Birds as a Source of Pictorial Creativity

Sylvia Bornarth

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
BIRDS AS A SOURCE OF PICTORIAL CREATIVITY

Sylvia Farrer Bornarth
Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts
in the College
of Fine and Applied Arts of the
Rochester Institute of Technology

December 16, 1966

Prof. Fred Meyer, Advisor
Table of Contents

Index of Illustrations..........................iii
Introduction........................................iv

Exposition

Pictorial Use of Birds in History.............1

The Sources of Twentieth Century Artists: Their Visual Exploration of the Use of Natural Forms........................7

Morris Graves: Birds as His Source of Creativity........................................14

Birds as a Source of Pictorial Creativity in this Thesis.................................18

Observations and Conclusion....................21

Illustrations........................................22

Bibliography........................................34
Index of Illustrations

Paintings:

Bird ................................................. 23
Skeletal Forms ......................................... 24
Little Seen Bird ....................................... 25
Birds in Flight ........................................ 26
Shore Birds ........................................... 27
Benedicite, omnes volucres caeli, Domino ... 28

Drawings ............................................. 29

Prints:

Birds in Flight ...................................... 31
Ostriches 3 ........................................... 32
Owl ..................................................... 33
Introduction

The purpose of the thesis is to use the theme of birds as source of pictorial creativity.

This topic has been a theme of much of my work for several years. In the thesis I have attempted to broaden my creative experiences with the subject and to explore new outlets for these experiences by further exploration of the bird and by research and study of other artists who found nature as a source for their inspirations.

I have attempted to express my discoveries in drawing, printmaking and painting. It is my hope that I have expressed through this thesis a greater understanding of the need of the artist to have an awareness of the experiences of other artists and to be open to new ideas and discoveries in his own work.
Pictorial Use of Birds in History

Birds as a source of pictorial creativity can be found throughout history. In the Oriental cultures many references to birds can be found in both art and literature. According to ancient Chinese belief, birds and flowers are associated. Examples such as the swallow and willow, sparrow and bamboo, dove and plum, phoenix and kiri, cuckoo and orange, and the nightingale and plum, can be found in both literature and paintings.

The bird has always been a favorite subject of Japanese painting. A beautiful example is Kano Motonobu's (1476-1559) ink paintings of ducks. Another painting of his is one with a crane surrounded by other birds and a flowering tree and waves breaking over rocks. On the other side are smaller birds and flowers. The birds in these paintings are not literal representations of birds but are more idealistic and decorative.
The most famous bird in Oriental culture is the legendary phoenix. There has been much literary evidence for the appearance of this bird: "Masudi writes in the tenth century that the legendary bird 'anga was depicted on carpets and in public baths." The Arabs believed that whoever came under the shadow of this bird would become king or queen. Graeco-Roman writers believed that the phoenix died either by inflicting its own wounds or by attracting the heat of the sun's rays. References to the phoenix can be found in Oriental paintings such as Fairy and Phoenix, an ink painting by Wu Wei. The artists' imaginations seemed to have had a wide range in depicting this creature as evidenced by the many different kinds of pictures of him. The phoenix as a Christian symbol represents faith, constancy and the Resurrection of Christ.

Birds, before they were broken down into species, represented the "winged soul." In Christian belief, birds suggested the spiritual as opposed to the material. Later on, specific birds came to represent

1 Jairazbholy, R.A., Oriental Influences in Western Art, p. 261.
different aspects of Christianity. The black bird was the darkness of sin and temptation. The cock, because of his early morning crowing, symbolized watchfulness. The crane is known for its vigilance, loyalty, good life and works, and good order in the monastic life.

It is supposed that each night the cranes gather in a circle around their king. Certain cranes are selected to keep watch and must, at all cost, avoid falling asleep. To this end each guardian crane stands on one foot, while raising the other. In the raised foot it holds a stone which, should the crane fall asleep, would drop on the other foot and so awaken it.2

It would seem that in Christian symbolism the birds' meaning depends on their habits and bearings.

Birds have also played a large and decorative role in American folk art. John James Audubon is perhaps the most famous recorder of birds and other nature subjects. His work has always been highly regarded for its precise detailing; his prints and paintings are collectors' items today. Rebelling against the painting of his day and influenced by the dramatic, Audubon, in his detailed work over-

dramatized nature. It is this over-dramatization that makes his work so fascinating today. By taking the liberty with his subjects through his close scrutiny of their details, Audubon gave us more than a factual account of a bird or plant.

Birds in American folk art were also depicted in other ways. A trip to the country will bring into view many examples of delightful weather vanes topped by farm animals and brief pastoral scenes as well as by birds. Besides indicating wind direction, the vanes were a favorite form of decoration.

The white hen with straight yellow legs and bold black eye, seen in profile against the sky, with blue showing through the large hole and small crescent slits, was a jaunty bit of decoration that enlivened the whole farm landscape. The effect achieved through a flair for functional design and a natural vitality of execution, as seen in these provincial weathervanes, would be hard to surpass in the most finished pieces of academic sculpture.3

The weathervane is the ultimate in simplicity and is one of the most lasting forms of American folk art. Picasso said: "Cocks have always been seen

3 Lipman, Jean, American Folk Art, p. 51.
but never as well as in American weathervanes."4

Among the most widely used weathervanes and most interesting as representative of a native art, were those that took the forms of the well-loved American emblems - Columbia, Liberty, the American eagle, and Uncle Sam. In England weathervanes were commonly made in aristocratic heraldic design. The fine public buildings and rural school houses constitute what Rita Wellman, writing of weathervane designs for House Beautiful, designates as "a new and engraviting heraldry, a heraldry of democracy."5

Another popular use of the bird in American folk art is the hunters' decoy. If possible the decoy was of even a simpler design than the weathervane bird. Today we can buy a new decoy which is beautiful in its minute detailing of feathers and color areas. The decoys of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, are not as elaborate as the decoys made today.

In speaking of the loon:

The long, flat shape and black and white pattern were dictated by its practical function as decoy; but its maker, though he did not do so deliberately, created a carved form any modern sculptor would be proud to claim...these decoys are made in the basic forms of birds that they were intended to lure, but they are far from literal copies. Made with the simplest

4 Ibid., pp. 54-55.
5 Ibid., p. 53.
tools, the decoys were executed with the non-realistic attitude on the part of the maker that characterizes the primitive and abstract art in which design predominates. This is the chief reason that they have been admired by modern artists. The old decoys are so formalized as to have an almost twentieth century air, and examples like the primitive blue heron and black plover, have been compared to the forms of Mestrovic and other modern sculptors. The most interesting part of the early carvers, who had somehow come to the conclusion that literal reproductions did not attract the birds as effectively as decoys created as abstract symbols.6

In conclusion it can readily be seen that birds have played a role in pictorial history as an element to evoke an emotional response or as a decorative, utilitarian object. In both instances the birds have been treated in an abstract manner suggesting perhaps that reality is not always the way we see it.

---

6 Ibid., p. 134.
The Sources of Twentieth Century Artists; Their Visual Exploration of the Use of Natural Forms.

Artists have always used nature as a source for their work. Nature has many forms besides birds but the artist's problem is still the same: how to interpret and relate these sources of inspiration to their own experience.

An example of this interpretation of nature can be seen in the work of Willem DeKooning, whose most famous paintings are those of women. His use of women and the human form is quite recognizable in his earlier works such as his two paintings, Acrobat, 1936, and Seated Woman, 1939. Both of these paintings are beginnings of abstraction with the later the more abstract of the two. During the 1950's, DeKooning painted a series of "women" paintings which are further abstractions although the figure is still discernible. DeKooning said of these paintings: "I always started out with the idea of a young person, a beautiful woman. I noticed them change. Somebody would step out - a middle-aged
woman. I didn't mean to make them such monsters." He has taken the seductiveness of the female form and has turned it into abstraction...into simple elements of the figure. In his paintings he has emphasized the individual parts; the arm, shoulder, or head and used these as independent existing parts, resulting in a completely abstract painting.

In the late 1950's his paintings, using the same shapes and forms, became even more simplified. September Morn, 1958, is an example of this progression from realism to biomorphism to geometric abstraction. Thomas B. Hess says of DeKooning:

Throughout his career DeKooning has invented, enlarged and perfected an extraordinary repertory of shapes, some simple, some complex, and in the work of inventing and perfecting them he has gone back continually to older shapes, recreating new ones from them, as if he were impelled to bring a whole life's work into each section of each new picture.

Another artist who was engrossed with nature is Arshile Gorky. Gorky was a self-styled artist.

---

7 Janus, Harriet, and Blesh, Rudi, DeKooning, p. 9.
8 Hess, Thomas B., Willem DeKooning.
He wanted to look like and play the role of the artist. In his attempts to do this he also became an emulator of first Gauguin, then Picasso. His work was not his own but a reproduction of their forms, their ideas and motifs. Later, in his associations with the Surrealists, he began to understand that picture-making involved the searching of one's self, of his own character and imagination. Instead of looking back on art, of what had been done before, he began to study nature. This was Gorky's awakening.

Through his study and use of cubism, Gorky evolved into a more emotional kind of painting. Gorky's work of the late thirties has been compared to Masson's but is considered a stronger and more forceful kind of painting.

To a notable degree, working in his new form (organically inspired version of Cubism) freed Gorky from the studio as subject matter; shapes now appear as symbols. His imagery begins to reach back into the verbal world of poetry and into the erotic. The bird is adopted as a strong motif (the bird's eye had shown up in earlier pen and ink drawings) and the
rhythm of the shapes affirms the area of action...9

In the forties, Gorky turned to nature with close studies of grasses and flowers which brought forth a burst of spontaneity and fantasy. Elaine DeKooning writes of Gorky during this period:

Accents of bright color suddenly lose their meaning as flowers and become crevices, imparting a strange voluptuous meaning to the surrounding pale, thinly washed surfaces; or plant forms change into human organs and a riotous pageant is transformed into a desolate landscape strewn with viscera.10

Gorky's investigation of the unknown, brought new experiences for him. These new experiences range from the original subject matter, and its growth and transformation, and the artist's interpretation of the subject matter.

For him, as for the Action Painters, the canvas was not a surface upon which to present an image, but a "mind" through which the artist discovers, by means of manual and mental hypotheses, signs of what he is or might be.11

---

9 Rosenberg, Harold, Arshile Gorky, pp. 80-81.
10 Ibid., p. 104.
11 Ibid., p. 118.
Joan Miro and Paul Klee are two more artists who were involved with nature and particularly birds as creative sources for their work. They are both concerned with forms and shapes that have resulted from this association with nature. Walter Erben, in discussing Miro's *The Farm*, writes:

The organization of the motifs, the relation established between the shapes and objects, with their precisely ascertainable reality content, still derive from the Montroig period; so does the way in which the component elements are grouped tapestry fashion. In the earlier pictures, we can already discern a tendency for these 'signs' increasingly taking possession of the picture surface. As we look at the painting we have only to forget the identity of the shapes with those of the subject matter in order to observe the 'abstract' signs emerging alongside the representational elements of the picture.12

Although *The Farm* is not what we today would term abstract, all of the indications are there to point to what we could expect from his later work. As Miro continued to paint, his object became more abstract, sometimes approaching fantasy and extreme simplification. *Woman and Bird in Front of the Sun*, 1945, shows this extreme simplification

of shapes, use of lines and bold texture. The sun is a favorite symbol of Miro's and can be found in many different shapes and forms. A later painting, Woman and Bird in the Moonlight, 1949, again uses symbols, this time stars and moon, also found in many of Miro's works. Again he has used a combination of lines and solid areas in forms that can be recognized in other paintings.

In comparison with Miro, Klee is not considered a symbolic painter. Klee writes in his Creative Credo:

Art does not render the visible, but makes visible...we used to represent things visible on earth which we enjoyed seeing or would like to see. Now we reveal the reality of visible things, and thereby express the belief that visible reality is merely an isolated phenomenon latently outnumbered by other realities.13

Klee felt that nature was the most important aspect of man - that man was nature and also a part of nature. However a visible approach was not enough for Klee:

...but the optical physical approach to nature is outdated. The artist of today expands his knowledge of an object by

including its inner being, its cross-sections (anatomy), its vital functions (physiology), the laws that govern its life (biology), and finally its relationship, intuitively conceived and depicted, with the earth and other planets (terrestrial roots and cosmic unity, statics and dynamics, weight and bouyancy.)

Klee's symbols were used to explain his meaning and to connect the picture with its title. In his painting, The Trout Stream, his use of symbols can be seen in the sun and stars...many of his paintings have an arrow in them which serves its function in showing the viewer which way to look.

In all of the four painters discussed, DeKooning, Gorky, Miro and Klee, nature, in all aspects in addition to birds, was the main source of inspiration. All four artists, in using nature, broke down the shapes and forms they found and reassembled them according to their own ideas. Nature provided the starting point from which the artists could proceed in their own directions.

14 Ibid., p. 183.
Morris Graves: Birds as His Source of Creativity

Morris Graves is of the Pacific Northwest School, a regional group of artists who use the relationship between man and nature as the theme of their work. It is this unity of nature and man that concerns Graves.

Several sources were an influence to Graves throughout the phases of his art. Mark Tobey was perhaps the most formative influence. Chinese and Japanese paintings and bronzes and in particular, the spirit of Zen Buddhism were sources of inspiration. That Zen Buddhism has influenced Graves' work is not surprising when one understands the extent to which it has governed his personal life and habits.

Zen stresses the meditative, stilling the surface of the mind and letting the inner surface bloom...Graves feels that activity obliterates the meditative vision which comes from living alone in nature. He is scornful of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and believes that the duty of man is lifting his own consciousness so that knowledge of his origin and destination is in some way reached.15

15 Wight, Frederick S., Morris Graves, p. 19.
Frederick S. Wight, in his acquaintance with Graves was impressed by several writings on Grave's wall:

Powerful and full of feeling
Subtle and expressive of thought
Light as floating clouds
Vigorous as a startled dragon
His ideas are like clouds floating in space
or a stream hurrying along—perfectly natural.
Zen means for man to behold his own
fundamental of nature
What I call painting is no more than a
Careless fantasy of the
brush, not attempt at resemblance
but only at the diversion of the painter

(Quotations from Chinese painters of the Sung period which concludes with the words of NiTsan.)

Grave's style has changed through his work but
this change is more of an attitude or way of thinking. At first he was interested in the decorative surface
of the painting but this surface interest deepened
and became a subjective interest. He began to
intensify his thinking into smaller realms instead
of larger. He went from the broad characteristics
of the painting into the character of the work,
then into the personality and mystery that became

16 Ibid., p. 2.
the fundamental element of his work. This mystery behind Graves' work is the universal mystery of man in nature and "man is nature." (Paul Klee) It is the mystery of how and why man relates to himself and his surroundings.

...images...will establish relationships with each other (and with us) because of their nature and not because of their position...the mature Graves is not concerned with problems of gravity, structure and places as they affect other forms of art.\textsuperscript{17}

All of Graves' paintings depend on nature and the mysteries behind nature and the influence of these mysteries on the artist and the viewer. One of his most famous paintings is \textit{Little Known Bird of the Inner Eye}. Graves says of this painting:

The images seen within the space of the inner eye are as clear as 'seeing stars' before your eyes if you get up suddenly. It is certain that they are subjective, yet there is the absolute feeling that they are outside around your head. This is the nearest analogy to the spatializing of the inner eye.\textsuperscript{18}

In each of Graves' birds he is dramitizing...\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 32.
a human condition. Woundedness-helplessness and solitude are found in Blind Bird, Wounded Scoter, Wounded Gull, Wounded Ibis. Graves said, "The bird is a symbol of solitude, the shore, of the environment of childhood...The way down to the shore is here. But this is missing the heart of the matter. I am not so much of a naturalist as some people suppose." 19

Wight, in his summary of Graves, says:

...Graves gives us an image or a symbol loose and all of in a void which has yet to be disciplined into time and space. This symbol exists in some antithetical contrast within itself, as between minnow and bird or fish and star, and the essential relationship, which carries the tension of the work, is between the symbol and ourselves, and in this sense, Graves is a religious artist. 20

19 Ibid., p. 32.
20 Ibid., p. 56.
Birds as a Source of Pictorial Creativity in this Thesis

The subject of this thesis has been one that I have been interested in for several years. For the past three or four years I have been using the bird as a source of reference for quick drawings and wash paintings in both oil and ink.

The birds used were either ones that were brought home by a cat or stuffed ones from the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences.

The mediums used for these quick studies were suitable in that they were adaptable to a rapid idea or a quick glance.

The Thesis has been a broadening experience giving me an opportunity to explore further my ideas about birds also work on a larger surface with a new medium (acrylic).

The actual studies for the final six paintings began last winter with a series of drawings from various sources including zoos, Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, photographs, and actual bird s. The work from photographs did not include copying the photo but using it as a reference. Many more
facets of the bird can be caught with a camera because of its speed. I feel that this was an essential and valid source from which to work.

While working in my minor, printmaking, I used the bird as a source for work in etching, lithography and woodcuts. In the six paintings for the Thesis I have tried to expand my exploration of the bird, to create in some cases, an impression of birdlife as a whole. In others I have taken the forms and shapes of the bird and interpreted them to relate to my own experiences in painting not only consciously and subconsciously but also physically, by the application of paint to canvas and allowing the forms to come by their own suggestion.

Birds have many facets to their existence. They fly, swim, fight, sing, breed and die. Sometimes they can be mysterious, like the midnight honk of a great blue heron on your roof - a noise which frightens the whole household (including the cat). Other times they can leave you saddened when you find that a Canadian goose is so faithful that he won't leave his mate, even
upon death. Happiness comes when you see the flocks of birds returning in the spring from the south; pity, in the spring when you find tiny dead birds unable to survive the long, hard winter.

Birds can bring back old memories, cause certain emotions and inspire future activity. I have tried to convey these memories, emotions and ideas in my paintings through the use of unusual shapes and form, composition, color, and painting technique.
Observations and Conclusions

Like the five artists I have mentioned, I too have attempted to find new meaning in natural forms. I have tried to convey the essence of my understanding with a personal interpretation of the many different facets of birds through painting, drawing and printmaking.

This searching for new ideas through the bird form has helped me to be more aware of the many other aspects of nature and their possibilities as sources for inspiration.

Throughout my research and study for this thesis I have become more convinced of the totality of nature and I agree completely with Klee that man is a part of nature and is nature.

I feel that the experience gained by the thesis project has been invaluable in my experience and will aid me in my future work. The greatest lesson that I have learned from this project is that research and study of the subject are essential for the artist.

He must acquaint himself as thoroughly as possible with his subject and not close his mind to future discoveries as his work progresses.
Skeletal Forms

This is a study of bird skeletons that resulted in a decorative design. The top part is the skeleton of the body, the lower part, the skeleton of the head.

Color is a personal choice chosen to enhance the decorative element of the painting. The flat background is in contrast to the character of the design, which is loose within its boundaries. Charcoal is used in some areas.
Little Seen Bird

Birds are taken for granted by most people but would be missed if they suddenly disappeared.

This painting began with negative and positive areas and a flat background. It developed into a cloud-filled sky, at time combining with and camouflaging the bird.

The transparency of medium lent itself to overlays of color washed to produce depth and surface interest.
Birds in Flight

This painting shows the graceful lineal quality of birds in flight. The use of the medium in its transparent form works to give the painting an airy feeling.
Shore Birds

This is a study of two shore birds, a pelican and a crane.

This painting uses both the transparent and opaque qualities of acrylic to achieve its surface qualities.

Here again the birds serve only to provide workable shapes and areas. Although the birds are recognizable, I feel the painting lends a mysterious quality to the crane and a humorous feeling to the pelican.
Benedicite, omnes volucres caeli, Domino

This painting is a culmination of the five preceding paintings. The medium is used both in its opaque and transparent forms.

In this completely abstract painting, I have tried to express the excitement and joy that can be found in observing nature. If the painting appears to be "loud," it is because of my desire to arouse in others an awareness of nature, and rejoice with them in this discovery; the discovery that nature, with birds as representatives, is everything, omnific, and eternal, and man is a part of this All.
Birds in Flight

This is an aquatint and a study of flying birds, using their forms in flight to create new shapes. This was done from the same sketch as the painting by the same name.
Ostriches 3

This is a lithograph of three ostriches. It is the enjoyment of the contrasting linear quality of the necks and legs to the rounded, fluffy quality of the birds’ bodies.
A lithograph of the study of the owl in flight.
Bibliography


Brown, G. Baldwin. The Art of the Cave Dweller. New York: R. V. Coleman. (Date ?).


