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Ferren

Paris in the 1930's

John Ferren (1905–1970) was born on a Blackfoot Indian reservation as his father was an Army Officer with the Indian Service in Pendleton, Oregon. He grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from Polytechnic High School in 1923. After a short attendance at an art school in San Francisco, Ferren became an apprentice to an Italian stonecutter, and later also created portrait busts, which he exhibited at annual exhibitions in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In 1929, Ferren traveled to New York and Paris, where he was exposed to the holdings of Albert Eugene Gallatin, an influential collector and painter of abstract and nonobjective art and the work of Hans Hofmann and Henri Matisse. While in France, Ferren attended informal classes at the Sorbonne, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and the Académie Ranson. However, according to the artist, he was most influenced by socializing with other artists working in Paris at the time, including Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, and Joaquín Torres-García.

By the end of 1931, after a brief return to America, Ferren was back in Europe for the rest of the decade. Settling in Paris, he became an avid participant in the Parisian avant-garde, absorbing the influences of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Delaunay. He attended gatherings at Gertrude Stein's and developed a friendship with Picasso, (whom Ferren would later help to sketch *Guernica* [1937]). Ferren was linked to the group Abstraction-Création, an association of artists formed in Paris in 1931 to promote abstraction and counteract the trend toward Surrealism and figuration.

In 1932, Ferren married Laure Ortiz de Zarate, daughter of the Chilean painter, and he soon became involved with a circle of Spanish-speaking artists who resided in Paris - and Torres-García was probably responsible for introducing Ferren to the Abstraction-Création group. In the same year Ferren was part of a group show at Galerie Zak at 16, rue de l'Abbaye.

While working at Stanley William Hayter's prominent workshop "Atelier 17" in Paris, Ferren discovered a nineteenth-century printing technique whereby an engraved and inked plate is imprinted in wet plaster, which, once dry, is then carved and painted. Two such engraved plasters by Ferren were among the first examples by an American artist to be acquired by Solomon R. Guggenheim, in 1938.

In May of 1935 Ferren showed in the "L'Atelier 17" group exhibition of engravings at Galerie Pierre (Pierre Loeb) at number 2 rue des Beaux-Arts along with Ernst, Giacometti, Toyen, Hayter and Da Silva. In 1936, again with Pierre Loeb he showed recent works alongside Arp, Hartung, Hellion, Kandinsky, Paalen and Tauber-Arp. Loeb then gave Ferren a one-man-show of paintings and "new objects" in early June, and later in the month he continued his collaboration with Pierre Loeb in a group exhibition along with Biedermann, Gallatin, Morris and Shaw. In 1936, in New York, Ferren took part in the exhibition "Five Contemporary American Concretionists" at the Paul Reinhardt Gallery and the dealer Pierre Matisse, son of the French painter Henri Matisse, gave Ferren his first solo show there followed by another in 1938. In 1937, Christian Zervos, creator of *Cahiers d'Art*, after introducing Ferren to Alfred H. Barr, organized the exhibition "Origine et Développement de l'Art International Indépendent" at the Jeu de Paume in Paris and included a painting by Ferren.

In the wake of the approaching war, and divorced, Ferren returned to America. He became associated for a short time with the American Abstract Artists. However, Ferren abandoned abstract art in the early 1940s to engage in a series of academic figural and still life works.

Early on Ferren became acquainted with Taoism and Zen Buddhism through his friendship with Chinese American avant-garde artist Yun Gee, who explored Taoist themes through his work. During the next decade this propelled Ferren to return to abstract compositions with an increased focus on evoking movement and unity. After service in the Office of War Information, Ferren began to work clearly in the late 1940's in the Abstract Expressionist style, rendering boldly painted, brightly colored canvases. He was an early member of "The Club", an informal group that was the nucleus of the New York School in the 1950s, and served as the president in 1955.

Though John Ferren was known later in his career as an intellectual among his peers, he avoided academe and formal art institutions, preferring to develop his own artistic style and theories that were nourished by his adventurous lifestyle and curious mind. In the late 1950s, Alfred Hitchcock enlisted Ferren as an artistic consultant on the films *The Trouble with Harry* (1955) and *Vertigo* (1958).

In 1963, Ferren spent a year in Lebanon, which raised his awareness of Islamic art, returning his eye and practice to geometric forms. Throughout his three decades in New York Ferren taught at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, Cooper Union, and Queens College.

During his lifetime, Ferren's work was exhibited in solo and group presentations throughout the United States, including the groundbreaking Ninth Street Show of works by sixty-one New York-based artists held in 1951 in a vacated storefront on the eponymous street.

Ferren remained active as an artist until his death in Southampton, New York, in 1970. A major retrospective of his work was held at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 1979.

His works are represented in the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, among other collections.

The works exhibited here are all acquired from a portfolio of John Ferren, auctioned in Paris by Kalck & Associés, 4 November 2009.