

“Where the Heart Stands in Perfect Sincerity”

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When I was introduced to Simon Dinnerstein’s *Fulbright Triptych*, I felt most deeply drawn by the forthright gazes of the artist and his wife. In meeting for the first time, we entered a silent dialogue, while continuities of history were at play on the walls, through the windows, and over the rooftops to a far horizon. The wife looks not demurely down to (the advent of) their child, but directly at me, and I identify with her unadorned simplicity, the warm geometry of her plaid covering, her bare feet so squarely placed on the plane of the floor, her stoic countenance. This is not a solipsistic exercise by her husband, who sits in solemn ease on a Thonet chair, his artist’s hands folded. His serious mien tells me that he is sharing everything that brings cohesion and meaning to his life.

There is both harmony and tension in the symmetry of the *Triptych*. Art both connects and divides. Hours required for creation are solitary, and the engraver’s art is among the most concentrated. The worktable, given pride of place in the central panel, could be both bridge and barrier here. Is it just coincidence that the word *solitude* in the *Triptych*’s one-point perspective rides at the vanishing point?

As Saint Jerome in his study, surrounded by tomes, hourglass and scissors, or Joseph in Campin’s *Mérode Altarpiece* with his augur, nails, and hammer, or as Merchant Giszze in Holbein’s portrait, the painter Dinnerstein, in E. H. Gombrich’s words, sets out to “characterize a sitter through his setting.”

Are we not fascinated with the “tools of the trade?” Would not viewers of all ages want to know what those “things” are for, the calipers, the palette knife, the engraving tools, the loop? And what of the fruits of the plane tree, tactile baubles gathered on a recent walk, perhaps. “Who lives in all those houses?” children might ask, and note that drawings like their own preside equally with the great masters. Table legs and radiators are a small child’s landscape, but mother and father are paramount in any vista, here, the tactile corduroy, the blue velour, that ample lap with its welcoming bright plaid. The mystery for them will not be a “fantasy,” or an oversimplified rendition of the

complex forms they see every day. Theirs will be curiosity, recognition, and comfort. They know what is true.

Via the replicated items affixed to the wall, we are informed by the artist's most iconic images, transfixed by his inclusive homage to many mentors which include Käthe Kollwitz, Edwin Dickinson, Holbein, Ingres, Seurat, Degas, Vermeer.

It has been put forth that there is an affinity in Dinnerstein's *Triptych* with northern European painting, the Flemings Jan van Eyck, Memling, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hugo van der Goes, among others. Yes, the attention to and validation of interior objects and ambiance, the distant landscapes through a window, and other similarities can be found. But the Flemish subjects are most often engaged either with one another, or a biblical or social event. They are looking into some interior dimension and only rarely seem to seek our own.

I prefer to see a strong affinity with early American folk portraiture, and would place this *Triptych* squarely in that lineage, a lineage with titles like *Gentleman Holding Oboe*, or *The Family at Home*. The unaffected directness of husband and wife reminds me of the concentrated dignity of the early pioneers and of our Native Americans, as they held their poses long for the camera's flash, in a serious claim on posterity, if not immortality.

Our itinerant artists were not untutored, but with uncomplicated purpose they represented their subjects to the best of their ability, included their significant possessions, the view through windows or curtains to their exterior environments. These artists' use of strong local color, of patterned surfaces, an undefined light source with lack of cast shadows, clearly delineated spaces and symmetry, the whole perceived and translated without subjective equivocation or intentional abstraction, could also be attributions of *The Fulbright Triptych*.

Richard Wilbur has written a poem called "Praise in Summer," in which he chastises himself, the poet, for elaborating on a theme or object in an attempt to magnify it, which only "perverts our praise to uncreation . . ." and results in "wrenching things away." He writes, "Does sense so stale that it must needs derange/ The world to know it?"

Abstract expressionism, among other forms, is often equated with intensity of passion and emotion, elevating it in this fashion above the likes of Ingres, van Eyck, Dürer, or Piero della Francesca. I might contend that in the attempt to delineate what we see, within the heights of our limitations, we pay homage to things *as they are*. Representational artists can be equally passionate in their mode of praiseful regard.

I feel Wilbur's "praiseful eye" in all of Dinnerstein's work.

The Quaker philosopher John Woolman wrote that there is a principle which is pure, "deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity."

Such was Simon Dinnerstein's heart, when he painted *The Fulbright Triptych*.



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