



Porter, Fairfield (1907-1975)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Bisexual artist, art critic, and poet Fairfield Porter is recognized as a major twentieth-century American Intimist painter, whose body of work features lyrical depictions of everyday life and portraits of family members and friends, in the manner of the late-nineteenth-century French artists Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, whose paintings Porter greatly admired.

Porter worked for years before his paintings were ever publicly shown, and it was not until the last decade of his life that he began to receive the recognition that many critics and peers felt he deserved. His reputation as an important artist and art critic continues to grow.

In fact, Porter's light-filled landscapes, domestic interiors, and perceptive portraits, which clashed so sharply with the trend toward abstraction that dominated American art in the second half of the twentieth century, are now recognized, as David Lehman noted in *American Heritage*, as "perhaps the best American representational art in existence."

Porter struggled throughout his lifetime with his sexual identity. As a young man he found himself attracted to other men and, beginning in his forties, shared a close friendship, and briefly a sexual relationship, with the poet James Schuyler.

Nonetheless, he and his wife, the poet Anne Channing Porter, enjoyed an enduring, devoted marriage that lasted over forty years and produced five children. As Catherine Noonan observed, writing in *American Artist*, "family was intrinsic to Porter's upbringing and adulthood."

Biography and Education

The fourth of five children, Fairfield Porter was born on June 10, 1907, in the village of Winnetka, Illinois (then known as Hubbard Woods), into an affluent family. His father was an amateur architect and natural history enthusiast who had inherited a Chicago-based real estate fortune. His mother was a schoolteacher, published poet, and lifelong social activist. Both sides of the family had deep roots in New England.

Like his father and brothers before him, Porter attended Harvard University, where he studied philosophy and art history.

In 1927, his junior year at Harvard, Porter had his first encounter, at a friend's house, with Anne Elizabeth Channing, a bright sixteen-year-old girl from a prominent Boston family, whom he was to marry five years later.

After graduating Harvard in 1928, Porter moved to Greenwich Village, then widely considered the center of New York's artistic, intellectual, and bohemian worlds. He spent three years studying painting at the famed Art Students League, under the direction of Thomas Hart Benton, the American Regionalist painter.

Bisexuality and Marriage

In the spring of 1931, at his mother's behest, Porter made a weekend visit to a Winnetka neighbor then studying at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. It was during this visit that he became reacquainted with Anne Channing, who was also attending the college.

Anne's attraction to Porter was immediate. According to Porter's biographer, "Anne had long known that she was a poet, and in Fairfield she had found a kindred spirit: an intelligent young man from a similar background who was following an artistic vocation rather than a more conventional way of life."

Porter himself was somewhat more diffident. That fall, he embarked on a months-long trip to Italy to continue his art studies. He and Anne, however, corresponded regularly throughout his stay.

While in Florence, Porter met Arthur Giardelli, a handsome young Oxford student studying Italian. The two men became close friends and spent as much time together as they could, visiting churches and museums, and discussing poetry and art.

Based on his strong affections for the young man, Porter realized he was bisexual, even though, according to Giardelli, "there was no physical relationship" between the two men, "only a deep emotional attraction."

Twenty-six years later, in 1957, Porter wrote to Giardelli: "I hadn't such a friend as you at home; but suddenly I had one in Florence, the unattainable became simple. For that I am always grateful. These things count, I hope you know, and I hope what I say will not seem strange to you. I loved you, and I think you loved me."

Giardelli, who had long since married and fathered two children, responded: "Indeed, I have often thought of you, but I never analyzed our relationship and was quite surprised to read your analysis of it, which was no doubt correct. I suppose that was how things were--although I don't know: words seem to pin down an experience & yet the truth of the matter flutters off."

Porter returned to the United States in May 1932, and became engaged to Anne Channing. Shortly after their engagement, Porter told Anne about his bisexuality and his love for Giardelli. As Anne Channing Porter recalled years later, "He just told me that that was how it was, and we both lived with it."

The couple was married on September 22, 1932, at Anne's family residence, Little Pond, in Sherborn, Massachusetts. Although the marriage was not without its difficulties, compounded, in part, by Porter's bisexuality, the two remained together for over forty years, and had five children.

The Porters divided their time between their house in Southampton, New York, their summer home, designed by Porter's father, on the family-owned Great Spruce Head Island, off the coast of Maine, and a studio in New York City, where Porter mainly went alone to paint and to take part in the vibrant art scene.

Art and Art Criticism

Although he had been drawing and painting from an early age, Porter first gained recognition not as an artist, but as an art critic. During the 1950s and early 1960s, he wrote a regular art column for *The Nation*, as well as articles for more specialized periodicals such as *Art News*.

Several New York artists whose works Porter had championed in print and who had befriended him, such as Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, and Willem de Kooning, urged John Bernard Myers, director of the respected Tibor de Nagy Gallery, to exhibit Porter's paintings, and in 1952, at the age of forty-five, Porter had his first

one-man show.

Porter's contribution to American art, as Carol Strickland noted in *The New York Times*, was "to fuse the intimate domestic interiors of the French painter Vuillard--comfortable, cozy parlor scenes--with the vigorous brush stroke and broad paint handling of de Kooning."

During his lifetime, however, Porter's work was not widely appreciated. His representational style and subjects--landscapes, still lifes, and portraits--were in sharp contrast to Abstract Expressionism (epitomized perhaps by the "drip" technique of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning's distorted *Women* series of paintings), which then dominated the New York art scene.

As Hilton Kramer, the respected cultural commentator and chief art critic for *The New York Times*, observed years later, "Many mistook [Porter] for an old-fashioned painter, kind of reactionary. His paintings of posh places seemed too bourgeois."

"Porter was quite misunderstood," Robert Dash, the artist, recalled. "Critics saw his paintings of people on a lawn or bike riding, and they saw banality in it. They didn't look at the paintings hard enough."

It was not until the last decade of his life that Porter began to receive wider recognition and respect for his art. His reputation as a significant artist continued to grow after his death. Interviewed for *Newsweek* in 1983, the leading poet and critic, John Ashbery argued "for a new assessment of Porter as perhaps the major American artist of [the twentieth century]."

Porter and James Schuyler

Through his friendship with Rivers and Freilicher, Porter met Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler, the four core members of what has become known as the New York School of poetry.

Porter was intensely devoted to his friends and repeatedly included them in his portraits. He also wrote about them in his art essays, including the 1961 "Poets and Painters in Collaboration," one of the first serious assessments of the poets of the New York School.

His friendships even inspired Porter to take up poetry himself. For example, Porter celebrated his feelings about Ashbery in "The Young Man" (1952): "Young man with the narrow waist and thin / Arms, and heavy beautiful thighs of youth, / Whose green eyes under a foxy brush of / Fair hair regard me with insolent love."

It was with James Schuyler, however, that Porter maintained his closest friendship. The two men met in 1951 when Schuyler was 28 years old. Porter's interest in Schuyler, at first, appears to have been mainly platonic. Although there is little tangible evidence of their sexual relationship, in an interview with Porter's biographer, Anne Porter confirmed that at some point in her husband's friendship with Schuyler it briefly turned sexual.

Schuyler was manic-depressive and suffered from occasional psychotic fits. He was supported both emotionally and financially by the Porters, and after one particularly severe breakdown he went to live with the family, where he stayed, at both their home in Southampton and their summer house in Maine, from 1961 until about 1973.

This put an immense strain on the family, especially on Anne Porter, who once remarked "that Schuyler came to lunch one day and stayed for eleven years."

Porter's complicated feelings about Schuyler and his wife and children, may be indicated in one of his best-known works, *The Screen Porch* (1964). In the painting, Porter depicts Schuyler seated, reading a book, on a screened-in porch, with Porter's two daughters, Katherine and Elizabeth, standing close by, while Anne Porter stands outside looking in. As Justin Spring noted in his biography of Porter, "[T]he image is remarkable for the odd tension which seems to exist among the four subjects, and by extension, the painter, whose perspective is taken by the viewer."

Several of Schuyler's poems, especially "Southampton and New York" (1972), "The Island" (1972), and "The Morning of the Poem" (1980), are intimate meditations on the life Schuyler led with the Porters.

Ultimately, however, Schuyler's mental instability became too much for even the Porters, and he was asked to leave. He returned to New York City and lived a relatively reclusive life until his death in 1991.

Death and Posthumous Reputation

Porter died at the age of 68 on September 18, 1975, of a massive coronary, while walking his dog near his home in Southampton.

After his death over 230 of his works were donated to the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, while many other Porter paintings can be seen at such institutions as The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; the Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas; The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; and The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, among others.

Porter's art writings were collected and published in 1979 as *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism, 1935-1975*, with an introduction by the art critic Rackstraw Downes.

Hilton Kramer, in his review of the book for *The New York Times*, called Porter "one of the most important critics of his time," who produced "consistently sensitive and thoughtful writing on new art, and on the art of the recent past."

Porter's poems were published in 1985, with thirteen selected drawings as illustrations and an introduction by John Ashbery. A selection of his letters was published in 2005.

His paintings received their first major retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1983. The exhibition met with record-breaking attendance. The show reopened in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art the following year.

A second major exhibition, "Fairfield Porter: An American Painter," opened at the Parrish Art Museum in 1993. The show received a strong critical reception, and travelled throughout the U.S.

Art historian William C. Agee, the show's curator, noted in his catalog essay, "Porter led the way to show you can work figuratively in an age of abstraction and still be a viable artist. His work . . . is deep, complex, and rich."

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.