

1954

Art Feature

Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones

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A R T F E A T U R E

Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones

NOTES ON THE PAINTINGS

A L T H O U G H M O D E R N in spirit, Sparhawk-Jones is one of those artists who continues the tradition of previous centuries. Many of her paintings are frankly and recognizably pictures of people, and of the way people feel about themselves and their situation. Other examples of her work are pictures of ideas poetically viewed, such as romantic love, or injustice. All of her paintings may be described as icons of personality, highly stylized and symbolic images. Icons encourage iconography, the study of the forms of representation. Although a painting by Sparhawk-Jones can be appreciated as an abstract, esthetic image apart from its literary meaning, the subject represented is as important, if not more important, than the composition and color in determining the total impression the painting gives.

The purpose of the notes that follow is to suggest (without attempting to be definitive or fanciful), meanings inherent in a few of these paintings, and to indicate their originality and consistency.

A painting of a legend or a myth will serve as a good introduction. If the myth is a familiar one, the way the artist treats it reveals his mentality, his interests.

Paintings of Lady Godiva, who rode naked on horseback through a town, usually show her seated with great aplomb and modesty, her body hidden by her long tresses. The popular conception romanticises. Any indication that a medieval lady, the mistress of a manor, might suffer physical discomfort and mental

embarrassment, becomes lost in the nimbus of sentiment. In fact, from the popular conception it is difficult to remember that Lady Godiva was a real person and had a reason for riding through town without her clothes. (Her husband bet her she wouldn't, and agreed to reduce oppressive taxes on his tenants if she would.) The whys and wherefores tend to become obscured by the sensationalism of the act itself.

The Sparhawk-Jones painting of Lady Godiva shows her climbing up on the horse to commence the ride. By the simple device of presenting Lady Godiva not in her moment of glory when she was onstage, so to speak, but in the wings in the act of getting ready, the painter has concentrated our attention on the fact that Lady Godiva was a human being who underwent something of an ordeal. Even admitting the possibility that she may have enjoyed the thrill of the ride (though nobody is supposed to have looked), her deed was daring. And the painting by Sparhawk-Jones catches the excitement of the act.

Reinforcing the humorous realism, the horse in the painting is depicted as a rather gaunt, hard-working nag who could be depended on to behave sedately, and not, as popularly conceived, a glamorous charger with a tufted tail. The painting imparts a sense of personal predicament to a scene that is usually rendered as romantic generalization.

The style of the rendition is flamboyant and delicate. While the colors are appropriately somber for the occasion (convention flaunted, medieval chivalry brought to a breaking point), the brush strokes are, by contrast, bold, appropriate to the vigorous figure of Lady Godiva and to the impetuous movement of her body.

The presentation of a revealing moment of personal drama is a characteristic of the paintings of Sparhawk-Jones. In a water-color entitled "Between Several" the subject is a lady drying herself after a bath. This subject has been a favorite of painters from the age of the Greeks to the time of the French impressionists.

Usually the lady is unselfconsciously and unashamedly enjoying a luxurious sense of physical well-being. The woman in the Sparhawk-Jones painting, on the contrary, is shown covering her body with a towel as if to escape from the view of prying eyes. The towel is wrapped around her head too, and hides her face. Her body is strong and capable, if awkward, and her skin is red and fresh, hardy, instead of sensual. This is a woman dedicated to housework rather than affection. The flesh tones are rich with watercolor hues, and the outlines are strongly sketched.

The usually pleasant and innocuous subject of woman after the bath is here given an acutely realistic treatment. The realism of the subject, however, as in the painting of Lady Godiva, is respected by the painter to such a degree that the treatment is invested with a romanticism of its own. The mingled and conflicting emotions of the woman and the intense homeliness of her position lend her character and dignity.

In both the painting of Lady Godiva and the painting of the lady after the bath, outward appearances are used to express inner emotions, but are not visibly transformed by emotion. However, in another, more expressionistic, style of painting by Sparhawk-Jones, the emotion expressed does transform actuality, so that the scene becomes transcendental.

A large, wide and brightly colored painting entitled "On an Enchanted Shore" is an example. Though we recognize the scene, the objects in it are distorted to emphasize meaning.

The painting has the cryptic quality of a charade. In the center and foreground, a woman wearing a bathing suit appears to emerge from one of several large, twisted sea shells that stand about the beach. Beyond is a rough shaped sea, and slashes of sky.

The woman has a simplified, clown-like face, delicate in coloring. Her skin has a blush as impersonal as the color of the sky. She is on all fours, her head hanging down; she looks out of the painting and sees the world upside down.

The conch shells are patently grotesque, and their tremendous size emphasizes their strangeness. They are works of nature, but their convoluted hardness and vivid coloration seem to indicate a mysterious and ponderously whimsical aspect of nature. They stand around on the beach in relation to the woman like an arrangement of still life of which she is the centerpiece. Motionless, she is as much a part of the landscape as the conch shells, no more, no less. Having the breadth of land, sea and sky, the meeting place of contrasting elements, a beach scene lends itself well to a sense of heightened reality, or unreality. In this painting, the air of spaciousness is used to convey a sense of psychic distance. Human beings and sea shells are both productions of nature, and both are enchanted.

The forms in this painting tend to be abstract, and abstracted, though recognizable. The brush strokes are bold, and each stroke is made to tell, to add to the shapes, so that the composition is built with considerable economy.

"On An Enchanted Shore" invents its symbolism, creates a mood. Although any reference to traditional subject matter is not essential, it is possible by a stretch of the imagination to see this painting as a 20th-century version of the "Birth of Venus."

If the woman in the painting is seen as Venus, she is born out of a sea shell, but no gentle zephyrs blow her in, and nobody is on the beach to welcome her. She has landed like a castaway. The beach is littered with old abandoned sea shells perhaps belonging to Venuses who arrived earlier than she. Yet the day is nice, the light is beautiful, and the shore is enchanted. She is glad to be there. A gaiety persists through the loneliness of the scene.

The point to be made about this picture, however, is that it is unnecessary to stretch the imagination—the lady does not have to be Venus, or to have a name—for the meaning and the mood to be understood.

In all the paintings of Sparhawk-Jones the central figures are anonymous spectators as well as personal participants in their

own actions and emotions, and are often shown observing their own fate while engaged in fulfilling it. This, incidentally, might serve as a definition of the role the artist plays. The people in these paintings often have the sensitivity and consciousness attributed to artists.

The subject matter of painting and literature is frequently similar in historic epochs of art. In the United States, to give one example, the paintings of Winslow Homer have important qualities in common with the writings of Stephen Crane.

The art of Sparhawk-Jones is imbued with a frontier independence, which may account for the ability to place the self personally in the situation of the myths she depicts (as Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee is placed in King Arthur's court).

Paintings of a more somber mood, such as the woman after the bath, remind one of the brooding and dogged directness of the writing of Theodore Dreiser, his evocation of the personal and poetic reality underneath garish respectability. Or perhaps the painting is even closer to the character of Sherwood Anderson's description of complex desire behind the crude facades of conformism.

A work such as "On An Enchanted Shore" has as its subject vague, subtle, but powerfully determinant forces of character and fate such as preoccupied Edith Wharton.

These allusions are misleading, however, insofar as the paintings are original rather than derivative, and at their best defy comparison. Though they are spiritually akin to the painting of Albert Pinkham Ryder and William Morris Hunt, they beat a path of their own in the 20th century.

One might go so far as to say that the enchantment in these paintings is an enchantment of experience rather than innocence—an experience that is candidly human. The world of the human (in contrast to the non-human or the inhumane), has only begun to be rediscovered and explored by contemporary American painting.

—Leslie Katz

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REFRESHMENT.



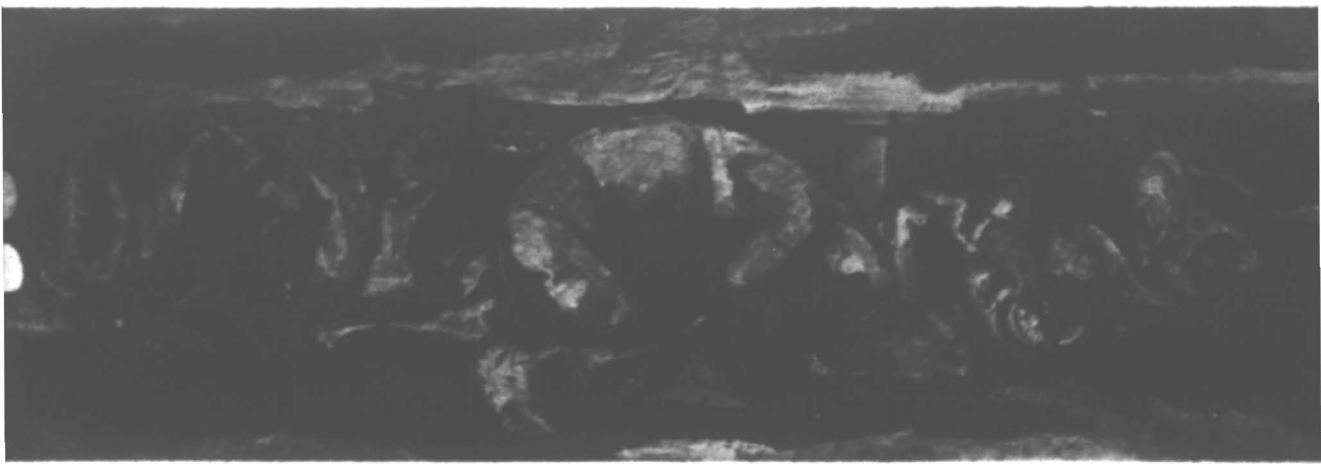
FACES ON THE DARK, *Private collection, Frank Rehn Gallery.*

WOMAN WITH THE MOON IN HER APRON.





BETWEEN SEVERAL.



ON AN ENCHANTED SHORE.



G O D I V A. *Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery.*