



To Italy and Back Again

William Congdon was once considered a significant player within the most important movement in American art of the first half of the twentieth century. His exile in Italy, however, left him forgotten on the other side of the Atlantic. In an effort to resurrect appreciation for his work, Crossroads Cultural Center in Washington, DC, hosted an event honoring his work at the famous Phillips Collection.

By Santiago Ramos

Action and Movement

The “New York School” of Action Painters of the first half of the twentieth century was the first truly international phenomenon in American art. The world that these Action Painters faced as mature artists was faster and, at least on a grand scale, more violent than the world of their forebears. These artists searched for a new method of painting which, as Jackson Pollock said, expressed, and not depicted, the reality they were living in. Among those involved, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Pollock himself were among the most famous; the movement also had its theorists, like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. The movement did not survive past the 1960s, however, once angst was replaced by irony and action was replaced by pop.

Isolated from this development, painting on his own far away from New York in Milan, Italy, William Congdon, once a notable member of the Action Painters, continued the tradition of expression in painting until his death in 1998. Congdon’s origins were atypical of the Action Painters: he came from an established New England “WASP” family, and he did not study at a major art school. But he was united with the majority in his experience of terrors of his century: an ambulance driver during World War II, he was among the first to enter the liberated Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In the 1940s, he was among the top-selling Action Painters. But after he fled New York for Europe in the 1950s—though not before *Time* magazine had written a story about him in 1951—and his conversion to the Catholic Church in 1959, he did not make any effort to become a protagonist in the American art scene.

Back in the Scene, Hopefully

His work, however, was preserved by a foundation started in Italy and bearing his name, the William Congdon Foundation, and his admirers continue to safeguard his legacy to this day. The Crossroads Cultural Center, which in the past has hosted events on artists as diverse as Grant Wood and Antoni Gaudí, in an effort to begin the work of rekindling interest in Congdon here in the United States, organized an event in conjunction with the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, which, open as a gallery for the public since 1921, started out as the private collection of Duncan Phillips, a far-sighted American art collector who was among the first to bring Modern Art to our shores.

The partnership between Crossroads and the Phillips was sparked by the fact that the Phillips’s collection contained, though not on display, two paintings by Congdon, purchased by the late

Duncan Phillips himself. Crossroads hoped that, by generating interest in Congdon, the two paintings—*Venice, 2 (Canal Boat)* and *Palaces, 2 (Venice)*—would eventually be returned to a permanent display for the public. Speaking at the event would be Fred Licht, art historian who has published studies on William Congdon and worked as a curator at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. Moderating the event would be Michael Patrick, a DC architect and Visiting Lecturer at the Catholic University of America School of Architecture.

Professor Licht's Analysis

On May 7, at 6:30 pm, at the Carriage House Studio within the Phillips Collection, Fred Licht spoke eloquently about the trajectory of Congdon's life and work for about an hour, to an audience that included Congdon's brother, Ted. Licht's initial focus was on Congdon's different stages in life: from Providence, Rhode Island, to Pennsylvania, to Europe and Northern Africa during World War II, to New York City, back to Europe—Paris, Venice, Milan—and, finally, to Cascinazza, Italy, where his bones rest today. "These transitions are essential and always mysterious," Licht remarked.

The event was titled, "William Congdon, An American Anomaly: To Italy and Back Again," and so Licht took some time to point out the ways in which Congdon was anomalous as a member of the Action Painters. For one, he came from an aristocratic family, or for what counts, or used to count, as American aristocracy: white, Anglo-Saxon, mainline Protestant (in Congdon's case, hailing from Puritan roots), and heir to a business fortune. Most other members of the New York School came from more humble beginnings and different ethnicities. Another difference was that Congdon was not educated in a prestigious art school, but rather by, as Licht puts it, "mediocre dilettantes" in smaller schools in New England and elsewhere, who nevertheless put enough into Congdon during his youth that he was able to pull even more out of himself in his maturity.

But most important to the development of Congdon's artistic growth, again, and surprisingly, according to Licht, was the painter's conversion to the Catholic Church in 1959. Licht, who is not himself a Christian, believes that the Church was, for Congdon, what resolved the "essential contradictions in the human condition," and opened up a new creative horizon for the artist (though, ironically, not at first—many admirers of Congdon either prefer his early or his late paintings, but no one thinks that his first post-conversion paintings, which are devotional and almost didactic in subject matter, are his best). Perhaps the full weight of ardor and suffering for the human person (refracted through war and the images of Bergen-Belsen, but also through estrangement with his family and Puritan past) that Congdon felt, along with the earth-shifting Meaning that he had just encountered, is encapsulated most beautifully and succinctly in the simple, dark *Crocefisso 90*, painted in 1974, a thick, violent splotch of black paint shaped like deflated balloon, and one of the paintings that Licht analyzed at length. "Black is the great challenge to every artist," he said. Indeed.

Home Sweet Home

The critic Algis Valiunas has argued, in an essay titled "The Spirit of the Abstract" which appeared in the journal *First Things* in January 2006, that the Action Painters were the last

American artists with “colossal spiritual ambition.” A shame it is, then, that such a unique member of this movement should be forgotten.

But it was Congdon’s desire to find a new way to live, given that all the old ways seemed completely falsified by the calamities of the two world wars, which led him away from his homeland. To a friend, he wrote: “Soil-less at home, I ground the root abroad, and a plant grows in Italy, in Greece, in India—wherever. America is all of these, and so I am.... In Europe I am constantly confronted with myself, not as a psychiatrist luxury but as a life and death reality... When life and death will be accepted with passion, not avoided, then we will be closer to life, and to art, and will not be afraid to die.” This attests to something John Updike would write within a decade of Congdon’s letter, that, in America, “we receive our supernatural mail on foreign shores.”

But things can’t, and shouldn’t, stay that way, and the colossal ambition of the Action Painters should not be forgotten. Even if Congdon’s pilgrimage did not lead him back to the country of his birth, it is fitting and right that his legacy should return in some way. It is good to see his two paintings adorning the walls of the Phillips, at least for a few days—enjoyed by his countrymen, as they should be.