San Fernando Valley State College

IN SEARCH OF COMMUNICATION

An Abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art

by

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ABSTRACT

IN SEARCH OF COMMUNICATION

By

Ethel Harriet Somers

Master of Arts in Painting

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the communicative potential of abstract and semi-abstract painting through the plastic medium of oil paint, while at the same time developing a personal style that is both expressive and evocative.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Who knows what stimulus kindles the fire that energizes the artist to paint? Sometimes when I paint there is a driving need to express a feeling that is aroused
by a specific sensory impression, while at other times
the paint flows without a recognizable stimulus almost
automatically, as though the images had been hidden
deep in the sub-conscious waiting for an opportunity
to emerge.

The latter method of discovering the unexpected
is quite similar to the process of free association
used in modern psychoanalysis. By simply letting a
painting happen, allowing it to develop at its own pace,
carried along by its own momentum, each addition of
color or form brings to light new and exciting nuances
of meaning.

There are those who would call this method of
painting taking advantage of the accidental. However,
most psychologists would counter that the process of
choice, that which we choose to exaggerate, that which
we choose to sublimate, that which we choose to elimi-
nate by painting over are all choices, not accidents.
They are dictated by our sub-conscious under the watch-
ful eye of the conscious self, and therefore the final
painting that emerges becomes a personal statement.

My painting is actually an act of memory, an as-
sociation of images colored by emotions. Form, color,
space, the gesture are never the representation of an object in nature; but derive their content from imagination and from memories dredged from the deep recesses of the sub-conscious.

In the beginning the painting may start with a gesture which is wholly spontaneous and unconscious, but as it evolves the aesthetic consciousness begins to take control and dictate associations of forms that eventually become fully realized and related one to another in an organic wholeness. One form is complementary to another, just as one color may be complementary to another, and with each addition of color or form or detail the entire composition may change. Thus, the painting remains in a state of flux, fluid and responsive to the emotion or aesthetic judgment which dictates the structure. There is always a sense of urgency, a compelling tension as I paint that ebbs and flows, but never allows me to rest until the painting has reached the point where the psychological and emotional tension is resolved.

Spatial dimensions are my way of making an emotional statement, and I find it more natural and easy to mold and control that statement through modulations of color and areas of light and dark rather than through
line. My art is one of memory rather than action.

Reality for me lies in the form which gives concrete expression to the idea and not in the physical act of laying on the paint as in "action" painting.

It pleases me to play with color much in the way a composer plays with the notes on a piano keyboard, to explore all the expressive aspects of color, and to try to translate visual impressions without sacrificing emotional impact. I find it fascinating to experiment and discover how a subtle change of color disguises or discloses a plane or gives an indication of space within the picture plane, how it is possible to control space by varying a tonal value or by juxtaposition, and how each color seems to have a weight of its own that has nothing to do with its brightness or darkness. Even a difference in paint quality, thickness or thinness, dry brush or palette knife, will affect the weight of a color and thereby change its spatial location.

CHAPTER III
CONTRIBUTORY SOURCES

Much of the painting for the Artistic Performance was done in Mexico and has, as a consequence, taken on overtones of the psyche of the Mexican people and the
warmth and color of the Mexican countryside, and could actually be titled "Impressions of Mexico".

As I travelled throughout Mexico I stored up images, sensory impressions of colors, sights, sounds, smells, and the emotions that they evoked. Then when I had the opportunity to paint, a kind of unity emerged that tied together all the elements.

For me, there is a need to organize a painting around forms drawn from nature. Whether this is to be attributed to man's basic need to structure his inner world and to be at one with nature, or whether it is a stereotypic way of viewing reality, I do not know. But I do know that my sensory experiences with nature seem to call up deeper "personal" images that are neither symbolic nor realistic, but are truly expressive of my feelings. This expressive quality should in turn induce in the viewer active participation and evoke images of equivalent power drawn from his experience.

CHAPTER IV
PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS

The above-mentioned "personal" images are related to the work of Carl Jung who has suggested the existence of universal archetypes which are sort of collective
bodied in the unconscious, and specifically in the folklore of a culture which are in some way common to all mankind.¹ This explains at least in part why a work of art can have a "universal" or cross-cultural appeal. Freud came to agree with him although his theories took a different direction.

A much simplified version of Freud's theory of aesthetic reciprocity is that the artist has the unique gift of being able to project the fantasies that are buried within him and in all of us. He is able somehow to elaborate them into a form that disguises their personal content and also their origin in the forbidden fantasy world of repressed desires. He universalizes his fantasy life in such a way that it gives a positive pleasure to the viewer that evidently has very little to do with its source in his own sub-conscious, but seems to be communicated by the proportions, the color, the texture, the rhythm, and all other properties that make a work of art appealing.²

Henry Moore in talking about sculpture has spoken of "universal shapes" to which everyone is subconsciously conditioned and to which they can respond if conscious control does not shut them off. Many great painters, Chagall, Jawlensky, Klee, Kandinsky, Picasso all have made statements which point out that their work was in part derived from archetypical images.

Abraham Maslow talks about the "peak experience" which comes easily and without effort as a spontaneous expression of an integrated person, or as a temporary unifying within the person. It can come only if a person's depths are available to him. He speaks of "primary" creativeness as that which is open, spontaneous, expressive and coupled with self acceptance, and cites as examples Jazz improvisations, children's art and certain kinds of "action" painting. He speaks of "secondary" creativeness as that which is more deliberate, critical, thoughtful, and associated with reality testing. Examples of this type of creativity would be the architect's design of a building or an engineer's bridge. The kind of creativity which uses "primary" and

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3 Henry Moore, Notes on Sculpture from The Creative Process (California, 1952), p. 75.
"secondary" processes easily and well he calls "integrated" creativity, and from this fusion of the two types of creativity comes the work of great art, or science, or philosophy.  

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Creative expression is the sum of all experiences of the artist. Thus, as the artist matures and experiences more he has a greater bank of stored impressions from which to draw. So perhaps it was actually a good thing that I was unable to do the preliminary work for the Artistic Performance during the "normal" daytime semester hours. Because of the necessity to earn a living I was forced to wait for a Sabbatical leave to complete the work. During the years while I was "marking time" I broadened my scope by studying anthropology, psychology, and education for the creative and gifted child. Now, looking back, I see that there is a relationship between these fields. The more I learn about

behavior - the more I learn about myself. The better I understand myself - the better I understand how and why I paint. The more I paint - the more sensitive I become to external stimuli, while at the same time the internal, fantasy world becomes more easily accessible to me, like a path worn through thick grass by retracing the same steps over and over again. Or to quote John Gowan, "By the enlargement of the bridge between the fantasy life and the real world".5

The more I feel that "peak experience" which comes with creating a painting - the more certain I become that I could never regress to a sterile, non-creative existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


LIST OF FIGURES

1 - 3  Flower Forms Nos. 1, 2 and 3 (Three figures showing the development of a painting)

4  Bandalleros

5  Flower Market

6  Forms Inside a Darkened Church

7  Plaza

8  Procession

9  Paper Flowers

10  Landscape 1

11  Landscape 2

12  Landscape 3

13  Broken Pots
(Figures 1, 2, and 3), each 36 x 46 inches;

"Flower Forms"

Three photographs of the same painting showing the evolution from start to finish.
(Figure 4), 36 x 48 inches
"Bandalleros"
(Figure 5), 36 x 48 inches

"Flower Market"
(Figure 6), 36 x 48 inches
"Forms Inside a Darkened Church"
(Figure 7), 36 x 48 inches

"Plaza"
(Figure 8), 48 x 54 inches

"Procession"
(Figure 9), 48 x 54 inches
"Paper Flowers"
(Figure 10), 48 x 72 inches

"Landscape No. 1"
(Figure 11), 48 x 72 inches

"Landscape No. 2"
(Figure 12), 36 x 48 inches

"Landscape No. 3"
(Figure 13), 34 x 46 inches

"Broken Pots"