PAINTINGS BY

KARL KNATHS

THE ART INSTITUTE

OF CHICAGO

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The catalogue was edited by Irving S. Tarrant with the collaboration of the following members of the staff: Miss Selma Johnson, G. E. Kaltenbach, Park Phipps, Walter J. Sherwood, and Frederick A. Sweet.

PREFATORY NOTE
Appreciation is due Mr. Duncan Phillips, Director of the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C., Mr. E. M. Benson, Supervisor of Education of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Mr. Dudley Crafts Watson, Membership Lecturer of The Art Institute of Chicago, for their introductory remarks, which contribute greatly toward a better understanding of Karl Knaths, the artist and the man.

The early recognition of Karl Knaths by Mr. Watson and the continued enthusiasm for his work on the part of Mr. Phillips and Mr. Benson have been major factors in the development of this significant painter.

Mr. Phillips, the most consistent collector of Karl Knath’s paintings, is to be thanked for his generous cooperation in lending seven canvases from the Phillips Memorial Gallery.
KARL KNATHS AS I KNEW HIM

Zona Gale, the Wisconsin writer of the American Scene, brought Karl Knaths to my office at the Milwaukee Art Institute. He was an angular, open-faced boy in rough warm clothing but without hat, overcoat, or gloves—although it was a zero day. She had found him in her home town, Portage—an apprentice in his uncle’s bakeshop. The uncle showed Miss Gale a batch of drawings made by Karl on scraps of paper and discarded box linings. “He will do nothing else when he is through baking,” complained the uncle.

After our conference, and with the conviction that here was another genius to be saved, Miss Gale secured the release of the boy from the bakery for a year, and he went to work in Milwaukee for Laura Sherry, director of the Wisconsin Players, as caretaker of the Playhouse and painter of scenery for the plays.

He attended classes of drawing and painting all of his spare time and was soon winning many of the honorable mentions offered. The next year he managed to enroll in the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, where he earned most of his way as janitor’s assistant.

He was drafted for World War I and laid down his brush to pick up the gun. His uniform arrived while he was home with his uncle’s family. He put it on and walked alone through the sunset to a loved spot at the top of a nearby hill, but he could never understand why—as the sun set blood-red—he laughed and laughed.

After the Armistice and his release from the Army, he studied in New York and Provincetown. While still a very young man, he established himself as an American artist with a set of brilliant monotypes done in Provincetown.

DUDLEY CRAFTS WATSON
1  Cock and Glove  Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery
KARL KNATHS, POET OF PAINTING

Karl Knaths is a poet of painting. The poetry is not as much in what he says as in the way he says it. In his art the lyricism is due to apparently simple but really very subtle relations which are more or less unconsciously achieved by one of the finest sensibilities of our period for painterly felicities.

There is a rationalizing element in the mind of man and even of the creative artist which would like to find a reason and a plan for the inexplicable and instinctive impulses, the intimate emotions, the whimsical fancies, and yes, for the accidental enchantments which happen sometimes on a bare or prepared canvas when a good painter is in good form. The rational is more familiar and more standardized than the emotional or the fanciful so that even the artists who like Knaths are most distinguished for their taste, their touch, their freshness and originality of vision are impelled to stress current theories of design or the structural patterns which they have imposed upon their poetry. Thus they make their technique and their dated aesthetics occupy the spotlight of their conscious attention. Nevertheless, they should never forget that "it is the crown and triumph of the artist not merely to convince but to enchant." There are ninety-nine of our competent painters out of a hundred who can convince us after a fashion. And yet that one outstanding exception who can enchant us, too, is likely to be the one whose art will live after him. There is a borderland between conscious logic of design and unconscious magic of creation where the artist draws deep upon both these sources of his strength. It was of this unmarked, indeterminate boundary in art between knowledge and instinct that Shakespeare was thinking when he asked in verse: "Tell me where is fancy bred, in the heart or in the head?"

The word fancy here signifies, if I am right, the logic of lyricism, of relations which may or may not be rational, which may be a moment's caprice, or an inexplicable association of incongruous objects, or the choice of a dissonant color which makes two other colors sing. It is that borderland of art which many of the best painters inhabit. There, among our contemporary American painters, Karl Knaths is to be found rationalizing with refreshed theory and sound precept what he has just done with spontaneous inspiration.
14  Turkey in the Straw  Lent by the Artist
I enjoyed the art of Karl Knaths many years ago when I was not yet mature in the modern idioms and when I was unready to accept without reservations the dicta of the School to which he clearly belonged. But in the first pictures by Knaths which were brought to my attention I found an expressive calligraphy which I liked at once. The functional angular pattern had a robust health about it, the sort of sensitive vigor one associates not with sophisticated Schools but with archaic art. And I saw that this strong simplicity was combined with a subtlety and a surprise of color which gave promise of a “paint quality” both rare and captivating. The whimsies of composition and drawing were like half-forgotten folk tunes or fairy tales translated into rational, cultivated, and even sophisticated pictures. The light which his color contained was functional and reinforced the color-form. Of the modernists and the pictorial story-tellers of our times who seem to get along in spite of an indifference to light in painting, it is undeniable to say that their colors are obvious, factual, and merely local. Such painters go about refusing to see what is happening miraculously before their eyes. Such people use color only to differentiate and define forms in airless space. Now we have come to associate luminous colors with the best French painting from Chardin and Cézanne to Bonnard and Braque, and so our American painters eager to be free of France are obviously afraid of luminosity. Knaths is both a luminist and a genuine American, for, with his light-enchanted colors, he conveys an intimate interest in his Cape Cod environment with a special fondness for farmyard cocks, lilac bushes, and certain familiar objects in his house or studio (duck decoys, for instance) the shapes of which he likes to use again and again for his creative purposes. One is reminded of the studio “properties” Paul Cézanne employed.

His earliest success came to Knaths from two canvases which soon found homes in museum collections. The first was a very stylistic rendering of lilacs in tones of sky-blue and brown-violet. It now belongs to the Gallery of Living Art in New York. The second was Cock and Glove which has been a favorite picture at our Gallery in Washington. It is more drawn than are most of his achievements. It seems to belong to the tradition of Chinese and Japanese brush drawings of birds and animals which were conceived to capture the
11 Giorgione Book  Lent by the Artist
quintessential character of their subjects. There is quiet humor in this picture of a cock which has just observed the farmer’s gauntlet. Surprise, resentment, and alarm are revealed in the agitated iridescent tail feathers of a hitherto care-free bird. In another of Knaths’ favorite rooster subjects entitled King Cock the stiff-legged strut and regal comb are magnificently comical. Light is integrated with the color for both these canvases and helps to convey the personal memory of visual experience. A third picture in this genre has an intense poetry of suggestion. It shows startled deer in moonlight. The air of witchery pervading a night of frosty silence is captured by the moon-chilled colors. How this hush is broken is told by the nervous zigzags of the brush. We can all but hear the crackling sounds which have frightened the wild creatures of the wood.

Perhaps I have stressed too much the subjects of Karl Knaths’ pictures and understated the importance of his truly intellectual and often musical designs. Angles and planes are as much his instruments of expression as are beautiful colors and he is at his best in sequences of lines and shapes evolving to the containing shape of the frame. Always his stress is upon balance and tension and the integrity of the picture plane. He fills a given space with an order in which lyric and logic are almost as indivisible as in Braque. In the large luminous canvas entitled Harvest the recognizable apples, pumpkin, bushel basket, and turkey constitute the thematic material for a progressive development of the design. The time element is conveyed through a clear invitation to the eye to travel from color to color and from line to line. Here the start is the contrast of the spherical apples to the verticals and horizontals of the room and the essential flatness of the picture. From the complete circles of the apples the artist leads us to semi-circles in opposite directions. Gradually we notice that the curves flatten into the rounded angles of the basket and finally we come to the radiating stripes of the turkey’s tail and the rectangle of the canvas itself. The whole effect is of a spacious room flooded with light and of reality electrified through rhythmical relations rather than objectified through realistic details.

DUNCAN PHILLIPS
Red Table  
Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery
KARL KNATHS AND THE LARGER VIEW

There are artists who will always be citizens of the world rather than just Americans, Dutchmen, or Englishmen: men whose spirit knows no boundaries. The language they speak with their art is an esperanto that would, in normal times, find friends in Bern, Berlin, London, or Leningrad. Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, and Jacques Lipchitz are among the best boundary-busters of our time. Karl Knaths, although less well-known than any of these, is one of the few Americans whose art is sown in the same ubiquitous soil.

This is not quite the same soil that gave us Rembrandt and Goya and other giants who probed the beating pulse of humanity, but a universality of form for its own sake, sometimes soaring above the deepest thoughts and feelings of men, sometimes living among them. In a separatist world where “good fences make good neighbors” the boundary-busters created a much-needed brotherhood of form. They removed the winding sheets from forgotten cultures and forged a new chain of communication among men.

In Chicago where Knaths had come from Wisconsin to study art, light came to him in 1913 like a revelation in the form of the Armory Show. This became his Bill of Rights. The wild winds of aesthetic doctrine that blew across the Atlantic were warming words of encouragement to Karl Knaths. They gave him a creed. The rest he has since discovered for himself in the slow solitude of his Provincetown studio.

Here an Erewhon of pigment on canvas and paper began to take on shape and meaning. A fresh geometry of forms gradually evolved. Not without benefit of Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Klee, and Marin, and later of Kandinsky, Arp, and Mondrian. To these founding fathers of art in the twentieth century Knaths turned with frank affection. In their painting he found the substantial stuff of which art is made and he used it freely and instinctively as children use the experience and personality-characteristics of their parents. To this legacy of art Knaths has made a creditable contribution of his own.
Duck Decoy  Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery
No camp follower, no hero-hypnotized sycophant, no intellectual bristling with an armory of facile phrases is this Karl Knaths, but a thinker-over, a slow-pokish prober who pursues a hunch with tireless persistence wherever it may lead him. His head and his heart, as in single-celled animals, seemed to be all of a piece. He is what D. H. Lawrence would call an abdominal thinker whose thoughts start as physical sensations and percolate upwards. Deep rather than brilliant, Knaths has, over the years, developed a point of view and an esthétique that are as closely reasoned as an argument by Spinoza or Santayana.

Knaths sees himself as part of a great tradition, the non-representational painting tradition that runs a clear course from Monet to Mondrian through Cézanne and Picasso. Knaths prefers to take his stand here beside the Dutchman Mondrian whose rectangular simplifications he admires enormously. And it is natural and logical that Knaths should take this stand. Except for a brief social-scene interlude, Knaths has never been vitally concerned with the humanistic aspects of his subject matter. The animals, men, boats, mountains, buildings, and still-life objects that people his pictures have no special inspirational meaning for him as subject matter. He regards them simply as a nursery of abstract forms. This does not mean that Knaths paints without passion. On the contrary, he does succeed in giving an intense visual life to his forms which is often profoundly moving and could only be achieved by a very able picture designer and superb colorist.

The casual observer would scarcely suspect that beneath the modest exterior of this broad-boned American there is more real honest-to-goodness talent than is to be found among the big-shouters and the well-advertised miracle men. In the Knaths of today we have an artist of mature stature who knows where he is going and how he intends to get there.

E. M. BENSON

Mr. Benson refers the reader to an article by him on Karl Knaths: The American Magazine of Art, XXIX (1936), 364-375.
CATALOGUE

1 Cock and Glove (1928)
   36 x 26¼ inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

2 Red Table (1929)
   24 x 30 inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

3 Duck Decoy (1931)
   20 x 30 inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

4 Frightened Deer in Moonlight (1932)
   36 x 48 inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

5 Harvest (1933)
   40 x 48 inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

6 King Cock (1934)
   36 x 32 inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

7 Moonlight, Harbor Town (1938)
   34 x 34 inches
   Lent by the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.
8 Clock and Table (1938)
   30 x 36 inches
   Lent by the Artist

9 Orarian (1938)
   36 x 30 inches
   Lent by the Artist

10 Doomsday (1941)
   40 x 50 inches
   Lent by the Artist

11 Giorgione Book (1941)
   40 x 20 inches
   Lent by the Artist

12 Johnny Appleseed (1941)
   42 x 24 inches
   Lent by the Artist

13 Store and Gear (1941)
   40 x 50 inches
   Lent by the Artist

14 Turkey in the Straw (1941)
   40 x 40 inches
   Lent by the Artist

Paintings lent by the artist are for sale