

HANS HOFMANN

American, b. Germany, 1880–1966

Fragrance, 1956

Oil on canvas; 60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm.)

Purchase, 1968 (3529.1)



Hans Hofmann was born in Weissenberg, Germany, and studied art in Munich and later in Paris. In 1915 Hofmann founded his first art school in Munich, and in the early 1930s he taught at the University of California, Berkeley. By 1932 he had settled permanently in America, and in 1934 he opened the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in New York. A theoretician, teacher, and painter, Hofmann went on to become one of the leading proponents of American abstract art, especially abstract expressionism.

Nature was the starting point for Hofmann's creative ideas. His paintings are interpretations of sensations and objects experienced in nature, three-dimensional reality transformed into two-dimensional patterns of high-keyed colors. *Fragrance* was painted in 1956, a time when the artist was working out a method of applying rectangularly shaped dabs of paint in heavy impasto. Bright blues, reds, oranges, and yellows seem drawn, as if by a magnet, to the center of the canvas, each interacting to create an explosive surface vitality. This vitality is reinforced by the illusion of advancing and receding planes, brought about by the properties of the colors and the shape, size, and placement of the brushstrokes. RAD

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American, b. Weissenberg, Bavaria, 1880;
d. New York, NY, 1966

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Conservation treatment supported by
Mark Olival in honor of his nephew,
Mala'e Lowell Olival-Heffelfinger, 1998

A theoretician, teacher, and painter, Hofmann was one of the leading proponents of American abstract art, especially Abstract Expressionism. Having built his reputation in Europe, Hofmann travelled to America to teach at UC Berkeley during the summers of 1930 and 1931; soon after, he relocated to New York City where he taught at the Art Students League before opening his own art school in 1933. Nature was the starting point for Hofmann's creative ideas. His paintings are interpretations of sensations and objects experienced in nature, three-dimensional reality transformed into two-dimensional patterns of high-keyed colors.

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Fragrance (#3529.1)
Purchase, 1968
Oil on canvas

HANS HOFMANN
United States
1956
Gallery 28

ARTIST: Hans Hofmann (1880-1966). Born Weissenburg, Germany. Influenced by German Expressionism, Fauvism and Cubism. Lived and studied in Paris, 1904-1914. Opened art school in Munich in 1915. 1932-33 moved to US. Through art school he opens in New York in 1933 becomes major influence on Abstract Expressionism. Both paints and teaches until 1958, and from then on devotes full time to painting.

SUBJECT/APPROACH: To Hofmann, "...dynamism, the constant flow and counterflow of forces, is the world's elemental reality." Not necessarily seen, this elemental or "super-reality" (Hofmann's term). (He also calls it "spiritual reality") can nevertheless "be intuitively sensed by the empathetic observer." Hofmann's paintings aim to "express" it through their "plasticity," which he defines as "the transference of three-dimensional experience to two dimensions. A work of art is plastic when its pictorial message is integrated with the picture plane and when nature is embodied in terms of the qualities of the expression medium." (Search for the Real, 72.)

Hofmann's "expression medium" is high keyed, saturated color. Its quality that "when pitted against each other, such high-keyed colors can be sensed to attract or reject each other in any number of directions across the surface, as well as to push out from the surface or recede into depth. The "picture plane" is thus structured as a dynamic field of forces released through the interaction of

colors." Hofmann counterbalances these color effects intuitively but with a guiding intelligence (he is both painter and theoretician), gives them "added force through the textured physicality of his paint." As a result, Hofmann's paintings often exude not only life, but a fierce joy.

INSTRUCTIONAL AIDS:

- Can you feel any energy in this painting? Does it flow in any particular direction? Whence does it arise?
- What kind of colors are used? Do they have a strong presence, or are they barely there? What allows you to almost 'feel' the colors? Are they the same throughout the painting? What effect does their different appearance in different areas have?
- Could you easily remove the brighter central portion of the painting from the rest? Why not? Could you easily remove a single color, such as all the red, from the painting? Why not?
- Imagine yourself one of the colors in the painting. Now position for room in the densely packed crowd of other "colors." How do you think the movement of everyone taken together looks to an observer? Going in one particular direction, or in and out and across in all directions, so it just looks like movement in general? Like plain all-over liveliness?
- Now if one of you, as a color, were outside the painting and had to walk in and find a position, would it be easy? Could you walk in deeply? Could you sidle in and adjust yourself? Would your elbowing for room affect the other colors? Would they have to move in some way or another? Might there be a pushing and pulling and bumping? Would it be very soft and cloudlike, or robust, and felt in unexpected places?
- (From this you might talk about the painter feeling that every color has a strong effect on its neighbor, and that the totality of such effects brings about a vital surface -- which reminds him of the general vitality of life as a whole.)