

David McCosh: Learning to Paint is Learning to See

Curated by Roger Saydack

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David McCosh (1903 – 1981) lived through times when painting in America was changing rapidly and dramatically. Modernism, social realism, expressionism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, minimalism and pop art all had their day during his career. Many painters who were active during these years changed with the times. McCosh did not.

The purpose of his painting remained constant during all the turmoil going on around him. For McCosh, painting was about learning how to see what was distinct and special about his subject. And his voice as a painter and the look and feel of his art always flowed from this simple yet profound premise.

This exhibition shows how McCosh used painting to learn how to see in three fundamental ways during his career.

- During his early years, David's goal was to find the distinctive character of his subject through careful and thorough observation.
- Beginning in the 1940s his paintings became demonstrations of his process of observation. **How** he saw was their point, not just **what** he saw.
- Then, toward the end of his career – painting for McCosh became a means of discovering the essence of his subject.

We'll start with character. McCosh always believed that the distinctive character of a subject

was what remained after you eliminated all the generalities, all the non-essential detail, all the trivia - everything that made a tree look like every other tree. His focus instead was on what made this one tree unique, special and worth painting.



For Anne, c. 1930, Watercolor on Paper, 9 x 13 1/4 inches (image), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.0492b

In 1930, when McCosh was in his 20s and just beginning to find his voice as a painter he received a Tiffany Fellowship to spend the summer painting in Oyster Bay on Long Island. He began a romance there with a talented young painter, Anne Kutka. His first gift to her was this tender painting of a gentle sunset on Oyster Bay which carries the character that place had for him as well as his inscription: "To Anne from David J. McCosh."



In the late 1920s and early 30s when he was a student and then a teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago, his focus was the people of that big, bustling city. He often made drawings, prints, or watercolors during this period that create a short story, a vignette. This drawing involves a man, a young woman and the situation they find themselves in at the dinner table. McCosh shows us with a few well turned lines what their conversation was all about.

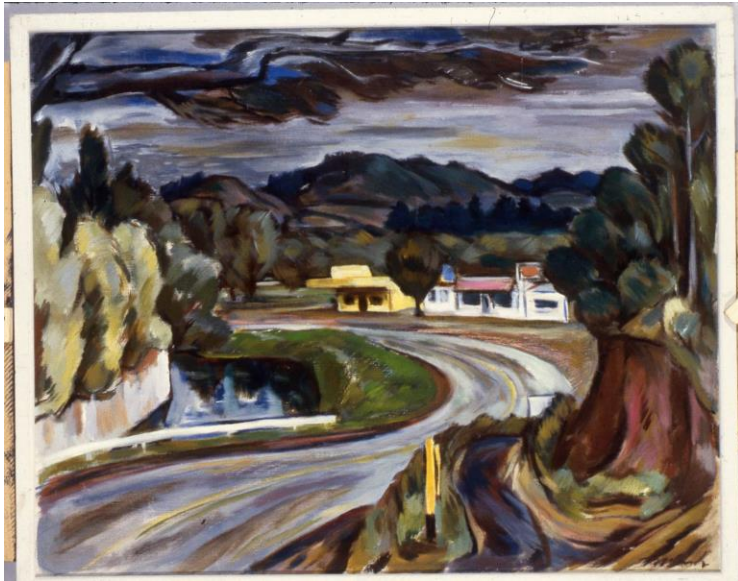
Untitled (Man and Woman in Restaurant), 1930s, Ink on Paper, 8 x 11 inches (image), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.0588



In 1934, David and Anne, now his wife, arrived in Eugene where he was to teach at the University of Oregon and paint until he retired in the 1970s. And we see him learning the landscape by painting with the eyes of a newcomer. *Farmhouse on the Millrace* has all the freshness and vibrancy of his first Spring in Eugene.

Farmhouse on Millrace (Millrace with Horses), 1934, Oil on Linen, 21 1/4 x 25 3/8 (framed), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.035

Judkins Point shows us Franklin Boulevard heading out towards Springfield and the Coburg Hills back in the days before the I-5 South entrance which now rounds the massive rock formation of the Point. It's a moody, late-summer day, with the threat of rain in the air. It's just a bend in



the road, a 'drive by' scene that's easy to take for granted when you live here. But McCosh sees deep, rich colors, dark, roiling clouds, and a winding old-time road with a few perfectly placed stores that's heading out of the city and into a day in the countryside.

Judkin's Point, c. 1935, Oil on Linen, 25 1/8 x 31 1/4, (framed), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.0135

This is accomplished, impressive work but McCosh also had an analytical interest in painting that he wanted to develop. So in the 1940s we see McCosh adopting his second approach to using painting as a way of learning how to see. He began to make paintings and drawings that focused on how he saw his subject.

This was an idea that came from Paul Cezanne (1839 – 1906), who was a source of much of 20th century modernist painting. Cezanne began a drawing or a painting by challenging himself to demonstrate "how I know" my subject, not just "what I know" about the subject.

So McCosh began to pay more attention to how he actually observed his subject. What caught his attention, how did his eye move around and through the scene, what made it linger, when did it speed along. This information gave him what he needed to demonstrate in his painting how he experienced, how he came to know, how he saw his subject.

This is a scene along the Mill Race in Eugene. He loved the mixture of rough and tumble nature in the city, gritty industrial sites and elegant little bridges the Mill Race provided. He's simplified

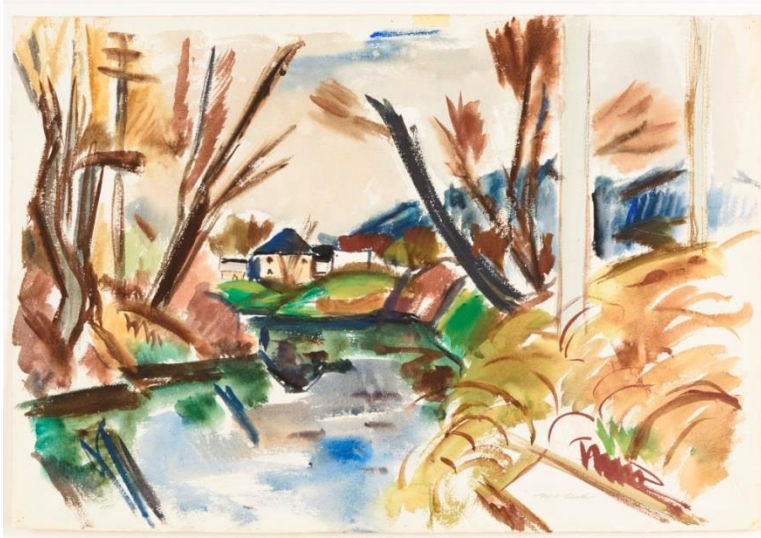


this scene by eliminating textures, colors, and the details of vegetation so he could focus on the structural components. We see the stream wandering off into the distance, the strong, irregular diagonals of tree trunks - some standing tall, others collapsing slowly into the stream bed.

Millrace, 1940s, Conte Crayon and Ink on Paper, 12 1/3 x 16 inches (paper), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.0211

This is the same scene but he's laying in color now which adds sensuality and motion. Look at how the brown land mass in the foreground on the right slows down the eye. The greens of the vegetation on the bank next to the stream make our eye move quickly off into the distance, just as his eye must have moved as he studied the scene. The dark black diagonals of the tree trunks become dramatic stopping points. Even the air seems to have the heavy, slightly sour smell of still water. McCosh has made an engaging painting out of a scene that most people wouldn't

look at twice.



His views and scenes of Eugene from this period look so familiar to those of us who live here that we tend take them for granted. The reason they look so familiar is that McCosh has captured the character of this little part of Oregon perfectly – and that's what we recognize.

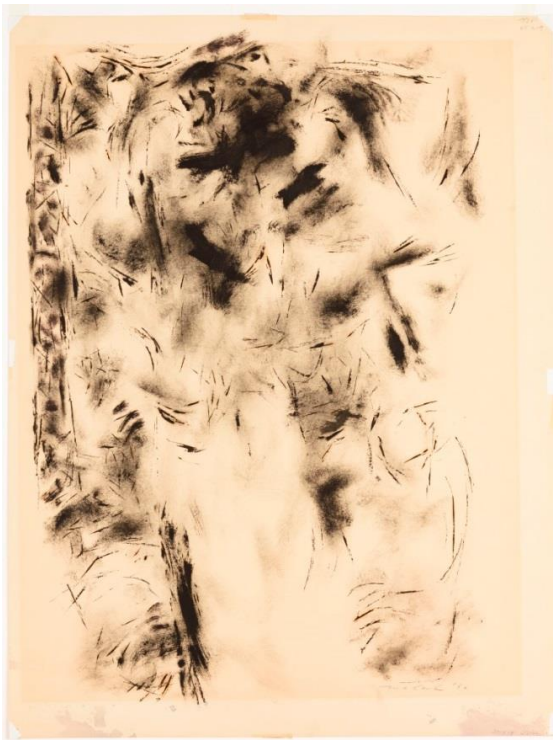
Millrace Bend II, c. 1940s, Watercolor on Paper, 15 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches (paper), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.0219

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, McCosh's painting technique became even more immediate and direct. He began to paint more quickly sometimes with colors straight out of the tube spread with sticks he found on the site. His technique changed to reflect his increasing emphasis on demonstrating how he saw his subject. He also began to develop methods for depicting the complex spatial relationships he saw in the natural vegetation of our forests and the multitude of colors of light and shade that filtered through the dense canopies of the trees.



McCosh, David, Tree, c. 1960, 35mm slide, McCosh Memorial Archive.

To help us see how his painting reflected how he saw his subject I'm going to mix in a few photos that McCosh took in the 1950s and 1960s because they show us the type of landscape situation that he was drawn to. He was a Sunday photographer at best so he had all the problems with exposures and the like that were common in the days before digital photography. His photos should be seen as visual notes, no more. He didn't make paintings or drawings from them. But when we compare them with his paintings of comparable scenes we can see how different what he saw was from what his camera saw.



One other thing about McCosh's photos – everything in them is important – the shadows, the moss, the tangles of underbrush, the colors of the bark, the sky peeking through the branches. He snapped the shutter only after he framed something that intrigued him.

Here's a work from 1953 of the same type of scene we see in the photo of the tree - a forest scene that includes some close-up views of trees. There's a large trunk in the middle leaning to the left. Another is on the far left side with its bark patterns illuminated by the sun. The dark, indistinct areas around the large trunk resemble boughs of needles, branches, and hanging moss, clustered about.

Forest Stream, 1956, Oil on Paper, 27 3/8 x 29 5/8 inches (paper), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.1235

This painting of how he saw, how he experienced this scene seems more visceral, more real than his photo which includes so much more detail.



Here's a photo of a stand of trees in the woods with some complex underbrush in the foreground that includes what looks like rhododendron bushes in bloom.

McCosh, David, Forest Scene, c. 1960, 35mm slide, McCosh Memorial Archive.



This is a painting that involves a similar scene. Strong verticals represent the trees. Swirls and dark masses indicate layers of vines and vegetation, and spots of white paint might depict rhododendron blossoms. We see his eye moving with great energy and emotional excitement – but always looking, searching, never just glancing about and missing what's there.

Woods, 1953, Oil on Paper, 20 3/4 x 27 3/4 (paper), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.1237

This work gives us a good opportunity to study how the new vocabulary he is developing of forms, lines and other devices shows us how McCosh sees this complex space. His intention was not to make this scene appear abstract and non-representational, quite the contrary. The forest space in this painting is more real to McCosh than a photograph or a painting that looks

like a photograph because his painting deals directly with how he actually experienced the forest scene.

The work in the exhibition now moves into the late 1950s. We are with McCosh on a sabbatical trip to Spain and France. The work from that trip will show how the concept of painting as a way of learning to see applies to his discovery of these new and different landscapes.



We're on top of a hill near Vence in France - looking at a knurly, twisting tree staggering its way up into the sky next to a fine old villa. The natural is contrasted with the man-made – both reaching into the sky. The wrought iron balcony rail reflects the bends of the tree. He could have been distracted by so much in this scene – the texture of the walls of the building, the shadows on the tree. But he focused instead on the fundamentals his eye was attracted to and a drawing of real clarity resulted.

Olive Tree and Balcony, 1958, Ink on Paper, 12 x 9 3/8

inches (paper), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC-0380



Now we are in front of one of the buildings in the village. What a difference the colors he has added make. It's a cloudy day. The leaves on the olive trees are a dark blue green in that light, the clouds are purple violet with some green. The varied colors on the ground suggest it may have rained recently. The air feels wet and humid – we're not far from the Mediterranean.

Rocky Peak – Vence, 1958, Watercolor on Paper, 11 5/8 x 15 3/4 inches (image), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC-0349

Imagine if we were looking at a photograph of this scene. It would give much specific detail but not nearly as much information as this watercolor gives us about the day and the feeling of the place.



We've moved up close to an olive tree in front of one of the buildings. McCosh uses patches of color to indicate shade and moss and spots of sunlight that creep through the leaves and reflect off the trunk. We look through the shadow of the tree towards a building – its whitewashed walls and roof dimly lit in the hazy light.

Again, the drawing creates an experience of the place that goes beyond simply describing the appearance of the trees and the building.

Olive Tree, Vence, 1958, Watercolor on Paper, 13 ¾ x 10 7/8 inches (paper), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC.0450



We're back in Oregon now– in our own backyard – the forests around the McKenzie River and Horse Creek – in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This is a spot along the McKenzie River. The stream runs around and over the boulders – mottled sunlight and shade –moss and the lush vegetation on the rock wall along the far bank.

McCosh, David, Forest Stream, c. 1960, 35 mm slide, McCosh Memorial Archive



And now a painting of a similar stream with sunlight dancing in the air. Notice how the patches of color are not tied to the rocks, the vegetation or the areas of water all of which are loosely defined by lines. The color patches are acting like natural light reflecting off the physical components of the scene

Fall Creek, 1964, Watercolor on Paper, 19 x 22 inches, McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC-0906

- the rocks, the water, the vegetation. They inhabit and color the air. McCosh is recreating his experience of the forest stream, not just giving us a report of its appearance.

Here's one final photo – a classic woodland scene – rich with verticals and diagonals – clumps of vegetation and flowers – and bright areas of sky.



McCosh, David, Forest Scene, c. 1960, 35 mm slide, McCosh Memorial Archive



Here is an especially vivid and elegant painting that shows how interrelated and engaging his forest imagery has become.

McCosh has arrived at his third approach to painting as a way of seeing, knowing and understanding. His work is now more than a record of his discovery of the character of the scene. It's more than a demonstration of how he observed landscape situations.

Tangle, 1960, Casein on Cardboard, 36 x 40 inches (framed), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC-0132

He is using painting and drawing to create meaning as poetry and music does. Not with a literal description of the world, but through the creation of a work of art that states the essence of his experience in a form we all can share.



And what is that essence? Is it the complexity of the tangled webs of vegetation and their deep and involved spaces? Perhaps. But the late works also show us that there is a pattern, a structure that brings order and life to the complexity we see.

Garden Study I, c. 1960s, Charcoal on Paper, 14 x 18 inches (image), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC-0292

These works are the experiences of an individual who discovered through painting something that goes beyond what he was able to observe. McCosh is not often thought of as a spiritual painter whose work reflects or participates in ideas that transcend painting itself. But his late work in particular has a spiritual dimension that results from his discovery of order, structure, and simplicity in complex and chaotic environments.



Garden Study III, c. 1960s, Charcoal on Paper, 133/4 x 18 inches (image), McCosh Memorial Collection; MMC-0294b

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