

Nelson Sandgren (1917-2006)

By Roger Hull

Nelson Sandgren was a painter and printmaker who taught at Oregon State University for thirty-eight years, from 1948 until 1986. He exhibited his work in Oregon, Washington, and California while participating in a mid-century Willamette Valley cultural scene that included his faculty colleagues and others in a variety of creative fields.

Ernest Nelson Sandgren was born on December 17, 1917, in Dauphin, Manitoba, Canada, the son of Beulah and Samuel Sandgren. The family moved to Chicago and, when Nelson was in his teens, to Portland. He married Olive Palm, a Portland native, in 1941.

Sandgren attended Linfield College in McMinnville, where he played baseball, sang in a quartet, and met Bernard Geiser (1887-1965), an Episcopal priest and artist who instilled in Nelson the idea of art as a profoundly human endeavor. Geiser was to remain a life-long friend and mentor.

Transferring to the University of Oregon, Sandgren earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1943. After serving in the U.S. Army, he returned to the University of Oregon on the GI Bill to study with painters Jack Wilkinson, Andrew Vincent, and David McCosh. He completed his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1948 and then continued his studies at the University of Michoacan, Mexico, with the painter Alfredo Zalce. During the summer of 1953, he enrolled at the Chicago Institute of Design.

In 1948, Gordon Gilkey, chair of the art department at Oregon State College (now University), hired Sandgren to teach painting. He encouraged him to take up printmaking, as well. Inspired by the work of John Rock, his colleague on the faculty, Sandgren learned lithography and woodcut. His work falls into three broad categories: oil (and beginning in the 1960s, acrylic), watercolor, and printmaking. He retired from Oregon State University in 1986.

Sandgren spent painting sabbaticals in Europe and Mexico, where he played semi-pro baseball while studying there in 1953. His career at Oregon State coincided with a rich cultural era in Corvallis and the Willamette Valley. His art department colleagues Gilkey, Rock, Paul Gunn, Demetrios Jameson, and others were a supportive group committed to both teaching and personal professional development. Writer Bernard Malamud, on the faculty from 1949 until 1961, further enriched the creative climate at the school and became a close friend of the Sandgrens. Another long-term Corvallis associate was dancer Robert Irwin. Sandgren was also friends with Salem painter Carl Hall and Portland artists C.S. Price, Amanda Snyder, Louis Bunce, and Jack McLarty. His work was presented in two one-person shows (1952 and 1957) and several group exhibitions at the Portland Art Museum.

Like many of his artist contemporaries in Oregon, Sandgren blended modernist abstraction and color with an interest in Oregon landscape forms, especially of the Willamette Valley and the Oregon coast. He cited Marsden Hartley and John Marin as artists of interest to him on the broader American art scene. Sandgren's works include murals painted for the Lane County Courthouse (1959) and the Mahlon Sweet Airport (1989) in Eugene (his son, artist and educator Erik Sandgren, assisted with the airport murals).

Nelson Sandgren's works are also in the collections of the Portland Art Museum, the Coos Art Museum, the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Oregon State University, the University of Oregon, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and several corporations.

Sources

Allen, Ginny and Jody Kleivit. *Oregon Painters: The First Hundred Years (1859-1959)*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1999.

Saydack, Roger. "The Oregon Coast Watercolors of Nelson Sandgren." *The Art of Nelson Sandgren*. <http://nelsonsandgren.com/>.

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