

Madonna of the Mines

Artist: Philip Evergood (1901-1973)

On Loan from the Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis

In Gallery 360

Oil on Canvas



**Gallery label: Philip Evergood used his art to make bold social and political statements during the Great Depression. He painted average people whose struggles were epic. Focusing his attention on the plight of American mining families, his Madonna of the Mines is one of the most important works from this period.**

## **Artist's Biography:**

Philip Evergood was born as Philip Blashki in New York City in 1901 to an English mother and an Australian father, Miles, also an artist who changed the family name in 1915 in order to sound less foreign to American and English ears. At age 8, he was sent to an English boarding school something he referred to years later in an interview as "not being such a good idea". He studied at Eton and Cambridge and subsequently enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London where he studied drawing. In his early 20's, he traveled to NYC and then on to Paris to study at the Academie Julian and the British Academy in Rome.

Evergood returned to the U.S. in 1926 where he painted for the Federal Arts Project under the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. He married in 1931 after spending six months in Spain studying the works of Goya and El Greco. As with many of his contemporaries, his work became radicalized during the depression. Evergood was a militant supporter of workers and fought against social injustice and for the rights of workers. He presented a critical view of racial discrimination, unemployment, worker/management issues and the threat of war. He was arrested and beaten during the "219 Strike" protesting layoffs from the Federal Art Project. He served as President of the Artists' Union during a time when the organization hoped to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor to obtain economic clout and political visibility. However, during the 40's with the phasing out of federal programs membership dwindled and the Artists' Union disbanded.

In the Philip Evergood papers from the Archives of the American Art Journal (see below), it is stated, "What emerges from these papers is the image of a man completely dedicated to his craft, who inspired respect among his contemporaries; an individual of integrity and honesty with a clear set of ethical principles who was profoundly involved with humanity and contemporary life. Indeed, attitudes which might first resemble platitudes soon reveal themselves to be the convictions of a man unafraid of failure who was willing to experiment with art." He was a figurative painter at a time when the rest of the world was more focused on abstraction.

Evergood admired the colors of Modigliani and Rousseau and developed a sense that the right colors achieved a desired effect. "Color combinations which at first may annoy, can later excite," he said, "the sweet in color can also be enjoyable if a little acid is alongside it-honey and vinegar cures many ills."

A chronicler of his turbulent times, Evergood's canvases are filled with men and women who resemble no people that we have ever seen: awkward creatures with clumsy bodies and distorted faces who reflect the crises of life in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. The vulgarity of his art characterized the way he viewed society. He is noted for his bold lines, spontaneity and his sophisticated compositions that are often openly humorous, frequently fantastic and clear in their symbolism. His color is never conventional but rather evokes an extremely personal mood that reveals him as militantly social and warmly sensuous. A blend of reality and fantasy gives his paintings a cartoonish quality. His art is a contradiction of sorts: sophisticated

intent is coupled with an intentionally crude technique. He is a wonderful subject for interesting gallery talks and brings out some surprising comments from the participants.

### **Madonna of the Mines-Questions:**

- **What is going on in this picture? How would you describe the figures in it? What are they doing?** The infant is balancing precariously on the shoulder of his mother. Consider the title of the painting. **What is the artist saying? What effect does this have on you, the viewer?**
- **What symbols do you see on the painting?** Wooden crossbeams are in the shape of a crucifix. The infant is holding a railroad car across which is written COAL. In the lower left, we see a man heading into the mine. He is walking away from the viewer and from his family. **Who is being sacrificed?** During this time, coal miners were dying at an incredible rate. In France in one mine accident alone, 1,098 miners were killed in one accident. Miners were contracting “black lung” disease. (Although black lung was not acknowledged to be a consequence of mining in part to prevent monetary set backs.) Coal dust was in the air being breathed by the families of the miners as well as the miners.
- **Notice the Madonna, her body and the look on her face particularly in her eyes. What is the artist saying? What is she saying? (It is interesting to compare her expression as well as the appearance of the infant with the Madonna and Child by Segna Buonaventura, 87.64.)** Her expression speaks volumes. Philip Evergood also assigns his Madonna an unusual stance. She appears to be clumsy and off balance-why? She has protuberant bones and coal encrusted hands and body. In the background right, we see a hint of living conditions.
- **Notice the face of the infant? How would you describe him? Why do you think the artist depicted him this way?** Philip Evergood is noted for his deliberately awkward figures. **What do you think he might be saying about the infant?** (Is the infant unlovable, easily forgotten, easily sacrificed?)
- **Notice the colors used by the artist? How do these colors effect you the viewer? Why were these colors chosen by the artist?**

**Historical Context:** 1925, Three Dancers, Pablo Picasso

1929, Stock market crash inaugurates the Great Depression

1930, over 3,000 banks fail in the U.S.,

1932, Famines in U.S.S.R. leave five million dead-caused by Stalin’s collectivization and requisition of grain.



**Threshold To Success, 1955, 1957**



**Mine Disaster, 1933/1937, Penn. Academy of Fine Arts  
Considered to be a Major Work of Social Realism**



**Dowager in a Wheelchair, 1952, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.**

**Sources:**

**Oxford Art Online (Of special note: Propaganda)**

**Hollis Taggart Galleries**

**Google Images**

**[The Philip Evergood Papers](#)** 

[Kendall Taylor](#)

*Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (In JSTOR)