

## DAVID PARK (1911-1960)

KIA owns *Woman with Coffeepot* (1958), oil on canvas, by David Park. This was acquired through a Director's Fund Purchase in 1968 along with a painting by Richard Diebenkorn, titled *The Sleeping Woman*, as major works of the Bay Area Figurative Movement, which included primarily Park, Diebenkorn, and Elmer Bischoff, although other artists joined their exhibitions on occasion. The work of David Park is significant in the context of contemporary figurative painting, in the history of contemporary American art, and in the power of the work itself.

### Career

David Park was born and grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. He was more interested in art than in academic studies, and rather than attending college, he moved to California. There he studied painting and drawing at the San Francisco Art Institute, later known as the California School of Fine Arts. He became an instructor there and was involved with the school as it expanded and gained in reputation following World War II. With the arrival in 1946 of Clifford Still as the most famous artist at the institute, the faculty and students focused almost exclusively on Abstract Expressionism. Park was also painting in this style but became dissatisfied with his own work of this period. Rejecting the institute's uncompromising focus on non-representation, Park left to develop his art without limitations. It was during this period at the end of the 1940s that Park turned to figurative painting. He received immediate local recognition, but New York critics questioned his return to figuration. By the mid-1950s Park was receiving national recognition and joined the art department faculty at the University of California, Berkeley. This major period in his career was cut short by his death at forty-nine of cancer.

### Development of Park's Approach to Painting

Park's approach to painting can be seen to move through several different styles during his career. His earliest work, painted in the 1930s, reflects the influence of the American scene painters and the WPA muralists of the era. At the beginning of his career, he worked as an apprentice to the sculptor Ralph Stackpole, who was completing a commission for the San Francisco Stock Exchange. The famous Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, was at the Exchange at the same time and his influence can be seen in Park's paintings and murals for the WPA in the mid-1930s. Park was never interested in the political aspect of the era's Social Realism, but in all of his work he was concerned with painting the average person in daily circumstances.

By the end of the 1930s Park was painting abstracted figures, having been decidedly influenced by developments in Modernist art and particularly by Pablo Picasso. His work moved increasingly toward abstraction during the 1940s, although he maintained some reference to the figure, and then to Abstract Expressionism. When he eventually turned to figuration at the end of the 1940s, he rebelled against Abstract Expressionism so vehemently that he consigned his works in this style to the Berkeley city dump except for a few which he painted over.

Park's first figurative work dates from 1949-50 and was done in isolation. When Diebenkorn, his friend and former student, saw the new work, he exclaimed, "My God!

What happened to David?" In the later 1950s Diebenkorn, along with Bischoff, would join Park in turning to figurative painting. *Kids on Bikes*, the first figurative work Park exhibited, was awarded a prize at the San Francisco Art Association 70<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition and was pictured in their bulletin as well as in the national *Arts Digest* of March, 1951. Nevertheless, New York critics tended to see the work as a regional development and even questioned the motive of a return to figuration. The issue was where to take Abstract Expressionism, which had put American art at the forefront of the world of art. Some critics saw figuration as retrograde, a return to earlier modes and a failure to move on with Abstract Expressionism.

Park's new work differs from his earlier figurative paintings at the same time that it confronts some of the basic canons of Abstract Expressionism. Park had several problems with Abstract Expressionism or action painting. He believed that this approach to painting calls attention to the painter rather than to the painting, contrary to his ideal that the painting should stand independently of the painter. Consequently he rejected what he saw as the egocentric excesses of Abstract Expressionism. He also feared that absolute non-representation could become simply decoration, color and shape, rather than work that confronts the viewer. Commenting on his move from abstraction to figurative painting, Park said: "Art ought to be a troublesome thing, and one of my reasons for painting representationally is that this makes for much more troublesome pictures."

Park's new figurative work, however, also extends many of the traits of Abstract Expressionism and gestural painting. He found that paint itself could be the subject along with the figure and interaction could take place through a spontaneous exploration of paint. Park used excessive amounts of paint, even turning to house paint, to explore the viscous qualities of paint and underscore the primacy of his brush strokes. He often developed a flat field in which to place figures, creating an undifferentiated space through layers of paint that unite figure and ground. Figures are neither anatomically nor spatially representational and exist in an ambiguous space. Although Park's first figurative works tend toward genre painting, he increasingly used the figure as a formal device, dislocated from the physical world and rendered through gestural brushstrokes. Everything is painted with the same broad strokes and the same opaque paint; a face is no more detailed than other objects or surfaces.

The painting at the KIA is an excellent example of Park's late figurative work. The figure, a woman pouring coffee, is placed in the picture in an unspecified relation to the space she occupies. The ground line is eliminated, and the foreground and background are simultaneously floor, wall, and just flat painted surface of the picture plane. Both figure and ground are painted with broad strokes of thick paint, the relatively limited palette, highlighted by red and white, emphasizing the gestural strokes. While the entire painting is rendered gesturally, the tension between the emerging figure of the woman and the flat color fields of the pictorial space creates a powerful, perhaps "troublesome," experience for the viewer.

### Critical Evaluation

Park's later work is generally critically referred to as "figurative expressionism" or "expressionist figuration." Although Park, Diebenkorn, and Bischoff attempted to resist the notion that they were a new, unified movement rather than individual artists, they are often critically referred to as the Bay Area (or California) Figurative Movement.

Since his death, Park's work, early as well as later, has continued to be exhibited and to receive critical praise. Henry Seldis finds Park's move to figurative painting not just a reaction against Abstract Expressionism but a search for a synthesis between image and abstraction. Richard Armstrong, commenting on paintings in the retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989, praises Park's "elated brushwork, comparable to that of any of the non-representational gesture painters of the day." In a 1989 article in *Artweek*, Marcia Tanner closely analyzes the way in which Park's figures demand attention: "Their status in the space they occupy is uncertain, as is their relationship to themselves and each other, as are the boundaries of the colored space itself." But Brian O'Doherty's assessment, in his *New York Times* review of the 1961 retrospective, speaks to the more indeterminate qualities of Park's work, his "exceptional honesty and power."