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Gabriel Prell

OTTO SCHNEID

THE PAINTER

The world of Otto Schneid is one of mysticism which is the outcome of conflict and search for a solution. His symbols, while thoroughly realistic, have about them an aura of ancient civilizations. One senses a personal mythology being brought back to life. The figures, sweeping in concept, possess not only strength, but a kind of glowing intimacy. His pastel, for example, of the prophet Ezekiel, shows a surpassing nobility, a universal comprehension as it were of things known and unknown. The prophet appears here with an astounding anatomical accuracy, the spiritual values not losing thereby an unusual keenness, their balanced form.

It is of interest to note here, that Degas, for all his greatness in the art of pastel paintings, was rather the unique master of intimate charm. Otto Schneid, on the other hand, is the creator of a pastel possessing monumental and rock-like qualities.

Yet his painting, "Head," representing a thoughtful, sad Jew, has something delicate and clean about it; there is great humility as well as tenderness here. Also, Schneid's "Head of a Prophet" has a royal splendour of color, together with insight and poetic sensibility.

Otto Schneid is mainly a humanist in his art. The human element is the central pivot of his intellectual world. His means of conveying his experiences are rather expressionistic. In his oil painting "Job," the dominating figure is conceived as being faceless. In an almost weird manner, the sorrow and despond-

ency characteristic of this mighty personality finds an unbelievably strong "articulation" in the toes and arms of the subject. Of the three figures of his friends, one represents the unshakeable believer, painted in joyless red; the other, in soft yellow, is affectionate, sympathetic, and seems completely to identify himself with Job's sufferings; the third man, in a green turban, is the silent "neutralist," who gives final form and cohesion to the trio. Though dramatically constructed and comprehensive, the painting is not devoid of a deeply lyric note.

This element is even more apparent in "The Visions of Ezekiel." Added here, however, is what could be described as monumental mysticism. This composition is an awesome representation, on a large scale, of some of Ezekiel's prophecies. The rising of the dead is here depicted in almost anatomical detail. The bones becoming flesh, flesh being transformed into men, the gradual return to life — all display penetrating insight as well as moving majesty. The circle beginning with death ends with the figure of a nude woman heading the resurrected ones while face to face with the prophet. It is to be noted that this female image is not based on the Biblical text, and was freely invented by the artist.

Another Biblical painting is "Jacob's Dream." It is not a conventional conception of this motif in that, that no ladder is visible. We do see Jacob asleep, reclining on the stone, yet his eyes are open, and above him pass successively generations that once lived, the faithfully portrayed ancestors of his own. The dream-like mood is reminiscent of a symphonic poem in the flow and tone of the colors employed.

A stirring painting, symbolic as it were of a non-realistic realism, is "David-Orpheus." Kind David and Orpheus, the Greek semi-divine hero, are here represented as one. While this figure plays on the cello, such legendary animals, as the wolf and the lamb, the tiger and the kid, all derived from Isaiah's prophecy, pass around him. This event takes place not on terra firma but somewhere

in an indefinable, both diurnal and nocturnal, heaven. This is a messianic concept, conceived by an artist who always seeks the mystery hovering beyond the recognizable veil.

Another aspect of a Biblical story may be discerned in "Jacob and the Angel." However, no angel is seen here. Instead, two whitish-yellow gigantic hands appear on a bluish-black and rose background. One is blessing him, the other sprains his hip. Night is about to vanish; the dawn is approaching.

His "Self-portrait with "Thorns" in a way emphasizes Schneid's search for humanity, God or other forces that may be extant in his cosmology. We see him here surrounded by a thicket of thorns; he attempts to cut through them. The hands touching the thorns are eloquent with a desire to free themselves, while the face itself expresses both sorrow and doubt. Perhaps, in a sense, even acceptance of fate.

Otto Schneid's subject of which he never wearies and which is a predominating theme in his work, is the tragedy of the Jews and all other peoples persecuted under the Nazi regime. He, perhaps more than any other artist, has given more of himself to a powerful interpretation of the catastrophe in deeply human terms. Here mystery becomes reality, reality turns into a new form of mystery. It is also noteworthy that a direct communication may be discerned between his paintings of prophets, various Biblical subjects, and the unprecedented destiny that overtook mankind in our century. This may best be exemplified by the painting of "Jonah and the Fish." Surrounded by a threatening, dark sea, swallowed by the fish, he is in a dilemma to which he does not even seek a solution. Eyes keep following him everywhere; empty, glaring, they stare out at him from an abyss, and he is unable to return their gaze. He is frozen, chained to endless, unquerable anguish, his hands and feet expressing complete surrender to the super-human power.

I recall the artist once saying to me that merely for an impression he would never touch brush or canvas. Indeed, in his landscapes and portraits as well is felt the same lyric spirit as in his monumentally conceived compositions.

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Note.

This bibliography is incomplete. It does not include lost manuscripts,
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