration from



Tom Kennedy, Camp Iroquois 1965

the American landscape and depicted our country's storied history through many of his portrait subjects. Whether portraying himself as a young cosmopolitan jazz musician or depicting a Native



Cowboy (Dan Mason) 1966

American or a cowboy when visiting his brother's camp for children in western Pennsylvania, Mason captured his subjects with a sense of timelessness that transcended the sitter.

Mason's love for plein air painting began as he traversed the green



Superstition Mountain 1987

mountains of Vermont during his summer classes with his mentor, Dumond. It was in these early days that Mason picked up on the principles of close value painting and the importance of color harmonics. Instead of depicting each individual tree and branch Mason quickly caught on to Dumond's teaching and realized the general massing

of planes and color values were much more effective when training the eye to hit on a particular point of interest.

When traveling across the country Mason's subject matter ranged from the awe-inspiring landmarks made famous by Frederick Church to the serene yet powerful compositions inspired by George Inness.

Often Mason wove a path from the foreground inward, so that the viewer could find a point of entry to journey further into the vast terrain. Mason's seascapes expressed his mastery of organization when challenged by an ever-changing subject. White capped waves continually lured Mason to the coastal towns of Maine where he discovered a tempest of stories engraved upon pummeled seaside cliffs and remembered by the residents who took root upon them.



Late Afternoon, Bald Head, Small Point 1953

GALLERY B – EUROPE

Mason first traveled to Europe in his thirties setting his sights on Brittany. With his easel planted on the beach of Isle de Batz Frank was transported to the old world, absorbing the beauty of farms and villages that spanned generations. In 1964 Mason decided to move to Rome where he soon met his wife, Anne. By 1966 he and Anne moved back to New York but spent a number of summers in the small Italian village of Anticoli Corrado. Mason secured a studio positioned on a hillside adjoining the main village where he had a pristine view of the clambering, terracotta rooftops that scaled the neighboring mountainside.



Valley View, Anticoli, Corrado, Italy c.1970



Brittany Rooftops, Isle de Batz c.1954

When exploring the rooftops of ancient cities or the vestiges of a rural village, Mason's European landscapes feel inaccessible and private. Figures toiling along a path or fishing boats cast ashore remind us that these lands are utilitarian for their inhabitants but only require pondering of the

traveler. This sentiment holds true of his interior paintings and studio works. In "Anne and the Italian Tutor" we feel as though we've



Sicilian Girl with Fruit
Basket 1965

entered a private session and can only peer into the dark recesses of the room. The young woman in “Sicilian Girl with Fruit Basket” seems aloof toward the viewer and a morning breakfast is mysteriously abandoned in “Sicilian Pitcher”, yet the yoke has been cracked and the fruit is just within reach.

Mason’s heritage sprung from Wales. “Maentwrog, Wales” began as a small study painted during Masons travels but he didn’t revisit the study until years later, producing the painting that hangs in this room. The foreground characters were sourced separately from other studies and observations during his trip. Mason’s ability to weave these studies into one tour de force reflects his acute sensibility for story telling and the creative liberty with which he composed his larger studio works.



Maentwrog, Wales c. 1976

GALLERY C – THE PORTRAIT

Beyond the steady gaze of these portraits the viewer can gain considerable insights into Mason's progression of interests as a painter. While landscapes have a transitory stylistic quality that suit the mood of the subject, portraits can be more disciplined in their approach and therefore more deliberate in their presentation.

This room of portraits spans 60 years of Mason's life from 1945 to 2005. Within these years the maturing of a master artist is apparent. Mason at a young age set out to prove his attention to detail, which is evident in "Mother's Artist at Tea" and "Walter Mason Sr. (father of artist)". These portraits have similarities to Vermeer's quiet interiors or Rembrandt's early portraits.



Walter Mason Sr. c.1944



Artist Mother at Tea c.1945

Toward the end of his studies with instructor Frank Vincent Dumond his portraits began to capture attributes that pointed toward American painters John Singer Sargent and James McNeill Whistler, the latter being a close friend and mentor of Dumond. Highly technical but with a subtlety of lost and found edges, "Wylanta Mason in Black Dress" and "Phyllis" show a formal style not previously emphasized in Mason's work. Phyllis was Mason's first wife, a brilliant painter and fellow classmate at the Art Students

League. When Mason returned to New York in 1966 from a two-year trip to Italy his style increasingly reflected the portrait techniques of Titian and Tintoretto. More expressive brushwork emerges. The portrait of Arden Mason, son of Frank and Phyllis, demonstrates

Mason's increased ability to move the paint with tremendous dexterity.

Portraits of his wife "Anne Mason" and son "Arden Mason in Red Vest" advance the thought that Mason combined his American and Italian influences to create a style in portraiture that is uniquely his own. By the 1970s portraits of his nephew and niece "Dan Mason" and "Joan Mason" communicate a language of paint handling that feels at once spontaneous and exactly intended. "Self Portrait of Artist with Palette and Large Sombrero" is quintessentially Mason, showing both his ability to incite



Arden Mason in Red Vest 1967

emotion through detail and playfully lighten his stance with a striking economy of

brushstrokes. This display of bravura continued through the third generation of portraits Frank painted of his great nephews, Scott and Bennett, and great niece, Lindsay.



Anne Mason 1966

GALLERY D – DRAWINGS

Mason would always remind his students that painting is in the drawing. “Can you draw with the brush?” Learning anatomy was not the end goal. Mason impressed upon young portrait artists that the academic aspects of drawing are something to be learned and forgotten so they are ingrained in the back of ones head. The



Nude in Motion 2000

mastery of drawing comes from the movement of line and the flow of form that must hold together structurally before the details are laid upon it.

A sketchbook was always lying in wait close to Mason’s hand. A wild cluster of plants or a lone figure trotting along a path would trigger Mason’s attention and the resulting sketch could very well end up in the foreground of one of his large studio landscapes. When ideas would spring to mind in the middle of the night

Mason would document the vision of inspiration in his bedside sketchbook to become further realized once the sun lit his studio canvas.

Mason’s father, in addition to being a Shakespearean actor, was an entrepreneur and ink manufacturer. His patented recipe for waterproof brown ink was taught to Mason at a young age. Throughout his life Mason would continue to cook up this secret sauce for countless ink studies and preliminary mural drawings.



Study for Dancer c.1994

Time spent in Italy turned Mason into a connoisseur of red chalk, a drawing tool demonstrated first by Leonardo da Vinci. Although it



Soldier for St. Paul on The Road
to Damascus c.1998

was difficult to find chalk that had a perfect mineral consistency, Mason sought out this drawing tool for its sanguine subtleties and fine lines. The results derived from the rough-hewn edges of this chalk allowed Mason to achieve line work in his renderings that echoed the drawings of the Italian Renaissance. In addition, the careful preparation of hard stock paper treated with rabbit skin glue sizing and pigment gave Mason's surfaces a tooth that the red chalk took to beautifully.

GALLERY E – LIGHT AND FORM



The Silver Tankard 2000



Garden Glory 1982

Within every subject matter he painted Mason found something exquisite, which he referred to as the life force. In “The Silver Tankard” the still life composition is purposely left absent of flora and fauna. The intended effect celebrates the element of light as it is absorbed in to the cloth fabric and radiates out on to the polished, metallic surfaces. Consequently, it is the light itself that gives every object its form and texture.

Turning to the other still life paintings in this room it becomes apparent that light swims over every form, whether inanimate or flourishing with life. With this in mind we can observe other paintings that surround us - a silhouette of a saint, a standing nude or the artists studio aglow with warmth - to discover that everything is bathed in light. Notice that in each instance the light source is not from an artificial fixture but from the sun itself.



St. John the Divine c.1957

Soul light and sun are the same. Above all else, this was the big idea Mason strove to pass along to his students and enthusiasts. In Mason’s own words, “Why paint from light that comes from the bulb above your head when the last rays of sunlight have traveled millions of miles to illuminate the form before you.”

GALLERY F – THE ARTIST’S STUDIO



Mary Cantline Drawing c. 2009

The paintings selected in this room are intended to impress upon the viewer the feeling of contemplation, which Mason attained through the tranquility of his studio. A new visitor to Mason's Little Italy studio in the heart of New York City would be first challenged to climb five flights of stairs before entering a world of soft light, radiating plaster casts from Greek antiquity and an abundance of artifacts. The artisan objects are likely present in painted form among Mason's body of work, displayed on exposed brick walls and under the canopy of thick wood beams. Echoes of Mason's piano playing can still be remembered as his self composed melodies used to reverberate around the room and soften against the oriental carpets.

It was within this environment that Frank was prolific and passionate about his work. “The Police Dome” was a view Mason encountered every day from the perch of his fire escape while “Little Italy” portrays his Italian American neighbors. Prior to taking residence in this exemplar of bohemian dwellings, Mason spent a number of years painting in his studio above Carnegie Hall. An excellent pianist and composer in his own right, Mason loved that his studio capped the center of New York’s classical music scene. The uniform light and large windows allowed Mason to concentrate his energies on producing incredible portraits and still lifes.



View From My Studio, Old Police Headquarters c.1975



Copernicus 1954

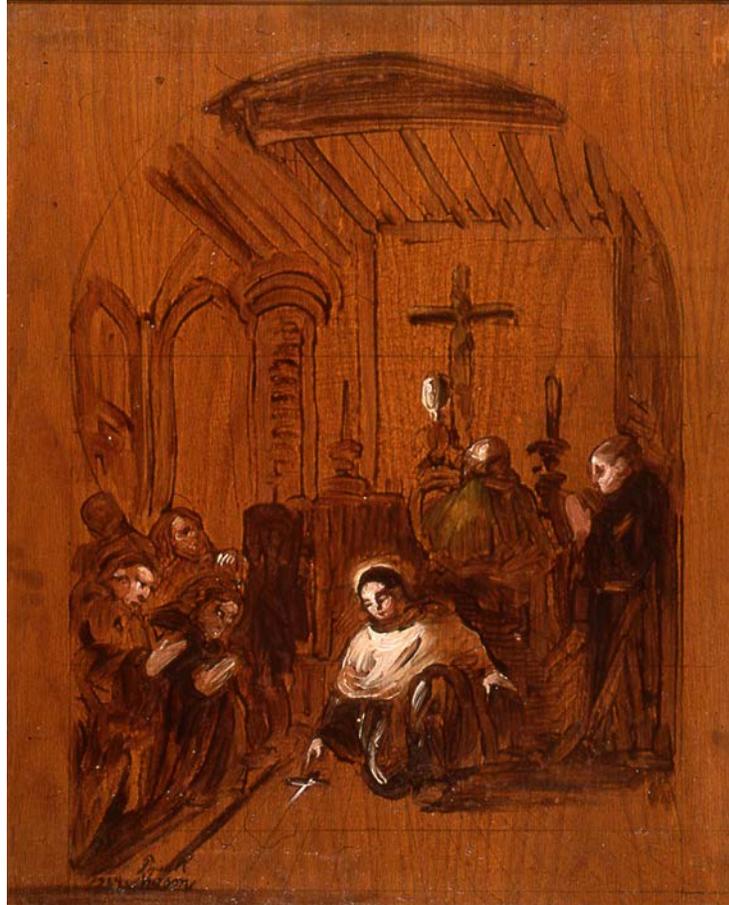
“Copernicus” was one of his favorite stories. He came across an older gentleman with a magnificent white beard outside The Art Students League. Although the man spoke little English, he agreed to pose for Mason in his Carnegie studio as the famous astronomer and mathematician. To Mason’s delight, the man revealed in broken English that he was, in fact, a mathematician. It was the spontaneity of Mason’s character and raw enthusiasm to paint that time and again brought him to the

perfect subject, whether inside his studio or when roaming the world around him.

GALLERY G – RELIGION

Artists through the ages have sought and found visual inspiration from religion. Through these ancient stories some of the world's most renowned works of art have been born. Frank Mason held the subject of Christ's life central to his creative spirit. Some of Mason's most powerful and celebrated works of art stem from his religious murals.

One of his most notable religious commissions was in 1962 when the Sovereign Military Order of the Knights of Malta asked Mason to paint an eight part series on the life of St. Anthony of Padua. These works were permanently installed in the Church of San Giovanni di Malta, Venice, Italy. Mason presented ten of these sketches depicting various chapters from St. Anthony's life. Mason spent a year painting the selected eight, which spanned 8 feet tall by 5 feet wide. Two studies, "The Hermitage" and "First Temptation of St. Anthony as a Boy" can be seen in this room.



First Temptation of St. Anthony as a Boy, Original Study 1964



Gloria in Excelsis Deo (Original Bozzetto) 1957

Other studies displayed here, “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” and “St. Paul on the Road to Damascus”, show Mason’s working method when exploring the narrative composition and dramatic impact of his subject matter. Saints and religious figures were a steady source of material that allowed Mason to explore the effects of transcendental light and ruminate on the subjects that influenced him most deeply. Large-scale murals of the finished

“St. Paul on the Road to Damascus” and “Christ at Emmaus” display Mason’s ability to interweave figurative groupings, hand and facial gestures and the directional power of light to exhibit awe struck emotion within his religious works.

For more information on Frank Mason and art sales please go to www.FrankMason.org

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