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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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GENRE PAINTING: PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

By

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May 16, 1986

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Genre painting can be a personal art which has universal implications. The environment can be an important inspiration for painting as it brings the painter closer to the surrounding world. Art should be in all aspects of life and not isolated from everyday existence. Art can help us to appreciate the world around us and the experience of living, and in this way, painting my environment carries personal significance for me.

Genre painting is defined as painting that "depicts scenes or events from everyday life, usually realistically."¹ Painters throughout time have been inspired by their environment and contributed their interpretations of their surroundings. Genre painting is portraying the ordinary or everyday in such a personal way as to give it extraordinary significance.

Many of the painters near the turn of the century, such as Winslow Homer, John Sloan, George Luks, and William Glackens, were trained by working on magazines or newspapers. The training gave them experience in depicting scenes from everyday life. Magazine and newspaper-trained artists believed in the relevance of art to life.

The influence of Impressionism on genre painting was that light and color were more important than subject matter. In the late nineteenth century artists wanted to do more than to simply represent places and occurrences. They wanted more complexity of ideas and more relevance of subject matter. Winslow Homer and

¹Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C. Merriam Company, 1973), p. 479.

Thomas Eakins developed genre art beyond ordinary reporting of events and places. They painted elements of life that related to the time in which they lived and expressed the fundamental human situation of that time.

Homer and Eakins expressed interest in human problems and concerns. Homer showed man's courage and strength in the face of the forces of nature. Eakins was concerned with man's appearance and character. Homer painted his friends as models for his fishermen and guides, but did not try to capture their individual character. Eakins painted his friends as models, but always kept their individual character. His portraits have strong psychological characterization, and this is the way he combines genre and portraiture.²

Robert Henri's group, called "The Eight" or the "Ashcan School" expressed opposition to academicism. They were against classical beauty, and the refined surface associated with academic art. The Ashcan school believed art should express the true nature of the working class people. America has always been a society of working and middle-class people, so this expressed a fundamental difference between American and European art, which had always appealed to the elite, upper class.

Henri expressed the view that above everything was the spirit of art, the depth and honesty of its view of life. He said, "Technique was nothing unless it served as a vehicle for

²Hermann Warner Williams, Jr., Mirror to the American Past; a survey of American genre painting: 1750 - 1900 (New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 220-222.

the expression of life."³ The Henri group made other artists aware of life around them and to the subject matter of the time in which they lived. Henri influenced a generation of painters with his belief that art must be relevant to the world in which the artist lives.

The Henri group painted the city as a background for human activity, but Edward Hopper painted the city as the main subject.

Hopper was one of the first artists to explore the pictorial possibilities of the modern city. His description of Charles Burchfield's painting also applies to his own. He wrote, "the sensation for which so few try, of the interior and exterior of a building seen simultaneously."⁴

Although the modernist tendency of his time was toward subjectivity, Hopper opened art up to a different kind of objectivity. His art was representational rather than abstract, and he began a movement toward American subject matter in art. He believed a nation's art was greatest when it reflected the character of its people. Hopper felt that American art, if it is sincere, would become independent of European influence. He said, "After all, the main thing is the natural development of a personality, racial character takes care of itself to a great extent, if there is honesty behind it."⁵

Edward Hopper was an artist who felt an emotional bond with

³Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Art in America in Modern Times (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934), p. 31.

⁴Edward Hopper, as quoted by Lloyd Goodrich in Edward Hopper (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1978), p. 105.

⁵Ibid., p. 97.

his environment. He wrote of Charles Burchfield and it was also true of himself, "His work is most decidedly founded, not on art, but on life, and on the life that he knows and loves best." Hopper said, while others are bored by everyday existence, Burchfield discovered a poetic or romantic quality in life through his art. Hopper said, "By sympathy with the particular he made it epic and universal."⁶

In the 1930's the American scene painters introduced social protest into genre painting. Their concern with political ideas resulted from the great depression. Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Stewart Curry were important to this movement.

Thomas Hart Benton believed art should relate to a larger audience and not be just for the elite. He felt the intellectualization of art made it too remote from the public, and he stressed the value of content in art. Benton, when explaining the purpose of regionalism said, "we were bent on returning painting to its historical representational purpose and, further, in the interests of American art, to making it represent matter drawn from American life and meaningful to those living that life."⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 101.

⁷Thomas Hart Benton, A Professional and Technical Autobiography (Lawrence, Manhattan, Wichita, London, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1969), p. 155.

The environment in which I live is an important source of inspiration for me. My art is designed to help the viewer appreciate the world around him or her, and see the beauty in simple experiences in life. I am trying to show the importance of spiritual values by communicating my feelings about the subject matter, and showing the significance of the subject to the world. I would like to help people see the beauty in their environment. After I paint from my surroundings, I appreciate the world around me more and feel closer to my environment. Studying the surrounding environment helps the artist learn about life, and painting is a key to this understanding. I choose carefully the places I live and work because my house and studio are often subjects I paint. It is important to paint subjects that are familiar to me. The city in which I live is especially important right now, as I spend more time working in my downtown studio than working at home. I am inspired by the old buildings in the city, which have a great deal of character and individuality. I love the muted, rich colors of the buildings, the brick reds and soft golds, the dark browns and light tans, and the warm and cool neutrals. Buildings have interesting compositional possibilities when they are grouped with other buildings of varying shapes and sizes, as well as different colors and values. The way the sunlight brings out the shapes and colors is especially important to me. Sunlight on a building creates a magical mood with the drama of the brilliant light on one side and the dark shadows on the other. I feel a very close

connection between Edward Hopper's cityscapes and mine, in that we both share a desire to paint sunlight on the side of a building.

We both use rich, saturated colors, the way they appear in bright, sharply-angled sunlight, and use strong lights and darks to create a dramatic mood. I identify with the lonely mood of Hopper's paintings, with few or no people, to create the feel of a city on a late Sunday afternoon, when no one is around. I like to paint a city that looks like it has the imprint of life on it, such as the old, used quality of the buildings. However, I do not want to show the actual manifestations, such as people and cars. Painting views as as they are seen through windows is important to me. Hopper often painted scenes through windows, and would give the feeling of an exterior and interior of a building at the same time. I painted my views through my studio windows, with the fact that they were actually windows expressed by painting the railing outside, and parts of the inside with plants on a shelf. I want to express the way I saw the city outside and what I felt about the view out there. I want to show how in the city, life is usually seen through windows, and a separation results between the viewer and reality.

I paint my buildings in shallow spaces for the same reason Charles Burchfield did, in order to create a feeling of intimacy with the subject. Burchfield was also very inspired by his environment. I identify with Burchfield when he said, "I am one who finds himself in an incredibly interesting world, and my chief concern is to record as many of my impressions as possible, in

the simplest and most forthright manner. In short, life, with all that the word implies, is of first importance to me."⁸

I find the people around me an important source of inspiration. When I see a characteristic in someone that is interesting, such as the colors they wear, the look in their eyes, or the way their hair falls, I want to paint them. It is important to me to capture the part of their personality that is most striking. I particularly like to paint and draw people I know. I feel better able to capture the person's natural character best if I am more knowledgeable about that person. Mary Cassatt usually painted people she knew. She painted friends and family doing daily activities such as reading or sewing. Painting people familiar to her helped Cassatt capture the personality and the mood of the person she painted.

Through art I can reveal my personality to myself and other people. In my art I capture my feelings about myself and the subject I paint or draw. My aim is to show people not merely as a part of a formal design, but to show them as Alice Neel did, as humans with feelings. She said, "When I drew a head, it had expression, it had eyes, it had everything."⁹ The expression is important to the life of the painting. Expression and mood give an individual quality to the personality of the sitter. The individuality of people is important, and just as every person is

⁸Charles Burchfield, as quoted by Matthew Baigell, in Charles Burchfield (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1976), p. 121.

⁹Alice Neel, as quoted by Patricia Hills, in Alice Neel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), p. 15.

different, each painting is unique. Every time I paint or draw a person, I will see him or her differently, according to the mood I am in and the way I perceive the person's mood.

I want portraiture to include the environment of the people I paint as did Raphael Soyer. He said his work "is a picture of the life I have known, an attempt to portray people in their environment...not isolated portraiture but the subject within its natural context, in its daily setting."¹⁰ I would like to do more paintings of people in their own homes either doing activities that they do often or surrounded by objects that are important to them. This is a way of showing the personality of the sitter in more ways than the person alone. It is expressing the person through extensions of the body, through objects that the person possesses or through his or her actions.

It is important to me to paint the familiar in order to understand its character, an idea shared by Edgar Degas. In order to express their nature, he allowed his sitters to pose the way they wanted. He wanted to do, as he said, "portraits of people in familiar and typical attitudes, above all in giving to their faces the same choice of expression as one gives to their bodies."¹¹

The pose of the sitter is very important to express the mood and personality. It is important to let people sit in a pose that is

¹⁰Raphael Soyer, as quoted by Lloyd Goodrich in Raphael Soyer (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), 1972, p. 104.

¹¹Edgar Degas, as quoted by John Rewald, in The History of Impressionism (4th ed.; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 56.

comfortable for them, so the pose will be natural, and will express their personality. Alice Neel said she tries to discover the sitter's most natural pose. She said, "Before painting. when I talk to a person they unconsciously assume their most characteristic pose, which in a way involves all their character and social standing - what the world has done to them and their retaliation. And then I compose around that." My work is much like Alice Neel's because we both try to look at each person individually and in a fresh way, without preconceived notions. Neel said, "When I paint it's not just that it's intuitive, it's that I deliberately cross out everything I've read and just react, because I want that spontaneity and concentration on that person to come across."¹² I look at each person I paint as if for the first time, even if I know the person well, because I perceive people differently each time. Every time we meet I discover some new characteristic they have. When I paint someone it is to explore that person and my reactions to him or her.

The best method I have discovered of maintaining the spontaneity of a pose and the mood of a sitter is to draw and take pictures of him or her. This is especially important if the person cannot sit long enough for me to paint him or her.

Both the drawing and the photograph capture the mood of the sitter, so it does not change all the time, as it would if I worked only from life. I have found that painting directly from the subject through the whole painting is not as good as using

¹²Alice Neel, as quoted by Patricia Hills, *Ibid.*, p. 141.

combinations of techniques in order to get the effect I want. This way I can maintain a consistent idea throughout the painting.

Photography is an excellent method for capturing sunlight on a subject, since natural light is always changing and I have to work very fast in order to arrange it in my painting. Sunlight can change in minutes, and the result could be indecisive if I continue to work with it. Photographing sunlight on objects or people allows me to do a finished painting with a consistent, definitive pattern of sunlight on the subject.

The structure of a painting is important because that determines the rest of the painting. If the painter does not form the structure correctly, no amount of details can save the painting. Robert Henri believed the beginning of a painting is the most important part, and the remainder of the time spent working on a painting should be to perfect the beginning. A painter should capture the most important part of a subject and achieve a sense of freshness and immediacy. Henri said,

"The development of an ability to work from memory, to select factors, to take things of certain constructive values and build with them your unique vision of nature, the thing you caught in an instant look of a face or the formation of a moment in the sky, will make it possible to state not only that face, that landscape, but make your statement of them as they were when they were most beautiful to you."¹³

Painting color patterns is important to me, because I can express the mood or personality of the sitter through the patterns

¹³Robert Henri, The Art Spirit (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1923, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), p. 31.

around him or her. I enjoy painting colorfully-printed fabrics with designs such as flowers and birds, to indicate flights of fancy. The person I paint is depicted in a relaxed pose, dreaming of being somewhere else. The pose has the feeling of motion, through the movement of the lines and planes of her body, and the play of light and color patterns over the whole canvas.

I am communicating through my art the importance of nature, and the relation of human beings to nature. I want to show that humans are part of nature rather than isolated from the natural world. I am trying to create an effect in my paintings of reclining women like that in Paul Gauguin's paintings. He uses flat planes and contrasting colors to show form. We both paint with a simplicity and directness that suggests primitive art. I share with Gauguin an attraction to the spiritual and emotional quality of primitive art. Mystery and suggestion are important elements in art. Too much technical perfection takes away the power of a painting to stimulate the imagination. I painted my reclining women as if they are dreaming and depicted their fantasies as I perceived them. I try to show emotion and express moods in my painting through line, shape, and especially color. Like Gauguin I paint the rich, warm colors saturated with sunlight and try to capture the spirituality the sun gives to nature. I want to show a spiritual world and capture a mood in the nature around me. I share with Gauguin an idea of a primitive world where humans are in harmony with nature. In this world nature is all-powerful and mysterious. I paint nature and allow myself to

change it to best express my inner feelings. Like Gauguin I want to show a spiritual world and capture a mood in the nature around me. I agree with Gauguin when he said, "Art is an abstraction we must be able to extract from nature as we lie dreaming before it."¹⁴

The best way to capture my impressions of nature and my feelings about it is to combine sources of information such as drawings and photographs with my memory and imagination in order to achieve the effect I want.

My art is made to simplify life by helping people understand priorities in life - of love over superficiality, spirituality over material possessions, and of human and natural qualities over artificial elements.

¹⁴Paul Gauguin, as quoted by A. Kantor-Gukovskaya, in Paul Gauguin (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1977), p. 5.

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