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TWO ORIGINAL OIL PAINTINGS: REALISTIC  
AND ABSTRACT PHASES OF A STREET SCENE

by

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An Essay  
submitted to the faculty of the

Department of Art

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Graduate College, University of Arizona

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### Statement of Problem

The problem that I have chosen for my thesis paintings for the degree of Master of Arts in Art is: To submit two original oil paintings, one realistic, and the other abstract in form, and to present with the paintings sketches and an essay on methods of procedure and background leading to the completion of the thesis.

My aim has been to capture the feeling of an afternoon street scene in the realistic phase and the abstract phase of the problem.



Photograph of Oil Painting- Realistic Phase



Photograph of Oil Painting- Abstract Phase

# In Defense of Thesis Painting for M. A. in Art

## Introduction

By way of introduction to my report on the techniques and procedure of the two oil paintings that comprise my thesis in art, I feel that it is also important to state the reasons and experiences that brought about and preceded this final piece of work.

It is often interesting to note the reasons for a person beginning in the field of art. In my case I believe it was due to great interest and natural ability to a certain extent. I always liked to draw, was encouraged by my parents, and even while I was in high school I attended a summer session at the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It was my first contact with higher level in art. I enjoyed it, improved in my work, and it naturally increased my interest.

Many people think that it is always the natural ability and genius of a person that gives him the power to create and design pictures. I cannot remember ever being outstandingly better than my classmates in art, or being called a genius. Nevertheless, with understanding of basic principles in art, and with further knowledge and practice, I have reached the point of being able to compose, choose colors, and design for painting.

These facts led me to believe, although it is a conclusion reached only by personal experience, that innate ability to a large extent in the field of art, is not necessarily a must in order to become an artist. Interest and enjoyment are half the battle. This also leads me to encourage others who have in their past been led to believe that they could not draw, and who like and enjoy drawing and sketching. So many people like to make things with their hands, and to reproduce scenes they love in paint. Art is composed of using the creative urge to compose, to write music, to invent, or even to arrange flowers to the satisfaction of the individual. It should not be limited to persons studying fine arts in formal educational institutions, or in privately organized groups. Creativeness is not the only part needed to be accepted in art today. Understanding and originality are both important. They can be developed according to the perseverance and interest of the persons involved.

Upon entering college there was no question in my mind about entering in the field of art. I graduated in Art Education from the University of Wisconsin in 1950. I chose education, because, as well as my enjoying art and being anxious to learn more about it, I have always rather wanted to teach others the way to have fun with, and appreciate it, too. I believe art is an inborn

interest in most people. I believe that they should come in contact with most art forms and have a beginning understanding of them in order to be happier in the appreciation of their surroundings, nature, clothes and furnishings. They may even develop an understanding of the principles involved in constructing magazine pages and advertisements. They should have the realization of the ideas behind the different art techniques and styles, including abstract art, especially, which the masses seem to condemn and misunderstand more than any other style today.

While I was still an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, I faced the fact that art teaching jobs were very scarce. While talking to several state educators I decided to take courses in elementary education at Milwaukee State Teacher's College during the summer. These courses qualified me for a temporary permit to teach in the elementary grades as a result of the shortage on that level. In any case, they added to my knowledge of elementary curriculum and philosophy.

As a result of taking these courses I applied for and accepted a position in the White Rock Elementary School in Waukesha, Wisconsin. I entered this job with the thought in mind to do the best job possible, and also to observe and learn as much as I could about the school situation, feelings of the classroom teachers,

and the art problems of the teachers. These little bits of knowledge are invaluable to me, and when I begin teaching again I feel I will be better prepared to anticipate art problems that may arise.

During the summer of 1951 I continued my schooling in art at the University of Colorado, at Boulder Colorado. I took courses in advanced figure drawing and watercolor techniques. Another part of the country, new and different instructors, and additional practical experience added in increasing my ability and understanding of these techniques. I had also attended a summer session at Ohio State University. This university, being in a well known pottery-clay and ceramic district of the country, was a fine place for me to take beginning sculpture and ceramics.

I enrolled for my graduate work at the University of Arizona. I feel, again, that I have learned more with practice and am on the way to doing better things. I anticipate a lifetime of enjoyment, resulting not only from the advances I have made technically, but also from the greater appreciation afforded through knowledge of history of art.

## Techniques and Procedure in Constructing Two Original Oil Paintings as a Thesis in Art

### Chapter I Realistic Phase

In first deciding the manner of doing my thesis, I conferred with several instructors of the University Art Department. With their help I was able to decide on the project: Two Original Oil Paintings-one realistic and one abstract in style.

I chose the subject of a street scene, because I have always enjoyed and been interested in buildings, their shapes, relationships and details.

In beginning the sketches for the realistic scene painting, I drove around the city of Tucson looking for interesting groups of buildings. After making detailed sketches of the buildings that appealed to me, I tried to arrange them in an interesting manner. Upon completing this step, I drew the finished sketch on the canvas prepared for the picture. I chose a twenty-four by eighteen stretcher, and used prepared canvas for the painting surface.

In painting a realistic picture I had to decide on a limit of detail, because in being realistic, a person can often get involved in details and overlook the larger, over-all impression of the painting. Realism as

defined is: interest in, or concern for the actual or real, as distinguished from the abstract... to represent things as they really are. There is a fine line here between the previous definition and near abstraction, which can still be recognized with slight imagination.

In referring to realism in history, many realistic pictures are classified in different subdivisions. Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, modern painters were Neo-classic and Romantic in their schools of thought. Paintings having classical tendencies are often referred to as Romantic. The word realistic, therefore, does not go very far in describing the thought and feeling that an artist may want to express in his work.

Even as far back as the pre-Renaissance, painters, painting religious subject matter, were striving to be realistic in their depiction, yet had not reached the point of doing this successfully by our standards of realism today. Painters like Leonardo and Michelangelo, with their scientific background, Velazquez, the Spanish realist, and Vermeer, used realism successfully to its greatest extent.

It was Gustav Courbet who added the term Realism to modern painting. He did not like what he felt were the affectations of both Romanticists and the Classicists. The Romanticists had seen the world through a veil of poetry and sentiment; the Neo-Classicalists had scarcely seen the world at all as they were preoccupied with notions of Greek and Roman ideals. Courbet wanted to demonstrate once and for all that painting was a matter of physical realities, painting of the bare facts. As a result, Courbet's pictures, lacking the feeling of such a man as Corot with his eye for fusing light, were sober and harsh, painted with detachment, which led to coldness.

It is not this point in realism that I wished to reach. I can see, however, how easy it is to become static and cold when attempting to paint realistically. With a definite mood in mind, a feeling to express, and a sympathy for the subject, the result will also mean more to the onlooker.

By becoming familiar with the objects that one paints, by understanding their form, weight, and the material of which they are made, the artist will soon have a personal understanding of them which he can then communicate to the persons who are to see his work.

Another means of attaining this desired intimacy with the subject is to be always on the look out for new and different things in everyday surroundings. By observing different forms in nature, and by seeing details and decorations in the things that we come in contact with every day, we naturally grow to know them and understand them. Thus, when beginning to paint, this feeling will show through the handling of the subject and more easily acquaint the viewer with the ideas of the artist.

Realizing the range of the word "realism" I have done my work using the detailed drawings, yet eliminated the parts that I felt were unessential to the whole.

The next step in modern painting was called Impressionism, followed by the period of the post-Impressionists. The artists were, aside from depicting their chosen subject matter, experimenting with light, broken light, different techniques of using the brush and paint, and striving to give the impression of light on the subjects in space. They wanted to give the feeling of warmth, color, and movement. These paintings were realistic, yet with more feeling given to the subject than the strict realistic demand for detail.

In my painting I would say that it can be called realistic, in that it is not abstract, and that it comes close in some ways to the terms described in Impressionism. I have tried to achieve the effect of sunlight on the buildings in the picture. By using warm colors, I gave the effect of the warmth in the city, and especially the warm weather so typical of Tucson. The play of the shadows on the street and on the buildings, also adds to the plan used in bringing out this warm, sunny feeling that I wanted to express.

Painting in the United States will also have some bearing on my work. The work of American artists and their different techniques is part of my background. The very detailed work of the Hudson River School of painting has not impressed me a great deal, but the growing change shown in such men as Ryder, Homer, and Eakins is more interesting and shows great advance in American Art.

The Hudson River School was not a formal school in the strict sense of the word. It was the name given to a group of painters in the United States who were painting landscapes in and around the Hudson River valley, and later moved west with the covered wagons and exploring parties to paint the parts of the country never seen by the Easterners.

In doing their paintings, these painters painted every blade of grass and every leaf on the tree as detailed as they possibly could. It was photographic. They did not know how to compose, simplify, or organize their paintings. Their colors were brownish, thin and transparent, very weak and sick looking. The paintings were labored and unconvincing, not even giving the impression of the scene as it was. There were no textures. The paint was all brushed smooth, and they were only interested in shapes. This resulted in no volume or form in space, and only a colored line drawing was presented.

Homer, Ryder, and Eakins were the outstanding American painters before 1920. Homer was the most American of the group in that he didn't have much of a chance to see any other paintings and he didn't have any lessons. He started out as an illustrator, worked into painting, and developed it in his own style. His first color was muddy, but as he progressed his work became more competent, more and more spontaneous, and later was stronger, more virile, and more personal. He used the sea and the wilderness for subjects of many of his paintings. He loved nature, took trips, and gave a heroic, personal effect to these subjects.

Albert Pinkham Ryder, on the otherhand, did not go out into nature, although he got his inspiration from nature. Ryder painted inside his studio and very rarely left the place. He was not popular with the public during his lifetime. We know him to be a strong personality who, seeing only beauty in the things around him, painted expressionistically and with a creative mood not found in the other painters of the day. Finally, Eakins should be mentioned in the development of American Art. Thomas Eakins was a skilled craftsman, who studied perspective, anatomy, and the paintings of his European contemporaries. He did not copy their ideas, as many Americans were doing at that time, but used his studies as a device for understanding and creating a style of his own. He was also known as a sculptor and was one of the first to use photography for analyzing movement and anatomy for his paintings. He was a realist, maintaining in his work a truth to nature, but not slaving for detail; searching rather for the essential truth to suit his own purpose. His subjects were no overly sweet and sentimental, but were deep, rich paintings of sports, nature, river scenes, and hunting trips. He was a lover of the out-doors and documented his activities.

The Ash Can School with its contempt for the sticky, sentimental, literary and moral ideas in painting, painted in back alleys and roof tops in New York. They painted with feeling, expression and understanding of their subject matter. They felt that beauty lay in the manner in which the painter painted and composed his work, as well as his choice of color, and that the subject matter was not of great importance. I have tried to paint my realistic picture with these aims in mind; which are, the arrangement of color and forms giving the impression and the buildings done with understanding and enjoyment.

I first sketched the buildings on several trips around the city. I looked for interesting details and shapes and groupings, that would lend themselves to good composition. After arranging the sketches, I drew the picture on the canvas with a soft lead pencil. I painted in the areas, using the colors that were in the color sketch of the painting. These areas were painted in flat color patterns to be used as an underpainting for the plastic color and shading. After allowing the underpainting to dry I applied retouch varnish to the picture area in order to bring out the best, most intense color of the oil paint. By doing this it is easier to see the value patterns while working.

## Method of Procedure in Painting

### I. Preparation of Canvas and Sketches

- A. Using prepared canvas tacked on stretchers, made taut by wood keys.
- B. Retaining the scale of the sketch, drawing transferred to canvas with soft lead pencil.

### II. Underpainting

- A. First coat of oil paint done in flat color areas to set up pattern in which to work.
- B. Colors used as basic scheme in color sketch, but changed in the value and intensity in original painting in order to retain a harmonious, over-all tone to the picture.
- C. Let first layer of color dry, cover with retouch varnish, (brings out the brightest and best color.)

### III. Glazing and Continuation of Oil

- A. Glazes applied on areas
  - a.e. Red glaze on center building
  - Light blue glaze on parts of sky
  - Brown glaze on parts of sky
  - White glaze on sidewalk
- B. Final detail and color painted in oil.

V. Final Glaze, or Varnish

A. Retouch varnish applied to picture area to bring out the brightest and best color

VI. Framing

A. Color of frame mixed and chosen to add to tone of the picture as a whole.

## Chapter II Abstract Phase

Abstract as defined is, "of, or pertaining to nonrepresentational art using lines, colors, generalized or geometrical forms."

The term abstract, as the term realistic, has different levels of subdivisions. Near-abstractions are recognizable with imagination as to their original forms. They are changed so that many of their personal traits are retained, such as the texture of the material or the basic shape of the object, but there is obvious distortion.

Therefore, abstract art may be abstract forms of real objects, or completely nonrepresentational, with no concern except for pleasing arrangements of line, color and form.

Abstracts may also contain the feeling or emotion contained in realistic work. This is done by the use of color and arrangement of lines. I have tried to capture the same feeling of an afternoon street scene found in the realistic in the abstract composition.

As a background in my abstract work, I relied mostly on my past experience in doing abstract designs, as well as on observing the techniques and styles of other abstract artists.

In examining the history of abstract art, I found artists getting freer and freer in their work. The emphasis had been on representational and illustrative work. Cezanne and Van Gogh had demonstrated with authority the value of an art which made free adaptations of physical appearances. Like El Greco they had distorted the shapes of nature out of psychological or compositional considerations. Their work seemed harsh and brutal and even savage to most people unaccustomed to their direct and powerful methods. But, for the next generation of painters in the twentieth century they had established a new pattern.

Cezanne's treatment led the younger painters to exercise the greatest freedom in their work. Because of their distortions they were criticised and called "wild" by the public.

Their interpretation of Cezanne's formalization led some to greater abstraction. His remark that all things in nature tend to assume the shape of cones, spheres, and cylinders was another new idea at that time. Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso began between 1908 and 1910 to experiment with compositions of abstract patterns in which shapes, which were natural, were reduced to a minimum, or wholly disappeared. Kandinsky, a Russian, composed designs in color without the construction of any

stable pattern of recognizable forms. Picasso with his originality and experimentation has done many different styles in abstract art, such as elongation, cubism, flat patterns of planes, and surfaces and textures. Familiar, prosaic shapes take on new vitality when placed unexpectedly in new relationships.

Hidden meanings and symbolisms are not necessarily present in abstract paintings. For the most part the artist is striving for pleasing arrangement of form, line, color and texture. Interesting changes and placements, and experimenting are rewarding, if properly executed. A great deal of Picasso's art has nothing to do with moral and intellectual conflicts in his age. It doesn't seem to touch the life of ordinary man and probably never will. It is called Expressionistic.

A phase of modern painting, far different from the Expressionistic, is found in the work of Matisse, who, with Picasso is a leading figure in the twentieth century. He exemplifies the decorative tradition always found in French art. Matisse accepts the distortion and the formalization of Cezanne, combining with them they striking color patterns of Van Gogh. He develops these features to suit his purpose in an original and personal way. Where Cezanne is massive and weighted, with space

elements that are strong, Matisse uses three dimensional forms in flat patterns with decorative color for enrichment, adapting the subject to fit the design.

Of all the cults and "ism" of modern art, surrealism has probably attracted the widest public attention. Many of the paintings of the surrealists have been highly realistic in nature, others have combined the designs of abstractionists with realism. Salvador Dali is the best known artist in this movement.

Again, I find these many ways of approaching the solution to do my abstract work. By seeing these different styles it was possible for me to choose a method of my own, possibly combining several of the styles that I just mentioned.

In beginning to organize my abstract painting, I first distorted the perspective and the shapes of the buildings that I used in the realistic composition. Next, I painted these shapes in flat color patterns. These distorted shapes and areas were placed in approximately the same positions that they were in the realistic phase. When this was completed, I took the painting and set it aside long enough for it to dry in

order to cover the picture area with retouch varnish. This varnishing gives a different texture on which to paint, as it is a bit sticky and takes the next layer of paint in a manner I wanted to achieve. It results in a more plastic, quicker drying surface.

I next divided the picture area into geometric space patterns, cutting through the flat areas and again shifting these areas to one side of the other. I painted in these spaces using the colors and same fine brush technique found in the first picture. After defining these areas, I added details, still distorting them slightly, as found in the details of the realistic picture. Finally I covered the canvas again with retouch varnish to bring out the best color in the paint.

From combined characteristics of the styles and techniques of the master's in art, I have drawn a pattern of my own, which is beginning to satisfy my ambition in the field of creative art. I have tried to trace the development of patterns through the various schools, and have made an effort to synchronize their methods in developing a style of my own.

## Method of Procedure in Painting

### I. Preparation of Canvas and Stretcher

- A. Using prepared canvas, tacked on stretchers, made taut by wood keys.

### II. Transfer of Drawing to Canvas

- A. Using basic forms in realistic compositions; distorted them to form interesting areas.

### III. Underpainting

- A. Using flat color areas, painted in colors similar in intensity and feeling to the realistic picture.

### IV. Glazing and Continuation of Oil

- A. Glazed and varnished with retouch varnish
- B. Area divided into geometric shapes and over painting applied to these areas.
- C. Final retouch varnish applied to picture.

### V. Framing

- A. Color of frame mixed and chosen to add to tone of picture as a whole.