

MEA CULPA: AN OIL PAINTING

By

MARCO MUROLO

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An Essay to Accompany

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SIGNED: marco murolo

APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

Andreas S. Andersen  
ANDREAS S. ANDERSEN, Head  
Department of Art

May 16, 1958  
Date

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List of the Original Sketches

Accompanying the Painted Thesis

Sketch Number 1 : The Geometric Form Approach - size, 18" by 25 1/2"

Sketch Number 2 : The Symmetric Subdivisions Approach - size,  
18" by 25 1/2"

Sketch Number 3 : The Monochrome Approach - size, 14" by 18 1/2"

Sketch Number 4 : Black and White - size, 21" by 29"

Sketch Number 5 : Preliminary Sketch, Black and White - size,  
17" by 23"

Sketch Number 6 : Preliminary Sketch, Black on Blue Tag-Board -  
size, 17 1/2" by 23"

Sketch Number 7 : Preliminary Oil Sketch on Canvas - size,  
11 1/2" by 15 1/2"

## PREFACE AND INITIAL STATEMENT

This summary of thoughts and ideas on art is related to and generated from my past experiences and should not be construed as prejudice against modern expressions and contemporary ideals.

Because I have always accepted and admired varieties of art expression as well as new changes in the technical approach to painting, I accept modifications and beneficial discussion about principles, forms and expressions in the art of today with the sincere desire to improve my knowledge. However, at the same time I cannot force myself to a definite and complete abdication of the principles of craftsmanship and established fundamentals on which, I believe, art is based.

Since I consider myself conservative, my art, in general, is an expression of my own conservatism. Having had experience in modern expression, I am convinced that change of forms will succeed naturally in my art and will develop from experiences in the past and from experimentation in new methods. However, it is extremely problematic that an artist, even an outstanding one, can escape entirely from the mannerism and the clichés of the period in which he lives. Yet it is my belief that the artistic integrity of a painter shows quite extensively his own character and is expressed

in his works. Many individuals possess a degree of creative power. For some, it may be imagination; for others, talent or artistic consciousness.

But as we imagine, so we think. Whatever talent one possesses develops in relation to the individual's life situation and environment. Occasionally, an artist dedicates his work to a cause; in such cases, he must be deeply concerned with the very narrow margin dividing sentiment and sentimentality in painting. Sentiment in painting is love for that which you are painting; sentimentality is mainly a desire to please and impress with certain effects.

Although I realized the difficulties and the importance of the work I planned to develop, I hoped that in painting "MeaCulpa" I would have enjoyment and love for the subject. Technical problems, probably more difficult than I anticipated, would have to be solved. But understanding the limitations of my technical and artistic possibilities, I also recognized that no art work presents itself without problems to be solved.

## ESSAY ON THE PAINTING

"Has it ever occurred to you that all forms in Nature, indeed, all shapes that man can see, are based upon some form of solid or plane geometry?

"Isolated forms may seem to have little charm or interest, but the moment we group them together, they steer the imagination and begin to suggest things that we have seen." <sup>1</sup>

Plate 1, Sketch 1, is an example of my first approach to the development of the painting, and illustrates the method by which space is divided into geometric shapes. This approach permits more creative subdivisions, but suited, I believe, to religious compositions of the kind I intended to develop. Furthermore, geometric subdivisions seem especially well adapted to large-sized paintings and murals.

In interpreting the initial ideas related to the subject of the painting, I realized that the composition was mainly constituted by two "focal blocks," one of which represented the human figure of the sinner and the other, an inspiration or vision.

The human figure was to be kneeling or seated, and for this reason, it had indeed a geometric form in its contour: a triangle.

To conceal the details of the face of the seated figure, I decided to use a side rather than a front view.

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1. Puttnam, Blenda, The Sculptor's Way. Watson-Guption Publication, Inc., New York, New York. p. 5, 1948.



SLIDE NUMBER 1



PLATE 1

SKETCH 1

The position of the human figure indicated the act of praying for help or forgiveness from God.

The motive of the cross with the feet of Christ was considered a valuable interpretation of the rectangular plane which constituted the second main "block" of the composition.

After a few additional small pencil sketches, the final organization of the geometric shapes was quite clear and planes A and B balanced the picture in a satisfactory way.

Although all unnecessary details were to be eliminated, the addition of planes A and B was accepted at the beginning. Later, plane A was eliminated in order to increase the contrast of the seated figure with the background.

Tempera black on tag-board was used.

Size of the sketch: 18" by 25 1/2".

"Line, area, value, color, texture, volume and space are to visual expression what sounds are to music. If they are simply thrown together at random they produce chaos. If they are organized and governed by the laws of harmony, balance, rhythm, unity, they become a design." <sup>2</sup>

Plate 2, Sketch 2, shows the method by which space was divided symmetrically. However, both the symmetric and the geometric approaches were beneficial in the organization of the model's

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2. Feldsted, C. J., Design Fundamentals. Pitman Publishing Corporation, New York, Toronto, London, 1950.



SLIDE NUMBER 11



PLATE II

SKETCH 2

position and for the final construction of the composition.

Sketch 2 followed a visual construction which had already materialized in the preceding sketch 1, where geometric subdivisions were used. Sketch 2 developed more accurate vision of details. Once more it was realized that the symmetric subdivision approach shows its beneficial qualities if it is used as a complementary process of the geometric type approach.

Tempera black, tempera terra rosa and water colors were used on tag-board paper.

Size of the sketch: 18" by 25 1/2".

After obtaining the results shown in plates I and II, Sketches 1 and 2, and after several small-sized water color sketches were developed, the more technical approach to the stated thesis began: the use of tempera underpainting and oil overpainting.

For this purpose a monochrome tempera underpainting sketch was developed on a board, 14" by 18 1/2", grounded with a coat of tempera white. Tempera white and tempera black casein were used. At this point, work began from the living model. It was expected that such a sketch would be helpful in the work which was to follow. Later on, as a further development, the tempera monochrome sketch was covered with a monochrome in oil.

Five or more portions of white were squeezed out on the palette. One portion of white was left as it was, while the other



SLIDE NUMBER III

THE MONOCHROME



PLATE III

SKETCH 3



SLIDE NUMBER



PLATE IV

SKETCH 4

parts were mixed with a touch of the color chosen for the monochrome.

By this means, a range of different tonalities was created to serve for the planned approach of the work. The highlights were developed by using that portion of white which had been left untouched in its purity. The darkest tones were developed by using the deepest tones, while the half tones were expressed with the use of those portions of mixed white and black lighter tones.

## THE UNDERPAINTING

The painting, "Mea Culpa," was started on canvas, size 42" by 56", and the preliminary drawing and modeling were developed with a tempera underpainting.

The purpose of this procedure was to simplify and prepare for the overpainting which was to be done in oil, and in a direct way, that is, alla prima.

All the attention was concentrated on perfecting the drawing and modeling. A careful approach had to be adopted in the use of light and dark tones to maintain a flat effect and a proper relationship throughout the painting, as it had been done in the preceding sketch in monochrome.

Slide V, Plate V, shows the painting at the completion of its first stage. Note the light tonality and the flat effect of the whole picture.

In using the tempera underpainting, there was no intention to develop the painting to its full effect. On the contrary, every effort was made to avoid such a thing, since underpainting in tempera should not be developed in the same way as oil overpainting.

As indicated in the description of the monochrome process, I tried, while working on the underpainting, to keep a



SLIDE NUMBER V



PLATE V

flat and light tone effect. To achieve this result, tempera black was carefully mixed with tempera white. The modeling was developed in large planes with little attention to details. Here it should be mentioned that the rapid drying of the tempera underpainting allowed an almost immediate start on the alla prima work in oil.

In starting the alla prima work, several apparent mistakes in the drawing of the composition were corrected by simply rubbing the tempera underpainting in the necessary areas with a flat touch of a wet sponge, allowing them to dry, and painting over again.

In this way, I had the opportunity to obtain better balance in the disposition of the planes. Although very often I was tempted to emphasize tones and volume, such emphasis would have compromised the whole process of the underpainting. Deep tones and effects too closely corresponding to the color and values of the projected final results would have caused the loss of the painting's freshness. In underpainting, it should always be kept in mind that there should be no anticipation of the full, final effect of the painting.

One of the main changes made on the underpainting concerned the reduction in the size of Christ's feet in relation to the size of the human figure. (See Slide VI, Plate VI.)

In the beginning it was not intended to create any rela-



SLIDE NUMBER VI



PLATE VI

tionship of size between these two elements of the painting.

Nevertheless, the change was made because the human figure appeared to be somewhat small.

## THE OVERPAINTING

Of special concern in the overpainting was the large size of the picture. Because of this, the overpainting had to be done very carefully, so that the freshness of color would not be compromised.

It became clear that only one coat done alla prima would probably create surface problems. The use of fatty oils such as linseed and copal oil in combination with a heavy impasto would make it necessary to rub or scrape, which I wished to avoid. The use of turpentine was also to be limited as much as possible. Therefore, the first overpainting layer had to be somewhat liquid, and thought of mainly as a means of covering the tempera underpainting.

To improve the contrast of the figure against the background, plane A was at this time eliminated. The head of the figure was developed later so that no details of the face would be in evidence.

The oil colors used for the first overpainting layer were raw umber, ivory black, ochre light, naples yellow, permanent green light, cadmium yellow light, cadmium red light, burnt sienna and white. But, as anticipated, the first overpainting

appeared to be somewhat weak and low in tones and contrasts.

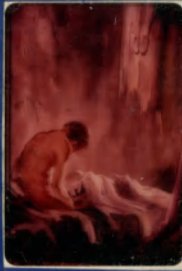
At this point the first coat of overpainting was left to dry.

The drying process of the first layer of oil overpainting was accelerated because of its absorption by the underpainting in tempera. However, this was of little consequence when the second and ultimate coat of oil overpainting was started, since oil over oil requires considerably more time to dry. Moreover, the slower drying of the oil over oil permitted the development of the alla prima method of painting, that is, using the direct way of aiming at the final effect from the very beginning of the second coat.

The final stage of the painting had to be solved in this way to improve the general effect of the work, which did not appear very satisfactory at the end of the first coat of oil overpainting, and to increase the freshness of color and contrasts.

With the addition of the highlights concentrated on the figure's contour facing the cross as well as on the draperies, the painting was nearing its completion. Reflected light effects, needed in various places, were also added.

The final touch was dedicated to creating better balance in the whole picture. Hence, more attention was given to the upper left corner of the picture where plane A had been eliminated during



SLIDE NUMBER VII



PLATE VII

the previous development of the painting. For this reason, an attempt was made to express signs of the time on the wall. However, careful attention was given to avoid any emphasis of these elements which might distract from the main composition.

One month and a half later the painting was sprayed with a dependable oil varnish.



SLIDE NUMBER VIII



PLATE NUMBER VIII

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