THE FIGURE FROM INGRES TO TODAY

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By age 17 Jean-Auguste-Domonique Ingres had acquired mastery in the art of drawing and painting from the nude, basic to the academic program of the early 1800s. He acquired his passion for the figure from viewing the works of Raphael, particularly his images of the madonna, reflections of tender motherhood, fusing the Virgin's features with that of the classical Venus. The academy's regulations required its students to paint studies of nude figures and compositions taken from ancient myth and history. Ingres gave special attention to the depiction of female grace and male strength. His intuition and character refused the conventional technique of the time. One of his innovations was to break with the school's dramatic light and opt for the light which molds the body into subtle poetry of tones discovered from Raphael.[1]

Ingres invented a language of "broken rules" through which he gave external shape to the tenderness, sensuality and desire of his imagination. Although it had its formal origins in the art of Raphael, line and color alone would express the character of the model. The ideal which he imposed on his model was not a cold perfection but a strongly felt response to nature. He recreated women in his work distilling from the beauty he saw but not intentionally departing from the realm of nature.[2]

In the mid 1800s William Merritt Chase completed a series of pastel nudes known for their solid treatment and brilliant color. Unlike Ingres, Chase held firmly to his belief that the nude should be realistically portrayed rather

than idealized. For Chase, technique was the means by which he could keep a truthful statement interesting.[3]

The artist Kenyon Cox recalled his reactions to the series of nudes by Chase: "Within a short time some of us have seen a few lovely pastels of the nude female. The delicate feeling for color and for value, the masterly handling of the material, the charm of the texture in skin; but we were not prepared for the line and delicate drawing, the grace of undulating contour,..."[4]

In sharp contrast to Ingres and Chase the avant-garde artists of the 1900s had many approaches to the figure. Pablo Picasso was such an artist and an artist that expressed the figure in many ways. In the "Artist and His Model" theme, no longer are the visual ideals of Raphael of Ingres the focus, nor the virtuoso technique of Chase's reality. In fact Picasso works from his head and not a model. His figure is an imaginary creation.

It is the model who presents all the difficulties, who plays all the tricks on him (artist) and who he vainly tries catch. But Picasso does catch her, first one way, then another. He paints a canvas a day and makes us understand how inaccessible the model remains and how many thousands of times one can catch her without having her.[5]

This nude, so beautiful; this nude so overwhelming for the artist; growing in the studio like a tree, with no problems compared to the artist who has many. It is Picasso's way of being: alone in the studio in order to the essential element of his life.

There have been few periods in history which the feeling of a catastrophe was more real than the 50s. There is talk of the danger in which modern man lives: the danger of losing his humanity. Man not only could physically destroy himself,

via the bomb, but individuals were becoming numbers in a computer-oriented world. But as in the reality of our lives, so in its mirror of the visual arts, a human protest arose against the fate to become a thing.[6]

In the development of art since the beginning of our century the negative emphasis in the expression of the fight for humanity prevails. There has been a struggle for the vitality of the human image to be rediscovered. Artists fight desperately over the image of man, and by producing shock and fascination in the observer, they communicate their own concern for a threatened and struggling humanity. They show the smallness of man and his deep involvement in the world which he tries to emerge with foil and pain.[7]

In 1949 Willem de Kooning began a series of abstract paintings on Women. He said he was interested in painting Woman, a figure, just as throughout the ages artists have made symbols of female goddesses or cult images. It was a traditional idea, and he felt that he wanted to continue the Western tradition by painting the symmetrical female figure but he also wanted a stark new figure.[8]

"Are they horrible, masochistic women whose distortion expresses great suffering?" De Kooning feels that they are also humorous. After all there is the atom bomb, a world in turmoil. Therefore relief, tragic-comic relief, is needed and the Women combine comedy with tragedy. He sees in them humor - the angry humor of tragedy.[9]

De Kooning does not work from models because the model would be a real woman and not a posed set-up. He looked at photograghs in men's magazines, cut them out, and turned them upside down, constantly changing parts to get new and surprising realities. Thighs became arms and vice versa, giving the figure a new and powerful twist.[10]

Clement Greenberg stated that it is impossible to paint the contemporary figure. The figure had already been so thoroughly done that nothing new could be added. "Thus in defiance of the dogma that figurative painting was killed by abstract art and photography, the figure has come back in as many forms as there are painters."[11] So to place all contemporary figurative artists under the mantle of Realism, without distinction, is a disservice to the artists.

Contemporary figurative art has moved to a specificity of direct observation. The marvelous classical drawings of William Bailey have the delicate modeling of forms and gracious line that gives them a timeless air. While he is often compared to Ingres, there is a mystery and sensual poetry in his work that moves it torward the realm of Balthus, but without the latter's narrative.[12]

James Weeks is more inclined to the specificity of the individuals in his drawings. They are crisp summations of appearance and attitude. They are drawn with a fluid charcoal line and sparingly modeled with a tonal wash - like certain Matisse charcoal drawings - in a sculptural quality of low relief. The graceful line illustrates Weeks' highly refined and economical skills as a mature draftsman.[13]

By comparison the drawings of Michael Mazur are inclined more to narrative. His pastel dancers allude to the visual perception of movement and focus via photo-graphy's impact on painting as is Duchamps's Nude Descending a Staircase.[14]

There are some conclusions that can be drawn from the work of contemporary figurative artists. Draftsmanship in the 50s had been so de-emphasized that the skills required and their appreciation appeared to atrophy. But now drawing has returned to a more traditional role and level of skill by the self-imposed and ever-increasing demands of figurative Realists.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Jon Whiteley, Ingres, (London: Oresko Books LTD., 1977), p. 14.

[2] Whiteley, p. 15.

[3] Ronald G. Pisano, William Merritt Chase, (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1979), p. 46.

[4] Pisano, p. 46.

[5] Helene Parmelin, Picasso The Artist and His Model, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), p. 14.

[6] Peter Selz, New Images of Man, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), p.9.

[7] Selz, p. 10.

[8] Selz, p. 89.

[9] Selz, p. 92.

[10] Selz, p. 92.

[11] John Arthur, Realist Drawings & Watercolors, (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980), p. 69.

[12]Arthur, p. 93.

[13]Arthur, p. 93.

[14]Arthur, p. 93.