

Three O’Clock at the Burghers of Calais

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At fourteen feet in width, *The Fulbright Triptych* was Simon Dinnerstein’s first painting. Dinnerstein had returned from Europe, where he started the painting, with a new family. He held the opinion that artists should not be rushed into showing or selling work until they have a serious point of view to convey. In keeping with that philosophy, he was running out of money fast.

In an act of faith, he took some photographs of the center panel of *The Fulbright Triptych* to a gallery he respected in New York. Dinnerstein invited the owner to come and see the actual painting in his Brooklyn studio. As Dinnerstein described it, in those days it felt a further journey to go from Manhattan to Brooklyn than to Paris. The dealer came and looked at the work for a half hour without comment and left saying Don’t call us, we will call you. Four days later he wrote and offered to buy the work in its unfinished state. Dinnerstein was paid monthly over the next two years until its completion.

The Fulbright Triptych started as an independent painting and ended as a grand commission. It brings to my mind another impressive commission. I find it noteworthy that I met Simon Dinnerstein for the first time in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in front of Rodin’s famous sculpture *The Burghers of Calais*.

Rodin’s commission depicted a heroic event in the fourteenth century when a few prominent citizens of Calais offered up their lives in order to save their city from a crushing siege. Rodin’s sculpture captures a moment of shame, defeat, and surrender. The burghers were rich men, who took off their elegant clothes and walked barefoot to what seemed a certain death. Along with them were the keys to the walled city which provided unrestricted access. This event was meant to be the moment of their disappearance. Instead, it became a defining moment which exalted them into collective memory as symbols of heroic self-sacrifice.

Traditionally, sculptures of this kind had a strong compositional hierarchy. Rodin depicted the burghers uniformly, without a clear visual focal point. His champions are shown isolated and equal in their grief. In traditional sculptures, the hero, more divine



than mortal, would be depicted gloriously raised on a pedestal, inspiring our worship and admiration. Instead, Rodin intended his sculpture to be displayed on ground level, eye to eye with its viewers. His heroes are walking among us, allowing us to enter into their suffering.

Very few of us will ever experience any crossroad remotely as dramatic as that of the burghers. Most of our lives are defined by small acts and everyday decisions. Life often feels messy and conflicted—the weight of work, responsibilities, and relationships stream by in an endless parade of activity. Our acts of faith often end inconclusively—our sacrifices, small and less noticed. Without the distance and clarity of history, life is not tidily wrapped up, distilled as is so often depicted by art.

Dinnerstein's *Triptych* sets the stage with a formally balanced composition, yet its subjects lack an obvious hierarchy. His figures seem solitary and look to us rather than to each other. Each element in the work is painted with equal clarity. Events and memories represented by postcards pinned on the wall form cluttered notations of thoughts and emotions.

There is no heroic formula used in the painting, just an artist making an honest attempt to translate his life into art. The life-size work draws us in, alluring us with its large scale and the disarming frankness of its execution.

Prior to becoming a painter, Dinnerstein was a graphic artist (drawings and engravings). In *The Fulbright Triptych*, he integrated the emotions of a painter with the precision of an engraver. He bridged the two mediums by drawing the whole first pass of the painting with a Rapidograph, a thinly pointed technical pen. He wanted to capture the diminution of space in the landscape so he made the draftsman's choice of linear rather than aerial perspective.

Dinnerstein chose the historically significant format of the triptych in which to create a secular contemporary painting. We can recognize some of the uniqueness of his painting by seeing how it departs from convention.

The painted triptych originated in medieval art and was strictly religious in nature. The three-in-one format provides a subtle reference to the Trinity. The three panels could be hinged so the painting could be folded and moved. Proportionally, the two side panels of Dinnerstein's painting could fold in to form the size of the center square. The historical triptych was an altarpiece facilitating worship and serving as a con-

templative centerpiece in religious ceremony. The center panel formed the focal point of the work with the side panels augmenting the narrative. The subject matter was usually key events in the life of Christ or other religious themes.

In *The Fulbright Triptych*, where one would historically expect to see Jesus, we find a simple table carefully laid with the tools of an engraver. The secular work of the artist has taken center stage. The side panels do not portray saints worshiping or attendant patrons kneeling in reverence; instead we have the formal portraits of the artist, his wife, Renée, and daughter, Simone, gazing directly at us.

In his book *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe*, Michael S. Schneider discusses the significance of the number three. The number one represents unity, a self-contained completeness and as such a perfect symbol of divinity. The number two describes opposites or polarities which results in tension—Dinnerstein and his wife sitting on either side of the center panel. The number three creates a binding element forging a resolution of the opposing forces. Their daughter, born out of their union, sits contentedly on her mother's lap.

The triptych format silently speaks of the reconciliation of diverse parts into a whole: three individual elements brought together to form a new creation. In *The Fulbright Triptych*, these elements are the artist, work, and family. This painting records and celebrates the conflicts inherent in the life of an artist. Dinnerstein unified in art what is often disordered and complicated in life.

A few months ago, I received a group e-mail from a friend jubilantly announcing the birth of his daughter. The next day there was a response from an artist saying, "Congratulations and when do we hold the memorial for your painting career?" I know the feeling. The urgent weight of life feels far more pressing than the call of art, which demands an idealistic investment of real time and money into an unknown future. However, the moment of the artist's disappearance can become his very making.

Dinnerstein and I spent some time talking after our initial meeting in front of Rodin's sculpture. I had been chasing a thought during our conversation but it felt inappropriate to speak aloud. Maybe I was guilty of projecting my own feelings and experience upon his art. Finally I asked: "Are you expressing some tension between work and family in your painting?" He laughed openly for the first time and said, "Clearly."

The artist offers the keys to his city and walks out.