Joseph Hirsch 1910-1981

Hirsch was awarded a four-year scholarship to the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art when he was 17. He studied with George Luks in New York and later with Henry Hensche in Provincetown. When he was only 23, he won the coveted Walter Lippincott Award at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Hirsch followed this award with the prestigious Woolley Fellowship giving him a year of study in Paris.

At the 1939 New York World’s Fair, by public ballot, he was awarded first choice for the best painting. In 1949, he also received a Fulbright Fellowship. As a pictorial war correspondent during World War II, Hirsch made about seventy-five paintings and drawings between 1943 and 1944 in the South Pacific, Africa, and Italy.

Hirsch’s murals decorated several Philadelphia public buildings. They depicted “Football,” “Early Unionism,” and “Adoption.” His works are included in the permanent collections of over 30 museums including the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Corcoran Gallery, the Addison Gallery, the Butler Institute, and over 25 others. AskArt lists 81 book references, many with illustrations.

The Columbus Museum in Georgia provided this commentary: “As a social realist and humanist, Hirsch frequently portrayed heroic images of ordinary people doing everyday tasks. For Hirsch, all paintings were a celebration of life and everything within the realm of living circumstance was a font of inspiration of almost equal measure.(1) He noted in a 1970 interview, ‘usually know where they come from when I think about it. I don’t care where they come from … On one of the streetcars in Philadelphia I was coming home late at night and saw one tired passenger whose hand was draped over the front seat… I mention these merely because I happen to remember these things. I’ve never painted anything that I’ve seen that I can remember. I’ve seen things, which have led to paintings.’

“Despite the fact that Hirsch refused to abandon representational painting in an era that embraced abstract painting more readily, he was admired widely for his work. In a 1976 exhibition catalogue at Kennedy Galleries, the author defended this stance by stating, ‘These (paintings) are powerful achievements of a powerful artist who has the courage to go his own way.’ The artist’s predilection for working with images of the world he inhabits can be summed up with this quote: “People bring so much to pictures. And I’m very dependent upon what people bring. They bring up stuff that I would never have -- there’s so much there that a painter or writer never dreams of that is there.’”