

Proposal for a Sabbatical Leave / David McCosh

“My project which I hope to be able to do someday, in any case, is simply to remain where I am and try to paint the material around me.

I have been living and teaching in Eugene, Oregon for 18 years. During that time I have produced many paintings but always on the interrupted and semi-occasional basis that a teaching schedule and its interests allow. In 1949-50 I had a Sabbatical Leave which was spent in two localities – Gray’s Harbor, Washington and in Mexico. The approach that developed out of necessity in both cases brought me closer to what I would like to be able to do with paintings and gave me some broad convictions about the significance of painting which I am anxious to put to a test here in Oregon. An extended and uninterrupted period of times seems to be necessary.

The validity of a painting as I have come to think of it, rests on its roots in experience. Perhaps the most significant painting is that which is motivated by concepts of visual reality. For myself, concepts come only after intensive searching and uninhibited observation.

I would like to feel that not only is the meaning of a painting of mine clear but that it furthermore could be stated unambiguously in words.

Both at the beach in Washington, and in the desert highlands of Mexico, I started with drawings and paintings in oil and watercolor which were as faithful to the observed material as I could make them. In both cases, I chose what seemed to me to be most characteristic elements and conditions in that they combined many qualities that seemed to me meaningful and expressible. Also the material suggested no other paintings to me.

Gradually the concept of what I wanted to do clarified and I think my painting statements did too. Some of the paintings are quite frankly a statement of the appearance of a situation, while at the other extreme are some that are apparently without recognizable subject matter. Actually, this is a deception since I have to make an effort to remember whether a particular painting was done on the spot or from drawings and remembered sensations. The more the concept of the total character became clear to me the more the form of the painting became a result. Still I think it is true that while the work varies in many respects, including the way the paint is applied, the series from the coast are unified and distinct from the Mexican series.

A penetrating observer is the same person whether he is observing a painting or nature, and the quality of his observation does not change. It was a pleasant, and new, experience for me to have persons whose interest in painting was slight, respond to the meaning of the painting even though they still asked “what is it” in some cases. They didn’t ask “Why did you paint it” which, to me, is a far more important question and one that the painting itself should answer.

It was also rewarding to realize that I had gotten away from the deadly attitude which attempts to supply something interesting to others and in place was trying to deal with something that sincerely interested me. It is my conviction that even though the sincere interest is focused on a

modest personal discovery, the resulting statement will have a fascination for others in spite of incompleteness and groping handling.

What I propose to do is to pursue the character of this section of Western Oregon in the same fashion. Just what exact subject matter would be concentrated on will be discovered as the experience progresses. I am sure that I do not want to make it up. Whether it produces regional painting in the sense of having some subject matter trade-mark or being freakishly different is immaterial. Painting that I admire is always regional in a broad sense and autobiographical as well. Rather than try to escape reality I would like to try to face it and let the consequences be determined by the experience.

The significance of my project rests on an affirmation of faith – that reality cannot be invented – that emotions must be genuine and that honest painting holds a unique position which no other activity or form can replace.”

David McCosh, 1953, draft of a statement proposing a sabbatical leave from teaching duties at the University of Oregon.

It is not clear whether this draft was ever completed and the proposal submitted to the University. McCosh did not have a second sabbatical until 1958-59, which he used for travel and painting in Europe. He never did take a year off from teaching to simply paint in Oregon, as he proposed here.