THE ARTS CLUB EXHIBITIONS

AT

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION OF

PAINTINGS

BY

WALT KUHN

MARCH 15 TO APRIL 17, 1927
Mr. LaSalle Spier, composer-pianist, resident in Washington, D.C., is a member of the Composers' Society of Washington, Chamber Music Society of Washington, Washington Chamber Music Ensemble; he has appeared with the Lenox, Rich and National String Quartets and with other organizations, and in recital here and abroad; his works include compositions for voice, piano, chamber music and orchestra.
ONE APPROACH TO THE ART
OF WALT KUHN

By LASALLE SPIER

Whistler's use of musical terms as applied to his pictures tends to befog, emotionally, the mind of the observer. In reality, his works have practically no relation to music whatever. Insofar as the structural basis of his compositions is understood to parallel that of music, his work is elementary as compared with that of Walt Kuhn.

In the latter case the application of musical structure to painting is one of real intelligence and solidity and will be easily recognized by any trained musician.

It is almost certain that the most casual layman will immediately take an entirely different point of view and derive instant pleasure from Mr. Kuhn's pictures if he will apply to them the same analysis which he employs when listening to the rendition of a musical composition.

Music is considered the most perfect form of art; mathematical in its precision, it demands the highest development of intellectual and emotional combinations of tonal lines, contours, shapes, forms, rhythms, colors and dynamics.

Walt Kuhn puts painting on a similar basis.

It must be understood, however, that while the method of procedure is the same, the final result visible on the canvas is not music but painting in its purest form.

A careful analysis of the work of this artist shows that he divides his canvas into sections corresponding to the measures, sections, phrases and periods of musical form and to the different groups of instruments in an orchestra. He then plays on these instruments in these forms and succeeds in obtaining a wealth of typically musical effects.
One does not have to search far to discover astonishing examples of rhythm, harmony and counterpoint. Polytoneal and atonal chords, even, are frequently to be found. His scale of dynamics is most unusual and ranges from the subdued velvet tones of muted strings to the powerful volume of full orchestra. His color schemes include everything from the wooden clack of the xylophone to the blatant brass blasts of trumpet or trombone.

In the case of Walt Kuhn we are dealing not only with a composer but also with an orchestral director who assembles his instruments, then plays his score on them. He seems to have every technical and interpretative resource of both composer and conductor at his command.

Before analyzing any of the paintings in this exhibition in detail, a helpful suggestion will not be out of place:

PAINTING, IN CONTRADISTINCTION TO MUSIC, PRESENTS ALL OF ITS ELEMENTS TO THE VIEW AT ONCE. Structure, rhythm, harmony, thematic development and purpose. This fact tends to create confusion in the mind of the uninitiated observer, who is apt to attempt to look at a picture in this “total” fashion. A much better method is to allow the eye to follow, slowly, preferably in measured time, the principal lines (or melodies) in the picture. Harmonic, rhythmic and contrapuntal effects will embellish and enrich every step of the way from one linear climax to another. Every section of the canvas should be traversed in this manner, with the eye and mind keenly alive to new impressions. Short excursions into the background will serve as contrast to the principal theme and will seem to balance it. This procedure will be like listening to the gradual unfoldment of a piece of music.

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Although the paintings, Superba, The Rider and others suggest music of great vitality, power and clarity, it seems to me that The City lends itself best for analysis. To my mind it is based upon a similar structure to that of a Symphony for Full Orchestra. It embraces the whole range of sound, and was obviously composed in the sonata form, with the central figure, from the bodice upward, including the arms and head, representing the first movement; the bodice itself the second or slow movement, the red rose on the bodice the scherzo and the lower part of the body the robust final movement based on dance forms.

The principal contrapuntal device employed is a rising and falling melodic theme containing a distinct climax. This theme is represented pictorially by an angle somewhat more than a right angle. It occurs most obviously in the corner of the table at the left side of the picture, but is ingeniously employed in many other places: at the wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck, waist, hips, knees, ankle and heel; in the hair, eyebrows, eyes, nose, lips and chin of the figure and in the shoulder straps, the bodice, the rose and the shoe of the costume. The figure as a whole, even, bends into this melodic curve. A counter theme is found in the straight leg of the table, which is balanced in the opposite corner by the hanging red stockings. Both themes are otherwise developed in the background.

The best comparison to the horizontal movement of counterpoint can be obtained by turning the picture on its side, with the table side down. The undulating sweep of the upper line of the figure from this position, with the straight lines in the background flowing serenely above and below it, are most suggestive of contrapuntal music.

Harmonically, the picture is doubtless composed in
the major and minor modes. In spite of unusual tone combinations and frequent, unexpected modulation, there is not a clashing discord in the whole composition. Particularly intriguing are the four different red tones of the rose, the flowers in the upper left background, the hair on the head and the stockings in the upper right background. They suggest four adjacent dissonant tones of a scale so distributed that they form a pleasing and sonorous chord, viz.:

![Musical notation]

The gloomy, sordid tones in the lower right background suggest cadaverous harmonies in the bass. On the contrary, the head and upper part of the figure contain the depth, richness and clarity of full harmony in the middle register.

In regard to instrumentation, one can detect the tone qualities of many instruments. In the eyes and lips one finds the limpid tones of the flute. The oboe plays an important part, together with the strings, in the slow movement, represented by the bodice with its embroidered design. The English horn, bassoon, French horn, double bass and the clarinet in its lower register produce effects similar to the dismal lower right hand corner of the background. In the rose one finds the brilliant, penetrating tones of the piccolo and the trumpet, and of strings, pizzicato. The head and upper part of the body represent
the full orchestra, with the eloquent tones of the French horn and cello predominating; the lower part of the figure suggests brass and percussion effects. And so on, indefinitely.

The painting entitled The Rider is a three quarter figure in blue against a background of black. It suggests the quality of many men’s voices; a male chorus whose tenor, baritone and bass sections correspond to the three color sections of the picture; blue, black and a kind of tan. The art consists in the proper distribution of these sections and in the dynamic crescendo movement in the big chest, and the powerful shoulders and limbs in the blue section. It is a composition of high, but restrained intensity.

An additional painting is illustrated, musically, on the following page.
In AMALGAM we have a picture which has no definite tonality, but is composed of highly arbitrary combinations of tones similar to atonality. The consonant tones of the major and minor scales have been done away with and the chromatic scale substituted instead, as a basis for chord building. The art consists in fusing these many arbitrary tones together, into a harmonious whole. The above example of atonal chord progression is suggestive.
MUSICAL TITLES SUGGESTED BY SOME OF THE PICTURES

The City—Symphony for full orchestra.
The Rider—Male Chorus; with suppressed power.
Amalgam—Atonality in brass.
The Dressing Room—Orchestra music for a ballet, A major, Allegretto.
Exotic Flowers—Violins divided.
Singing Tree—Folksong for contralto voice, unaccompanied.
Man With a Ship-model—Sonata in stark mood for piano.
Pine-tree—Gongs and bells.
Sheba—Barcarolle.
Portrait of Miss Enters—Andante for flute and strings.
Superba—Organ prelude; full organ.
PAINTINGS
1 Interior
2 Superba
3 Maternity
4 Battle of New Orleans
5 Young Woman
6 Man with Ship-Model
7 Woman Combing her Hair
8 Landscape
9 Rider
10 Amalgam
11 Portrait of Angna Enters
12 Sheba
13 The City
14 Dressing Room
15 Portrait
16 Vegetables
17 Baller in Red and Yellow
18 Riders Waiting
19 Flowers on Red Base
20 Exotic Blossoms
21 Apples
22 Beach Scene
23 Interior with Plant
24 Head of Young Girl
25 Pears
26 Singing Tree
27 Pine Tree
28 Girl with Dark Eyes
29 Still Life