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A COMMENTARY ON THIRTEEN PAINTINGS

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The activity involved in the painting of thirteen pictures is, in reality, many activities combined. These activities can be broadly divided into two areas--the actual physical activity and the far more important activities of the perceiving mind. These form a series of actions, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, ideas and shades of each interlocked. Some of the processes are having their beginning, while others are fading and still others are continuing. They are a mixture of conscious and unconscious actions--often arising spontaneously from the clashing or the meeting of two or more diverse streams of thought. Sometimes these interactions gather momentum only after a period of dormancy.

Writing analytically of such elusive and abstract mental and spiritual activities is difficult for the written word as such is an instrument of logical thought conforming to its own particular order. Painting is more in the realm of precursive thought and embodies a different kind of expression.

In this presentation the intention is to explore some of the stimulations and influences which lead to the visual images in the paintings. The stimulations and influences have come from varied directions to meet and form the energy which has given life to the paintings. The method, therefore, will be that of exploring the nature of the processes through interpretation of expression, of the historical and experiential background, and aesthetic and technical aspects.

As the thesis paintings are the main objects of consideration, a chapter on the individual paintings will follow. By its reduction to particulars and the descriptive data included, this section will have a significance in regard to the paintings and will serve as a basis for the more general commentary on the nature of the processes.

The commentary takes its departure from the preceding discussion and extends the ideas presented into more general statements concerning the activities involved in painting. The writer finds it impossible to speak separately of the categories mentioned above as the characteristics never occur as separates. Therefore, they will be treated together, coming under several headings for organizational purposes.

By this exploration of some of the reflections and changes of thought which occur in the growth of a visual image from its beginning as a nebulous inner thought to its ultimate expression, it is hoped that a few of the sources and activities which feed and fructify artistic creativity will be set forth. This attempt to coordinate and set forth such thoughts in clear, logical form should convey a comprehension and an understanding of the activities involved and also of the structure of the paintings.

## CHAPTER I

### THE PAINTINGS

The paintings do not follow any central theme except that they are a part of the thesis exhibit and that they all involve some experimentation as to method and medium. The most outstanding similarity among them seems to be the recurrence of landscape concepts. Some of the paintings are entirely oil while others are combinations of oil, casein, gouche, water color, enamel, flat paint, and varnish.

Any discussion of the finer points of painting is a result of appreciation rather than the cause of it. A discussion such as this cannot deepen appreciation unless the appreciation comes first. The actual experiencing should come before the analysis. This commentary of the exhibit is intended to be read after the paintings have been seen; therefore, without the paintings it is incomplete.

The first painting to be finished, Contained in the Shadows, originated from an early morning reflection cast through a window onto a gray bookshelf. The configuration was faint, but its unusual glimmer immediately attracted attention in the half-waking early morning hour. The painting is the development of several sketches plus the visual memory. The spatial arrangement is dependent on the double focus which interplays between the deep areas and the surface rhythms. If the forms seem to indicate biological beginnings, the semblance may arise from the nature of the reflected organisms. The fleeting and evanescent qualities of shadows are difficult to capture; therefore, to give the

painting substance and a permanency, deeper, more solid colors were used. These darker colors probably also contribute to the organic inflection of the picture.

Sometimes a painting grows into a more complex organization than has been foreseen. This happened in Crucible which began as a composition in blue and white. It soon became evident that more elements would have to be introduced to fulfill its purpose. The complex patterns required several overpaintings, the result of which was an intricate arrangement of forms. This painting is one of the few done entirely with a brush, mainly because the brush lends itself more readily to delicate work. The many directions and forms may tend towards disunity, but it is hoped that, technically, the light portions counteract this and create an entity--an entity motivated by influences and thoughts too numerous to analyze.

As a record of consciousness, a work of art undergoes various stages in the assimilation of material. It is impossible to reverse the process and try to follow it back to the sources without having missing links. It is a complex process for, to arrive at a general conclusion, one must constantly be weighing related points of view and images of thought. The motivations for this painting spring from many environmental influences including studies of the philosophies of different religions.

The two small paintings, Muir Woods and Rocks, are impressions of the California coastline and further inland where the redwoods begin. Both required several repaintings to give the desired texture and depth and to give adequate presentations of the rocky, treacherous coast and the centuries-old redwoods. The paintings may seem too small adequately to convey ideas of the grandiose towering trees and the magnificent



coastline with its sharp contrasts; however, it would be impossible to transfer them fully to larger canvases.

As has been stated, one of the most striking similarities occurring in the paintings is a personal feeling or affinity for landscape forms. This is true of the painting, Requiescence, as it is for several others. This work was first conceived as a lithograph which was unsuccessful technically. Experimentation in changing the medium was tried, calling for enlargement and development of the theme. Nevertheless, the theme has not changed radically, and it is one of the most concrete in the exhibit.

Another landscape, Before Spring, depicts the subtlety of the changes in a landscape in the between-seasons period before spring has really burst forth. It is an impression of the changes occurring as winter withdraws and spring takes its place. The theme is indicative of restlessness and expectancy—one in which the changes in nature are grasped and subjugated to consciousness. It began as a light, earthy-colored composition which was washed with turpentine leaving only the bare structure. The final painting was superimposed on this, blending with the original structure and giving the impression of the interval when the grays and browns of winter are washed away by the descending blues and greens of spring.

Interlude is another of the paintings which is basically a landscape. It represents a restive interlude during a tiring drive up the California coast and is indicative of a welcome change and relief from the intenseness of the never ceasing movement of the brilliant blue ocean beating and receding against the burnt brown cliffs and fields.

Here and there reaching to the ocean were dark, chalky-green fields of cabbage. The stark intensity of these surroundings was momentarily forgotten when suddenly the highway curved inland into a cool, shady grove of majestic eucalyptus trees. The in and out swing of the ocean was replaced by the dappled shadows of the gently swaying thicket of trees.

Land Rhythms presents a different kind of situation—one in which the harsh, dried rhythms of the desert are overpowering. It is representative of the constant fight to gain control of the land. Casein, oils and water color were used, with the desired texture and effect achieved by rubbing and scraping down the surface.

Every painting depends in part on the projection of its mood. The tempo of Solitude, which is a composition primarily in gray and white, is enlivened by the patches of vivid color which show through.

Often one learns from the actual process of painting. The developments of the painting, Time-worn, were a continual challenge. It began as a brushed on blue and white and finally evolved after many stages of bright and dull colors, smooth and impasto surfaces, to its final form.

One can describe the stages of a painting in detail and yet not approach the content of the painting. Noting the stages of development is similar to describing the sequence of the life process. Mere description is not enough; one must know something of what lies beneath the overt appearances. A painting is a human creation which embodies a mystery guarding its own secret.

Dancing, abstract patterns created by sunlight catching on the edges of objects is the subject matter of Reflections. An effort was made to catch the glimmer of the reflections cast by the land and water at a single moment.

Directions is a painting of vigorous changes of direction imposed on a somber background. Oils, enamel, and varnish were used in the exploration of connectives.

In the exploration of intangibles, things which one cannot see or grasp with the senses can have explosive reactions. A search for reality begun by science in its examination of the infinitesimal molecular structure of the universe has increased the barrage of visual phenomena which is bombarding the world today. Expansion in one field necessitates expansion in other fields in searching for an intuitive physical reality. Paths other than reason are being explored for avenues to serenity.

The last painting in the group, Triad, is a reaction away from a preset, formalized pattern. It also represents a turn away from the "natural forms" of much of the exhibit to come closer to the pure elements of harmony and pictorial internality.

## CHAPTER II

### A COMMENTARY ON THE ACTIVITIES

The following comments on the more general aspects of painting do not necessarily follow the order in which they occur, for it is difficult to establish any order of occurrence. There is constant interplay between them, and some of the headings are more inclusive than others. The purpose of this section is to supplement and to give added meaning to the statements in the preceding chapter by further exploration into the process of painting.

#### Cognition

The mind is constantly receiving multiform stimulations from the outside world and is sending them out again in various forms. When something is seen, heard, read, or sensed, it is of necessity interpreted by the spirit of the mind which it enters. The artistic consciousness of the mind interprets cognitions of the visual world, scientific conceptual comprehension of phenomena, as well as happenings of a more emotional nature which would include such things as convictions, impressions of particular places, people, conflicts, satire, exuberance, wonder, awe, and doubt.

The desire for communicating thoughts is universal and likewise the need for growth in powers of expressive communication of these thoughts.

Cognition of events in the world around us is conditioned by the peculiar characteristics, capacities, and subjective powers of the

individual mind, sometimes making it impossible to determine whether objective cognition or subjective awareness is taking precedence in the formation of a "painterly" idea. It is difficult to separate conscious and unconscious activity, for there is a constant ebb and flow between the two--each coming to the fore when a situation demands it. As one paints he is constantly creating new situations and striving to combine them into a unified whole.

#### Organization

Ideas or impressions may occur singularly or simultaneously with others. They may occur instantaneously, but they cannot be expressed in an instant. Therefore, some manner of sustaining the original impetus must be found if the painting is to speak through its rhythms, organization, tonal properties, colors, shapes, and subtle variations thereof, making a vision exist symbolic of the original impetus. To sustain an impression demands the ability to think in terms of area and spatial relationships--to organize thoughts into an entity which readily lends itself to visual expression. It also demands an artistic consciousness of one's environment. When a level of artistic consciousness such as this is reached--a state which Fiedler describes as an "independent, autonomous mental activity based on spontaneous perceptual experiences"<sup>1</sup>--then it is often possible to let the painting "paint itself." Each form, shape, variation of hue is a continual surprise and a continual challenge to be conquered if the trend of the painting is to be followed. However,

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<sup>1</sup>Konrad Fiedler, On Judging Works of Visual Art (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949), p. 61.

this is a procedure which can be deceiving at times, as it is easy to imagine oneself in such a frame of mind when really there is only a fragmentary grasp of the phenomena. Even when one reaches this level of consciousness, the process is often slow and laborious--a process in which more is destroyed or cast aside than is embodied in the final pictorial structure.

When one considers the dynamic inner workings of the human mind and the expression of a portion of these by transposing them into visual, material forms, one can readily see why discipline and reworking is necessary. One works with the idea of making a pictorial organization which will contain a reality of its own rather than an incomplete expression which may be good practice in technique but not a complete painting. In speaking of Chinese painting Laurence Binyon offers a solution to the enigmatical problem of expressing intangibles in material form when he describes the qualities in a successfully organized painting.

A painting on paper may seem static, but to the perceiving mind it is a dynamic experience--the pregnant strokes rising and falling, stretching and sweeping, crouching and springing--the tones swelling and contracting. It is not merely a movement, but an organized movement--a matter of relation.

The strokes may lean or press, yield or resist according to the inner tension--a line conception of the equilibrium of forces in such a whole--a feeling of rhythmic continuity, of uneven internality. An equilibrium achieved, lost and regained. It is a way of giving life--a sense of continuing.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Importance of Experience

The interpretation of an experience is colored to a certain degree by past experience as well as by the alertness of the perceiving mind at

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<sup>2</sup>Laurence Binyon, and others, Chinese Art (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1925), p. 6.

the time of the experience. An awareness of the experimental nature of a visual concept is an important factor in analyzing the work, and it is also helpful in discussing painting. For, when conversing with those who are aware of preceding experiences or who have had similar ones, the superfluous "go-between" explanation which is at best a substitute for something better transmitted by interchange of ideas, can be eliminated.

The way in which one utilizes experience has much to do with the vitality of one's expression. Experience is a deep well from which to draw material; the more one draws on experience the more worlds will be opened. The background of experience provides the substance of many attempts at expression. The growing depth and richness of past experience form a basis on which to build a maturing art. A painting is the expression of an individual, and experience in the form of artistic knowledge is expressed in each painting.

A painter can capture a part of the rhythm of the thought stream and, by the power of suggestion can evoke the feeling of being moved forward or backward in space and time. An oasis of consciousness exists by virtue of what antecedes it. In one's own way he comes to the time when he can leap the chasm separating the mind as a logical instrument and the mind as an embodying spirit to attain a potential awareness of his whole nature. When one reaches out towards abstractions and intangibles, this awareness and pure concentration raises the level of the mind's operation, increasing and enlarging visual powers and artistic creativity.

### Technique

The technical side of painting--the particular habits and ways of building the pictorial structure--is an important factor in the determining of the total effect of a work. However, technical knowledge and ability alone are not enough to create a significant work. Technical virtuosity and emotional content must complement each other. Often when one views a painting, the sheer technical virtuosity of the artist evokes the first aesthetic response, while responses to the emotional content are slower to come. But, in the long run, it is the essence of what the artist had to say rather than how he said it which remains. Technique is a means rather than an end. Competence in the technical handling of art forms is something which one must work to gain in order to make the gain work for him.

An individual's style, the means by which he brings a work of art into being, may vary from medium to medium; nevertheless, the artist's personality runs throughout. Sometimes acquaintance with a number of works is needed to become aware of this unique quality. As an artist matures, his personal style becomes a stronger element in his work. The uniqueness of an individual's style is found in its "irreducible element of personal grace or idiosyncrasy."<sup>3</sup>

### Freedom and Discipline

In the process of painting two seemingly contradictory qualities are absolutely needed--freedom and discipline. Herbert Read defines

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<sup>3</sup>Herbert Read, The Grass Roots of Art (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1947), p. 18.



freedom as a privilege which promotes energy of thought, fullness of interest, and active curiosity which are needed for the realization of an individual's artistic integrity.<sup>4</sup> Awareness of events or phenomena leads into a path of action which necessitates selecting and choosing. The impulse to action may arise from an awareness or an interest, but the power to perform is determined by the power of discipline. A discipline of the whole self is needed for fuller expression and for developing ability in the plastic arts, for painting is a weaving of fragments into a final, full pattern—a process of discrimination demanding utmost attention and concentration and increased momentum if the result is to be successful and is to have emotional appeal.

#### The Response

Each individual responds in his own way to the patterns and rhythms of the universe. Everything that moves has a unique rhythm of movement which exists as the being exists. Each thing is included in and has its place in the universe and has the power of evoking responses.

A work of art, as a measure of human effort, may be a small pattern in the scheme of larger patterns, but it can evoke growing responses as a pebble dropped into water initiates the expanding rings. Art is a means by which one can achieve what Wordsworth called the widening of the sphere of human sensibility. For a work of art the emotional appeal is primary; intellectual appeal comes secondly and should be the result, not the cause of emotional appeal.

For an understanding of the form expressed in a painting one

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<sup>4</sup>Herbert Read, op. cit., p. 18.

combines all that the painting gives with all that he brings to it. A painting is a thing within itself mirroring different things to different minds.

#### A Record of Consciousness

Art is a record of consciousness and a setting down of thoughts. As the realm of experience and knowledge broadens, the mind is more crowded with ideas, thoughts, and impressions; therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult to create an integrated expression.

In order to express a series of visual impressions as a new and individual product, growth must be two-fold. One must grow in the capacity for reception and absorption of stimuli and also in the capacity for complete absorption and expression. Mental and spiritual growth must be accompanied by growth in the power to create integrated expressions. If this growth is not two-fold, then, by disuse, the powers of expression will become more and more limited until at last they reach impossibility.

Especially is this true today when new areas are being explored, enlarging the visual world. Besides new visual frontiers older forms of visual expression are becoming more accessible. It is possible to view artistic efforts from times of antiquity down to the latest works, making one realize the vast tradition which lies behind and wonder what will lie ahead.

## CONCLUSION

Of the thirteen paintings presented here, eight are basically landscapes while the remaining five are of a more subjective nature. Taken as a whole, the exhibit is one of variety—a variety indicative of experimentation in the search for a foundation on which to build and also the fact that each painting started with its own potential.

The purpose of the thesis has been two-fold. First, to enable the artist to come to a fuller realization of expression in the arts, and secondly, to communicate something of the processes involved to the spectator. In setting forth these thoughts concerning the individual paintings and more general thoughts concerning the ways and methods by which they came into being, it is hoped that some insight into the various activities and processes has been given.

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