Two Roads Converge . . .

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Mysteries abound in *The Fulbright Triptych*, none more puzzling than its title. As in all its maker's work, his choices—in this case, over three years of growth— demand to be taken seriously. The fourteen-foot painting was born in a tiny improvised studio in the German crossroad town of Hessisch Lichtenau, where the artist and his wife in 1970, searching for Dürer, sought refuge from the steep rents of Kassel, far beyond their Fulbright means. At the outset, the artist imagined no title more dramatic than the address of the rude living-working space they had reclaimed from an unused attic. By the time of their return to Brooklyn in 1971, the painting had only begun its growth.

A clue to its origin comes from a later oil (1976), showing a table between two closed doors, crammed with the painter's untidy tools. It contrasts with the engraver's worn gear carefully arranged like a Tiffany showcase in the *Triptych*. The later work proclaims a painter deep in his craft; the *Triptych* is a salute to engraving. The *Triptych*, sprouting wings, surely flew out from this cliff-dwelling.

Another hint as to its birth comes from an earlier charcoal drawing (1970) of a wary Renée seated between different German windows showing the same townscape outside, but sharply different in detail and mood. The walls, albeit from another dwelling, are flowered wallpaper; the underlining ledge below the windows displays a second floral pattern; the window frames are wider, clumsier, and tightly latched. Behind the woman and her artbook, a small depopulated town weighs in on the viewer; it huddles under menacing skies and conceals the lands beyond. The *Triptych*'s windows instead are picture frames, lined with what seems to be gilt inserts; they show the same town but opened out, with airy spaces and well-kept gardens; in the distance, soft fields and hills swell towards skies of a pale Mediterranean blue.

Fulbright executive Ulrich Littmann's memories of the momentous Vietnam-obsessed Fulbright year of 1970-71 set a context. The couple moved first to a Rhenish suburb to meet the Fulbright Commission's wise insistence on German language-training—an irritant for two people who knew words were not their only means of communication. Managers of Fulbright Americans abroad know, after the exhilaration

of travel and arrival wears off, that a wintry slump may follow, as young people far from home settle down to work in a strange new culture with attendant discomforts, new rules, and other signals. And beneath all, in Germany, lay the gnawing ambivalence, reflected in the woman's face in 1970, of living in a country which only decades earlier had systematically killed six million men, women and children most of their faith.

The *Triptych* has left foreboding behind. Its long *Wanderjahre* gave its maker time to tell the beads of change in his life—the happy ending of his German stay, the role of George Staempfli as *deux ex machina,* the birth and growth of a talented daughter, the shift from the microscopic cutting-in of engraving to the colorful and gestural macroscopic building-out of sculptured oils, the absorption of an indispensable European past, and surely the coming-to-terms implied by a young couple's pact with a new place. The open, inquisitive faces of the flanking couple suggest resolution, reconciliation, perhaps even hesitant steps toward forgiveness.

Four years after the *Triptych*'s odyssey ended, in the spring of 1978, I was at work in my office as Cultural Attaché and chair of the Fulbright Commission in Rome when I received a call from Rudolph Arnheim, then resident art critic at the American Academy headed by the late John D'Arms, his colleague at the University of Michigan. In polite yet firm words, he said I *must* come to the Academy, that afternoon if possible. The command was intriguing and two hours later I drove up the snaking streets of the high Janiculum to the Academy gate where Arnheim waited. He led me up two staircases and knocked at a door. It opened and there was *Flower Market, Rome*, ten feet wide, drawing me into its profusion of colors, textures, and surfaces, all yearning to lift off the canvas. At its center was as beautiful a face as I had ever seen, haloed by the central window frame in the siena-washed wall behind her; with an unreadable smile she reigned over six long rows of white buckets jammed with every flower in Italy. I barely heard Arnheim's introduction to Simon Dinnerstein.

In his second year in Rome, with Renée and the young Simone, he had already come to terms with its opulence of site and memory and was deep in the new work which had caught me so unprepared. Its setting in the Campo dei Fiori, presided over—behind the painter—by Ferrari's brooding statue of the burnt heretic Giordano Bruno, might have lent ambivalence to those who knew it was there, but I saw only an affirming swirl of colors and patterns.

Renée, charcoal drawing, 25 x 39 in., 1970

Six decades of residence in the Fulbright world have brought me into contact with many overseas-resident American artists, some with and others without Fulbright support. In 1963-64, John Ferren underwent a life-changing experience in Beirut and for his remaining years ached to push deeper into the Middle East. Arthur Danto, after trudging up the Italian boot as a GI, was still a "painter doing philosophy" when he spent a Fulbright year in 1949-50 Paris, mixing with greats like Santayana and Alberto Giacometti, and making a film with Albert Elsen on Rodin's *Gates of Hell*; around him worked dozens of artists—Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, Jack Youngerman, Shirley Jaffe, Ellsworth Kelley, some on the GI Bill. Not surprisingly, Italy's Fulbright alumni likewise offered God's plenty—Frank Stella, Lee Bontecou, Dmitri Hadzi, Nona Hershey, Bunny Harvey, among many others.

Simon in 1976 was sheltered by the Academy in Rome, a precursor to the Fulbright Program, but born six decades earlier as an architecture school, then merged with the School of Classical Studies in 1912. Since its birth in 1948, Fulbright history has intertwined with the Academy, thanks to the great Princeton humanist-art historian Charles Rufus Morey—Cultural Attaché from 1945 to 1950—who created the Italian Fulbright Commission that year and launched the practice of having Academy directors all but ex officio on its oversight board.

The French had launched the idea of an Academy abroad in the seventeenth century: after Poussin uncovered Rome for France, Louis XIV filled the gap his death left, lodging the Académie de France in the splendid Villa Medici. There, artists like Corot fed on the city's riches and explored the light and landscapes of the Roman Campania—the Académie in Simon's years was directed by no less than Balthus.

The idea of an *American* Academy, responding to Italy's lure for American artists, came in its time. Early in the nineteenth century, American émigrés relished the materials, the light, the classical and Renaissance architecture, the plentiful models, the skilled craftsmen like bronze-casters and stonecutters, and the overwhelming ambiance of history, art, people, and cultural landscape. The powerful Greek-American sculptor Dmitri Hadzi, an exemplar in the 1970s, came after his Fulbright year in Greece to continue his discovery of self, shaping time-drenched memories of Mediterranean cliffs, rockforms and shadows, all bearing mythical names of Greek legend.

Dinnerstein, like Hadzi, probed behind the mask of the picturesque for a deeper sense of what he saw and who he was, in space and time. While Hadzi produced a dozen works a year, Dinnerstein, as he had in Germany, focused his principal energies on a single work, the *Flower Market*, *Rome*, nine months in the making. Scouring the markets of Rome for buckets of new flowers each season, he planted an imaginary forest of colors and forms that overrode nature's cycles and brought together, outside time, a mass of floral textures. Only decades later did I encounter the *Triptych* and conclude that, whatever else Simon might do, these two works had already set daunting standards.

Why a *Fulbright Triptych*? First, begin by de-consecrating the word "triptych." While three-panel works are common to its churches, Christianity has no monopoly on the triple form; in its rich non-Church history, the triptych is common to many cultures, ranging from filigreed Arab windows to Chinese and Japanese screens and exquisite Persian mirror-backs—Persian miniatures hang to the left of each of the *Triptych*'s windows.

Perhaps the name Fulbright, changed from German Vollbrecht, was an obvious subject, even if for most Americans he is remembered as little more than a troublesome gadfly senator from the northwestern corner of a then-insignificant southern state. But around the world his deeds made him something else: a monumental American, the creator, as Arnold Toynbee put it, of the greatest program of human interchange ever conceived, a global movement of which Simon felt himself part and whose spirit the *Triptych* seeks to catch.

How does a visual artist embody or pay tribute to an idea, let alone a spirit? With Fulbright, many have tried: Milton Glaser did a poster punning on the name; a U.S. postage stamp played with cybernetic symbols; portrait busts and plaques are everywhere; but even the life-size figure standing on the front lawn of the University of Arkansas lacks what Rodin gave Balzac. The *Triptych*, instead, avoids literalism and manages to ennoble the idea, the program, its progenitor, and of course its creator—in Shelley's words, it honors,

stamped on these lifeless things, / The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.

Doubtless each of its 400,000 alumni worldwide, of whom perhaps 90,000 are American, found in the Fulbright experience a unique and highly personal meaning.[1] How then does Dinnerstein depict his personal Fulbright experience so as to swirl these multitudes into a single visual statement?

Fulbright's program and the *Triptych* build on the idea of place, both in space and time. Eudora Welty said of place that it "absorbs our earliest notice and attention; it bestows on us our organized awareness; and our critical powers spring from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it." To this, she added the ultimate Fulbright insight: "One place comprehended can make us understand other places better."[2] Fulbright's own four years as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford's Pembroke College taught the young innocent abroad this simple truth and dictated his lifetime commitment to democratizing the Rhodes experience, for America and for the world. In his vintage cracker-barrel style, he argued that "mutual understanding is a helluva lot better than mutual *mis*-understanding."

Place has dimensions. The two-dimensional geography of the *Triptych* shows a studio in the banal Hessisch Lichtenau, in a Germany which three decades earlier had been the world's most despised enemy. Policies change rapidly, but ordinary human beings change little even over three decades: in 1970, the Dinnersteins' host-town doubtless harbored the same localist provincialism that Fulbright feared in his own beloved country. Yet there, in that time, a young couple found friends who helped them build a sanctuary, *their* space, a rough studio-residence; in it an artist and his wife found refuge, and in time reconciliation.

On the walls of his studio, Simon taped the painter's usual medley of visual and verbal memories, then set about depicting the whole. These painted collages make no attempt to fool the eye; they are miniatures which suggest past, present, and future, coexisting and prefiguring the Janus-mask symbol of the Rome Academy. The past is represented by minutely crafted portrayals from his "imaginary museum"—history new and old, seen through postcards, reproductions, quotations, letters, photographs, children's art and writing, and an unknown Soviet's exit visa. A centimeter to the right of the precise center of the core-panel, we find Holbein in his studio, cluttered with tools and objects. The future, time-yet-to-come, is suggested by the couple's pri-

vate work of art, a daughter born later (fall 1972); here she is little less than a year old, hence added to the *Triptych* in 1973 (her name pays tribute to Hessisch Lichtenau—"Simone" derives not from her father but from one of two daughters of friendly neighbors of Simon and Renée's generation).

The *Triptych*, too, shows time as growth and place as learning: marking a point in the unrolling of an artist's life, it denotes change, motion, and discovery; it records a moment at which an artist overcame fears, lay down the burin, and picked up brushes.

Beneath Holbein, slightly to the left of dead center in the table display, shines a rendering in oil on gold-leaf of Simon's last copperplate, inscribed on a disc of old gold—his superb *Angela's Garden*, the backyard of a neighbor in a faraway place called Brooklyn. Brooklyn runs throughout his "museum without walls," adding distance and corresponding emotions. Opening new doors closes old ones; travel leaves sadness at home and brings moments of homesickness, represented by Renée's letter from Staten Island, nostalgic snapshots, a painting by Simon's brother, a haunting poem by an immigrant child in a Brooklyn yeshiva, and seed pods picked up later on Brooklyn streets. The golden center shines like a priestly monstrance ("*Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir,"* wrote Baudelaire*)*, but it is first of all an engraver's copperplate whose prime reference might better be Holbein's pair of ambassadors, standing amidst their kingly gifts clustered around the luminous centerpiece of a distorting mirror—still a puzzle to iconographers. Simon and Renée, ambassadors too, are surrounded by their treasures and engage the viewer.

The studio in the *Triptych* is not the prison that the 1970 charcoal suggests. The artist has loosened the window-latches, given the houses below breathing room, disclosed their gardens and tidied the streets—winter has passed. Where the charcoal showed a single street visible only through the right window, an ugly rutted track repelling travel, the *Triptych*'s street shows through both windows; it has been widened and made enticing: now two upward-flowing streets seem to merge just below the windows, then stretch toward the hills and the bright horizon. What was closed, dark, and foreboding in the charcoal drawing has become pleasant, inviting, beckoning, engaging. The street has become the artist's open road, the path to life as discovery, of others and self.

Painters tend to bring roads, railroads, rivers, and coastlines down from the upper right edge to the lower left. Dinnerstein's road instead begins at the center marked inside the studio by Holbein and the golden disc; it leads to a point on the horizon concealed by the windows' frames; two streets funnel toward a mysterious somewhere, with a tiny time-clock on the table set to measure the journey. Unlike arteries, roads run in two directions, and when they cross or join, they both converge and diverge; yet this path flowing from a depopulated source shows little sign of arriving or bringing in. Rather it urges us out and away. It is the perfect Fulbright road.

Unlike much painting of our times, the *Triptych* flows from a tradition which demands to be "read." Every viewer will read a different text—deeply etched memories of my own Fulbright year in France in 1949-50, for example, cry out to be *heard*—sounds, words, voices, odors, inflections, and music. Reading the *Triptych* with the aging eyes of a fallen-away literary scholar and former cultural diplomat, I see a work growing from a seed to the point where its creator realized he had journeyed miles beyond a meaningless address in the German countryside. Perhaps only then did he begin to nurture the idea of depicting the Fulbright spirit, not the senator's vision so much as the hundreds of thousands of young people his Act enabled to leave their places and find other worlds. Words by the million have flowed about the senator, his program, and its impact, but only one painting tells the story so deeply. No visual work of art I know might more fittingly serve as the Fulbright icon.

I would like to believe that the senator, as I knew him, would be pleased.