

# A European Perspective

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Almost four decades have passed since I met Simon Dinnerstein for the first time upon his arrival as a Fulbright grantee in Germany in summer 1970. There were some occasions during his stay to discuss projects and to hear what grantees wanted to tell the sponsors of the fellowship program called Fulbright Exchanges. Since that time we have been in informal contact. The *Triptych* in its present form was begun during Simon's grant period and finished three years later.

When we look at the *Triptych* we are dealing with a rather complex issue: prima facie, there is a fairly large-size painting, providing reality, well constructed with three somewhat somber persons in a room, but apparently quite separate; in between them we see window perspectives, a table with fine-arts utensils, the walls clustered with all sorts of correspondence, sketches, pictures, memorabilia—a scrapbook atmosphere.

However, a second look invites questions, reflections, and comments, and out comes a totally different set of observations and references.

The title keeps us wondering: while the format of a triptych is obvious, its association with “Fulbright” appears to be a mystery. No image of the late Senator J. William Fulbright, no documents regarding the so-called Fulbright Exchange Program or Fulbright scholarship appear in the painting—so the painter might as well have chosen any name for his work. Yet, the name immediately places the painting into several frames of reference.

At least three years elapsed before the *Triptych* was finished, years of significance for the artist, but also for Senator Fulbright as well as for the German-American exchange program. A few sentences on the history will create a new perspective for the painting. Some historians may recall that the representative from Arkansas had introduced, in 1943, the so-called Fulbright Resolution committing the United States to the idea of the United Nations as a peace-saving institution; they may remember how the then-junior senator from the Ozarks expressed concern over the atom bomb

dropped on Hiroshima and in September 1945 introduced an amendment to the War Surplus Property Act. By this funds were made available for an educational exchange program that was designed to be operated on strict partnership principles between the U.S. and signatory states, and to pursue a dual objective: the promotion of (academic) knowledge and the furtherance of mutual understanding between nations. With the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961, the scope of the Fulbright Program was expanded even further to invite host-country cofunding. The German Federal Government (remembering that the binational Fulbright Commission of 1952 had been the first institution after World War II in which American and German distinguished personalities met and planned as equal partners) immediately signed a cost-sharing agreement which kept exchanges afloat during America's heavy budget cuts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thus, we can understand Dinnerstein's reason to apply to Germany because there were more Fulbright grants there than anywhere else. And the name "Fulbright" at that time was associated with the senator's attitude towards the engagement of the U.S. in Vietnam. German—like many European—students, politicians, and citizens cherished Fulbright as a desirable model American, although his "Arrogance of Power" was cited more than read. And while the U.S. was criticized in many quarters, Fulbright and the exchange program under his name were spared all local inconveniences. This exchange program still exists among many new efforts in many national and international organizations.

Against this more historical-philosophical background, Dinnerstein's *Triptych* reveals a lot more insights and aspects. We have to "read" the *Triptych* as one piece of art, and through its parts. The side panel with the artist tells us something of himself, of his interest in medieval art, of his interaction with philosophy—perhaps a brief reference to his application for a grant. The artist is a family man. Even though the child on the lap of his wife Renée did not yet exist during the grant period—Simon Dinnerstein obviously includes in his account the period of work on the *Triptych* beyond the stay in Germany—the family has been a major element in his Fulbright experience. Also, as we know that the spouse allowances of a Fulbright fellowship were rather meager and required considerable sacrifices from the young families, we

can understand that Renée—the person in the other side panel—worked part-time as a teacher in a local school of the U.S. Army. The images hanging on the wall behind her bear witness to her relations to the kids in her class, but some of them also depict the Vietnam War. Her side panel with the child indicates, too, that both Dinnersteins were part of the local society. It is still remembered among friends how that elderly landlady of the Dinnerstein apartment was deeply disappointed when the couple left at the end of the fellowship: “I thought you came to us for good because you are one of us.” In the little town of Hessisch Lichtenau, such a statement was a big compliment.

But both figures on the side panels appear to be somewhat lonely. The expression on their faces transports the idea of a typical passport photo and does not do justice to the Dinnersteins as I came to know them. The portraits look like a reflection and ingredient of the post-fellowship period at home. In this sense we find the work as a description of background, adventure, and report or result of Dinnerstein’s stay abroad. However, Simon’s sense of humor tends to lead viewers astray—you should see his smile when he takes notice of people wondering about this immovable photo!

Toward the end of his scholarship Simon Dinnerstein discussed with us the possibility of doing a major painting of the situation and work of an artist abroad. Most regrettably, funds for extensions or renewals of grants were further cut, but the discussions and plans are still rather vivid in my memory. It is true that artists—and fine-arts students in particular—go abroad to find the vistas and impressions that strike them as interesting or as alien or as fascinating. Simon Dinnerstein’s work in Italy, such as *Flower Market, Rome*, is vivid proof that he can stand in that tradition even by applying his very own style of order and color. *The Fulbright Triptych* is different in approach and philosophy: it is the self of personality, environment, and activity. The choice of format, i.e. the triptych, reflects the travels that Simon undertook during the Fulbright year to various places in Europe—and it was Europe with France and the Netherlands as primary regions of interest.

The center panel represents Simon Dinnerstein’s activities as a Fulbright grantee in an exemplary manner. The basic principles of Fulbright exchanges are here formalized. The advancement of knowledge—in the case of artists, creativity—is clearly

indicated by the burins, scrapers, and so on, and, of course, by the copperplate in which we recognize *Angela's Garden*. But otherwise there are no samples of Dinnerstein's rather extensive graphic oeuvre, and reproductions of paintings or photos match the wall decorations on the right panel. Yet his Fulbright application included Dinnerstein's plans and hopes to study graphic arts, and to investigate the graphic techniques of Dürer and his contemporaries. The other objective of Fulbright exchanges, to further mutual understanding between nations, is manifest in the windows overlooking Dinnerstein's temporary hometown. A very quiet and friendly atmosphere with orderly houses suggests a peaceful environment; the peaceful world that Senator Fulbright had in mind as an ideal goal. Germans would know that the place was close to the Iron Curtain, characterized by barbed wire and militarily equipped border guards on the East German side. But in the perspective no people can be seen in the streets and gardens. And, for that matter, there is no indication that, during the early 1970s, German university towns of all sizes experienced student demonstrations against the U.S. activities in Vietnam or against local political intentions in Germany. Would Simon be left without any feeling for his German neighbors and his American fellow grantees? From my own observations and meetings with Simon, I suspect that he is fooling his audience once more. He did care for his social environment of all different kinds, made lively comments and suggestions at grantee meetings—but there were no students demonstrating in Hessisch Lichtenau, and the various forms of protest in the bigger cities did not really interfere with his work as an artist.

Dinnerstein does not like to discuss his own paintings or prints. He rather lets his works speak for themselves. Yet, like in the *Triptych*, he hides or veils his personal attitudes and philosophy that go far beyond the creative art. The Wittgenstein translation on the wall behind Simon gives an inkling of the dimensions. On such tracks the Dinnerstein that I came to know becomes a thinker who presents his views as honest scholar, and in a vivacious manner. I felt, still feel, that Simon Dinnerstein would have fitted well into the legendary Black Mountain College in North Carolina. I can visualize him debating his own formal approach to form and content with Josef

Albers and adding to the atmosphere that breathed the spirit of the Bauhaus.

In 1974, when Dinnerstein completed his *Triptych*, Bill Fulbright had just lost his seat in the senatorial elections, although the signum of “his” exchange program was spreading through Europe, i.e. beating swords into ploughshares. It stands to reason that the *Triptych* is an homage to Senator Fulbright as well as to the exchange program that he initiated, and (above all) to Dinnerstein’s personal experience as a Fulbright grantee.