

MY MURALS FOR THE NEWARK AIRPORT: AN INTERPRETATION
by
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The walls of the house in Russia where I was born and spent my childhood were made of clay blocks, deprived of all detail, with a roof of raw timber.

It was here that I first experienced the poetic elevation of the object. This took the form of a structural substitute for a calendar.

In this culture, where seasonal changes are forcefully abrupt, there was no need, with the exception of the Lenten period, for a formal calendar. The people, with the imagery of their extravagantly tender, almost innocently direct concept of Space and Time, conceived of the following:

In the ceiling was a round aperture to permit the emission of smoke. Over it was placed a wooden cross from which was suspended by a string an onion into which seven feathers had been plunged. As each Sunday elapsed, a feather was removed, thus denoting passage of Time.

As I have mentioned above, through these elevated objects -- floating feather and onion -- was revealed to me, for the first time, the marvel of making from the common -- the uncommon!

This accidental disorder became the modern miracle. Through the denial of reality, by the removal of the object from its habitual surrounding, a new reality was pronounced.

The same sense of poetic operations manifested itself in the handiwork of the ancient Egyptian undertaker. Knowing that the living could not live forever, with the spiritual support of the priest, he operated upon the dead so that the dead might live forever -- never to die! To ensure the perpetuation of life, portraits, glassy-eyed and enigmatic, were painted upon the mummies.

This operation has transferred itself to the optical image of our Time. To operate upon the object! To oppose the photographic image, which was the weakness of the old masters. Their painting was complete when the outline of the object

was correct. The realism of modern painting is diametrically opposed to this concept, since the painter of today operates on the given space of the canvas, breaking up the surface until he arrives at the realization of the entirety.

I am definitely opposed to the interior decorator's taste in mural painting, which seems to be that everything must "match". Mural painting should not become part of the wall, because the moment this occurs the painting loses its identity.

In these times, it is of sociological importance that everything should stand on its own merit, always keeping its individuality. I much prefer that the mural fall out of the wall than harmonize with it.

Mural painting should not become architecture. Naturally, it has its own architecture and limits of space, but should never be confused with walls, windows, doors or any other anatomical blueprints.

A plastic operation is imperative, and that is why in the first panel of my Newark Airport mural, "Activities on the Field", I dissected an airplane into its constituent parts. An airplane is composed of a variety of shapes and forms, and I have used such elemental forms as a rudder, a wing, a wheel and a searchlight to create not only numerical interest but also to invent within a given wallspace plastic symbols of aviation.

These symbols are the permanent elements of airplanes that will not change with the change of design. These symbols, these forms, I have used in paralyzing proportions in order to impress upon the spectator the miraculous new vision of our time. To add to the aggressiveness of these shapes, I have used such local colors as are to be seen on the aviation field -- red, blue, yellow, black, grey, brown -- because these colors were used originally to sharpen the objects so that they could be seen clearly and quickly.

The second panel of the same wall contains objects commonly used around a hangar, such as a ladder, a fire extinguisher, a gasoline truck, and scales. These objects

I have dissected and reorganized in a homogenous organization comparable to the previous panel.

In the panel "Early Aviation", I sought to bring into elemental terms the sensation of the passengers in the first balloon to the wonder of the sky around them and the earth beneath.

This sense of wonder I also attempted to create in the second panel. From the first balloon of Mongolfier, aviation developed until the wings of the modern airplane, figuratively speaking, stretch across the United States. The sky is still green, and the map of the United States takes on a new geographical outline because of the illusion of change brought about by the change in speed.

The first three panels of "Modern Aviation" contain the anatomical parts of autogyros in the process of soaring into space, and yet with the immobility of suspension. The fourth panel is a modern airplane simplified to its essential shape and so spaced as to give a sense of flight.

In the other three panels, I have used arbitrary colors and shapes; the wing is black, the rudder yellow, so as to convey the sense that these modern gigantic implements of man are decorated with the same fanciful yet utilitarian sense of play that children use in coloring their kites. In the same spirit the engine becomes in one place like the wings of a dragon, and in another, the wheels, propeller, and motor take on the demonic speed of a meteor cleaving the atmosphere.

In "Mechanics of Flying", I used morphic shapes: a thermometer, hygrometer, anemometer, an airline map of the United States -- all objects which have definitely important usage in aviation. To emphasize this, I have given them importance by detaching them from their environment.

Mural painting does not serve only in a decorative capacity, but an educational one as well. By education, I do not mean in a descriptive sense, portraying cinema -- like, the suffering or progress of humanity, but rather the plastic forms, attitudes and methods that have become the heritage of the art of painting. Since many workers,

school children, or patients in hospitals (as the case may be) have little or no opportunity to visit museums, mural painting could and would open up new vistas to their neglected knowledge of a far too-little popularized art.

Rimbaud has epitomized for me the true function of the artist when he wrote:

"The poet should define the quantity of the unknown which awakes in his time, in the universal soul. He should give more than the formula of his thought, than the annotation of his march toward progress. The enormous becoming the normal, when absorbed by everyone, he would really be a multiplication of progress."