Spring 1973

Mural Painting

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Colby College

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ABSTRACT

For my freshman Jan Plan at Colby I painted a mural in Runnals Union illustrating a William Blake poem. This effort began a four year painting project which I pursued my sophomore and junior years by finishing the Hall of the Machines in Runnals and by commencing the Paper Wall in Roberts. As a Senior Scholar, I've continued my undertaking by painting eleven more panels. Eight of these are in the Paper Wall and the other three are in the Spa in Miller Library. In my wallpainting up until this year my major interest has been in a strong two-dimensional design created by color juxtaposition. Over these two semesters I've developed a greater concern with the role of color value contrasts in achieving a sense of three-dimensional space. As one views my paintings in chronological order, he can see that gradually colors become less intense, value contrasts more effective, and subject matter becomes based on observation rather than imagination. Please judge my achievement solely on observation of the walls in these three rooms as this paper is only a very brief catalogue of works and the slides are not the best reproductions.

Martha C.T. Wetmore
1. May 1973
For my freshman Jan Plan at Colby I painted a mural in Runnals Union illustrating a William Blake poem. This effort began a four year painting project which I pursued my sophomore and junior years by finishing the Hall of the Machines in Runnals and by commencing the Paper Wall in Roberts. As a Senior Scholar, I've continued my undertaking by painting eleven more panels. Eight of these are in the Paper Wall and the other three are in the Spa in Miller Library. In my wallpainting up until this year my major interest has been in a strong two-dimensional design created by color juxtaposition. Over these two semesters I've developed a greater concern with the role of color value contrasts in achieving a sense of three-dimensional space. As one views my paintings in chronological order, he can see that gradually colors become less intense, value contrasts more effective, and subject matter becomes based on observation rather than imagination. As the emphasis of my project is on the walls themselves, this paper serves merely as a catalogue of works. Please take a tour of these three rooms to make a thorough examination and to receive the full impact of my paintings.
The first four panels of first semester alternate with windows that face Johnson Pond and the soccer field. The paintings share domestic themes; all but the second are room interiors. In all four many colors are mixed with white to lessen the inherent acrylic intensities and to develop a wider range of values. This shows my first real concern with space. I felt I now understood acrylics and started to move away from concentration on color combinations, although there remains the juxtaposition of stripes marking divisions and outlining shapes. This inchoate attempt at three-dimensionality is not too successful and results in strong tensions and ambiguities between space and flatness. For example, the blue floor under the table in the first painting seems both to recede and also to jump out at the viewer. It recedes because one knows how to "read" a floor, but jumps out since the blue is as intense as any other color present. A more successful example is the light purple wallpaper in the fourth panel. Here the purple has a higher value than all objects in front of it and the white dove print has an even higher value, thus causing this pattern to anchor itself in the background.

The next problem is a corner panel. I chose to ignore the corner by painting a livingroom scene with a couch and
a coffee table stretching across the angle. The strong horizontal and vertical divisions are missing and the furniture has a sense of animation caused by legs not firmly set in space. Values in this picture are very close to promote a mood of coziness, but colors tend to blend a little too much. The couch, as center of attention, has the lowest value and is decorated with a floral pattern of the highest value.

The next two walls contrast with the restricted spaces and household objects of the previous five because these deal with flat shapes, color design, and simple patterns flowing over the surface. In the picture of two dogs playing, the background consists of areas of gray, green, and yellow-orange with no ground for the characters to stand on. The seventh wall, another corner, is based on an early Mexican animal design. A dark blue outline separates and defines some of the shapes. The corner is emphasized because each dog faces into it. The bottom half of the panel is dark green because various machines are kept in front of it.

The last painting in the Paper Wall contains strong value contrasts, intense colors, and a better sense of space. The picture is another livingroom. I started with the yellow and red chair and the yellow and navy blue chair and built all other relationships around these. This contrasts with
the way I usually work, which is by establishing the background first and gradually filling in the foreground shapes. In this work the most intense colors are in the front plane. There is constant play of light against dark throughout. For example, the yellow and gray television screen is surrounded by a red frame and the dark brown table is against the orange and pink striped wall.

After completing the Paper Wall, I moved on to the Spa and my most ambitious work. Painting conditions are much different in the Spa. Instead of quiet solitude interrupted by occasional poolplayers, now I faced a busy room full of people as well as limited working space and hours. The first mural I painted in the Spa is a large rectangular panel. The owners asked me to recreate a Spa scene and I chose to paint a picture of the service counter with all the accompanying machines. This project was definitely audience-oriented in its execution. The most important problem was conveying the proper distances between objects, achieved by using a restricted palette and by placing the most intense colors in front. To anchor the value contrasts, I worked on the background first, then the doorway on the left, next the navy blue of the counter front. I think this navy blue is the most successful use of color in the painting as it creates
a space in between each stool as well as between the stools and the counter behind. On the counter, the front objects are more intense and have lower values than the muted pink, gray-green, and blue objects on the back counter. This painting is a monument to today's high meat prices since they are recorded on signs on the back plane.

The next panel, a picture of a bedroom, has a limited color range with the emphasis on greens and oranges. It contains a strong recession and shows the most successful establishment of space. Back and front planes are clearly separated. On the walls in the far plane I've played with greens of close value which strongly offset the high value floor. Another effective color play is the yellow of the door and the yellow-white of the doorway.

The last mural, completed at the end of April, is of a dining table and two chairs. As in my last Paper Wall panel, I built this picture around the yellow. The painting is more decorative than spatially accurate. The table surface tilts forward and is laden with colorful objects as intense as the yellow top. The light green touches in the salad are repeated in the back of the purple chair. A Cornish hen perches on the window sill. This painting is an attempt to work with both the flat decorative design of