

By DEBBIE FORMAN

July 22, 2010 5:05PM

The evolving artist: Tworkov retrospective in Provincetown

Jack Tworkov (1900-82) was always exploring new expressions in his art, and the retrospective "Jack Tworkov: Against Extremes, Five Decades of Painting," at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

Jack Tworkov (1900-82) was always exploring new expressions in his art, and the retrospective "Jack Tworkov: Against Extremes, Five Decades of Painting," at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, takes you along the road he traveled from early figurative work, through his abstract expressionist period and finally to the late geometric paintings.

The exhibition of 40 works, which runs through Aug. 22 at the museum, was on exhibit in Manhattan at the UBS Art Gallery last year, the first retrospective of Tworkov's work in the United States since 1987, said Jason Andrew, manager and curator of the Tworkov estate, who took me on a tour of the Provincetown exhibition as they were hanging it.

I met Jack Tworkov in 1982 at the time he was having a show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. A vital member of the Provincetown artist colony, he was still in Manhattan in early spring of that year on the eve of his exhibition. He was looking forward to another season in Provincetown, which was destined to be his last. He died later that year in his summer location, which had been a seasonal home for him since the 1920s.

The Tworkov exhibition is arranged chronologically and begins with his early figurative paintings, then moves on to his abstract work, which had an impulsive, gestural intensity. Brash movements of line and color play across his paintings of the 1950s and '60s. His canvases are boisterous with both large and small brushstrokes and calligraphic sweeps that depict a rhythmic dance.

"In 1924, Tworkov hitchhiked to Provincetown with his sister Janice Biala to study with Charles Hawthorne," Andrew said. "He traveled to Provincetown with (Paul) Cezanne on his mind." He had seen Cezanne's work in the early 1920s and was fascinated by it. A 1929 still life, "Untitled (Still Life with Peaches and Magazine)," is a tribute to Cezanne. Tworkov also was influenced by longtime members of the artist colony, Karl Knaths and especially Edwin Dickinson, Andrew noted.

In the 1920s and '30s, Tworkov spent summers at the Cape's tip, where he regularly exhibited at the Provincetown Art Association and lobbied for a more liberal approach. His early work was figurative, "categorically social realist," Andrew said. The 1931 "Fisherman's Family" is an expressionistic and sober view of life by the sea. Also in 1931 Tworkov painted a watercolor of the town. The loosely painted image of a winding road, cottages and the Pilgrim Monument standing sentinel over the scene is an affectionate portrait of a quaint village.

In 1935, Tworkov turned away from Provincetown. "We thought it was ruined," the artist told me during our interview in his Manhattan apartment. I remember him laughing because he knew, compared to later years, the 1930s were bucolic.

Like so many artists during the Depression, Tworkov worked for the WPA's Federal Art Project and during World War II was a tool designer. After the war, he "began experimenting with abandoning the subject, trying to create his own kind of modernism," Andrew said. He became part of the abstract-expressionist movement in the 1950s and '60s. In New York, he had a studio next to Willem de Kooning's, and his 1949 "Abstract Figure at a Table" and 1952 "Sirens" are clearly associated with de Kooning's famous series on female figures. "Sirens," dominated by bold yellows that seem to be screaming like the sirens in Homer's "Odyssey" (which had inspired Tworkov), is a vibrant work full of the calligraphic wanderings of his brush.

After a 20-year absence from Provincetown, Tworkov returned in 1954, and he and his wife, Wally, purchased a house in the town's West End, where he lived and painted half the year.

Although his abstract-expressionist works, with their flame-like brushstrokes, seem to do away with any recognizable object, Andrew said that he sees the suggestion of a figure or landscape pushed to the back. Looking at the 1956 "Games III," he pointed out what he interpreted as a horizon line.

The 1961 "RWB #3," which suggests the American flag, was one of a series Tworkov did on a red, white and blue theme. The artist wrote, "They are "» perhaps unconsciously an ironic comment on my growing patriotism." Born in Poland, Tworkov came to the United States as a teen in 1913 and perhaps appreciated the opportunities he had here.

Tworkov was honored with a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1964, and it was around this time that his work took a sharp turn away from the spontaneity, personal explorations and what, he said to me, was the "unreasonable nihilistic attitude" of abstract expressionism. Yet, on that day in



"Untitled (Still Life With Peaches and Magazine)," 1929

1982, he expressed warm feelings about that period. "It was the only time in my life when I was a member of a group drawn together by aesthetic ideas and, at the same time, we were also close friends."

In 1963, Tworokov became chairman of the art department at Yale University and it was around that time that he became interested in minimalism. He was searching for structure. "I didn't want a painting that was so personal," he told me. "I wanted a painting that had elements outside myself." By focusing on geometry, he was hoping to tap into universality. In his need to simplify, the artist reduced the elements in his paintings and limited the use of color. His work took on a formality that incorporated defined grids and mathematical precision. His compositions became controlled, ordered and meditative.

You can see a grid pattern emerging in his 1960s "Crossfield I" and "Plain." Andrew, who never knew Tworokov and took his position as manager of the estate several years ago, sees these paintings as beginning as landscapes. "You can see the veils, screens, grids and barriers," he said. "They are structurally calligraphic and very measured." And he added, "You see those beautiful, elaborate weaves of color."

Tworokov's gray paintings, like the 1970 "Idling II," helped clarify his direction. And then he began introducing color. "There's a way of using color for its own sake, for its pleasure," he said when we spoke. "I always tend to color for structure."

The grid in the 1975 "Knight Series OC #1" was inspired by a chessboard and the intricate moves of the knight. His "Indian Red Series," begun in 1979, Andrew said, was "influenced by the changing seasons in Provincetown." In "Indian Red Series #1," subtle shades of red, mauve and umber mix in an animated arrangement of dynamic triangles that seem to multiply and stretch into infinite space.

The grid Tworokov used helped to establish specific spatial relationships, suggesting shapes to pursue, but they were limited by diagonals he drew within the grid, as in the 1982 "Compression and Expansion of the Square." His feathered brushstrokes softened the formality of his paintings and breathed luminosity onto his canvases.

Tworokov preferred the limits the grid set on his work, but, he maintained, that it still allowed him "infinite choices."

"The original grid from which you work is like the sea from which you fish, and what comes up is often by accident. So (the grid) doesn't eliminate randomness; it doesn't eliminate choice. But it puts some kind of form on what you do," Tworokov said during our interview.

In searching for a word to describe his approach on that day, he settled on "justness," which, he explained, involved "no unnecessary exaggeration." For him, "the field of action" was the rectangle. It was about geometry and Cezanne. "Cezanne didn't make beautiful paintings; he made true paintings. By comparison, other painters have made beautiful paintings but not true paintings. A true painting, like Cezanne's, stays with you a long time. So there's beauty, but it's a different kind of beauty."

Although Tworokov enjoyed painting in Provincetown, he was not sure how much its environment influenced his work because he was not a representational painter. He was aware of the unconscious influences when he said, "As an abstract painter, you're continually involved in ideas that are quite aside from the things that you see. It's a kind of mental and emotional process that goes on that is quite regardless of what you see. So I can't really say that the paintings I paint in Provincetown are any different from the paintings I paint in New York. A lot of the things I paint are evolving over a long period of time, quite regardless of where I was."

The serene quality of Tworokov's works speaks of an insular artist pondering aesthetic questions, yet he was not an ivory-tower painter. He expressed a liberal social consciousness and a serious concern for the future of Provincetown. He was distressed over the effect of tourism on the town. He remembered with reverence its former days as a quaint Portuguese fishing village. At the same time, he applauded the efforts of the Cape Cod National Seashore for preserving so much of the beaches and woods. "In a five-minute walk from where I am," he said, "I'm in the same Provincetown I've known all my life."

Debbie Forman has written a book on the history of the Provincetown artist colony. Based on her many interviews of the artists and writers in the colony, the book will be published next year.
