

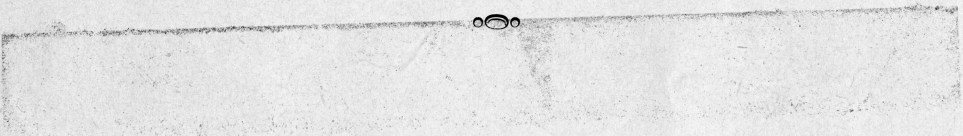
PAINTINGS

by

Vernon Hunter

Introduction

by Paul Horgan





Section of Mural "The Last Frontier"
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Introduction
by Paul Horgan



VERNON HUNTER GREW UP IN TEXICO, NEW Mexico, which is a little town on the very border of Texas. Long ago of course there was nothing there but vast flat lands, iron-red when the rain came and ran into mud; but most of the time, ochre yellow and wafted by distance into fading veils of color. Where the white sky met the earth, there was barely a line to make the horizon. When the railroad came, and when state and county lines were thought of and, being thought of, came to have influence over more visible facts, like the boundless plains, little clusters of buildings grew out of the town-idea. Those needs of habitation which can be seen and which endure weather created that combination of man and earth which, taken in its essence, stands for amenity; for environment. Some of the buildings were tall and narrow, made of rosy brick. Others were of wood, slats against the dazzling bars of plains light. Others were of waved iron ready to rust gorgeously under the swipes of the rain and the vast stand of the sunlight. Chief of useful graces that men brought were windmills, and ditches where water ran, and isolated trees that broke the pale yellow earthline at the sky.

The railroad went past, drawing from the distance toward the town and receding in another perspective that met at infinity, like the fact of vision and the fancy of imagination.

Nearby was a larger town, full of railroad shops and stores and newspaper office and cafés. (In the Southwest, the word is

always café; rarely restaurant.) That was Clovis, a crossroads of the great world.

A gifted youngster growing up in a place like that lived intimately with the big country, and knew without any doubt that on a spacious land the simplest forms of protection and cultivation for social life, and the life of the spirit, were things to be respected and nurtured. Evidently there was always allowance made at home for the talent of this painter, as in the littlest communities there is actually a kind of respect for such an exotic as someone with a talent. Slightly larger places feel that they have to conform more wholly to an urban misconception, and the difficulty of adjustment for extraordinary human material often drives it quite away from home.

Hunter left home, when the time came, with his images of life deeply affected by some grand simplicities: illimitable land; precious habitation there; sympathy for whatever feeling and delight in life is expressed by people in a lonely place, to whom the smallest diversion is dear. . . a street carnival, a revival meeting, a famous man passing through on the train which would pause for nine minutes at the water tower at dawn while the shaded windows of the private car could be looked at speculatively by those who know what man is like *here*, and who wonder what he is like *there*, where the tracks finally end in the turreted cities by the ocean. . .

Yes, the little human event on the tremendous plains made drama for anyone who lived to know it in its season.

Though I know the country I have been describing (as a means of becoming acquainted with this painter), I have learned much about it from looking at his paintings, which means that what he sees there has been truly put on the canvas. Men get along together by telling each other the news of what they have seen. Some go far afield for it. Others discover it in the back yard, and report the strange wonderful doings to those who live next door, but who don't happen to *see*. In all fine

painting there is news of life, and Hunter's version of it comes through in terms of the grand simplicities. His nature and his association with the Southwestern scene have combined to produce pictures in which the subject matter has been simplified almost to abstraction at times. But this strikes me not as an arbitrary paring down to a few symbols; rather it strikes me as a direct reflection of that early vision in his youth which daily looked out over flat land where distance itself, and the weathers conforming to the plains, made things *look* that way.

The advantage of this to Hunter's work is that almost from the beginning he was able to achieve that sense of the abstract which lies behind even the most factual of good pictures. This sense is present in all of his work, and the selective fancy in his kind of "news" makes of the subject matter often something exotic and startling, simply because the abstract and the pictorial come so very close to one another. In such a picture as that of the white hotel at Muleshoe, Texas, for instance the handling of the perspective, the horizon, the sky, the shadows cast by the great brash sunlight, illustrates what I mean. The design is as frankly abstract as that of a wooden block lighted from one source. But the pictorial news is perfectly laid over this pattern, and with the craft of color, and the memory of many days on the plains and many roads starting from *here* and vanishing just out of sight, *there*, where the white sky comes down, all the familiar news is given that turn of strangeness that helps to make it live once again as if for the first time.

And of course this is because of how Hunter sees all the familiar things he paints. He doesn't see them as quaint, or tortured, or dismal, as many painters of American trash-heaps do. He finds a kind of grave respectability in even the shabbiest windmill, or the remotest string of railroad cars on a mountain siding. He allows them their life, and adds to them the colorful pleasure of his imagination. He sees them all first as forms for design. But after he has a design, he does not kid it or

worm it up with furies more interesting in literature than in painting. There is a severity about his compositions and about his drawing that is saved from bleakness by his color. No range of color, or juxtaposition, could be implausible or disallowed to a painter whose first impressions of color came from the wanton play of light in the skies over the plains.

He paints with economy, rarely thickening his surfaces or wadding the pigment to make it perform some of the function of drawing. He draws scrupulously, with a kind of mildness that is far from weak. All his work has delicacy, and none more so than those interesting pictures that translate forms into *associative* images, such as the one in which the canvas barrier at the circus carnival is lifted by the wind into a vehicle for light and movement. It is in this function of dream-like plausibility that another characteristic of Hunter's style is frequently shown. . . the color, the light, the shape, of the real world: and the feeling, the memory, the oddness of the inner world where personal associations occur, and meanings come to life.

Now there is of course a whole canon of modern painting, with many little schisms of apostasy and zeal, that draws upon the world of the unconscious more deliberately than ever before in the study of art. The movement has achieved a certain chic, and it reflects legitimately in terms of art the attempt of modern man to bring the subconscious mind into the scheme of growth in life. In his studies and in his years of teaching in New York and Los Angeles, Hunter must have found corroboration for his own painter's nature in this psychological interest. But the material of his conscious world, his inheritance of the objects of sight in Texico, New Mexico, has retained the strongest power to release the delights of inner sight that so beautifully come to expression in his work.

So in his paintings we find a curious and interesting blend of the sophisticated and the folkish. The *treatment* could not be

more knowing and more honestly stylized. The *material* could not be more elementary, so to speak; the barest evidence of human concern upon endless land. I believe this to be proof of Vernon Hunter's genuineness and honesty as an artist. He uses *all* he has learned to celebrate the life he loves. After all, only two kinds of people get and appreciate the *simple* nature: those who know nothing else at all, or know any questions to ask; and those who know so much that they respect the humble and undiluted source of life because it answers the questions which a life of passion and trial has taught them how to ask.

Paul Horgan

Paintings

1922-1938

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| 1. Galisteo People | 24. Angel of Doom |
| 2. Penitente Night | 25. Virginia |
| 3. Trouble | 26. Flower Garden on
the Homestead |
| 4. Rain at Chimayo | 27. Workin' in Town |
| 5. Cyclamen | 28. Muleshoe Hotel |
| 6. Calla | 29. American Mural No. 1 |
| 7. Santa and Calla | 30. Sunday, after Dinner |
| 8. Girl and Red Lily | 31. Out-house |
| 9. Sleep | <i>loaned by Eleanor Bedell</i> |
| 10. Awakened | 32. Capulin Crater No. 1 |
| 11. Laguna | 33. Capulin Crater No. 2 |
| 12. Spring | 34. Railroad at San Felipe |
| 13. Morning | 35. After the Dust Storm,
Puerto de Luna Valley |
| 14. Pomegranite Blossom | <i>loaned by Paul Horgan</i> |
| <i>loaned by Raymond Jonson</i> | 36. Panhandle Town |
| 15. At the Sea | 37. Helen's Bouquet |
| 16. After the Contest | 38. Entre Act in the
Afternoon |
| 17. Barber Shop at the
Morning Star Hotel | 39. End of the Drought |
| 18. Bull Pasture | 40. Horse Chestnuts |
| <i>loaned by Josef G. Bakos</i> | 41. Black Tulip |
| 19. Cowboy at His Bath | 42. La Flor Exquisita |
| 20. Dahlias | 43. Flowers |
| 21. Rainbow at Evening | 44. American Mural No. 2 |
| 22. Watering Place | 45. Cotton Carnival |
| <i>loaned by Paul Horgan</i> | at Sundown, Roswell |
| 23. Horizontal Life | |