

Pleissner, Ogden Minton (1905-1983)

Vezein, 1933

signed "Pleissner" lower right

oil on canvas

29 1/2" x 27 3/8"

A Master Paints His Mentor

Vezein is a poignant tribute to Ogden Pleissner's mentor, the artist Charles Vezein (1858-1942). A rare and brilliant example of Pleissner's draftsmanship and sensitivity to the figure – Vezein's hunched concentration, the scattering of canvases, the Manhattan harbor visible through the window painted more in Vezein's style than Pleissner's own – all transcend the details of representation to capture the soul of the subject. Compositionally complex and expertly conceived, the confident brushwork and dazzling rendition of natural light create an engaging painting, one that supersedes the portrait label and becomes instead a landscape view of an artist's process. Executed alongside Pleissner's other Brooklyn scenes from this period, most notably *Brooklyn Heights*, *Vezein* stands out as a true masterpiece of American art.

Born into an upper middle class German-American family from Brooklyn, New York, Pleissner's parents encouraged him to attend Williams College, but instead he enrolled in classes at the Art Students League in Manhattan (1). It was there he likely first met Vezein, himself an alumnus of the school and a close friend of the legendary art instructor Frank Vincent DuMond (1865-1951). Vezein and DuMond had bonded over their joint belief in the value of representational painting, and both had embraced Pleissner for his talent and his inclination to carry on the tradition in the face of modernism's growing popularity.

Even though it was through DuMond's daughter, Elizabeth, that Pleissner met his first wife, Mary Horison Corbet, Pleissner maintained a closer friendship with Vezein. The two men had much in common. Vezein prided himself on his German heritage and maintained a studio near Pleissner's family on the Brooklyn waterfront, the same studio where Pleissner painted his portrait. Pleissner's father and Vezein worked in similar industries, importing different types of cloth from Europe (2). And perhaps most significantly, both Vezein and Pleissner credited DuMond with having a profound impact on their artistic development.

During the 1933 Lyme Art Exhibition, then a nationally significant event, the portrait hung alongside several works by Vezein featuring his beloved subjects – the New York skyline and the harbors of Brooklyn and Manhattan. The painting itself was nearly destroyed shortly after its completion. In late June of 1933, Vezein arranged with Pleissner's wife, Mary, to ship the painting to Boxwood, a boarding house in Old Lyme where Vezein occasionally rented rooms. On July 3, Vezein wrote to Mary:

Vezein by Ogden M. Pleissner arrived yesterday morning, in a very large box because it was packed with three of my frames. It was so large and heavy that I had it laid flat on the piazza below the outside studio at Boxwood. It has a big imprint across the front "Keep Dry", which was hardly appropriate as Connecticut has just gone wet! (3) I left the box there, for a visit to Popsky's Roost [his Grassy Hill studio] with the sky a beautiful clear blue and no indication of trouble. While I was gone there came a veritable cloudburst and tornado, which broke down a lot of fine trees in this section. I was caught in this storm in my car, coming down the back road from Grassy Hill to Popsky's Roost. The woods were black as night, and I had to drive very slowly for fear of running into fallen trees. My first thought was of that box containing *Vezein*. I immediately rushed to look at it and found Ah Yow, that Chinese servant you have seen, had spread a lot

of Chinese umbrellas all over that box. Bless her Oriental heart! I opened the box with trembling and found the layers of wrapping paper forming depressions filled with water. But, thank heaven, the paper was tough enough to hold the water and there was no damage whatsoever (4).

The portrait did not sell during the exhibition and has remained in the Vezin family until the present offering. In 1932, the Metropolitan Museum of American Art purchased Pleissner's *Backyards, Brooklyn*, making him at 27 the youngest artist in the museum's collection at the time. *Vezin* exceeds that effort, and is unquestionably the most significant Pleissner to be offered in recent memory.

-JFN

Provenance: From a private collection in Connecticut to the gallery.

Bibliography:

1. Peter Bergh, *The Art of Ogden M. Pleissner* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984), 3 .
2. Bergh, 3 .
3. This comment is likely a reference to Connecticut's passage of the 21st Amendment which ended Prohibition. Vezin was accustomed to enjoying a moderate glass of beer a day .
4. Charles Vezin, letter to Mary Pleissner, July 3, 1933, Old Lyme, CT. Vezin family archive.

Presentation Notes: In its original 4" gilt cove frame.