

Revisiting The Fulbright Triptych

By Mary Birmingham, Curator (Visual Arts Center of New Jersey)



Simon Dinnerstein. *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971-74, oil on wood panels, overall: 79 1/2 x 156 inches, Palmer Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University, Purchased with funds provided by the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art

I first met Simon Dinnerstein when he reached out to see if the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey might be interested in hosting a traveling exhibition of his work. While the size and scope of that show did not fit with our schedule, I asked if he might consider allowing me to curate a smaller, highly focused show centering on *The Fulbright Triptych*, his monumental three-panel painting now in the collection of the Palmer Museum of Art at The Pennsylvania State University. I was struck by the painting's format, similar to a religious altarpiece, but with a secular subject—the artist's world. It was easy to envision the triptych installed in our intimate first-floor gallery, where it would encompass an entire wall and effectively transform the gallery into a kind of secular chapel. Dinnerstein liked this idea, so we embarked on a plan to mount a show reexamining the triptych in this context, with an emphasis on its subject matter and related graphic works.

Dinnerstein began this complex painting in 1971 at the end of a year-long Fulbright Fellowship in Germany and he completed it in 1974 after returning to Brooklyn. The painting depicts a view of his studio and incorporates portraits of the artist, his wife and infant daughter, and a glimpse of the German town seen through two large windows. The artist arranged engraving tools and materials on a table in front of the windows and pinned an array of sketches, postcard reproductions, snapshots, notes, letters, children's drawings and other ephemera to the studio walls, suggesting personal connections and artistic inspiration. More than a representation of a specific time and place, the painting is Dinnerstein's meditation on art and family. *The Fulbright Triptych* serves not only as a recollection of his time in Germany, but also as a visual inventory of everything that gives his life meaning.

Dinnerstein had traveled to Germany with his wife Renée to study printmaking—specifically, the work of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) the great German Renaissance artist widely credited with elevating

printmaking to a high art form. Dinnerstein underscored the importance of this experience by making engraving the focus of the triptych's center panel. Placing a copper plate in the middle of his large worktable, he surrounded it with tools used in the engraving process, making it literally and figuratively the heart of the painting. The worktable resembles an altar on which the glowing, disc-shaped plate seems to levitate, suggesting a sacramental offering. This same copper plate—used to make the engraving, *Angela's Garden*—is included in the exhibition, along with the engraving. These objects link the triptych's iconography to Dinnerstein's printmaking practice.



A related charcoal drawing completed in Germany shows his wife Renée sitting between the same studio windows that appear in the triptych. Positioned at the center of the composition, she holds a book in her lap, open to a reproduction of Dürer's well-known engraving, *Melencolia I*—perhaps a subtle nod to Dinnerstein's intention to study and learn from Dürer's work. Similarly, by placing the subject of engraving front and center in the triptych, Dinnerstein acknowledges its importance not only as the motivation for his Fulbright year, but also as a subject that inspired him to make a painting. As incredible as it seems, *The Fulbright Triptych* was Dinnerstein's first attempt at painting. Prior to this, he had focused exclusively on drawing and engraving, several examples of which are included in this exhibition.

Albrecht Dürer (German, Nuremberg 1471–1528 Nuremberg) *Melencolia I*, 1514, engraving, plate: 9 7/16 × 7 5/16 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1943, 43.106.1

In the works Dinnerstein made before he went to Germany, windows figured prominently, not only as architectural features, but also as formal devices for framing the view. Looking out through the panes of his Brooklyn window in 1967, he made a pencil drawing, *Windows #1*, which featured the windows of a neighboring building seen behind a bare tree trunk. In 1969, he continued exploring this view through changing seasons, moving the vantage point closer in the tiny engraving, *Tree Study*, and pulling it farther back for a broader view of the same building in *Polhemus Place*.

Dinnerstein continued this practice of incorporating windows and their vistas while he worked in Germany. They are significant in the drawing of Renée as well as the triptych, although in both cases he drew the vantage point back to reveal more of the room's interior. Dinnerstein had previously experimented with this formula: a studio view with a prominent element positioned in front of two windows. In *The Kelton Press*, a charcoal drawing he made in 1969 during a MacDowell Colony residency, one could argue that he broke ground on a new compositional format he continued to develop in the triptych as well as in *Renée*. This format enables the viewer to see inside and outside simultaneously. Interestingly, each of these three works features a centrally-placed visual reference to the art of engraving: a printing press, a copper plate, and an example by the master engraver, Dürer. Exhibiting these seminal graphic works with the triptych offers a fresh look at an iconic painting created almost half a century ago.

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The Fulbright Triptych is an arresting work, impressive in scale and somewhat unusual in its three-part design. While a painting of this size and format might seem unlikely for a first effort, perhaps the artist was responding to some of the iconic works he and his wife encountered during their year abroad, including famous altarpieces by Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390–1441), Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1470–1528), and Rogier van der Weyden (ca. 1400–1464). It is tempting to speculate that this experience fed Dinnerstein's desire to branch out and make a painting at the conclusion of his stay. His choice of the triptych format was certainly a provocative idea.

Traditionally, an altarpiece is a work of art decorating the space above or behind the altar in a Christian church, usually dedicated to a specific saint or sacred event. Reaching its apex during the Renaissance, the format became increasingly elaborate, often involving multiple panels. While large altarpieces were employed in public religious practice, smaller versions were made for private devotion. The side panels often contained images of the donors who commissioned the works.

Since *The Fulbright Triptych* suggests an affinity with Early Netherlandish altarpieces, it is interesting to compare it with a well-known example in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *The Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)* is a small-scale triptych from the workshop of Robert Campin. (While Dinnerstein would not have seen this painting during his travels, it is possible he viewed it in New York after it entered The Cloisters Collection at the Met in 1956.)



Workshop of Robert Campin
(Netherlandish, ca. 1375–1444 Tournai)
Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)
ca. 1427–32
Oil on oak
Overall (open): 25 3/8 x 46 3/8 inches
The Cloisters Collection, 1956, 56.70a–c

The central panel portrays the Virgin Mary quietly reading in her home as the angel Gabriel arrives to announce that she will be the mother of Jesus. The room is filled with domestic and symbolic objects and the sky is visible through the open window on the rear wall. The left panel includes a portrait of the kneeling donors, while the right panel depicts St. Joseph working in his carpenter shop with his tools arranged on the table beside him. A view of the town can be glimpsed through the window.

Dinnerstein's triptych has a similar organization and relative scale: A nearly square central panel is flanked by two narrow side panels containing seated portraits of the artist on the right, and his wife Renée and daughter Simone on the left. Symbolic objects—personal and professional—are pinned to the studio walls. One might make a case that the presence of the infant is a somewhat “miraculous” element, since she was not born until after their return from Germany and could not have been present in the original setting.

The works share a similar combination of domesticity and work, although in Dinnerstein's painting the work table takes on a more prominent role: He has effectively replaced the sacred event in the center panel with a representation of his artistic practice. Like the *Merode Altarpiece*, *The Fulbright Triptych* can be seen as a devotional painting—in this case dedicated to the secular subjects of art and family.

This essay was written for the exhibition *Simon Dinnerstein: Revisiting The Fulbright Triptych* on view at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey February 22 – June 16, 2019.

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