Walter Burt Adams (American, 1903 - 1990)
Untitled (St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans), ca. 1938
Oil on canvas
36 x 30 inches (framed 36 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches)
#23118

Walter Burt Adams

Walter Burt Adams was a dedicated painter of the American Scene and a singular personality among his peers in the Chicago Modern Art community. His no-nonsense manner, devotion to his craft and sardonic sense of humor characterize a man whose paintings capture life in and around Chicago between the early 1920s and the late 1970s. Born in Kenosha, Wisconsin just after the turn of the last century, Walter Burt Adams spent his childhood in Fargo, North Dakota and began his artistic education there through a correspondence cartooning class as a boy. After finishing high school in Fargo, Adams moved to Chicago in 1922 in order to enroll at the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. Adams' instruction at the school with artists such as George Oberteuffer, Frederick V. Poole, Charles Wilimovsky, Elmer A. Fosberg and William Owen, Jr. bolstered his already well-developed drafting skills with a strong foundation in the fundamentals of painting. Adams worked a variety of jobs in order to pay for his education, serving for a period as art editor of a national trade journal - United States Egg & Poultry Magazine - where he was assigned with creating illustrations and graphic design. Adams became a resident of Evanston, Illinois in 1931 when his family moved there in order to make the artist's younger brother Wesley's enrollment at Northwestern University financially viable.

In 1936, During the Great Depression, Adams was hired by the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create sixteen easel paintings of Evanston. Of these, it is reported that Adams considered eight "near masterpieces" and eight "good pictures". Despite the artist's enthusiasm for the works created for the WPA, their location is currently unknown. Over the course of the better part of the following four decades, Walter Burt Adams owned an art supply store in South Evanston that was only steps from the train stations, lumber yards, gas stations and other local scenes that so often figured in his work. As he reportedly did not own a car, Adams chose views he could reach on foot. He painted mornings and sold art supplies during the afternoon.

Walter Burt Adams' depictions of the streets of Chicago, Evanston and other points along Chicago's North Shore reveal the artist's strong sense of place and his technical prowess. It should be noted that Adams authored a book about the mathematical systems used by artists over the centuries called Infinite Dynamics, The Golden Key to Art, so it comes as no surprise that the artist's paintings reveal his mastery over linear perspective and bare an academic balance in his compositions. Adams' work is also notable, in part, for the frequent absence of figures in his paintings - a fact which can lend a sense of isolation to his work similar in effect to the empty rooms and storefronts in Edward Hopper's paintings. Adams is on record on the subject of working with models, having said: "I've always maintained that models are too damned expensive. It takes so long to paint that I can go broke before I finish a painting", and: "landscapes don't say something is wrong with the nose!"

Adams' acerbic wit and curmudgeonly demeanor was not limited to his views on working with models. His independent streak caused him to be more than occasionally uncompromising. For example, a spat with the telephone company in 1938 prompted Adams to discontinue his telephone service at both his home and at his business for twenty-five years. In addition, a sign in Adams' art supply store read: "If you must have further discount, kindly go elsewhere, only be sure that you are not paying more elsewhere (with discount) than here without discount. We are fed up with unpleasant situations created by demands for discounts after we have already given you one. Sorry, we will just have to struggle on without you." Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Walter Burt Adams was a lifelong bachelor.

The warmth Walter Burt Adams seemingly held for his neighborhood, however, is evident in his lively palette, crisp eye for detail and, not least of all, in his lifelong devotion to the ordinary subjects he painted. Adams left behind a body of work that offers viewers today a glimpse of a bygone era in America when time seems to have moved more slowly than it does today. Some of the locations Adams depicted have remained as they were in the artist's day, while other sites have disappeared or have been made unrecognizable due to redevelopment.

Paintings by Walter Burt Adams were exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago fifteen times between 1930 and 1942. Adams' work was also exhibited at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the Evanston Women's Club, Evanston, Illinois and the Evanston Public Library, Evanston, Illinois. In addition to their presence in many private collections, works by the artist can be found in the collections of the Chicago Public Schools, the Evanston Historical Society and the Evanston Public Library.