

Joseph Hirsch (1910 - 1981)

Masseur Tom

oil on canvas, 1933

1999 Museum Purchase

Funded by Sunrise Collectors Club

Dimensions: (h) 80" x (w) 47"

Introduction

The powerful working style of Joseph Hirsch placed him at the forefront of twentieth century social realist painters. Inspiration for his art came from everyday events and ordinary people. In 1932, Hirsch studied with George Luks, a member of "The Eight" also known as the Ashcan School. It was from Luks that Hirsch acquired his brisk painting style and accurate draftsmanship. Shortly after Luks died in 1933, Hirsch, at age 24, painted this life-size portrait, which brought Hirsch to national attention.

The Artist

A native of Philadelphia, Joseph Hirsch started his formal art training at 17, when he won a full scholarship to the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art. He learned about color and was encouraged to work on a larger scale. In 1932, he went on to study privately in New York City with George Luks, a member of "The Eight," a group of American painters who rejected modernism in favor of depicting scenes of ordinary people and everyday life in a realistic style. Luks was a tough critic, but he showed Hirsch how to closely observe color how it was affected by other colors. Evidence of this can be seen in this painting, with the many colors that comprise the skin tones and interplay of light and shadow. He was encouraged to find his subject matter in daily observation and experience.



In 1935 he went to Paris on a Woolley Fellowship, where he spent 15 months and was able to visit some of the best art museums in the world. He planned to travel around Europe, but his return trip the following year became an extended trip around the world via the Orient, which gave him a new perspective.

On his return to Philadelphia in 1936, Hirsch created a number of murals and artworks for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Philadelphia. Living in a northeastern urban environment during the depression era, the vast differences between the rich and poor were constantly apparent. Hirsch suffered economic

hardship himself, so it is not surprising that his paintings focused increasingly on social commentary. Like many artists, he also tried printmaking, creating etchings of his work with the intent that they would reach a larger audience and be more accessible, but he soon returned to painting. (Later he made 67 prints, many of which were based on his paintings.)

Working during World War II as a war artist correspondent, he designed, *Till We Meet Again* (1942), probably the most widely produced and distributed war bond poster. Hirsch went on to record significant battles and events, documenting naval air training and the efforts of Navy medicine teams in the South Pacific. He later covered the Italian front and operations in North Africa for the Army. The majority of works he produced are still held by the U.S. Army Art Collection.

After the war, Hirsch continued to sell paintings through New York galleries, and worked commercially for corporations and theatres. He also taught at the prestigious Chicago Art Institute, the American Art School, University of Utah, the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League in New York City, where he taught until his death in 1981. Joseph Hirsch won numerous major awards offered for American artists throughout his career.

Discussion

In 1934, Hirsch won the prestigious Walter Lippincott Award for Figure Painting with this monumental piece, *Masseur Tom*. The subject is a masseur, standing in a red loincloth in the Turkish bath that his father used to frequent. It shows a giant, heavy-set man with a handlebar moustache standing with a cigar in his hand and a towel around his neck. The background is fairly non-descript, dark red, with a green checkerboard floor. The masseur emerges from the partial darkness of the room, suggesting that he works in a small, dingy space. His pose is solid, feet positioned apart to hold the great fleshy weight that Hirsch captured through his superb modeling of light and color.

The painting is composed in such a way that the viewer approaches the work at the level of his great girth, and so feels dwarfed and somewhat intimidated by the huge figure; perhaps the artist's way of glorifying this ordinary, or maybe, extraordinary man. Despite his solid build and stance, there is something rather fragile, mournful and a little mysterious about the lone figure standing in a semi-darkened room. The subtlety of the figure's facial expression further reveals his fragility, reminding the viewer that outward appearances are not all that they seem; this giant of a man certainly has a tender side.

Masseur Tom is a good example of the pervading humanism and sensitivity in Hirsch's work, capturing the strength, poise, and beauty in the most humble of subjects. His style is realistic and he applies paint with a heavy impasto throughout the figure, probably using a palette knife, and less heavily in other parts of the painting. His superior observation of light and color is the result of strict training in which Hirsch was taught to look at a subject and paint what he saw – probably acquired in his studies with Luks.

The whole color scheme is warm; the varied skin tones of the figure are comprised many hues. The figure seems alive, the brushwork giving the impression of a mottled skin tone, and a sense of muscles, blood, and veins beneath the skin. Hirsch uses warm shades of green in the shadows

to suggest modeling of the form, and his subtle use of light, gives the model a realistic sense of mass on the two dimensional surface. The lighting is fairly direct, and there is a distinct shadow cast on the tiled floor, which gives a realistic sense of space within the painting. So skilled is his rendering of light and color, we can sense the heat and atmosphere of the sauna-room.

After winning the Lippincott Award, the painting was exhibited at the National Academy of Design and won the Hallgarten Award. It was later exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1942 with sixteen other works by Hirsch. In a 1970 interview, Hirsch described Masseur Tom as “not a very saleable picture,” but clearly saw it as a landmark piece in his early career. It is also typical of the social realism seen in his choice of subject matter in which he portrayed people dressed in the clothing of their chosen vocation.

Style

Stylistically Hirsch’s work falls into the category of American Social Realism. His studies with Luks, one of the key artists of the Ashcan School, clearly influenced his ideas on style and subject matter. His early career with the WPA and as a war artist further solidified his interest in humanist subject matter, which he depicted in a realist style. The combination of this style and subject matter, originating with the Ashcan painters, and peaking during the depression era, became collectively known as *The American Scene*, and generally consists of two schools, American Regionalism and the more political and urban Social Realism.

These artists, active during the early part of the 20th century, were united by their “anti-modern” representational style and humanistic themes. The Avampato Discovery Museum’s permanent collection includes a number of artists associated with the American Scene, including Charles Burchfield, Stuart Davis, Raphael Soyer and Ben Shahn, whom Hirsch acknowledges as a close friend. American Social Realist artists often used specific themes in their work, but aside from a realistic depiction of their subjects, there was no specific style that all the painters followed. Hirsch states in the 1970 interview, that although he explored abstraction from time to time in his drawings, he was never interested in pursuing it in his paintings.

Sources

Most of the information is from the Smithsonian’s Oral History Interview with Hirsch, recorded in his studio at 246 West 80th Street, New York City. November 13, 1970, (INTERVIEWER: PAUL CUMMINGS)

<http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/hirsch70.htm> retrieved June 14th, 2004.

Poster Image “Till We Meet Again” found online at:

<http://www.mplib.org/wpdb/index.asp?searchcontrib=Hirsch,+Joseph,+1910-> retrieved June 14th, 2004

Others include:

<http://www.usbr.gov/museumproperty/art/biohirsc.htm> (biography) retrieved June 15th, 2004.

<http://www.history.navy.mil/ac/artist/h/hirsch/hirsch1.htm> (biography, US Navy site) retrieved June 15th, 2004.