

## A Triptych Between Past and Present

Steven Mansbach

The *Fulbright Triptych* is indisputably arresting, and not just physically or visually or even historically, although it captivates the observer in all these essential dimensions. What makes this painting so potent today is due as much to its format as to its size, style, and historical resonances.

A triptych is an inherently and unusually serious format for an artist to embrace, especially for a contemporary painter committed to making, displaying, and advocating art for a present-day audience. The use of a tripartite format has long been the preserve of religious works, primarily for those large-scale Roman Catholic altarpieces that graced churches, or that served the needs of devout noble families in their private quarters. Less frequently, or at least less often remarked on, small-scaled triptychs were created as ideal traveling religious icons whose very format would permit a physical closure by which the painted surfaces could be safeguarded during the rigors of travel.

Although wood-paneled triptychs were less frequently favored once canvas became popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and when various forms of Protestantism depreciated the tripartite (and diptych) format, the triptych was selectively revived, especially in the modern era, although more often for social and political effect than for predominantly and traditionally religious usage. At no time was this more powerfully evidenced than in the early twentieth century, when German Expressionist painters – Max Beckmann, Emil Nolde, among others, all of Lutheran background – embraced the painted (although now on canvas) triptych to advance a rigorously modern message of anxiety. Whether of secular or mystical-symbolic reference in Beckmann's nine triptychs, or with a febrile Christological narrative in the polyptychs of Nolde, or in Otto

Dix's inconsolable *War* (1932) panels -- all these painters seized on a physical format whose time-hallowed usage demanded serious-mindedness. Indeed, it was likely the inherently emotional sobriety that persuaded Francis Bacon to employ a tripartite format for canvases that revealed the deepest layers of his soul and registered the disquiet of his time. Thus, we should frame Simon Dinnerstein's monumental *Fulbright Triptych* in the high-minded context of its tradition-laden format.

Large triptychs have principally been figural in their imagery, even if their content or denotation is inexorably abstract: religious observance, rituals, or narratives celebrated in the Northern Renaissance, for instance; the piety of the patron(s) depicted in the Italian Renaissance; or the singular and frequently secular preoccupations of modern artist-creators from Beckmann to Bacon. Of course, the profoundly abstract referents of the format have persuaded several twentieth-century painters to embrace it for explicitly nonfigurative presentation, perhaps none so effectively as Mark Rothko in the non-denominational Houston chapel bearing his name. Nonetheless, the weight of art history has exerted a representational proclivity among those who seized upon the triptych to engage the deepest concerns of their time, or the most profoundly personal aspects of the painter. And thus we might productively view Dinnerstein's large work from this perspective.

The *Fulbright Triptych* is monumental in size, scope, and resonance. The physical scale attests both to the importance it holds for the artist and to the object's congruity with the long tradition of impressive multi-sectioned altarpieces. This affinity to the art historical tradition is further explicitly acknowledged in the array of "pictures within the picture"; namely, in the objects "affixed" to the depicted interior's walls, artifacts that unite both side wings and the central panel: studies after or copies of details from, among other sources, Northern Renaissance

panels by master painters, many of whom were the authors of religious triptychs themselves. The visually rich mix of artfully depicted (by Dinnerstein) master drawings, children's sketches, photographs, pictures by leading 19<sup>th</sup> century artists, and other objects from the private family life of the painter or inspired by those held in civic museums afford the viewer privileged insight into the matrix of influences, biographical and public, on which Dinnerstein has called for this elaborate yet intimate self-imaging. The medley of references, so carefully arranged on the walls of Dinnerstein's masterfully rendered German-Fulbright home-cum-studio, create pictorial "halos" around the Madonna and Child (of his wife and daughter) in the left wing, as well as around the figure of the creator himself in the right wing. The large central panel, with its two symmetrical windows opening onto the local townscape, presents today's viewer with a revelatory interior view in which the workplace of the painter is carefully set with the instruments of his creative craft. In subject reference and in formal composition the *Fulbright Triptych* prompts the spectator to summon to mind authoritative art historical parallels: for example, Rogier van der Weyden's rendering of *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin*, (ca. 1435-1440) in Boston, or the right panel from Robert Campin's triptych of the *Merode Altarpiece* (ca. 1425-1428) in New York. The Netherlandish masters' remarkable ability to monumentalize the intimate and to interweave the personal and the public is spectacularly reprised in the *Fulbright Triptych*. Here, Dinnerstein has revealed through art historical correlation the sanctity with which he pictures his own family, while presenting the instruments with which to render it naturalistically.

The details of this extraordinary modern painting, as well as many of its critical and defining aspects, have been investigated incisively in the anthology of articles gathered in the volume, *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and the Fulbright Triptych*,

edited by Daniel Slager, and published in 2011. However, the historical monumentality of Dinnerstein's tripartite composition merits emphasis here. The embrace of the triptych format, and the rigorous compositional choices both within and among the panels, constitute a brilliant wedding of art historical tradition and modern aesthetics, Renaissance reference and contemporary aesthetic practice. Indeed, the creative combination of a long-established religious format and a time-honored figuration, on the one hand; with a fully modern focus on strict geometrical organization united to an ingenious strategy of symmetry, on the other, elevate this painting to an iconic level. The *Fulbright Triptych* thus functions as a monumental work of art that hovers between religious allusion and secular description, between the highly personal and the accessibly public, and between the art historical past and the insistently present.

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