



71: Fairfield Porter *The Beginning of the Fields* (1973)

Juan Ludman

The Beginning of the Fields is a tour de force with a special place in Fairfield Porter's oeuvre.¹ He did not paint space, he said, he painted air, and that certainly seems true of this dazzling creation, one of many beautiful works from the last two years of his life. An homage to his beloved Long Island landscape, it displays the qualities that have earned Porter recognition as one of the major American artists of the twentieth century. It is also a superb example of the realist tradition that he upheld throughout his career, despite the ascendancy of abstract expressionism. When he died in 1975, at the height of his powers, Porter left behind an oeuvre of light-filled, sun-dappled landscapes, intimist interiors, lyrical still lifes, and insightful portraits. This body of work, as well as his teachings and writings, influenced an entire generation of figurative artists.

Porter was born in 1907 into a large, prosperous, and highly accomplished family in Winnetka, Illinois. Cultural pursuits and travel were encouraged and nurtured, exposing him to a diverse range of art and thought that shaped and inspired his own unique style. A family trip to Europe when he was fourteen showed him the work of Leonardo, Titian, Veronese, and J. M. W. Turner. A trip to Moscow while still a student at Harvard influenced his philosophy, his politics, and his art; another to France in 1927 enhanced his enthusiasm for Romanesque and Renaissance art and architecture; a return trip to Italy in 1931 sparked a lifelong interest in Giotto's frescoes.

In 1928, after Harvard, he moved into a wholly different milieu among modernists and literati in New York, studying with Thomas Hart Benton and Boardman Robinson at the Art Students League and growing acquainted with Alfred Stieglitz and the work of John Marin. During the Depression years, he embraced the socialist leanings and ideals of the 1930s' intelligentsia, provided illustrations for a socialist periodical called *Arise*, and painted modernist murals in the social realist tradition.

Porter attended exhibitions in the 1930s and 1940s of the works of Bonnard and Vuillard, notably at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and these artists joined the eclectic web of influences from which Porter was to fashion his distinctive style. At the Parsons School of Design during World War II, he studied with the Louvre restorer Jacques Maroger, who instructed him in the use of a rediscovered Flemish painting medium that caused the paint to dry slowly, making possible an easier reworking of the canvas. The dazzle of Bonnard's color and the intimism and patterning of Vuillard, along with Porter's interest in the Maroger technique and feel of the paint, became hallmarks of his landscapes, interiors, and still lifes from then onward.

In 1949 Porter moved with his poet wife, Anne Channing Porter, and their five children to Southampton on Long Island, the site of *The Beginning of the Fields*, where he appreciated the rural atmosphere and the proximity to the sea, while still maintaining a connection to the art world of New York City. He was the first of many artists, notably Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, to make their homes and set up their studios in the Hamptons (which in the 1940s was not the posh area it later became). De Kooning, whose work Porter was among the first to admire, became a close friend, as did the painters Alex Katz, Jane Freilicher, Neil Welliver, and Jane Wilson. The "New York School of Poets"—Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch—also welcomed Fairfield into their circle. In the early 1950s, this group often met at the Cedar Bar in Greenwich Village and read each other's poems. Porter, who had always enjoyed reading and writing poetry, experienced a burst of creativity in both his painting and his poetry. His art became more fluid and lyrical.

Fairfield Porter,
1907–1975
The Beginning of the Fields, 1973
Oil on canvas,
52 x 76 1/4 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
86.132
©Estate of Fairfield Porter
and Hirschl & Adler Modern,
New York

During this period, he began to have a series of successful shows of his paintings at New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery and at prestigious venues including the Whitney and the Cleveland museums. He simultaneously embarked upon another highly regarded career as an art critic, writing for *Art News* and *The Nation*. His reviews of contemporary painters and sculptors were finely written, forthright, and eminently readable. But as his shows became more successful and his reputation grew, he quit writing art criticism in order to devote full time to painting.

Over the following decades, into the 1960s and 1970s, Porter's paintings evolved into luminous, color-saturated canvases, his subject matter reflecting his and his family's daily life—domestic interiors and still lifes of the family dinner table, portraits of family members and friends, and perhaps most specially, landscapes depicting the countryside around his homes in Great Spruce Head Island in Maine and in Southampton, Long Island.

The Beginning of the Fields is a depiction of the wide-open, flat, uncluttered landscape in Southampton, near where Porter and his family lived from 1949 until the end of his life. In its powerful sense of place, its particular evocation of the Long Island atmosphere, its sea air and the light that he felt was the finest anywhere, better even than the famous light of the south of France, it pays an emotional homage to his cherished home as he hoped it would remain, green and unspoiled.

Porter often proclaimed that he saw the “extraordinary in the ordinary” and he “painted things as they are.” If this seems to describe a representational artist, it is also true that he believed in the reality of the paint. The place depicted is “real,” but so are the “paint” and the painting. For all his classical realism, Porter was a great admirer of the abstractionists, especially of de Kooning, and their influence is apparent in his gestural handling of the paint. *The Beginning of the Fields* is an image of both realism and abstraction—inconsistent shadowing, a disappearing roadway, an unusual perspective, and a powerfully atmospheric use of color in capturing the feel of the air that suffuses the entire composition. Large, flat planes of pure fluid color, rather than line, define borders. Porter has balanced his love of the medium, the feel of the paint, the handling of the paint, with his interest in visual reality.

In Porter's late paintings, he seems to have arrived at that distinctive individual style, simultaneously realistic, impressionistic, and abstractionist, toward which all his diverse training and experience appears, in hindsight, to have been leading. In 1974, the art critic Hilton Kramer wrote that Porter's “greatest strength is to be found in a painting such as *The Beginning of the Fields*, a dazzling, simplified construction of light.”² Kenworth Moffett, writing in the catalogue for the Boston Museum's 1983–84 retrospective, noted that “in certain very late pictures, Porter started to cross the border between Impressionism and Fauvism, between a reaction to natural light and a search for invented color.”³ “In *The Beginning of the Fields*, says art critic Michael Brenson,

*We seem to be looking at heat. The trees are like flames. The sun is a little white ball. The car on the road is an explosion of white. Only the blue of the signposts and road bring some relief, and the road is shaped like a cross. There is almost a Biblical quality to the light here. It is the light of revelation, but it is also fire, with its potential for purification and redemption. As cool, objective and American as Porter can seem, he is sometimes not far from Van Gogh.*⁴



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Elaine de Kooning

American, 1918–1989

John Ashbery, 1975

Oil on board, 34 x 30 in.

Marion Stratton Gould Fund,

99.3

Courtesy the estate.

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

Porter, who died in Southampton in 1975, was a man of strong opinions in politics and art. He was also a passionate environmentalist, and an avid critic of encroaching development and technological intrusions like the Shoreham Nuclear Power Station planned for eastern Long Island, sullyng the natural landscape and threatening his idyllic home.⁵ His art reviews, poetry, and especially his paintings, are, says Justin Spring,

*an essentially diaristic project in which the artist perpetually sought to define for himself his relation to the world. Only when that project has been appreciated in its literary, critical and artistic entirety will Porter be given the recognition that he is due as—in his friend [the poet] John Ashbery's words—"perhaps the major American artist of this century."*⁶

Joan Ludman, art historian and independent scholar, is the author of the catalogues raisonnés.