



Keeping it Real

Works from the Sara Roby Foundation Collection, now on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, broaden the definition of American realism. **By Sarah E. Fensom**





It took Honoré Sharrer five years to paint her multi-panel oil on composition board work *Tribute to the American Working People* (1951). The artist, who was the daughter of an Army officer and was raised internationally, worked as a welder in shipyards in California and New Jersey during World War II. The painting mimics the polyptych format of religious altarpieces and depicts the central, largest figure of the composition—a middle-aged worker with an average build and casual stance—as a saint. Taking inspiration from the format, as well as from the detail and precision of Italian Renaissance paintings, Sharrer, in the background and on the side panels, renders pleasant, if not joyous, vignettes of American life.

There is a schoolroom scene with children learning and painting, while humble country fair and barnyard scenes feature people of good American stock minding their property and relaxing. There are flights of exuberance, such as a man in a red shirt dancing a jig and a little boy standing on his head. The painting is reminiscent of WPA photography in the way it captures people in their element. Yet Sharrer is not presenting suffering or the extraordinary, but rather an ideal version of the ordinary. Her goal, as she put it, was “to express a sense of humanity.”

Tribute was purchased by the Sara Roby Foundation in the 1950s, and became a part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s permanent collection, along with the foundation’s gift of 174 other artworks, in 1986. Virginia Mecklenburg, the chief curator of the museum, has been working with the collection since it was donated. Referring to Sharrer’s piece, Mecklenburg notes, “If you look at ads from the 1950s, you see images of prosperity, like shiny cars, appliances—but this is about a different sense of prosperity. It’s saying

if you stick with what matters—family, community and things like that, everything will be all right.” As to which American values are embodied in the painting, Sharrer makes a strong case for diversity, especially with her depiction of two young girls—one black and one white—playfully hugging in a classroom, at a time when not all schools in America were racially integrated. “Sharrer is doing something very assertive here. These are people you know in real life—your cousin your neighbor, yourself, but none of these people really look alike,” says Mecklenburg. “This work celebrates difference.”

In many ways the Sara Roby Foundation celebrated difference, as well. Established in 1952, the foundation’s mission from the get-go was to purchase American art (at a time when its international profile wasn’t even close to what it is now) and make sure that people could actually see it. Though Abstract Expressionism had taken hold of the American art world on a critical level, Roby sought works with a representational bent. This preference came from her studies as a painter with Reginald Marsh and Kenneth

Previous spread, from left: Guy Pene du Bois, *Shovel Hats*, 1923, oil; Paul Cadmus, *Night in Bologna*, 1958, egg tempera. This page: Honoré Sharrer, *Tribute to the American Working People*, 1951, oil. Next page, from top: Reginald Marsh, *George Tilyou’s Steeplechase*, 1932, oil and egg tempera; Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, 1950, oil.



Hayes Miller at the Art Students League. There, the two artists emphasized technical skill and classical compositions. It was at a dinner party held by Marsh that Roby met Lloyd Goodrich, who was at the time the Associate Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Goodrich, who had an instrumental role in growing the foundation, was the person who convinced Roby, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist who had recently started a foundation, to set her sights on contemporary American art. Of his pivotal conversation with Roby at the party, Goodrich later recalled, "We discussed our mutual beliefs in the fundamental importance of form and design. She said that to support these beliefs she was collecting European paintings of the past. I suggested that the most direct way...was to buy the work of American artists whose art embodied form and design. She agreed, and shortly thereafter we began to form the collection."

The result of this agreement is a collection of paintings, sculptures, and drawings created between the end of World War I and the 1980s, amassed over the course of three decades. Seventy of these works



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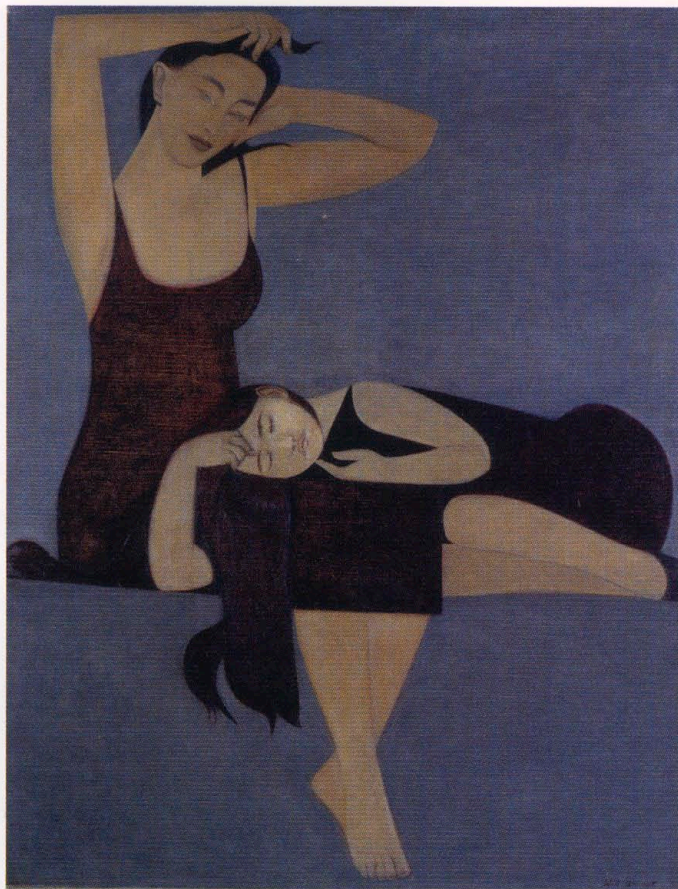
will be shown together this year in the galleries of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in an exhibition titled “Modern American Realism: The Sara Roby Foundation Collection” (through August 17). The show is just another addition in this collection’s long exhibition history. Since its first showing of pieces in 1959 at the Whitney, the collection traveled to Latin America, and then made itself available to other museums in the U.S. through a rigorous 25-year exhibition program. After its bequest to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in the mid-’80s the museum staged a show, and about 10 years later, in 1998, it organized a traveling exhibition so many of the works could again be widely seen. It became an American collection that not only represented America visually, but also engaged with an American audience.

With works by Stuart Davis, Edward Hopper, and Nancy Grossman on view, the word “Realism” in the title becomes fraught. Sure, all of the works in the collection at least tickle the surface of representation, but many approach abstraction, magic realism or surrealism. Thus, realism in this context isn’t as much an art-historical term as it is an ideological one. “We tried to come up with a title that describes everything in the show, but each thing we thought

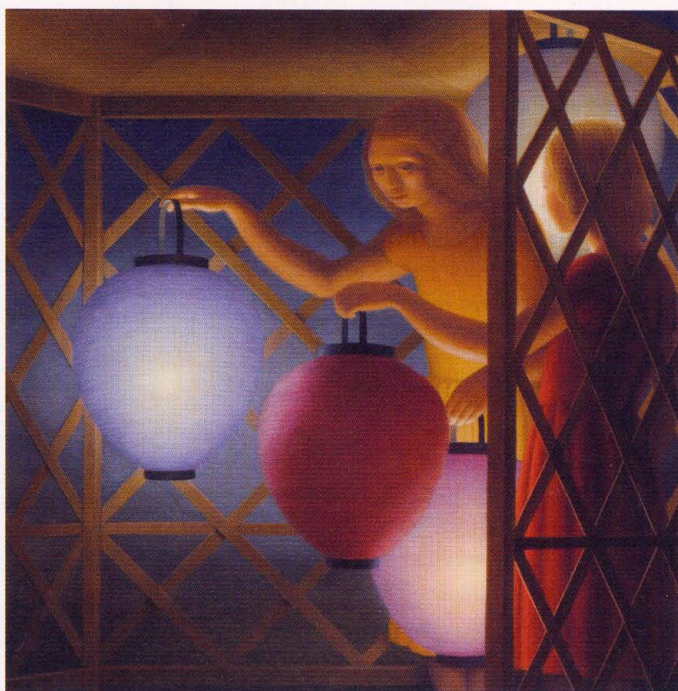


of denied some aspect of it,” says Mecklenburg, “Yes, there’s visual realism, but there’s also psychological and emotional realism. These works are about what we think and what feels real to us.”

Mecklenburg points to Harold Tovish’s sculptural work *In Memoriam* as a standout in the show. Tovish created the sculpture in 1984, decades after he began a series of figural sculptures in response to his exposure to Nazi concentration camps while fighting as a soldier in World War II. With a physical resemblance to the ubiquitous war memorials of stacked cannon balls that dot parks and the courtyards of municipal buildings around the United States, *In Memoriam* takes a poignant yet unyielding approach to war, monument, and remembrance. Each cannonball in Tovish’s pyramid has a split in it, and peeking from within each split is a human face. The faces all appear to be different—some are young, others old; some are male, others female. There is racial diversity among the faces, and each is oriented in a different way so that different facial features are highlighted. The piece, which hasn’t been on view in quite a while, struck Mecklenburg. “I hate the term ‘universal’ because it sounds so corny,” she says, “but this is a universal piece.” Tovish, who came face



Clockwise from top right: Will Barnet, *Sleeping Child*, 1961, oil; George Tooker, *in the Summerhouse*, 1958, egg tempera; Robert Vickrey, *Fear*, 1954, egg tempera.



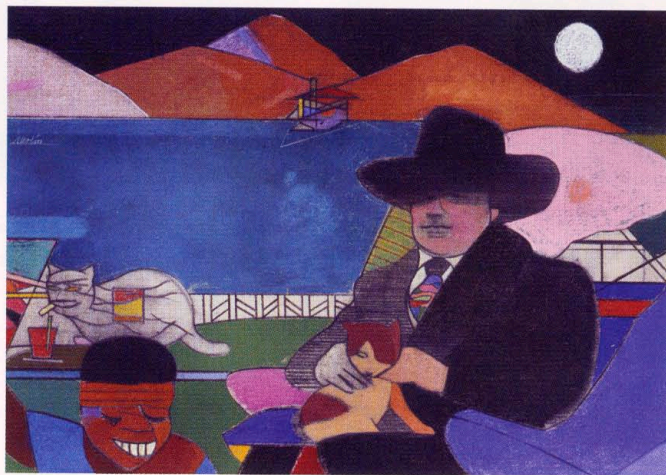


Clockwise from top left: Alan Feltus, *August 1983*, 1983, oil; Richard Merkin, *Gertrude and George*, 1979, pastel; Kenneth Hayes Miller, *Bargain Hunters*, 1940, oil.



to face with confinement during the war, is acknowledging the hold World War II had on a vast variety of people.

Not all the works in the show, or in the Roby collection, are as blatantly American as Sharrer's or Tovish's, however. There are four works by Paul Cadmus, a New York-born artist known for having a style rooted in the Italian Renaissance and a detailed sense of characterization that is more reflective than it is cruel. The second oldest of the lot is *Night In Bologna*, painted in 1958, five years after his return from a yearlong trip to Italy. The painting, which is an achievement of complicated perspective and architectural detail, is also a one-act drama depicting loneliness and lust. A soldier glances at a prostitute, and the prostitute glances at a traveler, who glances at the soldier. Each member of the love triangle occupies his or her own space within the architectural structure, seeming imprisoned by wall-less cells. The painting is hung next to Marsh's 1932 oil and egg tempera (*Bologna* is also egg tempera) work *George Tilyou's Steeplechase*. Another representation of furtive glances, the painting depicts a mechanical horse ride in Steeplechase Park at Coney Island in Brooklyn.



While a sailor and a young woman nestle into each other on one of the horses, both of their faces are turned in opposite directions, looking at other riders. Marsh, who focused much of his attention on New York during the Depression, portrays a rather hot scene for the 1930s. "This is really about flirtation and physicality," says Mecklenburg. "There's a sexual tension in the poses, but also through the gaze." The mystery as to who is looking at whom gives the painting, as in *Bologna*, a sense of distance and eternal secrecy, no matter how many times it's looked at.

Edward Hopper's *Cape Cod Morning* (1950) is one of the most classic works in the collection, and another painting that tantalizes the viewer with a mysterious gaze. As golden sunlight washes over wind-shaken grasses and trees, a blonde woman in a pink dress leans forward and looks out her window toward an unknown point of interest. For all its technical skill and sense of intrigue, it is quite simply a beautiful painting. "There are some classics like Hopper's *Cape Cod Morning*, where you just never have the answer, you never put it away," says Mecklenburg, "I guess that's part of what the whole show does." 