

1967

An Investigation of the Structural Qualities of Certain Technical Elements in a Series of Oil Paintings Related to the Figure

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13

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE STRUCTURAL QUALITIES
OF CERTAIN TECHNICAL ELEMENTS
IN A SERIES OF OIL PAINTINGS RELATED TO THE FIGURE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Art

by
Gretchen Hartsock Teague
September 1967

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APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Appreciation is extended to the members of the Central Washington State College Department of Art who contributed their time, knowledge and advice throughout this study. Dr. Louis Kollmeyer is given recognition for his valuable contribution as committee chairman. Recognition is given to Mr. Edward Haines for his participation in critiques throughout the progress of the study and to Dr. Stephen Bayless, who served on the committee in its inception. Special recognition and appreciation is given to Miss Diana Roulo for her patient and constant advice and attention to the study and for the contagious enthusiasm with which she served as a committee member.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

The history of art is a history of expression. Whatever the artist's personal aims of expression: didactic, humanistic or emotional, he is constantly seeking solutions to individual problems that impede this expression. Structure in painting is one such problem. Recognizing the question, the artist formulates methods for solving this problem and proceeds to examine the technical means available to him.

Technical innovations have given the artist the tools of aerial and linear perspective. Scientific studies into the nature of color have provided him with knowledge of the objective and subjective use of value, hue, intensity and temperature and an understanding of the elements of design and composition supply further instruments. These are the technical means available to the artist and he can, if he chooses, employ them to create illusions of three-dimensional form and space rising to the highest degree of naturalism.

However, the structural quality of a painting need not depend on the extent to which the work approximates nature, nor does structure in painting apply to positive form only. Structural relationships exist between positive and negative forms as well and ultimately the finished product should present a total structural unity.

For the purposes of this study of structure in painting, the candidate has chosen the human figure to represent the positive forms and further she chooses to recognize the integrity of the two-dimensional nature of the format as sufficient area in which to examine the problem of structure.

Therefore, the series of paintings will be primarily two-dimensional. Where references to illusion or realism appear through the use of technical elements of line, color, texture, space, form they should not be interpreted as primary aims, but as secondary means of articulating the relationships of figure to ground as they compliment and aid structure.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of this study is (1) to investigate structural qualities of certain technical elements of oil painting, (2) to apply these qualities and means to a series of oil paintings related to the figure, (3) to evaluate the quality of structure achieved by these means, and (4) to arrive at conclusions and suggestions for future modifications of the candidate's paintings techniques.

Importance of the study. Each artist employs technical means to achieve his own mode of expression, but each artist arrives at independent conclusions as to the most

functional and effective technical means of achieving the desired expression. The candidate believes that these conclusions often are based on habit and that periodic, controlled re-examination of means available to him may serve to broaden and improve his ability to choose and manipulate these means and increase his expressive effectiveness.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Positive form. For the purposes of this study, the human figure. Any form with an actual or implied boundary.

Negative form. The space that surrounds the positive form. Also called ground.

Figure-ground. Used to define relationships between positive and negative forms.

Technical elements. Technical means. Plastic elements or means. Refers to the specific elements of line, color, space, value, texture.

Expression. Refers to the personal interpretation placed on the positive and negative forms through the artist's choice of and placement of the technical elements.

Structure. (1) The individual parts (elements) that combine to create the total composition. (2) The total composition derived from the combination of the parts. Used

synonymously with Form.

Plastic. Capable of being molded. Refers to the "...effort to reproduce three-dimensional form, including painting." (8:88)

Pictorial Structure. Refers to the creation of plastic form through the use of plane. (15:24)

Plane. (1) A level surface "...such as a canvas." (8:88)
(2) A level surface of paint placed in relation to other level surfaces of paint to create pictorial structure.
(3) In pictorial structure the plane may be molded to create a curved (concave, convex) surface.

III. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

At the point at which the investigation began, the candidate's painting was dominated by a monochromatic color scheme, a reliance on contour line as an attempt to express positive form and strong value contrasts which were emphatic but failed insofar as they did not act spatially or in terms of positive-negative relationships. In December 1966, specific rules were self-imposed which were related to these habits. A broader palette was required, an attempt to avoid the instinctive use of the sensuous contour line as a crutch was made and strong value contrasts were avoided where they acted as dramatic passages unrelated to total unity.

As indicated, the study was begun in December 1966. The last painting was completed in June 1967. It was decided at the outset of the study that structural concepts could be examined within the limited subject matter of the figure.

Selection of the paintings for representation in the thesis was a determination of the Graduate Committee and the candidate.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I. INTRODUCTION

The statement of the problem in this thesis has presumed that structure in painting is directly related to the manner in which individual elements of a composition are combined to create this structure. The review of literature has been directed at substantiating this assumption and has attempted to explain the various aspects of structure in painting.

Much information was found related to the elements of line, color, texture and space and how the combination of these factors contributes to the quality of structure. But in order to understand their functions it is necessary to consider the quantitative aspects of structure as well. This is to say that a definition of structure implies more than the mechanical aspect of the word. Because of this, it is necessary to state here that often the word form is used in the process of defining structure and structure used in defining form. The candidate recognizes that some difference of opinion exists as to the interpretation of the limits of the words form and structure, but has chosen, for the purposes of this study to use the words synonymously. Faulkner, Ziegfeld and Hill (4:306) point out two meanings for form in their

discussion of the plastic elements. In the broad sense, form is interpreted as total organization, while in a narrower sense, it relates to a plastic element whose character suggests mass, shape, or structure.

In his book Art Structure, Rasmusen (10:6-7) equates form with "...plastic structure, the inner and outer shape of an existing object." He further states:

This would apply to any single part as well as to a combination or group of units which go to make up the whole. In a painting form is the resulting appearance of a combination of the quantities line, tone, space and color. [italics in the original]
(10:6-7)

II. THE QUANTITATIVE ASPECTS OF STRUCTURE

With the preceding definitions recognizing form in a painting as a total structural entity, composed of smaller structural components is possible. Rasmusen (10:7) breaks down his broad definition however, by dividing structure according to its physical, psychological and design characteristics.

Physical structure is achieved through technical means. From the point at which the artist chooses his medium, his ground, and applies his skill and quality of craftsmanship to these materials, he is dealing with one aspect of structure. He is concerned here with structural materials and techniques, their durability and their suitability as they will, in the end, serve the quality of a physical product. (10:7)

At the same time the artist is dealing with what Rasmusen calls "theme" and defines as psychological structure. Relating these to specific materials such as oil and canvas, the medium is applied to the ground in a manner suitable to the expressive aim of the artist. The artist chooses to employ the materials to create a line, place a color, define a texture or suggest a space for an expressive effect. (10:7)

In the act of seeking expression through physical methods, the artist deals with the third aspect of structure, that of design structure. Graves points out the means with which the artist deals to accomplish this structural task.

All visual design may be reduced to seven elements, factors, or dimensions. These elements are line, direction, shape, size, texture, value and color. These elements are the building blocks of art structure. They are the alphabet or scale of graphic expression. When an artist organizes these elements he creates form, which is design or composition. Art is manmade order, that is structure or form. (6:3)

Faulkner calls the artist's means the plastic elements and lists them as form, line, space, texture and color, reducing their number to five but agrees with Graves when he says:

...artists, whether painters, sculptors, architects, industrial designers, or craftsmen, use the plastic elements [*italics in the original*] ...when they express their plastic (or graphic) [*italics in the original*] ideas. (4:304)

III. ELEMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Much of the literature reviewed emphasizes the conclusion that individually each of the plastic elements, line, color, texture, space, form, possess varying expressive characteristics. Rasmusen (10:35) says in fact, that "each of the plastic means in isolation has certain advancing-receding properties which are valuable in...design." Examining line specifically, he points out that it can be horizontal in character, short or wavy and can be even "more imaginary than real." (10:9) Where it serves as a boundary of spaces, objects or masses it is structural in character. (10:8)

However, though a line or a space or a texture constitutes a form or a structural unit, in painting it does not exist alone but rather in relation to each of the other elements. Graves states in the Preface to The Art of Color and Design:

A principal of design therefore, is a law of relationships or a plan of organization that determines the way in which the elements must be combined to accomplish a particular effect. (6:17-18)

Saarinen discusses the relationship of these elements in Search for Form. Speaking specifically of the element of color, he states:

Is there a beautiful color, as such? Indeed, as such, there is no like thing. The color that you might consider beautiful is always discerned in correlation with contiguous color, or you picture a certain amount of this color to be employed with other colors for some particular purpose...Thus any manifestation of

form is dependent on a multitude of circumstances. Otherwise the manifestation of form not only loses its quality, but its effects might even become reversed as well. (13:136)

Rasmusen expands on the importance of understanding the relationships between elements and their combination in a work of art in the following statement:

...seldom in a good work of painting or sculpture are any of the means found in isolation, but many and sometimes all of them are interwoven and combined to create volumes, tensions, rhythms, and total form. ...The artist's problem is to organize all the structural elements within and in relation to the prescribed field, balancing weight against weight, force against force, movement against movement creating an organism that in its sum total is alive and complete. (10:33)

Saarinen (13:135-136) speaks of the human figure and head and their relationships of form to form, saying that the head, along with its psychological structure or its expressiveness, is beautiful because of its relationship to the body as a whole.

Levy defines form as "The structural elements in a work of art whereby the artist's conception and vision is given tangible form." (8:50-51) thereby suggesting again that total form is a result of a combining act.

Aaron Berkman sums up the attitude on the importance of understanding the design elements in creating pictorial structure in the following quote:

Organization, construction, design—that is what... artists were seeking. As a result of their efforts the modern artist now possesses the elements of a new plastic language. Line, color, planes, textures organization, design, structure—the basis for a new order. (1:134)

IV. THE QUALITY OF STRUCTURE RELATED TO THE PLASTIC MEANS

Looking further into the literature on the organization of the plastic elements, the candidate was made aware that the order of organization of the plastic means, the technical application of structural elements must, in the end, face a qualifying judgment. According to the literature reviewed, this qualifying factor seems to lie in the fusion of unity and vitality.

Discussing the beauty of form, Santayana (14:98-99) recognizes the varying character of elements acting independently, but further states that in seeking an aesthetic form, it is the manner of combination of elements that constitutes a vital unity and therefore a virtuous beauty. Where symmetry is evident in a work, through repetition a type of unity of similarity occurs, and true form must result from a more vital unity, "a unity of the manifold." This, Santayana insists, is an action of the mind, a conscious relating of separate parts, one to another to form a pleasing unity he calls a synthesis.

Rasmusen states that taking our guide from nature or the universe, the artist must learn to transmit unity and vitality to the canvas. "In unity there is balance, completeness, and perfection. In vitality there is force, movement, energy, and life." (10:35)

Rothschild, in his discussion of style in art contends

that unity is essential to a work of art. It is the quality of unity that "...transforms a collection of sensations in the plastic arts into a work of art...". (12:40)

Venturi (16:61) proposes that the combination of elements in a painting is a result of a synthesis also, which he calls taste. Properly and sensibly combined, this synthesis constitutes art, the total form, the unity.

Emond (3:118-119) points out in his study On Art and Unity that the word order is preferred by some critics and suggests that the connotation of the word order allows for dynamic composition and permits the vitality of contrasts to exist with and in relationship to formal unity when qualifying a work as art.

V. THE TECHNICAL ELEMENTS AS ANALYZED BY CERTAIN ARTISTS

Writing of de Kooning, Thomas Hess refers to the synthesizing of elements to the ultimate.

It is important to keep in mind that de Kooning's art is all of a piece. It is necessary prosaically to dissect its various elements for discussion. But in their life as facts, the paintings never appear as sums of elements; their unity is their breath. (7:15)

According to E.P. Richardson, (11:269) Whistler's conscious synthesis of elements is the direct cause of his style. Combining the tonal qualities of Velasques, the two-dimensional space quality of Japanese prints, his personal interest in light, and the Spanish influence on his subject

in the full length portrait, a style is manifested through personal interpretation and application of these elements.

Whistler himself said of artists:

Nature contains the elements, in color and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick and choose and group with science these elements, that the result may be beautiful. (5:349-350)

He recognized the necessity for synthesizing these individual elements and stated, "A picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared." (5:350)

Toulouse Lautrec, who believed that " 'Nothing exists but the figure.' " in painting, was, according to Cooper (2:4-6) a master of the technical means. His strongest inspirations came through Velasquez, Degas and Japanese prints. During his mature period, Lautrec devised his own methods for adapting the elements as they were used by those who influenced his art. Deserting Impressionism and its study of the effects of light, he adopted the expressive linear quality of the Japanese to a point of rhythmic unity. Cooper analyzes Lautrec's work as compositions employing masses of flat color, reducing light and shade for its modeling effect, silhouetting his figures, expanding his color range and "...evolving a means of spatial representation which would allow his human beings to exist in the round without violating the flat surface of his canvas." His elemental

analysis provided a means for depicting sculptural form along with a unique decorative quality of line and plane.

Loran (9:26-27) in his discussion of Cezanne's compositional techniques gives Cezanne the credit for being the first to understand the advancing and receding qualities of the element of color. However, Loran contends that Cezanne sought a color balance in relation to the two-dimensional picture plane and color to color, rather than statements in linear or aerial perspective. Loran insists that line was never abandoned by Cezanne, and did in fact serve as an important element in Cezanne's structure of volumes, but that the essence of his structural achievements lay in his "...organization of the important underlying planes."

CHAPTER III

THE INVESTIGATION AND RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

I. MATERIALS USED IN THE INVESTIGATION

Standard artist oils were used exclusively in producing the paintings. The ground consisted of canvas prepared with gesso and an acrylic polymer emulsion.

Mediums employed were (1) equal parts of stand oil and damar varnish to four parts turpentine, and (2) equal parts of damar varnish, linseed oil and turpentine. The first medium proved somewhat unsatisfactory in its turpentine ratio, producing a somewhat matte quality and was abandoned in favor of the second. Retouch varnish was used freely during the painting process.

Standard oil painting brushes were used in combination with some commercial paint brushes, but a change in the type and size of brushes occurred at a point in the study and will be discussed in the record of the investigation.

The rectangular format of all of the paintings was intentional but size determination was arbitrary. It was decided at the beginning of the study, however, to do the largest painting last.

II. THE INVESTIGATION

It is important to point out at the outset of this report of the investigation that shortly after it was started an unexpected direction began to develop. Although a concentrated effort was being made to approach the painting in relation to the problem as defined and researched, all of the developmental problems were not anticipated, but rather new ones grew out of the study and dominated each work in the process of its creation.

Psychological, physical and design structure, as defined in the preceding chapter, seemed to develop satisfactorily as they were examined with relation to the individual plastic elements. However, the paintings still lacked a quality which will be termed Pictorial Structure. The plastic elements were the means, but the ends failed to achieve a total plastic unity of structure. The inherent quality of the means and medium were being betrayed.

The critical examination of the work that follows, in the order of its development, will point up the direction the study took, the point at which an awareness of this dominant problem occurred and the development of a direct attack on this problem.

The subject matter for the first painting completed under the restrictions of the Limitations of the Study was derived from a series of sketches of a clothed, seated figure.

The decision to clothe the figure was directly related to the problem as it was felt color habits related to painting nudes might be avoided to some extent. In its completed stage "Seated Figure," a canvas measuring $43\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 36 inches, did represent some extension of the palette but still maintained an overall narrow color mood in the blue-green range. Although the value contrasts had spatial significance, observations of the painting after a "rest period" made the candidate aware that they were still used in a dramatic manner. Applied contour line was controlled, but the contour still dominated the form of the figure as an edge.

A plastic quality did emerge with the chair form but this, it must be admitted, was accidental. Several more accidents of this type occurred during the course of the study before recognition of their importance was firmly established in the candidate's mind.



FIGURE 1
SEATED FIGURE

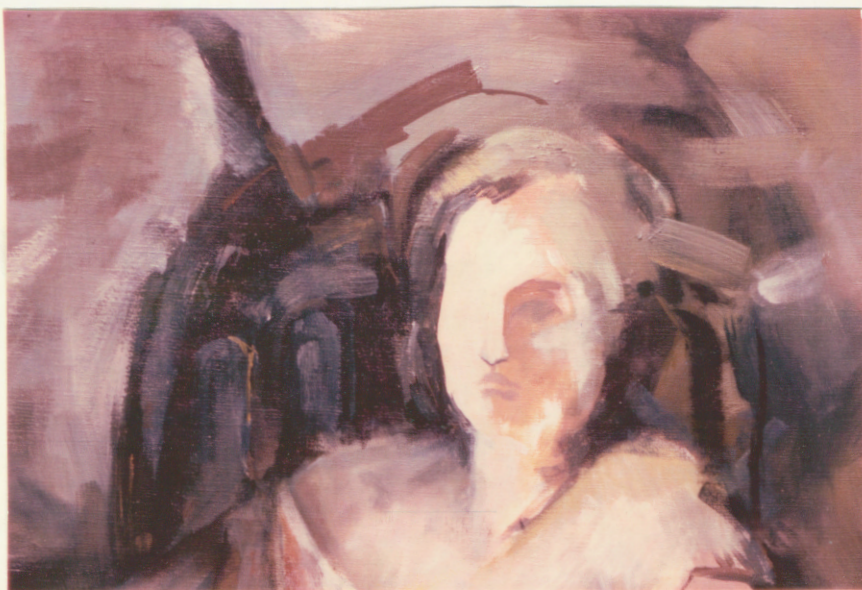


FIGURE 2
DETAIL OF SEATED FIGURE

A second painting entitled "Figures in Landscape," measuring $43\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 36 inches, was completed in February 1967. Acting under the same restrictions as in "Seated Figure" the additional problem of two figures, rather than one was imposed. The palette broadened somewhat, but an analogous color dominance still existed as it had in the first painting. The tendency toward line was powerful, particularly in the forward figure. A broadened, more relaxed brush stroke was achieved in the back figure and the value changes in this figure were related in mind to form but in practice acted loosely and floated around and above the form rather than acting to create it.



FIGURE 3

FIGURES IN LANDSCAPE

"Painting Three," measuring 40 inches by 53½ inches, completed in April, represented a strong advance in the use of color. While a definite step forward was made with this element, sensuous contour line reappeared and color selection was arbitrary to a major extent. A similar chair form as in "Seated Figure" (Figure 2) reappeared and determined the breadth of the palette in the rest of the painting.

If the figures are viewed separately, and their tendency to exist independent of each other is strong, each of them again is dominated by an individual analogous color scheme. Although the figures are themselves quite flat and space between figures is practically nonexistent, accidents occurred in this painting that began to make the candidate aware that color planes can and should be created to give the work pictorial structure. A few passages suggested movement into a third dimension, something beyond the height and breadth of the format.

A detail of the shoulders (Figure 5) shows where dark contour lines sit above light planes. The advancing quality of the light color acting with the receding quality of the dark line and placed in opposition to their spatial movement tendencies serves to create a spatial tension that forces the two to work together rather than exist without relation to each other.



FIGURE 4

PAINTING THREE



FIGURE 5

DETAIL OF PAINTING THREE

A detail of the head of the back figure (Figure 6) with darker strokes that move into the ground and the ground color that penetrates the positive form, begin to indicate a volume or space within a form. The elements are beginning to act plastically to create structure.

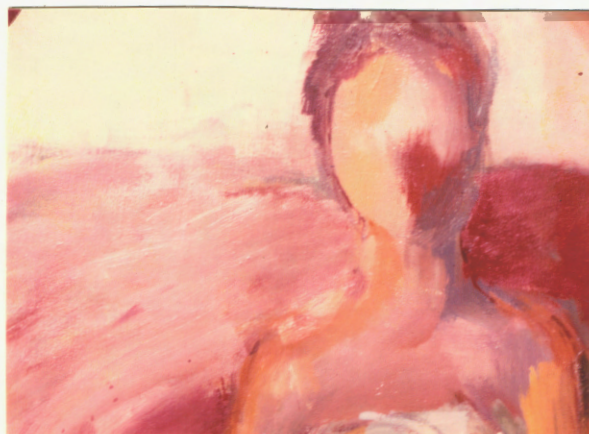


FIGURE 6

DETAIL OF HEAD OF PAINTING THREE

In "Figure Forms," a painting completed in early May and measuring 40 inches by 37½ inches, the candidate sought to create movement and volume intentionally, rather than by accident. Color movement into and out of positive and negative forms were attempted. The edges loosed, however the brush stroke tightened with a misinterpretation of movement. Positive forms suggested greater volume but value served in place of, instead of along with, color in creating these forms. The final statement was complete and unified but its unity was based on repetition and lacked personal commitment on the part of the painter.



FIGURE 7

FIGURE FORMS

A second painting completed in May, measuring $41\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $37\frac{1}{2}$ inches, entitled "Figures With Table," shows a persistence of the diagonal brush stroke but also indicates some growth in size and strength of the stroke.



FIGURE 8

FIGURES WITH TABLE

Details of the two figures illustrate how the analogous color theme appeared in the forward figure but was freed from this convention in the back figure. Although the color range was broad in this back figure, it was not arbitrary. Relationships of figure to ground in color existed and their choice and placement was intentional with regard to the structure of the form. Movement of stroke and structural movement began to occur together. Planes of movement and position exist in a modest manner, suggesting more space

between figures than had occurred in the previous paintings.

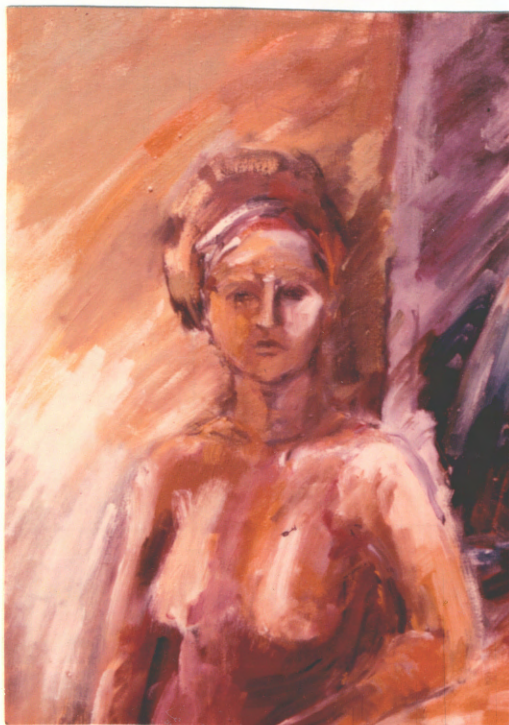


FIGURE 9

DETAIL OF FORWARD FIGURE OF FIGURES WITH TABLE



FIGURE 10

DETAIL OF BACK FIGURE OF FIGURES WITH TABLE

In "Painting Number Six," compositional problems inherent from the beginning overpowered the painting and it was eliminated in the process of selection for representation in this thesis. However, a detail of an arm from the painting shows a particularly strong structural form.

Opposing direction of strokes, color planes that create pictorial space, movement of color into and through other color with visual excitement, line and texture are all present in this area and plastic structure was achieved intentionally.

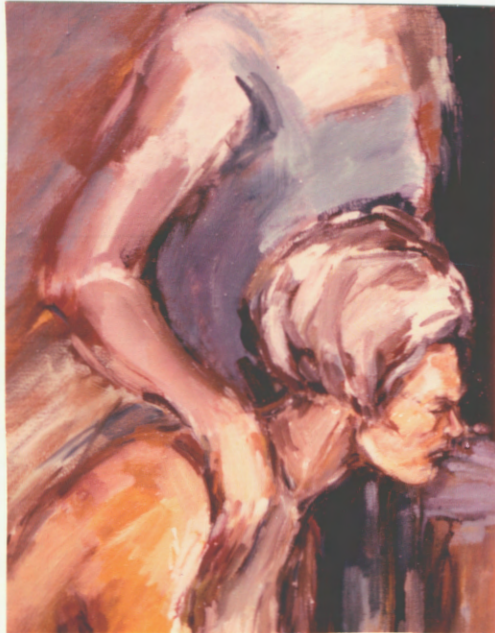


FIGURE II
DETAIL OF PAINTING NUMBER SIX

The painting "Two Figures" had been started earlier in the study. The canvas had been covered with broad flat areas of color but had been put aside for a period because figure to figure and figure to ground relationships lacked spatial coherence. The positive forms, although placed one in front of another, appeared to sit on the same plane and lacked convincing volume.

When approaching the painting the second time, some of the underpainting was used intentionally in a direct attempt to create pictorial structure. The aim was to achieve this quality throughout the entire canvas. The amount of success was not this profound but the problems were more readily visualized, the approach was conscious and for the first time a strength and vitality resulted in the background.



FIGURE 12
TWO FIGURES

A large canvas measuring 46 inches by $61\frac{1}{2}$ inches was constructed for the last painting in the study. Time, as well as the progress that the candidate felt was made on the last painting were determining factors in the decision to proceed to the larger canvas and begin a single figure study. It was felt that color habits that persisted before the study began could be avoided now and that a swifter approach could be made.

Some underpainting was done on the canvas, including a wash sketch of the figure. Larger brushes, heavily loaded with paint were used after this stage. Although larger brushes had been used in some areas on previous paintings, they had varied in style. In "Figure Study" flats were used exclusively since the character of the stroke produced by flats makes them more suitable for producing active structural planes.

The painting as a whole represents a greater unity of style and mood or "Technique" and "theme", however certain areas do dominate and belie a total synthesis. Details of a leg (Figure 14) and an arm (Figure 15) are, in the candidate's opinion, powerful and successful structural accomplishments. A detail of the head (Figure 16) though structurally solid, lacks a painterly quality characteristic of the rest of the painting and tends to be more geometric in concept.



FIGURE 13
FIGURE STUDY



FIGURE 14
DETAIL OF LEG OF FIGURE STUDY

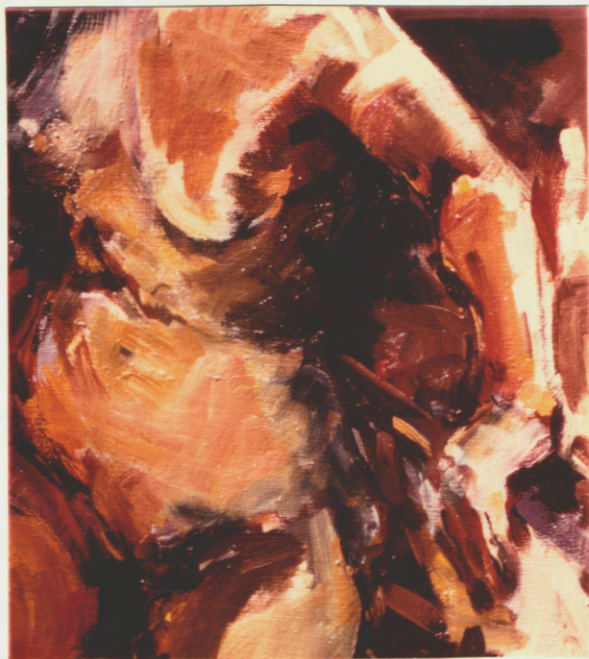


FIGURE 15
DETAIL OF ARM OF FIGURE STUDY

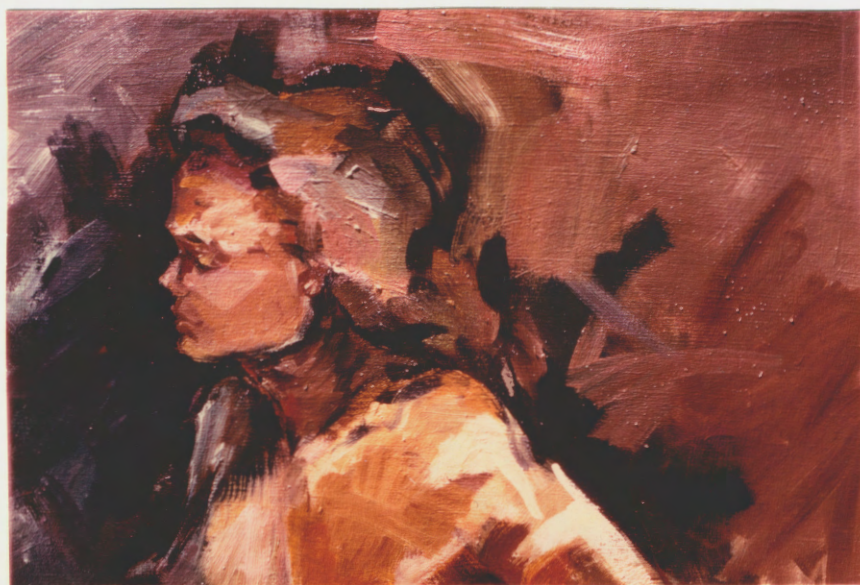


FIGURE 16
DETAIL OF HEAD OF FIGURE STUDY

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I. SUMMARY

At the outset of this investigation the candidate was well aware of the significance of manipulating the plastic means. Since the study undertaken and reported here represents a re-examination of these means rather than a primary introduction to them, evaluation of the validity of the hypothesis was based on a measure of improved structural quality from a point prior to the beginning of the study. To a point in the investigation, the structure was altered but not necessarily improved. To the extent that the candidate became aware that certain relationships of element to element served to strengthen or weaken the qualitative aspects of structure, the hypothesis was supported.

However, an understanding of the term structure in painting and a full comprehension of the potential in an approach related to pictorial structure came late in the study, therefore the later paintings are solutions to the problems hypothesized in the beginning, but fail as representations of adequate solutions to the problems that developed in the process of the study. The preceding statement should not be interpreted as a negative evaluation of the worth of the study but should, on the contrary, indicate

that the study served a twofold purpose, and, in the candidate's opinion, underscores the value of such a study.

II. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

To conclude that solutions arrived at through a precise examination of specific problems are ultimates in artistic achievement is absurd. Although an artist seeks an instinctive understanding and use of his means, one creative measure of his ability may lie in his selective re-use of solutions achieved to the extent that he does not allow himself to recreate new habits to replace old ones. Applying this theory to this study it can be said that although the candidate's ability to create certain qualities of calm and tension within and between forms has developed in the process of this investigation, this should not indicate that the particular effects achieved will necessarily serve as successful solutions to future paintings, but should suggest instead that with the germination of each new problem and recognition that the problem is a new one, the solution must be new in order to increase the expressive breadth of the artist.

A direction for further study has already been determined as a result of this study. The problem of pictorial structure has not yet been solved. An examination of methods of depicting a convincing volume and pictorial space in terms of planes in positions of calm and tension will be attempted.

Some limitations to the study have already been imposed, related to the elimination of wash drawings prior to the true painting process and increased speed requirements in the act of creation. Further, examination of pictorial structure need not be limited to figure studies and an expansion of subject matter will be explored.

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