

DAVID PARK (1911-60)

*Woman with Coffeepot* (1958) oil on canvas 40"x53"

David Park is an artist known today principally as the guiding impulse behind the Bay Area Figurative Movement, a group of post-WW II artists who turned away from strict abstract expressionism to include representational figures in their work. At age 17, Park relocated from his native Boston to the west coast where he studied art and began working in a figurative and representational style in the 1930s and early 1940s, even contributing to murals for the WPA. In 1944, he joined the faculty of the California School of Fine Arts (later, San Francisco Art Institute) and came under the influence of the abstract expressionists, especially Clyfford Still.

Park's work in the 1940's was clearly abstract expressionist, but he never was comfortable with this style. In 1949, he reportedly took all of his canvases to the county dump and, thereafter, began a return to figurative work. The art world viewed his first two figurative paintings, *Rehearsal* (1950) and *Kids on Bikes* (1951), as shocking and avant-garde; some labelled the new work pitiful. According to *Artweek*, upon seeing *Kids on Bikes*, Park's student and later colleague Richard Diebenkorn reportedly questioned "'My God? What's happened to David?'" Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, and several other colleagues in the Bay Area eventually took up figurative work as well.

Bischoff remarked Park thought abstract expressionist works "ran the danger of being 'just big decorations.'" Park was more comfortable using forms "which looked as if they came from 'life,' not 'art,'" according to Paul Mills, in a catalog from a posthumous exhibition. Biographer Nancy Boas said Park drew from "the dailiness of life...the commonplace contemporary world we live in." Park stated he had decided to stop "making 'paintings' in favor of making 'pictures.'" He was quoted as explaining "'art ought to be a troublesome thing . . . and one of my reasons for painting representationally is this makes for more troublesome pictures.'" The artist spent the 1950's creating a large volume of works, including many sizeable pieces in oil as well as smaller ones in water color. Through this period, he continued to teach; he was well liked by his many students, who spoke to his openness, flexibility, and dedication.

Despite turning to figurative art, Park's work displayed influences of abstract expressionism including aggressive use of color, energetic brush strokes, and non-representational depiction of space. He was observant of the world around him. Although he sketched from live models, his paintings were created in retrospect from images in his memory, often weeks later. Works he created in the latter 1950's showed even looser brush strokes and non-lifelike color selection. In these later paintings, Boas noted, "humans are inseparable from the material world" since the figures tend become shapes as they lose specificity and identity.

Park developed cancer late in the decade. His resulting weakness and pain sapped the energy required for creating large oil paintings; many of his final pieces were completed in pen and ink or water color on a smaller scale. He succumbed to cancer in 1960. Park's work has been included in several posthumous exhibits. *Woman with Coffeepot* was spotlighted in a 1962

edition of *Life* magazine. In 2012, art historian Nancy Boas published a detailed biography of the artist.

*Woman with Coffeepot* (1958) was accessioned by the KIA in 1968 along with works by Diebenkorn. Interestingly, the painting had been reported lost for several years, and was subsequently “found” in the KIA collection partly through the detective work of Boas. The piece has been loaned for Park retrospectives.

The painting features a woman participating in a commonplace daily-life activity, pouring coffee from a pot. We learn very little of the woman herself, since her shadowed face is minimally defined. In contrast, the woman’s arms/hands and the coffeepot are delineated in relatively realistic detail, although not in lifelike color. The table is minimally sketched in. The surrounding environment is barely hinted at. A strong direction of light and resulting shadows are evident. Typical of Park’s work is the generous use of impasto, large energetic brushstrokes, and other texturing including scumbling. The palette is mostly in muted secondary colors, lending a darker mood to the painting despite the brighter yellow area in the upper right, which hints at a light source—possibly a window or a terrace. The brightness of that area seems, by contrast, to further emphasize the mood which permeates the rest of the work. Perhaps there is a suggestion of a cityscape in the blocky vertical brush strokes with which that yellow is applied. The figure of the woman occupies the center and right half the canvas. The rich textured orange-brown expanse which fills the left half of the painting creates an asymmetrical balance in the work.

Approaching this painting with a tour, objectives would be: 1. Realize the subject is a figure we recognize, but the figure is only an element of the work; we do not know her as a specific person. 2. Notice the colors, painting style, and composition reflect the influence of abstract expressionism (perhaps comparing and contrasting with our Franz Kline); 3. Understand the mood/emotions expressed in the work come from the interplay of a figure doing something we recognize vs. the non-representational style of the painting.

Some questions that might be asked for a tour:

1. What in the painting draws your attention/focus?
2. Who is the woman? What do we know about her? Do we need to know anything about her? Does the artist seem interested in who she is an individual?
3. How does this painting make you feel? Is there a mood expressed? What conveys that mood—the subject? color choice?
4. How do you think he painted it? Small or large brushes? Painstaking slow application or quick strokes?
5. How would you title this painting?
6. If you owned this painting, what room in your house would you hang it in?

Samuel Grossman, 2017

References:

Wikipedia

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Lance Esplund, introduction to the exhibit David Parks' Works on Paper, May 2008