MODERNIST HISTORY, SURREALIST IMAGINATION, AMERICAN ART
The Ascendency of Modern Art in America in the 1940s

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Mitchell Siporin was a mainline American artist in the 1930s. A true believer in the social purposes of art, he established himself as a painter of the "people." With paintings of the American scene, Haymarket riots, social history, and the homeless, Siporin joined others in defining the imaginative space of the 1930s as pride and protest in American life.

By 1951 that imaginative space was gone. In its stead was an art of inwardness -- virtually abstract canvases of dreamy, moody ambiguity and complexity (fig. 1).

In the 1930s Benton Murdoch Spruance, a Philadelphia printmaker, also devoted himself to portraying the American spectacle. Football players, big city traffic, American locales, and people at work at different times of the day were Spruance's images of the world of his era. But by the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, a taste for the fantastic had overtaken his work as well. A mythic and biblical concept of time and space and a sense of eternal humanity informed his abstract and expressive canvases. Works about Lazarus, lamentations, the stars, the mythic labyrinth, Odysseus's journey, ritual offerings (fig. 2), and the return of the hero now defined his new world. Morning was no longer part of the cycle of labor but part of the Christian Passion.

Spruance had become a fantastic artist of pain and joy by 1950. In so doing, he joined the subjectivist Siporin and many others in demonstrating what seemed to be the new center of American art.

Neither Siporin nor Spruance is a seminal figure in American art history. Nevertheless, they seemed to illuminate the tide that was defined by greater names -- the Abstract Expressionists, whose work is the highest achievement in America in the 1940s and 1950s. Initially, the Abstract Expressionists' imaginative, dramatic, and fantastic art revealed a strong swing away from the prose representationalism of the 1930s and toward the contemporary European modernism of surrealism. From this swing a new American modernism emerged in the major abstractions of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb and the sculpture of David Smith, Isamu Noguchi, and Seymour Lipton, among others. The 1940s was the decade in which American art both decisively absorbed the European modern tradition and added to it in an original way. In the process, as the cliche goes, the art center of the modern world moved from Paris to New York, and America had its first style of international renown.

So decisive a transformation occured in the 1940s that the question arises as to what led to the turn toward modernism and surrealism at that time. How did an art of the inward, the fantastic, and the mortal become part of the mainstream imagination of American art in the late 1940s? How did it become so central that it attracted artists like Siporin and Spruance who had so different a heritage?

The answers to these questions lie in the experiences of history. In the 1940s history and imagination were dominated by a single event, the Second World War and its aftermath, the result of which was the transformation of self-contained American thought

into a more modern, wider reality. And modern reality led to the metaphysical art of modernism, for the change in imagination that the openess to the fantastic and deadly indicated arose out of the nightmare of the war and it had a direct effect on the forms of art. The seemingly merely imaginary of earlier modernism now appeared to fit reality. American art in the early 1940s thus defines a reality that was not only different from the previous decade but that was already shaping the imagination of most Americans and many others. In others words, the American artists were articulating a new emerging vision in the 1940s that was being accepted as the "truth" about the world. Human strife and war were the agent of the change. In order to understand how this came about, we need to return to the transformations of Siporin and Spruance.

Siporin had spent the years 1942-45 in North Africa and Italy as a war artist, and under the impact of that experience his art was never the same. Works such as Winter Soldiers of 1946 (fig. 3) and Ghost Harbor of 1947, with their jagged planes, jumbled spaces, and labyrinthian or wasteland vistas record not only the transition from a 1930s realist to a 1940s fantastic artist, but also the emergence of the expressive, surreal psychological space and reality out of which Abstract Expressionism would also grow.

Spruance suggests, with his Fathers and Sons of 1943 (fig. 4) in which succeeding generations of soldiers are interlocked in an underground labyrinth, that an inescapable maze characterizes the history of the human race.[1] His Souvenir of Lidice of 1942, with its timeless mytho-ritualistic imagery of the three cruxifixions,

transforms the site of a Nazi massacre into the stage of a modern Calvary. For Spruance, conflict and war are best rendered in a new variant of the eternal Western archetype of suffering, the crucifixion.

Perhaps the sea-change in art and thought is best summarized by another artist, Hananiah Harari. Harari was a founding member of the Abstract Artists Association in the 1930s who, nevertheless, did progressive themes about transport and flight. By the 1940s a new element entered his work before he went off to war. His large gouache Flight of 1943 (fig. 5), which was exhibited at the National Gallery in 1945 in one of the many exhibitions of art about the war, condenses in one work the journey of American art of the 1930s to the 1940s. From the left of the canvas in nebulous, shadowy space, arises Icarus, embodying in his desire to fly as high as he could all the ancient myths and legends of flight. The middle section of the work describes the technical history and progress of flight and the great period when humans conquered the air before they came crashing down to earth, a fall represented by an image in the bottom right corner. There stands a blood-stained tusked, horned, clawed, club-wielding, two-headed monster who bestrides a landscape of the dead. This new protagonist sports a Nazi helmet, Japanese Tojo caricatural spectacles, and a rising sun emblem on its brow, indicating that the monster is the Axis war machine ("death machine" in the painted text) which has transformed the progressive ideal of flight into a vicious and cruel beast. Harari, however, does not allow human history and its journey in space and time to end in death and defeat, for he inserts in the

top of that righthand section an abstract evocation of the future peaceful world after the war, a world in which an abstract, Miroesque-colored symbol of flight (a delta) offers the triumph of the human spirit in the brightness of a new dawn after the storm. Flight, then, distills in one work the historical transformation of Western imagination that occurred between the 1930s and 1940s. It is in this development of the fantastic out of the historical that American art emerges, for a new reality requires new forms of expression.

Throughout history Renaissance artistic rhetoric, on which much American art of the 1930s was based, had given individual human life order, dignity, and greatness, but the new, modern experiences of total, global, ferocious war did the opposite. Soldiers' experiences and tales in newsreels, magazines, photographs, posters, radio, and movies, as well as among friends, family, and loved ones, impressed on the mind and heart brutality, cruelty, and violence on an unknown scale. A radical, bestial evil permeated the 1940s, and it was impossible to ignore. As Samuel Hynes wrote about the First World War, the second conflict was such a great imaginative event that "no one after the war -- no thinker or planner, no politician or labour leader, no writer or painter -- could ignore its historical importance or frame his thought as though the war had not occurred. . . . Even as it was being fought the war was perceived as a force of radical change in society and in consciousness."[2] This change inspired a new language and style that were fantastic by the standards of just the day before. Ultimately, the change demanded a new kind of moral expression. The

modern artist wanted to know how he was "to paint pictures that would be entirely strange, and yet would express moral judgements?"[3] How could he protest the waste, cruelty, and savagery of the war yet represent it? A new means and form of truth was needed.

Significantly, the need for a new and different imagination had occurred during the First World War. In England, for example, pre-war cubism suddenly became a means for symbolizing the war as a vast and cruel mechanism:

> [The London Times] critic Clutton Brock . . . acknowleged . . . [its] authority and power: ". . . Mr. [C.R.W.] Nevinson . . . does it by a method which has become a commonplace of modern painting, the sharp distinction of planes [fig. 6]. He is half a cubist; but his cubism is justified by what he has to say. It expresses a certain emotion . . and . . . a certain protest . . . In these pictures (reality) is represented as process to which personality is utterly subject, showing itself only in energy or pain; and the result is a nightmare of insistent unreality, untrue yet actual, something that certainly happens and yet to which our reason will not consent.
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> The pictures are . . . efforts to show us something novel and strange, something which has stirred the artist because it is novel and strange. There they differ from the great art of the world which heightens what is familiar."

> These . . . critics agreed on one essential point: that the war was Modernist. They saw that the violence and the . . . [form] of pre-war experimental art had been validated as perceptions of reality by the war itself. Not only validated, but made necessary; for if war was a nightmare in reality, then only a distorting, defamiliarizing technique could render it truthfully. . . . Nevinson's Futurist war paintings provided the visual terms for imagining war in a new, unheroic, anti-romantic way.[4]

For many, then, the world wars were recognized as modernist. For the First World War, that meant cubism and expressionism. For the Second, that meant a surrealist imagination of inner nightmare, of the terrifying, the brutal, the fantastic, and the irrational yet real.[5]

Soldiers took the lead in describing the new imaginative reality. The marine and war novelist James Jones, for example, noted of Anzio "one long hellish nightmare . . . a pocked, surreal, destroyed . . . landscape."[6] Another rifleman declared, "For me it's B.W. and A.W.--before . . . and after the war . . . . I get this strange feeling of living through a world drama . . . you look forward to the glamor and have no idea of the horror . . . . You saw those things in the movies, you saw the newsreels . . . It seemed unreal. All of a sudden, there you were. . . . I was acutely aware, being a rifleman, the odds were high that I would be killed. At one level, animal fear . . . . I was schizophrenic all through this period. . . But I was acutely aware of how really theatrical

and surreal it was."[7]

In these descriptions, the soldiers defined the fundamental transformation of the imagination that was taking place in the 1940s. Reality had become surreal. A surrealist aesthetic was then necessary to articulate it. American artists thus turned toward the modernist art of nightmare and conflict as a starting point for their art.

To be sure, there had been surrealist art in America in the 1930s. It had been exhibited since the early 1930s at New York galleries such as Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse and in exhibitions at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford in 1931 and the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936. A small number of American artists had engaged this new art of irrationality before the war and had developed a homegrown art of ambiguous spaces, unknown narratives, irrational associations, lurking shadows, and enigmatic objects and configurations. Before the war Federico Castellon (fig. 7), Kay Sage, and Bruno Margo, among others, had created an imaginary world rather like that of De Chirico and Dali. Indeed, this engimatic art was even practiced by youthful Abstract Expressionists like Gottlieb in his tablet and box paintings of the late 1930s and 1940s and his first Pictograph series such as Oedipus in 1941-43 (fig. 8), Rothko in his first mythic paintings of Aeschylean themes, and William Baziotes in his more veiled, abstract mirror paintings, such as The Mirror at Midnight I of 1942 or The Balcony of 1944.

As critics have long argued, the arrival of the surrealist artists in America in 1940 as they fled the Nazis proved to be a

decisive influence on struggling American artists. Arshile Gorky, for example, first taught himself surrealism in the 1930s and then met and was profoundly influenced by the Chilean surrealist Matta Echaurren in the early 1940s. Gorky associated with the surrealist emigre group, and Andre Breton called him one of them. Gorky's was among the first American semi-abstract surrealizing art as he fused Matta with Miro. His important style combined Matta's futuristic imaginary landscapes and psychological morphologies with his own personal dreams and Armenian memories. To this complex he added Kandinksy's painterliness as in the One Year the Milkweed of 1944 [See Cat.]. In 1942 Matta also met with Robert Motherwell, Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, Gerome Kamrowski, and Peter Busa to discuss surrealism and to experiment with surrealist automatism, a technique for tapping the unconscious as the initial stage of art-making. Other surrealists such as Wolfgang Paalen, Gordon Onslow-Ford, and Kurt Seligmann befriended and socialized with Motherwell, perhaps Pollock, and others in the 1940s. The surrealist artists direct presence was undoubtedly a major factor in the Americans' absorption of surrealism.

But their emigration to American shores was not the only reason for their influence. Despite the contact with the younger surrealists, for instance, the major figures kept aloof or never came. Joan Miro, the favorite, stayed in Europe. Andre Masson and Yves Tanguy settled in Connecticut. Andre Breton never learned English, and Max Ernst left New York after a short period. Other modern artists such as Chagall, Leger, and Mondrian, also arrived in America but had little immediate impact.

The decisive factor was the wartime validation of the surrealist world and ideas. In other words, surrealism was perceived as a catalyst for imagining and representing the new world of the 1940s. This was evident in the rationale for the shows of Dali and Miro, for example, in 1941 the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Both artists were described as offering signs of the nature of contemporary civilization, the nature of man, and the character of his soul. According to the catalogue for Dali's show, his work "is in itself a significant happening in history: a sudden and perhaps unconscious revelation of the spirit of the day and age."[8] In his introduction, Monroe Wheeler also declared that Dali had been prescient about the calamities of his time, which were comparable to those in the era between Bosch and Callot, in which Rome had been sacked, Vienna besieged by Turks, Jews herded from one country to another, and the Netherlands savaged by the Spanish. The critic and curator James Thrall Soby also wrote in the same catalogue that Dali painted his birthright --- high-pitched Spanish emotion and an "Inquisitional heritage of cruelty and pain, the Catalan love of fantasy, and sanctification of instinct." Dali's surrealist art thus was taken to be an omen of the nightmare of history.

The catalogue on Miro hit similar notes. James Johnson Sweeny saw the artist as foreseeing the needs and temper of the era. According to Sweeney, the vitality of Miro's art points the way out of the current crisis, for it is "a persistent and constructive effort to achieve a sound balance of the spiritual with the

material in painting, an esthetic paradigm of a fuller, richer life in other fields. . . . Miro's vitality . . . native lyricism, and love of life are . . . auguries of the new painting in the new period which is to come."[9]

In short, surrealism fulfilled a modern need and modern reality quite different from the pre-war quest for economic transformation. It differed, too, from the official war rhetoric of sacrifice, nobility, and goodness or combat artist-correspondents' graphic depiction of battle. Neither of these two war arts presented the unconventional and the strange. Only what seemed bizarre and monstrous yet real was now directly relevant to many.

It is entirely appropriate that the surrealist, modernist version of reality be taken as true in America in the 1940s, for it had itself developed from the effects of the First World War. Surrealism is today understood not simply as revelatory of the personal unconscious, dream space, and automatism as it was first described in much art criticism, but as a comment on the ruin and loss of civilization, and it contains innumerable themes that visualize creation and destruction, the intellectual counterparts to war and peace. Surrealism is an attack on official civilization and a redefinition of the life process and human nature. In surrealist thought and art, a world of endless and uncontrollable violence is portrayed. As Sidra Stich writes, with images of brutality, massacre, torture, and aggression, the surrealists record "the transformation of a human into a voracious, bestial creature."[10] Works such as Masson's Massacres, Horses Devouring

Birds, and Birds Attacked by Fish describe a nature both human and animal that was dominated by inescapable and overwhelming instinctual violence. Admittedly deeply influenced by the war, Matta emblematized the surrealist imagining of war in his cover for VVV, the American surrealist magazine, in 1943 (fig. 9). Brute force, the base nature of human beings, their continuity with animals, violent deliriums, attacks on reason and restraint, on wholeness and unity, dynamic theaters of biomorphic (human/flora/fauna) strife, the endless conjunction of death and life, ecstasy and release, the struggle for renewal, and many more themes form the basis of surrealist art.[11] Surrealism and modernism thus overtook American art in the 1940s not only because the proximity of the surrealist artists or because it was innovative art but because it expressed the condition and experience of the world at the time. Its version of reality had become the reality of much of the world.

America both absorbed and added to surrealism. Fusing it with their own views of the mytho-ritualistic periods and processes of history and human life, American artists created a new anthropologically ritualistic yet surrealist psychological art. They were now conjoined and one. Suffering, death, and bestial cruelty, for example, forms the basis of not only the new work of Siporin, Spruance, and Harari but also of the Abstract Expressionists. From David Smith's Medals for Dishonor to Seymour Lipton's Moloch and Moby Dick series, to Ted Rozak's tusked birds, to Gottlieb's beasts, American art in the 1940s imagined a cruel

and nightmarish world as the psychological truest. Death and destruction forms the basis of early works of Noguchi such as This Tortured Earth (fig. 10). Lamentations and ritual process dominate Rothko's work, while Bradley Walker Tomlin and Barnett Newman, like so many in the late 1940s, memorialize the dead in iconic yet naturalistic terms. History blasted and broken yet elevated to myth underlies Gottlieb's art (fig. 11), and the cosmic struggle for new life and regeneration is fundamental to all Abstract Expressionist art. These themes are imagined in semi-abstract and, then, abstract form. For many, the conflictive unconscious, this is, inner man became the locale and rationalization for this modern reality.

The 1940s stood as a visionary, apocalyptic world. By their fusion of modern reality with modernism, American artists made formerly abstruse artistic methods and ideas that had little impact in the 1930s in the United States express new truth. As America had ended its isolationism at the beginning of the 1940s and joined the world, so American artists stepped forward into modern imagining. The result was a new and powerful art, Abstract Expressionism, which was to be the crest of the historical tide and the pride of America.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Mitchell Siporin, Interior, pastel, 1951, 17 1/2 x 23 1/2 in. Babcock Galleries, New York.

fig. 2. Benton Murdoch Spruance, Offering, lithograph, 1955. Courtesy Sylvan Cole Gallery.

fig. 3. Mitchell Siporin, Winter Soldiers, oil on canvas, 1946, 36 x 40 in. Babcock Gallery, New York.

fig. 4. Benton Murdoch Spruance, Fathers and Sons, lithograph, 1943. Courtesy Sylvan Cole Gallery.

fig. 5. Hananiah Harari, Flight, gouache, 1943, 21 3/4 x 28 3/4 in. Collection of the artist.

fig. 6. C.R. W. Nevinson, Returning to the Trenches, ca. 1915, . . . Courtesy Imperial War Museum, London.

fig. 7. Frederico Castellon, Untitled (#15), 1934, oil on board, 12 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

fig. 8. Adolph Gottlieb, Eyes of Oedipus, 1943, oil on canvas, 40 x 36 in. C The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc.

fig. 9. Matta Echaurren, [Untitled], VVV (February 1944).

fig. 10. Isamu Noguchi, This Tortured Earth, 1943, bronze. Noguchi Foundation, New York.

fig. 11. Adolph Gottlieb, Conflict, 1966, oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in. Flint Institute of Arts.