

Johann Michael Ferdinand Heinrich Hofmann

1824-1911

based in part on the work of Angela Swanson Jones

Heinrich Hofmann was born in 1824 in Darmstadt, Germany, which is about 10-15 miles straight south of the Frankfurt am Main airport, one of the world's busiest. His parents were Heinrich Karl and Sophie (Volhard) Hofmann, who always encouraged his enthusiasm for art. His mother tutored all of her five sons in drawing, but it was Heinrich who showed the greatest talent and consequently, "He always declared he would be a painter and nothing else." Hofmann's formal training began when he was 16 through an apprenticeship with the copper engraver Ernest Rauch. At 18 he entered the Düsseldorf Academy, a leading German academy and center of religious painting well into the nineteenth century, studying with Theodor Hildebrandt.

During Hofmann's three years at Düsseldorf he displayed precocious talent, eventually earning him a place in the master class under the direction of the influential Wilhelm von Schadow. Von Schadow was a "Nazarene," initially a derisive term, but later embraced by German Romantic painters in the 19th century who strove for realism, faith, and honesty in their religious work. Hofmann then spent the next twelve years visiting and studying in Europe's major art centers: Antwerp, Paris, Munich, Dresden, Prague, and most importantly Rome, where he lived and painted for nearly three years. He was influenced there by the German painter Peter von Cornelius, one of the founders of the Nazarene Brotherhood and a strong force in the revival of German painting.

In 1858 he married Elisabeth Werner; the couple would have no children. Hofmann was not initially a religious painter. He found success in many other genres including German history, Shakespeare, mythology, and especially the portrait commissions that dominated his work for the first decades. Although portraiture filled him "in the long run with emptiness and fatigue," it provided the necessary financial support for himself, his often-ill wife, and the numerous charitable causes to which they generously contributed.

Hofmann's great legacy, however is as a religious painter, the genre that won him his greatest success and brought his deeply spiritual mind the most satisfaction. His interest in Christian art grew out of his own faith in the New Testament. One writer noted that he began each day and closed it by reading in the Holy Scriptures, in which he was thoroughly at home. Ironically, religious painting didn't become his main focus until the 1880s, just as production of Christian art began to wane in Continental Europe, due, no doubt, to the influence of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin.

An appreciative article in a Munich art magazine once quoted him: "To be able to create high quality works in religious art it is not sufficient to be a gifted artist; you must also have devotion, and you must be sincere. Those who are trying to depict religious subjects— especially when the Savior is involved—without being moved in their innermost soul do not have the capacity for this task, even though they may be the greatest masters of art in the whole world. We could compare this to a preacher who gives a sermon about a subject he does not believe in and that he has not made his own...."

Hofmann's first museum-purchased painting was *The Capture of Christ* (1858). *The Adulteress before Christ* (1868) won him membership in the Dresden Art Academy in 1870, where he taught for over twenty years. His four greatest works are:

- *Christ in the Temple* (1880-81), (Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden). During the intensive bombing of Dresden during World War II the painting was moved into the countryside for preservation. After the war tastes had changed and the painting was not rehung. The painting in Riverside Church is his own copy.
- *Christ and the Rich Young Ruler* (1888/89), now in Riverside church in Manhattan. Mrs. Elise Drexler, an American woman from San Francisco and the original owner, had bought "Christ and the Rich Young Ruler" from Hofmann. In a letter to him, she expressed the wish to know more about his concept of the painting. Hofmann replied that it was very difficult for him to recall and put into words the innermost thoughts and inspirations that were present when he painted. But then he tried to convey to her his philosophy:

"What always interested me deeply in my art was the expression in the faces of men and women because that expression reveals the inner life of a person. Only painting and no other type of art — not even sculpture — can do this. I believe that people are attracted to my works because I succeeded in expressing some of the soul qualities and the spiritual setup of the figures in the paintings. The face of the rich young ruler, for example, shows clearly that he is ashamed, for he rejected what the Lord had asked of him. But a far greater challenge was the expression in the face of the Savior: His keen eyes should fathom the innermost recesses of the young man's soul and at the same time they should express deep sympathy, for it is written that 'He loved him.' You have to judge for yourself whether I have accomplished this task or not."

- *Christ in Gethsemane* (1890). Like many of Hofmann's religious paintings, *Christ in Gethsemane* soon found a home in an American collection. Purchased by John Zeile, so treasured was the picture that it was the only object saved from the collector's home when it was destroyed in the Great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906.

Likewise, reproductions of the original have found appreciation in millions of Christian homes and churches since the painting's completion, as a painting but especially as a stained glass window. Even into the next century the painting's popularity did not wane. In 1944 this iconic painting was rated by *Good Housekeeping* as one of America's eight favorite pictures.

In 1932 the famous oil tycoon and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. purchased *Christ in Gethsemane* and donated it to the Riverside Church in New York City. Of the painting he stated, "I have always been interested in the picture, but never felt that an individual ought to possess such a rare treasure. I feel that it should be made available to the general public."

- *Portrait of Christ, the Savior* (1894). Also at Riverside Church

Hofmann also produced three major portfolios of drawings depicting scenes from the life of the Savior. They are:

- Gedenke Mein (1885)
- Kommet zu Mir (1887)
- Friede sei mit Euch (1891)

Hofmann's wife Elisabeth suffered frequent ill health and died in 1891, leaving Hofmann a widower for 21 years. Heartbroken, he soon resigned his position at the Dresden Academy and withdrew to his studio, where he still continued to draw, paint, and receive guests. He died in Dresden in 1911.

Hofmann's religious painting found great appreciation among Americans, which accounts for many of his best works' being in this country, saving them from the devastation of World-War II that claimed so many of Hofmann's other works. By the time of his death his paintings were deemed in Europe "old-fashioned." Eventually, his surviving art was consigned to museum vaults or collectors' attics and forgotten. Only in Christian homes and churches have his paintings and prints been cherished and displayed proudly.

American churches in the eastern half of the country, especially those built between 1880 and 1930, are absolutely loaded with copies of Hofmann's drawings and paintings. Some are paintings; most are stained glass windows, whose designs are drawn from his paintings and three pen-and-ink portfolios.

St. Marcus Lutheran Church's leadership was as entranced by Hofmann's work as anyone in America. Its first worship space at its founding in 1875 was the upper floor of a house on Beaubian & Short Sts. (now Palmer and Garfield). The congregation built a proper wooden frame church in 1881 with an ornately carved altar, painted white and gilded in the fashion of the day. It is unknown what kind of design or art was in the large centerpiece in the reredos at first.

Hofmann's *Christ in Gethsemane* in 1890 took the American Christian world by storm, and St. Marcus must have commissioned a local painter to do a copy in oil on canvas. The earliest known photograph of the church's interior was in the 25th anniversary year of 1900; it shows the Hofmann copy above the altar. When the much larger red brick church was built in 1914, the old altar and its painting were installed. They graced the front of the church until 1950, when the congregation's leadership removed all the old white Gothic chancel furniture and replaced it with Danish blond modern Gothic furniture. The painting was saved, however, and now hangs in the south lobby of the school's Krier Center.

In 1913 the church's building committee selected local stained glass artist Carl Reimann to design and build the stained glass windows for the new church—transoms over the doors, six large lancet windows on each side of the nave, two huge transept windows and one equally as large in the balcony. Reimann was instructed to use Hofmann's figures from the life of Christ. The entire St. Marcus stained glass project cost \$2,035; individual donors and various groups contributed all necessary funds. Reimann probably also painted the large oil-on-canvas paintings of the women at Christ's tomb (south) and the Easter angels (north) on the walls flanking the chancel.

Carl A. Reimann was born in Milwaukee in 1873 of a Swiss father and a German mother. He attended Lutheran schools in Milwaukee and then studied with Wisconsin artist Richard Lorenz and with Max Thedy at the Royal Academy in Weimar. He set up a studio at 521 Jackson St. and established a painting and art glass practice for over 40 years. His home was at 116 E. Wright St. in our neighborhood. The two phenomenal windows in the portal to the Milwaukee Common Council chambers in City Hall are believed to be his work. He died in 1937 and is buried at Union Cemetery.

High up the east wall of the Atrium is the window of the resurrected Christ with Mary Magdalene. The two panels of the center figures used to be in a lancet window on the north side of the church nave. When the lower half of the window was opened up in 2003 to provide a doorway into the Atrium, the panels of Jesus and Mary were hung in the large overhead window at the east end. Andrew Paremski of Enterprise Art Glass in Milwaukee was engaged to design and execute an expanded scene of Jesus' tomb. The eerie periwinkle blue and butterscotch background is called "Kokomo" glass. Mr. Paremski went to the Kokomo Opalescent Glass Co. in Indiana personally to supervise the rolling of the molten glass that became the skies behind Jesus. It took three batches of poured and rolled glass before he was satisfied.

M.A.J.