BORIS ANISFELD

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

MAY 8 – JUNE 8, 1958
"I PAINT WHAT I FEEL, NOT WHAT I SEE."

Today, for both the artist and his public, this is a canon, almost a cliché. For Boris Anisfeld, this has been the guiding principle by which he has fashioned a long life in art. For his public in America, some thirty-five years ago, this was considered an unfamiliar audacity, almost a revolutionary credo.

Boris Anisfeld brought to America in the early 1920's a mature and developed art that had won fame and recognition in his native Russia, Europe and Asia. The statement "I paint what I feel, not what I see." -- made simply by word and forcefully by brush, was one of extraordinary significance for this country. A significance that was only partly the result of what this statement, in itself, disturbed and stimulated; but essentially, the result of when and how it was made.

America of the 20's was scrambling to take a new cultural stance: the Great War had shattered the basic tenets of the past. The "lost generation" could not look back. At a time when creators were struggling to assimilate new ideas and forms from Europe, the war experience had made things European suspect. At first art and thinking from abroad hit America with a frontal assault.

Anisfeld was one of the first of a large number of painters, sculptors, writers, composers and musicians, who during the next two decades, left the social upheavals of Europe and Russia and found peace here to work and teach. He had grown to maturity in a Russian cultural climate that, in one broad sense, was not unlike what he found here. Although centuries of effort had gone into the Russian attempt to assimilate the culture of Europe, the conflicting traditions of East and West remained separate and distinct in Russia. He had found and demonstrated in his own work, that the only solution for the artist in the face of the chaotic demands of his society, is to believe in his own vision.

In more than fifty years of painting and more than thirty years of teaching, Anisfeld has helped teach the artist in America that in the end, he must come to trust what he "feels." He has helped teach the spectator in America that in the end, he must come to trust what he "sees." He has helped move the artist in America, and his public, into the essential tradition of continuing growth, which is dependent upon faith in themselves.
Opera was the channel through which Boris Anisfeld came to us. The brilliant twentieth century opera "The Love of Three Oranges" by Serge Prokofieff had its initial world premier in the Chicago Auditorium with a background of correlated design and color created by Boris Anisfeld. These two had worked together, first in Russia then in Paris, to create an emotional unity between music and color that had never before been attempted, and possibly never since equalled! The opening performance remains in the memory of those who were there an unparalleled art event. Its two creators became famous over night.

Prokofieff returned to Paris but Anisfeld remained in America. Soon a startling exhibition of his colorful, dramatic, vital and poetic paintings captivated America from coast to coast. It was heralded as a Russian gift to the art of painting as vital as the Russian gift of the Russian composers to music. His brilliance, dynamic canvases were of reality and fantasy in color that had never before been seen, a veritable new form of illustrating the experiences and dreams of life within the pure technique of the art of painting.

His loyalty to and love for Chicago, the seat of his first American triumph, lead him to establish his home here where he became an American citizen. As head master of painting in the great school of The Art Institute of Chicago for many years, he has helped innumerable students into brilliant careers and given hundreds the ability to paint with knowledge and creative invention.

(signed)

Dudley Crafts Watson,
DFA
There is so very much to say about Mr. Anisfeld, about his excellence as a painter, teacher and friend. One could go on and on and perhaps just end up saying the usual thing. I don’t want to risk that, for Boris Anisfeld is a most unusual man; one who by what he is, by his example as a human being, which, among other things, takes in his activities as a gifted painter, helpful teacher, and generous friend, offers to us some idea of what we ourselves might be. All of us who have been Anisfeld’s students are very aware of how fortunate we have been. His love, warmth and humor is truly live and uncompromising dedication to life and art are among the many things that bind us to him.

(signed)

Arthur & Ernestine Oser

Whenever I paint I pay homage to Boris Anisfeld for it was he who taught me to work for some balance between seeing, thinking and doing. "Don’t let the mind loaf behind the hand, or forget that painting belongs to the sensory world of sight," he said. If it were not always what he said, it was often what he himself did that counted, for he is a magnificent teacher with a brush. The quiet brush, without words, in his hand spoke its special language and opened the world to those who could grasp the opportunity, it destroyed preciousness and replaced it with structure, it sang a sensuous regard for color and an ever increasing self evaluation. To make comparisons was his measure of a painter, for the balance and lucidity of man as an artist lies within his ability to compare.

(signed)

Edgar Ewing,
Professor of Fine Arts
University of Southern California
Professor of Fine Arts
University of Southern California
"I ALWAYS SEE A THING FIRST IN COLOR."

"It comes to me as a fairly complete conception, and I rarely have to alter the essential character of my initial impressions."

Boris Anisfeld’s “initial impressions” were formed in the vast grain fields, among horses and cattle, meadows and shifting skies and changing seasons of his native Bessarabia, where he was born at Bieltsy, on October 2, 1879. The son of a well-to-do landed proprietor, the boy was free to roam and inbreath the father’s large estate.

His son’s early zest for drawing and music were encouraged by the elder Anisfeld, himself a man of broad culture with deep interests in history and philosophy. At the age of sixteen, Boris chose art for his profession and left his family home to study at the Odessa School of Art.

The first five years of Anisfeld’s apprenticeship were crammed with great industry and complete absorption for the mastery of the fundamentals of his craft. His
teachers were stimulating and effective, and the eager young student tried his hand at everything. In later years, he keenly regretted that his students in Chicago, could not, as he and his fellow students in Odessa, “live in our art. It is painful for me to see so many of my students at the Art Institute rush from school, not to their studios, but to run an elevator, sell sheet music, and then have to deprive themselves of certain paints because they are too expensive,” he has said.

With time and means at his disposal, Anisfeld came to be thoroughly grounded in the technique and practice of painting. At Odessa he had painted landscape, figure, portraits and decorative composition. He had gained confidence in the use of crayon, oils, tempera, water color and pastel. In 1901 he went to complete his training at the Imperial Academy of Arts in Petrograd.

“In prewar Russia, artists all threw themselves into their art, and not having to make it pay, they were able to give their best.” For the next eight years (1901-1909) he was associated with the Academy at Petrograd, but Boris Anisfeld never let the Academy get in the way of his development. He and the members of his set paid little attention to the dogmas of their would-be masters, champions of tradition and specialists in battle pictures and genre subjects. Considered irreconcilable young rebels, they painted what they chose while their teachers stood by helpless, with only token objection.

Anisfeld was, indeed, “irreconcilable” with the precepts of the faculty and any insistence on pictorial realism. He became a leading member of a growing movement in Russia that was winning for the artist greater freedom of choice in subject and treatment. The new artists emphasized individual self-expression, spontaneity, and free play of emotion and imagination in color and form. They found new inspiration in the centuries-neglected themes of native Slavonic tradition.
In 1904 Anisfeld married. He traveled and sketched in Russia the following spring and summer. At the village of Gourzouff, in the Crimea, he visited the mountain of Aion-Dagh (The Bear) and there painted the canvas called "Clouds over the Black Sea." This painting was largely responsible for the initial recognition and reputation won by his work.

Igor Grabar, painter and critic and leading Russian exponent of Impressionism, became so enthusiastic over the work of the young artist that he brought it to the attention of Serge de Diaghilev. Diaghilev selected a group of Anisfeld’s paintings for an important collection of retrospective and contemporary Russian art he was then putting together. This exhibition proved the great event of the Petrograd art season of 1905 and achieved similar success in 1906 in the Paris Salon d’Automne. Boris Anisfeld was elected a Societaire of that organization, a rare distinction for a newcomer.

“When I begin work upon the scenery for a ballet or an opera, I pay scarcely any attention to the plot. I listen over and over to the score, for it is from the music that I derive my most valuable suggestions.”
In 1906, the year of his success in Paris, Anisfeld made his debut as a theatrical set designer with the setting for Hugo von Hoffmannstahl’s “The Marriage of Zobeide,” a Persian fantasy. His work, novel, daring and evocative, was a landmark in the history of stage design. Anisfeld recalls the “startled exclamations” of the first night audience as they took in his blue-greens, orange-greens, rose-greens and golds. Each scene formed a distinct painting, with the actors functioning as figures in the visual dynamics. Tones and structural lines were combined to lend added psychological effects.

His striking innovations in composition and revolutionary use of color, that were to influence stage design for two generations, again brought him to the attention of Diaghilev. Diaghilev was the organizing genius who dedicated his fortune and life to the Russian Ballet, which became a monumental outlet for the work of the most able new painters, musicians, writers and dancers. Its productions, under the uncompromising Diaghilev, attained a fusion of all the arts never seen before and only rarely seen since. Anisfeld was commissioned to work on some of the most important productions of the Russian Ballet.
"The muses are silent when the cannon boom."

For Boris Anisfeld, this was true, and America gave him an essential condition for continuing to paint, and later to teach: peace. This was more than he gave the critics and public in principal cities of this country, who were unsettled by major showings of his work during the next decade. His settings for sumptuous operatic productions in New York and Chicago, however, were immediately and unhesitatingly acclaimed.

For the Metropolitan Opera Company he did a number of settings, most notable among which were Maeterlinck's "The Blue Bird," Massenet's "Le Roi de Lahore," and Boito's "Mefistofele." Of "The Blue Bird," the critic of the New York Times wrote: "The task of the scenic artist is to make this fairyland the reality it is to the children (in the opera) and the illusion the audience knows it to be. Mr. Anisfeld has achieved extraordinary success in meeting the double problem . . . a remarkably beautiful production, and a work of art, in which the unity of the idea is clearly apparent . . . (he) is not only a master of stage decoration in the field dominated by the Russian school, he is a thinker and artist, who uses his training for individual expression and is able to respect the individuality of others."
In 1908 he collaborated with Golovin on the decor for "Boris Godounov." In 1909 Paris saw an "Ivan the Terrible" on which Anisfeld worked with Golovin and Rerikh. In the next few years Anisfeld's fame as a stage designer and painter spread throughout Europe and America with his work on such notable productions as "Sadko," "Islamey," "The Seven Daughters of the Ghost King," "The Preludes," "Egyptian Nights," and "Les Sylphides." It is interesting to note that he always insisted on painting the scenery himself from his own designs, and later, in this country, he had to join a craft union to do this work.

During the years of the ballet, he traveled and sketched extensively: Concarneau, Capri, the Tyrol, Biarritz and Hendaye, Spain, Switzerland, Northern Italy, Venice and Vienna. His paintings were regularly shown in the galleries of Petrograd, he was represented in virtually every important public and private collection in his own country, and had won high recognition in a dozen or more European capitals. He fled the national and international strife of Russia in 1917, and reached America, with a large collection of his work, in 1918. Anisfeld had come via the Trans-Siberian route, Japan and Canada.
“Le Roi de Lahore” was met with mixed reaction by the critics as a piece of music, but Anisfeld’s settings were universally praised. His work elicited such comments as “bewilderingly beautiful in spirit, in color, in design,” “Anisfeld has translated emotion in terms of color. He has achieved a sense of grandeur and of spacious magnificence by means of backdrops fantastic in perspective, intense and unified in color masses.” “He (Anisfeld) is the great creative artist of this production.” Deems Taylor said, “Boris Anisfeld’s scenery was the artistic triumph of the occasion.”

Anisfeld was introduced to Chicago with his setting for the Chicago Opera Company’s of Prokofieff’s “Love of Three Oranges.” Prokofieff puzzled Chicago and Anisfeld overwhelmed Chicago. He was persuaded to stay here to paint and teach.
"I strive not to be original, but merely to be independent, and to express myself in the most congenial manner of which I am capable."

The opinions of the critics in America who saw Anisfeld’s paintings at shows during the 20’s and 30’s ranged from high praise to high bewilderment to high damnation. Much of their comments reflect a restricted point of view that Anisfeld himself, as artist and teacher, has helped broaden by the expansiveness of his painting and thinking.

Perhaps he, himself, saw his own position most clearly in the 20's, when he said: "I do not, in so far as I am aware, belong to any special school or movement in art . . . I do not, as a matter of fact, consider myself a modernist any more. A few years ago, when my paintings were first placed on exhibition, the public greeted them with laughter, but of late they have ceased to laugh, for we have today in Russia many artists who are more extreme than I. We call them the 'young barbarians,' and some of them certainly seem to merit the term."
For more than thirty years Boris Anisfeld taught at the Chicago Art Institute. He continued to paint vigorously through these years in his studio in Chicago and his studio at Central City, Colorado, where he has spent his summers. A generation of students has benefited from his influence and example. An exhibition of the art of his students would undoubtedly contain the work of many outstanding painters.

The Chicago Art Institute is proud to note here, with this exhibition, the accomplishment of Boris Anisfeld, the artist.

David Levinsohn

May, 1958
Chicago, Illinois
THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

1. Fate, oil 1956-57  82" x 65½"
2. Portrait of Cornelia Lunt, oil 1932-35  45" x 36"
3. Dahlias, oil 1924  35" x 48"
4. Drama, oil 1942-43  70" x 50"  Lent by Dr. Edward R. Perl
5. Arrangement, oil 1944  40" x 45"
6. Thou Shalt Not Kill, oil 1957-58  48" x 71"
7. Reflected, oil 1945  31" x 49"
8. Rhapsody No. 1, oil 1942-43  75½" x 51¼"
9. Colorado Mountain, oil 1955  39" x 49"
10. Central City in Twilight, oil 1946  40" x 51"
11. Young Dreams, oil 1943-45  40" x 51"  Lent by Dr. Edward R. Perl
12. The Birth of a Child, oil 1927-31  60" x 51"
13. Self Portrait, oil 1914  28" x 30"
14. The Horse, bronze 1950
15. Amazons, gouache 1931
16. The Sea, tempera 1931
17. Salome, water color
18. Francesca da Timini, Dante Canto Quinto, No. 2, tempera
19. Circus, tempera
20. Exodus from Egypt, oil 1928-31  50" x 33"
21. Saint George and the Dragon, tempera 1907
22. Tanagra, tempera  Lent by Gretchen Rogers
23. Horses, composition on gesso 1933
24. Portrait of a Young Woman, graphite and pencil 1907
25. Head of a Young Boy, drawing 1905
26. A Spring Dream, water color 1931
27 Orpheus and Euridice, tempera
28 Saint George and the Dragon, oil 1950 28" x 36"
29 Self Portrait, tempera 1904-05
30 Marushka, oil 1926-27 22" x 24"
31 Courtyard of the Royal Palace, Stage design for Love of Three Oranges by Sergei Prokofiev, production of the Chicago Lyric Opera, gouache and varnish Owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art.
32 The Royal Palace, gouache and varnish Stage design for Love of Three Oranges by Sergei Prokofiev, production of the Chicago Lyric Opera, 1921, owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art.
33 The Castle of the Sorceress, gouache and varnish Stage design for Love of Three Oranges by Sergei Prokofiev, production of the Chicago Lyric Opera, owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art.
34 The Prince and Truffaldino, gouache Stage design for Love of Three Oranges by Sergei Prokofiev, production of the Chicago Lyric Opera, owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art.
35 Room of the Sick Prince, water color and gouache 1914 Stage design for Love of Three Oranges by Sergei Prokofiev, production of the Chicago Lyric Opera, owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art.
36 The Raven from Edgar Allan Poe, lithograph
37 Shulamit, lithograph 1913
38 Stage design for Le Coq d'Or by Rimsky-Korsakov, tempera
39 Apotheosis, tempera and water color 1923 Stage design for Mephistopheles by Arrigo Boito, production of the Metropolitan Opera Company, New York
40 Stage design for Le Roi de Lahore by Jules Massenet, production of the Metropolitan Opera Company, New York, water color 1923
41 Stage design for Le Roi de Lahore by Jules Massenet, production of the Metropolitan Opera Company, New York, water color 1924
42 Stage design for Le Roi de Lahore by Jules Massenet, production of the Metropolitan Opera Company, New York, water color 1925
43 Constellation, oil 1935 41" x 51\frac{3}{4}"
44 Ghost Town, oil 1944 35\frac{3}{4}" x 43"
45 Old Miner, oil 1944-45 35\frac{3}{4}" x 43"
46 West, oil 1943-44 50" x 61"
47 Indian Madonna, oil 1949-50 36" x 45"
48 Reveries, oil 1948 40" x 50"
49 The Feast of Balthasar, tempera 1950-51 Lent by Mrs. Sol Kogen
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<tr>
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<th>Dimensions</th>
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<td>Rhapsody No. 2</td>
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<td>Autumn Leaves</td>
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<td>White Poppies</td>
<td>1951-52</td>
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<td>Contrast</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>46&quot; x 35&quot;</td>
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<td>The Dying Swan</td>
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<td>Portrait of My Daughter</td>
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<td>Reclining Figure and Poppies</td>
<td>1943</td>
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<td>Anna Pavlova</td>
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<td>Storm, oil 1938-40</td>
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exhibited:

Diaghilev Exhibition 1905
Salon d’Automne 1906
Art Exhibits in Russia 1905, 1917
Soyuz, Mir Isicussiva 1905, 1916 & 1917
Vienna Secession 1908
Soyuz, Petrograd, Moscow 1911, 1912
International Exhibit Maimoi, Sweden 1912
International Exhibit Milan, Italy
International Exhibit London, England
International Exhibit Amsterdam, Holland
Venok 1917
Brooklyn Museum 1918
Boston Art Club 1918 & 1925
Allbright Art Gallery. Buffalo, N.Y. 1918
Cleveland Museum of Art 1918
Cleveland Museum of Art 1919
Detroit Institute of Art 1910
Detroit Institute of Art 1919
Milwaukee Art Institute 1920
Minneapolis Institute of Art 1920
St. Louis City Art Museum 1921
Palace of Honor, San Francisco 1921
Baltimore Museum of Art 1923
Art Institute of Chicago 1920 & 1927
Chicago Arts Club 1924 & 1926
Reinhardt Gallery 1925
Philadelphia Sesquicentennial 1926
University of Syracuse 1949
Cliff Dwellers 1956
Rhapsody No. 2, oil 1953-55
Shulanit, oil 1928-32

Constellation, oil 1955  41" x 51¼"
Pieta, oil 1957-58

Portrait of My Daughter, oil 1925 33" x 35"
The Horse, bronze 1950
White Poppies, oil 1951-52

Grey Autumn Day with Stormy Cloud, oil 1954  36" x 46"
The Red Room, oil 1947  40" x 50"

West, oil 1943-44  30" x 61"
Marushka, oil 1926-27  22" x 24"

Lady in White, oil 1950-51  44" x 36"
Descent of Christ, oil 1954-56

Reveries, oil 1948  40" x 50"

Thou Shalt Not Kill,  
oil 1957-58  45" x 71"

Arrangement, oil 1944  40" x 45"
Birch Trees in Autumn, oil 1956  37" x 49"

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, oil 1946  40" x 40"
Coming Storm, oil 1942-43

The Sea of Galilee, oil 1946-47  50" x 60"
Stage design for *Le Coq d'Or*
by Rimsky-Korsakov, tempera

Stage design for
*Le Roi de Lahore*

*Amazons*, gouache 1931
Central City in Twilight, oil 1946
40" x 51"

The Mystics (from Alexander Block's poem), oil 1953-54
45" x 52"
Contrast, oil 1941

Circus, tempera
Acknowledgement
This catalogue was made possible by contributions from Mr. Anisfeld’s many friends and students.