

About My Paintings, Mark Baum, ca. 1963

When my paintings were first exhibited in public, the terms “self-taught,” “naïve,” and “primitive” appeared in the reviews. I will discuss the “naïve” and “primitive” later; first I would like to set the record straight on “self-taught.” I did have a certain amount of formal training. I studied at the National Academy of Design for a year or a year and one-half, in 1924 and 1925. The following summer of 1926 I studied at the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, Massachusetts under Charles W. Hawthorne, after which I began painting on my own. I enjoyed painting landscapes both in the city and in the country. The scene around me was enchanting, vibrant. I tried to capture its vivacity in my painting, and went about it in the most direct way.

I developed a pattern of living entirely based on life’s necessities. I had learned a trade and worked half the year as a furrier while the remainder of the year I painted. Being a landscape painter I enjoyed painting out-of-doors, thereby gaining an intimacy with my subject. During the months of February and March I left New York for Georgia, its atmosphere being relatively unspoiled, and the climate permitting me to paint out-of-doors. When it was warm enough for outdoor work, I returned to New York.

Toward the end of 1929 I had my first exhibition at the Whitney Galleries. I showed a series of watercolors, three of which Juliana R. Force bought for the Whitney Museum. I continued working with watercolors, and also began to paint with oils and slowly gave preference to oils. I exhibited some of these early oil paintings in a group show at the Marie Harriman Gallery around 1930 and 1931; then I exhibited a group of paintings in a three-man show at the Downtown Gallery. During this period, I took three of my paintings to Alfred E. Stieglitz for evaluation at An American Place. Much to my surprise he bought one for his own collection. I felt that I had received a great honor.

My pattern of living depended on working as a furrier for half a year, but when the Great Depression came, there was no work in the fur trade. I was given work by the WPA, and during that time worked almost exclusively for them. Since I am a slow painter, I was not able to accumulate any appreciable number of paintings for myself.

In 1940 when my work with the WPA came to an end, I resumed my old way of living but with this great difference: I had a family. I had married in 1933. My wife, a substitute teacher, became an elementary school teacher and in the course of time received her Ed.D. and is now assistant professor of education at Brooklyn College. We had two sons; one was born in 1936 and the other in 1939. I gave much attention and time to my family, choosing to do so perhaps because I myself came from a divorced family. Nevertheless, I gave my sons a great deal of love simply because I loved them. It was a great experience for me to watch them grow. When they were small, I gave them care, and when they were in high school and college, guidance. Each was graduated from Harvard *summa cum laude*. The eldest is now assistant professor of mathematics at Princeton University and the youngest is working for his Ph.D. in psychology at Harvard.

In 1941, however, I resumed my trips to Georgia. Once again I was able to devote my entire energies to landscape painting. Two years later in 1947 I had an exhibition at the St. Etienne Gallery, and then in 1948 at the Laurel Gallery. Each of these was a one-man show. Further, in this period I participated in an international exhibition organized by the State Department. I contributed three paintings which were exhibited throughout every country in western Europe. Again the terms “naïve” and “primitive” appeared in the reviews. Naïve I never was. But although I was not a primitive painter, I did stand in a certain relationship to painting. Indeed, every reviewer when describing my work was forced to present certain modifications to the term “primitive.” And when Harriet and Sidney Janis, knowing my work, then at work on a book of primitive painters, came to see me, they, too, realized this and later stated in their book that I was too advanced for a primitive painter. I did not fit into the category of “primitive;” nor did I fit into the particular style of current landscape painting. I tried to give to my paintings the vitality of something captured in a heightened and intense vision. I believed in painting what was natural and tried to make my own means of expression as natural as the hand-mind-eye cooperation which I employed; that is, as natural as the hand and mouth rhythm while eating. I delighted in life and found pleasure in giving this delight to my paintings. At times I was criticized for expressing neither the suffering of the depression years nor the Nazi threat. My answer was that it was more meaningful to uphold and enrich this life and that it would be more worthwhile to defend it from the Nazis. This positive attitude lasted many a year. It did not come from a conscious idea to portray the positive in life; rather it was a natural part of my personality.

Unfortunately toward the end of 1948 and the beginning of 1949, I could no longer affirm anything. I was in crisis. I had lost faith in my painting; for that matter in any kind of painting. Painting seemed worthless. Many factors produced this crisis. Among them was Abstract Expressionism, which was moving to the forefront in American painting, and to which I was bitter and antagonistic, not to its originators but to the opportunists, the imposters who practiced this solely for their own reward. I watched them cling to it. I watched them being rewarded. To a moralist, which I am, this was very painful. My mood was one of sorrow, of depression. And I went to the gray countryside of Pennsylvania’s mining region. An accident brought me to the heart of that bleak region. My car got stuck on the road and a miner going home helped me and took me to the patch where he lived. That patch, similar to the space occupied by farmers in a village, measured two to three blocks square and contained one hundred and three families. I spent all of my painting time for the next three years in that patch or its vicinity. That gloomy landscape in various somber colors and shades of gray had a soothing effect on me. The landscapes I painted there were unlike the pleasant landscapes of earlier years. I exhibited some of these paintings at the Salpeter Gallery in 1953. The exhibition was not successful. But by then my interest in the coal mines had been exhausted. I felt something new to be stirring in me.

I had returned to landscape painting but in a different way. There was something new which I wished to realize in my painting. The paintings of the mining region like my previous landscapes dealt with the physical world, flavored slightly by the spiritual. My search, at that point not very conscious, was for an approach to the spiritual in painting.

During this period I looked at a painting I had done in 1948. It was a painting with a diagonal staircase and differed from the other paintings in that I had left out most of the house which supported the staircase. Thus, predominant in the painting was the staircase, which I realized to be from the point of view of aesthetics a diagonal movement across the canvas; a movement that was composed of one and the same units, a movement that had direction. Several paintings followed, all made up of one and the same unit arranged in directional movements, either diagonal or horizontal. They were derivatives from staircases and banisters, and so conditioned by these paintings that they presented only a method or an approach. All the problems of painting remained. I began to reconstruct all my painting, to scrutinize my every movement and step on canvas, for I thought that my new method possessed the potential of developing into a style.

Not being a formalist I am neither satisfied with balance—symmetrical or asymmetrical; nor am I impressed with ingenious innovations or manipulations. I seek content, or to be more exact, substance. Once more the painting of the diagonal staircase in 1948 was of help. Looking at it, I felt myself uplifted. I realized that it was the same upward movement one actually experiences before a staircase; one feels himself somehow drawn up. One experiences an up-movement (physical) which corresponds to an aspirational movement within his emotional life. I realized that having expressed this aspirational sensation through a staircase, I could express other feelings or emotional states through different types and patterns of movement on canvas.

For instance, if I were to state that I see myself writing, I would not mean that I see myself physically, but that I see an image of myself; it is not possible to see oneself physically. Thus, once I began to paint that image, I would be painting something outside the physical realm, thereby dealing in painting with a spiritual image rather than a physical fact. A whole new world is opened up. I can deal with the images arising out of all human spiritual life, the coming of a feeling or emotion and its dispersal or passing. If I see myself welcoming a beautiful day or if I see myself depressed by a gloomy day, at least two images calling forth different patterns would present themselves. Since human thought and human feeling are not static but flowing, the directional movements in my painting can capture and create corresponding movements. This approach allows nearly every image formed in our minds and generated by our daily emotional living to become renderable subject matter. Color, space, density of an area, and length of movement are the elements from which to build a parallel to a particular emotional experience. Thus, I am developing a style of painting based on the organization of one and the same unit into groups, phrases, and directional movements, paralleling the flow of human emotional life and drawing sustenance from my spiritual-aesthetic life enriched by religious thinking.

I have come to realize through time the validity of religious thinking, and I realized the difference between the related ideas of knowing thyself and facing one's maker. The attitude of facing one's maker is the superior attitude for it assumes that one is a part of a big world order rather than emphasizing the peculiarities on one's personality. Too often concepts of religious thinking atrophy beneath dead layers of formalized thinking. Yet those concepts are functionally important to our daily creative life. An example is the concept of perfection. No one really wants to be perfect, but the concept of perfection establishes a goal or a standard in one's life.

A verisimilitude is found in the function of the concept omniscience. By adopting the concept omniscience truth assumes a new meaning in our daily life, and more importantly, a new meaning in our creative life. For there is no use to hiding anything or pretending. One may as well be completely truthful. These concepts give a better tone to our lives. The concepts of prayer, strife for faith, etc., are the subject matter of my painting.

Now I do most of my painting in Maine in a remodeled barn as a studio. There I am much more able to concentrate, to sustain an idea and a feeling longer. There, too, I can live with greater intensity, absorbing the greenness of spring and the whiteness of winter, the fullness of summer, and all the colors of autumn. Absorbing this richness of life about me into myself, I can give the best of me to my painting.

If there is a way toward human greatness, and if it be the kind that is independent of social approval, and if it be the kind that is achievable in our human life, then this is my way. The essential elements of this way of living would seem to be: to discard all pettiness; to hold in one's awareness the vast and ever-expanding capabilities of the human mind and the appreciation of all life; to live all one's emotional life—to live a happy day step by step in its fullness, to live a gloomy day step by step in its fullness; to rejoice in joy and to absorb sorrow; to give fully and to receive humanly. To live thusly is to feed the substance of one's paintings.

Concurrently, two religious concepts meaningful to me are: the state of blessedness and the act of blessing. The concept of the act of blessing is of course related to wishing well. Yet it carries a more embracing significance. It implies a desire to rid oneself of selfishness and self-interest, and to give of one's aesthetic ability to the utmost; to give unsparingly.