

Robert Cole Caples: Nevada Artist Collection CAE0101

Introduction/Abstract

The Robert Cole Caples archive consists of materials donated to the Nevada Museum of Art by the estate of Rosemary Caples in 2001. Materials include letters, photographs, manuscripts, drawings, negatives, correspondence, and notes.

Biographical Note: Robert Cole Caples

Robert Cole Caples arrived in Reno at the age of sixteen in 1924. His earliest impressions of Nevada brought about an elevated awareness and sensitivity to line, form, light and shadow. He learned to “look with awareness” as a way to create paintings and drawings that expressed “things felt.” Caples lived in several towns and cities during his nearly 35-year stay in Nevada, but the countryside around Reno and Pyramid Lake most captivated his interest. His frequent trips to Pyramid Lake brought him in contact with members of the local Paiute Indian population, an experience that strongly influenced Caples’ personal philosophy and much of his life’s work.

Caples set up his first studio at Reno’s Masonic Building in 1928, then a second at the Clay-Peters Building in 1929 after returning from a brief session at the Santa Barbara Community Arts School. For a short time he specialized in charcoal portraiture, but in 1932 gave up commission work to take up the study of Indians he met in his wanderings. As an employee of the Federal Arts Project, he produced charcoal sketches of Nevada’s Indian people that are among his finest works. A collection of these drawings published in two portfolios by the University of Nevada Press during the 1970’s quickly sold out. During the 1930’s, Caples used a Washoe Indian legend as the basis for a mural housed in the Washoe County Courthouse in Reno. Following his involvement in the Federal Arts Project, Caples entered a new phase of work characterized by constant experimentation with new materials, techniques and artistic implements.

During the 1940’s and 50’s Caples produced haunting landscapes which conveyed the powerful influence of Nevada’s environment on the artist and his work. In his Dayton studio, behind the house he affectionately called “Lizard Hall,” Caples surrounded himself with notes and reminders to maintain a direction in his work that the heart understood, but the head struggled to recognize and express: “emergence – image should be ‘submerged’ in background, floating to the surface of picture plane in patterned emphasis...background = rectilinear solid, think of forms as frozen in block of ice – illuminated by transverse light.” Caples was determined to portray not just landscape, but landscape that was the very essence of landscape.

In 1964 the Church Fine Arts Building at the University of Nevada, Reno was the locale for the Robert Cole Caples retrospective exhibition (1927 – 1963), an event featuring some 50 works created by Caples during the years he resided in Nevada. The exhibition’s catalog includes an introductory essay by Walter Van Tilburg Clark, which represents the seminal description of Robert Caples’ life, personal philosophy and evolution of his art. In describing Nevada’s landscape and its lifetime effect on Caples, Clark stated: “It takes a long time to recognize such gradual, indefinable changes...and an even longer time to realize that they have any bearing upon one’s own activity.” The work Caples produced in Nevada exemplifies how fully the connection had been made. Reflecting back on his days in Nevada, Caples stated in 1964: “What mattered most at all times everywhere? The desert. Pyramid Lake country and the hills around Reno.”

While mainly known for his landscapes and portraits, Robert Caples also wrote and illustrated the book *The Potter and His Children – A Stone Age Fable*. The concept of the book haunted Caples for many years and by the mid-1960’s consumed all of his creative energies. Following the book’s publication in 1971, Caples soon discovered that readers and reviewers responded very favorably to his illustrations, but much less

enthusiastically to the story. Working up to the last months of his life, Caples steadfastly attempted to promote the book but encountered rejection and a growing sense of dismay.

Aside from the early 1960's when Caples produced a series of images resembling stars and galaxies, Caples' detachment from Nevada seemed to dampen his inspiration to paint. Several loads of sand trucked to his farm in Connecticut were not enough to recreate the awe-inspiring atmosphere that possessed him when he lived and painted in the desert. He died on 17 November, 1979 in the Connecticut house he called "Turtle Hill."

Scope and Content

The Robert Cole Caples Archive consists of materials donated to the Nevada Museum of Art by the estate of Rosemary Caples in 2001. The collection spans a significant period of the artist's life beginning in the 1920's when Caples first arrived in Reno, through the 1960's and 70's in Connecticut where he spent the final years of his life after leaving Nevada in 1958. Noteworthy materials include manuscripts, drawings, and letters associated with the book written and illustrated by Caples titled "The Potter and His Children, A Stone Age Fable," published in 1971. The Archive constitutes a unique and comprehensive visual record of the artist's work as seen in photographs, negatives, newspaper articles and material from his studio. Correspondence and studio notes offer significant insights into Caples' creative influences and philosophy, as well as personal reflections on his own life, artistic struggles and achievements.

This archive is currently in process.