

# Benny Collin

January 2, 1896 - January 10, 1980



*Benny Collin*  
*SYMPHONIC STYLE*



by Vikki Stenstream Burgess

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Publisher info:  
First printing  
William Green Publishing  
113A King St., St. Augustine, FL 32084, USA

Cover and layout design William and Natalya Green  
Printed in USA

## Acknowledgements

*To Scott Burgess for the encouragement, advice and final edit. This would still be just an idea had it not been for you.*

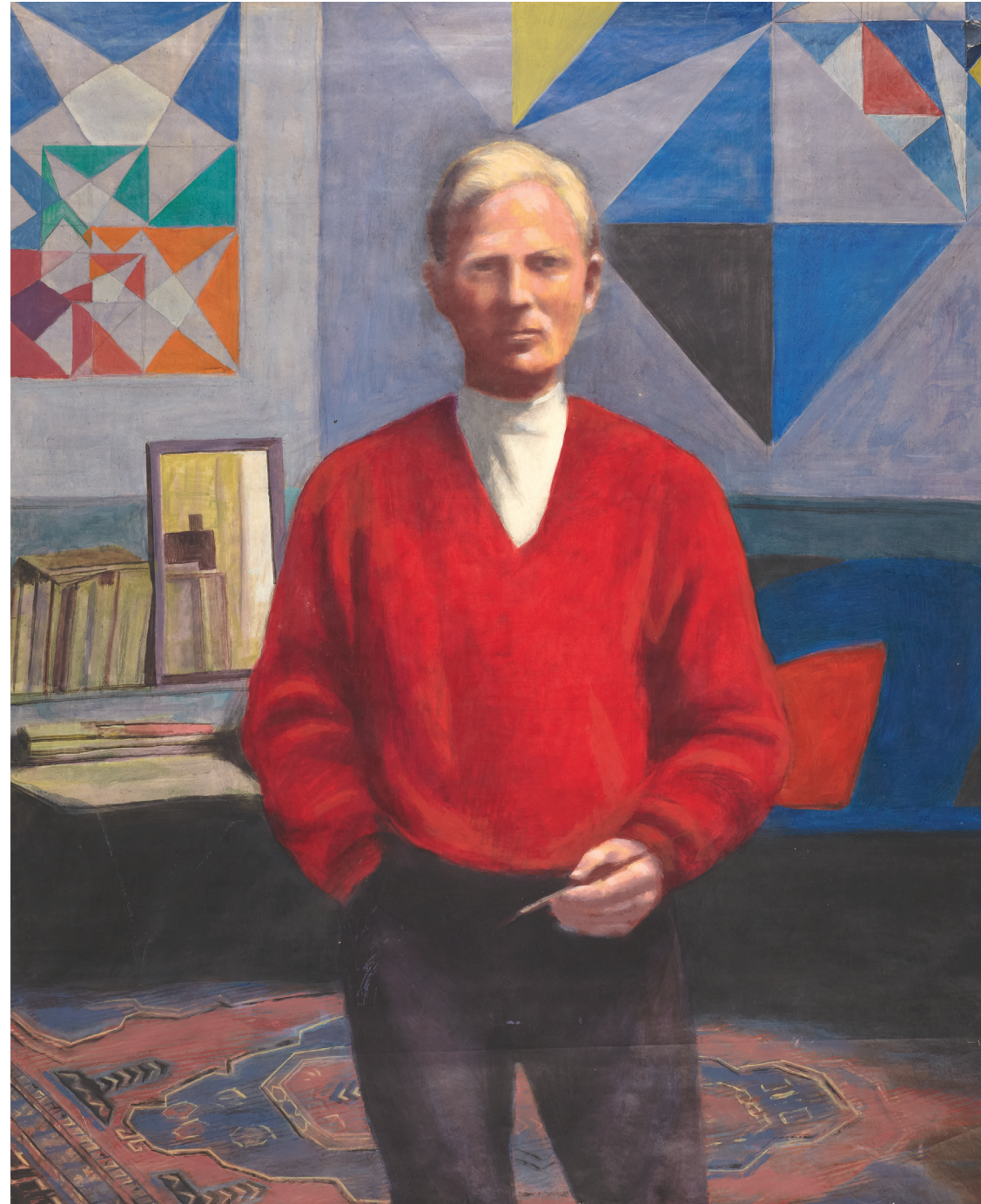
*To Eva Sverdrup-Jensen, Lene Tschemerinsky Kirkeby and the late Anders Cohn for the family history, our time at the summer cottage in Hundested, Denmark and the family reunited once again.*

*To Harle Tinney for taking the time to share your dinner with me at Belcourt Castle and the wonderful stories of Benny and the ghosts; Benny will always be a part of Belcourt.*

*To AJ Mueller for the time it took to photograph all of Benny's paintings; your work is amazing.*

*And, finally, to Robert Stenstream for your patience and continued belief in Benny's work.*





## *Benny Collin Symphonic Style*

*"These 20 paintings have no literary subject, the proportions in line and color decide the composition and have been carried through from the beginning to the climax; very much like a musical composition on canvas, and they have no other purpose than to give you pleasure."*

**- Benny Collin, 1958, Belcourt Castle, Rhode Island during his first showing of only his geometric abstracts.**

### **MUSIC WAS HIS FIRST PASSION**

**B**y age 10, Benny was an accomplished pianist. It was a talent that he enjoyed — and those around him admired — throughout his life. Even as a child, Benny's family and friends would gather around as he played.

But Benny Cohn's other talent was first discovered when his parents found a drawing he had created of seven French soldiers in elaborate dress uniforms. In the drawings there were even more soldiers behind

the original seven, all created from one of Benny's toys. After seeing this, Benny's parents encouraged the prodigy to pursue his talents.

Quickly, the world became Benny's muse and his talents with paint and brush would take him around the world many times over. His skill as a portrait painter would pay his passage across the Atlantic Ocean dozens of times. His talent as a trained muralist would allow him to travel

the United States installing modern classical paintings in newly built places of worship in a partnership with renowned architect Martin Hedmark. And Benny would tickle those ivories for 25 years at Belcourt

Castle, where he lived as the artist in residence and docent, exploring the depths of the Golden Spiral, a geometric mathematical formula that dates as far back as Ancient Greece.

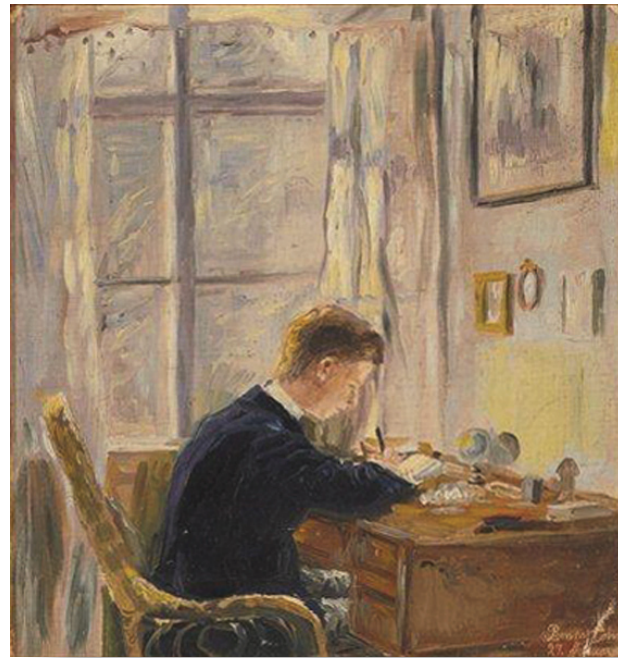
## DENMARK

As the War to End All Wars raged in lower Europe, a young Benny Cohn continued to paint and find new admirers. Even as a teenager, his work impressed many people within the Danish art scene, even catching the eye of a Danish King.

Benny was fortunate to study the arts along with his three siblings. Benny's parents, Ludvig Cohn and Marie Olsen, encouraged all of their children to study the arts, music and mathematics. Ludvig, a wholesale importer, understood Benny's talent was something to be appreciated, though he would never know how all of the things he encouraged him to learn would culminate into Benny's life's work.

In 1917, Benny, just 21, graduated from the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen, where he had entered as one of the youngest artists ever to be accepted. It was there he honed his skills as a painter, delving

into water colors and acrylics. He focused on the human figure as well as practicing sculpting and other artistic pursuits. While at the Academy, he was mentored by Joakim Skovgaard, the great Danish muralist



Benny's brother, Gerson, studying.

best known for his work in the Viborg Cathedral, one of Denmark's most important historical places of worship.

For the next few years, Benny painted and showed his works at numerous venues including Charlottenborg Palace.

In 1919, King Christian Vilhelm X — who would preside over the Scandinavian nation through two World Wars — present-

ed Benny with a Gold Medal for his piece, "Naked Young Men on the Beach" at the annual exhibition at Charlottenborg.

That medal provided Benny with a two year scholarship to study in Italy and France. It was a golden ticket to join the artistic community of the Lost Generation and engage in the volatile political world of Europe in the 1920s.

## PARIS

Benny studied sculpture and painting in Rome at the Accademia di San Luca, but in Paris life and art imitated each other. France would become Benny's home away from home.

The 1920s in Paris were particularly special. Monet was still alive. Gertrude Stein walked her poodles along the Seine and bemoaned the Lost Generation. Artists filled the streets with radical ideas and blank canvases waiting to capture the next Cult of Personality. It was during this time that Paris became home to Picasso, Chagall, Braque and many other artists.

Benny attended the Academie de la Grande Chaumerie, an art school known for its unorthodox teaching methods. The school did not adhere to the rigid aca-



A room with a view.

democratic formulas used in most Parisian art schools, but rather encouraged experimentation in all different forms and techniques. Modigliani and Hans Hofmann were early students at the school that was founded in 1902.

Alberto Giacometti and Tamara de Lempicka were enrolled shortly after Benny had left the school. Later Alexander Calder and Robert Held would be students at the Grande Chaumerie [academy of the large thatched cottage].

There are no records to identify Benny's friends in Paris, but he was inquisitive and his infectious personality served him well whether in front of easel or a piano. It's possible he met Robert and Sonia Delaunay who were associated with the Orphism movement, an offshoot to cubism, both developed in Paris.

Their paintings were pure color abstractions with a lyrical and sensual feeling similar to what music is to poetry, a philosophy Benny used to describe his own work.

Two American artists living in Paris, Morgan Russell and Stanton Mac Donald-Wright created the movement called Synchromism in 1913. They sought to use abstract shapes where a painting's significance was achieved through color and

form. Russell's intention was to create visual rhythms similar to what a musical composer would seek to achieve through the build-up of relationships and repetition in his musical score. It is quite conceivable that Benny would have sought out these artists and their work as they were closely aligned with his own evolving interest in art and music.

Benny was influenced by Jay Hambidge's treatise on Dynamic Symmetry, which uses the natural design methodology that is based on proportions growing from the square root of 2, 3, 5 and so on, creating the golden ratio. Hambidge's concepts were to be of major importance along with the concepts gleaned from the Synchromist and Orphismist in the development of Benny's geometric paintings. It was in Paris, influenced by the energetic art scene around him and all of the wonderful experimental work that Benny began his first tentative paintings using the golden formula.

While absorbing the Paris art scene, Benny maintained a rigorous painting schedule. He was rewarded for his efforts when in 1921, four of his works were accepted for exhibit at the Salon d'Automne. Through the years he was a member of

the Salon and exhibited on and off through 1960.

At the end of his scholarship, Benny continued to live in Paris and travel home for summers in Copenhagen to visit his family and paint Danish countryside scenes. It was also during the early 1920's that his sister, Thora, came to live with him in Paris.

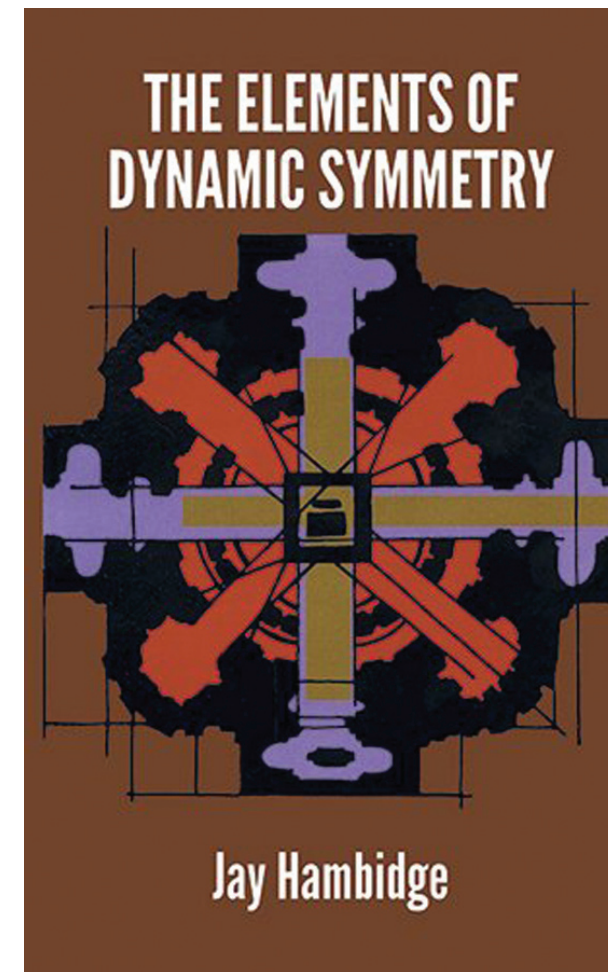
She was there to learn how to make hats and study fine sewing, which later served her well as the textile conservator at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Benny and Thora lived on the edge of that world in Paris that was filled with characters like Ernst Hemingway, Pablo Picasso and a raft of artists, writers and philosophers who had seen the devastation of the First World War and sensed the pending depression to follow.

Thora describes their time in Paris during one newspaper interview as "going out to La Rotonde and Le Dome, where we'd sit side by side with Matisse and Picasso and other artists. And Gertrude Stein would come in at night, with her big dog and friends. And composers. And that wonderful Japanese artist, Foujita."

The early 1920's provided Benny the opportunity to rub elbows with some of the

most important artists of the past century even before they were the labeled important. The confluence of influences helped shape Benny's work for the rest of his life and his never ending quest to create a musical fugue in shapes and colors.



Benny's later work would be influenced by Jay Hambidge's treatise on Dynamic Symmetry.

## A NEW BEGINNING

In 1927, Benny was commissioned by Swedish architect Martin G. Hedmark to paint the altarpiece for the Gloria Dei Evangelical Lutheran Church in Providence, Rhode Island. This was Benny's first visit to America and begins a successful working relationship between Benny and Hedmark in the design and decoration of many Lutheran churches throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic States. The knowledge gained from his old teacher Joachim Skovgaard paid dividends in Benny's collaborations with Hedmark.

During this first visit to the US, Benny lived in and around Providence, often staying with his sister and her husband Erik Magnussen, a silversmith at Gorham Silver. He used their home and a converted silo into a studio, painting not only the altarpiece, but the local country side scenes and portraits of his sister and her husband. Benny also spent time traveling to New York where he became captivated with the city's skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge in particular. Like in Paris, Benny used his



A study of the Altar piece.

spare time surveying the American art scene in New York and Boston.

In 1928, Benny finished the classical inspired alter piece titled "The Resurrection". The 40' X 20' oil on canvas is signed, Benny 1928, where it still hangs today at the nationally registered Gloria Dei Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Once the altar piece was completed, Benny returned to his studio in Paris, located in the same home where Whistler had his studio 30 years earlier. For the next ten years he fell back into his routine of spending summers in Copenhagen with his family and painting in Paris during the rest of the year. He exhibited in Paris and Copenhagen, showing his landscapes and portraits. All the while, Benny continued his exploration into geometric abstract painting. He applied his love of music to the Golden Spiral and found that he could apply his two greatest loves to paper. Thus began his painting of the geometric abstracts that came to later dominate his work.



"The Resurrection" as it hangs today.

## NEW FRIENDS

While in Paris, Benny became life-long friends with Ruth Fischer, a German-born agitator who formed the communist party in Germany during the 1920s. Fischer would later become a secret agent for the U.S. government during the '40s and '50s in a top secret program called "The Pond." The Central Intelligence Agency released documents on the espionage program in 2010.

Benny would work closely with Fischer during the time that transformed her from communist supporter to ardent spokeswoman against communism, Stalin, and even her brother, who she testified against in a U.S. Congressional hearing that had her brother blacklisted and deported.

Benny knew Fischer through Fischer's partner, Arkadi Maslow (originally named Isaak Tschemerinski), whose sister was married to Benny's brother. That family connection helped Benny first meet the star-crossed lovers as they were running for their lives.

Fischer and Maslow were leaders of the Communist Party of Germany, KDP, but were removed from power by Joseph Stalin in the '30s. The two then formed a new

communist organization in Germany just as Adolf Hitler began to seize power. The new party's radical ideas caught the ire of both Stalin and Hitler and initiated death sentences from the communists and Nazis. In 1933, they fled to Paris seeking Benny's help and a desire to work with Trotsky, who had been exiled to France. From 1934 to 1936, Maslow worked closely with Trotsky and served as a part of the movement towards a Fourth International party.

By June of 1939 with the impending German invasion of France, Benny knew his life, and those he loved, would need to change. He had spent the last five years listening to Maslow and Fischer as he tried to continue to explore different painting schemes.

Benny returned to Copenhagen to gather his parents and move to the United States. His mother, Marie, was in need of surgery and stayed behind in Copenhagen with Benny's older brother Gerson. The plan was that she would have her surgery, recover and then travel to be with her husband and son in the US. But father and son would never see her again as the dark storm clouds over Europe erupted into war.



One of Benny's favorite models.

Benny and his father, Ludvig, immigrated to the United States in June of 1939. At the urging of his sister who lived in Providence, he changed his name to Benny Collin and became a naturalized citizen by November 1939.

In an interview, Benny spoke of the war and his timing to leave Paris: "I stayed in Paris until the Nazis started to be nasty. I listened to the radios, from Prague and Budapest and all over, and I knew something was brewing. I came to the United States in June of 1939. I told my friends that the war would start in September. Afterward, they asked me how I knew. Well, it was easy, I knew they'd wait until the harvest came in."

Meanwhile, the Nazi invasion of France, in 1940, forced Maslow and Fischer on the run again with hopes to arrive in the United States. Fischer made it, but Maslow was stranded in Cuba.

Benny tried to help Maslow at Fischer's behest. He pleaded with the U.S. State Department, often sending telegrams to Fischer, updating her on every letter he'd receive. But as Maslow had family in an occupied country in Europe, he was not granted entry to the US. In the summer of 1940, Trotsky was murdered in Mexico with an ice axe, one of the final victims to Stalin's Great Purge that took the lives of more than 600,000 people.

Maslow, an enemy of both Nazis and Stalin, died in the streets of Havana, in 1940, from a reported heart attack. Both



Benny and Fischer sought more information after his death, believing he had been murdered under Stalin's orders. But they were only left with questions. Benny and his family maintained a close relationship

with Fischer.

After Maslow's death, Fischer's scorn was directed at the Communist Party both publicly and privately as an undercover agent. Fischer died in 1961.

## THE WAR TORN FAMILY

The war affected Benny and his family deeply. His mother, who had remained in Denmark for surgery, never recovered and passed away during the war. In the U.S., Benny and his father, awaited her arrival, only to receive news of her passing from Benny's brother Gerson who, facing certain danger staying in Denmark during the Nazi occupation, escaped with his son by rowing across Oresund Straits to Sweden in the dark of night.

As the war in Europe raged on, Benny and his father settled in Malvern, New York, in a small home they purchased. With Malvern's close proximity to Manhattan and its reputation as a thriving artist community, Benny felt at home and began to paint in earnest. During this time, he often traveled into the city painting the skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge, captur-

ing both the architecture and city life. He exhibited with the League of Present Day Artists, the Riverside Museum (NYC) and at the American British Art Center.

After the war, Benny and his father returned to Copenhagen. It was time to heal.

Benny spent the next four years traveling close to the family home in Denmark and exhibiting his works in Copenhagen while assisting his family in recovering from the war. Helping his family cope with life after the war was his main purpose at this time. So much had happened to the family. Aside from Benny's mother dying, Gerson's son had died while they were in hiding in Sweden. Benny wanted to help his father and brother recover from the losses suffered and to prepare for the New World that was calling. He needed to paint.

## RETURNING TO AMERICA

In 1949, Benny was again contacted by Hedmark to paint altarpieces for churches he had designed in New England. Benny moved back to the US, first moving in with his sister and her family in Providence, then to the Beacon Hill area of Boston where he was able to have the best of both worlds, family close and a bustling city environment rich with history and architecture. Benny painted pieces in churches designed by Hedmark in Chicago, Connecticut and New York during the early part of the 1950s.



1949, Benny paints the New York skyline.



New York City, 1949.

Benny lived in Beacon Hill until 1953 when Hedmark had commissioned him to paint the altarpiece for the Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood New York. This new piece required that Benny find a space large enough to work in to create the painting. After some time searching, Edward Dunn offered Benny the opportunity to live and work in a deserted estate in Newport, Rhode Island. Thus began Benny's stay at what was later known as Belcourt Castle.

## BELCOURT CASTLE

After sitting empty for twenty years, the old estate of O.P. Belmont came to life as Benny established his studio and living space in the attic. Over the next two years, while painting the altarpiece, he also acted as a caretaker of sorts, exploring the estate, learning its secrets and working to keep vandals off of the property.



Benny overlooking the courtyard of Belcourt.

A story often told was how Benny perpetuated the rumors of the haunting of Belcourt. One evening some teenagers mustered the courage to see if Belcourt was, in fact, haunted. Benny, armed with a broom and a sheet, scared off the teens from an upper window of the mansion, keeping the myth, of a haunted house filled with ghosts, alive for years.

By 1955, Benny had finished the altarpiece and invited the Newport public for a viewing of "The Transfiguration of Christ" before it was shipped off for installation at the church. Years later, the Lakewood church caught fire, destroying the church. Only one thing was recovered from the original church: Benny's work, which was placed in the new church and remains there today.

At this same time, Belcourt Castle changed hands again, and the Tinney family moved in.

Under the Tinney family's direction, Belcourt was restored and turned into a museum. The family opened the doors of Belcourt to the public for tours of both the mansion and the many fine arts and antiques collected by the family. Benny developed a



The transfiguration Altar piece - Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Lakewood, NY.

close relationship with Donald Tinney and remained at Belcourt as the resident artist and helped out as a docent, providing tours.

During his time spent at Belcourt, Benny immersed himself in his painting. He devoted most of his time interpreting the Golden Spiral and how music, namely Bach and Mozart, fit into the form and symmetry of his geometric art. He had started referring

to his paintings as Symphonic, designed to show the relationship between color, form, architecture and music. His paintings are highly disciplined relying on simple geometric shapes that are mathematically expanded, repeated and overlapped until they spiral off the paper or canvas.

Color and color harmonies are critical in defining the object/form and it's depth and attractiveness. Benny predominately used rice paper in a 40" x 40" size with oil and



Benny in his element - the Attic studio in Belcourt.

acrylic washes. In 1958, Benny had another show at Belcourt, this time to showcase his geometric abstracts. His show, in the grand ballroom, was well received by the Newport public; though Benny began to wonder if the public understood his work.

But his hopes were always dashed, as Benny once told a Danish reporter: "Unfortunately, I must sometimes compromise in my painting in order to survive. I can paint portraits, pastoral scenes and still lifes that the American public can



Home, Malverne, NY 1940.



Benny explains his vision. First geometric show - Belcourt, 1958.

understand yet; it is unsatisfactory for me as an artist. I feel the American public is not yet mature enough to understand and hang my abstract images in their homes. Really it's strange; my images should be the modern architect's dream."

Benny led an active life in Newport. Besides painting, traveling and his duties around Belcourt, he often served as a judge in Newport's many juried amateur art shows, he taught art at the Vernon Court Junior College in Newport, spent every morning swimming in the ocean and often visited with fellow painter, friend and neighbor John Stephan.

Benny would spend his summers with his sister at her summer home in Martha's

Vineyard. Setting up an easel in the back garden, Benny would paint from sun up to sun down daily, devoted to painting his geometric abstract art. At this point he had left behind all the other genres,

following his passion, finding the perfect balance between the music playing in his head and the form and color he painted on the paper.

## AN AMERICAN PAINTER IN DENMARK

During his time in Newport, Benny traveled home to Copenhagen on a biannual basis, painting portraits of passengers to fund his travels. While in Copenhagen, he would visit with family, his older brother and youngest sister. He continued to show works at Charlottenborg annually and in 1960 returned to Paris to exhibit at the Salon d'Automne.

In a December 30, 1960 article in the Danish newspaper, B.T., Benny discusses his concern regarding the compromise he had to make to survive as an artist.

"The United States is not particularly interested in abstract art. The English are the benchmark, and they have always been the literary set, demanding a psychological explanation of what an image represents. But I am completely in line with the French who are far more interested in the image's outward expression than in its narrative content."

The constant struggle to paint what he loved versus what the public wanted with art would continue for the rest of his life. Benny wanted to have people understand his work, but eventually stopped trying to appease the public, leading to Benny no longer signing much of his work.



Study - women aboard ship.



Opus 672-C.

## FLORIDA

In 1972, at the age of 76, Benny moved to Florida to be with his sister and her daughter's family. Benny continued to paint daily and assisted in raising his grand nieces. His love of family was evident in the way he looked after his siblings. When his sister Thora returned home from having suffered a heart attack in 1977, he sat by her bedside, crying tears of happiness that she had survived and was home. It was on that same night that he suffered a stroke while toasting her recovery. He passed away on January 10, 1980 from complications related to the stroke.

His nieces and nephews in both Denmark and the United States survive Benny. His works are found throughout the world, with family and friends, with admirers of his talent and in churches. His work has become part of their daily lives.

Some of his works he sold, some he kept and what remained, he left with friends

and family as he moved through out his life.

To Benny, each painting was an individual work, a study of light, balance and color. It was the music he knew transformed into colors and the never ending spiral of shapes.

Once he finished a painting, he was done with it, eager to move on to a fresh canvas or paper to see what the melody of colors in his mind would create. Benny was a gifted musician, mathematically inclined and an accomplished artist who was able to utilize all of his interests and passions in creating a unique painting style he called Symphonic Form.

As he once said in an interview: "As a boy, I heard a Mozart symphony, and I said to myself: One day you will try to paint some of the triads you heard here, in an abstract painting; I have tried and for me abstraction is a very serious matter."

