

Kay Miller – March OOM

“Trial,” Conrad Marca-Relli, American, 1956, Oil on canvas and collage, #57.36



"Going beyond the figures of traditional painting through collage has enabled me to reach a 'painting' which is always fresh, a composition which year after year is always visibly active."

- Conrad Marca-Relli

Questions:

1. What's going on in this collage? There are many forms. Describe them. What, if anything, do they suggest to you?
2. What emotions does this painting evoke in you? What has the artist done to make you feel that way? How does the limited color palette and large size contribute to those feelings?
3. How might your reactions change if the piece were smaller? If it were just an oil painting?
4. What movement do you see?
5. This work can be read many ways. How does that contribute or detract from its power?

Social/Historical Context: The abstract expressionist movement, sometimes called the New York School, started in New York in the 1940s and 1950s in the aftermath of World War II, the genocide in Europe and the nuclear bombing of Japan. The term "abstract expressionism" was coined in 1919 to describe German expressionism and used in 1929 to describe Wassily Kandinsky's work. In 1946, art critic Robert Coates applied it to the collection of New York artists who were determined to create an entirely new vision of what art was through increasingly abstract imagery. It was a small group to start - Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Hans Hofman and Mark Rothko, among others - and they knew each other well. They gathered in downtown studios, cafes and the few galleries showing modern art. It was a heady time, filled with extraordinarily serious conversation. These artists were ambitious, creative and often full of themselves, as they discussed the meaning, origin and the necessity of abstract art. They wanted to create art that was a deeply personal expression of their inner lives. By challenging and overturning the domination of Picasso and Matisse, the giants of 20th century art, they believed they would forge an entirely new culture, a new civilization, an alternative to the brutality they had witnessed in war. Their styles were rebellious, idiosyncratic and often wildly different from each others' work. But they shared a profound belief that by exposing their souls on canvas, paper, in metal, stone and photography, they would reinvent themselves and civilization as they knew it. None of them expected to make money. The art market for modern works then was tiny. But as more avant-garde artists joined them, their art grew into an international movement that shifted the locus of the art world from Paris to New York.

Artist's Biography: Marca-Relli's greatest achievement was to raise collage to the status of monumental painting, as a complete pictorial system without precedent in modern art. He's best known for very large

canvases that combine collage with oil painting. He was a founding member of the exclusive "Eighth Street Club," part of the early New York School Abstract Expressionists and the Pollock/de Kooning "Downtown Group," whose studios were in lower Manhattan. Collage was Conrad-Relli's break-through. He believed that for abstraction to be emotionally moving, it needed to employ psychologically affecting shapes and textures.

Marca-Relli was among just 24 of 256 artists chosen by their fellow artists to show at the landmark Ninth Street Show in 1951, the first comprehensive show of Abstract Expressionist work to draw critical and public notice. He showed in all the subsequent New York Painting and Sculpture Annuals from 1953 to 1957. As his work progressed, Marca-Relli distanced himself from the New York School. "I have never felt myself an Abstract Expressionist per se," he said in a video, "because I've always felt the figure always was very important."

He was born in Boston June 5, 1913, as Carrado Marcarelli (he later changed it to Conrad Marca-Relli) to immigrant parents. His father was a **news commentator and journalist** whose work took the family back and forth between America and Europe. Marca-Relli began drawing at an early age and his parents arranged art lessons on their many trips to Italy. When he was 13 his family moved to New York; he finished his senior year of high school at night to devote his days to painting. He studied art at Cooper Union for a year, but otherwise was largely self-taught. Early on, he taught art and painted murals for the Works Progress Administration, providing income for him to devote himself to art. The WPA also introduced him to Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, who exposed him to modernism.

Marca-Relli's artistic break-through came during a 1953 Mexico trip. He was "inspired by the different types of 'white' in the architecture and the landscape" - cold white was as different from warm white as white was from black. Lacking painting supplies, he began experimenting with collage to capture the light, forms and textures of his surroundings. He developed a process combining oil painting and cut-out shapes, intense colors, layering and splatters. In the 1950s, he had year-long teaching stints at Yale and Berkeley. During the early 1960s he experimented with wood, aluminum and vinyl in carefully structured, simplified forms. He was well-read, highly cultured and somewhat of a hypochondriac. He was also a wanderer by nature, a controversial investigator and tireless researcher of painting. He lived and worked in France, Spain and Italy, looking to Renaissance and Cubist painters for inspiration, seeking to apply lessons of European art history to the new America vision of painting. That search brought traditional European values of polish, elegance and finish to his work. Eventually, he and his artist wife, Anita Gibson, moved to Parma, Italy. He died there on Aug. 29, 2000, at age 87.

Marca-Relli exhibited regularly at the Stable Gallery, which showed very avant-garde work. His first collage show there was well-received, drawing museum purchases from MoMA, the Met, the Whitney and Chicago, which found his collage approach fresh and new. Artists like Picasso, Braque and Matisse pioneered collage. But their works were usually small and on paper. Marca-Relli worked on canvas. "Mine are major, giant paintings," he once said.

Collage gave him the opportunity to continually rework a painting, without it getting stale. "Each time you add a piece, it's fresh," he said. This was especially important given the monumental size of his canvases. Collage gave him the freedom and courage to innovate that which eluded him in painting alone. If he was dissatisfied with a large area in a strictly painted work, it was hard work to change it. Oil takes hours, even days to dry and turns to "mud" if overworked, he said in the video. "If you change it and you don't like it, you're really in a bad way because then you're angry that you ruined the painting." By layering canvas or linen cut-out shapes over painted areas and rearranging them, he could swiftly rework a piece until it was everything he could make it.

Unlike other Abstract Expressionists who derided **figurative forms**, Conrad-Relli found them essential to his work. He **started with figures that were lying down, seated or sleeping, reworking them continuously until they became abstract images**. It didn't work for him to start with just nonobjective paint slapped on a canvas. "The best way for me to get rid of the element of the figurative is to by starting a figure and slowly finding its forces that would possibly destroy it," he said.

Conrad-Relli believed that the Abstract Expressionists were not working as revolutionaries, trying to "tear down the old guard." He recalled how de Kooning, Kline and he all had reproductions of Matisse, Picasso and Renaissance works on their studio walls. "Every generation should have to offer an equivalent art form, an equivalent of what has been done before beautifully. You do it in the next generation in your terms."

The Object: "Trial" is part of a series of works begun with "The Struggle" (1955), in which Marca-Relli sought to extend the expressive range of collage through increased complexity. Having mastered collage, he worked on two large figure compositions, "Trial" and "Battle" (now at the Met). The MIA's Trial:

- Introduces **myriad figures** in a state of action and **movement**. These represent what Marca-Relli called "the **architecture of an event**." This piece is a progression of greater abstraction from his (1953-54) single-figure collages, which he called the "**architecture of the human figure**."
- Introduces a multiplicity and complexity unparalleled in his entire career.
- **Suggests organic** shapes, but **deletes** all specific, identifiable **human** references.
- Combines an extraordinary **variety of abstract shapes, textures and contrasts**. These merge, **overlap, collide and intersect** in endless configurations. Figures are densely meshed, but well-defined. Definition is furthered by limiting color to black and off-white.
- Makes collage structure paramount. All allusive elements of painting are gone. The material importance of shape, line, shadow and depth are emphasized.
- **Balances** control and spontaneity/ order and accident.
- Covers a **large** canvas. One of his freely structured collages that places him between de Kooning's figuration/abstractions and more formal geometric abstraction.
- **Evokes emotion** through cut-out, glued canvas shapes. Expressive way for him to paint vigorously, but control through classical arrangement. He begins with quick pencil sketch, then cut out canvas or linen shapes with a razor blade
- Establishes a **complete pictorial system** through collage.
- Shows that collage is a form equal to monumental painting before it was practiced by Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg.

Tour possibilities: Mostly Modern; Why is the Sky Yellow: Artists' Choices; Breaking the Rules

See also:

"The Joust," Conrad Marca-Relli, 1959, Walker Art Center, (1960.5)





"The Witnesses," Conrad Marca-Relli, 1956, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC (2006.32.41)



"The Battle," Conrad Marca-Relli, 1956, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC (56.203)

Resources:

<http://www.theartstory.org/index.html> A great site about modern art:

<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-marca-relli-conrad.htm> Site's item about Marca-Relli

<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-abstract-expressionism.htm#> And abstract expressionism

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGJergg0zvo> - Video of Marca-Relli talking about his work

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