



The Return of Walter Quirt

AN IMPORTANT AMERICAN PAINTER, NEARLY FORGOTTEN FOR DECADES, IS BEING REDISCOVERED.

BY JOHN DORFMAN

FAME IS FICKLE, and an artist can slip out of art history for reasons that have little or nothing to do with art. Case in point: Walter Quirt. By the early 1940s, Quirt had built a national-level reputation, both for his painting and for his spirited defense of modern art as a writer and lecturer. In 1943, Robert M. Coates, art critic for *The New Yorker* (and coiner of the term “Abstract Expressionism”) called him “the most impassioned artist alive today.” In 1944, Quirt was included, alongside Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and William Baziotes, in Sidney Janis’ *Abstract and Surrealist Painting in America*, a landmark book that mapped the landscape of the avant-garde at a pivotal moment.

However, that same year, worried about making a living, Quirt decided to leave New York for Milwaukee to take a teaching job and then remained in the Midwest until his death in 1968. Relocation to a place that was peripheral to the art world certainly did Quirt’s future fame no favors, but far worse was a near-total lack of posthumous exposure. Except for a retrospective in 1980 at the University of Minnesota (where he had taught for two decades) and a smaller show there four years ear-

As seen in **Art**
SANTIQUES



Previous page: Walter Quirt, *Shipwrecked*, 1943, oil on canvas, 40 x 48 inches. This page, from left: *Woman With Bare Feet*, 1953, oil on canvas, 38 x 26 inches; *Yellow Light*, 1958, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches.

lier, there were no shows at all until 2015 because Quirt’s widow, Eleanor, chose to keep his work private, within the family. The effect of 35 years of absence was that Quirt came close to disappearing from the art world’s collective memory.

The situation was salvaged after Eleanor Quirt’s death, when the artist’s sons decided to bring his work back to public view, through Seattle dealer Frederick Holmes & Company. Holmes and San Francisco Bay-area independent curator Travis Wilson have spearheaded the return of Walter Quirt, together organizing two major shows—a 30-work retrospective in May 2015 titled “Walter Quirt: Revolutions Unseen” and, exactly a year later, “Walter Quirt: Works on Paper, a Curated Survey of Paintings on Paper, 1956–1964.”

Moving through many styles and theories of art over the course of his career, Quirt always remained true to the ideals that fired his youth. Born in 1902 in Iron River, Mich., a poverty-stricken min-

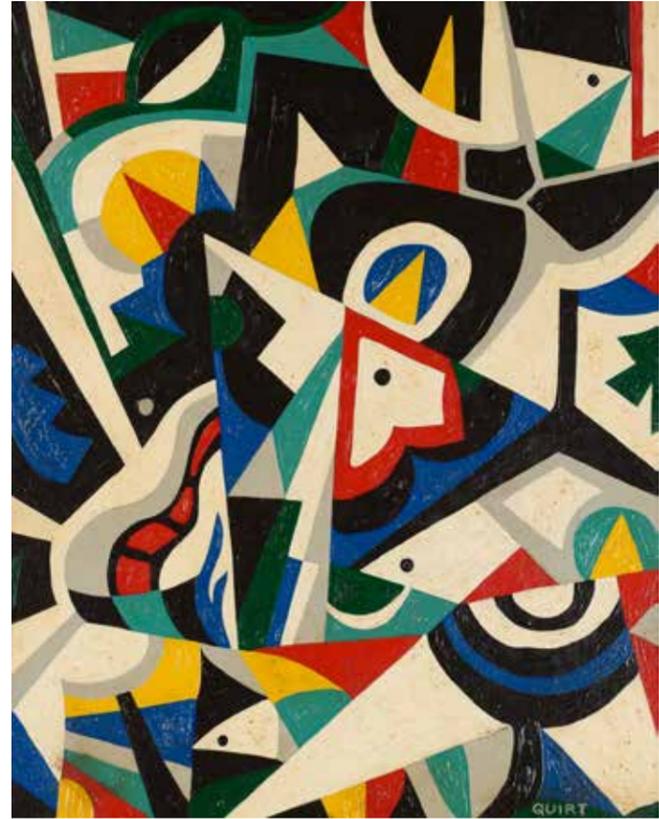
ing town, he worked in mines and lumber camps as a teenager while showing a precocious talent for drawing. Radical politics was in the air in the 1920s, as the country was convulsed by strikes, and Soviet Communism inspired many workers and intellectuals. In 1921 Quirt entered the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, where he not only studied drawing and painting but became a local union organizer. Having gained recognition for his art through exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Milwaukee Art Institute, Quirt decided to make the move to New York in the fateful year of 1929.

The Depression, while unkind to art commerce, was profoundly stimulating to socially conscious art, and Quirt plunged in. By 1931 he was the secretary of the art division of the John Reed Club, an important Socialist organization; his associates there included Social Realist artists such as Raphael Soyer and William Gropper. Like them, Quirt believed that art had a mis-

COURTESY OF THE WALTER QUIRT ESTATE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICHOLAS PISHVANOV



Clockwise from top left: *Quiet Dreams*, 1958, oil on canvas, 50 x 38 inches; *Untitled*, circa 1948, oil on canvas on board, 19 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches; *Creation/Horse*, circa 1961, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.



sion to depict the situation of the workers and the poor and to advocate for justice. He published political-themed drawings in highbrow radical magazines such as *Art Front* and *New Pioneer*, as well as more populist political art, such as a comic strip for the Communist newspaper

The Daily Worker titled *Jim Martin*, which chronicled the ongoing travails of a young labor organizer.

By the mid-'30s, Quirt had moved on into Surrealism, a recent import from Europe. In fact, he was one of the first American artists to work in a Surrealistic mode, soon to be followed by Louis Guglielmi,

James Guy, and David Smith. They called themselves "Social Surrealists," meaning that while they embraced automatism as a creative technique and no longer adhered to realism, they still intended to deal, more or less explicitly, with contemporary social and political problems. Quirt was denounced for abandoning Social Realism in favor of Surrealism, but in fact Surrealism had always been profoundly political. André Breton and his followers were leftists and conceived of Surrealism, in both literature and art, as a revolutionary instrument with the power to destroy bourgeois society from the inside out, taking the psyche as the front line in the battle for freedom and justice. Quirt's objection to Social Realism from a political point of view was that it was "dumbed down" and insulted the intelligence of the very people it was supposed to be appealing to.

Quirt's new work got him an exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York, which championed Surrealism, but it didn't



ured images. Quirt, an enthusiast of Freudianism, was

Clockwise from top left: *Head*, 1948, oil on canvas, 26 x 22 inches; *Lake Harriet Series, Two Doing Their Best*, 1964, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches; *Lake Harriet Series, Four Figures*, 1964, oil on canvas, 50 x 62 inches.

pay the bills. Seeking gainful employment, Quirt went to work in 1935 for the WPA's mural program, where he stayed seven years, absorbing influences from contemporary Mexican mural masters such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. Quirt's greatest achievement for the WPA was a panoramic mural in New York's Bellevue Hospital, *The Growth of Medicine From Primitive Times*, which combined Surrealism and history painting on a grand scale. He completed it in 1937, the same year that he publicly debated Salvador Dalí at MoMA, attacking the Spaniard's brand of Surrealism as politically imbecilic. This earned Quirt few friends and much criticism. In 1941, he published an essay titled "Wake Over Surrealism, With Due Respect for the Corpse," in which he articulated a need to move beyond Surrealism but affirmed the usefulness of automatism in art-making.

Quirt's work from the early '40s is incredibly dense and powerful, seeming to explode from the canvas while at the same time drawing the viewer into a multicolored maelstrom of emotions and frac-

psychoanalyzed during this period, and his work shows him sounding the depths of the unconscious. While its use of line and color was basically abstract—in fact, with its sense of furious freedom very much foreshadowing Abstract Expressionism—Quirt's early 1940s work was still figurative. In *The Crucified* (1943), the central figure of Christ (who has an eerie smile on his face) and the figures who surround him (including a Deposition from the Cross group) blend into the curving ribbons of color that envelop them. In *Compulsion to Anger* (1944), a graphic representation of a mental state, the human figures are reduced to faces that emerge from the tangle of curving colored stripes, only to be swallowed up again, as if they were drowning in a sea of psychic forces. In *Shipwrecked* (1943), that experience of sinking is more literally depicted, but still within



COURTESY OF THE WALTER QUIRT ESTATE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICHOLAS PISHVANOV

COURTESY OF THE WALTER QUIRT ESTATE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICHOLAS PISHVANOV



Clockwise from top left: *Man and Horse*, 1959–62, oil on canvas, 50 x 56 inches; *Nature's Children*, 1942, oil on canvas, 40 x 48 inches; *Social Surrealist Drawing*, 1939, 14 ½ x 18 inches.

the context of Quirt's special technique.

After his move back to the Midwest, Quirt changed his style again. The later '40s saw him painting more abstractly, in linearly-defined geometric patterns of color including a lot of white. These paintings are somewhat reminiscent of Stuart Davis, who was a great friend of Quirt's. Starting in the early '50s, his technique became looser and brushier, as if taking a new direction in the old search for freedom. The energetic curves persist, but they manifest themselves in a new way, a more gestural one. The compositions are less dense, sometimes quite open and airy—a single figure over

a wash of color, and in some works even the colors are attenuated, almost to monochrome. The lone figure is often a woman or a horse; Quirt had strong childhood memories of horses, and they seemed to connote freedom and joy to him.

After briefly teaching at the Layton School of Art, where he had been a student 20 years before, and at

Michigan State, in 1947 Quirt got a teaching position at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he would remain until his death. He showed his work at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis during the '50s, and had a traveling retrospective, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, in 1960–62. While his youthful dreams of revolutionary Socialism were disappointed, he never abandoned his belief that art has a mission to change the world for the better. Late works like the luminous abstraction *Quiet Dreams* (1958) and the lyrical, figurative *Man and Horse* (1959–62) exude a sense of deep peace and contentment that is diametrically opposed to the palpable anger of the wartime paintings. Quirt's desire to bring about social change and psychological transformation was also expressed through his teaching of countless students over the years.

"The great artist," wrote Quirt, "is one who faithfully follows his impulses, who vigorously and courageously peels off layer after layer of restrictions, prohibitions, and inhibitions. This takes courage, for it automatically means suffering." In his art, in his career choices, and in his willingness to express unpopular opinions, Quirt had that courage, and he suffered. But he also found great joy, which he was able to put into his paintings. ▣

