

Bild als Bildungsroman

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Possibly pretentious, this descriptive title for Simon Dinnerstein's autobiographical screen commemorating a keenly developmental year overseas is equally apt for artist and author. Born in the Buddenbrookian Hanseatic culture of Hamburg, this writer, having studied *Kunstgeschichte* and taught for many years, finds Dinnerstein's tripartite self-portrait, his *Bildungsroman*, one in which creative growth is achieved by assimilating the art of others, rendered in a seductively familial *horror vacui* reminiscent of the domestic cheer of Karl Larsen's domestically detailed *House in the Sun*. In that paean to the Swedish painter's family life and work, he celebrates the multiplicity of elements contributing to the creative joys of both ways to genesis.

His encyclopedic Fulbright Year *Jugendwerk*, mirrored within Dinnerstein's voluptuously detailed recollection, recapitulates the ontogeny of thousands of years of earlier visual achievements to present the proverbial Young Man in a Hurry to become an Old Master, so seen in a Darwinian self-study of developmental skill and ambition from the primordial cave of child art to the recent present.

Appropriating the sacred formula of the triptych, one often taken over by German artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so as to intensify their images of faith, friendship, and allegory, Dinnerstein too has personalized and profaned this trinitarian presentation. Now it commemorates a formative phase as Portrait of the Artist as both a Young Old Master and *brave père de famille*.

Pinning up works by van Eyck, Fouquet, van der Weyden, two Bellini, Holbein, and Vermeer, these are seen along with other signs of realism together with Assyrian, tribal, and Renaissance sculpture, and prints after Seurat and Degas. The young artist shows these not only as sources of inspiration but also as paragone for his own skills. Dinnerstein's selections represent returns to various Golden Ages, rejecting the fashionable schools then the sole legitimate area for the arts, presenting a brave declaration of independence from the influence of current costly art periodicals and from that of the vast, and vastly dispiriting, Venetian Biennali in his vivid exercise of *reculer pour*

mieux sauter. It could also be that there is a spirit of competition, of *reculer pour mieux dompter*. Added to the past are those images of child art, so central to early modernism, explored in Germany circa 1900 and exhibited by Paul Poirer, Roger Fry, and Alfred Stieglitz. Long the concern of artists and parents alike, images by children challenge and affirm our own sense of achievement. Those noble little savages' daunting feats were retraced in seventeenth-century art and collected and explored by French kings and nineteenth-century psychologists alike. Only very young children prove immune to, using the Yale Kabbalist's phrase, the Anxiety of Influence.

The scene abounds in *cartellini*, those little pieces of paper, sheets of notations, recreations of documents, possibly as crucial as passports. What these all signify is anyone's guess. They were first very popular in the north Italian Renaissance, though also naturally found in classical antiquity, where they bore the artist's signatures or other important messages, often to ownership. Hans Holbein the Younger, much admired by Dinnerstein, was fond of such devices, as, earlier, were Mantegna and members of the Squarcione circle. Some of these *cartellini* may have related to the distant past or to the popular conceit that a picture is worth a thousand words. They stress levels of reality and the powers of illusionism. Dinnerstein, a "literary artist," clearly responds to the allusive, not the elusive powers of the lettered paper fragment, employing it with infectious pleasure.

An ugly, impersonally rustic German village is seen through the window, one typical of those built or rebuilt after the successive horrors of the First or Second World Wars, each of these exacting a heavy toll on its fields and villages.

When young, few factors loom larger than Memory, the less to remember, the more significant whatever there may be becomes. Often the self is recorded following closely upon the very time that the Now happens, in diaristic fashion. With age, recollection becomes an often involuntary adventure in the arbitrary, teeming with sudden, unexpected and uncalled-for reminders. These jolts from the past often enjoy greater vitality than can the present to which their receiver may somewhat reluctantly return. The Now is seen in the collaborative labor of the artist and his wife: their daughter Simone. Seated on her mother's lap, at the left, she has grown up to be a most gifted pianist. A key factor in this tableau is Narcissistic reflection, that dimension

selected by the fifteenth-century Florentine theorist Leone Battista Alberti as the basis for Art's invention. The Greek shepherd's fatal passion and acceptance of his reflected image for reality initiated the powers of painted illusion.

In the *Fulbright* screen's presentation of Me, Myself, and Eye, the basic conceit is handily fulfilled—"By my triptych shall ye know me." In some ways, Dinnerstein's pictorial recollection is a painstakingly intricate *Bild* of an exhilarating European year's *Bildungsroman*, a visual "This I learned," "This I saw," and "This I did," "Here I am"—all brought back and forward by mirrored, reflective experience, where self-discovery is made possible through retracing others' achievements.

By appropriating the beatified context of the triptych, *The Fulbright Triptych* sacralizes formative experience, now placed within the context of secular worship. But precisely who or what are we praying to? Is it to the enduring miracle of responsiveness elicited by great art? Or are we bowing before the force of youth, to the prideful experience of self-education, one inspired yet undaunted by past feats? This is essentially an exclusive and excluding image, abounding in precocity's hermeticism, teeming with the isolating, compelling self-interest almost invariably critical for survival in the arts.

Two artists, one anonymous, the second a young New York painter, bring to mind the same drives shared by Dinnerstein in his eloquent recreation of Study Abroad. The first is a little-known early sixteenth-century artist from Hans Holbein the Younger's circle, who produced a cosmically painted tabletop for the standard bearer Hans Baer of Basel. Here, in a neo-Eyckian and sometimes Boschian fashion, he presents a massive assemblage of almost everything pertaining to life and art alike. The tabletop was ordered early in 1515, the year of Baer's death at the Battle of Marignano. At the center are the patron's arms conjoined with those of his wife, Barbara Brunner. One wants to look and look and look again at this mixture of rebuslike elements. What the hell (or in heaven) does this magical miscellany *mean*? What did the Swiss painter have in mind, hand, and heart? Nothing may really matter but for the mystery of selection and recollection, in the seeming absence of choice in this illusionistic infinity of thingness. Was this artist young, with a sort of "I can do anything better than you can" perspective? Or did he approach "maturity" with its desperate need to assert "I can

still do anything better than you”? We may never know. What matters is the power of memory and the manifold ways in which recollection may be recreated by appearance.

So much more than mere *trompe l’oeil*, rising above and diving below sheer visual sleight of hand, the cluttered tabletop questions the very fact of fact, along with the existence of existence. Encyclopedic, the table includes the image of *Elck*, simultaneously Everyman and Nobody, a concept so popular just before the Reformation.

Memory as imagination, or as imagined memory is the sustained feat of another artist, Elena Climent, who was given the complex commission to recreate no less than six scenes from the politically correct rainbow of New York writers by painting their respective authorial voices, these realized through depicting their Greenwich Village literary workplaces. These six panels were painted within the unimaginatively short period of six months. This cycle, *At Home with their Books*, consists of vertical panels measuring ten by thirty feet in its entirety. It was installed in New York University’s Languages and Literature Library. Jane Jacobs, who saved the Village from Robert Moses’s would-be depredation, is among the six chosen to be shown by way of using books for their own writing.

Just as the tripartite work communicated a message of genesis, so does the very large Library cycle, in which “my working site *is* my literary insight, representing my creative self.” Predictably, publications play the key role in every study, their covers or bindings bespeaking the words within.

Shrinking violets have no place in an ever-more cruelly competitive art world. Dinnerstein’s street is all too singularly appropriately named/numbered “First.” No one can, or should, ever hope to quite comprehend any painter’s necessarily self-justifying ego, especially after photography’s invention, when the basic need for the mirroring visual arts became obsolete, calling for radical redefinition of mission.

My daughter, also an artist—a poet—was prematurely prescient of this demanding situation. For her very first sentence, she simply but eloquently placed two key, highly conceptual words in succession, making for a stance so critical to creative survival: “First I.”

