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The Nostalgic Revival in America

Dale A. Twingley

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THE NOSTALGIC REVIVAL IN AMERICA

AS CONCEIVED BY THE MINIMALIST

by

Dale A. Twingley

Bachelor of Science, Minot State College 1970

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May
1972

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This thesis submitted by Dale A. Twingley in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is primarily concerned with the revival of nostalgia in America as seen by the minimal artist. The project reviews the current nostalgic trends in the media of theater, films, television, and radio, fashion, entertainment, business, and the arts. Attention is paid to the techniques by which this nostalgia is presented through the media of drawing and printmaking.

Because the artist's prints and drawings best illustrate the intentions of the artist, the majority of the paper is devoted to the study of them.

CHAPTER I

THE CURRENT NOSTALGIC TREND IN AMERICA

The zany zigzags and exotic exuberance of the old movies, the bold and brassy music of the jazz band, the sleek and shocking styles of the halter-neck dresses, wedgies, and chubby jackets, these are hallmarks of the past that America is reflecting upon today. This nostalgic revival began to take form in the last quarter decade and represents a form of aesthetic expression rather than educational reflection.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines nostalgia as "1. a severe melancholia caused by protracted absence from home or native place--homesickness."¹ Strange as it may seem, people of today in their 20's and 30's feel a longing for a time they never knew, but desire to recreate or just remember. Typical of the daydream, the current nostalgia selects only what is beautiful and pleasant and dims the memories of war, assassinations, and racial hatred. Those people who were adults before the 60's glance back at the "good old days" sighing with a bit of fondness or maybe sadness, but they too are guilty as are the young in their daydream of the "beautiful" past. Webster's second definition would probably be a bit more appropriate to this look at nostalgia: "a wistful or excessively sentimental

¹Webster's Third New International Dictionary (3rd ed.; 1961) p. 1542.

sometimes romanticized period or irrecoverable condition or setting in the past."² Without much question the most popular pastime of the present is looking back. By observing some of our contemporary media, ideas and interests, it can clearly be seen that many nostalgic facets are being revived.

One striking aspect of the nostalgic revival is seen in the media of film and the theater. Whether it be a 30-minute film of W. C. Fields or Mae West, or a re-release of entire stage productions such as Dames at Sea or On the Town they represent a striking development of a revived interest in the "good old days." One of the hottest selling tickets on Broadway is No, No, Nanette based on the unlikely combinations of an old show, old tunes, and some aging stars. The revival of Vincent Youmans' 1925 musical is supervised by oldtime movie showman Busby Berkley who was known for his spectacular productions including Footlight Parade 1933, and Wonder Bar 1934.

It is not unusual to find such antiquated film stars as Buster Keaton, Ben Blue, or Laurel and Hardy head-lining at a local pizza parlor or pub. The decor of these establishments is designed to create an atmosphere contemporary to the time of their origins. Most important, out of these arcades of entertainment comes the firm rebirth of the silent films and their creators. Nostalgic film festivals, too, are commonly planned for movie theaters and college campuses. There might be Gold Diggers of 1933 starring the comely comedienne Joan Blondell with Humphery Bogart, James Cagney and Errol Flynn, or Paulette Goddard in one of Charlie Chaplin's hit films.

²Ibid.

An old-time festival was presented during the fall semester of 1971 on the campus of the University of North Dakota and included the classics Citizen Kane with Orsen Wells and Duck Soup starring the Marx Brothers. Not only were these films milestones in American cinema, but they also represented a trend which can be found in other art forms today. Marcell Marseau, master of the silent skit known as mime, stated on The Tonight Show, January 6, 1972, that the media of mime has come into its own with the young people of the United States during the last decade and credited this occurrence to the revival and acceptance of silent films, another facet in the nostalgic remembrance of the past.

Movies such as Show Boat starring Kathryn Graysen, Ava Gardner, Howard Keel, Marge and Gower Champion, Joe E. Brown, and Agnes Moorhead were brought to the public through the media of television. Other film greats such as The Boy Friend have been remade with a cast that is contemporary yet nostalgic of the 20's. In this Kaleidoscope Films international production, the renowned model Twiggy played one of the leading roles. Special television series such as That Was the Year That Was, hosted by Mel Torme, led its viewers down memory lane by flashing edited historical film strips and adding sentimentally flavored bits of narrative. At first glance, the films suggested an ancient news reel, rescued from a storage shelf of some shut up 1930 movie house, but the atmosphere was set when the narrator asked, "Do you remember when . . .?"

With the revival of the speak easy and in conjunction with old-time films, came a revival of nostalgic music. In the earlier stages of this revival, the music consisted mostly of sing-along specialties

accompanied by a rick-a-tink piano and banjo. As interest in songs from the past increased so did the quality of the music being revived. Music by such greats as Benny Goodman, Lester Young, Gene Krupa, and Duke Ellington have been repressed and re-released. The television commercials advertising "Songs of the 30's and 40's" or "40 Years of Greatest Hits" are but a couple recent examples of promotion for recorded nostalgic music. This music is enjoyed not only for its reminiscent value, but also for the high quality of artistry presented.

Within the spectrum of the performing arts, or show business, singers, comedians, and instrumentalists are seen producing material from a nostalgic source. Beth Middler, a relatively new performer, has, on occasion, appeared on television and in nightclubs with her nostalgic routine. She is unique in so far as her act is based upon the recreation of songs from the separate decades of the past. The time periods range from the 20's through the 60's. Not only does she utilize nostalgic music, but she also dresses to blend stylistically with each appropriate decade. While Middler's performance stands as an important example of the revival of nostalgia, so too does she bring to mind the effect that nostalgia has had upon today's style of dress.

"The sleek fashion look of the 30's and 40's has resurfaced. Women with plucked brows are slipping into halter-neck dresses, wedgies and chubby jackets, while men are stepping out in two-tone shoes and bow ties."³ From the late 60's to the present day, many styles of dress have been a reflection of styles related to recent history.

³"Bright Lips of Yesterday," Life, 70, No. 6 (February 19, 1970), 52.

The "Roaring 20's" prompted such styles as the mini skirt, flapper caps, the revival of marcelled hair and red lipstick. Males of today are frequently clad in such reminiscent styles as knickers or wide ties and double-breasted suits, high lighted by saddle shoes which second for the wearing of spats. Gerald Clarke in his article "The Meaning of Nostalgia" in a recent Time magazine reflects on the styles of today.

After the first moon landings, it might have been expected that the lords of fashion would try to dress us in shiny vinyl astronaut suits. Instead, today's with-it woman often looks as if she is dashing off to the U.S.O. or to wrap bundles for Britain. The well-dressed man, newly attired in his double-breasted suit, could be off to vote for Roosevelt or Landon. Back in style are shoulder bags, wedgies, wrap-around fox scarves, and curly hairdos--all part of what Designer Bill Blass terms "the sexy vulgarity" of the 40's. Hot pants? You might have been arrested for calling them that, but there they were 30 years ago. "Most of the styles you see today I've worn already," remarked Rita Hayworth, who once helped make famous a garment called "shorts."⁴

It might also be noted that the styles of today are of a mixed origin, meaning that although one part of an outfit might be reminiscent of the 20's another part might be suggestive of the 30's or 40's. The mini skirt, which has been a relatively long-lived style in America today, has co-existed with the maxi and midi and very low hemlined styles which refer to the late 30's and the 40's. This rather contradictory occurrence is one seldom sighted before, yet each individual style comes from a part of our nostalgic past.

To this point, most of the examples of nostalgic revival have been given from the view of the individual and his styles, and today's entertainment. By investigating the acceptance and promotion of

⁴Gerald Clarke, "The Meaning of Nostalgia," Time, 97, No. 18 (May 3, 1971) 77.

nostalgia within the commercial arts, one can find added proof of a nostalgic revival. When a topic is chosen for advertising purposes, it must be one which will create interest within the public and sell a product. Therefore, when nostalgic topics began to appear as a basis for advertising, it was relatively fair to deduce that this nostalgic topic was being accepted. With such commercials as the 7-Up series, which varied between recent flash-backs and nostalgic fantasy, the past was revived as a testimonial to the product. Noted earlier was Busby Berkeley who was known for his dazzling productions such as Footlight Parade. There he packed an amazing number of girls into a human fountain and pumped 20,000 gallons of water every five minutes. Movie tap dancer Ann Miller keeps the Berkeley spirit alive in a television commercial for Great American Soups where a less spectacular group of girls imitates the glorious production of 1933. These various commercials have come before the public through the media of radio, television, and literature. This brings us to the final segment of this research, and that is the influence that nostalgia has had on today's literature.

One need only to browse through a local bookstore to see the impact of nostalgia on literature, and chances are the browsing would lead to hours of daydreaming and fantasizing with Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Captain America, Jane and Flock, Popeye, Pip, Squeak and Wilfred, Tarzan, Batman, and many more characters of the past.

A prime example of nostalgic literature is the book The Pulp, containing fifty years of American pop culture edited by Tony Goodstone. This hard cover book features one hundred full-color rare, original covers, plus black and white drawings and ads, and over fifty complete

stories, poems, features and articles all in their original format. The term pulp comes from the untrimmed, rough woodpulp pages that the early magazines were printed upon. In 1896, publisher Frank Munsey changed The Argosy from a boy's magazine to an all-fiction magazine printed on this pulp paper, thus creating the first "Pulp."

Before failing circulation (and, finally, one major distributor's embargo) killed them off in 1953, the Pulps had divided, amoebalike, into unknown hundreds of titles, and furnished inexpensive reading, escape from social oppression and hope for the future for tens of millions of Americans.⁵

Today, these old pulps are being brought out to be enjoyed once again by a new generation of readers, and The Pulps combines the good and bad of them all.

The 1908 Sears, Roebuck Catalogue--A Treasured Replica from Archives of History is another popular revival obviously nostalgic. Can you believe hand guns at \$3.00 or mandolins for \$2.00? Such are the exclamations of disbelief as the reader ponders over prices that have more than tripled today--those were the days!

A similar publication is The Saturday Evening Post Treasury, a compilation of classic cover paintings and memorable advertisements. Norman Rockwell, an illustrator for the Saturday Evening Post, has also been coming back into popularity, and was brought to the public earlier through the Saturday Evening Post. John Mack Carter reflects on Rockwell in an article in the Ladies Home Journal.

Why is Norman Rockwell, the Old Master of modern illustrators, the interpreter of the American Dream of the twenties and thirties and the forties, coming back into a second in the seventies? . . . We feel it is because

⁵Tony Goodstone, ed., The Pulps (New York: Bonanza Books, 1970), p. ix.

Norman Rockwell, echo of a gentler, idealized America, answers a deep need for contemporary men and women.⁶

The Penguin Book of Comics devised by George Perry and Alan Aldridge centers on a different aspect of literature, that of the comic strips. In this soft bound publication the comics are discussed as a form of communication and mirror of our time. The book contains the nostalgic characters of the Yellow Kid, Krazy Kat (maybe the greatest strip of all), Superman, Batman, Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. These comic strips were of particular interest to the artist because of the part they played in the development of pop art.

Joining with these books are a series of publications just coming onto the bookshelves of stores from a new publisher, the Nostalgia Book Company from New York. The books of Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, Captain Marvel and others are being published for all the American readers who are swooning over the days gone by. As stated earlier, looking back is certainly one of the most popular pastimes of today and pertains to the media of films, television, radio, the current styles, entertainment, business, literature and the arts.

It seemed natural during this time of nostalgic revival for this researcher to go beyond the revival as it is seen around him in America and to express his personal interpretation of the revival into the media that he knows best, that of drawing and printmaking.

⁶John Mack Carter, "Editor's Diary, The Good News Days: A Thanksgiving Message," Ladies Home Journal, LXXXVII, No. 11 (November, 1971), 8.

CHAPTER II

THE ARTIST'S MEDIA OF DRAWING AND PRINTMAKING AND THE INFLUENCES BEHIND THEM

The style reflected in my prints and drawings was influenced by three contemporary schools of thought: hard edge, pop, and minimal art.

Post-painterly abstraction or hard-edge painting was born, in part, out of the abstract expressionist movement. Edward Lucie-Smith states:

By "hard edge" I mean the kind of abstract painting where the forms have definite, clean boundaries, instead of the fuzzy ones favoured, for example, by Mark Rothko. Characteristically, in this kind of painting, the hues themselves are flat and undifferentiated, so it is perhaps better to talk of colour-areas and not forms.⁷

The hard-edge artists had a very strong interest in the future of abstract art, but favored a clean, precise presentation over the automatistic theory of abstract expressionism. If the compositional and technical aspects of hard edge art were to be defined in one word, it would probably be "contrast," the contrast of one sharp edge meeting another, of a positive mass striking a negative background, of red meeting green, black meeting white or square meeting round.

The two artists whose work best illustrates the hard-edge style are Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman. Kelly strives to

⁷Edward Lucie-Smith, Late Modern The Visual Arts Since 1945, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1969), p. 94.

develop his two dimensional fields of color in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish subject from background, therefore disposing of any three dimensional illusion. Moreover, it could be said that Kelly is interested in the segmentation of the surface composition rather than any individual piece of subject matter. Jack Youngerman, on the other hand, shows strong interest in the creation of new non-objective shapes. His abstractions resemble leaves, flowers, and other natural shapes which have been simplified to a point of originality. Both Kelly and Youngerman stand together in that they strive for a maximum of simplification and precision.

Like the hard-edge movement, pop art in the United States was developed in reaction against abstract expressionism. It is generally characterized by the use of imagery which depicts a satirical, commercialized aspect of contemporary America. James Rosenquist, for example, fills his paintings with realistic images that reflect facets of everyday life. Such subject matter as dishes drying, the family car, and spaghetti are juxtaposed to stress surface tension. Aware of the limitations of the two dimensional painting surface, Rosenquist brings his subject matter close to the surface of his canvas, in order to eliminate the illusion of deep space.

This movie close-up type of presentation can also be found in the work of Roy Lichtenstein. His blown-up comic strips are precisely executed with due consideration given to the technical details used by commercial cartoonists. Working under the premise of developing good art out of mediocre comic strips, Lichtenstein accentuates his subject material with widened, dark lines and enlarged dots, which represent the commercial half-tone process. In fact, it may be said

that the essential purpose of Lichtenstein's style is to destroy the elements associated with action painting and to present a body of work that resembles the product of mass production.

Lichtenstein is not interested in "realism" as such: he appears to be more determined to make abstractions out of the figurative, without losing the content of the subject matter. In his most successful works, the blown-up scale and enlarged mechanical dots become so formal that the subject matter is almost obscured: a tension is set up between the recognizable design and the formal design almost to the point where both become one, thus solving the argument of figurative versus abstract on his own terms.⁸

Both Lichtenstein and Rosenquist promote commercialized realism in such a simplified way, that it approaches minimal art and defines some common ground between the real and abstract.

The third influence investigated, minimal art, is defined by the critic Barbara Rose as "The art of a number of painters and sculptors of the 1960's, particularly in the United States, who seek to reduce their work to its essential abstract elements."⁹ The term minimal art automatically brings to mind the work of several sculptors including Donald Judd and Phillip King. These artists produce free-standing, repetitious, geometric figures which are meant to represent only that which they actually are: cubes, spheres, tubes, and other simple forms. The simplification process is carried to such an extreme by these recent sculptors that it becomes an end in itself.

It is this artist's intention to present an idealized form of nostalgia by incorporating the realistic imagery of the pop artists,

⁸Mario Amaya, Pop Art (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1965), p. 87.

⁹Bernard Myers, ed., McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Art, 4, Master Francke--Rotunda (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969), 83.

the flat, hard edge color areas of the post-painterly abstractionists, and a discerning use of minimal reduction. This combination of theory and technique is expressed in the media of drawing and serigraphy.

One consequence of pop art in America has been an attempt to re-validate purely realistic painting. "Post-pop" art has produced a number of painters such as Philip Pearlstein, who employ photographic realism (often actually painting from photographs).¹⁰

Similar to Pearlstein's use of photography, this artist has experimented with the grid system and the photo-projection process in order to present a somewhat realistic drawing technique through the medium of photography. The grid system divides a photograph into a number of equally scaled squares. A similar grid pattern is then drawn upon another surface, usually of larger proportions, and the subject matter of the photograph is transferred to the larger surface, one square at a time. This process proved to be accurate enough, but was also cumbersome and time consuming. With the intention of speeding up the drawing procedures, the photograph was inverted so each section could be transferred without concern for the entirety of the subject matter. But, in centering attention upon each small segment of the photograph, interest in the subject was lost. Finding this detrimental, a more direct process of transfer was chosen, this being photo-projection.

By projecting the image directly upon the drawing surface with a 35mm projector, it was possible to accurately transfer this imagery and still maintain some degree of rapport between the artist and the subject matter. The projection method presented an immediate option

¹⁰Lucie-Smith, Late Modern--The Visual Arts Since 1945, p. 163.

to add, abstract, or remove areas within the drawing and also made it easier to perceive the final minimal effect.

After the key lines were transferred to the drawing surface, a process of reduction and elimination began. The composition was developed with the idea that all subject matter within a given drawing can be composed of a combination of non-objective masses or planes suspended upon a negative background. When these masses are arranged in such a way as to create visual objects, they also define areas of negative space as positive. This simplification is achieved by deciding where, within the photographs, the values separate from one another. Then the separation of values is recorded as hard edge masses, rather than slowly breaking gradations. Also, by eliminating some objects, lines or shading from a drawing, a quality is created which gives the illusion that these elements are present. The simplified hard edge planes and the mixture of visual and illusionary objects gives the subject matter an air of something disintegrating with age and correlates smoothly with the nostalgic source material.

The bulk of the information which lent itself to the subject matter within my prints and drawings was taken from old photo albums. The photographs proved to be an advantageous source of information because it was possible to scan large quantities of material in short periods of time and to readily choose the photos that possessed strong nostalgic symbols and characteristics. This artist found that some of the strongest nostalgic symbols seemed to be mechanical objects, which obviously dated themselves, such as the old automobiles. The old styles of dress, since they have affected our contemporary styles to such a degree, played an equally important role. These nostalgic

objects were transferred into rough sketches and finished drawings, some of which became the foundation for single or multi-color serigraphs.

Serigraphy, or screen process printing, is a method by which a thick bodied ink is squeezed through a stretched section of silk onto a sheet of paper or any other flat surface. Although the principles behind the serigraphic process have been traced to the early history of the Fiji Islands, the screen printing method as we know it today has achieved status in the fine arts only within the past fifty years.¹¹

Two artists associated with the serigraphic renaissance are Guy Maccoy and Edward Landon. Their experiments with types of stencils, color and technique strongly reflect this researcher's style. Maccoy used preliminary drawings, as does this artist, from which he developed all the stencils for his prints. Also, as with this researcher's technique, Maccoy used opaque colors, relying more upon the layered effect of the ink than on its textural or transparent qualities.

I like to run colors (usually opaque with very little base). For large simple background areas I use tusche and glue, but often in the final printing of line colors I employ film stencils. As a matter of fact I intend to use this method in all my future prints because I find it tends to contrast the edges and surfaces giving a kind of woodblock cut effect.¹²

Although the use of opaque color tends to add extra effort in color mixing as opposed to that of a transparent ink, it has one significant advantage. When two transparent colors are overlapped, the third resulting color is dictated by the first two. With an opaque

¹¹J. I. Biegeleisen and Max Arthur Cohn, Silk Screen Techniques (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958), p. 7.

¹²Harry Shocker, Artist's Manual for Silk Screen Print Making (New York: American Artists Group, 1946), p. 66.

technique the color combination is dependent only upon the artist's choice. This opaque color technique combined with the simplistic properties of screen process printing greatly compliments the researcher's minimal style.

Edward Landon, whose method was much like that of Maccoy, stated,

To me the most important aesthetic value of the stencil print is simple, well defined areas and a minimum of texture. The quality of the solidly printed area produced by the silk screen method is so fine compared to any other printing process that it seems to defeat its purpose to break it up with texture except to create other color values.¹³

With technical findings similar to those of Landon and Maccoy in mind, a group of procedures were developed by which a simplified sketch could be transformed into a multi-color print.

I began the procedures by making a film stencil duplication of a minimal drawing, or by reproducing all of the darkest areas of that drawing. This "key plate" stencil was reserved for the final "run" or the last color to be printed. Next, paper stencils were cut for the first three runs, each stencil representing different segments within the drawing. All of these stencils were taken directly from the master drawing to insure perfect registration of the key plate.

The prints were run in segments, one color for each stencil. A color field, which served as a background for the subject matter, was printed using the first paper stencil. This color field was presented in one of two ways; as a rectangular shape, defining a four-cornered composition, or as a shaped color area, representing a silhouette of the subject matter from the drawing. As the second and

¹³Ibid., p. 66.

third colors were carefully placed upon this color field, a composition reminiscent of the style of the hard-edge painters was developed. In some instances, because of the layered applications of ink and the contrast in value, these masses of color appeared to float above the surface of the print. When the impression of the key plate was laid over the first three colors, the non-objective planes were bonded together and became functional parts of the realistic imagery (see Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4). Although most of these prints were run in a color separation process, it was found that some types of subject matter could be more effectively expressed in a single color production.

One purpose for using a multi-color process was to define specific areas within the print that would have otherwise been reduced in effectiveness or completely lost from view. Often, when a drawing was minimally reduced in the fashion of a single medium, complex subject matter became jumbled, with one section overlapping another. The problem was remedied by laying sections of color under that subject matter which was desired to express a feeling of separateness. This process created rhythm within the composition which aided in its easy readability.

What these prints represent is an accumulation of techniques and concepts developed into one coherent style for the purpose of idealizing persons, places, and objects out of the past.

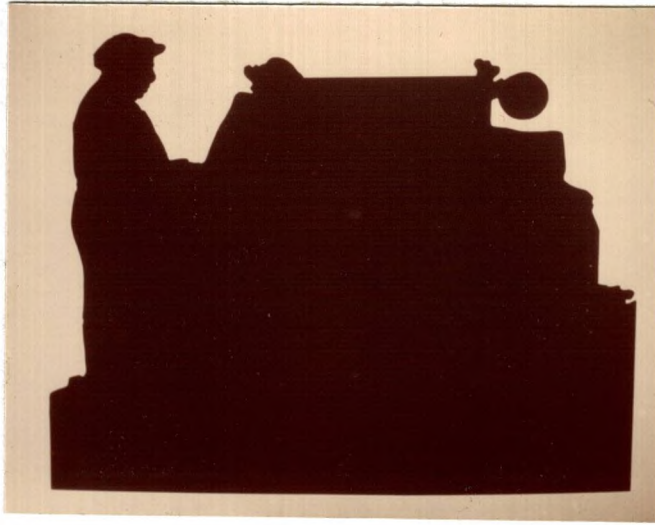


Fig. 1.--First Color Run

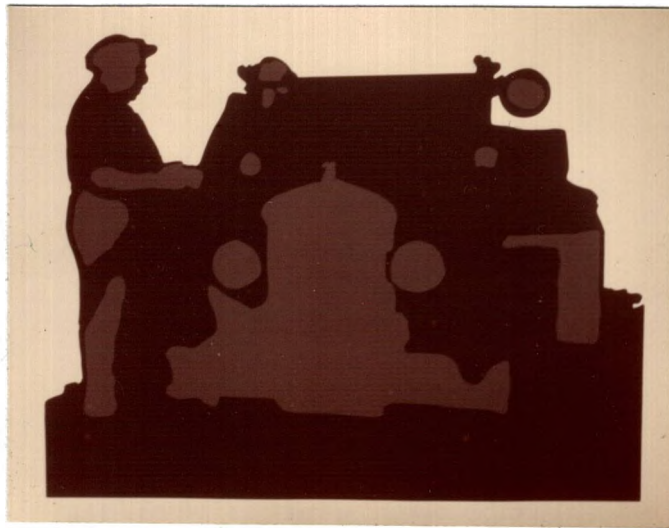


Fig. 2.--First and Second Run



Fig. 3.--First, Second,
and Third Color Run



Fig. 4.--First, Second,
Third and Key Strike

CHAPTER III

THE ARTIST'S PRINTS AND DRAWINGS

This nostalgia which has taken over so many people in America undoubtedly affects each individual in a different way. I have attempted to give some of the dimensions of the nostalgic revival in America as I see it, but personally my conceptions of nostalgia are revealed best through my prints and drawings.

The idea of using nostalgia as a main theme came to me while paging through one of my grandmother's old photo albums. As I thumbed through the album, she told me who the characters were and a story of why they were in each of the particular settings. Suddenly I realized what was happening; I was experiencing the past. In a fantasy type daydream, I was relating to the sounds and smells of another time. I quickly developed an interest in old objects and settings and soon found myself devouring every piece of nostalgia within reach. This obsession could probably be compared to the craze of antique collecting, but rather than gathering real objects such as coins, furniture or automobiles I collected nostalgic images. In this sense I began to realize that this nostalgia was not merely a desire to look at the past, but to experience an "ideal" past.

Look through any photo album and one constant factor will make itself apparent, that of well being and happiness. With exception of the sensationalism of the news media, people have little desire to record sadness and death for personal reasons, but rather want to

capture a joyful moment for the sake of reminiscence. Scenes such as boat rides, Sunday picnics, and holiday celebrations became typical topics in preliminary sketches and set the mood for my personal interpretation of nostalgia.

One of my first encounters with nostalgic art is reflected in "Pigeons" (Figure 5), a drawing rendered with pencil on illustration



Fig. 5.--Pigeons

board. The thing that most impressed me about this piece was the manner in which the figures were "frozen" within the composition. They seemed to be statues, and like much of my subject matter, reminded me of a Pompeian holocaust, in which these figures were trapped in their time to be excavated at the present. I enjoyed toying with this and other thoughts of suspended animation. At times I imagined my subjects as being in a glass room which was filled with water and instantly frozen or more to the point, as bottled specimens in formaldehyde pickling. With these concepts in mind, I worked as a

sculptor using a subtractive method and by eliminating unnecessary lines and shading I accelerated the drawing's illusion of being faded by sunlight.

In another drawing (Figure 6), I used an old upright radio as



Fig. 6.--Radio

the central object of the composition. To me, this old radio represented classic programs like The Shadow, and the weekly ritual they must have created within the family. Unlike our precise, well defined media of television, the radio programs left so much more to the imagination, creating an imaginary experience similar to that produced by the "Pulp" literature of the same era. In order to present the radio as a type of sacred image, I surrounded that object with human figures which were positioned in such a way as to point out its significance.

As I continued my study of these photographic characters, I conceived the idea of making a print which would portray an entire

page of nostalgic photos (Figure 7). A blue-on-red color scheme was used to represent darkroom procedures and the photographic process.

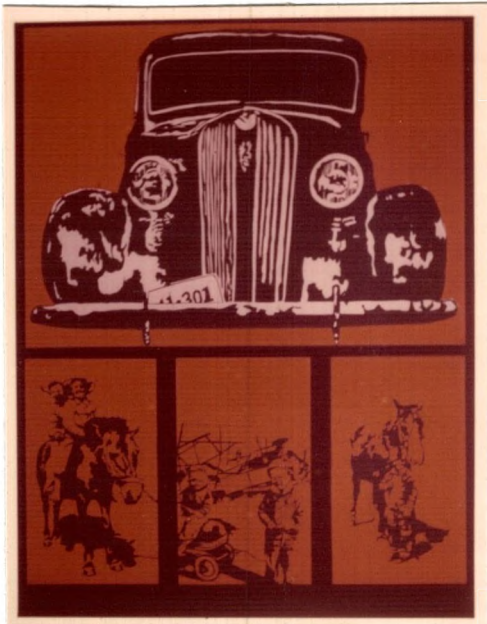


Fig. 7.--Trilogy (Print)



Fig. 8.--Trilogy (Drawing)

The purpose of this multi-segmented print was to pay tribute to nostalgic photography and to express my personal acceptance of it as a media. The human figures within the photos are my father, as a child, and his twin brother. I found that it was easier for me to become involved with a photo in which the characters were unfamiliar. In cases where I recognized the figures, I would attach pseudonyms to them and imagine them in a completely foreign situation. It seemed to me that a family figure held a sort of taboo that defied abstraction. This print, also seen in its drawing form, represents a point at which I became aware of the importance of the old automobile as a nostalgic symbol.

Because the idea of depicting photographic structure worked so well in "Trilogy," I decided to investigate the problem from a different

viewpoint. Rather than reconstructing another entire page from a photo album, I made a print which resembled pictures taken in a photo booth at a local "Five and Dime" (Figure 9). The juxtaposed figures



Fig. 9.--Hello!

represent a time in which photography began to be accepted by the public as a part of everyday life.

In some instances, I conceived my nostalgic situations in reference to historical situations. For example, in "Captain Jack" (Figure 10), I imagined the captain and his female companion as being on the tragic voyage of the "Titanic" or "Lusitania." Their relaxed attitude expressed an unawareness of the impending doom and the cool color scheme reinforced this feeling. I found that by relating the subject matter in this fashion, I was better able to "get into" the composition. The feeling I received from this encounter was similar to a child's imagining a broomstick to be a horse or a cardboard box to be a space ship.

I carried this historical reflection to the time of the prohibition and portrayed a few of those anti-heroes who smuggled



Fig. 10.--Captain Jack (Print)

illegal alcohol across the Canadian border (Figure 11). The stories of



Fig. 11.--Rum Running

bathtub gin, rum runners and revenueurs are so glorified that I decided to present my interpretation in a comic strip fashion. The "Bonnie and Clyde" type of setting seemed very natural in a cool, monochromatic color scheme, but I developed a rather cartoonish

atmosphere by interjecting a warm, foreign color. It became evident to me that even though I was working under the general heading of "nostalgia," my prints and drawings were being influenced by my attitude toward my media, by historical occurrences, and even by childhood fantasies.

"Boating" (Figures 12 and 13), somewhat similar in composition to that of "Captain Jack," is reminiscent of the 1920's and is illustrated in both the four color print and through the original drawing.



Fig. 12.--Boating (Print)



Fig. 13.--Boating (Drawing)

Even though their formats were alike, the mood of the two prints affected me in opposite ways. While I thought of "Captain Jack" as being a forbidding situation, I filled "Boating" with rich, warm colors which developed a frivolous atmosphere. This lightness of mood could be attributed in part to my interpretation of the figures' facial expressions. But moreover it was due to my fantasies about the

figures. For instance, I enjoy drawing hats and figures wearing hats. Of all the kinds and styles of wearing apparel, I think hats best reflect their owners' personality. The straw hats in "Boating" seemed to hold a symbolic reference to Vaudeville or perhaps a carnival midway. Childhood or recent fantasies such as this aided me in determining the mood for many of my prints and drawings.

Another case in which I used fantasy as a key to my nostalgic conception is evident in the print "Holiday" (Figure 15). The old



Fig. 14.--Holiday

model T which seems to float in space might well be labeled "Walt Disney Productions." I felt the car was such a powerful object in itself, that placing it upon a surface would only diminish it. By carrying this "Currier and Ives" type presentation one step further, I could easily envision it as being a postage stamp design commemorating some centennial celebration.

Firecrackers, skyrockets, the American flag, and all the pleasures of an old time Fourth of July celebration are the elements around which I created "Independence Day" (Figure 15). I used this print as an example of the numerous patriotic photographs I discovered

during my searches for subject material. I felt that some of the most idealized nostalgia was the type that contained patriotic symbols.



Fig. 15.--Independence Day

By using the old automobile in many of my prints and drawings, I began to consider my subject matter as a shaped object rather than something existing in an environment. "Ma Funk and B. J. Jones" (Figure 16) was one of the last prints in which I used a rectangular shaped color field. The old car and imaginary figures were so well



Fig. 16.--Ma Funk and B. J. Jones

defined that they denied the illusion of environment or deep space. I liked this feeling of sculptured objects on a two dimensional surface,

so I began to eliminate background illusion by shaping the color field and mats.

My first attempt at this shaping process is seen in the print "Cycling" (Figure 17). The child represents what I consider to be the



Fig. 17.--Cycling

essence of nostalgia, a longing for youth, childhood memories, and simply, the past. This celebrated figure was accented with a shaped mat and was accompanied by a dog which to me symbolized companionship. My intent was to develop this overly sweet, stereotyped figure into an aesthetically acceptable composition.

In a similar print I used a figure from the 1920's that resembled the silent movie star Buster Keaton and I called the print "Buster's Wagon" (Figure 18). This nostalgic reference, along with the childhood symbol of the wagon, developed into a very sculptural type of composition. It seemed that the adult figure held a stronger claim on the wagon than did the child.



Fig. 18.--Buster's Wagon

A final offering to this discussion of my nostalgic prints and drawings is "From the Back Porch" (Figure 19). This very typical



Fig. 19.--From the Back Porch

and seemingly popular mother and child pose was a common one in the series of photos that I encountered. Once again, it brought to mind the idea of the closeness of the family which has been a major theme in the nostalgic trend.

In discussing some of my work, I have attempted to give some insight as to my personal conception of nostalgia. Naturally, since the majority of work has been obtained through family albums and

collections, this study has a different appeal to me than it would to the public. Aside from these personal ties, however, a few major steps have been taken in the development of my work as an artist, and it is here that the major value of this study lies.

CHAPTER IV

AREAS OF SUCCESS RELATIVE TO THIS STUDY

At the outset of this research, two problems were raised in my mind as objectives for study. The first objective was to idealize the nostalgic figure; the second was to find a technique appropriate to this subject matter.

It seemed fitting at this time in American life to attempt to capture the feeling or mood of the people as they experienced their "longing for the past." It was important that an "idealized" character was seized, such as the mother and child combination, the patriotic figure, or the carefree image. Thus, the photographs which were chosen to use as a basis for the prints and drawings had to portray these characteristics as well as appropriate surroundings. The automobile was used effectively to date the work, as was the style of clothing. With this objective firm in my mind, a major question arose. What technique would be appropriate to convey this nostalgic subject matter?

In my first attempts to coordinate technique and subject, I used a pure form of realism. This style served only to reproduce the photograph and with a new, clean appearance, the drawing lost its character of being old. Finding this contrary to my intent, I began to abstract elements within the photograph by eliminating unessential lines and objects. I felt that the nostalgic figures should appear as tattered and torn as the photos from which they were taken. The

idea of substance disintegrating and fading with age prompted me to make a number of experimental drawings to decide how much abstraction was necessary to create this desired illusion. I began with a realistic image and gradually simplified it into a single hard edge plane which represented only the mass of the object. As this process was repeated, I discovered that the realistic qualities of an object could be maintained even though that object was abstracted out of its original state. This balance of real and abstract was achieved by simplifying only the shadowed areas of the subject matter, creating sharply breaking planes and interrupting the gradual flow of shading. In this sense, the shapes that composed the subject matter became significant in themselves. This concept is reflected by the minimal sculptor, David Smith.

I start with one part, then a unit of parts, until a whole appears. Parts have unities and associations and separate after-images--even when they are no longer parts but a whole. The after-images of the parts lie back on the horizon, very distant cousins to the image formed by the finished work.¹⁴

This minimal technique best illustrated my concept of the nostalgic subject and became the foundation for my style.

Although I attempted to obtain the ideal nostalgic figure through a minimal technique in all my work, I feel it was best realized through the drawing "Pigeons" and the print "Captain Jack."

Assuming that the aim of artistic creativity is either the satisfaction of needs through communication or through a more private presentation, it may therefore be concluded that artistic quality is determined by the degree to which the intended goal is achieved. And if the aim is some kind

¹⁴Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, p. 577.

of private satisfaction for the artist, then the best judge of artistic quality would probably be the artist himself.¹⁵

The determining factor in the nostalgic impact of "Pigeons" was not simply a reflection of the figures' style of dress. Although the clothing was the only recognizable nostalgic symbol, it appeared insignificant until the reduction process had been completed. By emphasizing the central composition, especially the figures, and de-emphasizing the structural background, a funneling effect was created which served to monumentalize the placid setting. Not only did the reduction process emphasize the nostalgic elements within the composition, but it also aided in developing the fading quality I had strived to achieve.

As my simplified drawings evolved into print form, I was better able to control the mood of the composition through the use of color. The color scheme of "Captain Jack" best represented all the lonely feelings of homesickness which are in essence the emotional purpose of nostalgia. Alternation of the reduced color planes set up a very rhythmical balance and defined areas of interest within the complex subject matter. Even though I used only the simplest form of a stencil print, I was able to create the illusion of rounded form and a third dimension. In the pop tradition, the figures were placed close to the surface of the print to emphasize their importance and to accelerate the idealistic theme. On the whole, this print best represents a condensed form of all my objectives concerning nostalgia and my minimal style.

¹⁵Kenneth Lansing, Art, Artist, & Art Education (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co.), p. 34.

I feel that I have successfully expressed my interest in the nostalgic past by incorporating it in my recent prints and drawings and in a group of techniques which will remain versatile regardless of the type of subject matter used. Although I am greatly interested in the ideas of nostalgia and my present techniques, and feel that old objects are an interesting source of subject matter, I have by no means ended my search for refinement. I consider my experiences with nostalgia as a springboard for future work. Even in my most recent prints a transitional concept has begun to take form.

I have begun to shape my format by removing the subject matter from its original setting and bringing it into my environment. This direction points toward a form of assemblage and could easily lead to a three dimensional media. The possibilities that exist within other nostalgic areas alone could supply me with ideas for years to come. For example, I have already considered developing my future works in series form according to different segments of nostalgia. One of these series may depict a military aspect of nostalgia, including a study of the Kaiser's Army of World War I.

Regardless of what subject matter I might choose for my next study, or which technique I might pursue, I feel this concentration of American nostalgia has aided in the development of my drawing ability and probably, more important, has introduced me to the vast possibilities of the silk screen print.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The feeling of nostalgia is everywhere. It has manifested itself in the lives of the American public through nearly every media and has served as a replacement for the hardships of reality. Nostalgia is the ideal. It is an accumulation of the past: radio shows and silent films, Mae West and W. C. Fields, midi skirts and red lipstick, Flash Gordon and Captain America.

The Romans regarded the Greeks as paradigms, the Renaissance looked to the grandeur that was Rome, the Pre-Raphaelites discovered their ideal in the Middle Ages. Like everything else, however, the cycle of revivals has quickened in the 20th century.¹⁶

It has been debated whether or not the nostalgic revival is simply a money-making project, like so many fads prompted during the 20th century. Undoubtedly, many thousands of dollars have been spent on the purchase of nostalgic literature such as the adventures of Buck Rogers and Dick Tracy, or tickets to old-time film festivals and Broadway productions; but there must be more to the nostalgic revival than the all-mighty dollar! It has to be the escape mechanism that so many seek.

In the last thirty years Americans have been pulled into a major World War, followed by the Korean Conflict and the Cold War with Russia. Young people in their twenties today remember learning in

¹⁶Clarke, "The Meaning of Nostalgia," Time, p. 77.

grade school about the vital necessity of building bomb shelters for the family in case of possible atomic attack. The Sputnik satellites prompted more friction between the two countries, and millions of Americans stood in their yards at night searching the skies for the small moving glow of Sputnik. The "hot line" was set up between Moscow and Washington to prevent any misinformation like the kind that led to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Innocent grain silos in North Dakota fields became mere costumes for the atomic missiles hidden beneath them, missiles that were pointed to Russia. The Cold War issue eased some in the sixties, but internal problems began to appear with racial conflicts exploding in major American cities, followed by the greatest atrocity of all, the assassination of a President that many had put their trust in. The pressure continued with more assassinations, campus unrest, including the brutality at Kent State, and most unfortunate of all, the Viet Nam War. When would the pressure ease? What was to come next? The questions were unanswerable and the problems seemed unsolvable. It was inevitable that America would try for a better life, and the nostalgic revival seemed a likely answer. Some psychiatrists would debate this kind of medicine, but if it is helping to ease the pressure, why not?

The cult of the past may have developed as an antidote to the cult of the future, as a protection against future shock. Is there such a thing as "past shock," and is America beginning to suffer from it? Perhaps. Yet the fantasy of homesickness, which is the meaning of today's nostalgic craze, cannot be dispelled with churlish facts and disagreeable reasons. If it gives a little pleasure in an otherwise unpleasurable year, why even try? So play it again, Sam--and again and again and again. Next year, with a little luck, we may not need you.¹⁷

¹⁷Ibid.

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