

Mark Baum (1903 – 1997): The Arc of his Painting Career

When Mark arrived in New York City from Poland in 1919, he was 16 years old, and had no chance to pursue his studies because he had to work to support himself. He eventually found work in a furrier's and later rose to the most skilled job of cutter. Looking for a creative outlet compatible with his job, he hit upon painting when he was in his twenties. He began with watercolors and received some guidance at the Cape Cod school in Provincetown and briefly at the National Academy of Design (which he rated as worse than useless, because he had to unlearn everything they taught him there), but was primarily self-taught. At first, he painted portraits and landscapes, but soon concentrated on landscapes, and these were shown and sold well.

Mark switched to oil paints around 1930. He continued painting landscapes, but became well known for paintings of city scenes ("cityscapes"). In the 1930s and 1940s, he painted mostly out of doors. Since the fur season included most of the warm months, he would travel to the warmer climate of Georgia during the winter and paint landscapes there. From the time I was four, my brother and I would go with Mark for the fall and attend school there. The last trip to Georgia was in 1948.

As the 1940s wore on, Mark began to find the constraints of outdoor representational painting too confining. He began to experiment with indoor painting and compositions from his imagination. In 1948, he painted "Aspirational Staircase," but set it aside because he wasn't sure what new avenue it could open up. He continued representational painting, indoors and outdoors, but his mood was low. In the early 1950s, he spent four summers in the anthracite coal mining region of Pennsylvania, living in a coal-miners patch. The paintings he produced during this period were dramatic but dark; when shown, they were not well received.

In the mid-1950s, Mark began experimenting in earnest, producing more abstract and expressive paintings that drew on his landscapes. He realized that he had always been interested in staircases and porches; many, many of his landscapes included these architectural elements. Even the coal-mining paintings included the same sort of diagonal elements. He concluded that stairs were a good symbol for human aspiration and could be used to convey ideas about spiritual life. For a period of about two years, he painted abstract landscapes with "vegetation" and staircases leading to lights that symbolized spiritual attainments.

From the beginning, he sought to capture spiritual and emotional themes. He often gave the paintings titles like "Prayer," "Meditation," "Invocation," "In Search of Faith," and "Approaching Certainty."

A breakthrough occurred in 1958. Looking at "Aspirational Staircase" one day, he realized that, after all, a staircase is a diagonal movement of directional repeated elements. He created a star-like element, based on steps, risers, and balustrades. He repeated these to make movements and, freed from the representational staircase, began at once to experiment with this new method.

The new direction was exhilarating. In 1961, Mark moved from New York to Maine and proceeded to explore the possibilities of his new vision. He began experimenting with differently shaped elements and expanded his use of color. By the late 1960s, he discovered a

satisfactory shape that he used for the rest of his life. This development marks the end of the early non-representational period and the beginning of the middle non-representational period.

For ten years, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, Mark pursued hierarchical compositions in which not only elements repeated, but groups of elements and groups of groups too. These were generally rendered in bright colors reminiscent of Kandinsky and Mondrian, from whom Mark said he took inspiration. As this decade elapsed, his compositions left more open space and included large, sweeping movements. The hierarchical themes were replaced with larger groupings of elements containing subtle tonal and color contrasts that promoted movement both across the canvas and in depth. His use of negative space, too, became more subtle and powerful.

In the late 1970s, he did a series of paintings in which the elements define rectangular shapes (sometimes bent) that float and dance with one another. This development marks the beginning of the late non-representational period, which lasted for almost twenty years. In this new period, Mark increasingly cut loose from linearity and reached for greater and greater movement and expression with large flowing shapes, complex repeating clusters, and gradations of tone and color that create dancing rhythms within the larger movements. He reached his height in the 1980s, when he was still able to paint each element with precision. Toward the end of his life, in the 1990s, he was less able to execute the compositions precisely, but the compositions themselves remain varied and exciting.

As you view these paintings, you will see both the evolution of Mark's visual thinking and the continuity that ran through them. Comparing the compositions of the representational paintings and the non-representational paintings, one can see similar spatial arrangements and similar repeating patterns, always carefully executed. One may enjoy also the emotional and spiritual expressions that run through them all. I hope you enjoy these paintings as much as I do.

William M. Baum (Billy)

Youngest son of Mark Baum