

# The New Criterion *October 2010*

Editors & Publishers *Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball*

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## Contributors to this issue

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**Brooke Allen's** latest book is *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Ivan R. Dee).

**Stefan Beck** is a writer living in Connecticut.

**James Bowman** is the author of *Honor: A History* (Encounter).

**Anthony Daniels's** most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter).

**Christie Davies** is the author of *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (Transaction).

**Paul Dean** is the Head of English at Summer Fields School, Oxford.

**John Derbyshire** is the author of *We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism* (Crown Forum).

**Denis Donoghue's** latest book is *On Eloquence* (Yale).

**Franklin Einspruch** is an artist and writer in Boston.

**Jason Guriel** is the author of a collection of poems, *Pure Product* (Véhicule).

**Rachel Hadas's** latest book of poem is *The Ache of Appetite* (Copper Beech Press).

**Hanny Hindi** is a writer living in Brooklyn.

**Michael J. Lewis** is Faison-Pierson-Stoddard Professor of Art at Williams College.

**William Logan** will have a volume of early selected poems in the spring.

**Herbert I. London** is the President of the Hudson Institute.

**Mario Naves** teaches at Pratt Institute and Brooklyn College.

**Alexander Nemser's** poems have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Paris Review*.

**Jay Nordlinger** is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

**James Piereson** is president of the William E. Simon Foundation and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

**Peter Schwendener** has written for *The American Scholar* and other publications.

**Barry Strauss's** latest book is *The Spartacus War* (Simon & Schuster).

**Terry Teachout** is the author of *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* and his latest book is *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*.

**Karen Wilkin** is on the faculty of the New York Studio School.

**Kevin D. Williamson's** *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Socialism* will be published in January.

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“Morris Graves: Falcon of the Inner Eye, A Centennial Celebration”  
 Michael Roesenfeld Gallery, New York.  
 September 8–October 30, 2010

There is an irony in Morris Graves’s status as a modern artist: in certain respects he was a medieval character. He worked mainly in tempera. He fled from one remote locale to another until he found himself on 195 acres in Humboldt County, California, which was finally sufficient to isolate him from the encroachments of modern life. A mystical bent prompted him to study Hinduism and embrace Zen. His efforts resulted in some of the finest religious art of the twentieth century—and not despite its syncretism and consequent lack of affiliation, but because of it.

Graves was born in 1910, and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery has mounted “Morris Graves: Falcon of the Inner Eye, A Centennial Celebration” in his honor. Graves’s work has long inspired devoted collecting, even at the outset of his career. The Seattle Art Museum gave him his first solo show when he was twenty-six. By 1942, he had been included in three important group exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the director Alfred Barr had purchased eleven works. Duncan Phillips took notice of him as well, and several pieces went into the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. that same year. Over the following decades, as Graves’s reputation transformed into that of a notable West Coast figure, with the marginalization that that entails, his collectors became a quiet and loyal contingent that supported him throughout a long, productive career. “Falcon of the Inner Eye” draws extensively from Rosenfeld’s personal holdings.

It’s easy to see the attraction. A good early Graves has the palette, economy, and charm of traditional Chinese painting. (This exhibition all but demands a supplemental visit to the superlative display of works in “The Yuan Revolution: Art and Dynastic Change” running concurrently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) Such handling is apparent in *Scoters and Wave* from 1943, an image of calm waterfowl riding wintry surf, which Graves painted in

elegant white brushstrokes. Yet works from this period also evince recognizably modern existential distress. Sometimes this takes the form of Surrealism, such as *Alter* from 1940, in which three birds perch on a dead branch that sprouts from a form that might be a vertebra, a deer torso, or something in between. Sometimes he delivers it through color and materials, such as the haunting *Journey* from 1943, an imaginary mountain landscape painted with ragged white lines on a background of dark ink washes. Either way, he described a lonely realm of the soul, populated at the very most with birds that look out through all-black eyes with expressions of surprise, disdain, or preoccupation. Common wisdom concerning Graves regards the birds as allegorical self-portraits.

In the 1960s and 1970s, he ramped up the intensity of his colors to no good effect and began to explore sculpture. Graves was no sculptor, and, at the time, he wasn’t much of a colorist either. Despite his aversion to the machine age—in the mid-1950s, construction of an airfield forced him to abandon a nearby house he had built for himself on Puget Sound—he became interested in a fusion of technological and spiritual tools. One example in the exhibition, *Instrument for a New Navigation #1* from 1962, is a brass stand for a little candle and a lens set into a granite disk. Whatever its poetic aspirations, as sculpture it’s ill-conceived and impersonal.

In the 1980s and 1990s, and until his death in 2001, Graves painted still lifes. He abandoned the stark imagery and palette of his earlier years in favor of vases of flowers and luminous colors. Certain Graves aficionados are apologetic about his late work, but I find them appealing, no less spiritually resonant, and demonstrative of eventual victory in a twenty-year battle with hues outside of classical Chinese models. They recall the pastels of Odilon Redon, whom Kenneth Rexroth once cited as a predecessor of Graves as a visionary artist. “Falcon of the Inner Eye” has only one of them, *Red Powder of Puja II* from 1980. Puja is a ritual Hindu offering. The picture shows an altar of flowers and a sea shell, set in front of a blazing vermilion wall onto which an archway has been drawn. Con-

templation at last yielded joy, and a lifetime of infusing art with esoteric energies rendered the artist capable of emanating them.

—Franklin Einspruch

“Defining Beauty:  
Albrecht Dürer at the Morgan”  
The Morgan Library Museum, New York.  
May 14–September 12, 2010

The full force of Albrecht Dürer’s talent was on display in a recent exhibition “Defining Beauty: Albrecht Dürer at the Morgan.” Drawn entirely from the Morgan’s permanent collection, the show consisted of ten works on paper and a pair of leather-bound sixteenth-century volumes. It was a small show but, like the Morgan’s collection in general, it was concentrated, not minor.

In a drawing of his brother Endres (1518), Dürer articulates every hair in a fur coat as carefully as he renders the sitter’s eyes. The style is freer in the rendition of a *Kneeling Donor* (1506), but the accents in white gouache are a perfect match for the blue “carta azzurra” that Dürer adopted after his journey to Venice. Also on display were a fine print of *Melancholia I* (1514), an *Abduction on Horseback* (1516) with Leonardo horse and Laocoön head, and some curios from the Morgan’s collection: a saddle design, a coat of arms, and a letter fending off a fussy client.

The centerpiece of the show was Dürer’s 1504 engraving *The Fall of Man*. Vladimir Nabokov once dismissed the Venus de Milo as an “eyeless” and “armless” statue “which for some reason or other is considered ideally beautiful.” I confess to being similarly bewildered by Dürer’s *Adam and Eve*, another pair of candidates for ideal beauty in Western art.

Perhaps this is unfair to Adam. He is ruggedly handsome, yet vulnerable—a *cinquecento* Frank O’Hara. The problem is with Eve, who also looks like Frank O’Hara. She is thoroughly unconvincing as a woman. Her body is a man’s body, pinched at the waist, and her face is even more masculine. (As the first German artist to draw female nudes from life, Dürer should have known better.) By way of contrast, consider the portrait of

a *Young Venetian Woman* that Dürer painted the following year. Dürer’s Eve could never tempt anyone to eat an apple, but his courtesan looks quite convincing.

Eve’s unshapely figure is a result of Dürer’s strict adherence to the set of rules he laid out in his *Four Books on Human Proportion* (at the Morgan in a 1534 edition): “From the crown to the throat let there be one tenth part and one eleventh. To the top of shoulders, two eleventh parts. To the bottom of the chin, 1/7.” And so on. This is even drier in tone than Dürer’s treatise on geometry, and no wonder—it was his stated aim to capture the human form “mit dem zirkel und rickscheyt” (“with ruler and compass”). In his least successful work (mostly in religious scenes), Dürer plays the dispassionate geometer, “defining beauty” rather than admiring it. Such a pedantic turn of mind suggests the truth of William Blake’s famous phrase: it is the “fearful symmetry” of a tiger that we’re after, not the inert symmetry of an icosahedron.

Blake’s tiger is also an apt reminder of how often Dürer set his ruler and compass aside, especially when his subjects were animals: we see this in the precise watercolors of an owl, a hare, or a roller’s wing; in the woodcut of a fantastical rhinoceros (the original specimen drowned en route from Portugal, a scene re-created by Walton Ford’s 2008 watercolor *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros*); and even in the menagerie included in *The Fall of Man*. Consider the elk passing between Adam and Eve, or the ox to Eve’s left. I’ve never seen drawings that better capture the frisson of looking a fellow mammal in the eye.

The art historian Erwin Panofsky pointed out that Adam and Eve were meant to represent a perfect balance of mind and body, while the animals surrounding them embodied the four humors *in extremis*. Thus, the melancholy elk, the choleric cat, the phlegmatic ox, or—to return to the human animal in a different context—the *Young Venetian Woman*’s hot-blooded courtesan. These are imperfect creatures, which Dürer allowed himself to see. It was only when he tried to define beauty that Dürer produced something ugly.

—Hanny Hindi