

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST

by

Robert James Stone

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An Essay

To Accompany A Painted Thesis  
submitted to the faculty of the  
Department of Art

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
in the Graduate College, University of Arizona

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THE COLLEGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
THE THREE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST	11

## ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
FIGURE 1 - CENTER PANEL	23
FIGURE 2 - LEFT PANEL	24
FIGURE 3 - RIGHT PANEL	25

## INTRODUCTION

I did not become interested in art as a career until I was twenty-six years old. The years prior to this were years of floundering and indecision. In high school I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and become a physician and surgeon, and I enrolled in courses in Latin for three years, and took four courses in science, and all the mathematics I could get. In junior college I began to rebel at the idea of a medical career, and I enrolled in a general program which included almost everything except art. I graduated from Fullerton Junior College in 1931, and entered the University of California with the intention of studying art, but found myself attending classes in the history of art and I soon lost interest in the subject, for, I wanted to paint and draw.

After one semester at the University of California, I withdrew because of the depression. Then followed a long series of jobs of every kind. I worked in service stations, in hardware stores, a soap factory, a coffee factory, on fishing boats, and on farms, picking tomatoes, beans and apples. I clerked, janitored, labored, and sweated. I travelled with sales crews, worked in eucalyptus groves felling trees, then chopped them into firewood. I took a Civil Ser-

vice examination and worked in a post office; then worked on a newspaper, and on various construction jobs; I drove a truck; sold magazines from door to door; and I waited on tables.

I relate these experiences because they are influences which have affected my art. In several of the jobs I was offered the opportunity of a well-paying career, but there was a restlessness in me which always made me move on to something different. After I had worked on a job long enough to save some money, I would travel until the money was spent.

During the depression, I visited almost every large city in the United States, from San Francisco to New York. I was fascinated by the crowds of people and their activities, but as many people were going in one direction as were going in the opposite direction, and few seemed to know where they were going. This was true not only of the people in the streets, but also of those I met at my various jobs. It was true of their careers, philosophies and religions. Most accepted the religion into which they were born,- the first job that offered a livelihood,- and a materialistic philosophy based on the dollar. I learned to respect a man for what he was and not for what he had. I became introspective, and spent most of my free time reading biography and philosophy.

Until this time, I had always been active in a variety of athletics including football, basketball, tennis, swimming, skiing, hiking, and fishing. I suddenly switched to mental

activity although I retained a love for the outdoors. I no longer could hunt and take pleasure in killing any kind of game. I broke away from the church. I had been brought up in a strict, Presbyterian home with Sunday school, morning and evening services to attend every Sunday, and after dinner every evening we had family worship which ended with the Lord's Prayer.

I am happy that I had this religious training, for it served as a point of departure upon which to base my thinking. I seldom enter a church anymore, for I seem to get more spiritual uplift from a walk through the desert, or from the growing plants, or from the various aspects and moods of nature which are with us constantly.

Although I no longer am active in any church, I will always support the churches, for I realize that they are a necessity in the lives of most of us, and that in most cases they are working for what is good and that which is right. The fact that I seldom attend church does not mean that I am not a religious person. I feel that I am deeply religious. My mind is open to as much of the Truth as I shall be permitted to know, and I am trying to find it. This attitude has affected the work I do in art, and it will continue to affect it.

When I was twenty-six years old, I seriously started to study art with the intention of making it a career. I entered

the Los Angeles County Art Institute and attended there a total of five years, part of it before the war and part of it since World War II. At the time I entered it was almost entirely academic in its approach to art. I spent at least one year drawing in charcoal from casts or still life.

Along with this work I was given instruction in anatomy and composition. I made hundreds of quick sketch drawings from life during the time I was there.

After the first year at the Institute, I was introduced to oil paint, and it has been a challenge and a fascination to me ever since. I started painting still life, and then entered the life and the portrait classes. The more I learned about painting, the less I really seemed to know about it. By the time I had achieved something I wanted, I already was desiring to achieve something else, and it is this striving, with brief periods of satisfaction, which make oil painting a fascinating study. Over the last fourteen years, I have gained a certain proficiency in the technique of using oil paints, but the fascination is even greater now, for the challenge now presents itself in how best to express my own feelings about what I am painting.

I received several scholarships while at the Institute, and was enjoying a little success in selling my work, when the war began. I soon found myself sitting atop a stack of five-hundred pound demolition bombs receiving instructions in their

care and safety. I made futile attempts to be transferred into camouflage work, or into some work vaguely related to art, but I either did not know the right people, or the army thought too highly of my ability to handle ammunition, for I remained in the Ordnance Department for three years and seven months. The only art work that came my way then was an occasional order for a sign, and in my free time I made a few portraits and landscapes. I detested the regimentation of army life and the caste system by which it had to be administered, and I was very happy when I became a civilian again in December of 1945. While in the army, I fell, and permanently injured my spinal column.

I returned to the Los Angeles County Art Institute for about eighteen months, then my spinal injury began to cause me so much pain that I could not continue in school. I spent several months in the Veterans' Hospital. I was told that I had a cervical arthritis and that I should go to a warm, dry climate. I went to Tucson, Arizona, and enrolled at the University of Arizona. This was the best move that I have ever made, not only because my health improved, but primarily because I now received a thorough education in the history of art. I was introduced to many theories and trends in art, about which I would not have heard had I attended another art school where history was not a required subject. In Special Studies and in Research I was permitted to experiment and to

attempt to find myself in art.

In this experimentation I tried many approaches to painting. Among the approaches were underpainting on gesso panels using an egg tempera for the underpainting, then glazing over this with oil colors. I painted in a direct manner with the brush or palette knife on a white canvas or on a canvas which had been toned with a warm or a cool color. I experimented with broken color. I used areas of flat pattern. I experimented with calligraphic lines to enclose areas or overlaying them to create a pattern. I tried combining these various techniques, and I varied the depth of the format; experimenting with varying degrees of abstraction all the way to completely non-objective paintings. I studied and experimented with the watercolor medium. As subject matter, I used still life, nudes, portraits, landscapes, and seascapes. Usually I worked from an object, but often I painted from drawings and imagination.

The more I learn about technique, color, composition, drawing, line, texture, light and dark, - the more I realize that they are merely tools with which to express my feeling about the subject I am painting. The use of these elements in painting should be brought so well under control that their application will be subconscious, and thus the entire mind can be devoted to expression in the painting, in the same manner that one writes a letter without being concerned with penmanship.

I feel that subject matter is the least important element in a painting, and yet it is important. Subject matter should be the point of departure, and one should try to express how one feels about this subject matter.

I am undecided about the importance of non-objective painting. Very often art critics in describing a painting reach over into the field of music and use words and phrases appropriate only to music in order to attempt to clarify in words how they feel about a painting. Hilla Rebay has stated "Why not make the intuitive sense of creation as visible as music makes it audible?" She also states that "The purity of space on a virgin white canvas is already ruined by an objective beginning." She states, "The non-objective picture stands by itself as an entirely free creation, conceived out of the intuitive enjoyment of space."

At the present time I feel that non-objective art is a personal expression which has meaning only to the artist who painted it. Such painting has no relation to the sense of sound, except that in music and art there is a comparison between the technique or fundamentals of composing such as rhythm, repetition, etc., and all building toward a complete unity. Music, like all other sound-waves, has always been abstract. Once the sound wave is created, it becomes an ephemeral thing and soon dies. On the other hand a painting is a concrete objective form, which exists timelessly and yet

can be seen in a moment of time. Music is dependent on a time-interval for its appreciation; it must use the human mind while it composes and thus it is dependent on memory, for what avails the present sound if one does not remember what was played a moment before? A painting can be judged in a glance, and if it is inviting one will linger and enjoy its sensual qualities.

The abstraction of sound is a universal thing. I am sure that our primitive ancestors enjoyed the songs of birds just as much as we do, and yet such sounds are non-objective. Regarding non-objectivity I can see no basis for comparison between music and art. Art is an objective thing, for anything which is seen by the eye must have its existence in reality, that is, objectivity, and no matter how non-objective a creative artist may attempt to be, he is going to find that he has objective elements in his completed painting. He might not have a complete cube, cylinder, or cone, but he will have parts of such shapes or forms, and I feel that it is a universal reaction for the eye to look for these familiar objects.

Some of Kandinski's improvisations are an attempt at non-objectivity, but people will refer to a particular painting as the 'Fried Egg Picture' or to another of his paintings as 'The picture with caterpillars in it'. It is as natural for the eye to look for and enjoy basic shapes, as it is for

the ear to listen for and enjoy familiar sounds. Man, being created, cannot create, but he can pursue the creative activity of discovering, combining, arranging, or rearranging, and I feel that a man should be sufficiently humble to realize his limitations.

This is the way that I feel about non-objective painting at the present time, but tomorrow or a year from tomorrow, I may completely reverse my opinion and become an avid non-objectivist. However, it will have to be a natural and gradual change. When I first started in art, to me the greater work was that which was the most representational, but as years passed my work gradually became more abstract. At the present time I enjoy a high degree of abstraction in art, but I like it to be an abstraction from something, not a pure abstraction with a scintillating title to make it more confusing. To me the highest type of painting would combine the expressive feeling of a Ryder with the searching intellectualism of a Cezanne. Each of these men used subject matter as a point of departure, but they used subject matter. I feel now that the complete absence of subject matter, as in non-objective painting, weakens a painting, for it is an element which can stimulate the mind. In other words, it is a component for enriching a picture, for in addition to having all the basic elements which are present in a non-objective painting, subject matter also gives access to another part of

the mind.

I have given much thought to the importance of non-objective painting, for, many critics, intellects, and pseudo intellects have given credence to its greatness and potentialities, and many great artists, along with a horde of fakers, are turning them out on an assembly line basis. To me they are a personal thing, a kind of toying with the basic elements which make a picture. What non-objective painting could not be improved by using the same fundamental picture-building elements, in the same arrangement, to express feeling about an object? Of course there can be feeling in a non-objective painting, just as one can put feeling into the practicing of scales on the piano, but why isolate such an important component as structure? Why not enrich it by using it to express our feelings about the things with which we are familiar?

I discuss non-objective painting in this defense of my thesis, for I feel that research should delve into the most advanced area of one's field of study; and with innumerable intellects stating that non-objective painting is the most advanced field in art, I feel that I should give my reasons for experimenting with an abstraction based on religious subject matter, instead of experimenting with non-objectives.

## THE THREE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST

This triptych, based on the three temptations of Christ, consists of three separate paintings. I have spent almost all my available time this semester in preparing these panels and painting these three pictures. I shall find it difficult to say much about these paintings, as I hope they will be self-explanatory, but I shall start from the beginning with the development of the idea, an explanation of the technique in the preparation of the panels, the technique in the painting, and an evaluation of the results. The latter will be difficult, for I have found it difficult to objectively evaluate my own work before it has 'cooled off' for a period of several weeks.

The triptych was originally developed as an altar piece consisting of three panels. The center panel was the larger one, a smaller panel on each side (often decorated on the back) was hinged to the center panel and folded over it to form one unit when closed. These panels were related in subject matter and technique, so that when the panel was open there was a uniformity among the three. Webster's Dictionary refers to a triptych as a picture or carving, hanging in three parts.

I stated my desire to Mr. Andersen to base my thesis on a religious subject, with the intention to make it abstract.

I had originally intended to paint only the temptation in which the devil tempts Christ to change the stone to bread, for it seemed to offer more possibilities for abstraction. Mr. Andersen suggested that I do the three temptations of Christ and combine them into a triptych. This idea appealed to me for I had never seen them done in this way before.

To develop the idea, I drew a series of small thumbnail sketches until I arrived at about what I wanted.

Next I made a series of realistic drawings, and when I arrived at a satisfactory solution to these, I carried them over into the abstract form, using charcoal on white paper. These abstractions, although in black and white, suggested a mosaic-like pattern, or a stained glass window.

The next step was to do a drawing in color. I selected chalk colors, as they are easily worked over and adjusted until the desired color is attained. I wished to maintain the stained glass effect, so I selected bright yellows, yellow ochre, brown, green, blue, and a few touches of red to make the cool colors more vibrant. Over these colors I placed heavy black lines to form a flat-pattern effect. I did not wish to duplicate a stained glass effect, but I wished to have a feeling of stained glass without violating the painting medium.

I decided to use the underpainting technique, as a glazed color reveals the color's overtone and gives a

brilliance and luminosity which is difficult to achieve in any other way.

I selected masonite as a base for the paintings, because it is durable and very suitable for the underpainting technique. The center panel is thirty inches wide and forty-eight inches high. Each side panel is twenty-six inches wide and forty inches high. These shapes when placed together form an interesting group.

Because of the size of the panels, it was necessary to place braces on the back to prevent the panels from warping. For braces I used white pine, one inch thick and two inches wide. I mitered the corners of the braces for precise fitting at each corner on the backs of the panels. These braces were glued to the panels with a plastic resin glue called Weldwood. Weldwood is in a powder form and must be mixed with water until it forms a thick paste, then more water is added until the glue is about as thick as heavy cream. When this glue dries for forty-eight hours it becomes water resistant. The glue was liberally applied to the braces, then the braces were fitted to the panel and a hundred pound weight was placed on them for forty-eight hours.

The first step in the preparation of a painting surface was to use sandpaper on the smooth masonite so that the isolating coat of gesso would adhere firmly.

The second step was the application of a glue solution.

This solution is prepared by adding one ounce of hide glue, which is purchased in a flake form, to one pint of water. The water must be kept hot over a small flame, but not boiling, and the flakes are stirred until completely dissolved.

The third step is the application of a gesso ground. This gesso is prepared by adding one part of the glue solution to one part of bolted whiting and one part of powdered zinc white. The mixture should be applied to the panel as quickly as possible, and it should be evenly applied to prevent the formation of small bubbles, otherwise, tiny pin point areas like small holes will form on the ground. When this coat of gesso is thoroughly dry, it must be sanded as smoothly as possible.

Steps four and five are the same as step three. After each additional coat has dried it must be sanded until it is glassy-smooth.

The sixth step in the preparation of the panel was to add a small amount of powdered charcoal and powdered white lead to the glue solution. I streaked this onto the panel with a small sponge to give the surface a silvery-grey tone. The streaking must be done very rapidly from one end of the panel to the other, and in one complete stroke, for one cannot go over it without smudging the surface.

The seventh and final step in preparing the panel to receive the underpainting was the application of a solution

composed of one part white shellac and two parts of denatured alcohol. This isolates the gesso ground and prevents it from being absorbent.

Now the panel was ready to receive the drawing.

I placed transparent paper over the chalk drawings and traced the drawings onto the transparent paper. Over these drawings I placed horizontal and vertical lines, thus dividing the drawing into sections. In this manner I transferred the drawings to large pieces of manila paper which were the exact size of the masonite panels. These pieces of manila paper were divided into the same number of sections as were the smaller drawings. When these cartoons were completed in charcoal, I ran a perforating tool over all the lines and thus formed lines with tiny holes. The cartoons were then taped to the gesso surface of the panel. Next I dusted the surface of the paper with burnt umber powder which was placed in cheesecloth, thus transferring the cartoon to the gesso ground. The drawing on the panel now consisted of a series of tiny dots. I completed the drawing with a pencil. This drawing was isolated with damar varnish to prevent it from coming off into the underpainting. I now was ready to start underpainting.

The underpainting solution was prepared by adding one part egg (using the whole egg as the unit of measurement) to

one part of water, and to this was added one-half part damar varnish and one-half part cold-pressed linseed oil. Place this solution into a bottle and shake until it is thoroughly mixed. This is the underpainting medium.

A small amount of powdered white lead is placed on the palette and, using a palette knife, the underpainting solution is mixed with the powdered lead to the desired consistency. This mixture is now applied to the panel with a brush. In areas where a high glaze is desired, the paint is applied more thickly and evenly, completely obliterating the grey surface of the panel. If less glaze is desired in certain areas, then the white underpainting is streaked on or applied very thinly, thus permitting some of the grey tone to show through.

The theory behind underpainting is that the light passes through the thin layer of transparent oil paint which is glazed over the underpainting, and this light strikes the opaque white underpainting, then is reflected back through the color producing the color's overtone. Some colors lend themselves to glazing, while others do not, depending on their degree of opacity. For this painting I found that the most suitable colors for glazing were alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, viridian, monastral blue, monastral green, burnt sienna, burnt umber, and yellow ochre. In addition to these colors I used permanent green (light), cerulean blue, and cadmium yellow.

(light), but these colors were used sparingly as they were too opaque. I also used ivory black and flake white.

For a glazing medium I mixed together equal amounts of damar varnish, turpentine, and cold-pressed linseed oil. I glazed the central panel first, so that I could adjust the colors of the two side panels to correspond with it. Under ordinary conditions the first glaze should dry within two or three days, but this first glaze required about twelve days to dry; therefore, I reduced the amount of oil in the glazing medium and this immediately increased the drying time of the glaze.

Historically speaking, underpainting is a very old process. It developed in Flanders in the Fourteenth Century and spread from there to Italy where many painters used the technique in the Fifteenth Century and later. The Van Eycks, although not the inventors of the oil medium, brought earlier experiments to a climax. The process they used is very similar to the one described in this paper, except that they used a wooden panel, and the exact vehicle that they used with the oil paints is unknown. The Van Eycks' paintings are in a very fine state of preservation, which speaks very highly for this method of painting.

Underpainting is a long and tedious process, and it is seldom used in modern painting as the emphasis now is on direct painting. Underpainting, however, has its place in modern painting just as it did in earlier times, for I know of no

other way in which a painter can achieve a comparable luminosity and color quality.

This abstract approach to painting has an historical basis beginning with impressionism. The Impressionists experimented with the use of color, especially broken color, to give more life and luminosity to painting, but during their experiments they lost form and structure. It was then that Cezanne began his great experiments to make something more solid and strong of impressionistic painting. He advocated that the artist should be concerned with the fundamental forms: the cone, the cube, and the cylinder. He led all others in experimenting with color and pictorial architectonics. He always organized his pictures in space with a controlled depth. There was the illusion of a third dimension with the reality of two dimensions.

Out of Cezanne's work grew cubism, and this gradually became looser, freer and more emotional. Then followed a long series of "isms" in art, most developing from some phase of Cezanne's experiments.

Most of these "isms" are with us today, and it is difficult to know out of which "ism" a great art form may develop, but it is certain that most have contributed in some way to the advancement of art.

Perhaps this painting, The Three Temptations of Christ, could be classed as eclectic, for I have borrowed from many

sources,- cubism, Flemish underpainting, impressionism, stained glass windows, etc., but if this is the basis for eclecticism, then what painter is not eclectic? Every man is an eclectic in the sense that he is a synthesis of everything he has learned. To go beyond eclecticism one must do the old things in a new way or add original ideas to the knowledge one already has accumulated.

In this triptych, I feel that there is an original approach to the painting of a religious subject, for I do not remember ever having seen a triptych painted in this manner. I do not claim any originality in the method of painting, for this flat-pattern two-dimensional painting has evolved out of cubism. The use of black lines upon the painting has been used by many artists, and probably was derived from stained glass windows.

In evaluating the work I cannot be objective about it for I must wait two or three months and then look at it to really see what I have done. The most I can say about it now is that I derive pleasure from looking at it and I do not seem to tire myself by looking at it. This usually is an indication that I have achieved what I wanted. The more I look at it, the more I see that certain changes could be made. For example, some of the shapes could be given more variety in the central panel. There are places where the juxtaposition of lights and darks could be changed, and I feel that the two

smaller panels are too broken. They seem a trifle 'busy' when compared to the central panel. These are changes which require time, and when I find time I shall make these changes. The subject matter is present in the finished work, but it is subordinate to the more important aspects of the painting, such as composition, color, light and dark.

The surprising thing about this painting is the fact that several people who do not like a high degree of abstraction in a painting, have liked this one when they viewed it. They stated that their reason for liking it was because of its color and because it reminded them of stained glass windows. In other words, they could enjoy it because they could see a practical use for such a painting. They saw the painting first and then took cognizance of the subject matter, and thus their mental image was enriched.

I feel that this triptych expressed the religious feeling that is inherent in the subject matter primarily because of the approach to the painting. It has many of the qualities of a stained glass window due partly to the patterned areas formed by the black lines, and partly due to the luminous quality resulting from the underpainting. Stained glass has been used for hundreds of years in the churches, and the fact that this painting is reminiscent of stained glass immediately imparts a religious mood.

I do not feel that in my attempt to impart a feeling of stain-glass I have violated the painting medium. The triptych has many areas of broken color, and there are opaque areas played against luminous glazed areas. There are areas of vibrant color contrasted with neutral black lines and neutral areas of white pigment.

The painting should have an emotional impact on the viewer and stir his senses. I do not mean that a painting should be propaganda or illustrative or anecdotal, but it should have a sensual quality. The color, composition, and light and dark values should first attract the eye, then please it, and make it wish to linger. The eye then should perceive the subject matter, thus tapping another segment of the mind and adding additional connotations which should make the painting more significant.

If a painting can impart a feeling to the viewer and create a mood within the viewer similar to the mood and feeling that the artist tried to express when he undertook the painting, then I feel that the painting has been successful.



FIGURE 1

CENTER PANEL



FIGURE 2

LEFT PANEL



FIGURE 3

RIGHT PANEL