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ARTS 105-B04 LUO

May 30, 2018

## Philip Guston



1969 | The Studio

Oil on Canvas | 71" x 73 3/10"

Private Collection

Philip Guston, a painter, and printmaker lived a very full and varied life. His artwork spanned over seven decades and went through three phases. The first phase of his younger years was filled with art influenced by his favorite Renaissance painters but also reflected his personal beliefs and life events. During the second phase, Guston became well known for being one of the leaders of the Abstract Expressionist movement in New York along with other artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko. His third phase brought him back to more figurative paintings with a cartoonish look that brought harsh reviews from his critics.

Philip Guston was born in Montreal, Canada, on June 27, 1913. His family moved to Canada from Ukraine, fleeing the persecution of Jews. At the age of 6, they moved to Los Angeles, California. While in LA, racism and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan were growing, and Guston's father felt the strain. Unable to find steady work for several years, Guston's father committed suicide by hanging himself. Guston was the child that found his father's body in the family shed (Abramson, 338).

Shortly after the death of his father, Philip started retreating into the world of comic books. His mother enrolled him in the Cleveland School of Cartooning, a correspondence course, and his love of drawing blossomed. In his teenage years, while studying art history at the library in Los Angeles, he was drawn to the Renaissance artists, and his early paintings reflected this passion (Rosen, 53). In 1927, Guston enrolled in the Los Angeles Manual Arts High School, where he met his life-long friend, Jackson Pollock. While at Manual Arts, he studied Cubism along with the philosophies of Krishnamurti and Ouspensky. Guston and Pollock later distributed satirical pamphlets poking fun at the English department, and the school expelled

them (The Art Story). During the 1930s, he worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), painting murals. He won an award for his mural *Maintaining America's Skills* for the WPA Building at the New York World's Fair in 1939 (Abramson, 338).

Guston taught for many years. His first teaching job was at the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa from 1941 to 1945. Between 1945 and 1947, he was an artist-in-residence at the St. Louis School of Fine Art of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He then moved to New York City and taught at New York University and the Pratt Institute. (Abramson, 338)

In the late 1940s through the early 1960s, Guston's work started to take on more shapeless forms. His use of both light and intense brushstrokes seems to make his images float. This description echoes across several books and articles written about Guston. He used a limited color palette of black, white, blue, and red and would continue to use these colors for the remainder of his career. His use of more shapeless forms was the start of his abstract painting phase. As his paintings gained popularity, the public quickly recognized Guston as one of the founders of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism (Rosen, 49). Abstract Expressionism was mainly a post-World War II US art movement centered in New York City. It is a form of art that moves away from traditional figurative drawings and the standard easel. Abstract artists used different mediums to make their art, from paints splattered on a large canvas laid out on the floor (like Pollock) to small pieces of fabric with broad brush strokes (like Ryman). Their art is meant to convey strong and thought-provoking emotions (MoMA).

By the late 1960s, Guston was tired of creating abstracts. With the Vietnam war and violence and turmoil in America, he could not see going into his studio to adjust colors on his

abstract works. His work shifted to more figurative creations. Guston had a fascination for the Biblical story of the Flood (Gen 6-9), and during this shift in his work, he created three paintings called the *Deluge*, *Deluge II*, and *Deluge III*. Just like the flood covered all the earth and then slowly receded, exposing mountain tops, trees, and plants, so did his *Deluge* paintings. They seemed to symbolize the death of his abstract era and slowly revealed his old but changed form of art (Rosen, 62-64).

His new art consisted of figures drawn with a more bulbous, cartoonish form like the comics he loved in his youth. They were often hooded like the Klan, shown on run-down streets and neighborhoods, or sitting in rooms with cigarettes, empty bottles, and half-eaten foods (Rosen, 49). The hooded figures were common in his later paintings, possibly experiences from his youth; a world filled with violence, racism, and his father's death.

In 1970, he had his first art exhibit featuring his new style of paintings at Marlborough Gallery in New York City. The critic's reaction to the opening was severe. One famous critic, Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times*, said Guston was "A Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum" (Rosen, 43). After this article, Guston retreated permanently to his country home in Woodstock, New York. This criticism scarred him to the point that he hated to attend future showings, often standing outside the gallery with his family, looking pale, nervous, and very vocal about his dislike for the critics (Mayer).

While living in Woodstock, Guston met a young writer named Philip Roth, and they quickly became friends. Roth and Guston shared many common bonds, including their loathing for the newly elected President, Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon. They both thought Nixon was using his power as President to further his own political and personal agenda (Balken). Roth

wrote a satirical book about Nixon called *Our Gang*, and on its heels, Guston started his project of drawing 73 caricatures of Nixon throughout his life and presidency, capturing "one of America's most maligned politicians in a depraved, monstrous state" (Balken). In these pictures, Guston portrays Nixon as a figure with a long nose and sagging jowls resembling male genitalia. He labored many long hours over the 73 drawings, working long hours over many days. When he finished, his friends and peers encouraged him to publish his pictures as a book. Guston did not want to because, in the wake of all the other Nixon bashing occurring daily, he did not want to appear as just another "Nixon hater" (Balken). He was also apprehensive about the critics ridiculing his work again. In 2001, The University of Chicago Press released his book, eleven years after his death in 1980.

Guston's fellow artists and critics favored his early work of subtle, tasteful, and elegant pieces that pleased the eye. His transformation in the late 1960s and 1970s left people shocked. They looked at his clownish drawings and pictured Guston a drunken cartoonist (Stevens). Today, people view his paintings in a different light. One New York Times critic remarked that the paintings are some of the best to come from the 1970s. They are "uncompromising, independent, darkly funny and even tragic" (Kimmelman).

Guston's early art from the 1930s is impressive. His paintings depict the social condition of this time in history, much like the Renaissance artists but from the perspective of someone living in the United States as opposed to Europe. When looking at his art, the eye travels to many places and discovers new parts of his paintings. The heart feels what Guston is trying to illustrate.

Abstract Expressionism as an art form looks childish and something anyone can create. Not having a deep understanding of post-war United States culture may contribute to this opinion, but there must have been a need for this type of art, a place people could escape the horrors of the time. A place to be free and not confined to a set of rules or social norms.

His later works featuring the cartoonish figures are reminiscent of video games and the SpongeBob SquarePants cartoon character of Squidward. Although they are somewhat intriguing, the question that begs to ask is "why?" Even though many of his initial themes deal with violence and racism, it is hard to take them seriously with the comic-like figures.

Guston's art evokes a sense of intrigue. To read about him, he seems to be an intense, talented artist who lived an incredible life touched with not only happiness but also depression, frustration, and fear. The chance to visit an art exhibit with full-size paintings will prove to be an exciting experience. To see how he used his paints and how his abstract art seems to float off the canvas can provide a much deeper understanding of his work. Looking at art on a one-dimension computer screen is very different from looking at a full-sized, three-dimensional object. Maybe up close, his later works can speak to what he was trying to convey in the paintings.

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