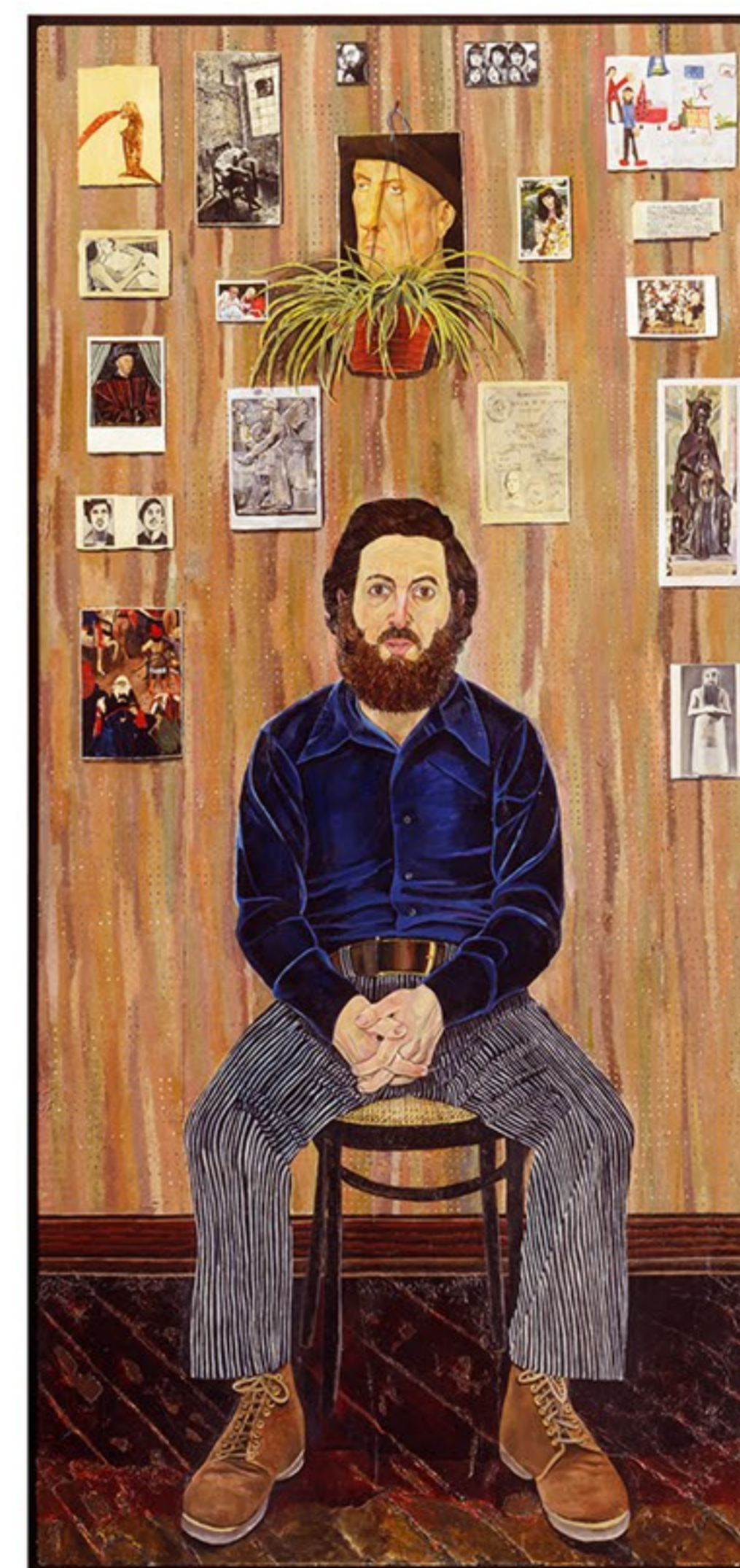


Savoring Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych*

BY PETER TRIPPI



Simon Dinnerstein (b. 1943)
The Fulbright Triptych
1971-74, Oil on wood panels,
7 x 14 feet (overall)
Owned by the Palmer Museum of Art,
Pennsylvania State University

Anyone interested in great realism is hereby on notice: you only have until March 31 to experience the remarkable, and comparatively little known, *Fulbright Triptych* painted in the early 1970s by the Brooklyn-based artist Simon Dinnerstein (b. 1943). Clocking in at 7 feet high and 14 feet wide, it is hard to miss hanging in the lobby of Manhattan's German Consulate General, which is open weekdays during regular business hours. How it

came to be there — indeed, how it came to be at all — is an intriguing story.

Born in Brooklyn, where he still lives, Dinnerstein studied history at City College, then drawing and painting at the art school once operated by the Brooklyn Museum. In 1970, he won a Fulbright fellowship to study printmaking and the compellingly immediate prints of Albrecht Dürer in Germany. Dinnerstein and his wife, Renée, settled in Hessich Lichtenau,

near Kassel, where he started this, the first painting he had undertaken since his student days. Such ambition was impressive, even over-the-top, not only for the three panels' huge size, but also for their daring combination of portraiture, still life, interior, and landscape, all knitted together into an allegory representing Dinnerstein's life and worldview at that time. Unsurprisingly, he did not complete the triptych until 1974 (back in Brooklyn), and ever since it has become an object of almost cult-ish

fascination for realists in the know. Dinnerstein says *The Fulbright Triptych* is unlike anything else he has made, though in fact its allegorical spirit infuses many of his paintings.

A FEAST FOR THE EYES

A cursory glance at the triptych makes plain that Dinnerstein had been admiring the symmetry and serenity of medieval and Renaissance altarpieces even before he reached

Germany. (His passion for them endures, by the way; when I lunched with him in Paris this October, he had just returned from his second encounter with Matthias Grünewald's famed *Isenheim Altarpiece* of 1512-16.) The triptych's focal point is his tidy studio, and particularly its sturdy worktable, which bears what first appear to be the requisites of a sacred meal, but are in fact a round copper plate and the tools used to engrave or etch it. Equally notable are the postcards of favorite masterworks tacked to the wall — including Bellini, van Eyck, Donatello, Holbein, Vermeer, Ingres, Seurat, and Degas — and, of course, the windows opening onto a frankly ordinary street in Hessich Lichtenau. This central panel, then, brings us to the altar of art, informed by the past yet very much connected to the real world outside.

Just as Renaissance artists once consigned depictions of their altarpieces' underwriters to the wings, so Dinnerstein shows himself at right, and at left is a Madonna-like vision of his wife and newly arrived daughter, Simone (now a renowned concert pianist). Behind these figures are still more postcards, though mixed among them now are children's drawings, news clippings, snippets of Melville and Wittgenstein, snapshots, and other personal memorabilia. Behind Dinnerstein hangs an exit visa for a real man with a real expiration (1971), a subtle reminder that this is a Jewish family who volunteered to live in Germany only 30 years after many German Jews sought such a document.

Stylistically, *The Fulbright Triptych* is a miscellany reflecting the range of options available to attentive artists of Dinnerstein's generation. Though the illustration here may strike some as neo-Pre-Raphaelite in smoothness and detail, the triptych's surface is surprisingly varied, with patches of roughness and loose brushwork that keep the eye intrigued. The overall effect is a riot of pattern and color, with the only (comparatively) plain color blocks appearing in the worktable and the figures' flesh and tops. As confirmed by his preparatory charcoal drawings, and indeed many subsequent drawings, Dinnerstein is a superb draftsman who was happy to let certain passages "go," not because he could not refine them, but because he didn't need to.

FINDING A HOME

Needless to say, *The Fulbright Triptych* was never likely to be a commercial success, so its very existence owes much to the Swiss-born, Manhattan-based dealer George Staempfli (1910-1999). It was he who paid the monthly stipend that allowed Dinnerstein to complete the pic-

ture, and it was he who exhibited it in Dinnerstein's first solo show (1975). There is more to be written about Staempfli's unique contribution to American art by presenting a diverse array of painterly figuration during the heyday of abstraction, Pop, minimalism, and conceptualism: Salvador Dalí, Paul Delvaux, David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Joan Brown, and Antonio López García were all welcome in his gallery, so it made sense that Dinnerstein was, too.

Though postmodernism ultimately failed to fulfill its threat to kill off painting, prospects were pretty bleak for *The Fulbright Triptych* in the late 1970s, so Staempfli must have been thrilled when he sold it to the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University in 1982. Today the Palmer's leaders appreciate what a good picture they have, but they don't have enough room to show or store it, so have generously loaned it to the German consulate since 2011. Its stay there must end this spring, however, so readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* are encouraged not only to come see the triptych, but also to suggest another museum venue where it might go on long-term loan.

As for Dinnerstein, he has pursued a distinguished career marked by such honors as membership in the National Academy of Design and a Rome Prize fellowship. He generally paints figures, still lifes, interiors, and cityscapes that are dreamy, even hallucinatory, exploring the fertile — and still underappreciated — territory ploughed up by 19th-century symbolists and 20th-century surrealists and magic realists. Collected by museums and individuals worldwide, Dinnerstein has rightly been refocusing attention on *The Fulbright Triptych* because it is so unique in his oeuvre. In 2011, Milkweed Editions published a handsome volume, *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and 'The Fulbright Triptych,'* which contains 44 essays authored by an intriguing array of novelists, poets, composers, musicians, actors, artists, critics, and art historians. That so many people can find something to say about the triptych speaks to its significance.

Now go see it for yourself. ■

Information: German Consulate General, 871 United Nations Plaza (First Avenue at 49th Street), New York, NY 10017, 212.610.9700, germany.info. Detailed passages of *The Fulbright Triptych* can be savored at simon.dinnerstein.com/images/news/lstd.pdf. To hear Dinnerstein's recent conversation with the critic James McElhinney, visit nccsc.net/webcasts/audiocasts/simon-dinnerstein.

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