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# The Theology of Art

Edward J. Sullivan

*The Fulbright Triptych* employs the ancient, tripartite format generally reserved for religious purposes in the Middle Ages, Renaissance and, in rarer instances, in later phases of the history of Western art. Often found on a high altar of a church or chapel, the triptych represents and celebrates the most sacred of persons. A typical main subject of this type of painting (which originated in the north of Europe but became a general feature of ecclesiastical art throughout the continent) would include New Testament scenes such as the Annunciation, the Ascension of Christ into Heaven, or the Assumption of the Virgin. Saints and angels would likely inhabit the right and left panels of the work (typically done in oil on wood) and donor figures (those patrons who commissioned, paid for, and were honored by the painting) would also appear on the side panels or “wings.”

Triptychs in modern and contemporary art are rare, indeed almost nonexistent. While there have been many revival styles since the nineteenth century, few artists have attempted to employ this format, so essentially connected with such great names of the past such as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, or, in the baroque period, Peter Paul Rubens.

Simon Dinnerstein’s use of the triptych form is not surprising, however. A dedicated student of old master techniques, he has created numerous updatings (and, indeed, radicalizations) of past traditions (styles, formats, and media) in his quest to meld the ancient with the modern. This painting, one of his most monumental achievements, constitutes both a dramatic break as well as a modernization of a hallowed tradition of Western art history.

There are many shocks awaiting the viewer of this work. The first is, perhaps, the dramatic liberties the artist has taken with the subject matter. I mentioned above that among the most common themes in a medieval or Renaissance triptych would have been a biblical subject, often (but not always) associated with the life of Christ. Among the most popular was the image of the Holy Family: the Christ Child, the Virgin Mary, and the (usually bearded) Saint Joseph. In this painting the artist is fully con-

scious of appropriating this theme and transforming it into a group portrait of his own family. He is equally mindful of his marginalization of what in earlier times would have been the main subject. Mother, father, and child have been displaced to the side panels. While still recognizable as an updated simulacrum of the Holy Family, they have now become subordinate actors in a drama whose main subject is art itself. The three figures (in roles that in the past would have been played by the angels and saints in the triptych's wings) here serve as witnesses to the principal scene while, at the same time, functioning as donors, or, rather, facilitators of the acts of creativity that are implied with such dramatic force in the foreground of the main body of the painting.

Carrying this thought further, however, we could also observe that the two adult figures in this scene serve, in fact, as paradigms of creativity, having brought forth a child (the Dinnersteins' daughter Simone was, in her own right, destined for a life as an artist—in her case a concert pianist). This manifestation of the act of creation parallels and stimulates the making of other forms of life—the “life” of art. Art, as represented throughout the work (on the walls, and especially on the altar/table in the center panel), is sacramentalized and literally raised onto a platform as the focal point of the painting.

Furthermore, this work, more than any other modern American painting, represents a dramatic homage to individual *things*. It presents to the viewer a veritable “language of objects.” The three figures lead our eyes into the center, and from there our gaze radiates outward, taking in the vast quantity of elements that comprise the essence of this scene. There is an almost musical quality to this painting; each object becoming the equivalent of a note in a vast symphonic score.

This painting is also an homage to looking, an encyclopedic concretization of scopific intensity. There is a plethora of individual square and rectangular shapes throughout the composition which we initially perceive as a vast series of punctuations of its space. Yet we soon become aware that most of them are postcards or photographic reproductions of works of art (many of them well-known). They are famous paintings and sculptures in museums from Munich to the Metropolitan, each of them holding a special place in the aesthetic hierarchy of the artist. We are reminded of a wall of a museum, or, as André Malraux would have described it, a museum without walls.

The *thingness* of these art reproductions is reinforced because they are interspersed with handwritten notes, family photographs, newspaper clippings, and children's drawings. In a very privileged position just above the central table we find an aerogram. This letter from afar is one of the most intriguing of all of the many bits of paper that populate the walls. It is obviously from someone important to be given such a place of honor. Yet we don't know who sent it. To whom was it destined and from where did it come?

Even the landscape outside the windows becomes a series of *things*. This is a village scene, two streets of a solidly middle-class Germanic neighborhood, yet the houses inevitably look as if they were made of blocks from a child's log set. The similarity of the structures enhances the sense of patterning and object-hood created by the images on the walls. Nature inevitably intervenes, however, in both the landscape scene as well as the interior. The streetscapes stop and a gentle, hilly, unpopulated landscape begins. In an analogous way, spider plants hanging in pots on the walls of the artist's studio relieve the planarity of the surfaces.

As indicated by the title of this essay, the real subject of this painting is the making of art. The table functions as the locus of creativity, the altar of the theology of art itself. It is a large, impressively detailed table, placed strategically before two sets of vertical white lines (the grills of two radiators) that serve to punctuate the space behind it, making it stand out dramatically from the brown walls. The table has two drawers that evidently guard a series of secrets, perhaps additional tools of art-making such as those on the table itself.

The artist himself has eloquently described the contents of this surface, which is tipped upward at a slightly unreal angle to allow the viewer maximum comprehension of all the meticulously illustrated implements there. Dinnerstein states that this is a "very large painting about the studio of a printmaker . . . The instruments on the table are burins, scrappers, burnishers . . . all to be used in [the] engraving process . . . The object [in the center of the table] is a depiction of a copperplate I was engraving at the time (*Angela's Garden*). I used gold leaf and oil to get at the particular luminosity of the surface of this form."<sup>1</sup>

Grateful as we are for Dinnerstein's own description of the objects represented on

the surface of his worktable, we sense that the real significance of this image goes far beyond appearances and typological characterization of the things before our eyes. The plate itself is a gold object, a shimmering thing that stands out dramatically from the deep black of the table's surface. Although it is, in its mundane form, a matrix for a print, it may be read metaphorically as a virtual sacred host. Were this a traditional religious painting of an earlier era, this gold disk would take the form of a miraculous wafer, such as the host in traditional portrayals of Saint Gregory, a doubting cleric to whom God revealed the mystery of transubstantiation through a miracle of elevation. (This was a well-known hagiographic incident, often depicted in medieval art.) Yet this is not a medieval painting. It was done in the 1970s, not the 1370s. Nonetheless, *The Fulbright Triptych* evinces an equally powerful message of the sacrosanct nature of art and human creativity.

There is also a distinct feeling of confrontation in this piece. It is enhanced by the artist's deliberate compression of space. Everything is pushed up almost impossibly close to us. The artist's space becomes ours and we are immersed in his reality; we are confronted and absorbed by it. In effect the *Triptych* is a deeply autobiographical, confessional work. It is a parable not only of creation but of the artist's life creed. The making of art is his *métier*; the belief in its transformative and indeed transcendental power is at the core of his earthly existence and it represents his deeply humane message made palpable for us in this painting.