



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Between Art, Craft, and Design: Henry Varnum Poor and the Making of a Modern American Artist

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This dissertation examines the interrelationship between the arts in the first half of the last century in America through the creative activity of Henry Varnum Poor (1887–1970). Like a handful of other fine artists of his time, Poor engaged in the making of “decorative” or “applied” arts. He made furniture, designed houses and interiors, created murals in tile and fresco for public and private spaces, and produced graphic illustrations and designs for carpets. As one of the first studio potters in this country, his achievements presaged the Studio Pottery Movement. In the late twenties, he participated in staged exhibitions of modern domestic interiors in New York and other cities. Poor also created frescoes for Federal office buildings in Washington, D.C., among other public projects. His own studio and residence (Crow House) acted as a catalyst for his involvement in the decorative arts, from which he engaged in other commissions and expanded on his ideas of domesticity, decoration, and art.

Despite this abundance of creative activity, the significance of Poor’s overall contribution and the richness of this period in American art remain obscure. This situation results partly from the later twentieth-century art historical preponderance for classification, and hence division, of the arts. I argue that through his multi-faceted involvement in the arts, Poor played a role in the redefinition of craft as art and that his use of craft gave rise to an expression of domesticity that was effectively modern. By taking a broader look at Poor’s activities, particularly between the wars, within the context of the artistic climate at home and abroad, I will form a more nuanced understanding of Poor’s embracing of craft as an art form and the richness of this period in American visual and material culture.