

Demuth Museum Video Transcript

Welcome to the Demuth Museum, the home and studio of Charles Demuth (or, as he jokingly referred to it, The Chateau). When you walk into the Demuth Museum, you're walking into the home that the Demuth family lived in for decades. On the first floor, there's a gallery that's dedicated to Charles Demuth and his artwork. You'll see some pieces of his throughout his lifetime. Those rotate—so sometimes there are watercolors. There might be a few of his oils, but mostly watercolors because works on paper is what he focused on.

Who was Charles Demuth? Charles is an American artist and aspiring writer, a poet. He was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania—the only child of Ferdinand and Augusta Demuth. Around the age of four, he developed a hip infirmity (treatment of which was six weeks in traction followed by a year of bed rest). So, to keep him occupied

at this time, he was given watercolors and drawing books. Around 1894 or 1895, he started taking art lessons with Martha Bowman and these are the earliest surviving drawings that we have of his.

When he was asked to provide a brief autobiography, Demuth responded, "I was born November 8th 1883, studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under William M. Chase and Thomas Ancheus. I went to Paris in 1907 for the first time and afterwards returned to it in 1912 and 1921, living there and in London during these visits—about four years in all. I have exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy and the Daniel Gallery in New York City. I think that is the limit of my knowledge about myself. I suppose you will reply, "Know thyself, young man."

Demuth has an almost Forrest-Gump-like quality of being in the right place at the right time. He was in Paris before the war, in Gertrude Stein's salon with Picasso and later

with Hemingway. He was in New York as a member of Alfred Stieglitz's circle as the early modernist movement is taking place and the Stieglitz group struggles with creating a market for modern art in America and, at the same time, defining an American style of art. He was close with Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Alfred Stieglitz. Georgia would visit him in Lancaster and the two would paint in his mother's garden.

I'm referring to him as "Demuth" here in Lancaster because that's the way it was pronounced in the town. Charles, however, preferred "Dee-muth." In fact, some of his nicknames were "Deem" and "Deem-O." But, the family here in Lancaster was definitely the Demuths.

Demuth had a charming wit that people greatly enjoyed. Marsden Hartley talks about it in the essay "Farewell Charles" when he talks about the first time that he met Charles. Marsden Hartley and his friends were having lunch in Paris one day and Charles comes up, asks if he could

join them. Hartley then writes that “Charles soon made us particularly aware of him by a quaint, incisive sort of wit that was ultra-sophisticated with a post-1890s touch to it. Immediately, there was much banter afloat. And at the end of the meal, I recall telling Charles, “I think you should come and sit with us all the time.””

The hip infirmity—probably Perthes—did not hold Demuth back and he was known to dance, swim, hike, and play golf before the onset of diabetes in 1920. Demuth was fortunate that his patron, Dr. Albert C. Barnes referred him to Dr. Frederick Allen in Moorestown, New Jersey. He was at the psychiatric institute as a diabetic patient as they begin to use insulin to treat diabetes. This treatment prolonged his life by a decade and allowed him to complete many of his most famous paintings—paintings that founded the Precisionist movement, helped to define an American style of art—which would inspire abstract expressionism and the Pop Art movement.

Major retrospectives after Demuth's death really helped to spread his fame beyond just the collectors who knew him during his lifetime. He was a very versatile artist, but in some ways, that makes him harder to place in art history. He's incorporating traditional American Folk Art that he saw in the artwork of his great aunts and grandmother as well as the modern art principles from Europe. So, you have his still lifes that capture the essence of Cézanne, the figurative works and book illustrations that capture the influence of Toulouse-Lautrec. You have the Precisionist paintings that incorporate the cubist ideas of Picasso and Gleizes. And then you have the poster portraits.

I would say his poster portraits are pretty important just because it was a new take on how to convey a person and not an actual visual representation of their likeness, but more of a concept of things that represent them. And it's that fusion of abstract portraiture and graphic design that goes on to influence the Pop Art movement—Andy Warhol's soup cans and then the work of Robert Indiana who

incorporated The Figure Five in Gold in many of his artworks. On hearing the hallowed Metropolitan Museum has purchased one of his paintings, Demuth wrote, “must one, now I wonder, feel old mastery...ha...I hope not!”

To him, everything was an artistic choice—from the clothes you wore to the food you ate, how you walked, how you talked. Everything was an artistic expression. One of the things that he wrote about—everyone’s talking about, “let’s start a theater...let’s start a magazine.” Nobody says, “Let us create a moment.” And Demuth’s talked about moments a lot. When you experience something, it kind of pulls back the veil and, for a brief moment, you catch a glimpse of the infinite—your moment of purest happiness and of your greatest understanding. And how it’s the artists’ job to experience these moments and then to put them down either in writing or in a painting or in a sculpture. And this is something that Demuth spent his life struggling to try and not only experience as many moments as possible, but to create works of art that capture these moments.

He passed away on October 23, 1935 in his bedroom on the second floor of the Demuth home. He was two weeks shy of his 52nd birthday. Demuth was very reluctant to talk about his paintings, especially the deeper meanings or hidden truths. Instead, Demuth urged people to just spend time looking at paintings. "Paintings must be looked at and looked at. They, I think the good ones, like it. "Look at that!" is all that can be said before a great painting—at least by those who really see it."