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MARIAN SCOTT

A HUMANIST PAINTER

by Miriam WADDINGTON

Living amidst mass media which destroy the privacy and inwardness of the individual, and the demands of a society which places a premium upon the separation and specialization of the three basic human endowments — intellect, emotion, and physical being —, it is restoring to come, fresh as I did, to the work of Marian Scott.

Although Marian Scott's work was new to me, she is recognized as one of Canada's distinguished painters, and her pictures can be seen in public galleries from Quebec to Vancouver. The critical standards with which I approach may be familiar, but they are rooted in a value system rather different from that of the art critics who recently argued the case for non-figurative painting in the pages of *Vogue* magazine, and coming closer to home, in the pages of the weekly magazine section which fits into many a newspaper across Canada.

The arguments are familiar and superficially persuasive. First you dispense with the need for representational elements in painting with the claim that the camera can do it better. Apart from the obvious differences between a human being and a camera as selective agents, the photograph stands in the same relation to a painting as bottle feeding does to the human breast as a source of infant nourishment. The one simulates life, the other is life.

If we attempt to analyze further only one element in a painting — light — we see how specious the camera argument is. What camera is going to release the coiled concentrations of light which every now and then spring into fiery illumination in Marian Scott's pictures, or surround us with the creator-praising light of Louis Muhlstock's landscapes, or betray us to the flushed uneasy light that is ambushed in Philip Surrey's streets ? All these qualities derive from the artist's vision of life, and they can only come to us through his own breathing hand.

The claim in favor of non-figurative art next proceeds along the line that we have looked too long and too seriously on pictorial statements about the «great banalities of life» (presumably love, death, compassion and other human concerns), and that the new painters are no longer interested in painting *about* experience — their paintings *are* experience. By omitting any taint of the representational from their work, they have opened up startling visual worlds, brought us precise intellectual stimulation, and by refraining from social comment they have taken the tedious moral uplift out of art, and made it witty and playful.

Of course no one can explain what such painting really means except in the limited vocabulary borrowed from the physical sciences : words like balance, tension, mass, energy, and spatial juxtaposition. To use more openly qualitative words would be to attempt a literary comprehension of an art which only wishes to be understood in its own painterly terms.

If we followed this logic, art criticism would have to be done with pictures, instead of as it is now done, with words. The absence of moral and social implications from non-figurative painting does not mean that these painters, for the sake of purity in art, are purposely holding back their comment. It only means that they are refusing social involvement, and thereby shutting off from their work one of the major areas of human life : civilization has always been composed of societies.

Most limiting of all is the denial of the universality of sensory experience, of our common physical being. Whether we like it or not, it is a fact that objects are perceived generically by the human species — fish as fish, chairs as chairs, trees as trees. «I know they boast they souls to souls convey. Howe'er they meet, the body is the way.»[1]

So if we wish to appreciate non-figurative painting, we can appreciate it only by limiting, and not, as is claimed, by expanding our consciousness. Only one part of the self, the intellect, has a chance of becoming involved, although an undirected (and therefore frustrating) emotional excitement may also be had. Paint as paint does not intrigue me, any more than words as words do. Both can be organized into equally meaningless patterns to which there is only one logic : «Diana was a goddess made,/That silver-smiths might have the better trade.»[2]

It was therefore a pleasure to look at Marian Scott's most recent collection of paintings[3], to find patterns that were meaningful, and subjects which showed her involvement with contemporary life. The person who approaches with the Aristotelian idea of imitation may be momentarily perplexed. This is because Mrs. Scott continually develops a plurality of process around her single stroke of reality : yet the representational element is never absent from her canvases. She may call her landscapes *Totemics,* but they still remain recognizable landscapes. She may choose to see lighted streets, crowds, and celebrations in the designs which she calls *Translations,* but the germ of content has been planted. As for men and women — Marian Scott paints them over and over again with passionate preoccupation, as it shown by the large number of her *Facades* and *Iconics.*

One of the most engaging qualities of this painter is her readiness to part with habit in order to affirm what appears to be a changing and developing view of the world. I would judge that her *Translations,* so suggestive of «The milky way, the bird of paradise/ Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,/ The land of spices; something understood»[4], with their em-

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1. William Cartwright : *No Platonic Love*
2. Thomas Traherne : *Right Apprehension*
3. Dominion Gallery, Montreal, Sept. 26 — Oct. 10, 1956
4. George Herbert : *Prayer*

FAÇADE No 4 (détail)
huile sur carton (24 x 18 pouces)
collection G. CAMPBELL
photo DOMINION GALLERY.

phatic patterns of line and color, their kinship with her earlier paintings of the body's interior, represent her unmediated habit of seeing the world.

Despite the care, attention to detail, and graceful elegance with which these streets are painted, the *Translations* were too stylized for my enjoyment. They seemed to have been worked over to the point where I could not help wishing that the forms had been allowed more play, while the color was almost too virtuous, and so happily reconciled, that my suspicions were at once aroused. Reference to the sensory world seemed too transient, so that ideas came to me in fragmentary fashion and I was left stranded in a kind of puzzled aftermath, surrounded by colorful echoes. If I gained no admittance to the heart of these pictures, some of the fault may be ascribed to the artist for having locked the doors too securely.

Moving on to Mrs. Scott's *Totemics,* one is attracted by her organization of the elements of nature in a way nature never intended or dreamed of. Here tree trunks, bark surfaces, the serration of leaves and the falling of water meet with a melancholy awareness and are placed in an orderly relation to each other with a faithfulness that can come only from observation which has been experienced, not merely noted. Yet I don't suppose everyone would care for these landscapes since they don't quote any well-known authorities, and they break away from conventional syntax to write their own original sentences.

This is not to say that Mrs. Scott in any way forces her medium. She is both subtle and gentle in her handling of it, but never tries to dominate it with the kind of brutality we frequently meet in a painter like Rolof Beny. In her most successful paintings, Mrs. Scott lends herself to her medium and is willing to initiate the process of making a picture without trying to rigidly control every single aspect of it. That is to say, she lets a subject have its way with her, and so grants it a life of its own which is beyond her pride.

FAÇADE No 11 (détail)
huile sur bois pressé (30 x 22 pouces)
appartient à l'artiste
photo DOMINION GALLERY.

IMPRESSION 1952-1953
huile sur toile (36 x 30 pouces)
photo DOMINION GALLERY.

APOSTLES
huile sur carton
photo DOMINION GALLERY.

This is one of her profoundest talents and it speaks most clearly through her *Iconics*. What do these *Iconics* mean ? Since they depict human faces, usually two in varying relation to each other against a background of color, it might be guessed that their intention is worshipful, and the reference is to madonna and child. Christian myth baffles me, and dogmatic reference is alien, so I prefer to interpret the *Iconics* more generally — as being about the relation of men to women, adults to children, and even about the divided parts of the same self.

This is no less than the whole problem of living, so it is no wonder that Mrs. Scott paints this subject over and over again, without ever repeating herself. Understood in this way, the attitude is not one of worship, but of apprehended problem. Each *Iconic* is a new attempt to grasp and resolve the problem. The viewer cannot help responding to this painter's refusal to break the problem up into its parts, or admiring her determination to tackle it whole, and from the beginning each time. The difficulty of this total lending of oneself to the artistic process can only be understood by another artist, but it should be valued by all of us in a world where the partial aspect of things is too readily accepted as a symbolic rendition of the whole.

The problem is by no means resolved, either for painter or viewer. Both, however, attain a deeper insight as to its nature, and its tragic range is brought momentarily closer. Many lines in these faces are broken, frustrated of completion, or entirely cut off from each other. We see one face dwarfed in relation to another, thrown up any old way, and we are allowed to glimpse the terrifying passivity of victims, without ever being helped to more than sense the presence of the destroyers.

Fortunately, color is the redemptive force in this group of paintings, and it sings out from the linear bareness with a beautiful eloquence : « . . . how oft shall he/ On faith and changed gods complain : and seas/ Rough with black winds and storms/ Unwonted shall admire.»[5]

One more aspect : no one could help being reminded of early Byzantine paintings when looking at Mrs. Scott's *Iconics*. In *Iconics* 1 and 3, even the worn rubbed surface of old stone is suggested. The question of such a use of traditional or ancient form for contemporary subjects is certainly worth exploring, particularly when the artist imposes what cannot help but be the greater complexity of modern content on a primitive form. To place the greater weight on the simpler structure seems to produce a richer art, as Mrs. Scott's work shows. On the other hand — to pour, as Canadian artists so often have, and still do — a relatively primitive content into sophisticated European forms, seems to produce an odd lack of propriety, and in this viewer at least, an emotional discontent.

Why this should be, is hard to analyze. Perhaps any reminiscence of timelessness is a joy to us once we become aware of the limits of immediate time : or perhaps it is simply because, in the words of Joshuah Reynolds, though art has its boundaries, the imagination has none.

5. Horace : To Pyrrha (translated by John Milton)

Miriam Waddington