

On Originalities

When I began my project to make historical narrative paintings more than thirty years ago I had accepted that there was a tremendous diversity in contemporary art making and that virtually anything could now be considered as art. I decided that I would simply set aside that book without complaint and do something completely different - something that no one - or almost no one - else was doing, that is, make narrative paintings based on Greco/Roman culture. I had for a guide the New York Artist and critic, Sidney Tillim who had written an article entitled, **Notes on Narrative and History Painting**. In this brave and utterly original essay in Artforum Magazine, the most avant garde publication, he wrote that, "...history painting is nothing more or less than a dogmatic approach to the problem of originality. It consciously attempts to graft onto the hide of history a contrary notion about art and culture... By originality, then, I mean nothing like a 'breakthrough' in the modernist sense, but a feeling for the figurative tradition so strong that it seems radical." At a time when radicalism was and has been conventionalized by the comfortable embrace of museums, critics, collectors and galleries, making what I came to call "the literate picture" seemed daring to me - not just daring but necessary as a counter-balance to the predictability of almost all contemporary art and because we were and are in need of a renewed knowledge-based culture.

Tillim's writing as well as his paintings gave me license to think in ways that were totally out of fashion and thus wonderfully fresh and dangerously outside. My decision to dress my figures in classical, or quasi-classical clothes went against the Renaissance tradition of updating ancient dress in paintings to fashions of the present day. But updating in that way would make me a realist and I felt that we already had enough realists holding up the mirror to contemporary life as part of our total obsession with nowness.

What I wanted more than anything was to search for the center or the source of western art. I sought to understand the underlying principles of Greek culture and found that those included fundamental concepts that have returned in many forms over the intervening centuries. For instance, one of the most essential aspects of ancient Greek art was the duality between order as represented by Apollo and chaos represented by Dionysus. Neitzsche, in his 1872 essay, **The Birth of Tragedy**, describes this duality as a "primal unity." He writes that, "Here we have presented, in the most sublime artistic symbolism, that Apollonian world of beauty and its substratum, the terrible wisdom of (Dionysic) Silenus; and intuitively we comprehend their necessary interdependence." My painting, **Hercules Protecting the Balance between Pleasure and Virtue** is one of many paintings where I refer to that "primal unity."

In this period of intense popular distractions, a strong disinterest in education and what the art historian, Hugh Honour has called "the fashion-conscious mania for novelty," I want to attempt to make paintings that return to origins - another kind of originality. Therefore, I believe in painting that attempts to convey specific meaning by way of the abstraction of history. I also believe that representation (perceptual analysis) is important because it has the potential to make us see more clearly and rationally. But as Sidney Tillim wrote, "Belief, like good intentions, hardly guarantees anything, originality least of all, but the manner of its occurrence, like originality, cannot be anticipated. So that, if representation per se is not new or 'surprising,' its conviction in contemporary terms can be."

David Ligare, 2010

See Sidney Tillim, Notes on Narrative and History Painting, Artforum, May, 1977, p. 41