

THE FIGURE IN PAINTING

by

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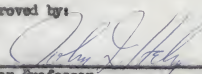
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the much publicized trend of a resurgence of interest in the figure in painting and to make a study to determine to what extent the figure was and is a vital part of painting. The interest in this occurred in various approaches on the part of the painter in attempting to reconcile the human figure to the picture plane and the relationship of one to the other.

The figure has been painted realistically, symbolically, scientifically, distortedly and expressively. In all these approaches, it was found that the figure remained a dominant element in man's attempt to communicate his feelings and desires. Since the critics have been telling the world that the artist has reclaimed the figure as a basic motif for painting, it seemed desirable that the role of the figurative image, in this case specifically, the human figure, be examined.

It was easier to reach an awareness of how important the figure was and is if an attempt was made to categorize the various approaches in some manner. The categories set up for this problem were: the symbolic figure, the scientific figure, the figure with social significance, the figure of design, the figure in Impressionism, and the figure of individualism. It was found that dividing many of the chosen painters into one of these classifications in a rigid manner was impossible. Indeed this became a vital point in the thesis. It strengthened the contention that the approaches of the figure, even on the part of one specific painter were so varied that it added to the evidence of the vital role that the figure has played. This then emphasized the diversified effect on the human figure in painting.

Another contention expressed in this thesis, was that even though the

figure has been used in many different ways, there are a number of painters who chose a similar message and a similar approach. Some of these similarities have been pointed out.

This thesis then, was not an attempt to present a historical essay on painting, but rather an attempt to discover what role the figure has played in painting and whether its use is more prevalent at this time. The choice of the painters included represents only a few of the painters in history, but does include some of those painters who have made the figure a prominent motif.

THE SYMBOLIC FIGURE

"No subject has been so well painted, drawn or sculptured, or so badly painted, drawn or sculptured. When man portrays man, either the most interesting or the dulllest results occur according to the purpose of the painting, the stature of the artist and his conception of the subject before him."¹

The symbolic figure is one which by its design relates a meaning other than purely a figurative one. The cave man found that a stylised drawing after his own image could tell many facts concerning his love of life and ritual. Illustration was the key purpose for his effort at painting and therefore a quick, simple symbol was desirable. The figure itself became an abstraction indicating only slight interest in a decorative vein and emphasising the effort of communication and identification with man himself.

The Egyptian used the figure to prompt obedience and adoration for the ruling class, and to represent his love of life after death. The figure was composed as a pompous personality, more notable for size than refinement. The Egyptian used a more decorative approach submerging individual traits of man in an effort to generalize. The human figures were standardized, abbreviated 'signs' for the purpose which stemmed from the fact that they were created specifically for the conveying in visual form of the majesty of the divine king.

In Crete, nothing of the quiet somber dignity found in Egypt existed, but rather a style directly expressive of a democratic people intimate with nature. It was a sprightly art, imaginative and naturalistic rather than abstract. The Greeks were the first free men unhampered by convention and

¹ Bryan Helm, The Classical Figure, p. 7.

therefore their approach to the figure was unique in that their gods assumed human forms of grandeur and nobility. The stiff frontality of the archaic figure gave way to the Hellenic desire to glorify the human body. The Greek experimented with the use of shadow to make his figures appear round. Line was their prominent means of expression, both to model and express volume.

In Etruscan and Roman art, Plate I, the painter used flat symbolism in figures and showed an extraordinary grasp of the structure of the figure and its place within the shallow space in relation to adjoining figures. The Romans isolated the figures in an abstract neutral space.

The Hindu artist in both painting and sculpture used the figure not as an imitation of natural appearance, but as an expression of an understood language of form and spiritual values.

The Chinese used simplification, suggestion and abstraction as in poetry. The line was delicate, but firm and was used to model the figure and create pattern and movement. Naturalism replaced conventionality and the spiritual idealized portrait took on likeness of living persons. The human body was merely incidental to the whole. The life of action was subordinated to the life of contemplation.

The Japanese used the same stateliness and tenderness, the same vitality born of religious conviction and the same dynamic line as in Chinese art. They showed however, subtler feelings for proportion and for decoration. The Japanese feeling for the figure was to become a great influence as the nineteenth and twentieth century artists were seeking an approach to design with the figure.

Forms were less austere, more human in Early Christian and Byzantine

EXPLANATION OF PLATE I

"Detail of Sarcophagus Relief"

End of 6th century B.C.
Limestone. Detail 9" high

PLATE I



art. Figures began to represent brotherly love. They were thoroughly non-corporeal, were glorious symbols of bodies and were highly decorative because of their very flatness. Thus appeared an art based on nature yet with no intention of producing an illusion of natural appearance. This was due to the natural fusion of the East and the West, the East whose ideal was transcendental and whose forms were abstract and the individual West, whose forms were naturalistic.

The Romanesque approach was spirited, infinitely varied and highly decorative. The figures appeared to be filled with life and movement.

In Gothic times when Giotto, (1276-1336), painted, there were two widely divergent attitudes in painting. The proponents of the one constructed forms out of purely formal elements -- line, light and dark, color and texture -- with little or no regard for the natural appearance of what was represented. The tendency was toward abstraction, and if carried to its logical conclusion would result in pure geometry. The other attitude represented by Giotto, would construct forms with direct reference to visual perception and spatial relations. The tendency was toward naturalism and its logical conclusion was photographic. Giotto's attitude showed a whole-hearted grasp of actuality based on visual perception. His paintings showed inventiveness, for each one was a different problem of the integration of visually perceived figures expressing grave and powerful emotions. The way was shown back to natural forms with Giotto. Giotto used figures rather than architectural framework to create pictorial space. In Siena, at this time, Simone Martini, (1285-1344), was using the same vigorous modeling of figures which betrayed an influence of Giotto.

In the Late Gothic period in the North, as the Northern counterpart

of the Early Renaissance, the approach of Jan van Eyck, (1385-1440), in figures was significant. The figures were not starkly tangible and seemed less isolated and less sculptural than the earlier Flemish masters. Rogier van der Weyden, (1400-1464), tried to recapture the emotional drama of the Gothic past. His modeling of the figure was sculpturally precise with brittle angular drapery folds.

THE SCIENTIFIC FIGURE

Early Renaissance art sought an attitude toward the human body similar to classical antiquity. To Masaccio, (1401-1428), the world was a realm of monumental grandeur rather than the concrete everyday reality. He approached the human figure in such a way that he made it fit into the world as actually visually perceived. Masaccio's figures were 'clothed nudes' as opposed to Giotto's body and drapery which formed a single unit. Next to Masaccio, Mantegna, (1431-1516), was the most important painter of the Early Renaissance. Mantegna gave the world an uncompromising fearless recording of facts. His painting was authentic in every detail. Mantegna used tense, lean figures, firmly constructed. Sketches have shown that Masaccio and Mantegna began with nude figures in working out their compositions.

In Florence, Botticelli, (1444-1510), substituted energetic graceful movement and agitated linear contours for the stable monumentality of Masaccio. He used shallow modeling and an emphasis on outline which produced an effect of low relief. His bodies were attenuated and drained of all weight and muscular power.

With the High Renaissance and the new interest in scientific anatomy,

there emerged one of the great masters of the figure, Leonardo da Vinci, (1452-1519). Leonardo wanted to paint man and the intention of his soul. He based his discovery of man on observation and personal experience rather than on tradition. His painting was a mental thing. It could not stop at being decorative, but had to be the vehicle for the translation into plastic terms of human sentiment and passion. Along with Leonardo, the High Renaissance was represented by Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian. These artists though they shared the ideals of their predecessors, expressed them so completely that their names became synonyms for perfection. The idea that men of genius were men of divine inspiration led to attempts at vast and ambitious goals.

The High Renaissance painters were less concerned with rational order than with visual effectiveness. Leonardo, unlike Botticelli, thought not of outline, but of three dimensional bodies made visible, in varying degrees by the incidence of light. In this method of modeling (*chiaroscuro*) the forms no longer stood abruptly side by side, but took on a new pictorial unity. Michelangelo, (1475-1564), believed that painting should imitate the roundness of sculptured forms and must partake of the organic qualities of the human figure. Michelangelo's faith in the image of man as the supreme vehicle of expression gave him a sense of kinship with classical sculpture closer than that of a Renaissance artist.

Michelangelo viewed man as a unique and almost god-like thing and the artist was not a calmly observing scientist, but a creator under whose hands dead materials suddenly came to life.¹ He chose to use the monumental

¹ H. W. Janson, and Dora Jane Janson, The Picture History of Painting. p. 122.

style of Giotto and Masaccio, but with a new forcefulness of action. Michelangelo's ideal was the human nude conceived sculpturally.¹ He used a more or less realistic approach as he revealed the expression of the inner mind. Michelangelo was interested in big generic ideas, and used the figure as a vehicle for the expression of these ideas. The figure was a unit of organically related masses. He wanted to organize the figure into a complex arrangement in space. (Plate II) To do this he used contrasting movements which produce a feeling of restlessness or even violence. His reclining figures expressed torture of soul through muscular distortion of the body. These contortions lifted the figures from mere illustration to the realm of personal experience.

The genius of Raphael was the unique power of synthesis that enabled him to merge the qualities of Leonardo and Michelangelo, creating an art at once lyric and dramatic, pictorially rich and sculpturally solid.² Raphael, (1483-1520), had a rare ability to organize people in space. He created his pictorial space with the movement of human figures rather than perspective vistas.

In Venetian painting at this time, Titian, (1477-1576), found characterization of the model not only in expression of face, but also in details of costume. He painted his figures with the same joyous freedom and scientific structure as the Italian masters, but added the sensuous lyrical qualities of his predecessor, Giorgione. Titian used the perfect cohesion of every means available to the painter. All elements, facial expression, pose, gesture, costume, line and color, were definitely related to every

¹ Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages, p. 495.

² N. W. Janson, History of Art, p. 369.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE II

"The Cumaean Sibyl"

Michelangelo

PLATE II



other in order to attain his objective. His objective was: to grasp the individual character and psychology of the situation.

The greatest painter in the Mannerist tradition, El Greco, (1451-1614), approached the figure in a style profoundly disquieting, willful and visionary. He used disproportionately long and twisted figures that flouted most of the elemental rules of anatomy. El Greco applied sharp edges to his 'frozen' figures with angular frantic gestures and drawn out limbs. El Greco's approach and that of the Mannerist tradition suggest a similarity with some of the most modern painters.

In the Baroque period, Rubens, (1577-1640), made the human form the fundamental motif of his art giving it an overflowing vitality. He was in perfect tune with his environment as he characterized soft luminous flesh, silky hair and lustrous satin with scintillating swirling movements. He approached the figure in a sensuous way absorbing the Italian tradition far more thoroughly than had any Northerner before him. It was said that he used the powerful bodies of Michelangelo and Raphael, the color of Titian, sweep of Correggio, the naturalism and spotlighting of Caravaggio and the force of expression found in Gruenwald.¹

Rembrandt, (1606-1669), the greatest genius of Dutch art, at first approached the figure in an intensely realistic manner. Later he developed a full-blown High Baroque style. His painting would show splendor and violence with a sudden flood of brilliant light pouring forth, heightening the drama. He concentrated upon light as the chief organizing element. The character of the form and the personality of the subject interested

¹ H. W. Janson, Picture History of Painting, p. 171.

him equally in his portraiture. Glowing light and shadows enveloped his figures and blurred their outlines. Rembrandt was called the poet of light and color and the maker of moods.

Jan Vermeer, (1632-1675), represented the climax of Dutch genre painting. He pictured the everyday scene of purely human significance. Vermeer's single figures, engaged in simple everyday tasks, do no more than exchange glances. This lack of narrative and feeling of contentment without explanation was found to be evident in twentieth century painters.

The Baroque period in Spain, produced Diego Velazquez, (1599-1660). He approached the figure with a cool objective impersonal attitude toward visual appearance. His objective was to catch the movement of light over the figure rather than have the figure in motion. His concern was with the optical characteristics of light.

Poussin, (1594-1665), was the guardian of the classical approach in a Baroque world in France. He modeled his figures after classical statues and masters of the Roman High Renaissance. His aim therefore, was to represent noble and serious human actions.

With David, (1748-1825), and the Neo Classic tradition in France, the artist was still insisting on technical disciplines concerning the figure. David began with the skeleton and built muscles on it. Ingres, (1780-1867), developed the academic nude female figure. He used magnificent line and began to break away from antique sculpture. Ingres was classicist by conviction, but his work shows warmth of the Romantic. His figures were precise, sharply defined, though stilted, but sensuous beneath a careful surface. As the scientific figure was discovered and rediscovered, the artist began to also place a strong social significance on the figure as a moral opportunity

to reveal conviction.

THE FIGURE OF SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Goya, (1746-1828), saw the world without illusion. His portraits were presented without idealisation. Every element in his portraits contributed to the creation of a total personality. Goya wanted to paint in a manner that would show life as it was met head on rather than in detail. He presented an image of reality in such a way that we see it and respond to it as he did. The flattering image had no place in Goya's paintings for he felt it honest to present the world in truth. (Plate III)

Delacroix, (1798-1863), introduced to the world what is now known as Romanticism. He was concerned with recording inner emotional impressions through exotic images. He was interested in originality rather than in rule, complication, rather than in purity and preferred risk to safety.¹ Delacroix desired the total expression of human emotion on a grand scale in images of universal significance.

Daumier, (1808-1879), penetrated into the contemporary life of all classes and represented it in a form that was terse, compelling and caustically energetic. His subjects demanded compassion. He felt that art was for the common people. Daumier's figures were sculptural and showed a sense of volume and mass. He eliminated all unnecessary redundancies. Daumier found men good where Goya found men ultimately base. Their approaches to the figure show this inner feeling. These painters then, expressed with their use of the figure, their feeling toward society.

¹ John Casaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art, p. 44.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE III

"And Nothing Can be Done about It"

Goya

PLATE III



THE IMPRESSIONISTIC FIGURE

In the Impressionistic tradition, Renoir (1841-1919), was possessed by this new use of pigment and was also possessed by an absorbing interest in the human figure. He took sheer delight in feminine charm and frankly expressed joy in it. He eventually used it as a point of departure for creating abstract designs in deep space. Renoir generalized woman as a symbol. Woman as a generic concept was lovelier to him than any individual set of features could be. In portraiture he succeeded in getting both likeness and painting quality. He was vastly influenced by Ingres' line. Renoir was able to produce fine sentiment in his figures without sentimentality. He united the brilliant rainbow colors of his Impressionist phase with his awareness of classical form in his shimmering voluptuously rounded bodies.

Degas, (1834-1917), also working with the Impressionists, used clear line and pattern sought in some casual moment. He viewed life realistically. Degas liked unexpected gestures and working with a group. His subtle handling saved his paintings from being too photographic. The influences of the Japanese print were evident in the design of Degas. He seized the grandeur of the unfamiliar act. Degas' figures maintained strong rhythmic movement placing beauty in superb muscular control. Degas never stood in judgement, never made a moral evaluation, never committed himself to evaluation, and never committed himself to justify man's existence. The flavor of his painting was however, pessimistic. Degas' attitude toward the world--a fascination with its fragments and a refusal to comment on its wholeness was summarized in his attitude toward women. Few painters have been more preoccupied with representing them; no painter has portrayed them more acutely as personalities. Woman's body fascinated him, but only as a

structural entity, not as a symbol of beauty or as an abject desire. He was in this facet the opposite of Renoir. Renoir was joyously convinced of life's goodness. Degas was interested in painting the individual as a psychological entity. He was the first to realize that a moment can be used for complete revelation of individual character. Degas' figures of carefully composed lines were graceful forms cleanly set down.

THE FIGURE AS DESIGN

In African Negro art the figure was dissected and distorted. This art played a very important part in influencing the nineteenth and twentieth century artist in his search for design. The African Negro dissected the figure and reassembled it not according to nature, but according to an esthetic pattern related to the material he was using, the space to be filled, the function of the object and its symbolic significance. Every part of the figure functioned as an element in plastic design. To be transformed into a design, the human figure must be regarded in a way quite different from that of ordinary life and of most classic sculpture. It must not appear as an inviolable whole, treated as one unit and posed in this attitude or that. The figure must be dissociated into its parts, regarded as an aggregate of distinct units, the head, limbs, breasts, trunk and so on each by itself. It never came too far away from nature nor completely abstract. The paintings were not generalized men and animals, but individualized men and animals set in an infinite variety of naturalistic poses.

Cezanne, (1839-1906), as a post-impressionist, used people as form and also their organization in space. He wanted to put things in order. He believed common objects and people could be as majestic as mountains and

gods.¹ Cezanne achieved classical dignity in his figures. Of simple people Cezanne made abstract forms expressing the dignity of human existence. He concentrated on massive simplified forms. Heads and bodies, in portraits and figure studies, were subject to similar distortions. Yet for all their revolutionary character, the paintings were first of all alive as expressions, whatever their surface of technical theory. His figures had a sense of weight and volume. They assumed a rocklike firmness of shape.

Van Gogh, (1853-1890), was a social realist. His main contribution to the figure was the emotional and luminous quality that pervaded his paintings. His figures revealed strong modeling which in turn revealed strong personality in undulating strokes rhythmic and forceful. The play between personality of painter and subject was apparent. Van Gogh had an extraordinary clarity of purpose.

Gauguin, (1848-1903), tried to express the simple and direct faith of country people. Forms were simplified and flattened out so as to suggest they were imagined and the colors were equally unnatural. Gauguin applied pure color and reduced all form to its essential outlines. He eliminated modeling within the outlines, as far as possible, especially in shadows. Gauguin's basic theme, (Plate IV), was the undercurrent of superstitious fear beneath the simplicity of primitive people, the menacing whisper of the unknown permeating lives apparently simple and natural.²

Toulouse-Lautrec, (1864-1901), had a consistently satirical viewpoint. He dealt with the individual, penetrating to the very depth of his life and expressed his interpretation in a style as terse and caustic as his

¹ Ibid., p. 343.

² Ibid., p. 381.

PLATE IV



observation. With a few lines he caught a characteristic pose, exaggerated or distorted it to force a point creating a striking design. (Plate V) He was the portrayer of the night life in Paris. In portrait painting, he set quick impressions to bring out personality. He used bizarre lighting as influenced by Japanese design. Simplicity was the key to the handling of his figures. Lautrec's art as he recorded such people in the life of the half-world they inhabited was partly journalism, partly the informal sociological record through the incisive presentation of specialised modes and manners and partly, by whatever extension the observer wants to make for himself, a moral lesson. Lautrec used 'key-hole' vision. His detachment was never self-pitying, his comments on viciousness were not vicious, scornful, or envious; his painting of depraved subjects was no more depraved than it was self-righteous.

THE FIGURE IN INDIVIDUALISM

In the twentieth century, the artist adopted an individualistic approach in relation to the figure. This approach referred to the various attempts on the part of each artist to reconcile the figure to the picture plane in his particular manner. Many twentieth century artists approached the figure classically or in the tradition of the old masters. More present day painters, however, are trying to approach the figure in a new and forceful way.

The figures of Matisse, (1869-1954), were drawn in bold planes with uncompromising force and emphatically defined silhouettes. He combined sinuousities of line, arbitrary color and dislocations of form. Matisse wanted to maintain the impression of spontaneity in the completed canvas,

EXPLANATION OF PLATE V

"La Goulue at the Mouline Rouge"

Toulouse-Lautrec

PLATE V



even though its final organization of form and color was the result of preliminary calculation, trial and color. Matisse explained his approach:

"Supposing I want to paint the body of a woman: first of all I endow it with grace and charm, but I know that something more is necessary. I try to condense the meaning of this body by drawing its essential lines. The charm will then become less apparent at first glance, but in the long run it will begin to emanate from the new image. The image at the same time will be enriched by a wider meaning, while the charm, being less apparent... will be merely one element in the general conception of the figure."¹

Matisse had learned of the artist's function as a creator who first responds to nature, then effects his own transmutation of nature in such a way that his response to it takes the form of an image revealing that response to the observer.

Medigliani, (1884-1920), approached the figure with a combination of Early Italian painting and African Negro sculpture. He elongated forms, combined a taut witty precision of outline with his typical neurotic languor of mood.

Rouault, (1871-1958), was a truly religious painter. He was concerned less with personal redemption than with humane sociological values. He was horrified by man's inhumanity to man. Women were symbols of mankind's self-corruption through the corruption of his fellows. He used heavy simplified powerful volumes to represent the human body. Rouault revealed spiritual corruption through corruption and disfigurement of the flesh. Through identification of himself with these subjects and by the consciousness of tragedy that stirs us by these images, he also made the picture a statement of man's hope. Rouault's design device was somewhat explained by his previous apprenticeship with stain glass work.

¹ Ibid., p. 417.

Picasso, (1881-), has experimented with almost every type of approach to the human figure. The figure has challenged him in a designful way, a distorted image, a classical manner and cubistically. Picasso first used figures similar to Lautrec and then worked with the flat areas of Gauguin. The blue period brought elongation in angular suffering figures which then moved into a classical approach. The Rose period brought figures of a tender whimsical nature with the circus motif. These graceful figures began to change into sculptural forms with decisive geometrical regularities leading to cubism. Picasso had at this time discovered the ingredients for cubism - Cezanne plus African sculpture. He proceeded to use the figure as the structure for his cubistic efforts. After cubism, Picasso returned to weightly sculptural figures, (Plate VI), and then to sweeping circles and black outlines. He has in all these approaches used the figure to challenge his creative powers. Picasso has used the figure to present social messages, as a foundation for design and in all cases found the figure as the most meaningful way to express his reaction to his environment.

In Germany, Käthe Kollwitz, (1867-1945), used her painting to deeply emotionalize protests against the poor both before and after World War I. In emphasizing the human value of the worker, a strength of character came out in her forms. Unlike, Goya, Daumier and other socially conscious painters of her own day, she could not let her painting act as a release from her anguish. It was apparent that her protest does not diminish from drawing to drawing.

Germany's Max Beckmann, (1884-1950), studied the old masters and then used monumentality of form, universalized personalism to speak of mankind.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE VI

"The Entrance"

(1903) Umrang

Picasso

PLATE VI



He used symbolism for good and evil. He tried to show the ideas which hide behind reality. Beckmann built a bridge from the visible to the invisible. He exhibited a deep feeling of despair at the state of civilization. Beckmann showed a nightmarish present day world. The characters always existed in deep space as they do in life. The figures were gloomy and pessimistic. Beckmann packed them into a condensed section of space and they acted their parts lustily with concentrated meaning pervading the concentrated forms.

George Grosz, (1893-1959), another German artist working after World War I, began to dwell on the senseless destruction brought about by war. He used humor to sharpen the feeling of horror. He satirized the bourgeoisie, clergy, military and the bureaucrats who were responsible for the war. Grosz used cruel sharp line to show evil and paradoxes to reveal repulsiveness and brutality. The despair led to powerful symbols in his figurative work.

Max Weber, (1884-), a Russian of the Jewish faith portrayed this heritage in his work. He came to America at an early age and proceeded to use the figure as his dominant motif. He chose to portray women in this monumental style to express the heavy maternal richness of their bodies. Weber's figures are translated into forms remarkable for their expressive power, eloquent distortion and intensity of life. Weber has summed up his feeling for new fads:

"I shall never forget or abandon the great and eternal canons of art for the bizarre, fragmentary, spectacular and fugitive - the fad. Impregnating the plastics with human passion, pathos, eloquence, spiritual aspirations and vision will put the artist on the way to the infinite, the universal and eternal."¹

¹ Nathaniel Poussette-Dart, American Painting Today, p. 18.

Chaim Soutine, (1894-1943), a Russian Expressionist who worked in France, approached the figure with a morbid sensitivity. His figures presented a nightmarish mood with inner tension in their figures and faces. He brought out the character by probing beneath the surface. The rhythmic instinct was so strong that all forms appeared to take on a quality of this strength. He rebelled against superficial realism. The figures expressed the disquieting distortion of El Greco.

"The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form and design."¹ In this quotation, Edward Hopper, (1882-), American, has expressed his feelings concerning his involvement with a variety of subjects. In his paintings that involve the figure or those that do not, the viewer senses the single mood of aloneness. Every person and every subject in a Hopper painting have existed in separation from everything else. He believed that simplicity was the key to painting. His figures exist only to produce a characteristic pose.

Thomas Hart Benton, (1889-), was another American who like Hopper wanted to paint the American way. He was interested in the figure only as a means to relate regional happenings, in this case, happenings in the Midwest. He portrayed his people and the flavor of folkways in a uniquely American character taking liberties with proportion. He wanted to portray those figures and events which would relate regional aspects. Benton's approach of elongating the figure is reminiscent of El Greco as they were both interested in portraying the figure in this method of expressive distortion.

¹ John I. H. Baur, New Art in America, p. 146.

When the tendency for regionalism in painting faded and the painter began to seek other means of interpreting his environment, some painters sought a new way to delve into man's mind while others continued expressing social consciousness and concern for humanity.

Ivan Albright's, (1897-), painting has approached the grotesque. This was partly true because normal vision does not probe so close to reality. His work then approaching the microscopic, became symbols of horror with its closeness to reality. He has used the art of strong light and dark contrasts. This violent pattern has spread itself over his big forms bringing to mind a surrealist approach. He combined his message of social inhumanity with his surrealism.

Rico LeBrun, (1900-), was born in Italy and later came to America. He, also, painted to portray man's blindness to his fellow man. LeBrun put awareness and terror into the forms themselves. He was found to be a painter of ideas using a religious theme, though far from conventional. He said of his painting:

"In dealing with ideas, vision and techniques for the task of communication to the many, I hope for the day when a few of us, by using contemporary techniques will finally correlate some of the facts of contemporary vision and collectively, even unanimously say what we feel about the world around us."¹

Rico LeBrun's message and style indicate that of Rouault and would thus indicate that this particular approach in painting was not a new one nor will it cease to be used as long as man feels strongly about equal liberty.

Reginald Marsh, (1898-1954), American, approached the figure in just the opposite manner as Hopper. Hopper, as before stated wanted the scene

¹ Poussette-Dart, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

to take precedence and he was not interested in showing the figure except when necessary for the overall effect. Marsh was not interested in non-human nature and not even in man made surroundings. He used man made surroundings only insofar as they helped to display people. His figures became creatures surging, surging, and revolving in dizzy masses of anonymous energy.¹ He tried to portray the seamy side of life, seeing through the false glamour.

Hilton Avery, (1893-), American, approached the figure with his reliance on intuition and extreme spontaneity. He never knew in advance when he looked into a face what he was going to see. After the first stroke was down what followed was determined more by the life of the painting than by any resemblance to the subject. Avery's figures have been solved in flat patterns occupying space without conscious communication among themselves. The flatness of the figures suggested the style of Gauguin and many contemporary painters, who felt that modeling of the figure took away from the pattern desired. (Plate VII)

Abraham Rattner, American, (1895-), worked very powerfully in his approach to the figure. He, in his deliberate dispersion of color on canvas, the planned distortion of the human image, the fierce contrasts of light and dark, the occasional use of jewel like color areas and black line, expressed his compassionate view of the human situation. The jewel like color and bold black outline suggested Rousult and Rattner's feeling of social degradation was also reminiscent of Rousult's message.

It was found that Willem de Kooning, (1904-), used brush strokes with a ferocity of their own even when describing an image. de Kooning, a

¹ Virgil Barker, From Realism to Reality in American Painting, p. 52.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE VII

"Poetry after Breakfast"

Milton Avery

EXPLANATION OF PLATE VIII

"Nude in Yellow Ochre"

Balcomb Greene

PLATE VII



PLATE VIII



Dutchman now considered American, used a turbulent style which has been an influence on younger artists that wanted to work in abstraction with human structure. The psychological content of his painting was frightening because of the sensed personal reservoir of feeling apparent. His figures are almost submerged by the ferocity of his painting. "Like Siamese twins, his abstract pictures live off the figures: the figures cannibalize the abstractions."¹ (Plates IX, X, XI) de Kooning's approach to the figure was one that led to renewed interest on the part of the art world concerning the more abstract approach to the image.

"The concept of clarity in deliberate ambiguity is brought to bear on the idea of the human anatomy---it is a sort of 'no-environment' of the body which the artist has called 'intimate proportions'. Just as there is no real 'place' in the modern environment, in a sense that a place can no longer be identified from its parts, so there is no 'real' anatomy in terms of the style and proportion of details."²

Two Frenchmen who represented two various approaches to the figure in contemporary France were Edouard Pignon, (1905-), and Francis Gruber, (1912-1949). Pignon developed his figures as a part of his design both in color and shape. His canvases captured the dynamism of life and translated it. His approach to design with color and sweeping circles has suggested that approach of Picasso in Cubism. Gruber on the other hand, used perspective, modeling, light and shadow to show a predilection for the expressive tortured forms that Picasso experimented with in the Blue period. Gruber drew the figure out disproportionately and used jagged contours.

In America, Jack Levine, New York, (1915-), has used social satire to deal with man's predicament in the world. It was apparent that this

¹ Thomas B. Hess, Willem de Kooning, p. 20.

² Ibid., p. 21.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE IX

"Woman II"

Willen de Kooning

EXPLANATION OF PLATE XI

"Woman IV"

Willen de Kooning

EXPLANATION OF PLATE X

"Woman III"

Willen de Kooning

PLATE IX

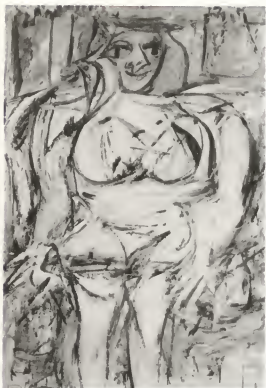


PLATE XI



PLATE X



approach has been used time and time again and each artist achieved a somewhat different style of representing his reaction to this motif. Levine was primarily concerned with the living core of humanity and his chief enemy was the callousness of mankind. He expressed this drama of life with light and shadowy shapes.

Another American, Jacob Lawrence, New York, (1917-), has tried to show the impact of war by using his figures in a flat pattern and eliminated all unnecessary lines. He has portrayed the ideologically powerful Negro. Lawrence's paintings have spoken of the Negro situation and even broader of the human situation.

Andrew Wyeth, Pennsylvania, (1917-), gave us still another message in that he portrays, with absolute realism, the quiet subject. He revealed the life in inanimate objects. The subject was the all important thing, thus his expression became almost microscopic. He has said of his approach, "When I paint, I try to obliterate Andy Wyeth."¹

David Park, American, (1911-1960), felt that it was possible to see all of humanity in one person. His figures were broadly handled and interpreted in massive rhythms. The portrait was complete when the vibration and rhythm of his painting corresponded to the vibration and rhythm of the person from the structure that interested him.

Many American painters have become interested in the figure as a result of Willem de Kooning's efforts with the figure and abstraction. All of them have similarities and yet each has painted with his own individual approach which is characteristic with the twentieth century. These painters have exhibited their desire to reconcile the figure with abstraction.

¹ Barker, op. cit., p. 57.

One of these painters, Richard Diebenkorn of the West Coast, (1922-), has used directness, breadth and metaphors that has made his pictures memorable. He first began with likeness, then felt around and became more deeply involved. Finally he abandoned the portrait's restraints and became involved with a specific attitude.

A keen insight into individual and group virtues and vices was exhibited in the paintings of Adolph Dehn, New York, (1895-). He revealed a never failing sense of humor and a compensating response to the tragic. Dehn tried to dramatize the life of his time. It was apparent that as Dehn said, "I like to play with gestures,"¹ as his figures cavort about acting out their life drama. (Plate XII)

Bill Bisttram, New Mexico, (1895-), reverted to the cave man style as he used symbolism in the figure for his New Mexican Indian Dance series. The two dimensional approach was utilized to express the dynamic symmetry desired.

In the paintings of Warren Brandt, North Carolina, (1918-), it was apparent that he was a defender of portrait painting as a discipline. He believed that a portrait entailed not only capturing a likeness but also creating a believable form existing in space, a form based on a manipulation of planes and color contrasts.

Larry Rivers, New York, (1923-), as his answer to the problem of what to put around the figure, has placed more figures or parts, in his paintings. Rivers focused attention precisely on the most magical parts of the human anatomy--eyes, faces, hands, as the primitive artists did, letting other areas act as passages.

¹ Ralph M. Pearson, The Modern Renaissance in American Art. p. 77.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE XII

"Haitian Heaven"

Adolph Dohn

PLATE XII



James McGarrel, (1930-), of Indiana said of his approach, "I work in a rather deliberate way to make plain pictures of the figure, sometimes particular people, places and objects which are important and interesting to me."¹

Raphael Soyer, New York, (1899-), portrayed real people in a characteristic pose. His love for the tenement dweller and a feeling for contentment on the part of his figure has pervaded his paintings.

Balcomb Greene, Pennsylvania, (1904-), has been one of the leading figures in a revolt against a purely abstract approach in figure and landscape. The figure has slowly worked its way back into his work due in part to his search for a means to express the wholeness of life, and the inseparability of flesh and spirit. (Plate VIII)

William Pachner, Florida, (1915-), has portrayed the figure in the pathos of war. He has in his paintings endeavored to show meaningful Jewish life and the rich feeling of maternity.

Using a curvilinear method, Walter Quirt, Minnesota, (1915-), has shown faces of figures similarly enwrapped and drawn. The figures were sketchily drawn representing an impromptu approach.

Robert Kaufman, (1913-1959), used big shapes flattened for emphasis with the figure. His negative areas are shown to be large and simple. A bold outline has illuminated the features and has given the subject a painted on look.

This section on the individualistic approach of the figure could have gone on and on. The choice has been a difficult one, as even though the approaches are very diversified, still many similarities exist. The

¹ Dorothy G. Seckler, Art in America, Winter 58-59, p. 24.

attempt has been made to choose those approaches which seem to embody the idea that the figure in essence has many 'faces'.

The figure has been used almost consistently since the caveman began to symbolize man's efforts and yet the critic has written, spoken, argued and disputed that the figure in the last few years has become still more important to the painter. It has been suggested that the painter has forsaken a more formal abstract approach in order to 'return' to the figure.

This controversy has presented a great many writers and critics a chance for new evaluation.

THE RESURGENCE OF INTEREST IN THE FIGURE

Two exhibitions held in New York recently, "The New Images of Man", and "Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure", point unhesitatingly to the fact that the critic was saying that the figure was becoming more and more important to the present day painter. (Plate XIII) The columnists, as they discussed these shows put the question in the public's lap by pointing out the vast differences in the approaches of present day artists to the figure. Two columnists have expressed these differing views. Dorothy Adlow, art critic of New York, said:

"...artists no longer see man in classic terms. Man cannot see himself as the measure of all things in the classical way, but rather as a greatly diminished victim of overwhelming circumstance. Existentialist ideas have something to do with the thinking of many of these artists. That they try to focus on man in natural, and the chances are that most of them will continue to evolve pictorial schemes with man as the point of reference."¹

Fairfield Porter, artist and writer, in discussing the "Recent Painting

¹ Dorothy Adlow, "Is the Figure Returning", The Christian Science Monitor, March 2, 1963, p. 16.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE XIII

"Miss New Jersey I"

Larry Rivers

(From Recent Painting U.S.A. -
The Figure)

PLATE XIII



U.S.A.: The Figure" show said:

"Since painters have never stopped painting the figure, and since the exhibition shows no change on the part of particular painters from a non-objective to a figurative style, it could be said to represent a renewed interest in the figure on the part of critics and audience rather than among painters."¹

Thus a controversy became evident as differing views were expressed. The critic had found a trend or movement helpful in evaluating painting, whereas the artist was reluctant to find himself identified as a part of a group or trend if this would make him less individual.

More thought was given this question as the University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, queried their exhibiting artists in 1961. The artists were asked to express themselves concerning the 'return' to the figure.

The question asked was:

"There seems to be a new interest in subject matter in contemporary American painting and sculpture. Do you feel that works of art reflecting the entirely formal (or non-representative) elements are becoming outmoded? Do you see such a return to figurative subject matter, or do you see any other changes in the present directions of American art?"²

The answers were varied, some strongly expressed, and some in doubt concerning the meaning of the question. Several answers expressed a very personal feeling toward the subject and would seem to be relevant in this quest concerning the actual role of the figure and the 'return' to it. These specific quotes were chosen because these painters tend to work with the human figure rather than just the figurative image and they do represent a varied sentiment.

Stuart Davis: "A call has been put out that "The Figure" should

¹ Fairfield Porter, "Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure", Art in America, Vol. 1 - 1962, p. 78.

² Thomas H. Garver, Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture, p. 1.

be returned to art. I will be frank in admitting that I never knew it had been omitted."¹

Lee Gatch: "Contemporary trends are too cerebral, too brutal, and at times masochistic with little left for rejoicing and communication. I am encouraged by the "New Images".²

Bruce Connor: "I see no changes. The spirit of man exists. It is a lie to look for directions."³

Ralph S. Du Casse: "It is not the function of the artist to create the trends of any period of painting. This function belongs to the historian and the critic. If an artist artificially arrives at any particular surface appearance, he has destroyed real creativity."⁴

Peter Grippes: "...as for returning to the figurative, I don't believe that you 'return' to anything. The figurative has always been present even in my most abstract work."⁵

Richard Haines: "The new interest in subject matter by many contemporary artists does not in my opinion, either outmode the non-objective point of view or herald the return to studio still life. Rather I think, the artist feels the need of a broader field of exploration and communication."⁶

Richard Diebenkorn: "Your questions concern groups of artists and their changing attitudes, which I take for granted and about which I'm not very interested. What interests me is that a few strong painters are at work some of whom, incidentally, will remain 'non-representative' while others will 'return'.⁷

Bruce Currie: "My painting continues to be of the subjects that make up my personal world."⁸

Hans Hofmann: "Every figurative attempt in the visual arts is positively to be condemned when made without consideration of the underlying aesthetic principle of abstraction, because such mortal negligence will necessarily lead to uninspired, imitative and academic formalism."⁹

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- 1 Ibid., p. 44.
 - 2 Ibid., p. 46.
 - 3 Ibid., p. 55.
 - 4 Ibid., p. 63.
 - 5 Ibid., p. 72.
 - 6 Ibid., p. 74.
 - 7 Ibid., p. 91.
 - 8 Ibid., p. 111.
 - 9 Ibid., p. 116.

Harold Tovish: "I do not wish to be surly about it, but I don't feel the interest is exactly 'new'. A great many artists have been dealing with subject matter untiringly."¹

Arthur Osver: "Is this new interest (in figurative subject matter) coming from the artist or from museums, critics and collectors? Hasn't figuration been at the party all along and is only now being asked to dance?"²

Phillip Evergood: "The new interest in subject matter has been going on for a long long time. In fact it has been always going on and it always will go on so long as man exists as man and not some other anthropoid type of being."³

Lundy Siegriest: "I do feel there is a new interest in subject matter in contemporary American Art today. . . . But I do not see an end to non-representational art altogether, rather an interesting marriage of the two."⁴

Paul Wanner: "I use recognizable subject matter because I am interested in looking at 'things' around me, and because people and objects seem to me more specific terms with which to put down the kind of things I have to say about the world and about myself."⁵

These painters expressed the idea in essence that they paint as they feel and this feeling has led them to the figure or again it has led them away from the figure. The ideas expressed the point very strongly that an artist resents any grouping and would rather insist on being thought individual in all respects specifically in choice of motif. The artists questioned felt also that this type of question was for a critic or historian to answer and as Richard Diebenkorn so aptly put it, "Your questions concern groups of artists and their changing attitudes which I take for granted and about which I'm not very interested."⁶ Others felt that this was indeed an opportunity to clarify their feeling concerning this question.

¹ Ibid., p. 147.

² Ibid., p. 149.

³ Ibid., p. 160.

⁴ Ibid., p. 195.

⁵ Ibid., p. 208.

⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

The twentieth century painter thus showed again his desire to approach his motif in an individualistic manner and that the figure has been and will be a strong motivating element.

CONCLUSION

From this study, it has been determined that when man wanted to depict his love for ritual, (caveman), love for kings and love of life after death, (Egyptian), love of present life, (Renaissance), love for fellow man, (Goya and Daumier), love for color, (Renoir and Degas), love for design, (Cezanne and Gauguin), and finally love of individualism, (Picasso-Diebenkorn), it was the human figure that he chose as his motif.

The figure has stood for pride, hate, love and self-identification in these emotions. The painter could tell a story, release his emotions, find forgiveness and direct sermons to his fellow man all through his use of the figure.

The twentieth century artist has found additional meaning in the figure. He has painted figures alone, in twos, in groups, ecstatically, morbidly and indifferently. He has made man powerful, weak, to be pitied and to be loved and at the same time identified himself with his subject.

Regardless of the critics' statements concerning a return to the figure, it has been evident that the painter has been and will continue to use the human figure in painting as a connecting link between his world and himself.

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THE FIGURE IN PAINTING

by

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The figure from the time of the caveman and the beginnings of symbolism has been used to communicate man's joys and frustrations. The symbolic figure was developed in an effort to pass on the rituals and ceremonies of the early peoples. The scientific figure came in answer to man's quest for knowledge as the human body itself became a prime objective in the desire to understand God's world. To portray the human body became an end in itself with its glorification as the prime motif. Coupled with this scientific approach the effort to communicate man's love for God and his fellow man resulted in a flattened image with individual characteristics submerged in an effort to glorify only one God. With this new interest in brotherly love, a yearning for social equality led to painting which pointed toward the gross inequality and evil consequences of war. The figure in all these efforts became the best means to portray what man feels and what effect society has upon man's soul. This figure of social significance was represented by a universal image expressing concern for all humanity.

When painting became an end in itself and conceived to become a revelation of the artist's individual feeling, design took precedence. In this concern for design, the figure did not leave the horizon, it merely took its place as a prime motif for organic design. The figure was, on occasion dissected, distorted, viewed only in sections and in some instances became almost completely invisible. All the while, the figure remained as the structural foundation of the painting.

Man's answer to a continuing search for more expression and less apparent image did for a time appear to leave the figurative image and began the exploration of a purely formal nature. The figure was at this time still a source of basic reference and began to emerge almost immediately as the painter realized its versatility.

In respect to the critics' statements concerning the apparent resurgence of interest in the figure, it has been learned that even though some painters apparently favor a 'return' there are others who feel that the figure has been in favor all along. The feeling that has prevailed most consistently is that both a figurative approach and one of pure formalism can be valid and necessary. The two approaches could co-exist and have been doing so even though this fact has not been publicized extensively until recently.

The conclusion of this study has been that the figure as a motif has been used consistently down through the ages in various approaches and it has remained a dominant one today. Whether the painter expressed his feelings in symbolism, realism, social messages or all of the various approaches, in no other manner has the painter said so much about his life, his loves and his reaction to his environment. This essentially, was and is the reason for painting.