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AN INTERPRETATIVE ESSAY CONCERNING TWELVE PAINTINGS
ILLUSTRATING FANTASY

by
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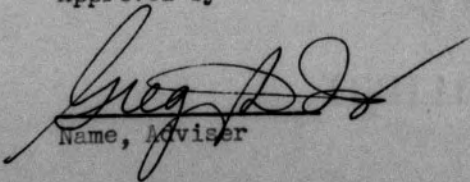

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INTRODUCTION

"Painting is a paradox in which narration becomes poetic fantasy, description gives way to suggestion, concrete objects become evocative configurations, never obvious, never over-stated, and yet an emphatic intensification of experience and thought."¹

The purpose of this essay is to interpret the author's thesis paintings which, exist as a manifestation of his reality from reality. The objective has been to carry each observer into his own soul in order to conjure a realm of existence in which one may stretch each sense to its point of transcendence. Here, where the absence of reason is the fuel for flight, the only means of mental conveyance to the sublime, human knowledge and experience cease; and one is able to realize his God-reflected self and grasp a bit of the infinite.

There is a mood which captivates and frees the human mind from the directness of reality--and seems as important. Given complete freedom, it is capable of becoming reality; controlled, it refreshes and relaxes. This mood is fantasy--the fantasy found in a Perrault fairy tale, where no moral is sought or lesson prescribed. It is the recognition of a naive freshness embodied in the imagination of a child, apparently free from the sophisticated conflicts within adults.

Fantasy has been used to instruct, suggest, and acclaim moral and ethical theories; or it has stood merely to stimulate the aesthetic sense. The latter being the artist's concern, it is his

¹ Cameron Booth, 40 American Painters, 1940-1950. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1951), p. 9.

desire to work with fantasy in painting and try to develop and possibly originate a means toward a new direction that may add to the field of aesthetics. By considering this realm of make-believe, which grows out of the gamut of human experiences, he hopes to lift it from its pure state and deal with it intellectually without destroying its child-like vitality.

In his diary of the film "La Belle et la Bete", which concerns the mood of fantasy, Jean Cocteau says what is applicable to this painter's work:

It is up to us (that is to me and my unit, in fact, one entity) to avoid those particular things which can break the spell of a fairy story, for when it comes to sequence, the world of make-believe is at least as susceptible as the world of reality.

For fantasy has its own laws which are as rigid as those of perspective. One can focus on what is distant, and hide what is near, but the style remains defined and is so delicate that the slightest false note jars. I am not saying that I have achieved this, but that is what I shall attempt within the means at my disposal.

My method is simple; not to aim at poetry. That must come of its own accord. The very word whispered will frighten it away. I shall try to build a table. It will be up to you to eat at it, to criticize, or to chop it up for firewood.²

In the discussion of a painter's work it is customary to use the chronology of execution either as the agent to show his progression toward maturity and mastery of style or as a convenience for the writer to obtain a unity of expression. The technique used in this paper will be in the latter sense. Because the progressive mechanism of the creative process should be complete and separately composed in each painting, the style of a painter must come and can

² Jean Cocteau, Diary of a Film (La Belle et la Bete). (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950), p. 15.

come only when once the artist's purpose of statement is integrated with his whole being.

Within the mood of fantasy one can obtain the height of sensuous enjoyment, which can be unveiled through subject, form, and color. Properly used, these elements will exert a compelling urge to the spectator to travel. This has been the artist's wish in the constructing of each painting--that each man become an Odysseus, whose wanderings will carry him to an oblivious misty realm to gain a deeper understanding of himself. This can be done only if he relaxes his binding grip on his imagination, releases it through exultation, and lets it caper among the romanticism of vapor-expelling ruins.

PART I

SUBJECT

Subject, the appearance of natural forms suggesting narration, has a prominent position as an element in the enjoyment of these paintings. Subject is used by this painter to attract the spectator's attention and stimulate his imagination through suggestion rather than statement. Solely devoted to the translation of a tale into a visual experience, the literary painter can become too enthralled with narration to create a fine painting, as he often neglects formal elements of composition and sincere expressions of emotions and feelings.

In the execution of most of these paintings subject developed to act as a unifying agent to guide toward a completion of the work. Such an approach overcame the emotional sag of retaining concentrated interest after the initial stimulus. The spontaneity in the primary desire to paint can often be lost in a canvas if a great deal of time is required for the execution. To retain the initial inspiration it would be best to finish the work in one sitting; but, as this is rarely possible, subject acts as one means of extending the mood of fantasy.

Why a specific symbol has been selected; for example, the headdresses of the women, is rather vague. It is like the drawing of a bucket from the well--one depends upon the splash and weight to determine how full it will be when it reaches the surface. In other words, in finding explanations for recurrent symbols, it is

necessary to draw on the senses when probing into the recesses of the dark well of clouded reasons.

Girl with Cage had its conception in a pen and brush drawing. Like the genesis of the painting, subject in the drawing emerged after an initial pleasure in the kinesthetic sensations and the tactile pleasure derived from the use of the tools, both of which play a part in the creative experience.

After this immediate enjoyment was transposed to the paper, suggestion, drawing on the artist's love of imagery, took hold and evolution commenced. The main problem concerned was the transposing into paint the allegory of the bird's assuming the Poetic Spirit restrained by Vain Convention continuing her vigil as protectress.

Born in the Nymphs and used throughout the rest of the paintings, the evocative quality is a characteristic element to interest the spectator and stimulate his imagination to inquire and to search for the illusive conclusion. Care has been given to the interpretation of the languid and unconscious feminine gestures, such as the movement of the hand to the hair--a movement that might occur at the approach of a possible visitor. Through this motion attention is called to a specific area of paint, of which the artist is particularly fond.

From the enchanted mood of composure in Nymphs, Cimmerian Mist represents the enchanted mood of quietude complemented by the warmth of humanity mingling with a cool, silvery silence. This introduces a second quality, that of escape, of which fantasy is the portal. From Cimmerian Mist this theme becomes evident, not only

in their subject patterns, but also in their titles. As to the place the titles of the paintings play in the over-all construction, a note should be added. In Girl with Cage, Post-Confession, Prometheus, Colossus, and Family Group they exist merely to differentiate the works. Since Cimmerian Mist, Somnolence, Departure of Pheobus, Respite, Ecstatic Adduction, and Consecration become descriptive as poetic titles and act as symbolic clues, greater explanation would destroy their prime function.

This game-like purpose establishes a third quality, utilizing the riddle, which differs from the evocative in that a specific answer can be derived, whereas the conclusion to the evocative is uncertain. In order not to deprive the observer of his conquest in solving the riddles in the paintings, a poem written by the artist in 1950 is given to illustrate indirectly the method of approach:

REVEALING DEPTHS

The smile was but an empty lake
with dahlias all around,
decaying on the crumbling banks
which groaned with human weight.
Rills ran through the cracking earth
like dwindling veins of blighted life,
which begged the generous sun
for bits of failing light.

Washed pebbles lay about,
(Count them if you like)
remnants caused by charging grains
caught beneath a skeleton whose bones were premature.

Digging, digging in the ground--
A treasure might be found.

The dampness in two eyes
reveals a fallen hill,
which averts the floating sighs,
never reaching sandless tides,
and cuts the vital source
now growing with remorse.

Lizards, clinging on a branch, watch the
 smothering clouds
 wave their shifting, bloated arms to serpents
 on the ground.

Digging, digging in the ground--
 A treasure might be found.

With the title of the poem, "Revealing Depths," as a clue the following couplet suggests that an answer is to be found:

Digging, digging in the ground--
 A treasure might be found.

The metaphor in the first verse describes a scene suggesting the results of a previous energy which has caused the lake to dwindle; and that of the second verse supplies a landslide, a "fallen hill," as the energy which has diverted the natural course of the stream. The conclusion to the riddle should be "the eyes reveal what the smile conceals."

This illustration should give the spectator an insight into what his concern should be for each symbolic, pictorial image. That an artist can often become too personal with his pictorial images to convey even the general meaning of them is of primary concern to this painter. His purpose has been to keep them, not too personal, but general, as the particular would be too limiting for both the spectator and the artist. The answers to the painted riddles are in the nature of truths to be applied specifically and individually to the observer.

Post-Confession began to represent but not fully to realize, as did such drawings as Catholic Action and City in the Sea, the spiritual as the self in its relation to God. Like Gothic architecture the medium of reaching columns and vaulting is used to symbolize man's grasping for the infinite.

Although humanity, represented as mother and child, is used for contrast only in Cimmerian Mist, that element intensified in detail of drawing and enhanced by a more vital rhythm, is the major subject in Prometheus.

The fourth quality, lyricism, upon which these paintings have grown, acts as a skeleton, the basic support for the aesthetic theory. Colossus is the pure embodiment of the lyrical quality--that expressing the most inward emotions of the artist. Not particularly through actual subject, but rather through an atmospheric one, which plays upon man's love of spatial freedom, the emotions are manifested. Since space is related to form, that subject will be elaborated upon in the second part of this interpretive essay.

Although Phoebus Apollo's driving across the sky each day is considered a myth by modern man, fantasy can be more real in its reflection of man than scientific concepts. The painting, Departure of Phoebus, along with others which make classical allusions, tries to validate this hypothesis. It attempts to create a non-analytical mood to be felt through each individual's entire sensuous network rather than through a part, since the dissecting of paintings often develops a limited concept. The vitality of Phoebus, gliding to his home, and his fusion with the acropolis, where mortals display the gift of Prometheus, may be the starting point from which the spectator's emotions begin to rise.

In Respite the artist was experimenting to discover whether the mood of fantasy could be held just as well with rural symbols as with his customary images; such as, columns, moon, trees, and birds.

To form the pattern of Ecstatic Adduction subject interests and compositional interests are interwoven. If the former were omitted, the painting would become non-objective. In the artist's approach it is quite impossible to conceive of such an exclusion, because, if such a rejection were made, it would be at the expense of not having a cornerstone. The figure in the painting began as a two-dimensional movement pattern. As for the three-dimensional movement, a method of selecting from the drawing of two figures was used in order to realize the true subject purpose, that of leading the figure toward the adductive power.

Through the utilization of the reaching vertical, discussed previously, Consecration became to the artist the pure embodiment of spiritual semblance exemplified in the nude figure in the painting.

The four qualities: the evocative, the escape, the riddle, and the lyrical, have been the means by which subject incorporated fantasy.

PART II

FORM

In speaking of form in a painting one must define his meaning. Within this essay the word refers to two-dimensional and three-dimensional pattern, created by line, color, and value; and to subject incorporated in space.

In these paintings the main purpose of form has been to realize the infinite quality of space within a restricted area, in other words, to give space vital substance. This purpose gives an insight into the painter's symbolic usage of the nebulous, fog-like quality, which would probably stand merely as a technical means toward style unless an explanation were given.

This usage stems first from a delight in only the suggestion of form when fog obscures the complete contours which usually interrupt space and prevent one from going on an optical trip. Because of the rigidity of unequivocal vanishing-point perspective, which places a limitation on infinite travel, one's freedom from directed movement is not permitted. Another possible cause for the use of spatial mist could find its origin in the enjoyment derived from a study of Chinese landscape painting. The valid reason for the fog-like quality slips into the sub-conscious, and which of the two was the real stimulus can only be assumed.

"Portal to fantasy," the circular movement framing the inner picture, is poetically descriptive of a form-device used in Somnolence, Prometheus, Family Group, and Ecstatic Abduction. The

portal is used to achieve a sheer curtain-plane to break the three-dimensional space in the fashion that a stage curtain does. The purpose has not been to break the space rigidly by such a plane, but rather to insert a syncopated movement of semi-opaqueness to act as a transitory, interest quality before one travels into the accented theme of the painting. It also pulls the spectator to a level where he becomes an actual part of the composition. The "outside looking in" effect that the four sides of a painting often creates may be eliminated through this approach. Such an effect may be due to one's environmental association with two-dimensional windows. By pushing the "window frame" into the picture, the sides of the painting fade. Through this technique "spatial freedom," the desire of which seems to be basic in man's nature, occurs. As an escape, the arts aid man through releasing him from his natural limitations; such as, rivers, mountains, and forests, and of the self-inflicted ones; such as, his house, his work, and his family. The word, limitation, is used in a derogatory sense only when it limits too rigidly and destroys the imagination. Through the art modes freedom of space, experienced vicariously, ensues to deliver man from the stagnation of reality. It is better for one to respond to "spatial freedom" through the art modes rather than through actual travel, as the essence is interpreted for the observer, who, because of many distractions, often does not discriminate between the trivial and the profound.

This is a paradoxical age in art, when Impressionistic forms exist with Expressionistic ones, classic with romantic, and by so

doing it exhibits a healthful tolerance of many approaches. During this transitory period much misunderstanding arises, enabling pseudo-sensuousness to sell itself oftentimes as art. That approaches differing from all previous ones are accepted slowly is good because through such a rejection only the artist with infallible conviction will survive. Although there should be just enough self-doubt in an artist to make him look at his work analytically, objectivity should be greatly over-powered by his strength of "rightness" in his aesthetic philosophy.

The next concern is with the linear quality and its use as form in the paintings. To this artist line is a thin shape, containing the same dark and light value and potency as color. In painting the only true line is the direct, intangible movement existing between two magnetic points held apart by the artist for the sake of inference rather than statement. If a strong enough magnifying glass were held to even the finest line, its width becomes obvious; therefore to speak of "line" as describing form in painting should not be applied, but rather should be thought of as a thin form complementing a shape. If any form more than another distinguishes these paintings, it is that of line. The best example of the above definition is exhibited in Family Group, where the transition from one proportion to another is less than in a painting like Respite or Consecration. The lack of linear contrast in Family Group is one reason it stands apart from the others, which seem to be stylistically characterized by contrast of line to other form proportions.

Line suggests actual, or tangible substance, integrating itself with the intangible nebular ones. In Prometheus, Ecstatic Adduction, and Consecration this approach is used to create a unity, or oneness, of forms, discernible through value contrast rather than through color. The contrary approach, through color, is incorporated in the other paintings.

The drawings should be classified according to purpose rather than medium. Thisbe and Pyramus, Catholic Action, Two Despairs, City in the Sea, Adam and Eve, Grotto, and Tree Man are colorless paintings in that they are complete ideas, whereas the drawings, Girl with Cage, Lake Stroll, and Two Figures were notes toward another end and are only sectional parts of paintings. This does not imply that fragmentary drawings are of less aesthetic value but are merely incomplete ideas, which exist as the artist's visual reasoning or thoughts. However, they are complete and conclusive in their purpose and from this draw their value.

Although in Western thought, which differs from that of the East, it is customary to look at positive form, that of subject, as most important, this painter has tried to concern himself also with negative form, that of space.

PART III

COLOR

Color and its application is surely the most informative of all the elements of painting when an investigator is trying to understand an artist's work, because it is the most distinguishing and the easiest element to associate as feeling. The strangeness of the acceptance of color with its abstractness seems a paradox. If any quality more than another in painting is distrusted by man, it is that of abstractness, which contains to those unfamiliar with its use the same mysterious wizardry as writing, herbs, and eclipses did to medieval man. Although the distrustful spectator today is perplexed at quickly changing movements in art, frustrated by charlatans, and ignored by the painter, he can step up to a Jackson Pollock and sincerely praise his use of color but classify his form of painting as nonsensical.

In the use of color, limitation is of primary importance. Rather than endeavoring to submit any unique gift to the science of color usage, this artist has been more concerned with understanding the properties existing in his own work. Because of the past emphasis given by the Cubists to form and structure, to the neglect of stress on color, the enjoyment of color discovery is wide spread in the field of art today. Through the Cubists' limitation of use, each color applied to the canvas became vital in its own right rather than subordinate to another effect as was often the result in the approach of the Impressionists. Limitation does not mean

that a complexity of color can not exist but that a unity of complexity must. This painter's concept of achieving unity is based on a theory that complementary colors can not be used in equal proportions, since each will lose its intensity and worth. The Impressionists made clear the ability of man's eye to fuse colors, thereby creating a singular effect. By mixing equal quantities of red and green the artist produces a nondescript muddiness, and by placing these colors unmixed in a painting, he will cancel the vitality of each, producing a tonal disturbance. There are ways in which they may be used together for the sake of an emphatic contrast or of an actual complement to one another. When such a desire for their use arises, a great amount of one in proportion to the other, such as a fifty to one formula, is effective. In color usage there are actually few rules, the majority of which have been directed merely by environment. Use of moderation in the formula can not be overstated. When employing it, the artist should apply it to his painting with care, according to the demands in his specific case. It is very difficult to know how personal or general color theories are, for in shades of colors, of which thousands exist, it is impossible to pin-point one and say that it is a "pure" color; and it is even harder when looking at them in relation to other colors for one to label them conclusively. Therefore the decision as to what is the exact complement of a color has to be discovered by the individual painter. In fact, as to what any color actually is can be determined only by its use in a specific composition. Baudelaire said of Delacroix in an interpretation of that artist's work:

Just as a dream is placed in an atmosphere of color suited to it, so a conception, once it becomes a composition, must move about in an environment of color specifically its own.³

The statements made concerning complementary colors are applicable in the use of warm and cool ones in that a similar formula can be applied. In much the same fashion the strength of a warm color can be dulled, thereby losing potency, if an equal weight of a cool one is also used.

Dark and light value in most of the paintings has been keyed to white. The darkest value in Post-Confession, Prometheus, Respite, Departure of Phoebus, Consecration, and Cimmerian Mist has been presented through line nestled in and integrated with intangible substances to suggest itself as color calligraphy. To this artist these masses of color carrying light values and dominating the darker ones make the paintings, Girl with Cage, Nymphs, and Family Group, distinctive in this respect from the others.

If musical terms can be used in describing the color compositions in the paintings, Departure of Phoebus, Nymphs, Girl with Cage, Family Group, and possibly Ecstatic Abduction would assume symphonic proportion because of the greater complexity of themes and tones rising and falling in them rhythmically, while Post-Confession, Cimmerian Mist, Somnolence, Colossus, Respite, Prometheus, and Consecration would be nocturnes, as twilight songs. The symphonic paintings contain sectional luminosity because of the strong contrasts between larger dimensions of dark and light values and warm and cool

³ Charles Baudelaire, Eugene Delacroix, His Life and Work. (New York: Lear Publishers, Incorporated, 1947), p. 24.

colors, whereas the nocturnes claim an over-all luminosity through less. To create radiance of tone and to restrict contrast of value have been the means by which this painter attempted to capture the mood of fantasy through color.

In trying to grasp the real through the unreal, it has been romantically suggestive to use a medium of encaustic painting related to the one used by the translators of mythology, the Greek artists. Painting with bleached beeswax dissolved in turpentine and sealing it with heat has two advantages over the regular oil approach. The first is that little light glare occurs while the painter works; and, second, that because of the burning in process the short drying period allows immediate application of glazes.

Of the tools of painting, sometimes brushes, sometimes fingers, the palette knife was used mostly. Through the manipulation of a flexible steel blade, which records in paint the slightest pressure of the hand, this artist was able to feel by watching and experiencing the flow of color an exuberance which he attempted to transmit to the canvas. Because of the quantity of energy contained in color he kept constantly in mind the necessity of unifying and limiting his usage of it.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to translate verbally the qualities of fantasy embedded in these twelve paintings. As interpretation of feelings from one medium to another often causes the loss of a vitality existing in the original, a search has taken place to locate word symbols that could possibly suggest the qualities illustrating fantasy contained in these canvases.

To perceive the world of make-believe subject was used to create the following: the evocative element, which arouses and excites thought to a search for meaning; the escape element, which permits freedom from the trivialities of reality; the riddle element, by which the nerves of intelligence may be tickled to supply an answer; and the lyrical element, which delves into the artist's inner-being.

The principal means of form to realize the mood of fantasy as used by the painter has been that of suggestion rather than of statement, better worded by Keats:

"Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard
are sweeter."⁴

Through inference a bit of infinite space necessary to the mood may be grasped. Also by the "portal to fantasy" and other such form-devices, it has been attempted to entice each observer into

⁴ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Writers of the Western World. (Addison Hibbard, editor; New York; Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942) p. 722.

being an active participant in these painted illusions. The two major functions of color have been to lure the mood by creating an over-all radiance of tone and by restricting contrast of value.

Words not being this artist's medium, he feels that the paintings must carry the full meaning and speak for themselves.

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