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Marion: a creative expression of personal reactions to environment

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MARION: A CREATIVE EXPRESSION OF PERSONAL REACTIONS TO ENVIRONMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
College of Fine and Applied Arts
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Harold Franklin Spencer
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INTRODUCTION

In July of 1964, a man stood looking at his surroundings. (Fig. 1) His thoughts turned to terms geographic, sociological, cultural, creative, expressive, color, and paint. One hundred and sixty-nine years before in September of 1795, another man stood looking at his surroundings. (5:8)* His thoughts must have centered around such terms as shelter, Indians, crops, fertile, forest. These surroundings were the same only in that it was the same spot on a sphere spinning in space and time—a spot called Marion. The 169 years, time, form the nucleus of this thesis for it is the heritage of Marion, 1964.

The purpose of this thesis is to creatively express personal reactions to environment through

*A numbered bibliography will be found at the back of the book. The first number refers to the bibliography placement. The second number gives the page reference.
the development of a series of paintings based on Marion, New York. It is a visual attempt to show man at work expressing his reactions to emotional stimuli. It contains people and animals, and is a specific kind of place with the mark of history. The intelligence of man pervades the unchecked emotion of the animal and the ebb and flow of nature's fluctuating elements. Stamped upon this reaction record is the mark of an individual—one of the multiple units of apartness that form existence.

PART I

Marion is a rural community in north western New York State, and is six miles due south of Lake Ontario. It covers 17,801 acres in the center of Wayne County. The township contains 2,000 people with the village serving as the center of activity. There are
800 people occupying 140 houses.  
(5:5)

The public school annually serves one thousand students and provides a community center for local gatherings. Five churches tend to spiritual needs for young and old alike, while three grocery stores and numerous small businesses take care of physical needs.

The land of Marion is the inheritance of the Seneca, one of the six nations making up the Iroquois Indians. It had been kept by them for centuries as a hunting ground. Streams teemed with fish while wooded hills and valleys abounded with animals.  
(18:1)

Father Dallion walked into this Eden in 1625 looking for lost souls. He was the vanguard of the Jesuit missionary coercion of the wilderness. For over a hundred years these Gallic priests
traversed a Christian wasteland preoccupied with saving the savage. 

(18:1)

France reluctantly withdrew her influence with the advent of the French and Indian War. The Seneca briefly settled into idyllic bliss. The revolution quickly followed and Americans spread outward over their land. This mighty and constant thrust penetrated the Seneca hunt land. Mad Anthony Wayne's defeat of the Indians in the west secured the land against savage reprisal. The Seneca humbled into history as Marion's first settler, Henry Lovell, arrived. (18:2)

The year was 1795 and this land held the promise of a resurrection for settler from the East. Timothy Smith and Daniel Powell soon joined the Lovells to form the beginning of Marion. (5:8) The land was cleared and more folks came as the years went by. Roads were built. Cabins turned to farm
houses. The meeting house became a school, and churches were established. Soon the second generation supplanted the first and traditions developed through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

Marion men always fought for their country. There was the War of 1812; the Civil War; the Spanish American War; the First World War; the Second World War; and the Korean Conflict.

Marion men always loved and cherished the land. They cleared the forest. They drained the swamps. They revered the nature of the earth.

Marion men always followed their fathers. They lived in their fathers' houses. They farmed the homestead for five generations. They always came home after a journey or a lifetime.
Marion men loved their God with all their might. They went to church three times every Sunday and sometimes on Wednesday. They went to every social and class meeting. They went to christenings, weddings, and funerals.

Marion men always loved Marion. They wanted it to lead. They wanted it to be cultural. They wanted it to be educational. They wanted it to belong, but yet to be apart.

Into the pristine 20th century came all of the tradition plus the automobile, the Kodak, the airplane, and modern war. Marion clung to tradition. Change won, but the victories were grudgingly granted. Youth grasped for the new only to inherit the old. Fifty-four years of conflict put Marion on the edge. It was at that precarious moment when it could clearly see back, that it catapulted forward.

Tradition was still available, but did not comfort. The motion
of speed intoxicated and farmers weren't needed much anymore. Who could think about a small town when there was moon travel? The lawn needed mowing on the Sunday morning after Saturday night. It was Marion. It was 1954.

PART II

There was an additional aura of excitement for the school's new art teacher that year. He was a beginning teacher. He had a first job. He was going to become part of mnemonic Marion.

Here his grandparents had packed their wagon in search of the Industrial Revolution. They had moved out with the ease of the new century, but had always longed for home. It was this foster remembrance--this umbilication--that flavored the town.

The artist-teacher began a stick-to-itive career that year
in Marion. Time permitted the
outgrowth of interests that turned
a job into a position. He devel-
oped an affinity for the community
and became a Marion man.

There was a flux and flow to
the passage of time. Unfledged
people moved through each school
year with the constancy of auto-
mation. Children were born. Life
ebbed from oldness. Faces bared
their truths one by one as conta-
gious friendship effervesced.

It was an unfoldment of ten
years involving people, ideas,
and a place. The artist identified
with these and with the kaleidoscope
of world influence. By nature and
training he was a creator and ident-
ification was important. It formed
his orientation for creativity.

"Creation is led up to by
each moment, every gesture of our
lives: not by a sudden decision."
(16:226)
The artist must need to say something—to express—before he can bring about an act of creation. "These themes VanGogh fell on with passionate intensity, as though he could absorb into his own being the assured, unchanging, sane there-ness of the chair,...(and) the immutable continuity of the seasons."

The need was insanity with VanGogh, but normally it is fostered and sustained by the mundane life and its spiritual repercussions.

Awareness was the vehicle by which the artist encompasses his community and proliferated his world. He looked and listened. Life was the object of this attention.

There were many considerations. What was the reaction of man to nature? What relation did this have to the interaction of man? "The artist, by nature, is
sensitive and receptive to the human currents." (21:181) Was an understanding of self enough to synchronize man and nature? "The artist is the middle man in a visual communication system. He must fuse inspiration, ideas, and technical ability into a statement." (21:181)

Consistently he looked inward to find the rightness of individuality and the place for art in life. Here the universal quality versus the personal statement conflicted. Could locale be used as subject stimuli to gain a universal concept and an every-man quality without summoning up trite emotionalism? Ralph Pearson says in the *Modern Renaissance in American Art* that the intellect must rule in a painting—emotion has its place but must be tempered. (17:16-20) Would it be more right to fully exploit the literal genre
and deal only with a segmented universal? All important art is creative. It is man's expressive attempt to set down a world apart—something new. (17:16-20) This might sacrifice spontaneity and displace the concept that each painting has a life-quality of its own developed during the painting process.

A ten-year history of involvement with Marion as a community and with the world as a technological free form was the primary background for the artist. His knowledge, inventiveness, and sensitivity were to be the guiding force behind problem-solving ideas and materials. His result—an artistic statement—is a summation of his intellect. "An artist's reality—the expression of ideas in form and color that communicate in a personal way." (21:18)
PART III

The six thesis paintings originated in Marion and encompassed a period of time that promoted multiple thought about painter and painting. A cause and effect relationship of subject, artist, and painting became the mainstream for deliberation.

Marion--Part I--was presented in a manner calculated to produce a visualization of the place that served as a subject. This subject area was the beginning for each creative effort. It served as a stimulus of varying degrees of intensity during the painting process and provided a recognizable form content. Sir Herbert Read comments on the need for recognizable form in art. He says that pure composition is not enough to strike a chord of response in the artist or observer. The work of art must have associational value that will penetrate into the sub-
conscious to stimulate mental images that at best link man with an explanation of his destiny.
(19:249)

Expressive form has been pulled from Marion to summon up images for thought. Many of these were found in sketches and refined to act as a kind of shorthand to say something about the society of the region.

Color was a careful consideration for it served as an integral part of these statements. The area is rural; therefore, the sun plays an important part in the minds of the people. Sun is one of the necessities of nature and in the process of promoting growth affects the appearance of everything else. Its effect on total color feeling is one of brightness, clearliness, and contrast with an encompassing sense of warmth.
Added to this consideration is the uniqueness of the artist's personality. There were times when his emotion dominated the subject to the point where it became almost unimportant. "Art is the product of spirit, and spirit resides not alone in intellect, but in the whole of man." (17:22)

Charles Birchfield was one of the few artists to succeed in uniting his personality with nature as subject. He spoke of becoming "...part of the elements..." (6:236) as he painted in a rainstorm. In fact, he reached such a point of unity with his paintings that they seemed to materialize under their own power.

The subject and the artist became a cause. The effect was a painting. At this point there began to be a complicating force - the reaction of the artist to the created material. The effect now acted as a counter cause.
This continual play back and forth gives a quality to the painting that can only be termed--a life of its own. Jackson Pollock felt this to the degree that he had to work for a physical unity with the canvas while painting. His material-centered concept produced art void of subject but highly decorative.

This idea of artist and material promotes an increasingly important sense of the personal in art. "The cult of the individual, the concept of 'genius' was a product of the Renaissance." (15:23) Eric Newton in *The Arts of Man* swung this personal back to humanity with this statement:

"Style...is the outward manifestation of personality. But personality is...the product of a cultural environment." (15:19)
MARION, NUMBER ONE

Marion, Number One, (Fig. 7), dealt with the overall physical characteristics of the land. The geological formation of the surface served as a basis for design structure.

Marion's elongated hills extending north and south were glacial deposits of silt left during the last ice age. East and west travel through this country forces a continual up and down movement. It is a sensation that is similar to riding the waves in a small boat.

A type of double focus results from this motion. The crests give an overall view and the valleys an intimate look. Most of the painting is composed of simplified horizontal form to extend a feeling of vastness. (Figs. 5-6) John Constable, too, found that simplicity and directness of approach gave a spacial
quality. "His Brighton Beach hardly has a subject. His space becomes so vast and simple there is abstraction."

(10:268) The right center of Marion, Number One forms a complex series of shapes to give the sensation of closeness. This area was developed from a felt pen study made on the spot. (Fig. 3)

The road shape rising from behind a simplified foreground was given the suggestion of perspective to carry the observer up and over continuous form into space. Its dark color was lightened and the shape lost some of its vitality. (Fig. 6) The final picture shows the road dark once again and acting as a vibrant thrust into space.

There was also a direct attempt to heighten the feeling of unlimited space in the color contrast of warm and cool at the
Samuel Palmer worked to achieve this effect early in his career and termed it "...a mystic glimmer behind the hills..." (10:260)

The effect of Marion, Number One is attractiveness. It has a calmness that somewhat defeats its effectiveness by pushing it into the nice picture category. Perhaps over-simplification would have heightened the form contrast to gain excitement.

MARION, NUMBER TWO

One of the local land characteristics of Marion is a rich earth called muck. This is swamp land that has been drained. It is an unusually porous black soil that produces abundant crops.

Marion, Number Two (Fig. 13) is a statement about this earth. There has been an attempt to suggest growth through form and color. The thrusting diagonals held down by the horizon line are form ele-
ments taken directly from nature. On the spot watercolor sketches (Figs. 8-9) point up this contrast. The pen drawing (Fig. 10) is a linier adaptation of the same forces.

Warm color dominates the painting for heat—sun—is associated with growth. The sky adds to this sense of richness with its hot pervading green tone. The strong light-dark contrast adds still more to the sun quality. This is most apparent in the pen drawing growth study (Fig. 10). Gustave Courbet also used this "...thunderously dramatic chiaroseuro..." (9:284) to heighten the excitement of his vigorously applied paint.

(Fig. 11) shows an early stage of development in the life of the painting. At this point it was much too complicated a statement to be effective. It was simplified considerably,
(Fig. 12). Finally, more small shapes were removed to heighten the dramatic quality of small versus large shapes.

There is now a pleasing blend of landscape quality with contemporary form and color in this picture. It has a boldness of painting style that heightens the vigorous growth quality. Marion as subject has been taken over by design and color, and the growth message.

MARION, NUMBER THREE

The mass relationship of animal forms is the subject of Marion, Number Three (Fig. 16). Animals are an important part of the economy of Marion as it is in other rural communities.

There is only a half-hearted attempt to designate a certain kind of animal for the mass relationship does not depend on any specific ones. (Fig. 14) shows an early stage when large block-like areas had been vigorously laid on with a
knife. August Macke of the Blue Rider group did a picture that is amazingly similar to this. It was titled *Cows and Camel*, and showed the same concern for heavy color interspersed with brilliance. (19:223)

Massed animals have a ponderousness that is surfaced over with twitching, wiggling motion. Tails swat flies, ears twitch, jaws move and skin ripples. An approach with a small brush loaded with thick paint produced this effect for the placid shapes seem to shimmer in color movement reminiscent of Vincent VanGogh. "(His work)...liberates coloured paint; the bright pigments themselves writhe, as though matter were on the point of taking life." (10:306)

The message here was simple and direct. The painting technique is highly compatible with the message and together they provide a
complicated statement of unlimited depth. In their solidity, the animals are of the earth. In their shimmer of color and movement they personify life itself.

MARION, NUMBER FOUR

The family units in Marion are the regeneration and continuation of the community. (Fig. 18) shows Marion, Number Four as a combination portrait-growth symbol. The man and woman stand together as he holds up a series of shapes representative of germination. It might be a potted plant or it might be seedlings.

Color play and form were kept unusual to stress the spirituality of regeneration. The earliest stage of development, (Fig. 17), tended toward cubism with definite geometric structure. The structure continued but in an almost classical vein. The unreal-out-of-this-world shapes are reminiscent of Graham Southerlands' search for
unusual form. (19:264)

Color choice became fused with shape design. A heavy color was required to counteract the upward push of the arm. The male form seemed to demand a vague coloration and movement to orient the arm structure and the frontal female form. Background color needed to be flat but sharp to lend contrast to the figures.

The male form seemed still to be a somewhat unresolved form in its own right. Perhaps structuring similar to the female should have been used. This could tend to sharpen the composition and focus toward the "...visionary and symbolic humanism..." (19:240) of Oskar Kokoschka.

MARION, NUMBER FIVE

The fifth painting centers around architecture, one of man's
reactions to nature. Architectural form and color were utilized to emphasize man.

Almost every form in the picture (Fig. 22) is based on man-made surfaces. This form was drawn from man-made structures in Marion. The ruralness of Marion appears in the barn and silo shape. The locking together of the forms is meant to suggest the attempted domination of nature by man. Continual simplification (Figs. 19, 20, 21) emphasized this solidity of interlocking form.

The overall color tone is derived from the redness that dominates the landscape. There is the ever-present red barn with its out buildings. In addition to this, Marion has an abundance of red-brown cobblestone houses made of lake-washed sandstone. Both the color tone and the closed-in quality give a strong feeling of place to the picture.
This placeness doesn't seem to come through as solely Marion. It could be any number of places in the world or even a stage set lighted for the entrance of actors. Regionalism is taken over by the universal at this point.

MARION, NUMBER SIX

Marion society is the subject of the sixth painting, (Fig. 27). Here there has been an attempt to show the interaction of human personality. The compact group of three figures with its costume effect is meant to suggest that part of community life that is dominated by tradition and convention, and usually associated with older people. The ring-a-round figures moving through the landscape structures were used to suggest progress, change, and the passage of time.

Color and form were once again used to push toward subject
meaning. (Fig. 23) shows the first step in the development of the painting. The large figure group shape was removed to simplify and clarify the message. The painting developed through a lightness of color into overall darkness and back again (Figs. 24, 25, 26). The predominantly light and bright color seems to lend itself to the dance-like movement of figures through space. Vibrant red and orange in the upper right was used to incite a feeling of apprehension—a quality that change is about to take place (Fig. 27).

Both Chaim Soutine and Vincent Van Gogh utilized this type of emotional-outlet color. However, it was Georges Rouault who exploits it for his own purpose of making a social statement. It is interesting to note here that this type of color seems to demand a thick em-pasto kind of painting. Soutine, Van Gogh and Rouault all used stiff
paint and Marion, Number Six is layered with heaviness. (19:238)

This build-up gives a direct and forceful feel to the painting.

The message incorporated in the last painting has taken on a universal quality. It was meant to have a very regional feeling.

The segmented quality about the figure group at the top of the canvas developed with the painting. There was an unsuccessful attempt to exploit its tension-giving qualities in the figure grouping at the lower right.

CONCLUSION

Time, place, work and personality have all had their opportunity to function as the thesis progressed. They have produced results that could be called a synthesis of thought—1964. Interaction of one with the other, or others, tended to produce paintings reflecting the
complexities of Marion and a space-centered world.

A most important reaffirmation occurred with the thought that there are no absolutes. The facets of intellect seem boundless as they solve their way through the problematical universe. Definitive statements invariably act as a call-to-arms arousing the singleton of action.

The Renaissance concept of individuality was continued into 19th century art by Paul Cezanne with his successful attempts to "...discover or construct a creditable world." What he saw "...must be made real". (19:13) Painting then became the construction of individual reality and allowed the artist to lead man into universal understanding.

Regional art statements that transgress the literal interpretation of form and ally with the basic universal tend to rise above
the colloquialism. The excitement generated by Marion, Number Two (Fig. 13) is the direct result of an expansion of form, color, and space. Because of this, there is an expectancy of growth—the underlying force of landscape. In contrast, Marion, Number One, (Fig. 7), with its more precise translation of form emphasizes the regional spaciousness effectuated by the hilly, open country of Marion.

The work process, too, helps to define and universalize form if the artist is sensitive to his material. The interaction of color and sometimes the very consistency of the paint suggest developments that had not been considered in the initial approach. The play of vibrant red-orange against predominantly light color in Marion, Number Six (Fig. 27) is an example of this. The color was suggested by
surrounding color areas and increased the expectation and excitement.

The total effect of a painting must be a sense of rightness—sometimes called pictorial quality. This does not necessarily depend on total recognition of form intent. It is in reality a balance between the push and pull of color, the movement of form or shape and the control of space. Graham Collier states in Form, Space and Vision that "...shape and color in painting are significant in two ways. They affect our mood and suggest ideas. They strike at both the head and the heart." (4:203) Color and form are then active elements. Space is the container—the controlling area that prevents or allows movement.

Creativity in a work of art depends on the success of its organization as well as technical ability and idea. As in life it
extends the natural feeling of the wholeness of existence to the observer.


(Cont'd.)