

REVIEWS

William J. Forsyth: The Life and Work of an Indiana Artist

By Rachel Berenson Perry

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii, 150. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Irascible, doggedly convinced of his own rectitude, and fiercely devoted to the cause of art in his native Indiana, William Forsyth was a vital force in the flowering of the so-called Hoosier School in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Rachel Perry's *William J. Forsyth: The Life and Work of an Indiana Artist* chronicles a life rich in art-making, travel, teaching, family, and involvement in many of the organizations that put Indiana in particular, and the Midwest in general, on America's artistic map in this formative era. Exhaustively researched and richly detailed, Perry's account traces Forsyth's journey from his Indiana boyhood as the eldest child of a struggling housepainter to his arduous training in Munich's Royal Academy and on to a long professional career in which honors and influence habitually vied with financial anxiety and conflicts with

colleagues—the latter, as Perry notes, often the product of the artist's combative temperament.

Through abundant quotes from letters, published writings, and other documents, Perry brings Forsyth vividly to life as an individual. She sticks close to her subject, with little interest in the larger story of regional American art of the time. Yet Forsyth's story is equally noteworthy for what it typifies. His experience was a common one in the formative generation of American artists who came of age in the wake of the Civil War—especially those from a region in awkward transition: no longer the frontier but decidedly the hinterland, economically established but culturally immature. Even in Indianapolis, one of the Midwest's major metropolises, aspiring artists such as the young Forsyth struggled to find serious academic instruction

and the patronage to support mandatory study in Europe. Returning home from seven years abroad a mature, confident practitioner, Forsyth then began a much longer struggle to forge an artistic career. He was part of a group of Indiana artists determined not only to “make it in the Midwest,” in Perry’s phrase (p. vii), but also to make the Midwest itself their primary artistic subject. Often their efforts were rewarded critically but not financially. Forsyth was forced to spend much of his time teaching (Perry devotes a useful chapter to some of his important students, including his own daughter Constance), as well as writing and speaking—all the while working tirelessly to promote art locally through such organizations as the Society of Western Artists. Having helped to establish a mature artistic culture in the Hoosier state, Forsyth lived long enough to witness, and to protest against, modernism’s defiance of the ideals upon which his hard-won career was based. As Perry notes, however, he found his own path of experimentation, evolving stylistically while remaining true to standards of representation, craftsmanship, and beauty. The type of pleasing impressionist landscape painting with which Forsyth and his Hoosier School contemporaries are

identified has long been more attractive to collectors and museum-goers than to art historians, yet these artists represent a mainstream that is too historically central to be overlooked.

Perry’s book is more biography than art historical study, with analysis of Forsyth’s art and its development largely confined to a concluding chapter. Lacking figure numbers, the illustrations are reduced to mere accessories to the text rather than subjects of discussion. This is a handsome and well-designed volume with fine reproductions of artworks and archival photographs. The brief bibliography, the index, and, most of all, the exhaustive list of Forsyth’s exhibition history add to the value of Perry’s study. It is all the more regrettable, then, that her readable prose is not well-served by the publisher’s uninformed editing. Overall, however, Rachel Perry deserves credit for an engaging study of an artist whose story has much to tell us about Indiana’s cultural legacy.

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