

CITY DANCE:
CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE URBAN THEME
IN THE PAINTINGS OF ISABEL BISHOP (1931-1974)

by
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PREFACE

New York, New York
It's a hell of a town
The Bronx is up and
The Battery's down
The people ride in
A hole in the ground

Leonard Bernstein,
Betty Comden and Adolf Green
On the Town

The characters . . .
bear no resemblance to
living persons.
Only the city is real.

Lawrence Durrell
Justine

The city as an influence on the work of Isabel Bishop presented itself naturally as a theme for this thesis after considerable brainstorming with other tentative topics. A trip to New York City in May 1975, taken to interview Miss Bishop on the event of her Retrospective Exhibition crystallized the notion of the city's impact on the artist. Valuable insight into the relationship was provided foremost by the Thomas B. Hess interview shown by

videotape at the Whitney Museum of American Art, location of the Bishop show. The substance of Miss Bishop's remarks in that interview laid the groundwork for this paper.

Dr. Sheldon Reich, my adviser, furnished invaluable information on Isabel Bishop, and I would like to acknowledge his help in preparing the manuscript. A thank you is extended to Linza Jester for taking the photographs. I am most appreciative of the efforts of the Inter-Library Loan staff under Mrs. Susan Spaulding for the assistance in retrieving a variety of materials.

Warm thanks go to Isabel Bishop for the time she afforded me in our correspondence and interview and her personal reflections on a frequently-neglected aspect of American painting history.

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ABSTRACT

The predominance of the urban figurative theme in the paintings of Isabel Bishop suggests New York has been a considerable influence on the artist. Critical views validate this correspondence.

Bishop's first responsive reaction to the energy of the city was coupled by her contacts with urban advocates at the Art Students' League, notably Kenneth Hayes Miller and Reginald Marsh. Both emphasized city life as a viable theme for art.

The legitimacy of art based on everyday life in an urban setting was the leading premise of the so-called "Ash Can School," and certain Ash Can artists figured prominently in Miller's and in Marsh's careers. Isabel Bishop in this context, is an inheritor of that tradition and is often considered among the second generation of Ash Can artists.

Since the late 1930s, Bishop has continued to work in a more personal style, evolving her own idiom, and concentrating on effects of light and forms in motion. In her most recent works, she has moved toward a more abstract view, although her allegiance to the urban figurative theme remains firm.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE CITY

The spectacle of New Yorkers coming and going is witnessed daily by Isabel Bishop from the long window in her studio facing Union Square. A composite crowd surges forward, then disperses, changing direction in continuous flux. The passers-by may be shoppers, office girls on break, or students on their way to class, but to the artist in their unrehearsed movements, they are performers in a ballet. The critics use this image to describe Bishop's work: "In observing pedestrians, she has found a kind of city dance."¹

A fascination for New York has guided Bishop's artistic pursuits since her arrival in the city in 1918. In a career of more than 50 years she has maintained a buoyant regard for city life while her presentation of the urban figurative theme has evolved in the critical view (Figs. A1 and A2). (For the sake of convenience, all illustrations appear in the appendices following the text.)

In a video-taped interview made for Miss Bishop's Retrospective Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, April 30-June 1, 1975,

¹Ralph Pomeroy, "Isabel Bishop," Art News, Vol. 66, April, 1967, p. 9.

the artist talked with critic Thomas Hess. She spoke of the impact of the city upon her arrival and said, "I thought, my God, this is a city! This is a great city!"

The notion of a "great city" was in contrast to Detroit where Isabel grew up. She was born in Cincinnati in 1902, the youngest of five children. In 1903 the family moved to Detroit where her father, Dr. J. Remsen Bishop, took a position as principal of a high school. She studied at the Wicker Art School in Detroit starting in 1917. Describing her "city feelings" about Detroit to Thomas Hess she said, "I was brought up in the middle-west in Detroit. My family didn't come from there and they never liked it. They never felt it was a city in the sense that a city is civilization."

After graduation from high school, Isabel left the Midwest for New York. She relates the experience:

I first came to New York when my parents thought I ought to learn how to make a living. I studied at the New York School of Applied Design (for Women), but I don't know what I was supposed to be, probably an illustrator.²

New York in 1918 was still feeling the shock waves generated by the Armory Show of 1913. Bishop responded to the wave of modernism and abandoned her plans of becoming a fashion illustrator in favor of pursuing a serious career in painting. In 1922, she began studies at the Art Students' League.

Bishop stated in an interview:

²"Isabel Bishop Finds Time for Both Art and Family," Peekskill, N.Y. Star, May 1, 1941.

I was going to be an illustrator, and then I heard of modern art, which I had never heard of in Detroit, Michigan. Why, it opened up something so tremendous that I left the commercial school where I was and went to the (Art Students') League. There things were seething . . .³

³Sheldon Reich, Isabel Bishop (Tucson: University of Arizona Museum of Art, 1974), p. 19.

CHAPTER II

THE LEAGUE YEARS

Years of study at the Art Students' League focused Isabel Bishop's attention on the city's special relationship to art. It was there, beginning in 1922, that she was to come under the tutelage and influence of Max Weber, Guy Pène du Bois, and more importantly, Kenneth Hayes Miller and Reginald Marsh.

With the exception of Weber, these artists were attempting to respond to the urban milieu with figurative studies of familiar situations in New York. Like members of the Ash Can School,⁴ they turned to city people

⁴The Ash Can group favored realistic depictions of contemporary urban scenes and freedom from academicism. The five original members were Robert Henri, John Sloan, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, and George Luks. Called the Philadelphia 5, they studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and admired Thomas Eakins. All except Henri had worked as newspaper illustrators. After relocating in New York, they were joined by Ernest Lawson, Arthur B. Davies, and Maurice Prendergast, and exhibited together as The Eight Independents. Strictly speaking, "Ash Can" refers only to the Philadelphia 5, although some critics use the term more loosely to include all members of The Eight. See Lloyd Goodrich and John I. H. Baur, American Art of Our Century (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1961), p. 25.

for thematic sources, and this partly explains the label "post-Ash Can" often attached to Miller, Marsh, and du Bois.⁵ In addition, however, the "post-Ash Can" attribution has a more direct causal factor in that du Bois, Miller, and Marsh were students of, and/or colleagues of the Philadelphia 5. Du Bois studied with Henri, Marsh was a student of Sloan and Luks, while Miller taught at the same time with Henri at the New York School of Art and at the League. Isabel Bishop's associations with her teachers may be viewed in this light for she is often considered by critics such as Canaday to be an inheritor of the post-Ash Can tradition.

First Contacts: Weber and du Bois

Abstract modern art was first encountered at the League by Bishop in her beginning studies with Max Weber, who was working in a Cubist vein. Weber, she felt, was an admirable artist working in a difficult style with success. Even now Miss Bishop believes the difficulty inherent in the Cubist manner explains the short span of time Weber and others worked in this influence.⁶ She remained but a short time with Weber.

Brief formal study was also spent in the studio of Guy Pène du Bois, of whom she has said, "I got to know him quite well so I felt a lot of influence

⁵John Canaday, "A Certain Dignity For The Figure," New York Times, May 11, 1975, Sect. II, p. 31.

⁶Isabel Bishop, personal interview with the artist at Miss Bishop's studio, Union Square, New York City, on May 30, 1975.

from him. It probably doesn't show . . . I do admire his work. I think he's under-thought of right now."⁷

Du Bois' Ash Can affiliation is noted by Milton Brown who writes: "As a student of Henri he had belonged to the younger generation of realists. His early work, like Bar, 1908 (Fig. A3), had the distinctive Ash Can mood and setting. In his later work the focus shifted to a satirization of the well-fed bourgeois . . ."⁸ (Fig. A4).

For Isabel Bishop, du Bois' influence was greatest in his role, not of artist per se, but as friend. She relied upon his advice when she started to depart from Miller's ideas toward the end of her League years.

Kenneth Hayes Miller: A Theoretical Base

While Bishop admired both du Bois and Weber as artists and friends, she was seeking more direction as a young art student. It was in the class of Kenneth Hayes Miller that Bishop received the intellectual stimulation and artistic criticism she sought. "Then I went to one of Miller's classes," she said, "and I thought, my God, he has a mind! You know at that age though I never went to college, I was reading and I felt myself to be an intellectual. I thought, here was a mind, and here I am, I'm home."⁹

⁷Thomas B. Hess interview with Isabel Bishop for the Retrospective Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 19, 1975.

⁸Milton Brown, American Painting From the Armory Show to the Depression (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 168-169.

⁹Reich, p. 19.

Miller enjoyed a fine reputation as the most influential teacher in America since Henri.¹⁰ His intellectual bent and rigorous dedication to art were perhaps fostered by his unique background. He was born in 1876 in the utopian community at Oneida, New York.¹¹ He studied at the New York School of Art with William Merritt Chase and at the Art Students' League under Kenyon Cox who admired the Venetian painters, Titian and Veronese.¹² Cox's admiration for the Venetians imbued Miller with a high regard for the techniques used by the great painting masters of the past. While himself a student in 1892, he noted the disparity between the old and contemporary paintings in an exhibit and wrote:

I was appalled by the gulf between them. No, not a gulf but a chasm--the chasm dividing fine honest achievement and slick superficiality. Could it ever be bridged, I wondered? Could we ever again paint as well as the old masters? Then I saw a painting by Eugene Delacroix and I knew the answer. Here was a man painting 200 years after Rubens, and painting with just as much skill, fire and imagination. Delacroix formed my aim. His painting proved to me it was possible to bridge the gulf between the old masters and moderns.¹³

Miller taught from 1899-1911 at the New York School of Art where he and Henri were the chief teachers after Chase left. An interesting aside

¹⁰Brown, p. 182.

¹¹Lincoln Rothschild, To Keep Art Alive, The Effort of Kenneth Hayes Miller, American Painter (1876-1952) (Philadelphia: The Art of Alliance Press, 1974), p. 19.

¹²Ibid., pp. 23-24.

¹³Ibid., p. 24.

is the comparison between the two teachers made by Rockwell Kent, who studied with both. Kent writes:

As Chase taught us to use our eyes, and Henri to enlist our hearts, now Miller called on us to use our heads. Utterly disregarding of the emotional values Henri was so insistent upon, and contemptuous of both the surface realism and virtuosity of Chase, Miller, an Artist (sic) in a far more precious sense than either, exacted a recognition of the tactile qualities of paint and of the elements of composition.¹⁴

In 1911, Miller began teaching at the League, and was considered unorthodox during the first few years because he had exhibited four paintings in the Armory Show of 1913.¹⁵ The relationship between traditional and modern art in Miller's view was essentially that craftsmanship had to return to the art of painting. One critic wrote:

He was a pioneer in the revival of traditional techniques. Impressionism and direct painting had all but destroyed the method of building form in underpainting, overpainting, and glazes, by which the old masters had achieved a combination of solidity, transparency and depth impossible to secure by direct opaque painting.¹⁶

Miller advanced the application of Renaissance techniques to subjects drawn from the familiar and real environment of the artist. His concepts affected his students, Isabel Bishop and Reginald Marsh, as we can see in Marsh's foreword for Bishop's catalog for her first solo exhibit at the Midtown Galleries, October 3-15, 1932:

¹⁴Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 26. Oddly enough, Miller was later castigated for his conservatism at the League.

¹⁶Goodrich and Baur, pp. 75-76.

Isabel Bishop is a very excellent example of what I feel is the right trend in American painting. She has studied with great diligence the classic tradition in Western painting and is employing it on the environment around her. She has successfully fused these two elements. . . . Every object is drawn with great care for its authentic shape and the part it is to play in the whole design. This intense positive study of each object for itself in a world which is new to the painter's brush, is of immense value to American painting, which is all too shot with meaningless French mannerisms.

Direct opaque painting and Impressionist atmospheric effects were aspects of the French style Miller shunned. The eschewal of such foreign mannerisms was counter-balanced by Miller's emphasis on certain facets of style that were considered characteristically American. Albert Pinkham Ryder was admired for his monochromatic yet glowing works which had a continuity with a traditional American which Miller favored. Rothschild writes:

The sensuous values Ryder created were not those of his European contemporaries, the Impressionists and post-Impressionist painters. Relating only to American tradition, the prime pertinence of which was a basic tenet of Miller's career also, he ventured no more than a virtually monochromatic luminosity. The special magic of Ryder's light can always be distinguished. It was achieved by richly contrasting transparent and opaque applications of the oil medium, a usage that Miller stressed constantly in his teaching.¹⁷

To achieve the special effects he sought, Miller experimented with various techniques suggested to him in his readings of Doerner's Materials

¹⁷Rothschild, p. 28.

of the Artist.¹⁸ The book contained information on the methods used by the painting masters of the past. Rothschild gives an account of his discovery:

. . . his desire to understand fully the medium he was using led him to Max Doerner's book. . . . He began mixing his own paints of pure pigment carefully ground into the medium.

. . . he finally discovered the "mixed technique" of alternating oil glazes with opaque tempera to facilitate the Venetian method he had long favored, of repeatedly painting opaque into transparent. . . . The advantage was that the water-soluble tempera could surprisingly be painted into the oil glazes while they were wet; whereupon both would dry quickly.¹⁹

Miller's promotion of the mixed technique of alternating oil and tempera and his admiration for monochromatic luminosity were of considerable influence on Isabel Bishop. In an article entitled "Bishop Paints a Picture," the author states:

. . . her pictures . . . represent no radical departure from the method she has been developing for more than two decades, since she left the Art Students' League and first revised the precepts of her teacher Kenneth Hayes Miller. . . . For the exquisite luminosity in her pictures Miss Bishop looked past the Impressionists and post-Impressionists to the Dutch and Flemish masters; she derives her banded surfaces not from Cézanne but from the sketches of Rubens.²⁰

Since the League years, the soft tones and shimmering surface have remained relatively constant in Bishop's work. She stated the relationship

¹⁸Max Doerner, The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting, With Notes on the Techniques of the Old Masters, transl. Eugen Neuhaus (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1934).

¹⁹Rothschild, p. 44.

²⁰Dorothy Seckler, "Bishop Paints a Picture," Art News, Vol. 50 (November, 1951), p. 39.

between color and light in her work in 1961 when she wrote: "What concerns me firstly in my painting is the reflecting quality of the surface. I have to learn to see how the surface takes the light. . . . I throw the image back into the unconscious in a kind of primitive search. Mostly it reaches only the pigment and barely the color."²¹

Within the envelope of influence from Ryder to Miller and Miller to Bishop, another common bond appears. In Miller's eyes, part of Ryder's charisma was his austere life style which suggested that self-abnegation provided an appropriate climate for creativity. Rothschild writes that Ryder believed in the "antagonism between material and spiritual values" and that he lived in a cold water flat in Greenwich Village. He completes the metaphor, writing, "Perhaps this aroused a sympathetic echo in Miller's unconscious, for though he could enjoy the pleasure of various luxuries and entertainment, his ordinary way of life was Spartan and his generally driving habits of work were quite exacting."²² For Isabel Bishop, these strains of Ryder filtered through Miller proved most appealing, as Rothschild writes: "The serious and methodical aspects of Miller's personality attracted Isabel Bishop, whose energetic thinking followed orderly patterns."²³

²¹Ernest Harms, "Light Is the Beginning--The Art of Isabel Bishop," American Artist, Vol. 25 (February, 1961), p. 60.

²²Rothschild, p. 27.

²³Ibid., p. 61.

Other aspects of Miller's teaching that profoundly affected Bishop as a student at the League were his theories of aesthetics. Adolf Hildebrand's book, The Problem of Form,²⁴ dealt with the need to relate the compositional plane to its architectural support. In her painting, Bishop continues to exercise this principle by setting up layers of planes within which the action takes place, always arranging them parallel to the planes of the edges. In an article called "Concerning Edges," Bishop wrote that "illusion denies the surface of the canvas but [it] can be compatible. . . . if the arrangement of the planes echoes the directions of the painting surface."²⁵

Miller's interest in the analysis of style in art history led him to recommend to his students Heinrich Wölfflin's book, Principles of Art History.²⁶ The theories presented suggested to Bishop the means for creating the feeling of movement in the spectator. An earlier volume by Wölfflin, entitled Renaissance and Baroque summarizes the major concept of evoking change in this way:

Painterliness is based on an illusion of movement. . . . Because it has no physical reality, painting has to depend on effects of illusion.

²⁴Adolf Hildebrand, The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture, transl. and rev. by Max Meyer and Robert Morris Ogden (New York: G. E. Stechert and Co. , 1907), standard ed. , 1945.

²⁵Isabel Bishop, "Concerning Edges," Magazine of Art, Vol. 38 (May, 1945), p. 173.

²⁶Heinrich Wölfflin, Principles of Art History, The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art, transl. by M. D. Hottinger, 1932 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. , n. d.). First published in German, Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 1915.

. . . Light and shade contain by nature a very strong element of movement. Unlike the contour, which gives the eye a definite direction to follow, a mass of light tends to a movement of dispersal, leading the eye to and fro. . . . This basically, is how the painterly style evokes an illusion of constant change.²⁷

Bishop has said, "mobility and detachment of forms are contradictory and cannot be had together."²⁸ In this sense we see her solution for creating the idea of mobility is drawn from Wölfflin's concepts. She endows a feeling of mobility in the figures she paints by uniting the environment and figures in a seamless web. Goodrich writes: "She has a strong sense of the continuity of forms; they are continuous throughout the picture plane, not separated by their edges but merged."²⁹

Kenneth Hayes Miller established a theoretical base from which Isabel Bishop launched an interpretational flight of development. In assessing Miller's role in Bishop's development at the Art Students' League, theoretical and stylistic relationships may be cited. However, Kenneth Hayes Miller was greater than the sum of the parts for Bishop and she refers to him as a "symbol." In a tribute to Miller she wrote:

The potency of the symbol came mostly, however, from a deeper steadfastness--from an unchanging and fanatically held belief

²⁷Heinrich Wölfflin, Renaissance and Baroque, transl. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 30-31. First appeared in German as Renaissance und Barock in 1888.

²⁸Bishop, "Concerning Edges," p. 172.

²⁹Goodrich and Baur, p. 79.

that radiated from him. . . . This belief was that the pursuit of the art of painting is of an absolute importance.³⁰

The Urban Mandate

Forbes Watson wrote the opening statement to American Painting Today, describing a cultural shift from Europe to America after the First World War. He states:

Ours is the art of a country which throughout its colonial, pioneering, and industrial rise remained an intellectual province of Europe, and the remarkable fact [is] . . . it is within that time that American art has become independently conscious of itself and American artists have become concerned primarily with America.³¹

During the years before and after World War I, there was a general drift of American expatriate artists returning home and a renewed interest in the American scene. Respected artists like Eakins had urged American art students to "remain in America to peer deeper into the heart of American life. . . . It would be far better for American art students and painters to study their own country and portray its life and types."³²

³⁰ Isabel Bishop, "Kenneth Hayes Miller," Magazine of Art, Vol. 45 (April, 1952), p. 169.

³¹ Forbes Watson, American Painting Today (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 13.

³² Henry Geldzahler, American Painting in the 20th Century (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), p. 16.

The advice was followed by the Regionalists such as Curry, Benton, and Wood who portrayed the rural life of the American heartland,³³ and by the Urbanists such as Miller, Marsh, and Bishop who carried forth the interest in the city from Henri and the Ash Can School. One art historian writes:

During the years that the regionalists were personifying America in its rural aspect, other painters were continuing the Henri group's tradition of urban observation in the cooler and more careful styles of the later day. While the painting of this group cannot be thought of as constituting an homogeneous movement, the artists had in common an awareness of the social forces at work in America, and they were all keen observers of the city and its character.³⁴

Miller's frame of reference had been the rural settings of Upstate New York and Long Island and his artistic preference for Davies and Ryder with their idyllic scenes reveal his early taste and roots.³⁵ However, in 1917 a letter Miller wrote shows the shift in his reference point: "It seems I have never enjoyed New York so much, nor sensed it so richly as I do now."³⁶ Rothschild attributes Miller's reversal to the changes occurring in American society with the immigrant influx and the expansion of the marketplace after the war. He states:

He was one of the first painters to recognize the dramatic quality of a new individualism as it emerged from the previously nameless masses. Earlier artists had made them simply a picturesque

³³The Regionalists were John Steuart Curry of Kansas (1879-1946), Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri (1889-1975), and Grant Wood of Iowa (1892-1942). See Goodrich and Baur, p. 87.

³⁴Geldzahler, p. 101.

³⁵Rothschild, p. 32.

³⁶Ibid., p. 33.

phenomenon, as in the ghetto scenes of the Ash Can School. With no particular awareness of the commercial changes after World War I, Miller responded to the visible presence in the marketplace of a clientele . . . Working in the midst of the shopping center that featured drastic price competition for these still economically marginal consumers, he recognized intuitively in them an important new force on the cultural scene.³⁷

An example of Miller's response to the new "clientele" is his painting of 1928, Shopper (Fig. B2). Miller's theme was used by Bishop in paintings such as Union Square, done in 1931 (Fig. A1). According to John Canaday, "It was obvious enough that Miller had been the dominant force in her choice of subject matter, and that her girls' heavy proportions were related to his ponderous formula."³⁸ In comparing these works, it is apparent that Bishop followed Miller's mode quite closely in the preferred figure type she chose to portray. Yet, even at this relatively early stage in her career, the forms appear freer than those of Kenneth Hayes Miller.

Reginald Marsh's association with Bishop at the League was the beginning of a lifelong relationship, partly based on their shared love of New York and their enjoyment in recording their observations of city people. Miss Bishop accompanied Marsh on expeditions to Coney Island, one of his favorite spots. In her introduction to a text on Marsh, she states, "The [artistic] problem relates to the character of his subject matter and to his attitude toward it. He said of his subjects of the late 20s and 30s," and she quotes:

³⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

³⁸ Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

I . . . paid frequent visits to the beach at Coney Island where a million near-naked bodies could be seen at once, a phenomenon unparalleled in history . . . New York City was in a period of rapid growth, its skyscrapers thrilling by growing higher and higher. There was a wonderful waterfront with tugs and ships of all kinds and steam locomotives on the Jersey shore. In and around were dumps, docks and slums all wonderful to paint, and, in the city, subways, people, and burlesque shows.³⁹

Marsh studied with John Sloan, George Luks and Miller from 1920 to 1924 while working as a newspaper illustrator.⁴⁰ His experience parallels that of the Ash Can members, who, with the exception of Henri, had all worked as illustrators in New York or Philadelphia. Luks had said, "Doing newspaper work gives an artist unlimited experience, teaches him life, brings him out."⁴¹

Similarly, Sloan had advised artists to "go among common people to get knowledge of life."⁴² A genre painter previously, Sloan focused his artistic interest in the late twenties on city events such as the subway, crowds in motion, flashing lights.⁴³ An example of his work dating from 1928, Sixth Avenue Elevated at Third Street (Fig. A7) may be compared to Marsh's Why Not Use the L? (Fig. A8) of 1930 to demonstrate Marsh's allegiance to the

³⁹ Norman Sasowsky, Reginald Marsh: Etchings, Engravings, Lithographs, with an Introduction by Isabel Bishop (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1956), p. ix.

⁴⁰ Geldzahler, p. 103.

⁴¹ Bennard B. Perlman, The Immortal Eight (New York: Exposition Press, 1962), p. 90.

⁴² Van Wyck Brooks, John Sloan (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1955), p. 54.

⁴³ Goodrich and Baur, p. 85.

theme and spirit of his Ash Can heritage, as well as to point out Marsh's infusion of social commentary into paintings which Ash Can artists like Sloan assiduously avoided. Interestingly, Sloan expressed social criticism in political cartoons, but not in paintings.

Concurrently in the twenties, Bishop and Marsh were Miller students. An interesting point of view suggests that Marsh's background influenced Miller's incipient affection for New York, rather than the other way around. Rothschild says: "When he [Marsh] came under Miller's influence, his artistic personality was already well developed, and his intense interest in city life may even have had some effect on changes that took place in Miller's own attitude after World War I."⁴⁴

In either case, Miller's urban imperative initiated his move to a studio on West 14th Street in the early twenties.⁴⁵ He urged his students, Marsh and Bishop, to follow suit. Marsh recounted Miller's approach in advising him to take a studio near his own. Miller said, "I never go to the country; there is nothing there. You live in the country." Marsh thought, "14th Street looked like 14th Street," and answered, "The people are ugly here." Miller observed, "They are ugly, they are people."⁴⁶

⁴⁴Rothschild, p. 59.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁶Reginald Marsh, "Kenneth Hayes Miller," Magazine of Art, Vol. 45 (April, 1952), p. 170.

Bishop moved to a loft at 9 West 14th Street in 1926.⁴⁷ Her description of the place brings to mind Ryder's cold water flat in Greenwich Village as she recollects, "My first studio was across the square. It cost \$20 a month and I took baths standing in the sink and pouring water warmed on the pot-belly stove over me."⁴⁸

Upon taking her own studio, Isabel left the League and Miller's class and tried working on her own. At this time she produced what she refers to as "a whole lot of little brown things that I can still look at. I mean, I can still see what I was after."⁴⁹ This period of productivity was soon interrupted by a loss of confidence in her abilities. "Then I really lost my nerve," she disclosed in an interview. "This idea only came to me recently. I lost my nerve working . . . alone. I really felt that I'd have to jump out of the window."⁵⁰

Other causes for desperation at this same time were revealed in another interview. Sally Moore writes: "At 24, after a long love affair ended, she made three serious attempts at suicide." She quotes Miss Bishop's details of the incident: "Once I jumped into the Hudson River in the middle of the night

⁴⁷Thomas B. Hess interview.

⁴⁸Sally Moore, "Isabel Bishop: Half a Century of Painting the Flotsam of Union Square," People Weekly, May 26, 1975, p. 53.

⁴⁹Reich, p. 20.

⁵⁰Ibid.

but my body just wouldn't die. It began to swim. From then on," she recalls, "my belief in painting was like a religious conversion."⁵¹

Deciding she could work better among her peers, Bishop returned to the League in 1926. She entered Miller's mural painting class but balked at collaboration on the "labored scenes," and eventually left.⁵² She has since destroyed her work of this period because the pictures "made no human sense at all," or as Reich has said, "Isabel feels strongly that her paintings must relate to life, and these simply did not."⁵³

Miller had promulgated the notion of the mural class being a "new Renaissance." Du Bois, never a Miller enthusiast,⁵⁴ had questioned the idea as well as Isabel's output artistically. She credits him with having broken the spell and says, "By Jove, maybe it was du Bois who helped me wake up to it. He came to my studio one time and . . . he said, 'My God! What are you doing?'"⁵⁵

Concerning her return to the League, Bishop said, "Miller had . . . an advanced composition class which I went into and you know that put me off the track for years! To go back was a wrong move."⁵⁶

⁵¹Moore, p. 53.

⁵²Reich, p. 20.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Thomas B. Hess interview. Miss Bishop stated that du Bois "hated Miller" and Miller resented Bishop's fondness for du Bois.

⁵⁵Reich, p. 20.

⁵⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER III

THE FOURTEENTH STREET SCHOOL

After leaving the Art Students' League, Isabel Bishop worked on her own but continued to maintain a liaison with her former teacher, Miller, and her colleague, Marsh. By virtue of the fact that all had studios on West 14th Street, they met often for lunch to discuss their work and were joined by other Miller protégés who were equally inspired by city life around their studios. A consequence of the association was they were grouped together and identified as the Fourteenth Street School. One critic writes:

Kenneth Hayes Miller, the mentor of the Fourteenth Street School, was also one of the most influential American art teachers of the twentieth century . . . His Fourteenth Street group included Reginald Marsh, Isabel Bishop, the three Soyer brothers.⁵⁷ . . . The name refers to Miller's and his followers' favorite subject matter, the life of the New York streets, especially in the area of the city that was near their studios.⁵⁸

Miller's urban mandate found full though varied expression in the interpretations of the scene within the group; his own monumental vision of

⁵⁷The Soyer brothers are Raphael (b. 1899), Moses (1899-1974), and Isaac (b. 1907).

⁵⁸Geldzahler, p. 101

shoppers contrasted with Marsh's bawdy views of Bowery life, while Bishop pursued sensitive studies of the pedestrians of Fourteenth Street. Stylistically diverse, critics name the quality uniting the artists with each other and with the past:

Within their generally conservative technique, the New York Urbanists differed widely in style. What they chiefly shared was their awareness of the emergence of a new sophistication in American life. What they recorded was not the ease and self-assurance of an old aristocracy but an America of vibrant contradictions. It was with Henri and his followers that the observation of our twentieth-century urban reality began; by the late twenties the complexity of this observation had increased manyfold.⁵⁹

Milton Brown emphasizes the inheritance from the Henri group and states the Fourteenth Street School "in its concern with city life was almost a revival of the Ash Can School . . ." The choice of subject matter he credits to more than merely the coincidental location. He states:

For them, Fourteenth Street became the hub of artistic existence. In their search for 'life' they may have turned to Union Square because it was physically near, since most had studios in the vicinity; but added to this was the colorful activity of the section which appealed to them as a spectacle. In the twenties the Square had a special flavor which it subsequently lost.⁶⁰

The "special flavor" of Union Square is described in the New York City Guide as follows:

Union Square district belongs to the working people of New York . . .
 . . . Before these cheap stores, cheap movies, cheap restaurants passes a ceaselessly moving crowd of men, women, and many children, of all nationalities . . .

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Brown, p. 182.

. . . Touched with a bit of Coney Island, democratic, with a robust and loquacious vitality . . . ⁶¹

A peculiar loyalty to Fourteenth Street emanated from Miller.

After his death, Bishop wrote of her teacher's steadfastness and its significance:

Kenneth Hayes Miller's presence on Fourteenth Street, New York City, was a fact of solid importance to many artists . . . For one thing, he was always there. While others from this place tried living in New Mexico, Paris, Seattle, Italy, Maine, or at any rate, were actually in New York but a few months of the year, Miller just stayed. And he became a symbol. ⁶²

Bishop followed Miller's example in that she rarely leaves New York and is a tireless worker. She shudders to think of working anywhere but Union Square, saying, "Leave my people here? Why I could never work anywhere else!" ⁶³

Why would the environs on Fourteenth Street inspire such fidelity to art? Lawrence Alloway's comments provide insight into the question. He writes: "Typical of the bias of many of us, the only connection I used to make between art and this busy cross-town street was Allan Kaprow's remark, 'A walk down 14th Street is more amazing than any masterpiece of art.'" ⁶⁴

⁶¹Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration New York City Guide for 1939 (New York: Random House, 1939), pp. 198-199.

⁶²Bishop, "Kenneth Hayes Miller," p. 169.

⁶³"Isabel Bishop Finds Time For Both Art and Family," Peekskill, N.Y. Star, May 1, 1941.

⁶⁴Lawrence Alloway, "Isabel Bishop, the Grand Manner and the Working Girl," Art in America, Vol. 63 (September-October, 1975), p. 61.

He goes on to explicate that the commitment to art implied commitment to life:

. . . the notion of modernity was not then restricted to a few sickly formal devices, as it is now. It denoted a sense of responsibility toward absorbing the refractory spectacle of contemporary life into a lucid canon of art. In Miller, Bishop and Marsh we can see the artist at work claiming segments of the current scene as offered in maximal form in New York, the most modern of cities.⁶⁵

Isabel Bishop's painting, 14th Street, also known as On the Street (Fig. A5), is an early example of the artist's use of the reality of everyday life. However, at the same time, it was a re-ordering, as Alloway suggests, into a "lucid canon of art." A review of her first exhibit in 1932 states:

In her group subjects she offers various revealing commentaries on life, two of the most successful being 14th Street and Summer Morning. It is Miss Bishop's method not to take life as it comes, but to select her figures carefully with a view to types, and to re-organize them in relation to a reasoned compositional unity.⁶⁶

In the Hess interview, Bishop spoke of her early interest in giving an "orderly presentation" of the passing scene. She has said she was "very interested in strict order and especially in the ways I'd see it at that time." A work such as Union Square of 1931 (Fig. A1) is representative of her concerns at that time. "I'd see so many people crossing," she says, "crossing in a narrow street and with the sunlight coming down! God! How dramatic! How moving!"⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 61-62.

⁶⁶New York Herald Tribune, October 9, 1932, clipping.

⁶⁷Thomas B. Hess interview.

The "strict order" Bishop probed for in Union Square gives the impression of contrivance and rigidity. To an extent, Miller's influence may be responsible, yet Bishop's own objectives were realized in rendering her experience so pristinely in interpreting the scene in a layered effect.

A variation of the painting Union Square is Dante and Virgil in Union Square, done a year later (Fig. A9). The artist has said this was a painting done as a gift for her father in thanks for persuading a relative to support Isabel's studies in art school. At that time, she was reading a literal translation of the Inferno by Dante and was struck by Virgil's remark, "I did not know there would be such a multiplicity of souls." Bishop has said, "It was the multiplicity of souls that connected me with it."⁶⁸

Critics have variously interpreted this combination of Union Square pedestrians and the Divine Comedy, but most overlook the obvious humor. Given the mayhem of the crowd converging in Union Square each day, Bishop makes a point in so wryly relating Union Square to Hell. The passing mob of pedestrians, the "multiplicity of souls," reappeared as a major theme in the sixties after a thirty-year hiatus; however, the light-heartedness in the bustle of the crowd in the thirties versions is noticeably absent in the later renditions.

Many critics regard the placing of Virgil and Dante in this scene as a means of investing the passing crowd with importance and dignity. One

⁶⁸Ibid.

reaction was this: ". . . the artist borrowed artistic modes he felt reasonably sure the viewer would consider authoritative. So Bishop suggests that what goes on in Union Square is important, involving ultimate values, by placing Virgil and Dante there as observers of the action."⁶⁹

Bishop's use of grand manner painting techniques is an added element for creating a sublime condition in her works. Lawrence Campbell refers to "Two early paintings by Bishop . . . which burn brightly in the memory. Both were painted in the first years of the Depression, and both have as a theme crowds of people in Union Square. In one the crowd or frieze of people is being inspected by Virgil and Dante." He then asks rhetorically, "What is it that makes these paintings both poignant and, indeed, beautiful--the icy years they were painted in, or the incredible romanticism of an artist who, like others of her group, thought of herself as a Renaissance artist looking at modern life, . . ."⁷⁰

The act of endowing importance to city natives may have gone beyond the original intentions of the Ash Can School which rendered city dwellers in a realistic, albeit, picturesque manner. In 1974 a critic reviewed the show, "Paintings of the Thirties" and with the advantage of a forty-year perspective, had the following insight:

⁶⁹Jerrold Lanes, "Problems of Representation--Are We Asking the Right Questions?" Artforum, Vol. 10 (January, 1972), p. 61.

⁷⁰Lawrence Campbell, "Three Figurative Painters at Midtown Galleries," Art News, Vol. 70 (November, 1971), p. 84.

. . . in the art of Bishop and others there seems to be an attempt to confer upon even down-on-the-heel everyday life the dignity and honor of bourgeois 'Great Art.' That is much more complicated, I think, than simply an Ash Can hangover, and considering how the pictures were to continue to be collected and valued, it is even unexpectedly subversive.⁷¹

Masheck's comments expose the contradiction whereby everyday city people were elevated in status by the grand manner style Bishop used, if only in an artistic sense. The shift in taste in art circles has caused paintings of down-and-outers to be incredibly high-priced, which seems offensive.

Alloway sees Bishop's predicament of portraying individuals she regards as "class-marked" while unaware she has her own class bias. He writes: "She assumes that her insight into her models' lives is classless; that is to say, she thinks that her own upper-middle class role enables her to see the world coherently and whole. Her class is not 'definable' because it is presumed to be the natural order."⁷²

While Bishop has been listed with the Social Realists,⁷³ she, in fact, is less involved with social commentary than other members of the Fourteenth Street School like the Soyers or Reginald Marsh. Marsh's painting, The Bowery (Fig. A11), in the words of one critic, "captures . . . the mood

⁷¹Joseph Masheck, "Paintings of the Thirties," Artforum, Vol. 12 (May, 1974), p. 66.

⁷²Alloway, p. 63.

⁷³David Shapiro (ed.), Social Realism: Art as a Weapon (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), p. 315.

of despondency and isolation' of the Depression years,⁷⁴ while Bishop's Dante and Virgil in Union Square presents an elevated view of the phenomenon of shoppers as a homogeneous group.

John Canaday's comparison of Bishop and Marsh highlights this difference as he writes:

Reginald Marsh shared Miller's conviction that New Yorkers were worthy of something deeper than the picturesque genre treatment that the Ash Can School had given them. He wanted to reveal their vitality and exuberance, which he would season with a dollop of his own social consciousness.

. . . As the youngest of the trio, and a woman to boot, Isabel Bishop became typed early in the game as a Miller-Marsh hybrid.

. . . The "sympathy" with which Isabel Bishop studied working girls has little to do with the class tolerance that people unconsciously read into her paintings on the basis of their own romantic feelings. Rather, they are the result of an innately classical response to the dignity of the human spirit.⁷⁵

Karl Lunde, author of the first biography of Bishop, has written that "The single aspect of nature that most interests her is humankind in the environment of Union Square."⁷⁶ This follows Miller's prerogative. One day Miller said as he looked down 14th Street, "This is the greatest landscape

⁷⁴Geldzahler, p. 105.

⁷⁵Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

⁷⁶Karl Lunde, Isabel Bishop (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975), p. 14. Lunde's book brings together primary references on Bishop and is thus a handy compendium for the casual reader. However, it offers little original material and is not very incisive. Miss Bishop has expressed dissatisfaction with its over-statement of fact. For these reasons, the Lunde text is not relied upon heavily in this paper except in Chapter VI, where psychological interpretations are explored.

in the world. It is made by man. Nature we cannot understand."⁷⁷ In this sense, Bishop is part of the Fourteenth Street School in her commitment to the imagery taken from the daily scene of New York.

Her motive for using local types, however, is that they are "available." She regards bums (Fig. A10) for example, as a phenomenon of any society.⁷⁸ She is set apart, then, from any social urgency that the name "Fourteenth Street School" implies. Her concerns, mainly formal, were to model the "nobodies, the anybodies in the grand manner."⁷⁹

Bishop's interest in a sublime interpretation of city people is unique but it has served art well. As Lunde writes, "It is the totality of art that eventually informs us, that allows us to see the majesty in the ordinary . . ."⁸⁰

⁷⁷Marsh, p. 170.

⁷⁸Reich, p. 25.

⁷⁹Bishop, on the occasion of the "Presentation to Reginald Marsh the Gold Medal for Graphic Arts by the Institute of Arts and Letters," May 26, 1954.

⁸⁰Lunde, p. 17.

CHAPTER IV

A MILLER PUPIL EMERGES

On the occasion of Isabel Bishop's second exhibition at Midtown Galleries in 1936, an article in Art Digest summarized the critics' consensus that this student of Kenneth Hayes Miller was emerging from his heavy influence and at last realizing her own distinctive identity as an artist.

Entitled "A Miller Pupil's Shackles Loosen,"⁸¹ we are given a semantic clue to the master-slave relationship that existed between Miller and his students, the result of his dogmatic line. Bishop's gradual shift away from Miller had begun in the twenties with her decision to leave the Art Students' League. In 1934 she married Harold Wolff, a noted physician, and moved to a residence in Riverdale, New York. Although she set up a new studio in the present Union Square location, Bishop no longer was a 14th Street neighbor, but a commuter. By the mid-thirties, her independence stylistically was marked by the critics although her departure from Miller was initially marked by a refined treatment of his urban view.

⁸¹"A Miller Pupil's Shackles Loosen," Art Digest, Vol. 10 (March 1, 1936), p. 16.

The Art Digest stated:

Although the critics still found evidences of the lingering influences of Kenneth Hayes Miller in Isabel Bishop's exhibition at Midtown Galleries, they noted the spell was lifting. It was her first exhibition in three years, and the painter offered new evidence of a quite personal development.⁸²

Jerome Klein of the Post was quoted in his subtle comparison of Miller and Bishop as follows:

The Kenneth Hayes Miller tradition is based on a calm, scrupulously full construction of the human figure poised in an adumbrated social setting. Miss Bishop shows a fine control over nuances of expression, always in a carefully restricted range, in her conversational groups or single figures.⁸³

Miller's influence has been of continuing importance to Bishop, who, according to Canaday, "all but genuflects at mention of his name today."⁸⁴

Yet even Bishop grew wary of Miller's rigidity as Rothschild recounts:

The most serious objection to Miller's teaching is the denial by some students of his stated . . . concern with their creative individuality. More and more, as time went on, he was charged with dogmatic insistence on rigid formulae . . . Even a person as close and admiring as Isabel Bishop had certain reservations along these lines.⁸⁵

During a trip to Europe in 1931 Miller demonstrated his limitations to Bishop and another traveling companion, Edward Laning. Reportedly, Miller refused to do any sightseeing, focusing all his attention on the paintings

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

⁸⁵Rothschild, p. 63.

in the Louvre. Rothschild says: "Finally Laning managed to engineer an expedition across the river to the Cathedral of Notre Dame, right there in Paris . . ." and then gives Laning's description of Miller's reaction as follows: "Proceeding doggedly ahead, without turning his head to right or left, Miller got half-way around the ambulatory and quit. 'The Louvre is my cathedral,' he pronounced, which ended the sightseeing."⁸⁶

Rigidity was a facet of Miller's art as well as his personality.

Milton Brown wrote of Miller: "When he began to paint the Fourteenth Street scene, he approached his subject with a pedantic precision . . ."⁸⁷ Jerome Mellquist observed:

Among our contemporary Puritans, the chief is Kenneth Hayes Miller, a man of learning. . . . For some years now, Mr. Miller has been painting the ladies of Union Square. He portrays them shopping. In large, maternal rhythms he puts them into a canvas and seeks to compose them according to the order of the Renaissance. But when he finishes, only the lesson remains. His is the painting of a schoolmaster.⁸⁸

Miller had attempted to integrate many diversive goals in portraying city life and some critics feel these efforts failed. John Canaday noted:

He wanted to invest a single aspect of the New York scene, its salesgirls and female shoppers, with the weight and dignity (alas, not the grace!) of classical sculpture. But he never managed to emulsify these antipathetic ingredients, and his style has not worn well. His Aphrodites in the unlovely street

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸⁷ Brown, p. 183.

⁸⁸ Jerome Mellquist, The Emergence of an American Art (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1942), p. 295.

clothes of the 1930s look neither weighty nor dignified, but only overweight and ponderous. It didn't work.⁸⁹

For Isabel Bishop, the integration of past styles and current themes did work. One article said: "Now and then we have an exhibition like that of Miss Bishop proving that it is possible for a contemporary to use a classical method without becoming an anachronism."⁹⁰

Milton Brown has said Bishop "far surpassed her teacher both as painter and observer."⁹¹ In this lay her success and Miller's weakness as an artist. Bishop's keen perception was developed by sketching the locals "in situ." She avoids using professional models because "everything they do is fallacious. They even brush their teeth in a false way."⁹²

Early in her career she turned to people in the 14th Street and Union Square setting and asked them to pose. One result was the painting Two Girls (Fig. B1) finished in 1935 and purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The painting shows two women discussing a letter with a teacup at hand. Isabel found her models for this work in Childs' Restaurant at 14th Street and Broadway where one worked as a waitress. "I can't get over it this picture causing all the commotion," Miss Riggins, the waitress, said. "I thought

⁸⁹Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

⁹⁰Ann H. Sayre, "Substantial Technique in Isabel Bishop's Work," Art News, Vol. 34 (February 22, 1936), p. 8.

⁹¹Brown, p. 183.

⁹²Moore, p. 53.

about how Miss Bishop used to come into Childs' in the morning and have three cups of black coffee and toast for breakfast."⁹³

In Two Girls Bishop explored the unspoken, close relationship between two young women. Of the waitress and her friend who posed for the painting, Isabel has said, "They had the kind of intimacy I wanted to express. I don't think I could ever use a professional model again. It makes a great difference, because I try to paint people who are trivial outside and show they are decent and good inside."⁹⁴

With this work, Bishop adopted a simplified approach to subject matter. Earlier works such as Union Square of 1931 followed Miller's reliance upon the cityscape which diverted aesthetic attention from the figures. The studied re-creations of the city had bogged Miller's work down in documentation, and for some time, Bishop's development seemed cramped by Miller's precedent. From the mid-thirties, Bishop eliminated many of the details of the physical setting and concentrated on the human environment. In doing so, Bishop made a critical step in her career because it is in the realm of personal interrelationships that she is most adept artistically.

In spite of her reluctance over the years, Bishop has found it necessary to hire professional models. Yet she maintains a serious attitude

⁹³William Engle, "Portrait of 'Two Girls' Bought by Metropolitan Reunites Two Ex-Waitresses Who Posed For It," New York World Telegram, February 27, 1936.

⁹⁴"Isabel Bishop Painting Is Sold to Metropolitan," New York Herald Tribune, February 20, 1936.

toward simulating scenes she sees and sketches on the street. Her approach set her apart from Miller and Marsh as one reviewer noted that "Somewhere between the fancy counterfeits of fashion pictures and the buttocky satires of Reginald Marsh is the truth about the New York Working Girl's life and looks. Of her few sympathetic interpreters in art, the subtlest last week had an exhibition . . ."95

Often called "sympathetic" in her view of working girls, Bishop has actually concerned herself with penetrating the facade of appearances. She said in this regard: "There is a great discrepancy in American women. Their hats and clothes make them look like flibbertigibbets, light as air, when they are not. Traditionally we show silly people in silly clothes, and the housewife with her hair done up and in a gingham apron. But that is an anachronism. It isn't true of the modern world."96

Social comment on the position of working women in Bishop's vocabulary consisted of her theory of "mobility": "the very fact that they do not belong irrevocably to a certain class, that anything may happen to them."97 To achieve this sense of mobility, Bishop relaxed her style and used a lighter palette, again marking her departure from Miller's volumetric and shadowy

95 "Bishop's Progress," Time, Vol. 33, January 30, 1939, p. 36.

96 "Isabel Bishop Painting Is Sold to Metropolitan," n.p.

97 "Bishop's Progress," p. 36.

style. Henry McBride wrote: ". . . her style has loosened up somewhat; she is no longer afraid to lose a contour on occasion, with the result of a gain in atmospheric envelope and fluidity of movement."⁹⁸ Another reviewer said: ". . . there is a definite change in her work, a lifting of the Miller pall . . . her palette has become lighter and paler. . . ."⁹⁹

By portraying people in an indistinct way, Bishop felt she could express the indefiniteness of their social class. She said:

It's something that's true of America. The people I paint are clearly defined as a class. But they are not bound to that class. There's no limitation to what they may do and no telling where they may wind up. So when you paint them, you can't make anything too definite. The colors have to be muted. It comes out that way. I struggle to get them into a more defined scheme. But they can't be more defined because of what I'm trying to do.¹⁰⁰ (See Fig. B3.)

Alloway contends the "implications of mobility" in Bishop's work are "spurious." He states that "Bishop valued her working girls because they represent a stratum of tough unchanging vitality," much as peasants were the favored subject matter of the Dutch genre painters.¹⁰¹ Alloway states:

Bishop's literacy as a painter, her awareness of precedents in the grand manner and in genre, was an obstacle to signifying

⁹⁸Henry McBride, "Some Others Who Arouse Interest: Displays by Gropper, Sepeshy and Isabel Bishop," New York Sun, February 15, 1936.

⁹⁹Emily Genauer, "Miss Bishop Rates High as Painter," New York World Telegram, February 15, 1936.

¹⁰⁰Adelaide Kerr, "Isabel Bishop Paints Four Pictures a Year," Toledo Ohio Times, May 2, 1943.

¹⁰¹Alloway, p. 64.

mobility by movement. She appreciated the working girls of 14th Street as embodiments, so to say, of low life. They were vivid precisely because they lacked Bishop's own grace.¹⁰² (See Fig. B4.)

The fluid style the critics welcomed in 1936 became their main point of criticism in Bishop's 1939 one-woman show at Midtown Galleries. In an otherwise unidentified clipping entitled, "New Paintings Shown by Isabel Bishop," and dated 1939, a reviewer observed:

But in her attempt to break away from the bondage of too, too solid flesh which enslaves Kenneth Hayes Miller's old League pupils, Miss Bishop began to envelop her figures in opalescent tone. Presently they took on the semblance of vaporous forms that never seemed quite to congeal.¹⁰³

Reviewing the 1939 show, Forbes Watson noted: "As one astute critic remarked, 'Miss Bishop is going Old Master on us.' It does seem as if such extremely close searching for subtle values sometimes leads this artist to oversee the focal point of her picture. Perhaps it also leads to a vagueness of color, a neutrality approaching timidity."¹⁰⁴ He concludes his remarks with the notion that these "limitations" may rather be qualities consistent with Bishop's approach, stating: "She has such remarkable abilities that one wonders if they would gain or lose by a slightly clean and more outward color statement."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²ibid.

¹⁰³"New Paintings Shown by Isabel Bishop," (1939), The Archives of American Art, NY 59-4, frame 952.

¹⁰⁴Forbes Watson, "Isabel Bishop," Magazine of Art, Vol. 32 (January, 1939), p. 54.

¹⁰⁵ibid.

Bishop's exceptional abilities carried her beyond Miller's point of departure using shoppers and secretaries and artistic themes. Brown has said Miller "saw in humanity only material for his concepts" and that "his people never came to life, but remained wax dummies posed for effect."¹⁰⁶ By contrast, Bishop's work such as Office Girls was noted for "its air of perfect naturalness."¹⁰⁷ Canaday types Miller's women as "doubly pseudo: pseudo-Olympian and pseudo-Bronx" while Bishop's are the "result of an innately classical response to the dignity of the human spirit."¹⁰⁸ Critical assessments therefore indicate Bishop transcended Miller as an artist. Yet indebted as Isabel Bishop remains to her Miller heritage, one may conclude that the "shackles" which early in her career bound her to Miller secured her emergence later as a great artist. Forbes Watson aptly wrote:

. . . for some time after her paintings were seen in the important exhibitions she remained in method and viewpoint a pupil of Kenneth Hayes Miller. That no apparent handicap was created by her devoted apprenticeship to this serious teacher is proved by the fact that, although her emergence from school influences may have been longer than usual, she is now, . . . a distinctive personality.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Brown, p. 183.

¹⁰⁷Carlyle Burrows, "Notes and Comments on Events in Art," New York Herald Tribune, January 22, 1939.

¹⁰⁸Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

¹⁰⁹Watson, "Isabel Bishop," p. 54.

CHAPTER V

URBAN REGIONALISM AMID ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Isabel Bishop continued to be a "practitioner of a form of regionalism that celebrated New York City" during the period dominated by Abstract Expressionism in America following World War II.¹¹⁰ While form became synonymous with content to the Expressionists, and the introspective artists expressed the new reality by bold brushwork gesture, Bishop pursued representational studies of urban themes. Most significant is that her form of Urban Regionalism endured "when other prominent figurative painters of her generation vanished beneath the tide of American abstraction."¹¹¹

In 1949 Bishop had a one-woman exhibition of paintings at Midtown Galleries, her first such show since 1939. One reviewer noted the artist's individualistic course that evidently resisted the pressure of the Abstract Expressionist influence. Margaret Breuning said:

While many contemporary artists appear definitely under 'influences,' this painter has developed an aesthetic idiom which is entirely personal. . . . The figures of her canvases are drawn

¹¹⁰Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

¹¹¹Ibid.

from environing life, neither romanticized or understated but imaginatively presented in their natural milieu.¹¹² (See Fig. B6.)

Throughout the forties, a continuity of concern for the human element was revealed in Bishop's work. Reviews of her show of etchings and drawings in 1942 point to this. "They [the etchings] deal with life as the commuting and working office girl or even jobless see it," wrote one reviewer. "Easy everydayish things are found by Miss Bishop . . . her observation has both probity and freshness."¹¹³

Henry McBride wrote of "the closeness to life of Miss Bishop's observations," and then itemized a few, saying:

The young men and women in the drawings belong to the great middle class, the class that takes the 8 a. m. subway to work, that gulps down hot dogs at street corners, goes to the lesser movies and does a little discreet lovemaking on the benches in the park. . . . Her people are glad to be alive, and I take it, particularly glad to be New Yorkers.¹¹⁴ (See Fig. B7.)

Bishop's sense of responsibility to content, to realism, won praise from Reginald Marsh in 1951. He wrote: "The subjects of her art . . . her people, are what they are--they are never what they are not, for her

¹¹²Margaret Breuning, "Bishop Show Emphasizes Solidity," Aero Digest, Vol. 23 (May 1, 1949), p. 15.

¹¹³James W. Lane, "Bishop," Art News (June-July, 1942), p. 42.

¹¹⁴Henry McBride, "Attractions in the Galleries," New York Sun, May 22, 1942.

perception cuts to the truth."¹¹⁵ Bishop's credo of art based on life put her in a camp opposite the Abstract Expressionists who opted for freedom from representational content. Generally not involved in feuding among her fellow artists, Bishop assumed a stance which drew her into a heated debate.

In 1953 Bishop joined other artists including Raphael Soyer, Jack Levine, and Ben Shahn in a group called "Reality."¹¹⁶ They issued a journal by the same name in an effort to present an alternative to the Abstract Expressionist dominance of the art scene. Bishop has said the title "Reality" always seemed ambiguous, and Jack Levine suggested calling it "From the Horse's Mouth," to show where the opposition was coming from.¹¹⁷

Isabel Bishop and her former teacher, Max Weber, had featured articles in the second issue in which the Abstract Expressionists were viewed as a new Academy, divorced from the pulse of life. Weber wrote:

" . . . abstract art, the countless isms have reached an impasse . . . art plus humanity, art social, will always survive and surpass, with no fear of even approaching an impasse . . . fashion, fad and intellectual snobbery can become another kind of pot-boiling or academy."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵Reginald Marsh, Catalogue of 75th Anniversary Exhibition of the Art Students' League at the Metropolitan Museum in 1951, quoted in the program for the National Arts Club, "69th Annual Dinner and Presentation of Awards, Guest of Honor, Isabel Bishop," January 25, 1968.

¹¹⁶Reich, p. 33.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Max Weber, "Fads and Academies," Reality, no. 2 (Spring, 1954),

Isabel made a comparison between the Traditional and Modern Academicist in their dogmatic approach. Today her own views may seem recalcitrant, but at the time, the issue had reached a fever-pitch of emotions.

She wrote:

"Follow the Masters," says the Traditional Academicist.¹¹⁹ But try to drag him to a museum! He won't look at a Master, having done so, he says in his youth, when he made the particular mis-interpretation on which he patterns his work, and which he passes on as "Standards which must not be Debased." On the other hand, "Be Bold, Be Free," says the Modern Academicist to the poor bewildered student. Does he mean that? Far from it. Unless the boldness and freedom result in a work of discernible likeness to that of Kandinsky or followers, Klee, Miro, Mondrian, Picasso . . . it isn't Bold, it isn't Free, it isn't Art.

. . . they are both extremely self-righteous and have a great sense of Mission. In their rigidity and intolerance, in the certainty of each that he has all the answers, they show their spiritual brotherhood.¹²⁰

While only three issues of Reality were published, a lively discussion was sparked in art circles with the editors of Art News and Art Digest participating. Arthur Millier of the Los Angeles Times gave an account of the controversy which went so far as to adopt the language of the Red scare of the day.¹²¹ The Reality people were pitted with Moscow critics for being against "decadent bourgeois unintelligibility and anti-humanism" by Art News and

¹¹⁹The "Traditional Academicist" was most likely based upon Kenneth Hayes Miller. See Rothschild, p. 52.

¹²⁰Isabel Bishop, Untitled article, Reality, no. 2 (Spring, 1954) p. 1.

¹²¹Arthur Millier, "Real Question Lost in 'Reality' Debate, Strong If Misunderstood Impression Is Made Upon Influential Art Circles," Los Angeles Times, July 26, 1953.

referred to as a sour grapes reaction of the "defenders of the old order" by Art Digest.¹²²

In the midst of the controversy, Millier maintained the real question raised by Reality was lost. Bishop and others had questioned that "the excitation of texture and color" were the true ends of art. She had also commented adversely on the introspective position the Expressionists recommended. She said, "The commonest and most sadly wrong advice to a young painter is to look inward to express himself. Most of all he needs to look outward, to understand."

Millier concluded: "The real question aroused by Reality in our view, is how far can improvisation (or 'mere textural novelty') go without a firm structural basis provided by traditional form and buttressed by observation of the visual world?"¹²³

One art historian viewed Reality as a "vigorous affirmation of the artist's responsibility . . . at a time when collectors avidly patronized the most daring of the experimentalists . . ." ¹²⁴

The issue of responsibility was an acute one. A Time article discussing the question in 1955 quoted Selden Rodman, a well-known opponent of

¹²²ibid. Millier quotes "The Language of Reaction: 'Reality,' " Art Digest, June 1953. Millier notes this is particularly amusing since Art Digest's slogan was "Controversy is the Life-Blood of Art."

¹²³ibid.

¹²⁴ Oliver W. Larkin, Art and Life in America (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), p. 470.

Abstract Expressionism at the time, who maintained that an artist has an obligation to express human values in his art. The article states: "Rodman's thesis is that modern art has turned its back on content and therefore on the public. . . . To draw the shutters on all values except formal ones, and paint pictures of nothing at all, demeans art to the status of decoration."¹²⁵ Discussing Isabel Bishop's work as illustrative of the Rodman viewpoint, Time said Bishop is the kind of painter who is "less concerned with art than with life."¹²⁶ While this may be an overstatement, since the artist is so dedicated to formal values, it must be acknowledged that humanity is the source of inspiration from which her art is derived.

In 1955, Bishop's one-woman painting show at Midtown Galleries won praise from the critics. Time wrote: "A meticulous realist, Bishop comes down hard on content but escapes academicism on two counts. First, her paintings are paintings, not mere pictures. She sinks her subjects into an angry sea like De Kooning but into a forest pool of paint . . . Second, she paints them as human beings, never mere flesh and bone."¹²⁷

An example of the artist's work from this period, Girls in the Subway Station (Fig. B8) of 1953, confirms this view. Bishop uses the familiar grouping of two young women, one in profile, one facing forward;

¹²⁵"Basic Debate," Time, Vol. 66 (November 28, 1955), p. 68.

¹²⁶"Isabel Bishop," Time, Vol. 66 (November 28, 1955), p. 70.

¹²⁷Ibid.

one fair, the other dark. While they wait for the subway, one reads the paper as the other gazes off in the distance. The interesting aspect of this painting is that certain presumptions seem ready-made. One could presume these girls know each other fairly well, they work together, one is industrious and the other is a day-dreamer. Most of all, there is the impression we have seen these faces before, we know them. Bishop's intuitions are so keen in portraying these people that we accept the scene as a matter of course. The painting depicts a situation, but it also presents an understanding of the individuals themselves and reveals something of their relationship with one another.

Bishop herself has spoken of the inseparability of form and content and this may at first appear as a rationale for abstract art.¹²⁸ While, in fact, Bishop is tolerant of other styles, she has asserted that art which emphasizes its subject in the form in most powerful. She said:

. . . abstract art, of course, can have content without subject. But the content is very generalized. It must be. It can be cheerful, it can be melancholy, it can be energetic or restful or exciting, but it couldn't deliver much of your relation to life . . . Emphasis on illustration robs art of a great power. Power in the art of painting exists at its height with the use of subject--content being within the subject and within the form.¹²⁹

Miller was offended by the disrespect for tradition in the "avant garde's casual manner,"¹³⁰ as were members of the Reality group such as

¹²⁸Reich, p. 21.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 22.

¹³⁰Rothschild, p. 55.

Ben Shahn, who Bishop says "was very wrought up because . . . he found . . . that students didn't know there had been any art before Abstract Expressionism. They didn't know about tradition."¹³¹

Isabel shared the concern for tradition, yet reacted most strongly against the utter control of the art scene by the Abstract Expressionists. She was accepting of other facets of the movement, and, in fact, applauded certain formal concerns they professed. For example, she whole-heartedly agrees with Hans Hofmann's statement, "The secret of the Old Masters is the importance of the picture plane."¹³² She questions the vast dimensions of Abstract Expressionist works, suggesting their ideas would be better if executed in smaller sizes.¹³³

Similarities in Bishop's work and that of the Abstract Expressionists have been noted by the critics. To the casual observer, her technique of "scumbling"--a build-up of dry paint over dry paint, does resemble the painting surface the gesture painters created. However, Alloway maintains these "coruscations" of paint derive from Bishop's formal sense and act to modulate the vision much as a shop window reflection gives an added dimension, "a glimpsed form to other details."¹³⁴ Physical facture has been

¹³¹Reich, p. 33.

¹³²Thomas B. Hess interview.

¹³³Isabel Bishop, personal interview at Miss Bishop's studio on May 30, 1975.

¹³⁴Alloway, p. 64.

a continuing aspect of the artist's style, although it is more pronounced in the later works.

Harms has pondered the artist's choice of subject considering her sophistication technically:

Returning to the studio in Union Square, we wonder why this artist who carries within herself the most advanced impulses of modern art, feels that this public center of deviate living is "her world," and its people the preferred subjects of her pictures. . . . We who seek to understand the creative striving of Isabel Bishop's art might answer: the world of Union Square has a definite elementary frankness, an openness of expression that is frequently found where so-called culture and formality do not dwell.¹³⁵

The artist's position in the years dominated by Abstract Expressionism is revealing, for she continued to be "absolutely and utterly concerned with city life"¹³⁶ while sharing certain academic interests of the New York School.

A reviewer of Bishop's 1960 exhibit referred to the painter as representative of a "generation of un-extreme American painters who are not appreciated at their worth."¹³⁷ Today the renaissance of figurative and representational art has renewed public interest in Bishop's work. Canaday notes, however, that Bishop has prevailed in the critical view even when figurative art seemed elsewhere to be an anachronism. He states: "Critics

¹³⁵ Harms, pp. 61-62.

¹³⁶ Cynthia Lowry, "Artists Fail to Receive Decent Living," Richmond Virginia Times-Dispatch, March 12, 1947.

¹³⁷ James Schuyler, "Isabel Bishop," Art News, Vol. 59 (May, 1960), p. 14.

who have found their greatest pleasure in mutilating the corpse of the American tradition Isabel Bishop stands for, have given her their respect . . . because the seriousness of her art could not be dismissed even when figurative painting seemed most *démodé*. "¹³⁸

¹³⁸Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

CHAPTER VI

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE URBAN THEME IN THE LATER WORKS

Isabel Bishop is not in accord with critics who impute symbolic meaning to her work. Despite the artist's intent, the critics continue to find aspects of Bishop's work compatible with psychological interpretations, especially in the years since 1955.

The issue of whether psychological meaning may justifiably be read into a work of art without the artist's consent can confuse one's subjective response. The fact remains that Bishop's choice of subject matter--life in New York--lends itself to considerations beyond those purely at face value since the climate of alienation and impersonality are pervasive. Lawrence Campbell wrote: "Her subject is one most present-day artists avoid: the modern fragmented city and the people who live in it, yet are not altogether of it."¹³⁹

The experience of New York is unique. The sense of someplace, of no place, is a schizophrenic condition peculiar to it and Bishop's sensitive studies cannot fail to reflect the effects of the environment on the people she

¹³⁹ Lawrence Campbell, "Isabel Bishop," Art News, Vol. 54 (November, 1955), p. 50.

paints. The earliest review, to my knowledge, acknowledging this dates from 1949. Christopher Freemantle said: "She paints with a realism which is sensitive to the psychology and atmosphere of her subjects . . . Her big painting, Resting (1943, Fig. C1), studies the character and repose of a couple traveling from nowhere to nowhere and belongs to this genre."¹⁴⁰

Karl Lunde suggests that some of Bishop's earlier works deal with escapism, showing people day-dreaming in their moments of leisure, and perhaps restructuring reality to suit their needs. He writes: ". . . she shows them in their reflective moments. As in Bootblack (1932, Fig. C2), these people have a deeper life that is not being revealed. The allusion in Blowing Smoke Rings (1938, Fig. C3), is to hiding from reality: smoke rings, like dreams, are not real."¹⁴¹

Public image and private reality are often divorced. Dressing, putting on make-up, looking in the mirror, are aspects of transforming oneself to appear appropriate in public. "We get close to her people's dream world," says Lunde, "when we see them intent on making ready to enter the outside world." Citing the example of the nude study, Preparation (1964, Fig. C4), he says, "Preparation for appearing in public is the ceremony for entering into the limbo of unreality."¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰Christopher Freemantle, "New York Commentary," Studio, Vol. 138 (September, 1949), p. 91.

¹⁴¹Lunde, p. 48.

¹⁴²Ibid.

Most possibly, Lunde overstates the case by including Preparation in his discussion of transformation. It is because of this critical hyperbole that Bishop rejects the body of psychological inferences.

Other works, especially the more recent ones of city dwellers, incontrovertibly raise the issue of reality. Subway Scene of 1957 (Fig. C5) shows a reflected full-face image in a gum machine with the figure, a woman, appearing at the left in partial profile. The setting is a subway stop. Dealing so poignantly with image and reflection, the painting raises the question, "What is real?" Fairfield Porter writes:

You are held by an image of an image. The human image, and its architectural setting, which are important to Miss Bishop, are only half of her subject; the sublimated and immaterial half. The other half is not image, but the wall behind it. Her paradox consists in saying that the part of art which represents the outer world, and which criticism associates with reality, is a sublimation; and that the abstract part that represents nothing, and that criticism associates with non-objectivity, is the part that stands for reality, for the object, for being awake.¹⁴³

Bishop's interest in the subway incorporates her life experience in her painting. Every day since 1934 she has commuted from Riverdale to her studio on the subway. She has used the trips for sketching other riders, and from these beginning studies paintings such as Subway Reading (1956, Fig. C6) and Homeward (1951, Fig. C7) have emerged. The fatigue and isolation portrayed in these works capture the phenomenon of the work-a-day existence.

¹⁴³ Fairfield Porter, "Art," Nation, Vol. 190 (May 21, 1960), p. 458.

"The experience of the subway--its life and movement--is integral to the art of Isabel Bishop," says Lunde. "On her way to the studio she often makes quick sketches of figures . . . Strangers in close proximity to one another, yet never acknowledging one another's existence, lonely riders in a crowded train hurtling through dark spaces beneath the city's streets: these are the people with whom Isabel Bishop begins her day."¹⁴⁴

Under Union Square, dating 1957, is a painting inspired by Isabel's subway stop. The multi-layered tiers at this junction presented some difficulty for representation, for Bishop noticed that when she made the figures distinct, the people looked like they were in little cells, in prison.¹⁴⁵ One critic wrote: "They walk in tiers, in Piranesi's prisons."¹⁴⁶ To counter this effect, the artist tried blurring the figures, rationalizing this would create a sense of hurrying which would fit since a "subway is not the kind of place you want to linger."¹⁴⁷ The result was successful: the spindly caverns of Bishop's subway stop were transformed to grand-scale architecture. "She can give the Union Square Station some of the mystery of a cathedral," wrote

¹⁴⁴Lunde, pp. 13-14.

¹⁴⁵Isabel Bishop, personal interview at Miss Bishop's studio on May 30, 1975.

¹⁴⁶Porter, p. 458.

¹⁴⁷Thomas B. Hess interview.

Time. "Yet her people make their entrances and exits, and the trains rush in and out again, and life moves on."¹⁴⁸

Lunde uses the same metaphor asking, ". . . what is the meaning of the cathedral complexity of the station shown in Under Union Square? Why is the painting so calm and still? Where are these people? They are in Union Square, in the subway, and in life--and they are in limbo."¹⁴⁹

The sense of limbo becomes more pronounced in recent works such as Subway Station Under Grand Central #2, completed in 1968 (Fig. C8).

Bishop remarked to Thomas Hess that people on the street seem to deliberately avoid eye or body contact, and this ambiguity of purpose has led the artist to be less concrete in portrayal. Lunde states:

In recent years there has been less searching into character and more generalization. There is a sense of busyness in the women and men in the streets and in the subway. Each figure is intent on its own destination. They never touch, never see one another; no pattern is ever repeated. There is a sense of alienation, a separation of the self from itself, of all people from one another.¹⁵⁰

A comparison of an early and late treatment of the same theme, The Coat, illustrates the impersonality and detachment attained in the 1967 version by the generalizing technique, in contrast to the exacting study of 1941 (Figs. C9, C10). A critic of the 1967 display spoke of "those women who put

¹⁴⁸"Poet in the Square," Time, Vol. 75 (May 16, 1960), p. 82.

¹⁴⁹Lunde, p. 17.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 56.

on and take off their coats with studied movements, [whom] Bishop observes with more sympathetic detachment . . ."151

The paintings of people walking, executed since the early sixties, deal with groups criss-crossing in contrapuntal rhythms of color and light (Figs. A2, C8). Lunde has said the tempos in the paintings are those of the "working world--of the clock . . . of depersonalized life."152 Yet he notes Bishop's people are "much more somnambulists than automatons."153 One review refers to the pedestrians as "persons who glide down the street like isolated phantoms."154

These recent group studies are related to the first paintings of large groups which Bishop completed in 1931 and 1932, with their presentation of a "multiplicity of souls," that is, a homogeneous group en masse. Lunde writes: "Traversing Union Square, Isabel Bishop, like Dante, sees a multiplicity of souls . . . Dante sees the shadows of people. Isabel Bishop paints her people as if they were ghosts. . . . They walk obsessively, their

151 Avel de Knight, "Isabel Bishop," France-Amerique, April 13, 1967, p. 15. The original quote in French is: "Ces femmes qui s'habillent et se déshabillent avec des mouvements très étudiés, Bishop les observe avec davantage de détachement sympathique . . ."

152 Lunde, p. 48.

153 Ibid.

154 Knight, p. 15. The direct quote is: ". . . ces personnages qui glissent dans la rue comme des fantômes isolés."

legs' crossing and recrossing; they are going somewhere without questioning their destination."¹⁵⁵

It is perhaps this unconscious quality in the Bishop cast of characters that gives rise to analytical views of her works. Since 1955, the increasingly generalized treatment of the figures and the fragmentation of the painting surface into patterns of light and color have heightened the ambience of desolation. Psychological interpretations therefore seem viable, and given the number of critics who engage in seeking a deeper meaning in Bishop's work, there is persuasive evidence for such a view.

The issue of what is real, what is suggested, what is subjective will continue to be pondered, and resolved only in the mind of each individual. Porter says Bishop "emphasizes . . . the illusory nature of objectivity" since "representation is shown to be illusion."¹⁵⁶

He then asks, "What is real, the room where we spend most of our time, or the human imagination?"¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵Lunde, p. 43.

¹⁵⁶Porter, p. 458

¹⁵⁷Ibid.

CHAPTER VII

APPROACH TO ABSTRACTION

A turning point in Isabel Bishop's career occurred with her 1960 exhibition. While using the familiar theme of New Yorkers in public settings, the artist adopted a new modus operandi in which formal elements were emphasized to elicit fresh reactions to the experience of the city in flux.

In reference to the stylistic change, Lee Sheridan wrote: "More exciting than simply the continuing activity of her work for nearly 50 years, is a change in approach, an exploration of new responses to the city scene . . . a less literal, more imaginative feeling . . ." ¹⁵⁸

Typical of the first reactions to the 1960 show was the following review by Dore Ashton: "Her motifs remain the same: subway scenes, nudes in interiors and downtown street scenes. But they are handled far more broadly now, with suffusions of light that fall into abstract schema." ¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Lee Sheridan, "Meeting Isabel Bishop Exceptional Pleasure," Springfield, Mass. Daily News, February 20, 1974.

¹⁵⁹ Dore Ashton, New York Times, May 5, 1960, p. 40.

A work such as Soda Fountain With Passersby (Fig. D1) dates from 1960 and is characteristic of the new expansive approach and soft focus.

Of this painting, Allen Weller says:

In more recent works the light, and the use of white which produces it, has become more diffused. The focus is much less sharp, the treatment of the figures is broader, and the representation of their volume is becoming secondary to their relationship to the space surrounding them. She has begun to utilize the technique of scrambling (sic), and so built up the texture of the painting surface that it is now quite thickly painted.¹⁶⁰

Soda Fountain With Passersby represents a radical departure from Bishop's previous body of work. The figures are so broadly treated they assume anonymity. Considering the artist's loyalty to representation in the fifties, the abstract mode is surprising. The mottled light and syncopated rhythms of the approaching forms set up a collision course, creating a sense of tension. In the background, the soda fountain looms like a mirage and heightens the confusion of inside-outside, given the shallow space. An eerie view in this work, and those painted in its wake, replaced the calm, studied and sometimes almost "sweet" works of the forties and fifties.

At first, Bishop's new treatment of light seemed to some critics to be an adaptation of post-Impressionism. One reviewer referred to the figures as "melted by light and loose brushwork into almost pointilliste presences."¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Allen S. Weller, ART-USA-NOW (New York: Viking Press, 1963), Vol. 1, p. 116.

¹⁶¹ "Art Exhibition Notes," New York Herald Tribune, May 7, 1960.

Ashton said: "One thinks of Puvis de Chavannes, Seurat and Vuillard. Like them, Miss Bishop is more concerned with the dimmed profiles of forms that take their places in shallow receding planes, than with distracting details."¹⁶²

In actuality, the artist's amorphous space and speckled light were techniques devised to achieve that elusive quality she has sought since the thirties: "mobility." The new path to actualize the potential for change could be discerned as early as 1949. Bishop was then involved with capturing a sense of the momentary in individuals drinking from the Union Square fountain. She said, ". . . like birds, they drink and fly away . . . You could easily pose a person there but that wouldn't be it. I struggle for months and months to make it look as momentary as it really is."¹⁶³ Time magazine described Bishop's means for producing this result:

To get that effect, Bishop half-conceals her figures in shifting shadows and dim spangles of light. She highlights some shapes with dabs of tempera, underlines some with India ink scratches, blurs others out. As a result, her subjects seem to be glimpsed through the rich, hazy surfaces of her pictures.¹⁶⁴

The continuing search for "mobility" has led Isabel to more and more abstract means of realizing it. Using strokes and dots of paint, she creates visually stimulating surfaces that are intended to imbue the spectator

¹⁶² Ashton, p. 40.

¹⁶³ "They Drink and Fly Away," Time, Vol. 53 (May 23, 1949), p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

with a feeling of the possibility of change. Pomeroy in 1967 analyzed the contradiction of stasis and change coexisting in her work. He wrote: "She traps her subjects in a network of shimmering lines, dots and strokes. Often you can see right through her figures and yet they remain substantial. She is trying for mobility in the Baroque sense: the form fluid and moving."¹⁶⁵

A letter from Canaday to Bishop dated April 29, 1967 stated:

"I have thought that perhaps your technical device that I describe inadequately as 'dots and lines' was intended to give to the subjects a kinetic character, some of the feeling of constant motion and change to which people in the city are subjected even when they are nominally at rest."¹⁶⁶

The energy of the city is the essence of the late works by Bishop. She has said that the strange effects produced by the dots and strokes were not intentionally aimed for, but that they arise in conjunction with the impulses from her nervous system.¹⁶⁷ Bishop had said of Marsh's work: ". . . You say something about America--something not obvious, but felt. We are not an 'artistic' people, not searching for Beauty, not believing very much in

¹⁶⁵Pomeroy, p. 9.

¹⁶⁶Reich, pp. 34-35.

¹⁶⁷Isabel Bishop, personal interview in Miss Bishop's studio on May 30, 1975.

individual importance, but believing in our energy, feeling its presence."¹⁶⁸
 In this statement, Bishop reveals her mode.

We have noted that the pulse of New York made a deep impression on Isabel, when, as a young woman, she was fascinated by people walking in the city. She said: "Then I came to New York and I thought, my God, this is a city. This is a great city! So then people walking in it took a terrific meaning for me. People walking in Detroit made no impression on me because Detroit made no impression on me."¹⁶⁹

In the sixties, Bishop returned to the theme of pedestrians in the city which she had favored in the early thirties. Lunde has said the artist's attachment to Dante and Virgil in Union Square (which for years hung over the mantelpiece in her Riverdale home) foreshadows the return of the theme, "figures-in-transition." He says: "The theme [of Dante and Virgil in Union Square] is re-stated in Students Walking #1 (Fig. D2)."¹⁷⁰

Miss Bishop agrees the theme has re-surfaced, but she is emphatic that her objectives have changed. While in the thirties she was interested in "an orderly presentation of the passing scene," the recent works are intended to be an event for participation by the spectator. She says:

¹⁶⁸Isabel Bishop, "Presentation to Reginald Marsh of the Gold Medal for Graphic Arts by Isabel Bishop of the Institute," National Institute of Arts and Letters, May 26, 1954.

¹⁶⁹Thomas B. Hess interview.

¹⁷⁰Lunde, p. 21.

What I'm now trying for which I didn't at all with this idea of the layer of people, is that I want them to be in motion this way (she gestures with her fingers meshing) and I don't know how to do it so it's an everyday experiment with me. I'm trying to make something that seems to happen as you're looking at it, rather than description. It's not description! It's a happening. . . Like cinerama, cinerama involved you. You became part of the space. I was thinking, how can I make the spectator involved?¹⁷¹

While attempting to give the spectator a more active role, Bishop has chosen to present the participants passively, and generalized. One critic maintains that though the figures have been generalized, the overall feeling of life remains: "In an abstract space of flat areas of color, youthful figures of students move independently, each pursuing his own direction, yet all part of a larger context of movement that unites them and the composition. No longer individually characterized, the figures are nonetheless human, alive."¹⁷²

The interest in homogeneous groups was focused on shoppers in the thirties; from the sixties, themes include women (Fig. D3), people in the subway (Fig. D5), and students (Fig. D2). The similarity of roles is typified by look-alike figures in the recent paintings. Sheridan sees the portrayal as a positive unity: ". . . a feeling of the oneness of a group of people, more personal than their oneness as human beings, people not touching or acknowledging each other yet aware of their common yet individual identity as persons."¹⁷³

¹⁷¹Thomas B. Hess interview.

¹⁷²Sheridan, n. p.

¹⁷³Ibid.

Other reviewers allege that the artist's complete involvement with abstract problems of movement, time, and space have changed Bishop's entire frame of reference with regard to the figure. Canaday said in 1971:

By now she is hardly a figurative painter at all. She is certainly not a realist, as she used to be. Her subjects are still the same--nudes in bedrooms and common people on city streets--but they have become only the raw material for completely organized paintings in which time and space, rather than objects seen at a given moment in a given place, are the true realities.¹⁷⁴

The evolution of Isabel Bishop's style has in the present phase led toward abstraction. To activate the surface of the painting, the artist immerses her pedestrians in blizzards of pigment. Like children watching bottled snowfalls, we experience the flurry of activity of the transient crowd on canvas. The ever-increasing depersonalization of life in New York could be a factor in the generalization of the people portrayed and in the dominance of the theme of the group in motion.

To account for the approach to abstraction, one must reflect on what constitutes the human experience in the city today. In Bishop's view, the city is a vague land, a limbo for a "multiplicity of souls," where everything moves, but nothing changes.

¹⁷⁴John Canaday, "Three Figurative Painters at Midtown Galleries," New York Times, November 13, 1971, p. 29.

CHAPTER VIII

CITY DANCE

Isabel Bishop's paintings have evoked critical reactions that document both stylistic evolution and thematic consistency. The artist's development mirrors episodes in American painting history from the Ash Can heritage to abstraction, yet her interpretation has always been quite personal.

At first, Bishop was so influenced by Kenneth Hayes Miller and Reginald Marsh, she was considered a hybrid of the two. Later, critics noted Bishop emerged as a distinctive artist of merit. Canaday concludes that the revelation of Bishop's Retrospective Exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1975 is that "she rather than Miller, or Marsh, or Grant Wood or Thomas Benton or any other of the American painters who represent post-Ash Can figurative schools, may be the one the history books eventually choose to represent them all."¹⁷⁵

Responding to a changing city scene, Bishop correspondingly changed her style. Consumed by the notion of mobility, the artist has evolved from realistic genre portrayal of socially mobile office girls to abstract, generalized scenes of figures in transition.

¹⁷⁵ Canaday, "A Certain Dignity," p. 31.

Constant in Bishop's work has been her inspiration--New York, and her theme--city people. She has said, "I was thinking, why didn't I try to paint the city if the city was so moving to me . . . I couldn't deal with the physical environment, it's big, great. Anyhow, the people occupying it, the city life, the life in the city to me became absolutely fascinating."¹⁷⁶

Regarding the passing spectacle as a spontaneous event, a natural ballet, Isabel Bishop is at once audience and choreographer: "In observing pedestrians, she has found a kind of city dance."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶Thomas B. Hess interview.

¹⁷⁷Pomeroy, p. 9.

APPENDIX A

ILLUSTRATIONS, CHAPTERS I - III



Fig. A1. Union Square 1931



Fig. A2. High School Students #2 1973



Fig. A3. du Bois: Bar 1908



Fig. A4. du Bois: Woman with Cigarette 1929



Fig. A5. On the Street (14th Street) 1932



Fig. A6. Miller: Fourteenth Street
c. 1928



Fig. A7. Sloan: Sixth Avenue Elevated at Third Street 1928



Fig. A8. Marsh: Why Not Use the L? 1930



Fig. A9. Dante and Virgil in Union Square 1932



Fig. A10. The Club 1935



Fig. A11. Marsh: The Bowery 1930

APPENDIX B

ILLUSTRATIONS, CHAPTERS IV - V



Fig. B1. Two Girls 1935



Fig. B2. Miller: Shopper 1928



Fig. B3. Young Woman 1837



Fig. B4. Respite 1939



Fig. B5. Lunch Counter 1940



Fig. B6. Girl With Frankfurter 1945



Fig. B7. Double Date Delayed 1948



Fig. B8. Girls in the Subway Station 1953

APPENDIX C

ILLUSTRATIONS, CHAPTER VI



Fig. C1. Resting 1943



Fig. C2. Bootblack 1932



Fig. C3. Blowing Smoke Rings 1938



Fig. C4. Preparation 1964



Fig. C5. Subway Scene 1957



Fig. C6. Subway Reading 1956



Fig. C7. Homeward 1951



Fig. C8. Subway Station Under
Grand Central #2 1968



Fig. C9. The Coat 1941



Fig. C10. The Coats 1967

APPENDIX D

ILLUSTRATIONS, CHAPTERS VII - VIII



Fig. D1. Soda Fountain With Passersby 1960



Fig. D2. Students Walking #1 1967



Fig. D3. Women Walking 1963

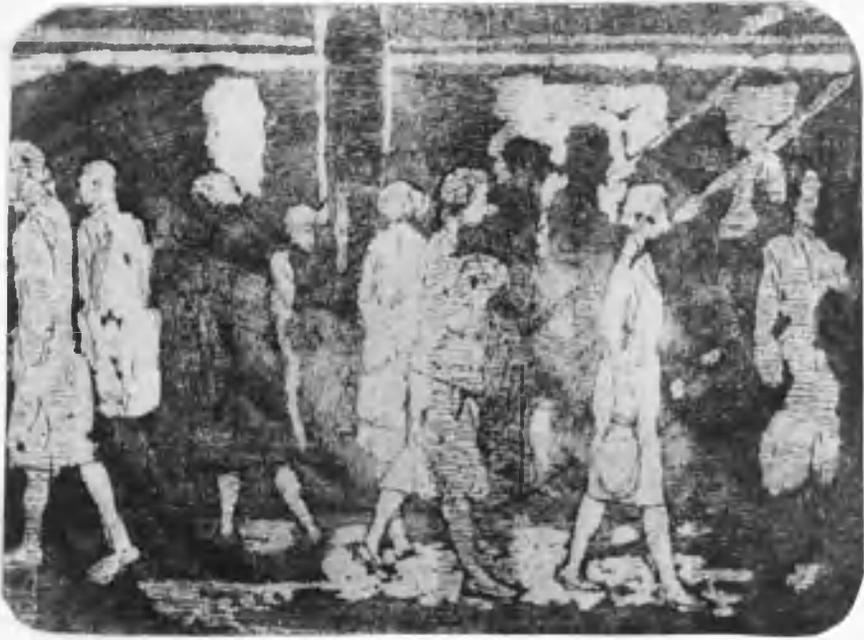


Fig. D4. Walking in the Subway Station 1961



Fig. D5. Walking in the Subway Station 1963

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