

cc to Ruth Bowman

Who wrote this?

1936

Name: Gorky, Arshile

Date and Place of Birth: Tiflis, Caucasus, Russia, October 25, 1904

Education: After coming to the United States in ¹⁹²⁰~~1922~~, studied civil engineering at Brown University, Providence, R.I. Studied painting in Boston and New York.

Occupational Record: Came to New York in 1925. Has taught past 7 years to support himself, at Grand Central Art School and the New York School of Design. Has lectured on abstract painting, cubism, surrealism, and the art of painting.

Exhibitions: Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, J. B. Neumann Gallery, Rehn Gallery, Weyhe Gallery, Julien Levy Gallery, Downtown Gallery, John Baker Gallery. Had one-man shows in Philadelphia and in New York at the Guild Art Gallery. Was represented in the Municipal Show at Rockefeller Center in 1934.

Mural: Located in foyer of second floor of Newark Airport. Entitled "Aviation: Evolution of forms under aero-dynamic limitation." Will cover about 1500 square feet of wall space. Started 10/4/35, designs approved 7/27/36. Mural will be oil on canvas, painted in studio; canvas to be applied to wall after being painted. Is aided by three assistants.

Appearance: Tall, dark, small mustache. Seems older and more mature than his age.

Philosophy of Painting: Gorky's ideas are very interesting and based on an apparently wide knowledge of painting and esthetics. His method is perhaps inclined to be mystical; but he is aware of the complex problems, technical, formal and social, confronting the artist today. In his mural he has sought to express his concern with these problems.

These problems fundamentally, from Gorky's point of view, revolve around the question of space. This is space not in a Kantian metaphysical sense, but in the sense that in the plastic arts a form, a shape, an object, must logically occupy a given space. The predominant concern of the painter, therefore, from this point of view, is to achieve this occupation of space by an object by means proper to the medium of painting.

From this point of view, also, sheerly technical considerations are of secondary importance. How, asks Gorky, can an artist give himself exclusively to problems of grinding pigment or using an airbrush or some kind of new paint, when the all-obsessing problem of form in space has not been solved? This means in his case that he is not interested abstractly in materials. Yet he is interested in technic as a method of creating form. And he adds, how can one separate method from the artist's intention and creation?

In his designs for the Newark Airport, Gorky has concerned himself with forms derived from aviation and from the airplane. But since scientific invention is ever changing, he does not wish to use these forms in a literal spirit, because the airplanes of today will obsolete in a few years, but a mural should certainly be able to speak to people of the future in a language above the purely topical idiom. So it is the forms ^{of} an airplane in an abstract and essential mood which Gorky has utilized in his designs, wings seen as almost straight lines, as they actually look when viewed in profile, a rudder, an aileron, an instrument board, a wheel, a lamp, a cylinder, insignia from the underwings and from the fuselage, all distilled to their ultimate expression.

With these forms he seeks to occupy the space given him, the walls allocated to the mural. These spaces are rectangular, they are two dimensional, they are solid constructions of masonry. And the artist must not violate their essential function, which is a supporting and protecting one. Therefore his design must not seem to break through the wall or to shatter the wall; his design must really occupy the space it is intended for and not seek to move outward in a three-dimensional disruptive way.

Yet since the artist has a theme, "Aviation," he must create more than the inanimate forms of his subject matter; he must create also the mood of aviation, of flying. This mood is suspension in space, the sense of objects floating in space. And moreover this mood is bound to be colored by that thing which differentiates the 20th century from the 19th, technical and scientific integrations involved in the machine. This differentia Gorky calls "the operation of our time." And he amplifies this by explaining how the original material is lost through this operation, as the linen or raw silk of the^c wing's fuselage becomes not a textile but a sustaining member of the heavier-than-air flying machine. For this it is necessary, he states, to have a dialectical organization of forms so that "the beautiful miracle of our times, the miracle of the engineer, of the scientist, of the artist" may be fully realized in the painting. Here obviously those qualities of his being which made him study to be a civil engineer express themselves.

The intellectually stimulating aspect of Gorky's equipment for painting this mural is suggested when he quotes Heraclitus as writing that a part is more beautiful than the whole. Here indeed is the keynote of abstract painting, this insistence that metonymy is a legitimate device of the painter as it is of the rhetorician. This quality of Gorky's mind is a

gain revealed when he speaks enthusiastically of Hogarth's "Analysis of Beauty" as being the forefather of modern painting. And one understands more of his principles when he mentions his heroes in painting, Paolo Uccello, Ingres, David, Picasso.

From this it is evident that Gorky is a modern painter. He himself explains, when queried as to what prizes he has won, "Do modern painters ever win prizes at the salons?" But what is "modern?" In an obvious sense modern is cubist or abstract. But there is more to the modern spirit in painting than a style. This Gorky insists on. Actually he would say that "modern" means a certain way of looking at life in this transitional period. It means observing the outside world which surrounds the artist, but observing it not in terms of memory, nostalgia or association, but in terms of its own forms and textures. This means that the modern painter does not go back to Piero della Francesca for his inspiration, or his organization of form; instead he uses the discoveries "of our ancestors, as Picasso" to continue that exploration of experience which is the artist's function. "How," asks Gorky, "can I understand those men of another century when I can't even understand the world today?"