

# Tworkov

## PAINTS A PICTURE



The common question people ask when confronted with an abstract or non-objective painting is, "What is that supposed to be?" The question is, of course, not a bad one; it is difficult because fundamental. In realist art there is no problem of the subject, but in abstract art the subject rules, and the question of the subject is radical. Jack Tworkov believes that "one man's subject becomes another man's art theory"; consider, for instance, Cézanne's subject, his *petite sensation* which turns into the Cubists' theory, or the Impressionists' light which became Seurat's theory as well as the theory of certain non-objective painters. To quote Tworkov directly: "If I knew what I wanted to paint, I surely would love to paint that."

To elaborate, he does paint what he wants to paint, but he is not conscious of the desire in advance. He believes that, although creation belongs to the painter, a "true" subject is peculiar not to the individual but to his time. This era has not produced a "true" subject, as the Middle Ages had Christianity, and the Renaissance produced Humanism. Or is

Tworkov at work [left], with his color in a cup, in his Fourth Avenue studio [below]. Studies on the wall are for *House of the Sun* (p. 33), on the easel in foreground. In the far room, also on easel, is one of four other versions (see opposite page).



the subject of our time a revolt, a romanticism caused by and in reaction to that contempt for individuality which seems to be the result of the standardized society that exists everywhere? But Tworkov is less interested in revolt than in his connectedness with others. Painting is linked with what came before, and there is the fact of precedent. If one were completely free one would not have to paint. The ideas one has in revolt are shared by others in revolt. If a link is broken it is to find oneself as strongly linked to another chain. The essence of communication lies in how one is linked with another.

If the physiological function of dreaming is to permit the sleeper to go on sleeping, so the function of painting for Tworkov is one that permits him to go on painting and living, and doing something different. When the painting is done, it may be as forgotten as a dream that did not awaken the sleeper. For instance, at the end of the painting, when asked what colors were used in a certain place, he could not remember.

The subject here first appeared in a drawing made at Black Mountain last summer. He did not choose the subject but he came to know it. In mode it derived from a series of paintings he made a year before on the theme of the Odyssey, where he, partly influenced by Futurism, showed figures in definitely ambiguous space—from more than one point of view at once. As the figures began to develop, the subject tended to become erotic. This is the internal origin of the subject and also the origin of the turbulence of the form. There then begins a pull between this origin on the one hand and aesthetic considerations on the other, which set a direction toward non-objectivity.

Tworkov has no technique of procedure in any narrow sense. The painting is not a partial or momentary record of the artist's experience. It represents not "emotion recollected in tranquility" but emotion recollected in the act of painting. Though there are periods when the painting proceeds without a thought, mostly it is correct to say that he is always thinking about painting while he is painting. The act is conscious.

Though the subject is erotic in a general way, the particular form and the momentary form are mysterious to the artist in



Tworkov's glass palette [right] where colors are blended before being mixed in a cup with varnish and oil.

proportion to how deeply he is involved in the process and unaware of what he is doing. There is a difference between erotic symbol and erotic content. If the figure becomes too prominent—if he allows the eye too easily to organize the figure—there may be a tendency toward the pornographic. But a continual play of shapes may actually be much closer to his real feeling.

For Tworkov, mind includes sensation and emotion, and subjective material is not different from reality. It comes from outside, from what is called the real world. His painting is neither spontaneous nor automatic. He is not trying to be blind to what goes on in the picture. His motivation is to give concrete expression to what he feels. He keeps several pictures going, all with the same origin, and in this way finds the shapes he wants that will say best what he wants to say. He observed: "It is in the nature of painting that it sometimes takes its own

#### *Four simultaneous versions*

Tworkov discovers his subject through the act of painting; four separate versions [below] were made *after* his now completed canvas [see next page] was started instead of *before*, a direct reversal of the usual procedure. Thus any one of these four might have become the finished one, and may still be used for a new work later.



*Tworkov paints a picture* continued

bent. If something good happens, I don't want to be blind to it. But still painting is not to be considered a technique of exploiting accidents."

Tworkov believes in content, and the content is like a dream; if it becomes explicit, it tends to become language beyond this, primitive and rudimentary. He likes neither the intimist nor the aesthetic approach, nor the approach that wants to remove more and more elements from painting—the puritanical approach found in an extreme *avant-garde*, which is opposed to sex, to quality, to accident, to image, to object. In the latter case what remains is that which is left in industrial design, in architecture, in layout, in mathematics. "If you drain out of art the passageway to the symbol or the dream, what would remain would be anti-art."

As he paints, while immersed in the process, involved in his total curiosity about what he may discover as the true way for the particular painting, sometimes the painting is "like a muddied pool, but sometimes it flashes back like a mirrored surface, the secret vice, anguish or joy. It is here I become conscious of the audience; something like panic seizes me when I think someone is looking over my shoulder and I try to stir the pool up again, to destroy the reflecting surface." This sequence can recur again and again, and it is more or less a matter of control of self-consciousness that decides the final outcome. The more relentlessly objective he is with himself, the more triumphant the picture. But when the ideal situation does not happen, that is, when the picture simply fails to come into existence, then he begins to conjure with tricks out of his past experience, using this kind of stroke, that kind of approach to line and color, until the picture starts to "breathe." Then instantly he must abandon the devices he used and start searching for an opening so that the picture will come to life, by itself, so to speak, without any familiar device.

The monochrome, first *version* [p. 31, extreme left]—as distinguished from the progressive *stages* in the development of the picture (which are reproduced on this and the facing page)—was not worked beyond a certain point. As a drawing on

canvas it looked unfinished, so he then painted it in black-and-white, achieving a more solid result than if it had been left in charcoal. There is some red in it, an accident of the brush which he chose to balance with another spot. The forms were considered as relating to any part of the center. Arms could be considered as legs and vice-versa. There is no face because a face has too much personality, and is too specific. The forms should *derive* from a figure instead of *referring* to it. In stage 1 [below], begun before and continued after the above version, he wanted to make the form and color more concrete, less a figure than a suggestive form in itself. The problem was further to divide the canvas in such a way that it would be set in motion, not strung together in a series of pieces but having a unified, not too nervous flow. He wanted to paint only where needed and to incorporate large sections of unpainted canvas as if they were painted too. In the first version [p. 31, extreme left] there were many lines as well as a certain turbulence. The lines were there as a means of organizing the shapes, and at first there were no clear color shapes. Tworkov counts lines not as borders of things but as formal devices that can cross edges. And when line is not a contour, the picture empties out. He said, "remove the lines and make a fuller picture." In a brimming glass you do not notice the edges of the container. When shape partakes of the quality of line, the painting becomes a drawing. But line is used by the painter when the meaning is being lost: he returns to line for clarification. As Tworkov sees it, "drawing is a note that says, here I must work." He tries line to see what happens—in the end they may remain. But the whole history of the painting remains apparent in any case, if only as unevenness that lies under the surface layer. White is used as a way to paint out. With white he decides how full or how sparse the canvas should be, and the number of "events" or divisions. White is not negative space; it has the dual purpose of counting either as fullness or relative emptiness.

The function of color he considers to be for illumination and richness, or as another means of drawing, to establish the places of the parts. The colors are like instru- [Continued on page 72]

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*Jack Tworikov: stages of  
House of the Sun, 1952*

The completed work, 45 by 50 inches, which may be seen from any side, presents a figure in perpetual movement like the swastika of ancient man who saw the sun tumbling through the sky on arms and legs. Five successive stages (left), complex in #1, simplified in #2 by veiling parts of the picture with white, swung back and forth in the next stages between figure-idea and conceptions in which the figure was temporarily lost, to be refound later.

ments in an orchestra. They dissociate one form from another. Reds echo each other, and so with yellow, and so with blue; but a parallel red and blue have different directions in so far as they have different qualities. It is like two people who take the same journey: the qualities of the journey are as different as the individuals taking them. However, though colors are individuals, they must not be too individual, or they will break the unity of the picture.

At the start, stage 1 [p. 32] of this specific picture was tentative and messy, so Tworikov painted a number of separate versions [p. 31], reversing the classical order of procedure by beginning the painting before making the studies. He felt that the idea had been presented poorly. The second of these separate versions [p. 31] benefited from the work on the painting, but became wispy. The third such version [p. 31] was in red lavender, all the yellows were greenish, the whites toward buff, and with bare canvas. It had an undesirable softness. The fourth version [p. 31] was in primary colors: red, orange, scarlet and blue. The greens derived composition are like different choreographies. Now Tworikov had many doubts about the painting, that it was cold and perfunctory, that it was too calculated, that he was watching himself, that he was not taking chances. In the beginning it was full of potentialities, while now it had become somewhat limited, his hopes for it had not become realized. It needed to be freed.

Three weeks later it had become simpler and more painterly. He could work on it only when he felt good about it. For two weeks he had been on the verge of finishing it. The reds became deeper, but as he repainted it the stroke began to be spoiled, so he scraped off and repainted the ground a pale grey, which, for Tworikov, counts as white. Then he went through a phase of disregarding the subject. The picture tended to lose its meaning, and he would start to look again for the first impulse. And as he painted, the picture grew denser so that the whites got more and more the texture of something made out of matter instead of light, and color also became material. He scraped off parts that became less dense, and in the painting they regained density. He discovered that his original purpose, to have the painting dense in the center and less and less dense toward the edges, did not work: when he insisted on it, it made the painting empty. It seemed that this was a prejudice to which he was mistakenly trying to make the painting conform.

The finished painting, which he titled *House of the Sun*, took from July to October to finish. It had a balance of densities which could not have been foreseen at the beginning. It was not made of an accumulation of strokes but of designed strokes. The strokes had direction and shape. In realistic painting the surface is simpler. And where there is no given subject, where even the subject must be invented, there is nothing outside the painter, no reference in the objective world that determines his solutions for him. To carry through such a painting is difficult in the same way that it is difficult for a child to bring himself up according to moral standards without parental guidance. When such a painting

from cerulean mixed with white, painted over yellow. This last had freshness and pathos, a kind of helplessness, as if full of unrealized or unconscious discoveries, the implications of which were not yet known. As reproduced, it had been painted over with white until the parts separated from each other, and was in an advanced stage of remoteness from the original subject. Tworikov said this version might foreshadow the next picture he would paint after he had completed the painting here reproduced in color. It exemplifies what happens when the formal idea takes over, and was useful as a source of ideas for the original painting. Benefiting by these discoveries, he went back to the original canvas and made it flatter, as seen in stage 2 of the present painting [p. 32]. He scraped it and painted it over with off-white, which served to integrate it better and gave it a surface like polished chalk.

All these different pictures, painted from the same impulse, can be compared to different dances done to the same piece of music. The music is the idea, and the different variations of comes off, however, it has enormous clarity. It leans on nothing else. "The subject," said Tworikov, "stays with me from start to finish." He thinks that his next pictures will not have clearly defined elements of color. It is a relief to work on a painting with color that exists independently. In *House of the Sun*, color exists as the colors of the parts.

Tworikov does a lot of painting with a knife. His brushes are very good quality, and he keeps them clean and soft. He uses 2-inch camel's hair brushes with 5½-inch handles, for blending or for stroking—if he wants the stroke to appear to be in a certain direction, or if he wants a stroke to move across an abrupt change of hue. This can be done on a thickish, not-yet-dry impasto. He also uses ¾-inch wide, 2-inch long ox hair brushes, 1-inch wide by 2-inch long bristle varnish brushes, regular flat bristle brushes and a few sable brights ¼ or ⅓ inches in diameter. He keeps them in a can of varnalone just above the bottom of which is a screen of hardware cloth against which he rubs off the paint, which then settles to the bottom below the screen. He learned this from Edwin Dickinson. His colors are Cremnitz white and all the brightest reds, blues and yellows. He uses almost no dull colors because they can be mixed, except for raw sienna and yellow ochre to give warmth to Mars black which has the advantage of drying quicker and more evenly than carbon blacks. The colors on his glass-topped painting table are all the cadmiums, scarlet lake, ponsol pink, manganese, cerulean, cobalt, ultramarine and thalo blue, and Mars black. He uses little cadmium orange and little green. His medium is a mixture of one part of stand oil to two parts of damar varnish and two parts of oil of gum turpentine. He dissolves areas to be removed with Glyptal thinner, and adds Glyptal in small quantities to the paint to make it dry faster. His canvas, 45 by 50 inches, was tacked to a wallboard easel until it was done, so that it would have a firm backing in case he wanted to scrape off at any time, and when it was finished it was mounted on stretchers, which Tworikov makes himself.