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**CHRISTIAN IMAGERY IN ABRAHAM RATTNER'S
PAINTINGS OF THE 1940s:
AN EXPRESSIONIST'S RESPONSE TO WAR AND ANTI-SEMITISM**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a series of paintings by American artist Abraham Rattner (1893–1978). Considered a figurative expressionist, Rattner explored a variety of subjects during a career that spanned more than six decades. In the early 1940s, Rattner began to paint Christian imagery to symbolically express his anguish over the outbreak of World War II. In these compositions, Rattner used Christian themes not only to address contemporary socio-political concerns, but also to reflect his personal experiences with anti-Semitism.

The introduction and first two chapters outline background information, including Rattner's place in the 1940s New York art scene, his childhood and artistic training, and his years in Paris. In chapters three and four, I address the iconography of numerous paintings created during World War II. Chapter five concerns the reemergence of Christian themes in the late 1940s to reflect Rattner's sorrow after the death of his first wife.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Abraham Rattner is such an intriguing artist to study, particularly because he left behind thousands of pages of archival, hand-written materials, including correspondence, journals, studio notebooks, and countless keepsakes that he collected throughout his lifetime. His incredibly well-documented career, preserved by the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C., brings the artist to life for the researcher. This thesis incorporates many of the artist's journal entries and letters, but is by no means a comprehensive effort at examining Rattner's work alongside his writings. More than 24 linear feet of microfilmed documents comprise the Rattner collection in the Archives of American Art, a wealth of material that has yet to be investigated. Hopefully, more scholars will take advantage of this rich resource in order to make better known Rattner's unique contribution to American art. I would like to thank the Archives of American Art Reference Library for making this information available for study through Interlibrary Loan. Secondly, I would like to thank the University of Cincinnati Libraries Interlibrary Loan Office for their assistance in acquiring these materials for my research endeavors.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1943 American art critic and writer Samuel Kootz (1898–1982) featured a crucifixion scene, *Darkness Fell All Over the Land* (1941-42), by the New York painter Abraham Rattner (1893–1978) on the cover of his book *New Frontiers in American Painting*.¹ By including a wide variety of avant-garde American artists active during the early 1940s, the book proved to be a pivotal, yet controversial, work in its departure from the established realm of American regionalism. Kootz embraced new trends and discussed an emerging movement he termed the “new realism” led by three artists who fused aspects of European modernism with their American experiences: Stuart Davis (1892–1964), Walter Quirt (1902–1968), and Abraham Rattner.² While acknowledging that each of the three artists had developed a unique pictorial language, Kootz singled out Rattner for his sincerity and autobiographical approach to handling religious themes, stating that “[Rattner’s] contribution acquires major importance through the frank kinship he has with his time, and his ability to reveal its spiritual universality.”³ The artist’s religious paintings of the 1940s departed from his earlier work, which had focused primarily on genre scenes, landscape, and still lifes. This thesis will investigate Rattner’s adherence to New Testament imagery, particularly the figure of Christ, during the 1940s to express concerns directly related to the international crisis surrounding World War II. With their bold use

¹ This painting (Fig. 21) will be discussed in Chapter 3.

² Samuel M. Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1943), 35-42.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

of color, expressive black lines outlining faceted forms, and evocative subject matter, these paintings represent the artist's most powerful work.

Even prior to Kootz's publication, Rattner enjoyed extensive international recognition through numerous exhibitions in both the United States and abroad. After participating in various group shows beginning as early as 1924, the painter had his first solo show at Paris's Galerie Bonjean in 1935. Shortly thereafter, Rattner experienced similar prestige in his native country with solo exhibitions in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco in 1936. Throughout the 1940s, Rattner continued to gain prominence through his affiliation with New York's reputable Rosenberg Galleries, which represented Rattner for almost a decade and featured his work on a regular basis.

The artist's visibility increased significantly with his participation in museum exhibitions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Artists for Victory" show (1942), two solo shows at the Baltimore Museum of Art (1946 and 1947), and extensive involvement in such notable juried exhibitions as the Whitney Annual from 1944 onward. Rattner continually received prizes for his work, including the Temple Gold Medal at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Annual (1945) for his semi-abstract painting *Kiosk* (1944) (Figure 1), which demonstrated the traditional Academy's change in attitude toward modern art.⁴

⁴ The Academy had previously favored more conventional, academic figurative works in their art competitions. See "Philadelphia Goes Modern," *Time* (5 February 1945): 86. This article described the Academy's annual as "more often than not . . . the stuffiest art show in the U.S.," stating that they "shucked tradition" by awarding top prize to "an out-&-out esthetic experimentalist." Also see Ben Wolf, "Progressive Trend Distinguishes Pennsylvania Academy Annual," *Art Digest* 19 (1 February 1945): 5+. Wolf attributed the "progressive trend" to the influence of modern artist Arthur B. Carles, an instructor at the Academy and, coincidentally, one of Rattner's teachers.

Painted in a Cubist style with a brilliant, unnaturalistic palette of reds, greens, and blues, *Kiosk* depicts a solitary vendor at his newsstand surrounded by his wares. The newspapers and magazines reveal headlines pertaining to the World War II, such as “liberté/ fraternité/égalité” in the upper right.

Rattner won several other monetary awards at art competitions in the 1940s, including fourth prize at Pepsi-Cola’s Third Annual Art Competition in 1946,⁵ first award at the second annual invitational La Tausca Art Competition in 1947,⁶ and honorable mention at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute Exhibition of American Painting in 1949. In addition, *Look* magazine conducted a poll in 1948, asking museum directors and art critics to name the best painters active in America. Rattner was among those who received a high number of votes and was featured in an article about the poll. Furthermore, such prominent institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired paintings by Rattner in the 1940s.

⁵ One critic called the Pepsi-Cola Annual Art Competition “the country’s largest and most affluent painting competition.” Josephine Gibbs, “Pepsi-Cola Presents ‘Paintings of the Year’—Divides \$15,000 Purse,” *Art Digest* 21 (1 October 1946): 9.

⁶ La Tausca’s art competition was sponsored by Heller-Deltah Company, Inc., producers of La Tausca pearls. Their mission was to increase contemporary art patronage by industry in order to benefit artists financially and to make better art more available and understandable to the public. The 96 paintings entered in the competition were shown in an exhibition that traveled to museums throughout the United States, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Speed Art Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and others. See John D. Morse, *1947 La Tausca Art Exhibition* (New York: International Press, 1947), n.p.

Today Rattner is considered a figurative expressionist, along with such better-known painters as Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), Max Weber (1881–1961), and others who merged American realism with European modernism.⁷ These figurative expressionists laid the foundations for a radical style that has since been overshadowed in American art history by the popularity, significance, and boldness of Abstract Expressionism, a key movement in American art that also emerged in the 1940s. However, Rattner remains an important figure in the development of modern American art with work represented in major collections across the United States and abroad, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Museum of American Art, Yale University Art Gallery, The Phillips Collection, Walker Art Center, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Collection of the Vatican, Musée de Grenoble, and others. In January 2002 the Leepa-Rattner Museum, a museum devoted to Rattner's work and that of his stepson, artist Allen Leepa (b. 1919), opened in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Born in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1893 to Jewish-European immigrant parents, Rattner received his primary artistic training at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. (1914–17), and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia (1917 and 1919). In 1917 Rattner's education was interrupted by his call to military service in World War I, where he served in France as an army sergeant in the camouflage division. After returning to Philadelphia to

⁷ Piri Halasz, "Figuration in the '40s: The Other Expressionism," *Art in America* 70 (December 1982): 111.

resume his studies in 1919, Rattner was awarded the academy's Cresson traveling fellowship to Europe, thus departing for what would become a twenty-year sojourn in France. While taking classes in Paris during the early 1920s, Rattner traveled extensively; met his first wife, Bettina Bedwell (1889-1947), an American fashion correspondent from Nebraska; and began to exhibit his work in Parisian galleries. Initially, Rattner experimented with a modern European style derivative of Cubism and Futurism, and eventually incorporated curvilinear forms reflecting the visual vocabulary of Surrealism. While living in Paris, Rattner primarily painted pastoral compositions, focusing on domestic interiors, still lifes, and landscapes. Along with Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Joan Miró (1893–1983), Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), and others, Rattner joined the Minotaure Groupe, a group of artists working in the vein of Surrealism, in 1927, and remained active within the Parisian avant-garde artistic milieu throughout the 1930s.

Witnessing the volatility of the political climate in Europe in the late 1930s, Rattner and his wife prepared to leave Paris. They returned to New York in 1939 on the last boat to leave France before the Nazi invasion.⁸ Upon settling in New York City, Rattner realized that as war erupted overseas, Americans remained oblivious to the horrifying tyranny of Adolf Hitler's regime and were, in general, ignorant of the prospect of a second world war involving U.S. participation. As a result of his long absence from the States, Rattner no longer understood his fellow Americans and soon set off by car on a mission to "rediscover" America with fellow expatriate and writer Henry Miller (1891–1980), whom he had

⁸ Allen Leepa, *Abraham Rattner* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 44.

befriended in Paris. Their journey through the southeastern United States is documented in Miller's *The Air Conditioned Nightmare* (1945).

As Rattner's frustration with American apathy escalated, the artist began to paint Christian imagery to visually express parallels between the suffering of Christ and the present-day plight of European Jews victimized by Hitler's ruthless reign. Of primary concern to Rattner was the overarching theme of humankind's bestiality and violent nature and the role of spirituality in healing a wounded existence.

Prior to the 1940s, Rattner had rarely depicted Christian imagery.⁹ With the sudden emergence of this iconography in his work, Rattner wrote in a 1940 letter to American poet Ramon Guthrie (1896–1973) that he had recently begun a series of "violent Christ compositions."¹⁰ Rattner likely characterized the paintings as "violent" for their bold colors, expressive lines, deeply emotional content, and most importantly, for their reference to contemporary violence. Such New Testament pictorial vocabulary became an appropriate, more palatable means by which the artist could communicate his feelings concerning human nature and suffering because the message was veiled, rather than explicit. During the 1940s at least thirty published oil paintings and drawings incorporated this imagery. Whether overtly or metaphorically expressed,

⁹ So far, I have only learned of one of Rattner's works created before 1940 that overtly depicts Christian imagery, *The Descent*, 1923, oil on canvas (Fig. 2). This painting is discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ The Abraham Rattner and Esther Gentle papers, 1891-1986. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Reel D204, frame 287. Subsequent references to this collection will be abbreviated AAA, followed by the appropriate microfilm reel and frame number(s).

Christian themes emerged in Rattner's work as a result of a particular catalyst: the barbarity of World War II.

Later recalling this turning point in his career from pastoral compositions to more symbolic imagery, Rattner stated:

Then came the thirties, the Nazi years in Germany. As Hitler's voice came over on the radio with its delirious frenzy, its demoniac [sic] power, the old fears and terrors awakened in me once more. I felt that cubism and surrealism were for me escapes from my emotional entanglement with the suffering of my fellow-men into a beautiful, serene, pure, intellectual paradise, a sort of betrayal of my inner self. I could not resist the lure of my emotions and—while I cherish more than I can say the memory of those purely esthetic years—I have followed from then on my inner calling. My art reflects my moral engagement toward the lot of my fellow-men. Painting for me has no value in itself, only as a language through which I try to communicate values I believe in.¹¹

Stating that Hitler's voice reawakened his old fears and terrors, Rattner alluded to his firsthand experiences with anti-Semitism as a child growing up in Poughkeepsie. The son of Jewish-European immigrant parents who had moved to upstate New York to escape the pogroms in Russia, Rattner, as well as his family members, was a victim of several anti-Semitic acts in the predominantly Christian community. Such issues will be addressed in subsequent chapters of this thesis in order to substantiate the artist's empathy for the suffering of Jews during World War II and his belief in the innate bestiality of humankind. In this sense, Rattner's Christian compositions can be interpreted as autobiographical in content.

In addition to several brilliantly colored, jewel-toned Christ compositions of the early 1940s, Rattner painted a handful of works that overtly depicted war

¹¹ Abraham Rattner quoted in Paul Mocsanyi, *The Gallows of Baghdad* (New York: New School Art Center, 1970), 5.

events. The artist also turned to apocalyptic imagery derived from the New Testament book of *Revelations* to refer to the inevitable destruction that results from a catastrophe like war. However, such conspicuous images of war and destruction were relatively infrequent in comparison to the artist's symbolic Christ compositions of the same period.

Concurrent with the appearance of Christian imagery in Rattner's work, the artist gained increased recognition—and frequently elicited harsh criticism—as a leading expressionist painter who united traditional subject matter with bold, discordant colors and modern, faceted forms to confront socio-political issues. While many critics hailed Rattner as an innovative colorist, such relatively conservative writers as Peyton Boswell of *Art Digest* and Edward Alden Jewell of the *New York Times* criticized the artist not only for being too radical in comparison with the established artists of American scene painting, but also for being too derivative of the Parisian modernists Pablo Picasso, Georges Rouault (1871–1958), and Marc Chagall (1887–1985). However, through his relationship with the Rosenberg Galleries and with the help of progressive critics who applauded his innovative approach, Rattner remained a visible, increasingly prominent figure in the New York art scene.

Because Rattner's work of the 1940s was exhibited considerably, major art periodicals from that period, particularly *Art Digest*, *Magazine of Art*, and *Art News* contain a plethora of exhibition reviews that are useful as gauges of public opinion concerning the style and content of Rattner's work. With their concise reviews and occasional articles, these periodicals create a rough chronicle of Rattner's career during the 1940s. Several small-scale exhibition catalogues

published throughout Rattner's career provide a pictorial record, yet the catalogues rarely include more text than a general biography and an occasional statement by the artist. To date, no catalogue provides a thematic grouping in its selection of images, and, moreover, no exhibition has ever investigated Rattner's Christian themes of the 1940s as a series of related images corresponding to the social and political events surrounding World War II.

The most recent major exhibition devoted to Rattner's work was curated by Susan Bandes, Director of the Kresge Museum of Art at Michigan State University, for the Tampa Museum of Art in 1997. Accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, the exhibition "Abraham Rattner: The Tampa Museum of Art Collection" was a retrospective sampling of all of the major periods of Rattner's career, yet the collection included only a few of his major compositions of the 1940s and no Christ compositions dating from the war years.¹² At any rate, Bandes's overview of Rattner's career, selected chronology, and bibliography provide an exceptional foundation for further iconographical study of Rattner's work.

Prior to Bandes's publication, the two most substantial works documenting Rattner's career are a monograph written in 1974 by the artist's stepson and former pupil, the artist Allen Leepa, and an unpublished doctoral

¹² This collection, originally presented to the Tampa Museum of Art in 1992 by the artist's stepson Allen Leepa, was subsequently given to St. Petersburg Junior College in Florida in 1997. The Tampa Museum of Art kept three paintings for its own collection. Shortly thereafter, a substantial amount of Rattner's work and works by other artists in Rattner's collection were given by Leepa to St. Petersburg Junior College in Florida to establish the Leepa-Rattner Museum and Art Education Center, which opened in 2002 on the college's Tarpon Springs campus.

dissertation written by art historian Piri Halasz (Columbia University, 1982). Leepa's *Abraham Rattner* examines the artist's seven-decade career and includes reproductions from each stylistic phase and medium. As was his intention, Leepa provided a commendable pictorial survey of his stepfather's work. The author derived a majority of the text from interviews with the artist, which unfortunately resulted in numerous inaccuracies because Leepa relied heavily on Rattner's fading memory and, in many instances, was unable or did not choose to compare the data he collected with the artist's abundant, and at that time uncatalogued, archival records. However, the monograph includes detailed biographical information, beautiful color plates, intriguing anecdotes and insights, and quotations recorded by an author who intimately understood the artist and his work.

Titled "Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions of Paintings Exhibited in New York, 1940–1949: Abraham Rattner and His Contemporaries," Halasz's dissertation presents a clear time line of Rattner's artistic activities during the 1940s in order to establish his significant place within the broader context of the New York art milieu. She argues that the primary trend in American painting of the 1940s was a subjective, introspective type of work in which abstraction and painterly canvases dominated and that many of these artists were responding indirectly to World War II. According to Halasz, figurative expressionists such as Rattner set the stage for Abstract Expressionism, and her study organizes extensive data, primarily focusing on exhibition history and critical reception, to assert Rattner's position as a precursor to the later, more successful and revolutionary movement. The dissertation is a valuable resource

for understanding the artistic and professional parameters in which Rattner's Christ compositions evolved, yet Halasz's primary focus is the gallery scene and the manner in which Rattner and his contemporaries interacted with dealers, critics, institutions, and collectors during a pivotal period in American art. Halasz was the first scholar to take advantage of the extensive collection of archival materials (then titled "The Abraham Rattner Papers") housed at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art (AAA) in Washington, D.C. Based on her dissertation, Halasz published three scholarly articles (1980, 1982, 1992) and authored an exhibition catalogue essay (1983) focusing on Rattner's role as a figurative expressionist in New York.

To date no comprehensive thematic or iconographical study of this specific aspect of Rattner's oeuvre, his Christian imagery, has ever been conducted to accompany the wealth of existent biographical and professional information. Although Bades's, Leepa's, and Halasz's writings are crucial to discovering and evaluating aspects of the artist's career, these authors and others have yet to investigate in depth arguably the most compelling segment of Rattner's work. Rattner's paintings of the 1940s are what brought the artist his greatest acclaim and established him as a significant figure in American modernism.

A number of writers have broached the subject of World War II in connection with Rattner's religious subject matter of the 1940s, namely, Bades and Halasz. Most notable is Ziva Amishai-Maisels's tome *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (1993). However, no publications provide more than a cursory glance at a subject that demands more

attention. A study of Rattner's use of New Testament imagery in the 1940s and how this imagery pertained to his views regarding the intertwined themes of war and inhumanity, more specifically anti-Semitism, not only brings together a particularly powerful set of images to analyze, but also offers a complex social, historical, and autobiographical context in which to discuss these works.

The Archives of American Art now possesses a more complete and reorganized collection of Rattner material under the name, "Abraham Rattner and Esther Gentle papers, 1891-1986," acquired from various sources between 1972 and 1992. Containing thousands of documents, this valuable resource currently includes more comprehensive and catalogued archival materials, such as diaries, correspondence, professional records, and travel journals than was ever previously available for study. One of the most intriguing segments of this collection is the countless letters collected by Rattner's closest sibling, Jennie Rattner Allen, with whom the artist corresponded throughout his career. These letters offer candid, poignant memories of their childhood and insights into Rattner's thoughts about the war, his personal life, and his career.

Chapter One of this thesis, "The Formative Years," investigates influences leading up to Rattner's 1940s religious works, such as the artist's Old World Jewish heritage; his childhood experiences with anti-Semitism; his artistic training; his first exposure to war through military service in World War I; and his scholarship for travel abroad.

The second chapter, "Between the Wars," addresses Rattner's two decades in Paris and his affinity with the European avant-garde. In addition to discussing the artist's stylistic developments, I examine the political climate of Europe in the

1930s as the continent became more and more plagued by Hitler's escalating power. I also explore possible sources for Rattner's religious subjects and artistic style, particularly his visits to medieval cathedrals in France. I conclude with Rattner's abrupt departure from Europe upon the Nazis' invasion of France. While much of this biographical information has been presented previously in other scholarly accounts, it is important to address certain aspects of Rattner's childhood and early career in order to set the stage for the dramatic change in style and content that emerged in his art work simultaneous with the outbreak of World War II. Although biographical information has been outlined by Halasz and Bades, the artist's childhood in Poughkeepsie has never been thoroughly evaluated in the context of his paintings executed during the 1940s.

Chapter Three, "The Early 1940s," concerns the beginning of World War II and the appearance of Christian themes in Rattner's work. The chapter begins with the artist's trip through the southeastern United States with author Henry Miller, with whom he had set out to rediscover America. Whereas many Americans remained apathetic toward the situation in Europe until 1941, Rattner related early details about the war in letters and journals and avidly pasted newspaper clippings into his journals. Once the United States became involved in the war in 1941, the war consumed the artist's thoughts and Rattner's documentation of the events grew even more thorough and intense.

In addition to his written documentation of current events, Rattner commented on the war through his numerous "Christ compositions." Such painted, metaphorical responses to the war were the only role the artist could actively play in this international crisis, for his repeated requests to serve as a

camouflage artist in the second world war were denied by the U.S. government. Here I discuss the style and subject of Rattner's earliest works created during World War II. Focusing primarily on formal and iconographic analysis, this chapter includes examples of: simple, symbolic Christ compositions; complex, multi-figure compositions; and paintings more overtly documenting the 1940s experience. In this section, I investigate why Rattner selected Christian imagery for his depictions of contemporary human suffering. I also explore Rattner's views regarding war, primarily addressing the parallels the artist saw between war and biblical apocalypse—the optimistic belief that catastrophe can result in a new beginning. This chapter will touch on Rattner's place in the 1940s New York art scene, yet Halasz's dissertation serves as a far more thorough analysis of this aspect of the artist's career.

In Chapter Four, "Reflections on War and Suffering," I further examine the artist's Christ compositions, primarily those created near the end of World War II, focusing on the autobiographical content of these works. This discussion reveals the parallels Rattner perceived between his own life and Christ's. On a personal level, Rattner viewed himself as an outcast because of his Jewish heritage, as revealed in letters to his sister Jennie. On a professional level, Rattner viewed himself (and colleagues) as an outcast as a modern, rather than conventional, artist. Letters and journal entries about the modern artist's unimportant societal status reveal Rattner's discontent with the American art scene and shed light on his perpetual struggles with finances and morale. I analyze some of the artist's more complex metaphorical compositions, such as

Clowns and Kings, and conclude with the end of World War II and Rattner's eventual return to more placid imagery.

Chapter five, "In Memory of Bettina," concerns the re-emergence of Christian symbolism in Rattner's work in the late 1940s to reflect the artist's profound suffering after the sudden death of his first wife, Bettina Bedwell Rattner, in 1947. Whereas Rattner's use of Christian imagery a few years earlier came about as a response to the international, universal suffering inflicted by Hitler's regime during World War II, his use of similar imagery in the late 1940s was an expression of a deeply personal trauma. Several compositions executed around 1947 and 1948 include Christ or Christ-like figures, reflecting the artist's overwhelming grief and again emphasizing that, for Rattner, Christian imagery could symbolize individual, as well as universal, suffering.

Rattner remained active as an artist until his death in 1978. The conclusion of this thesis places the artist's series of 1940s Christ compositions within the context of his entire career, addressing why these works of the 1940s are particularly powerful and accomplished in relation to Rattner's prolific oeuvre referencing Biblical themes. The conclusion briefly discusses Rattner's continued interest in human suffering, as is evident in his later series of works titled *Six Million*, begun in 1963 in memory of the Jews massacred during the Holocaust, and in his series depicting the Iraqi hanging of Jews in 1969.

Human suffering is a timeless theme. Abraham Rattner's use of Christian imagery in response to World War II and anti-Semitism is a topic that reflects today's renewed interest in the Holocaust, Jewish heritage, and the importance of evaluating artistic creation within the context of its guiding social-historical

forces. Although relatively forgotten in the history of art, Rattner was a significant figure in both the Parisian and New York avant-garde in the 1930s and 1940s and one whose complex response to war and human suffering is particularly dynamic and timely and, thus, merits more investigation.

CHAPTER I
The Formative Years:
Rattner's Childhood in Poughkeepsie
and His Development as a Modern Artist

American artist Abraham Rattner began to depict Christian themes in 1940 shortly after returning to the United States from a twenty-year stay in Europe. This turning point in the artist's subject matter coincided with the outbreak of World War II, which offers a complex historical context in which to place Rattner's religious paintings of the 1940s. The artist's commitment to such themes at this time reflects not only the political situation in Europe with the rise of Hitler's regime, but especially the social issues of human suffering inherent in Hitler's intolerance of non-Aryans. As previously stated, this thesis will investigate Rattner's use of New Testament imagery, particularly the figure of Christ, during the 1940s to express concerns directly related to the international trauma of World War II. In order to set the stage for a discussion of Rattner's religious imagery, this chapter and the following one will provide a brief overview of his life and work prior to 1940, including Rattner's childhood, artistic training, military experience, and life in Europe. Chapter One addresses those events leading up to the Paris years, while Chapter Two concerns his time abroad.

Prior to immigrating to the United States, Abraham's father, Herman Rattner, had been a rabbinical student in Odessa. His mother, Sara Bela, was from Romania.¹ Having met in Odessa, the couple departed the Old World for

¹ Rattner referred to his mother as Sara Bela in a letter to his sister Rose Rattner Novak (1963). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1358. Also see AAA, Reel D205A, frame 345. In the latter reference, Abraham refers to his father as "Chaim," which may have been his father's name prior to immigration.

the United States during the massacre of Jews in czarist Russia in 1891. Once across the ocean, the couple married in New York City and moved to Poughkeepsie in upstate New York. In a 1963 notebook, Rattner described his parents' escape from Russia and arrival in the States, praising his parents' courage and criticizing the "New World" for its treatment of newcomers:

. . . there the New World presented itself to them with all the difficulties and strife with which it always presented itself to newcomers since it existed and so it always has been. . . . Yes the New World became the world of illusions—escaping from the Russian world of Pogroms—an escape which as an act was itself filled with the trials of courage—leaving their families and their homes under conditions of fear of being found out as escapees by the prowling local Russian Jew-haters, enemies who always demanded bribes or else, who were as bad as the Nazis of Hitler—my father escaped over the west Russian frontier hidden in a cart loaded with hay . . . and then the constant fear of travelling without a passport . . . (working at night in bakeries and other shops and hiding in the daytime)—in Germany—slowly traveling from place to place—getting eventually to Hamburg and then waiting to save enough for the boat crossing. . . . Then came the USA hardships for a Russian Jewish Emigrant . . . an almost impossible endurance test for the barriers were the 'plenitude' they found there.²

Born on June 8, 1893, Rattner spent his childhood in Poughkeepsie, where he and his family strove to establish themselves as well-respected American citizens. In 1970 Abraham recalled, "I have known the fear and horror of the evil in man since my childhood. My parents were forced to flee their native Russia because of the recurring pogroms. The tales I heard at home as a child were tales of persecution, torture, murder. . . ."³ From his parents the artist learned of oppression toward Jews, yet they also instilled in him a rich cultural and spiritual

² From a 1963 notebook. AAA, Reel D205A, frames 345-46.

³ Abraham Rattner quoted in Mocsanyi, 4.

heritage derived from their Old World upbringings, and from teachings in the Torah and scholarly exegetical writings.⁴ Young Abraham gained an awareness and knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, which would remain a significant aspect of his spiritual life throughout his career, even though he did not regularly attend synagogue or consider himself a practicing Jew during his adult years.

Furthermore, Rattner developed an appreciation for language and writing from his mother, who not only spoke several languages, but also composed Yiddish poetry as a hobby. The artist's own writings, now housed in the Archives of American Art and in the Abraham Rattner Archives in St. Petersburg, Florida, coexist with his artistic oeuvre as a notable creative endeavor in their own right. These writings include reflections on art, spirituality, and philosophy, essays, journal entries, letters, and poetry. Many of Rattner's later drawings and architectural commissions include Hebrew inscriptions or English text written in his calligraphic script, reflecting the artist's introduction to Hebraic scripts at an early age. Visible in many of his Christ paintings, Rattner's unique, stylized signature also conveys his interest in the various alphabets and languages that he was exposed to as a child.

Having abandoned his clerical studies upon arriving in the United States, Rattner's father worked as a baker, and in several other menial positions, to support his large family. (Abraham was one of six children in the family to live to

⁴ Frank Getlein, *Abraham Rattner* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1960), 4. Much of the following biographical information is derived from this source, from Susan J. Bandes, *Abraham Rattner: The Tampa Museum of Art Collection* (Tampa: The Tampa Museum of Art, 1997), 7-9, and from Halasz, "Directions, Concerns, and Critical Perceptions of Paintings Exhibited in New York, 1940-1949: Abraham Rattner and His Contemporaries" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1982).

maturity.) The Rattners struggled financially; however, poverty was not the only obstacle the family faced. Even though German and Polish immigrants abounded in Poughkeepsie, the family discovered that anti-Semitism was quite prevalent in upstate New York. Throughout his life, Rattner expressed resentment toward his hometown, insisting that its residents had ostracized his family and eventually caused them to disperse and move to other parts of the country. In an October 1943 letter to Jennie, he recalled the struggles their family faced there:

Our own family was persecuted in Poughkeepsie. False charges were always thrown at our father until he was ruined. I personally had to fist-fight my way thru [sic] the attacks of my contemporaries—from a little kid up—until I licked them into respect and fear. My life in Poughkeepsie was one fist-fight after another. It may have been a good thing for my character—but it left its mark in my nature. I haven't been back to Poughkeepsie—only two hours away—so strong are those memories.⁵

Rattner continually expressed his negative feelings about Poughkeepsie in his letters to Jennie, writing in 1945 “. . . Poughkeepsie has no sweet memories for me (I mean the town and contents in general—and not our own world). That town for me stands as a community of prejudice and unkindliness—where the struggle and bitterness was too great for our happiness and . . . such that we all packed up and moved away from it—and enjoyed being far away from it.”⁶ In Poughkeepsie the Rattners found neither the safe haven for which they longed, nor the financial stability which they so desperately needed. In 1968,

⁵ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (October 1943). AAA, Reel 1212, frames 317-18.

⁶ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (January 1945). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 356.

Jennie sent Abraham some photographs of their family during the Poughkeepsie years. Greatly affected by the images, Rattner wrote:

We can know our family went thru [sic] the poverty, the younger generations today can not appreciate. I love those photographs and I weep when I see them. I wish our parents could have continued to have nice things—those satisfactions of comfort and personal feelings of fulfillment of the hope and dreams they must have had to give them the strength the courage and determination to come to America. Even anti-Semitism followed them and ruined their lives here. Yes, I weep for them. . .⁷

Not only did Abraham's own experiences with anti-Semitism haunt him, but the memories recounted by his parents of the pogroms in Russia also contributed to his fears of violence toward Jews. In 1971 Jennie's mention of a class reunion at Vassar College, located in Poughkeepsie, rekindled her brother's resentment for their hometown. He stated,

. . . it opens my own memory 'throw back' to long ago experiences, to those growing-up becomings throughout those Poughkeepsie years—years of mixed events of unforgettable impressions, dramas, struggles, hardships, pain—hurts at seeing our mother and father and be a witness—to all their sufferings—all their trials and tribulations, frustrations, efforts to contribute a realization of our (each one . . . of their beloved children)—inherent possibilities—our spiritual, and material potentialities to— see us find some joy, some happiness in the life they brought us into.⁸

Despite the anti-Semitism the Rattners faced, the family maintained close ties to their Jewish heritage and celebrated traditional holidays. At the age of seventy, the artist remembered, "Those childhood days, when Rosh Hashonah meant so much to our father and mother and we all participated. . . . But our people suffered and struggled and hoped always hoped—and the New Year

⁷ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (September 5, 1968). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1380.

⁸ Letter to Jennie and Lou Allen (October 28, 1971). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1465.

stood for something—. . . with a promise that the new year would bring with it some gladness—some peace—so badly needed.”⁹ They always hoped that the new year would bring respite from the previous year’s struggles.

Often tormented by hostile peers prejudiced against Jewish immigrants, young Abraham learned to protect himself through boxing techniques taught to him by a sympathetic Irish policeman who had witnessed the child being bullied by other children. (In fact, Rattner later boxed semi-professionally in Philadelphia prior to World War I and occasionally depicted boxer imagery.) In an interview recorded in 1968 for the Archives of American Art, Rattner recalled his childhood:

My early boyhood days were not trained like the usual Because we suffered too much with poverty and with the need to keep our balance as a group, as a family. My father and mother were immigrants who came to America after a pogrom in Russia And when they came to America they went through a period of prosperity and then through a period of poverty, which I experienced as I grew up, and the suffering that they felt, and the language being qualified by the European accent, and the conflict in me between my Americanism and my devotion to their ideas.¹⁰

Despite monetary and travel constraints, the Rattner family members remained very close, particularly Abraham and his sister Jennie (later Jennie Rattner Allen). The two siblings maintained an active correspondence throughout Rattner’s life, providing a series of letters that document the artist’s most intimate thoughts concerning their shared childhood experience, the outbreak of World War II and

⁹ Letter to Rattner’s sister Rose Rattner Novak and brother-in-law Sam Novak (September 25, 1963). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1358.

¹⁰ Abraham Rattner, interview by Colette Roberts, transcript (20 May 1968), Archives of American Art Oral History Program, Washington, D.C., 29-30.

his resulting departure from France, and his feelings upon returning to the United States.

During his childhood, Rattner demonstrated an early interest in drawing. In an interview recorded after the artist's death, Jennie recalled that her brother spent many of his childhood days executing portraits of friends and family members and frequently sketched the surrounding landscape. Also interested in architecture, Rattner and a friend liked to "re-design" local architectural monuments on paper.¹¹ In high school he took drawing classes and drew caricatures as art editor of the school's yearbook. In 1914 Rattner left Poughkeepsie to enroll in an architecture program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. In addition to these classes, he attended night courses in drawing at the Corcoran School of Art. Enthralled with the challenges of fine art, he soon withdrew from his architectural studies to attend the Corcoran full-time. Always maintaining a strong interest in drawing the human figure and in the underlying structure of all things, Rattner participated in anatomy classes and drew cadavers at a local medical school to supplement his studio training.

During the 1910s, Rattner returned to New York during the summers, where he spent hours copying the works of the Old Masters at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artist recalled exiting the museum after a particularly long day of tedious copying, wandering along Fifth Avenue, where the energy of city life pulsed in full force. Contrasting the austere museum with the vibrant city streets, Rattner concluded "I failed to have as much appreciation for the museum

¹¹ Piri Halasz, "Directions, Concerns, and Critical Perceptions," 303.

and therefore the old masters as I should have had. I was anxious to feel a more living quality in what I wanted to do. When I went to the Corcoran I plunged immediately into a kind of freedom of spirit.”¹² Throughout his career, Rattner continually referred to museums as morgues, places for dead art that lacked the verve of city life. This realization led Rattner to modernism, where he began to explore the faceted forms of Cubism and the daring, unnaturalistic color of the Fauves. In addition, like many early twentieth-century artists, the art student had begun to experiment with distortion to enhance the expressive qualities in his work.

Instructors at the Corcoran considered Rattner’s bold use of color and form too radical for their conventional predilections, particularly when the artist began to influence other students, who preferred his modern approach to the school’s more traditional curriculum. According to Rattner, who tended to exaggerate on occasion, school authorities asked him to withdraw as a result of his “negative influence,” yet later asked him to return.¹³ Other sources indicate that the Corcoran administrators merely threatened to expel him and did not follow through with their warnings.¹⁴ In a 1945 journal entry, Rattner recalled, “When I was a student at the Corcoran School of Art I was trying to organize the painting in a cubistic way—and Mr. Messer the School director called me into the

¹² Rattner, AAA interview, 3.

¹³ Rattner, AAA interview, 2.

¹⁴ Halasz, “Directions, Concerns, and Critical Perceptions,” 308.

office and threatened to dismiss me if I continued.”¹⁵ At any rate, when Rattner left Washington, D.C., in 1917 without completing his course work, while he may have felt coerced into leaving, it seems to have been on his own accord since there is no concrete evidence to suggest otherwise. Explaining his bold use of color during his student days, Rattner recalled: “It was perhaps to free myself from the memories of these gloomy, fear-filled years [growing up in Poughkeepsie] that I went, as a young student, into that kind of jubilating, ecstatic color explosions in my paintings for which I was kicked out of art school.”¹⁶

Seeking a more tolerant educational atmosphere, the artist transferred to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1917, where he took courses in painting and illustration under the artists Arthur B. Carles (1882–1952) and Henry McCarter (1866–1942). Carles was a Philadelphia artist who had studied in Paris before obtaining a teaching position at the Academy. Painting in a modernist style influenced by the Parisian art scene, Carles offered his students insight into current artistic trends and brought a taste of international experience to the Philadelphia studio. McCarter was known for encouraging imaginative approaches and was controversial for his stand against traditional academic training.¹⁷ While the Academy remained relatively conventional in its taste for representational art, Rattner discovered, under the guidance of these two

¹⁵ Journal (May 2, 1945). AAA, Reel D204, frame 836.

¹⁶ Rattner quoted in Mocsanyi, 4.

¹⁷ Halasz, “Directions, Concerns, and Critical Perceptions,” 311.

instructors, an environment much more attuned to his aesthetic inclinations. To support himself in Philadelphia, Rattner executed illustrations for local newspapers.

Shortly after arriving in Philadelphia, Rattner took a hiatus from his studies to serve first as a corporal, then as a sergeant in America's first camouflage unit during World War I. He served in Dijon, France, under Captain Homer Saint-Gaudens (son of the renowned American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907)), then took charge of his own division in the Château de Thierry sector. He subsequently taught camouflage techniques to other soldiers at Camp Souge near Bordeaux. Rattner's military service proved to be an important foundation for the artist's later views on war, brutality, and human suffering during the turmoil of the second world war. In a letter to the American writer Henry Miller, with whom he shared a forty-year friendship, Rattner stated, "The adventure of war filled me with a horror that still continues to generate nightmares and terrible photographic images . . ." ¹⁸ Rattner's military service not only gave him firsthand experience with the violence of combat and the inhumanity of face-to-face confrontation with the enemy, but also taught him the value of committing to a cause. ¹⁹ Realizing that he alone was incapable of ending the violence of war, Rattner found at least some comfort in taking action against the enemy.

¹⁸ Rattner, quoted in Leepa, 38.

¹⁹ Halasz, "Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions," 310.

As a camouflage artist, Rattner devised a system of concealing guns with chicken wire covered in green and brown burlap and also experimented with life-size silhouettes to disguise soldiers in an effort to deceive the enemy.²⁰ At this point, camouflage methods mainly consisted of concealment techniques in a sculptural manner, rather than in a painted manner. As Susan Bandes has argued, Rattner's "camouflage technique would resurface in his use of masks and disguises, and the first-hand experience of death and the horror of war would influence his ongoing depiction of tragedy and his outrage at man's inhumanity."²¹ I will discuss the artist's use of masks briefly in Chapter Five.

While serving in the war, Rattner also painted mural decorations at soldiers' camps and entertainment halls, and executed numerous drawings during his spare time.²² He viewed these artistic endeavors as additional, albeit minor, contributions to the war effort.²³

Although his military service focused on the practice of camouflage techniques, on three occasions Rattner found himself in the very center of battle, where he witnessed the ruthless killing of friends standing only a few feet away. Fighting on the front lines, the artist wounded his back when he fell in a shell

²⁰ Magazine clipping (January 2, 1939). AAA, Reel D203, frame 722.

²¹ Bandes, 8.

²² A fellow soldier who served with Rattner during World War I called the drawings "marvelous" in a 1942 letter to the artist. Letter from Grenville Rickard (June 13, 1942). AAA, Reel D203, frame 439.

²³ AAA, Reel D204, frame 395. Rattner recalled these activities in a notebook (December 17, 1941).

hole attempting to dodge artillery fire.²⁴ After the injury, Rattner was removed from the front lines and began teaching camouflage techniques to other soldiers. This back injury, as well as his advancing age, probably resulted in Rattner's rejection for military service in World War II.

After serving in World War I, Rattner was no stranger to the continuing conflict between world powers. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, he frequently referred to World War II as a mere continuation of the earlier war, believing that the conflict in which he had served had ended prematurely. During the second world war, he wrote in his journal on November 11, 1943, "To think this is Armistice Day—25 years ago my war ended or rather merely came to a 'time out' period."²⁵ Although many years passed between the wars, Rattner viewed the situations as a single conflict with a two-decade interruption.

Traveling to France to fight in World War I was the young artist's first visual introduction to the Old World that his parents had described. Although France was in a state of trauma during the war, Rattner remained impressed by it, particularly the rich history of the country's cathedrals, monuments, and other sites. In biographical notes compiled many years later, he recalled,

We recognized that those stones, those monuments, that beautiful architecture and all the rest that constitutes the atmosphere in France of distinction and style and grace, typified the Europe that had been part of the lives of our forefathers and mothers. . . .

²⁴ The artist had a minor break in the sacro-iliac segment of his back, but did not seek treatment at the time because he did not want to abandon his duties. In 1928 he pulled his back and was rendered temporarily paralyzed. He returned to the U.S. that year for an operation to heal the break. Rattner recalled these details in a letter to his sister Jennie (AAA, Reel 1212, frame 326).

²⁵ AAA, Reel D204, frame 703.

—everything of that Old World—was a living picture of which each one of us was to some degree a part. We of the New World saw the civilization out of which we had been formed. We became conscious of the reality that we were part of it—and that it was part of us.²⁶

Although the artist's parents were not of French origin, this visit to the Old World gave Rattner a better sense of his family's European cultural heritage.

After the war, Rattner returned to Philadelphia in 1919 to complete his studies at the Academy. Recalling his return to Philadelphia after World War I, Rattner wrote, "... I was not the same. ... I, like most of the G-I youth of World War I, ... had become preoccupied with the concept of man as a human being."²⁷ During the war, the artist had become more aware of his conscience, developing a deep sense of moral obligation that would remain with him for the rest of his life. As a result, over the coming years, Rattner's work would gradually begin to reflect issues of inhumanity and suffering, issues that had plagued him since childhood and that became more intense during military service.

Obviously effected by the trip abroad, Rattner was eager to return to France, yet this time as an art student rather than as a soldier. The artist longed for not only what he described as the "Light" of France, but also the country's inspirational scenery, rich cultural history, encouraging artistic atmosphere, and "civilized society."²⁸ Although the Academy in Philadelphia was gradually

²⁶ Autobiographical notes compiled by the artist. AAA, Reel D203, frames 339-40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, frame 341.

²⁸ Autobiographical notes compiled by the artist. AAA, Reel D203, frame 342.

becoming more progressive, Rattner still found the atmosphere too stifling for an emerging modernist. In 1920 he designed painted decorations for the Academy's notorious annual ball. With their bold forms and colors, the decorations received mixed reviews, ranging from harsh criticism in the conservative press to exuberant praise from fellow avant-garde classmates and instructors. Immediately following the ball, Rattner received the Academy's prestigious Cresson Traveling Fellowship in the field of illustration. He departed for Paris in the summer of 1920, beginning what would be a two-decade sojourn abroad.

CHAPTER II

Between the Wars: Rattner in Paris, 1920-1939

While traveling in France, Spain, Belgium, and Holland with Cresson scholarship funds, Rattner was enthralled with Europe's rich cultural climate. Consequently, the young artist extended his trip abroad for what would be an almost twenty-year stay in Europe (1920–1939). During this period, Rattner made only a few brief visits to the United States, primarily for exhibition openings in the 1930s.

In Spain the artist visited the Prado Museum to view paintings by El Greco (born Domenikos Theotocopoulos, 1541–1614), whose works Rattner had specifically traveled to Madrid to see. With his powerful religious imagery, intense emotionalism, and elongated, Mannerist figures, El Greco was an important art historical influence on the American's turn toward religious imagery in the 1940s.

Recognizing Paris's dominance in the Western art world, Rattner settled there in 1920 after depleting his Cresson travel funds. In Europe the young artist's awareness of current art trends broadened and he continued to adhere to non-traditional means of depicting his surroundings. Rattner happily discovered in Paris a conducive environment for practicing modern art—a city where artists were admired for their individuality and were, generally speaking, respected members of society, regardless of their level of success. Furthermore, the American expatriate could continue his artistic training at numerous Parisian academies, as well as fraternize with fellow modernists in a progressive, thriving artistic community. Rattner's circle of friends eventually included such well-

known figures as the Surrealist poet Pierre Reverdy (1889–1960), the famous Cubist painter Pablo Picasso, the brilliant draftsman and colorist Henri Matisse, and the avant-garde American writer Henry Miller, depicted in a 1947 portrait by Rattner (Fig. 3). A bust-length depiction of the writer, the portrait is painted in a palette of deep reds and ochres, characteristic of Rattner's paintings of the 1940s. The sitter's serious expression and eyeglasses emphasize Miller's intellectual side. Rattner also enjoyed exploring the lively nightlife in Montmartre, featuring streets and establishments saturated with dancers, show people, prostitutes, and pugilists.

Between 1921 and 1925 Rattner enrolled in various art schools. He attended classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, the École des Beaux-Arts, and the Académie Ranson, while also making contacts and developing friendships with like-minded creative individuals through participation in the thriving café life of Montmartre. Rattner was in search of a sympathetic environment in which he could move beyond traditional forms of representation without the censure of his instructors. While continuing his artistic training, he struggled to support himself with numerous odd jobs, such as working as a laborer in a print factory, a porter at the Gare St. Lazare, a potato planter in Giverny, and an art director for an American film company.¹

In 1922 Rattner lived outside of Paris in the small, country town of Giverny, as seen in a photograph from the time (Fig. 4). Sharing a studio and living quarters with fellow American painter Isadore Levy (life dates unknown),

¹ The film company job is mentioned in AAA, Reel D203, frame 704. Some sources suggest that Rattner turned down a job offer in Hollywood as a set designer because he wanted to stay in France.

with whom he had originally traveled to Europe, and one other unidentified artist, Rattner lived next door to the aging Impressionist master Claude Monet (1840–1926). Having moved to Giverny to be in close proximity to the French artist, Rattner greatly admired Monet’s technique of painting *en plein air* and longed to achieve similar stylistic results in his own work. In a 1942 letter to fellow American painter Rico Lebrun (1900–1964), Rattner recalled fondly the hours he spent watching his neighbor paint: “I used to watch Monet paint (I would hide in the bushes along the fence of his lily pond so he wouldn’t see me) at 83 years of age. He was standing up at work, solid as an old tree trunk, holding his palette in one hand and swinging his right arm. . . .”² Although it is unlikely that the two artists ever interacted, Rattner revered Monet’s expressive translation of nature during these years, particularly his monumental depictions of waterlilies—in their constant state of flux as light continually altered their appearance—in his water garden at Giverny. He greatly admired Monet’s non-linear approach to the canvas, and for many years, Rattner would describe to friends the French master’s technique of applying paint in sweeping brushstrokes, “swinging that brush in a straight arm position from one side to the other in huge bold gestures. . . .”³

It was during these early years in Paris and its neighboring towns when Rattner met his first wife, Elizabeth Lee (called Bettina) Bedwell, a native Nebraskan who was working in Paris as a fashion correspondent for the *Chicago*

² Letter to Rico LeBrun (February 19, 1942). AAA, Reel D205A, frame 406.

³ Letter to Jack Stark (May 3, 1943). AAA, Reel D204, frames 631–32.

Tribune Syndicate.⁴ Rattner painted Bettina in 1921–22 (Fig. 5), soon after the couple met. Rather somber in mood and reminiscent of El Greco's elongated figures with unnatural skin tones, this psychological portrait depicts Bettina in her study, surrounded by books and what appears to be a sketchbook or art book in her lap. The palette is quite subdued in comparison to Rattner's other works of the period. Peering out from a small, gaunt face, the sitter's eyes stare directly out at the viewer. If not for the intensity of her gaze, Bettina's small head would be lost in the shadows of the upper composition. The couple married in 1924 and remained inseparable until Bettina's death in 1947.

At the Académie Ranson, founded by the artist Paul Ranson (1864–1909) and his wife, Rattner studied under the French artists Émile-Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929), Paul Sérusier (1863–1927), and Maurice Denis (1870–1943). Through his association with these French symbolist or *Nabi* artists, Rattner developed an interest in Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) (whom Sérusier and Denis regarded as their master) and traveled to northwestern France to experience Gauguin's Brittany firsthand.⁵ Interested not only in Gauguin's unique sense of color and line, Rattner was equally enthralled with the region's indigenous religious customs

⁴ Some sources suggest that the two Americans met while Rattner was working as a freelance artist for the fashion section of the *Chicago Tribune Syndicate*; others credit their first acquaintance to one of the Parisian academies where Rattner studied. Very little is known about Bettina Bedwell. In addition to working as a fashion correspondent, she also authored at least one novel.

⁵ While in Brittany, Rattner and Isadore Levy discovered a mural by Paul Gauguin, titled *Joan of Arc*, 1889, in a restaurant, hidden beneath layers of wallpaper. Rattner eventually brought the painting back to the United States to restore and sell it. In letters dating back to the 1950s, Rattner's second wife, Esther Gentle, refers to the still unsold Gauguin. The painting remained in Rattner's New York studio for quite some time.

and the simple, untainted lifestyle of the native Breton people, as evident in his painting *Fête Bretonne (Brittany Festival, France)*, No. 41 (1924) (Fig. 6). Learning from the work of Gauguin and the painter Émile Bernard (1868–1941), who joined Gauguin to paint in Brittany, Rattner embraced their use of unnaturalistic color and evocative line. Bernard was credited with devising a style known as *Cloisonnism*, in which strong black outlines surround flat areas of brilliant color in a manner akin to the decorative techniques of medieval enamels and stained glass. When he turned to religious imagery in the 1940s, Rattner's style would reflect elements of *Cloisonnism* and medieval church decoration in his use of thick black lines outlining faceted forms and vivid jewel tones.

In 1923 Rattner had rented his first studio in Montmartre, the neighborhood where he would live until 1936. This area of Paris thrived as an outpost for figures of the Parisian avant-garde, and the American expatriate established numerous like-minded contacts. In the States Rattner had studied stylistic aspects of early twentieth-century modernism, such as the bold, pure colors of Fauvism, the faceted, decomposed forms and planes of Cubism, and ways of depicting movement and simultaneity developed by the Futurists, yet these modern movements did not come to life for the American artist until he lived in Paris. As Rattner immersed himself in the artistic trends of Europe in the 1920s, these influences became more pronounced, particularly Futurism and Cubism, as effective ways to express the pulsating rhythms of contemporary life. Rattner explained in a 1968 interview that in America he had merely been going through the motions with regard to these modern European styles. He stated, "I didn't know what Cubism was, or Futurism really, but I used the words. . . .

And I only found out after I got to Europe what was meant by Cubism. When you get it from the horse's mouth you get something that has authority behind it. And it opens up the whole . . . mystery of the thing and gives you a new light on it."⁶

Primarily painting pastoral compositions, Rattner focused on domestic interiors, still lifes, and landscapes during these early years. He participated in several group shows, including exhibitions at the Salon d'Automne (1924), the Salon des Indépendants (1924, 1927, 1929), and the Salon des Printemps (1925). An example of his work from this period is a tempera painting on paper, *Pourquoi* (1924) (Fig. 7), which depicts an interior scene with figures seated around a table. This portrayal of figures seated around a table was probably borrowed from Paul Cézanne, who painted in the 1890s a series of works depicting card players seated around a table. However, for Rattner, the subject matter was almost irrelevant: the painting is primarily an exercise in Cubism, with its faceted forms and the depiction of space as a series of overlapping planes.

In contrast, another painting from this period, *The Descent* (Fig. 2), is a rare precursor to the artist's Christ compositions of the 1940s. Dated 1923, this canvas depicting Christ's descent from the cross is the earliest extant example of Rattner's use of religious imagery. Christ's body, rendered as a pale, gentle S-curve, is carefully removed from the cross by several draped figures. The cross is just barely detectable behind them. The large cropped head along the right side of the painting gazes out at the viewer, much like the stylized faces that appear

⁶ Rattner, AAA interview, 45.

in Rattner's later Christ compositions. The figures were painted in loose, broad brushstrokes, showing the artist's turn toward an expressive, rather than academic, style. These two paintings demonstrate the different styles with which Rattner was experimenting during these early years.⁷

Around 1927 Rattner joined the *Minotaure* Group, a group of artists and writers affiliated with the Surrealist movement in France. Artists involved with the group included Picasso, Miró, Giacometti, Le Corbusier, and other prominent figures in modern art history. Rattner exhibited with the *Minotaure* Group in Brussels in 1934. A French Surrealist review, *Minotaure*, was established in 1933 by the publisher Albert Skira (1904–1973). A close friend of Rattner's, the Greek art critic and publisher Tériade (b. Efstratios Eleftheriades, 1897–1983), served as the magazine's artistic director until its demise in 1939. (The publication declined as a result of financial problems during Europe's economic downturn at the threshold of war.) *Minotaure's* mission was to embody "the spirit of the modern movement."⁸ Tériade also edited *Verve* (in existence from 1937 to 1960), a review in French and English to which Rattner contributed at least two lithographs before his return to the United States.

In addition to his involvement with the *Minotaure* group, Rattner met other primary figures associated with the Surrealist movement, including André

⁷ *Descent* may be a copy of an Old Master painting at the Louvre. However, the large, stylized figure on the right would have been Rattner's addition. Evidence suggests that Paul Sérusier had turned to religious imagery at this time, so Rattner may have created this while studying at the Académie Ranson.

⁸ "Paris: The Heart of Surrealism," in *Documents of Dada and Surrealism: Dada and Surrealist Journals in the Mary Reynolds Collection* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), website educational series, n.p.

Breton (1896–1966), author of *Manifeste du Surréalisme - Poisson Soluble* (1924), known as one of the Surrealist manifestos. Adopting the swirling forms characteristic of surrealist compositions, Rattner developed a more curvilinear style in many of his paintings executed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. For example, his 1931 painting *Bacchanal* (Fig. 8) features a tangled mass of nude figures in a maelstrom of celebration. The forms are more loosely rendered than the artist's Cubist works, such as *Pourquoi* (1924), and Rattner's characteristic structured space has dissolved into a swirling web of figures. Executed in a somewhat similar fluid style, Rattner's *Girl with Hoop* (1925) (Fig. 9) was reproduced in the February 1934 issue of *Minotaure*. The painting's content reveals Rattner's interest in Surrealism's focus on the bizarre or irrational in its depiction of an apparently naive, young girl playing with a hoop amidst a dark frenzy of nightmarish figures. However, whereas Surrealists such as Salvador Dali (1904-1989) and Yves Tanguy (1900-1955) focused primarily on the world of dreams and the subconscious, Rattner's primary interest in Surrealism was in the rhythmic flow of superimposed forms and sweeping lines and in rather obscure subject matter, as seen in both *Bacchanal* and *Girl with Hoop*. In a letter dated 1936, Rattner likened this curvilinear style to "the electricity of nature."⁹ Writer Henry Miller later termed Rattner's Surrealist style "flou" in his book, *Remember to Remember: Volume 2 of the Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, stating, "In these canvases, the human figure blends with the pattern of nature in a sort of shadowy,

⁹ Letter to Del Quest (January 16, 1936). AAA, Reel D204A, frame 81.

translucent marinescape. All is flow, movement, arabesques of infinite motifs.”¹⁰

As a result of his association with Surrealism, Rattner began to exhibit his work in galleries affiliated with the new movement. He received his first solo show in 1935 at Paris’s Galerie Bonjean, whose mission was to showcase the latest Surrealist works, and was given similar recognition in America shortly thereafter with a solo show at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York (1936). An ardent supporter of Surrealism, Levy exhibited work by the German exile Max Ernst (1891–1976) upon his arrival in the United States, as well as Dali, Miró, and Man Ray (1890–1977). Levy’s mother-in-law, modern poet and artist Mina Loy (1882–1966), lived in Paris and began working as Levy’s Paris art agent in 1931. Apparently, Loy visited Rattner’s studio on occasion to select paintings for exhibitions at Levy’s gallery.¹¹

In the 1930s, the American art world was dominated by American Scene painting and Regionalism, isolating itself from European artistic movements in order to create a style that was uniquely American. When Rattner began exhibiting work alongside prominent European artists, particularly at Levy’s gallery, in the mid- to late 1930s, he established his place in the international avant-garde and was viewed as un-American by many American critics. *New York Times* art critic Richard Jewell, a staunch advocate of American Scene painting, visited Rattner’s first solo show at Levy’s gallery. Although he criticized

¹⁰ Henry Miller, *Remember to Remember: Volume 2 of the Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York: New Directions, 1947): 80.

¹¹ AAA interview, 5. The interview transcript refers to her incorrectly as “Minna Lloyd.”

the expatriate for not following the path of such artists as Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) and Edward Hopper (1882–1967), Jewell conceded that an “energy” flowed through the gallery.¹² Embracing European modernism, Rattner was well on his way to developing his own form of expressionism characterized by a dynamic color palette and rhythmic line.

Although Rattner did not firmly adhere to Surrealist ideals, Levy granted him additional solo shows in 1939 and 1941, and maintained high regard for the expressionist’s work throughout his career. In his 1977 book *Memoir of an Art Gallery* published just a year before Rattner’s death, Levy maintained the artist’s significance:

... somewhere in this account I should mention three American painters in the virtue of whose work I felt the deepest conviction. In spite of my faith and efforts, none of the three reached the degree of national and international fame I thought they deserved, unlike almost all my other painters who, with or without my efforts, eventually reached the top. These three were Abe Rattner, Howard Warshaw, and Leon Kelly.¹³

Contemporary reviews in New York noted the dynamic, rhythmic quality of Rattner’s work of the late 1930s. In 1939 Inez Robb, a critic for New York’s *Daily Mirror*, praised Rattner’s paintings for their lyric and poetic qualities and characterized his work as “dithyrambic,” a term used to describe a frenzied

¹² Quoted in Piri Halasz, “Abraham Rattner: ‘Rebel with a Cause’,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 32, no. 3 (1992): 24-25.

¹³ Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), 158-59.

poem in irregular verse or a furied, impassioned choric hymn and dance of ancient Greece performed in honor of Dionysus.¹⁴

For the exhibition catalogue accompanying Rattner's 1939 show at Levy's gallery, the writer John Dos Passos (1896-1970) described the artist's emerging, mature style: "Abraham Rattner is a painter who takes chances. He has come back from Paris intoxicated with shapes and colors instead of with the dogma of cubism or surrealism or post-expressionism. He has brought back work dangerously fresh, fluid, experimental."¹⁵ Another enthusiastic account classified the show as America's first introduction to the new Parisian style of "Sensorealism," comparing Rattner's work to the "dithyrambic" style of literature, and acknowledging the artist as "the first American painter to start an independent art movement in Europe."¹⁶

In addition to Surrealism, Rattner experimented with a style similar to Picasso's more soft-edged version of monumental, "classical" Cubism of the 1920s. For example, in the painting *Mother and Child* (1938) (Fig. 10), Rattner used broadly painted, rounded forms to depict a voluptuous mother lying on her back as she lifts her child above her body. The cool blues and greens of the surrounding landscape possibly evoke fertility, while the pink and peach tones, the woman's golden locks, and surrounding flowers convey the warmth of

¹⁴ Inez Robb, "Rattner's Paintings Disdain Similitude for Riotous Color," *Daily Mirror*, 2 January 1939, 4. The critic defined "dithyrambic" as a "poem in wild, irregular strain in honor of Dionysus."

¹⁵ AAA, Reel D203, frame 707.

¹⁶ AAA, Reel D203, frame 710.

motherhood. The mother's horizontal, almost mountainous silhouette mimics a landscape with its undulating forms, while the veils of blue and green paint overlaying her body suggest translucent ocean waters.

Another example of Rattner's Cubist approach in the years leading up to World War II is *Workman's Lunch* (1936) (Fig. 11), which depicts a tranquil domestic scene of three workers seated around a dining table. Perhaps another reference to Cézanne's *Card Players*, the painting's warm palette of reds, pinks, browns, and ochres imparts a sense of community. The central figure smokes a pipe, while the figure on the left finishes his meal. The man on the right rests his chin in his right hand, relaxing and listening to the conversation. This work shows the artist's growing understanding of European modernism and its precursors, namely the skewed perspective and flat, square brushstrokes used by Cézanne, the faceted forms of Picasso and Georges Braque, and the vivid, unnaturalistic palette of the Fauves.

By 1936 the artist and his wife had tired of the rowdy, bohemian lifestyle of Montmartre, so they relocated to the quieter neighborhood of Montparnasse. A candid photograph from this period shows Rattner in his studio on rue Cauchois (Fig. 12), a cigarette in one hand and a bundle of paint brushes in the other. Rattner wears a paint-splattered smock and looks over his shoulder, as if caught unaware. In Montparnasse Rattner befriended Henry Miller, who also resided in that Parisian neighborhood. The two expatriates would remain close friends until the artist's death in 1978. Miller often wrote about Rattner, providing insightful recollections of their years together in Paris and glimpses of

Rattner's personality, work ethic, and spiritual beliefs. In a 1965 exhibition catalogue, Miller recalled his earliest encounters with the artist:

I was impressed from the very beginning of our acquaintance. I had discovered one expatriate who devoted all his time to his work, who lived and breathed it daily. More than that, I had found a friend who inspired me to give my best. How often, at the end of a day spent in riotous living, I thought of Rattner, his perseverance, his tenacity, his discipline, his devotion to his work. Sometimes, reflecting on his sober, earnest way of life, I thought of him as a saint rather than an artist. . . . As for visiting him at his studio, that too was a difficult matter. He always kept the door of his studio locked. Only a rare few ever broke through the barriers. I remember one occasion when I foolishly kept knocking at his door, knowing that he was inside and how he finally opened it to reveal the face of a man no longer of this earth. He was completely gone, lost in his work. I wanted to flee at once, or get down on my knees and beg his forgiveness.¹⁷

As political turmoil in Europe became more apparent in the mid- to late 1930s, expatriates such as Rattner and Miller discussed Hitler's fascist regime in Germany and its potential effects on France and the rest of Europe. An artist with a deep social conscience, Rattner began to reflect this instability in his work. In 1937 the artist contributed a lithograph for Tériade's first issue of *Verve*, which the editor paired with the writer John Dos Passos's story *Fire* (Fig. 13). This issue also reproduced Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), his renowned painting depicting the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. In a similar but more turbulent style, Rattner's lithograph reflects Europe on the brink of world war through its surging orange and yellow flames and tangle of overlapping forms that depict the fires of hell. The artist later recalled his intentions: "My interest was the outbreak of world-

¹⁷ AAA unprocessed papers, 3 typed pages. Henry Miller, "A Word about Abraham Rattner" (Pacific Palisades, California, January 17, 1965); quoted in Susan J. Bandes, *Abraham Rattner: The Tampa Museum of Art Collection* (Tampa, FL: Tampa Museum of Art, 1997), 10-11.

wide war. . . . This is before World War II when Hitler was coming up. And I was full of fear and that's why I was making this the end of it. Here's the end of culture and civilization, art."¹⁸ The impending war filled Rattner's mind, and his fears and anxieties surfaced in his art and writings.

Another image conjuring the discord in France in the 1930s is *Fantasia* (1938-39) (Fig. 14), a painting whose composition is now known only through reproductions. Rattner repainted the work in 1940 to create the Christ composition *A Place Called Golgotha*, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. In *Fantasia*, a partially draped female nude is uplifted, yet engulfed, by a swarm of monstrous figures. The female figure may represent Liberty, as the composition recalls Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) allegorical personification of Liberty, also a central, partially clothed female figure, in his 1830 painting *Liberty Leading the People* (Fig. 15). Rattner would have seen this important painting at the Louvre in Paris. In Delacroix's portrayal, French Liberty perseveres in the Parisian revolution of 1830, lifting up the French flag with her right arm in a gesture of triumph. However, in Rattner's composition, Liberty slumps backward, her right arm constrained, foreshadowing the plight of France on the eve of the Nazi invasion. Remembering Paris in the 1930s, Rattner wrote, "From 1930 I had the conviction that another war was inevitable. The thought of it gave me a horrible feeling—disillusionment and hope became an inseparable partner to the growing image of the horror of war. My mind tried to tell me that man would avoid it, but way down in my inner depths I knew the challenge would overstep the

¹⁸ AAA interview, 11. Apparently Rattner did not execute the drawing with Dos Passos's *Fire* in mind. Tériade paired the drawing with the story since they shared a similar theme.

limits of any possible conciliation.”¹⁹ With *Fire* and *Fantasia*, Rattner was moving toward the more socially charged, evocative subject matter that would dominate his work during the 1940s.

Throughout Europe people sensed the inevitability of a second world war. As the 1930s neared conclusion, Americans abroad commiserated over the impending war and their imminent return to the United States. Abraham and Bettina knew that their days in Europe were numbered. Rattner later recalled the unease that resulted from Hitler’s corrupt regime and its effect on his aesthetic progression:

We were all aware that something was happening and that the good days were few. . . . Because during that period Hitler’s voice came over the radio and it came over stronger and more violently all the time. It affected me personally very much because I took a very deep concern that it meant war again. And the anti-semitism was sharply underscored. It was something that troubled me very much personally. And it affected me in this way that I grew further away from the aesthetic thing. I had to keep my balance because my emotional response to these feelings that were stirred up in me went back to my anti-semitic experiences here in America. . . . And I never could get over them because it left an awful mark on me in some way or other in my youth. And for a while I was free of it—Paris meant that. And now Hitler’s voice disturbed me. It disturbed me in what I wanted to do. And I knew I could not keep on with abstraction, I could not keep on with the intellectual searching after an aesthetic direction, that I had to do something about this emotional thing in me. And I had to start painting from what I saw, what I experienced. Van Gogh came into my life then. And El Greco. And I was pushed around by the tumult of this kind of experience.²⁰

This excerpt from an interview with Rattner is crucial for understanding the stylistic and iconographic change that occurred in the artist’s work as a result of

¹⁹AAA, Reel D204, frame 703.

²⁰AAA interview, 13.

the outbreak of World War II. Rather than engaging in aesthetic explorations of form and style, as he had done in works shaped by Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism, Rattner felt an intense need to respond to the world around him—to find a way to express the horrors that Hitler was inflicting and the inherent doom of a second world war. Rattner referred to this artistic effort as “extensionism,” meaning that the artist personally reacts to the outside world, rather than separating him- or herself from the outside world. For Rattner, in the midst of such trauma, the artist should become an extension of the world if his or her work is to have lasting meaning.²¹ Reflecting further on the limitations of various artistic styles, Rattner later wrote, “. . . Cubism became too undecipherable for anyone but the artist and could not live long without the food of human emotion. Cubism was a beautiful machine that could not function.”²² For Rattner, Hitler’s message struck a deeply personal chord, awakening haunting memories from his youth, which in turn transformed his approach toward more emotional, relevant content.

One of the final paintings the artist executed in Paris, *April Showers* (1939) (Fig. 16) is probably Rattner’s most widely reproduced image. The painting debuted in Rattner’s second solo show at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1939. An example of the artist’s successful adaptation and translation of European modernism, *April Showers* represents Rattner’s movement toward a more structural style, as opposed to the more loose, curvilinear style of *Bacchanal* (Fig.

²¹ AAA interview, 14.

²² Undated notebook. AAA, reel D205, frame 113.

9). Depicting a row of well-dressed figures holding their umbrellas (and a bouquet of flowers by a central figure) in the rain, the painting's surface is composed of a frieze of sequential and overlapping faces, similar to a Futurist rendering of a solitary figure or form in motion. However, as Piri Halasz suggests, Rattner used this row of faces not to provide a sense of motion like the Futurists, but rather to convey the "multiplicity of humanity."²³ Such pictorial devices would continue to appear in the artist's work throughout the 1940s as a way to express the many facets of human character. The overlapping figures and umbrellas remind the viewer of the faceted planes of a Cubist painting. Further, Rattner's use of heavy black outlines to differentiate the areas of color that comprise the composition are similar to the black lead tracery between facets of color, or the mullions, that make up the design in a stained-glass window.

Prior to executing *April Showers*, Abraham and Bettina spent time traveling to medieval churches in France, such as the famed Chartres Cathedral and other churches near Paris. Chartres is known as an outstanding example of High Gothic architecture, sculpture, and luminous stained glass. In an artist's statement prepared to accompany a reproduction of *April Showers* in Sidney Janis's book *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (1944), Rattner conveyed his intention to combine aspects of Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism (i.e., showing his adept assimilation of European modernism), and medieval architecture in this one painting. He wrote:

—*April Showers*—city streets, people, fuse together. Blacks of enamel or of velour, wet, fresh, clean. The light an iris-like aura of jewel colors. The ghostlike figures coming out of nowhere, then

²³ Halasz, "Abraham Rattner," 25.

disappearing like an echo. The whole thing at once the festival, the dance, the dirge, where time is a tempo of spaces and shapes, where space becomes a tempo of written music in line and color, where the human being is sculptured in a frieze of floating humanity. *April Showers* is like a cathedral, the cloisters, the ogival arches, flying buttresses, candle flames, columns, and stained glass windows.²⁴

For Rattner, the Gothic style of architecture created a dynamic space in motion, which, when translated onto canvas, resulted in a three-dimensional composition splendid in its flowing, unified, almost architectural elements. Throughout his career, the artist recorded his ideas about Gothic architecture. For example, in 1954 he wrote, "The cathedral became a synthesis of color and light and space which promised peace of the soul."²⁵ This unity is an effect he aimed to achieve on canvas. Not only would the forms and colors characteristic of medieval architecture and its decoration appeal to Rattner and surface in his paintings, but the artist also discovered an affinity between medieval spirituality and his own beliefs, which will be addressed in upcoming chapters. Rattner's mature style of the 1940s has been compared to the scintillating, fractured nature of stained glass design,²⁶ thus *April Showers* serves as a bridge between the artist's Parisian style and his mature work painted in America during the war years. The figures in *April Showers* are probably Americans, as indicated by the *Times* newspaper held by a figure in the lower left.

²⁴ Rattner quoted in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944): 58.

²⁵ AAA, Reel D203, frames 238-39.

²⁶ See, for example, Dorothy Adlow, "Tonal Intensities" *Christian Science Monitor* 3 (19 March 1956): page number unknown. (Reproduced AAA, Reel D203, frame 1009.

Representing one of Rattner's final achievements as an expatriate, *April Showers* is one of the first compositions to demonstrate the artist's successful use of a complex structural, almost architectural, framework. This framework would organize many of his compositions in the 1940s. In addition, the stylized faces of the figures, with their sharp, elongated, angular noses and large, almond-shaped eyes, would become a salient feature of Rattner's work throughout the next decade, and he often depicted stylized figures in a similar state of progression. Through his structural compositions, use of sequential elements, such as interlocking faces, and radiant palette, Rattner was able to achieve an almost kaleidoscopic effect in his work.

When Hitler's troops invaded Poland in 1939, Rattner and other Americans living in Paris knew that a second world war had reached their doorstep. Although he had believed that the outbreak of war was inevitable, the artist maintained that he was in a state of shock when it finally happened.²⁷ The Rattners remained reluctant to leave France. Although the situation in France was quickly worsening, the artist was not anxious to leave, particularly since he had gained respect as an artist in Paris. He believed that even a fraction of this respect would be difficult to achieve in America. On a return voyage from New York to Paris in 1939, after a brief trip to the States for his solo exhibition at Julien Levy's gallery, Rattner had rejoiced upon sighting the French coast at Le Havre. And he ranted in a letter, "I am sick of American art talk. I am sick of American art ignorance. I am sick of 'Americanism' in art. I am sick of being 'entertainment' to a prejudiced public; and over here where bayonets are being

²⁷ Autobiographical notes compiled by the artist. AAA, Reel D203, frame 338.

sharpened; where a canon thunder can almost be heard overhead; where the air is permeated with High Explosif [sic]—over here, where the spark to start the catastrophe seems constantly inevitable, do I seem to find again a calmness of spirit.”²⁸

In August 1939 the artist and his wife received a letter from the American Embassy advising them to return to the United States. The Rattners busily prepared to depart Paris, packing as much as they could take with them and storing the remainder, including many paintings. On a route that took them first to Bordeaux, then through rough seas across the Atlantic, they arrived in New York on October 27, 1939.²⁹ Years later, the artist reflected on his time in Paris and the outbreak of World War II: “These were years of maturing. They did not seem long years. Yet when it all came to an end, the end seemed sudden. The end seemed final. The lights had been growing dimmer with each new political crisis. Then the lights went out. Everything was in Darkness. An era was at an end.”³⁰

²⁸ Letter to Mr. Bernhard (?) (1939). AAA, Reel D204, frame 222.

²⁹ Details of their departure are recounted in *Bandes*, 11.

³⁰ Autobiographical notes compiled by the artist. AAA, Reel D203, frame 345.

CHAPTER III
The Early 1940s:
Christian Imagery in Response to World War II

After returning to New York, Abraham Rattner and his friend Henry Miller found that they no longer identified with their native country. Their extended stays abroad had distanced them from American culture, yet they longed to reconnect with the States. The former expatriates were surprised and appalled to find an America that was unconcerned with the situation in Europe. Rattner recalled,

... we'd [Rattner and Miller] talk about the strange thing this country is, how the war is going on there, the Germans are coming into Paris and they're going to spread all over the world and we came back here [to the United States] and everybody is nonchalant. They're wearing their good clothes, they're eating well, they're all gay and cheerful. There's nothing here that reflects what's going on over there.¹

America was enjoying its distance from the war in Europe—people were relaxed, safeguarded from conflict by the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In 1940 Rattner and Miller decided to travel by car from New York, through the mid-Atlantic and southern states, to Louisiana on a mission to “rediscover America.”² On their trip Miller wrote about their experiences, while Rattner executed drawings to illustrate the journey. Primarily exploring the Southeast, they traveled together for approximately three months, discovering that, in general, Americans remained disinterested in the crisis in Europe. In one of his

¹ AAA interview, 46-47.

² See Christopher Carrell and Wendy Winfield. *Our America: Abraham Rattner and Henry Miller From New York City to New Orleans by 1932 Buick: October 1940 to January 1941* (Sunderland: Sunderland Arts Center, 1976).

studio notebooks, Rattner recorded memories of their journey in a stream-of-consciousness fashion (Fig. 17). This page tracks their route through New Jersey, down the east coast, and along the southeast to Louisiana. Words and phrases scribbled on the page reveal Rattner's discontent with what he and Miller saw in contemporary American society: "mass production," "Ku Klux Klan," "artists are pariahs" (recorded twice for emphasis), "anti-semitism," and "Isolationism."³

Upon re-settling in New York City after his trip with Miller, Rattner continued to express his frustration with America's isolationism. In addition, he soon became discontent with the American art scene, finding the environment unnecessarily competitive among critics as well as fellow artists, as opposed to supportive and creative like the European milieu. Rattner wrote to a friend in March 1940,

... American painters are a funny bunch. I don't understand them. They tear each other down and apart. The critics likewise. And in the end the bone falls in the stream. It's because they make it into a bone-picking issue. Like cigarette manufacturers they compete with each other to get all the 'business.' Result they all starve. (Unlike cigarette manufacturers.) That's one reason I stayed in France. So I could work out my painting problems without feeling the necessity of making a business of them. And it's one of the reasons why European art is of the high standard it is.⁴

For the expatriate who had spent almost all of his artistic career in Europe, American isolationism, both governmentally and culturally, affected the critical reception of his work. Rattner continued,

But this remark is un-American. The idea is un-American. . . . American critics tell the American people that I am European. That

³ AAA, Reel D205, frame 305.

⁴ AAA, Reel D204, frame 269.

my art is Un-American, and therefore, doesn't mean anything. So, nothing. As if all the painting being done here is not derived[,] as if it could be pure—an American product, made by a melting pot of Greeks, Italians, Germans, Irish, French, English, Spaniards, Scots, Welsh, Poles, Czechs, Sweeds, Finns, Norwegians, Portugese, Orientals, Negroes, Jews, and so on and so on.⁵

Fueled by his frustration with America's apathy toward war in Europe and with the American art scene, Rattner began to paint with a greater vitality than ever before. In 1940–41 Rattner exhibited his work in cities across the country, including New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Whereas his modernist style had been well received in Europe, a reviewer in Chicago labeled his work "dangerously radical."⁶ These shows in the early 1940s included works executed primarily in Paris, but at least two west coast exhibitions included a small, inconspicuous, new work titled *Crucifixion*.⁷ In a review for the artist's Los Angeles show at Stendhal Gallery, one critic wrote "Best piece of all is the little 'Crucifixion.' No realism and little reference to natural forms in this. If abstract design can be great art, then this is great."⁸ The description of the work as small and unnaturalistic suggests that the work is

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Halasz, "Directions, Concerns, and Critical Perceptions," 352.

⁷ It is unclear which *Crucifixion* was included in these exhibitions, as there are several undated works that this title could accompany. In reviews about this exhibition and in Rattner's papers, the image is referred to as *Crucifixion* and in other accounts as *Study for Crucifixion*. The image could have been *Study for Crucifixion* (Fig. 18), which Leepa dates 1942. However, Leepa's dates and titles are sometimes inaccurate. In all likelihood, the work exhibited was *Crucifixion* (Fig. 19).

⁸ Source unknown. Newspaper clipping (1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 322.

Crucifixion (1940) (Fig. 19). One of the first “Christ compositions” Rattner executed after the outbreak of World War II, this painting is a relatively simple, but poignant depiction of the subject. It depicts Jesus’s descent from the cross, with two figures gently removing his lifeless, emaciated body from the armature in an embracing gesture. The crucifixion is graceful and rather refined, not “violent” like some of his subsequent compositions. The mood is quietly sorrowful, intimated by Christ’s drooping head, the lowered gaze of the figure on the left, and the furrowed brow of the figure on the right. A moon on the far right faintly illuminates the scene. While not a major picture, this work established a theme that would dominate Rattner’s oeuvre over the next few years.⁹

As the situation in Europe worsened, Rattner’s concern for France escalated. In a letter to his sister Rose, he wrote of his adopted homeland: “I still have my studio and belongings in Paris. But haven’t heard whether or not its [sic] all okay. Now it will be fascist there—tho’ I expect there will be an upheaval in France. Lord only knows the suffering there will be now. . . . The France I knew is gone.”¹⁰ Closely following details of the war abroad, and anticipating United States involvement, the artist began to express his anxieties on canvas through an intensified palette, more expressive style, and, most importantly, evocative, symbolic subject matter. Rattner’s cheery palette of greens, yellows,

⁹ It is interesting to note that Picasso also depicted Christian imagery. He painted a crucifixion in 1930, of which Rattner was probably aware. The two artists’ paths crossed on numerous occasions during Rattner’s years in France and even later.

¹⁰ AAA, Reel 1212, frame 269.

and vivid pinks transformed into sometimes discordant jewel tones reminiscent of colors used in medieval stained glass windows. He used facets of bold colors, often outlined in heavy black strokes akin to the expressive style of French colorist Georges Rouault (1871-1958), as in, for instance, his *Head of Christ* (1938) (Fig. 20). However, compared to Rouault, Rattner provided a more rigid structural composition as a framework for these rich colors and his figures are generally even more stylized than those depicted by Rouault. In addition, Rattner's compositions from this period often employ the faceted forms of Cubism and the sequential forms of Futurism.

Stylistically, Rattner's emphatic black outlines around the figures are very similar to Rouault's. Yet, Rattner's compositions are typically more complex than the French artist's. Reminiscent of the tracery of stained glass windows, the black lines were a stylistic technique that Rattner had learned from repeated visits in the 1930s to the magnificent cathedral in Chartres, France, Notre Dame in Paris, and other medieval churches. Explaining his use of heavy black outlines, Rattner wrote to fellow artist Hilaire Hiler (1898–1966) in March 1940, "In a stained glass window the lead frameworks absorb the shock of the violence or intensity of the colours."¹¹

The stylistic change that occurred simultaneous to the outbreak of World War II can be illustrated by a comparison between the two paintings *Mother and Child* (1938) (Fig. 10) and *Darkness Fell All Over the Land* (1941–42) (Fig. 21). Executed prior to World War II while the artist was living in Paris, the earlier painting reveals a bright, buoyant palette of pinks, greens, and blues. The cool

¹¹ AAA, Reel D204, frame 282.

blues and greens gently complement the warm pinks of the mother's and child's skin. The undulating forms of the figures and surrounding landscape are faceted, revealing the artist's adoption of modernist trends, yet rounded, so as not to achieve a splintering, decomposing effect. The overall mood is calm and comforting, conveying the joyful bond between mother and child. The curvilinear, almost colossal forms reflect Surrealism and the solid, classically inspired forms that Picasso had begun to explore in the early 1920s.

While the later painting, *Darkness Fell All Over the Land*, also maintains close ties to European modernism, the palette is dark with deep reds, blues, and yellows applied in discordant juxtapositions. For Rattner, color became what he termed an "articulative force" through which he could express designated themes.¹² The faceted forms are heavily outlined in black, giving them emphasis and providing a framework for the shapes of color. The figure of Christ is a sickly greenish yellow, drastically different in color and form from the mother and child painted just three years earlier. The figures are more angular and fractured in this painting, evoking the chaotic atmosphere of the period in which it was created. In terms of subject, this crowded crucifixion scene is inherently more provocative and solemn with its depiction of Christ's lifeless body nailed to the cross and its line-up of malicious onlookers.

In describing Rattner's stylistic vocabulary of the early 1940s, most historians attribute his jewel-toned colors and almost violent brushstrokes to the intense passion with which he pursued this segment of his career. One author

¹² *Abraham Rattner: Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1986): n. p.

states that in these paintings, “. . . the lines [are] swiftly brushed into place and the colors richly applied with all the explosive radiance of a stained glass window. Life, death, love, resurrection, salvation, justice, and beauty are the things about which Rattner felt most passionately, and he explored them as a springboard for his art in terms of their ethical and inspirational content.”¹³ Rattner used the elements of painting—line, color, form, and subject—to communicate forceful messages about his personal feelings and about the world at large.

Unable to distance himself from the external world, the canvas became Rattner’s outlet during World War II: a way to portray the emotional anguish he was experiencing as millions suffered under the rise of Hitler’s regime. Christian imagery, as well as imagery related to war and destruction, emerged in his work as a way to express the ubiquitous suffering instigated by World War II. When the United States entered the war in 1941, more thorough and frequent news accounts of the situation abroad finally aired over the radio and appeared in newspapers. Rattner followed the coverage religiously. While he awaited news as to whether he would be permitted to serve once again in the camouflage division, Rattner, now forty-eight years old, concluded that painting might be the only way he would participate in the crisis abroad. Eventually, he learned that his age and his previous World War I back injury disqualified him from serving in the second world war. The artist was disappointed not to serve, particularly because camouflage techniques that he and his colleagues had developed and used in the first world war were further advanced by this time

¹³ Ibid.

and more heavily relied upon. Greatly frustrated by his inability to assist in the war effort, Rattner eventually stated in his journal that "If I cannot be on the fighting front I can make my contribution via art."¹⁴

Meanwhile, Rattner engaged in depicting the war's suffering symbolically, rather than overtly. In 1940 he had written to his friend the poet Ramon Guthrie that he had started working on several "violent 'Christ' compositions."¹⁵ The emergence of Christian subjects in Rattner's work directly resulted from the outbreak of World War II. According to Halasz, with the advent of such compositions, Rattner became the first American artist to depict traditional iconography in a contemporary (i.e., international) style, merging Christian themes with Parisian modernism.¹⁶

Between 1940 and 1945, Rattner executed at least twenty-five known paintings, prints, and drawings that incorporate Christian imagery. These compositions range from simple scenes, such as a pietà or a crucifixion with only a few figures, to more elaborate compositions with numerous figures. Some of Rattner's more complex compositions contain mere references to Christian themes interwoven with autobiographical content.¹⁷ Rattner most often

¹⁴ Journal entry (September 8, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 548.

¹⁵ AAA, Reel D204, frame 287.

¹⁶ Halasz, "Abraham Rattner," 26. Also see Halasz, "Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions," 353. It is doubtful that Rattner was the first American artist to explore such themes in a "modern" style, but he was arguably the most accomplished in merging this subject matter and style.

¹⁷ More complex compositions include *Hallucination* (Fig. 42) and *Clowns and Kings* (Fig. 46).

explored the Passion of Christ: carrying the cross, crucifixion, descent from the cross, lamentation, and pietà. In his studio notebooks and journals of the early 1940s, he periodically mentioned working on his “Christ compositions.”¹⁸ In addition to these works that symbolically referred to World War II’s atrocities, Rattner depicted actual scenes of war in a few works, so I will discuss these, as well. In all of his works related to World War II, the artist relied on an evocative style and subject to address the issue of human suffering. Throughout Rattner’s career, the human figure—whether stylized, intentionally distorted, or abstracted—played an important role in his oeuvre. Focusing on the human condition, the artist’s Christ compositions of the 1940s were by far his most powerful, evocative, and well-executed achievements.

Rattner turned to Christian imagery to signify the contemporary suffering of Jews under Hitler’s regime. For him, only such dramatic, emotionally charged themes could begin to convey a fraction of the horror of World War II. One advantage of using such conventional imagery is that most audiences were relatively familiar with the New Testament narrative and could instantly recognize Christ as a victim. Christ had been depicted by artists for centuries, and, as Halasz has asserted, for Rattner Christ was a “suffering Jew who personified the entirety of modern humanity being tortured and extirpated by the war.”¹⁹ Christ functioned as a universal symbol of a victim who was subjected to the bestiality of human nature, yet one who, according to Christian

¹⁸ For example, AAA, Reel D204, frame 402. Rattner wrote on December 21, 1941 that he “worked on Christ compositions.”

¹⁹ Halasz, *Archives of American Art Journal*, 26.

faith, endured in the end. Furthermore, Rattner likely realized that veiled, symbolic imagery about the war would be more palatable to dealers and collectors than overt depictions of current events.

Symbolic references to the war seemed to have had great appeal for many artists at this time. Regarding art executed in response to the war, Halasz argues, "The war itself was perhaps too all-encompassing and horrible to be dealt with directly, and for this very reason indirect treatments of it—offered, for example, . . . in religious paraphrase by Rattner . . . —proved more acceptable" ²⁰ In addition to European artists such as Picasso, Chagall (Fig. 22), and Rouault, many American artists turned to Christian imagery at this time, including Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), Walter Quirt, and Rico Lebrun, among others (see figs. 22-25 for examples). Compositions by Hartley, Quirt, and Lebrun are much more ambiguous in comparison with Rattner's Christ compositions of the same period. Hartley's painting (Fig. 23) focuses more on the group of shirtless men than on Christ's suffering, imbuing a religious subject with homosexual undertones. Quirt's painting (Fig. 24) depicts a horrifying melee of skeletal figures in a manner similar to Rattner's earlier Surrealist style, but not nearly as fluid, and not as accomplished as his 1940s compositions. Rico Lebrun's painting *Woman of the Crucifixion* (Fig. 25) is a rather simple composition that relies on a single grotesque figure to convey emotional impact. Few, if any, American artists from this period devoted so many canvases to Christian themes or rendered this type of imagery as powerfully or as originally as Rattner. Moreover, Rattner's personal history as a victim of anti-Semitism, combined

²⁰ Halasz, "Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions," 132.

with firsthand war-time experience, makes the content of his paintings that much more meaningful, and sometimes autobiographical.

Dating from 1940, the same year as *Crucifixion*, is a much more complex, multi-figure painting, *A Place Called Golgotha* (Fig. 26).²¹ For this composition, Rattner painted over parts of *Fantasia*, which he executed in Paris only two years earlier, but he preserved the curvilinear style and turbulent, claustrophobic composition of the 1930s. Whereas a nude female form is the focus of the earlier composition, the revised painting depicts a multitude of interwoven figures surrounding Christ on the cross. Golgotha, the ancient name for Calvary, was the hill near Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. According to the New Testament, when Jesus was turned over to be crucified, Roman soldiers placed a crown of thorns atop his head and shouted, "Hail King of the Jews!" Christ then carried a wooden cross up to Calvary, where he was nailed with arms outstretched to the cross. In *A Place Called Golgotha*, Christ is almost lost in the upper center of the composition, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. Rattner's swirling, faceted forms are difficult to decipher. Recognizable images emerge from the clutter, including a moon in the upper right corner that establishes the time as night; figures holding candles and torches illuminate Christ with his jagged crown of thorns; rungs of a ladder propped against the cross; and flames in the upper left corner suggest destruction.

²¹ Maisels lists the date for this painting as ca. 1941-42, but Halasz's research on Rattner was far more extensive and she lists the date as 1940. Because Rattner quickly broke away from the curvilinear style of *Fantasia* in the early 1940s, the earlier date of 1940 seems more appropriate.

The onlookers also provide clues as to what the artist intended to convey with this painting: a figure on the left reads the newspaper, another rolls a pair of dice, a percussionist in the lower center beats his drum and stares up at the cross, several figures with almost grotesque, leering grins represent those who mocked Christ on the right, and an anguished man with a furrowed brow (whose upturned head is superimposed on Christ's emaciated torso) puts his hand over his mouth and stares at Christ in disbelief. A plethora of other figures is suggested by overlapping, stylized profiles and swarms of eyes. Within this cast of characters, Christ is the focal point—lifeless, with his head dropped sideways against his outstretched arm. As Christ suffers, members of Rattner's painted society look on, either applauding Christ's demise, disinterested, or unwilling to help him. Some spectators, such as the newspaper reader and the gambler, are oblivious to the inhumane persecution taking place, referring to both greater societal apathy toward human suffering and to American isolationism as Europe faced war. For Rattner, the historical plight of Christ echoed contemporary Europe—as Hitler waged war, relatively few were inclined to help those whom the dictator and his followers aimed to eradicate. For the *Magazine of Art*, Rattner prepared the following text to accompany a reproduction of *A Place Called Golgotha*:

. . . motivated by the continued demonstration by human beings of their failure to live up to the high principles of morality or unselfishness but rather indulge in their weaknesses for malice, intolerance, stupidity, and just plain cussedness. Man placates or shrinks from the responsibility of his more noble possibilities or obligations—and as man continues 'to have fun' with the abstract but practical ideas and ideals of Christ—so I proposed to ridicule

man—but in plastic terms of a painting structure, which is my primary concern [sic].²²

From this point until the end of World War II, such images of Christ surfaced in Rattner's work with greater frequency as the conflict abroad worsened. Rattner immersed himself in these Christ compositions, writing to Jennie in 1941 that "I have been working with much interest on some new compositions which have absorbed me so fully. . . . Often when I think of the moment we are going through and the resultant pressure it brings on all of us, the concern, anguish and general devastation of spirit, I feel very fortunate indeed to be able to let the interest in my work absorb me and so relieve this pressure."²³ Still distressed over American disinterest in the conflict in Europe, Rattner frequently voiced disgust with his native country in letters to Jennie. While the artist did not consider himself a militant individual, he firmly believed that to remain indifferent and neutral about the war was to be, as he put it, "Pro-Vichy and Pro-Nazi."²⁴

In addition, Rattner remained dissatisfied with the treatment of artists in the United States. Arguing that artists garnered more respect in Europe than in the U.S., Rattner identified such modernists like himself as outcasts in the American art world for their unorthodox approach. In his writings, he repeatedly lamented the lack of critical and financial support for artists and

²² AAA, Reel D205B, frame 402.

²³ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (December 1941). AAA, Reel D205A, frame 1280.

²⁴ AAA, Reel D204, frame 730.

referred to himself as a “pariah.”²⁵ Meanwhile, the notion of the modern artist as degenerate continued to prevail among totalitarian regimes. Therefore, Rattner viewed himself as an outcast on multiple levels, first as a Jew, second as an artist, and lastly as a modern (rather than traditional) artist. Thus, Christ, an archetypal outcast, evolved as the primary subject in Rattner’s art of the early 1940s not only as a social-political icon, but also as an autobiographical icon who symbolized the modern artist as pariah. In Chapter Four I will examine such autobiographical content more thoroughly.

In 1941 the United States joined the Allies to fight World War II. U.S. involvement commenced with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which Rattner documented in his journals. Horrified by the deception of the Japanese who bombed Pearl Harbor, Rattner diligently recorded the details of that day in his journal:

We were having a quick lunch at home and . . . turned the radio on to hear the startling news that Japan had attacked Hawii [sic] - Pearl Harbor. . . . we are at war with Japan—the radio reports filled the air all afternoon. Bettina and I were held before the radio paralyzed. In Washington the Jap ambassador Nomura, and special envoy Kurusu had been conducting a series of “peace” talks with Sec. of State Cordell Hull and Pres. Roosevelt and the deceit was obvious. They were conducting such a meeting at the precise moment that bombs were falling in Honolulu. I was filled with a strange feeling of rage and relief. Rage at the treachery. Relief over the confidence in the American people because now this country would finally wake up, unite and act.²⁶

Although Rattner detested violence, he did not want the United States to remain apathetic. American involvement in the war presented Rattner with a glimmer of

²⁵ See, for example, AAA, Reel D203, frames 124, 167, and 185.

²⁶ Journal entry (December 7, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frames 379-80.

hope that the war could soon be resolved. He and Bettina, along with other former expatriates, had been appalled by the lethargy of the American people upon their return to United States. They believed Americans took their freedom for granted, not realizing that they may eventually pay for their liberties through war. He feared that his fellow citizens, who failed to acknowledge the suffering abroad, did not take the war seriously. He wrote:

... the picture of people who could not face the reality (that our neighbors across the sea were dying and starving was simply news for reading and talking about). That it was not so far away did not seem apparent to this new world. They could not imagine that soon we too would be tasting that same dying and starvation. Smugness and complacency filled my eyes and ears wherever I went. I was sick at heart. Inside me I was violent. The only outlet was on canvas.²⁷

The artist continued in his journal on December 7th, "Air raids on U.S. cities can be expected. My patience with U.S. War Dept. for not having called for me as they wrote they would is at an end. I must do something."²⁸ Four days later, Germany and its allies declared war on the United States. By the 12th of December, Rattner was enthusiastic over America's participation in the war, and he diligently followed accounts in the newspaper and on the radio. In fact, the artist admitted to friends and family that his interest in the war as an "obsession."²⁹ In a January 1942 letter to his friend Jack Stark, Rattner stated,

The war has become an obsession, filtering into the insides as well as confounding anything in work on the outside. Each day seems as though it may be the final day. Each moment seems burdened

²⁷ Journal entry (December 31, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 416.

²⁸ Journal entry (December 7, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 380.

²⁹ Journal entry (December 26, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 408.

with a serious portent. Not that there is any fear of a sudden demand to stop, but because of a great desire to do something in the nature of licking the Goddam [sic] Japs and Nazis and the realization that the army may not take me. A fury gets in my skin Am still waiting the call from Washington."³⁰

Rattner became increasingly frustrated over his inability to contribute to the war effort through military service (at this point the U.S. government had not yet responded to his two requests to enroll) and felt that he must act. When Rattner learned that he was definitely not allowed to serve, the artist turned to painting symbolic compositions with an unparalleled intensity even though he was so preoccupied with war events.

Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Rattner painted *Darkness Fell All Over the Land* (1941–42) (Fig. 21), which was featured on the cover of Samuel Kootz's pivotal 1943 book *New Frontiers in American Painting*. Greatly impressed with the direction Rattner's work had taken, Kootz listed him, along with Stuart Davis and Walter Quirt, under the heading "The New Realism" and concluded that these three artists "meet on common ground in their unfailing absorption in the spirit of their time—in individually grasping the true revelation of spiritual universality."³¹ He stated that Rattner "suffers a profound pain . . . , an almost Biblical anguish about war and its causes. He is morally implicated in everything he does."³² *Darkness Fell All Over the Land* depicts a crucifixion with a series of interlocking faces across the bottom of the composition. These faces, reminiscent

³⁰ AAA, Reel D205A, frame 408.

³¹ Kootz, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

of the sequential faces in *April Showers*, represent witnesses to the crucifixion. Some of the faces are skull-like and some appear to be rulers wearing crowns. Again, leering grins grace the faces of some onlookers, while others appear indifferent. They stare out at the viewer rather than looking at Christ's lifeless body on the cross. For Rattner, the sequence of faces does not imply movement or a temporal effect, as in a Futurist composition, but rather represents the faces, or types, of humanity, ranging from passive onlooker to bestial dictator.

Unlike *A Place Called Golgotha*, Christ is now more prominent and dominates the composition. His pallid body is covered in sores and the stigmata are visible on his palms where he is nailed to the cross. In describing the palette he used to depict Christ figures at this time, Rattner explained that he chose pale flesh or yellowish tones to connote not only Christ's lifelessness, but also his purity of soul, and lightness of spirit.³³ Contrasting the dark, foreboding composition, a patch of bright yellow paint behind his head suggests a mandorla. As seen in the earlier crucifixion, a figure with a furrowed brow and upturned head to Christ's lower right looks up at him with a melancholy, sorrowful gaze. Candles illuminate the night scene, possibly a symbol of hope for peace. The title of the painting, *Darkness Fell All Over the Land*, refers to the New Testament book of *Revelations*, in which St. John the Evangelist prophesied that darkness would sweep over the land during the apocalypse, a theme to which Rattner returned throughout his career.

The sequential faces, first seen in *April Showers* and again in *Darkness Fell All Over the Land*, appear in several compositions from this period, namely, the

³³ Journal entry (December 20, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 401.

masterful 1943 painting *The Judges* (Fig. 27), the etching *Among Those Who Stood There* (1944) (Fig. 28), and the drawing *Frightened Faces* (1943) (Fig. 29). *Judges* magnifies Christ's suffering to a monumental scale, with his head dominating the right side of the composition. With large, sorrowful eyes, Christ—depicted with almond-shaped eyes, pointed beard, and elongated, angular face—peers pleadingly at the viewer. In a style and palette akin to the faceted forms and jewel-toned colors of medieval stained glass, the central cityscape depicts Jerusalem filled with figures. To the left of Christ is a frieze of faces, representing spectators who mocked Christ and those who stood idly by. Many of the faces reveal demonic grins; others are expressionless. Angry, shouting figures appear in both the lower right and left of the composition. When this work was exhibited for the first time in 1944, a critic for *Art Digest* praised the painting, stating, "Perhaps the most striking of the dozen paintings by Abraham Rattner at the Rosenberg Galleries is one called *Judges*, a conception of Christ shown close-up as a suffering face There are strong dark lines dividing the many facets of color, . . . leaning towards blues, intense greens, glowing reds, and yellow as in [manuscript] illumination."³⁴

In the etching, the series of figures alludes to the spectators of the crucifixion, with the central figure and the female figure second from the right representing mournful, yet passive, observers with tear-streaked eyes. Other figures include a crowned ruler on the far left and a bestial warrior type on the far right. By depicting these various figure "types" (such as ruler, soldier, and

³⁴ Maude Riley, "Abraham Rattner Continues His Story," *Art Digest* 19 (1 October 1944): 11.

passive bystander), Rattner suggests that not just one person or type of person is responsible for inhumanity to others; the responsibility lies with the population as a whole. About this etching, Rattner wrote, "I was thinking of the people who stood watching the crucifixion. The forms are inter-penetrating and related—a synthesis of the oneness of different and opposing forces."³⁵

On the other hand, the sequential faces in the drawing do not appear to represent various figure "types." Descending and engulfed in flames, the stylized, wide-eyed faces in the drawing are far more ambiguous. *Frightened Faces* may refer to American citizens fearful of air raids after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. One day after the bombing, Rattner denounced the government's educational air raid instructions that aired over the radio, criticizing officials for not drilling the public before war became a reality. The Rattners had undergone such preparatory procedures in France, and they viewed the U.S. as much less prepared than Europe. With the impending threat of air raids, Rattner sensed the onset of terror amongst his fellow Americans and wrote: "Kept the radio going too dazed to realize the hypnotism and devastation upon the human being of today by this instrument the radio."³⁶ The faces obscured by flames evoke the artist's descriptions of the frenzy consuming the American people as they listened to warnings and news coverage on the radio.

During America's initial involvement in World War II, Rattner frequently compared this world war to the first world war. Whereas Rattner had

³⁵ Abraham Rattner, "An American from Paris," *Magazine of Art* 38 (December 1945): 315.

³⁶ Journal entry (December 8, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 381.

experienced World War I firsthand, he was very much a spectator during the second. In 1941 he recalled his naiveté as a young soldier during World War I, stating “The last war was supposed to have been ‘Save the world for Democracy.’ We did not know exactly what that meant. . . . The idea that any liberty or freedom has to be paid for should have been drilled into us. . . . And so when I was in the army, the flag—everything American was sacred yes. But that idea of human liberty and freedom the flag is supposed to symbolize was not a burning fire within us. . . . That is why when that war was won—we failed to create the force which could have prevented this war.”³⁷ Whereas World War I did not drastically alter the quality of life for many American civilians, Rattner viewed World War II as the “people’s war,” presenting a life or death struggle for all of humanity.³⁸

While Rattner documented the war in his journals and paintings, he maintained hope for peace. Akin to medieval views of the apocalypse, the artist believed that the inevitable destruction of World War II would eventually result in a new beginning for humanity. Rattner expressed this sentiment in a journal entry dated December 26, 1941: “I look out upon the glory of the morning over the city, but the gloriousness of it is shadowed immediately by the related fact of human devastation. The only consolation is the hope that the awful structure

³⁷ Journal entry (December 14, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frames 389-90.

³⁸ Letter to Private David Turnbull (October 15, 1942). AAA, Reel D205A, frame 410.

man has built up for himself will be so thoroughly shaken as to force him to rebuild it all along finer and more noble lines."³⁹

Rattner based several compositions on apocalyptic imagery, including *Place of Darkness* (1941–43) (Fig. 30). Begun in 1941, *Place of Darkness* was underway on Christmas day of that year, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.⁴⁰ The palette is similar to other paintings of this period, yet the forms are more curvilinear and monumental, much like Rattner's *Mother and Child*. Derived from the book of *Revelations*, figures in the painting include: an angel clutching a guitar; a ghost-like figure; a bird-like, beaked warrior creature; a faceless, robed knight figure holding a dagger; a horse; and a horse ridden by a knight in the far distance, possibly a reference to the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The large, red head in the lower left appears to be straight out of Picasso's *Guernica*. This nightmarish cast of masked characters evokes a world on the brink of ruin. Rattner originally titled the painting *Peut-On Illuminer un Ciel Bourbeux et Noir?*, a verse from Charles Baudelaire's poetic masterpiece "Les Fleurs du Mal" (1857). Rattner translated the title as, "Can One Illuminate a Sky which Is Muddy and Black?"⁴¹ In Baudelaire's poem, sinners despair, then realize that there is hope and light at the end. According to Halasz, optimism is reflected in *Place of Darkness* by the candle in the foreground,⁴² a recurring motif

³⁹ Reel D204, frame 408.

⁴⁰ Journal entry (December 24, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 406.

⁴¹ AAA, Reel D205A, frame 1252.

⁴² Halasz, "Abraham Rattner," 29.

throughout Rattner's Christ compositions. In describing this image, Rattner acknowledged the painting's apocalyptic content, stating that the scene represents a group of sinners on the day of redemption.⁴³ In his focus on such imagery, Halasz states that "[Rattner] was implying that a Day of Reckoning was coming in the present, as it had been foretold in the past."⁴⁴

A composition more focused on the catastrophic aspects of apocalypse is *Apocalypsion* (1943) (Fig. 31), which depicts a collapsing world engulfed in flames. Combining both his fluid and structural styles in this work, Rattner relied on a maelstrom of figures and architectural fragments to refer to the chaos of war and the destruction, or apocalypse, that results. Painted primarily in a flame-colored palette, *Apocalypsion* reveals a fractured world turned upside-down from war. A blonde female figure stands in the lower left, holding fruit in her right hand and a chalice in the left. She attempts to balance these symbols of a more serene existence while the swirling backdrop of the world around her bursts into flames. An almost earthquake-ravaged environment, her surroundings include shattered architectural elements, such as arches, columns, roof shingles, windows, and aqueducts. Curvilinear, orange flames creep into the scene from the right. A green satanic figure jeers at the woman from the lower right. Barely visible in the midst of the commotion, a small bird chirps in the upper left corner and a cluster of golden angels hovers to its right. Suggesting hope, the golden angels illuminate the scene below, casting an angular, hourglass-shaped light

⁴³ AAA, Reel D205A, frame 1252.

⁴⁴ Halasz, "Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions," 363.

over the world of ruin. Akin to the apocalyptic prophecy described in *Revelations*, the fallen city depicted here probably alludes to the Fall of Babylon, while the symbols of hope, the angels and the bird, suggest the birth of the New Jerusalem. Rattner's view of apocalyptic rebirth remained a crucial aspect of the artist's spiritual convictions. In his studio notebooks, which were devoted to writings about color theory, iconography, and other artistic concerns, Rattner often recorded musings about apocalyptic imagery. In one undated notebook, he summarized this theme succinctly: "out of the disorder, ruin[,] life is regenerated. Instead of suffering, peace."⁴⁵

Rattner remained confident that the United States and the allied forces could defeat the Germans and the Japanese. Meanwhile, he was not ignorant of the sacrifices that his country would have to endure in order to ensure victory, nor was he unaware of the consequences of defeat. He wrote in his journal, "I don't care if I have to starve. I want to see the Nazis beaten, the Japs sent back into their ant hill. . . . if we fail to win the war our way of life will be arranged for us by Nazis and Japs."⁴⁶

In 1942 Rattner participated in a significant group exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Artists for Victory." This juried show was organized by a group of artists who wanted to demonstrate their support for the war effort. Out of the approximately 8,000 submissions, 500 works were selected for the exhibition, including Rattner's *Descent from the Cross* (1942) (Fig. 32). One

⁴⁵ AAA, Reel D204, frame 1279.

⁴⁶ Journal entry (January 6, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 428.

of the artist's most accomplished Christ compositions, *Descent from the Cross* was praised for its intense color and effective compositional structure. The five-figure scene depicts Christ, after his death on the cross, as two figures attempt to remove him from the structure in preparation for his burial. Set at night with the moon visible in the distance, *Descent from the Cross* brings Christ's lifeless body, heavily marked by open wounds, to the foreground of the composition. Two figures assist Christ. One looks up at him with a melancholy gaze, while the other looks pleadingly at the viewer. Their almond-shaped eyes are characteristic of Rattner's stylized figures of this period. Two dark onlookers lurk in the shadows to the left of the cross, staring blankly at the scene. They watch but do not assist. These winged, bestial figures probably represent soldiers, as Rattner often used this scale-like pattern to suggest military attire.

By 1942 Rattner's work was represented by the renowned art dealer Paul Rosenberg. A Jewish-European immigrant, Rosenberg had once owned a prominent gallery in Paris, but, like many others, was forced to relocate to the United States to escape Hitler's imminent persecution. In Paris Rosenberg had represented such modern artists as Matisse, Picasso, and Braque. He continued to represent these artists in New York, along with a few carefully chosen American modernists like Rattner and Max Weber. Rattner greatly admired Rosenberg's knowledge and appreciation of modern art, and believed that the gallery's stamp of approval would prove to be a turning point in his career. With continual shows of his work at Rosenberg's gallery throughout the 1940s, Rattner gained prestige as a leading artist in New York, known for painting traditional,

figurative subject matter in a modern style.⁴⁷ The artist's first solo show at the Rosenberg Galleries in May 1943 elicited a variety of responses, including harsh criticism from Peyton Boswell at *Art Digest*, who disliked Rattner's "international" style, and praise from the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and other publications whose critics found the work both highly emotional and beautifully decorative.⁴⁸ Maude Reily of *Art Digest* commended Rattner's use of Christian imagery, writing "The *Crucifixion* is the subject of two impressive paintings . . .," and *Darkness Fell All Over the Land* is "a glorious sight."⁴⁹ However, she then criticized the work, stating "it is without the compassion of a Rouault Christ, or the deeply religious emotion of a Rembrandt *Crucifixion*."⁵⁰

As Halasz and other scholars have discussed, World War II forever changed the American art scene. When avant-garde European artists fled to the United States to escape the danger of war, New York gradually took Paris's place as the center for modern artistic expression. Many critics eventually became more tolerant of non-regionalist styles, and, as a result, New York became more progressive than ever before.⁵¹ As attitudes evolved in the 1940s, Rattner's once

⁴⁷ Rattner eventually joined Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery in the 1950s. Rattner explains his break with Rosenberg in AAA, Reel D203, frames 59-61.

⁴⁸ Halasz, "Abraham Rattner," 29.

⁴⁹ Maude Riley, "Recent Paintings by Abraham Rattner," *Art Digest* 17 (15 May 1943): 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Piri Halasz, "Figuration in the '40s: The Other Expressionism," *Art in America* 70 (December 1982): 112.

“dangerously radical” style became more acceptable, and even mainstream, among critics and collectors. As a result of this shift in taste and Rattner’s representation by one of New York’s leading galleries, the artist was enjoying greater success not only in terms of garnering exhibitions and prizes for his work, but also in selling his work to major institutions and private collections.

In 1942-43 Rattner painted two compositions that overtly, rather than symbolically, documented the tragedies of war. The first composition, titled *The Survivors* (1942) (Fig. 33), recounts the horrifying true story of a refugee ship that caught fire while transporting European Jews to the United States. A mass of screaming victims, the frenzied scene depicts helpless refugees drowning at sea, flailing their arms in hope of rescue.

A look at the inherent anxieties of war, the painting *Air Raid* (1942-43) (Fig. 34) depicts two civilians embracing in the foreground as their surroundings are ravaged by bombing. Stylistically, the turbulent composition recalls Rattner’s somewhat cluttered Surrealist paintings and reveals the American artist’s debt to Picasso. However, unlike Rattner’s earlier Surrealist works, this scene is imbued with the narrative of war. The two central figures’ faces merge into one, forming a circular, static composition in the center. Surrounding the two embracing figures, who serve to balance the chaos, the whirling composition is made up of faceted, overlapping, Cubist forms defining a cityscape engulfed in flames. The faceted style emphasizes the turmoil, and Rattner’s familiar visual devices—the wide-open, unknowing eyes and the grasping hands, for example—enhance the feeling of terror.

Rattner's interest in the war effort never waned. He recorded news about it, collected newspaper clippings, and commented on the effects of war on his and Bettina's lifestyle, including the rationing of cobalt blue paint, the scarcity of artists' supplies, and black-outs. When Rattner was not painting Christ compositions, the war and its news coverage consumed his thoughts, as is evident in *The Sun* (1943) (Fig. 35). Upon first glance, this domestic interior appears lighthearted, without references to war or Christian imagery. A self-portrait, *The Sun* portrays the artist sitting in an armchair in front of a blank canvas, reading the newspaper. However, the front page of the paper reproduces maps outlining the movement of troops during World War II, revealing that the war always weighed heavily on his mind.

Although aware of only a fraction of the actual deaths and ruthless war crimes occurring overseas, Rattner was sickened by the inhumanity exhibited by the Germans and the Japanese. Accounts of Hitler's hatred for Jews and his plans to eradicate them were gradually reaching the United States. Such stories personally affected Rattner. Responding to a particularly gruesome newspaper account of the war, he wrote:

Oh God how can human beings become worse than beasts to do such cruelties. We must put an end to this side of man's nature. . . . Both Germany and Japan must be reduced to impotency militarily. They must be made to understand that the spirit of anti-reason and of anti-heart of their herd psychology has brought upon them their tragedy and that their super-race ideas brought the world down upon them.⁵²

European Jews were the primary victims of Hitler's bestiality, and the Nazis were relentless in their pursuit to annihilate them. In November 1942, Rattner

⁵² Journal entry (March 11, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 491.

lamented, "Hitler . . . is letting it all out on the German scapegoat the Jew—and declared the germans [sic] would massacre every one of them before they go down. Already estimated over 2 1/2 million of Jews have been wiped out. Nothing will avail Germany now. The Jewish curse is on that people—they will remember Spain which treated the Jews the same way."⁵³

In the fall of 1942, the artist detected a change in the war climate, as an eventual end to the conflict became more realistic. He wrote in his journal, "Well now the turning point of the war seems near. Today marks the beginning of the end of Hitler's Germany and Musso's Italy."⁵⁴ However, there was still a long way to go before peace could be achieved. As Rattner continued to read accounts of Jews killed *en masse*, he lamented incidents such as the mass suicide at Toulon, France, where a group chose to commit suicide rather than suffer under the Nazis' imminent wrath.⁵⁵ Aware of the consequences of a U.S. defeat in the war, Rattner feared a government overtaken by fascists. In 1942 he wrote, "If we lose this war—we'll all be victims of these ambitious slave-owning Feudalistic Industrialists. The great revolution in history—to free humanity—will triumph but not so easily with these humanity-haters in the high places."⁵⁶ For Rattner the battle of World War II was a battle between inhumanity and humanity, between the dual nature of humankind: bestiality versus humanity. He believed

⁵³ Journal entry (November 24, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 569.

⁵⁴ Journal (October 8, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 561.

⁵⁵ AAA, Reel D204, frame 570.

⁵⁶ Journal entry (January 15, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 439.

that what was at stake for humanity was also at stake for art. In a 1942 letter to Jack Stark, Rattner wrote "Nazi-ism, fascism, shinto-ism demand that it [beauty] be stifled, choked, suffocated, killed. We are at war to see which will win: if our side loses then beauty through art will be doomed for a long time. If our side wins then I think the great things you see possible in the future will come. Man will have gained another notch of freedom and that parallels spiritual development."⁵⁷

Rattner continued to focus on "Christ compositions" throughout the war, often juxtaposing Christ figures with bestial, grotesque figures to illustrate this duality of human nature. As seen in most of the Christ compositions discussed thus far, Rattner typically distorted figures in order to achieve heightened expressive results and to enhance the dichotomy between holy figure and demonic figure. In 1944 the artist described this aspect of his style: "The artist deforms the 'type humaine' ou l'objet de la nature [the human type or the natural object]—not because he desires to make a spectator laugh—but because his pity, his sensibilities, his transcendent nature, his idealism has been so outraged that he has to give expression to his view of the world of beasts, diabolic man and woman turned into monstres [sic]."⁵⁸

Two examples of Rattner's juxtaposition of Christ figures with beastly figures are *Crucifixion* (1944) (Fig. 36) and *Christ with Two Soldiers* (1945) (Fig. 37). Both compositions feature distorted, grotesque rulers and soldiers alongside an

⁵⁷ AAA, Reel D205A, frame 81.

⁵⁸ AAA, Reel D204, frame 744.

ethereal, serene Christ figure. Rattner has exaggerated their monstrous qualities, beginning to transition into abstraction with their inhuman, fractured faces to enhance the contrast with the Christ figure.

An especially intriguing painting illustrating the contrast between these two aspects of human nature is *The Jeweled Christ* (1943) (Fig. 38), an inventive composition in which Christ's torso appears to be adorned by the jewels on the crowns of the Roman soldiers lined up in front of him. With their skull-like faces, clenched teeth, and black eye sockets, the Roman soldiers represent the bestial side of human nature. Their vacant eyes stare out angrily at the viewer. On the other hand, Christ, wearing a crown of thorns, suffers quietly behind them with arms upraised in the moonlit setting. Christ's face is elongated and angular, yet serene and sorrowful in comparison with the hideous figures below. Rattner's unusual composition, devoid of spatial recession, brings to the foreground this juxtaposition of the earthly and spiritual realms and the perpetual battle between inhumanity and humanity. In a statement about this painting prepared for the *Magazine of Art*, Rattner wrote, "Facing a second World War, I couldn't be an 'escapist' painter . . . The jewels are selfishness and the figure of Christ represents selflessness . . . good and evil."⁵⁹

Design for the Memory (1942-43) (Fig. 39) is an equally compelling image, which Rattner described as a "Totem Cross."⁶⁰ Rather than a horizontal alignment of interlocking faces, the canvas and the arrangement in this

⁵⁹ Rattner, "An American from Paris," 312.

⁶⁰ Journal entry (February 20, 1942). AAA, Reel D204, frame 481.

composition are vertical, reflecting both a pagan totem pole and a Christian cross form. The various heads include a crucified Christ figure at the top level, then a helmeted soldier figure, a crowned, ruler figure, a skull, and an inverted feline-like head at the bottom, suggesting the descent of human character from the spiritual to the animalistic. Flanking the cross are an angel on the left and fragmented architectural elements on the right, reminiscent of *Apocalypcion* and the destruction of civilization.

Rattner believed there would always remain both impassive, ignorant types and cruel, savage types. As he described in 1944, "What diabolic structures we humans are—on the one side slaughter and on the other hands uplifted!"⁶¹ Rattner's use of bestial figures in his Christ compositions demonstrates his preoccupation with the duality of human nature, and how the bestiality of humankind could lead to wars and suffering. In 1939, prior to the outbreak of World War II, Rattner wrote about humankind's animalistic tendencies, foreshadowing the demise of humanity and spirituality that he would represent a few years later in *Design for the Memory* and other paintings:

Man is uncertain. . . . Man has gone back to the jungle. He has reverted to the animal. Man is a beast and has finally admitted it. And this is the keynote of the Twentieth Century, our modernism, the new civilization. Our glorious past was false. It was veneer, pretense. Man is now frankly animal—admits it—orates upon it, makes it a virtue, glorifies it. The beast in man from now on is man's better spiritual aspiration. Civilization is obsolete. Beastialization is born. BEASTIALIZATION ERA, XX A.D.⁶²

⁶¹ Journal entry (December 23, 1944). AAA, Reel D204, frame 804.

⁶² AAA, Reel D205A, frames 89-90.

At the outbreak of World War II, the artist wrote, "It's a circle with beginning, without end. The people are good, yet they are ever ready to strangle you when you're down. If they were always morally good, we'd have no wars. People are men. Men are animals. As animals, life must go on. A law of nature. Kill in order to live. A work of art is as full of mystery as the spirit of man."⁶³

The universal battle between humanity and inhumanity, good and evil was central to the cause of World War II. The artist wrote,

Death is always near. Destruction, war, fire, blood. Mystery of life and death are present everywhere and in everything. There is no repose. The invisible light is the great protection against evil. The struggle between the good and bad, virtue and vice, between the spirit and the flesh is the drama of St. Anthony, Hercules, Buddah, Christ. Spiritual life is that struggle continuously.⁶⁴

Rattner turned to Christian imagery throughout the war years not only to express these universal struggles, but also to communicate his own obstacles.

⁶³ AAA, Reel D204, frame 271.

⁶⁴ AAA, Reel D204, frame 1292.

**CHAPTER IV:
Reflections on War and Suffering:
Autobiographical Content in Rattner's Paintings of the 1940s**

Many of Rattner's Christ compositions of the 1940s, particularly those executed in 1943-44 just before the conclusion of World War II, are poignant, often autobiographical, portrayals addressing the issue of suffering in the world. Using Christ as a symbol, Rattner not only drew parallels between the suffering of Christ and the torture and elimination of Jews under Hitler, but also associated Christ with his own suffering both as a Jew and as a modern artist. When society ostracized Rattner for his modern aesthetic approach, the artist identified with Christ, who was also an outcast in society.¹ According to Rattner's close friends Edith and Milton Lowenthal, avid collectors of Rattner's work, the artist felt the same way about his Jewish heritage and identified with Christ on that level as well, particularly during World War II.²

The disdain that Rattner experienced is suggested in the 1944 painting *Procession* (Fig. 40), in which Christ carries the cross amidst a crowd of jeering bystanders. A spectator on the far left holds a stone in his clenched hand, ready to hurl it at Christ. At one point recalling stories about Cézanne's own troubled youth and the lack of recognition he received during his lifetime, Rattner wrote, "I've been jeered and stoned too,"³ referring both to his childhood difficulties as

¹ Halasz, "Figuration in the '40s," 117.

² Halasz, "Directions, Concerns and Critical Perceptions," 389. The Lowenthals owned several of Rattner's paintings, including *Transcendence*, *Figures Waiting*, *The Jeweled Christ*, and *The Fisherman*.

³ AAA, Reel 205, frame 203.

a Jew in Poughkeepsie and to his adult troubles as a modern artist. Even if on a more modest scale, Rattner could identify with the cruelty that Christ experienced.

Throughout his career, Rattner lamented his insignificant place in American society. He once stated, “the artist continues to be the abnormal element of our society living thru [sic] the well known drama of misery and torture. . .”; and the painter “must accept being the outcast from his society—condemned, doomed and damned.”⁴ Rattner resented critics, blaming them for the public’s lack of appreciation for non-traditional art, for American artists’ financial insecurity, and for art museums’ morgue-like atmosphere.⁵

By 1943 the artist had fully settled into the American art scene, and he recognized how different his career would be in his homeland. Both the terror of World War II and his own struggle as an artist in America weighed heavily on Rattner’s mind, and the works he created at this time are particularly reflective. A melancholy, yet exquisitely beautiful, example is Rattner’s *Transcendence* (1943) (Fig. 41). Executed in Rattner’s signature jewel-toned palette, *Transcendence* is one of the artist’s most intriguing crucifixion scenes. As the focus of the composition, Christ’s pale body is covered by flagellation sores. A series of stylized faces begins with Christ’s head, which is dropped to one side and supported by a large hand, and transcends upward to a more youthful figure. As Lisa Mintz Messinger has stated, “The crucified Christ is depicted first as an aged

⁴ AAA, Reel D203, frames 167 and 185.

⁵ AAA, Reel D205, frame 268.

and lifeless being with a sorrowful face. But slowly, as his spirit is awakened and embraced by God . . . and as angel wings appear (in the background at upper right), Christ's features change dramatically to those of a wide-eyed youth."⁶ The curly hair and rounded chin of the more youthful faces, as opposed to the more angular, elongated face of Christ, are self-portrait features that Rattner would include in several paintings of this period, an indication of the artist's personal association with Christ's anguish. Although likened by one critic to a high-speed photograph, the series of faces refers to Rattner's belief in the multi-faceted nature of humanity and in the transformative power of spirituality.⁷ A pair of hands in the upper right are rendered in a cradling gesture, perhaps suggesting support and comfort for the victim. In contrast, Christ's own hands are limp against his torso—perhaps bound at the wrists—symbolizing his ultimate vulnerability and helplessness. The orange cross is partially visible in the background, as well as a golden moon in the distance. Crouching onlookers, tiny in comparison to the figure of Christ, huddle beside the cross, while a dark mass of soldiers on the left awaits the crucifixion.

The association Rattner made between Christ and the modern artist is evident in *Hallucination* (1943) (Fig. 42). Set in the artist's studio, the painting portrays Rattner's vision of his own multi-faceted psyche, evoked through his pictorial device of interlocking faces. Rendered with curly hair and a rounded chin, the central figure is Rattner, holding a palette and paintbrushes and

⁶ Lisa Mintz Messinger, "American Art: The Edith and Milton Lowenthal Collection," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Summer 1996): 36.

⁷ AAA, Reel D203, frame 1115.

standing in front of his easel. Christ's head, topped with a crown of thorns and highlighted by a glowing mandorla-like sphere, hovers behind Rattner's, suggesting that Christ is an inherent component of the artist's persona. The shadow of a figure with its mouth agape is cast against the artist's torso. There is an interesting play between the two compositions in this painting. There is a painting within the painting: on the easel the artist has rendered a serene cityscape with a glowing sun; however, in the background of the composition outside of the easel, there is a cityscape in turmoil in the upper right corner. The easel may represent Rattner's hope for a new beginning after the war, while the city in turmoil represents the reality of a world at war in 1943.

As seen in *Hallucination*, Rattner often depicted himself in his studio accompanied by Christ. The 1945 painting *Composition—Five Figures* (Fig. 43) shows the artist, holding a candle, accompanied by Christ in the background and a kneeling angelic figure in the foreground. Although the image is quite ambiguous, it seems as if the four figures have appeared to Rattner in his studio, in a vision like *Hallucination*.

The analogy between Christ and Rattner as modern artist surfaced as a recurring theme throughout the artist's career. For example, a more conspicuous juxtaposition of the two personalities appears in *Deux Personnages* (1964) (Fig. 44), in which the artist stands directly before the crucified Christ in his studio. Christ's arms stretch across the top of the painting within the painting, giving the appearance that his body has been nailed to Rattner's canvas rather than to a cross. Whereas the cross had been used in the 1940s to represent Christ's burden to carry, in the 1960s the easel embodied the modern artist's burden.

In August of 1943, the Rattners vacationed in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, where the artist was inspired by the simple lives of local fishermen. After returning to New York, Rattner began to work on the fisherman motif, as seen in the painting *Fisherman* (1943) (Fig. 45). Symbolizing the biblical fisherman of Galilee, the fisherman is a Christ-like figure, humble in his simple profession and carrying his wooden fishing gear much like Christ carried the cross. The melancholy figure with elongated face and sorrowful eyes recalls Rattner's Christ figures and self-portrait imagery of the modern artist, whom he also viewed as burdened by a noble, yet non-rewarding, obligation to create.

Throughout his writings, Rattner lamented the artist's place in society. In France, he found that artists were treated with respect, whereas in America, artists were outcasts who struggled financially to survive. Shortly after returning to the U.S., Rattner wrote about his and Bettina's continual financial burdens:

The total negative possibility of self support from painting. The mockery of the painters [sic] life and world. His position in society as a pariah. Impossible to obtain a living pittance from it, let alone the wherewithal to buy material, paint, canvas, etc. to continue. One is forced to consider the impossibility of continuing creative work. The mind runs in directions for earning money. Money is not only the God of America. It is the blood of America. But to obtain it one must be bloodless.⁸

Rattner saw parallels between the fisherman's daily struggle for survival to his own ongoing efforts for positive critical acclaim and financial stability. He once wrote to his sister Jennie that "The life of a painter . . . is one I feel is a most unhappy one. The ignorant layman may imagine the life of an artist as a very

⁸ Journal entry (December 18, 1941). AAA, Reel D204, frame 397.

bohemian and happy-go-lucky kind. But it isn't true. It is a rather tragic one. There is no security. One is always trying to grasp the intangible."⁹ Among Rattner's friends in New York were a multitude of artists, such as Stuart Davis (1894-1964), George L. K. Morris (1905-1975), and Paul Burlin (1886-1969), with whom Rattner identified and whom he classified as fellow pariahs for their unorthodox approach to art. Rattner socialized and corresponded with these artists, discussing their plight. The artist professed, "Prosperity has been continuous yet art and artists continue to live apart from this prosperity and are living as insecure and mediocre as before except for being absorbed by demand for their teaching services in schools."¹⁰ Rattner knew firsthand of the academic demand for artists, as he taught at numerous institutions in order to make ends meet.¹¹

One of Rattner's most metaphorically complex, autobiographical compositions that addresses the theme of artist as pariah and America's ever-growing materialistic society is *Clowns and Kings* (1944) (Fig. 46). Like Rouault, Rattner often equated the artist with the clown, referring to the clown as an outcast, who, like the modern artist, was mistreated by society and who suffered through life behind a mask to shield feelings of unhappiness and disappointment. In this composition, the figure of the costumed clown plays a

⁹ Letter dated March 6, 1949. AAA, Reel 1212, frame 661.

¹⁰ AAA, Reel D203, frame 104.

¹¹ Institutions nationwide invited Rattner to teach art. Rattner accepted many of these offers, including teaching at the New York School for Social Research, University of Illinois, Yale University, Michigan State University, and others. However, the artist always hoped to support himself without teaching.

guitar in the foreground, while to the right a gaunt Christ-like figure, straight out of *The Judges*, looks downward, eyes lowered to suggest sorrow in contrast to the music-playing clown. In the background, a crowned king stands before the artist's easel. In general, Rattner despised political rulers, believing that they represented materialism, greed, and the demise of moral values in society. Farther to the left of the composition, the artist (a self-portrait) stands before his easel, peering out at the viewer amidst the hypothetical gathering of figures in his studio. Other figures included in the scene resemble onlookers often seen in Rattner's Christ compositions—a newspaper reader in the lower left, a couple resembling a bride and groom, a series of interlocking faces in the center representing the multi-faceted nature of human character, a yellow eye and scale-patterned helmet on the far upper right (behind the king) recall grotesque, bestial figures from Rattner's other Christ compositions, and a blond-haired figure in the center right lifts a candle in a gesture symbolizing hope.

Regarding *Clowns and Kings*, Rattner commented, "This painting . . . grew out of a 'world at war' atmosphere."¹² Emily Genauer, a New York art critic, wrote about this work in 1948 after receiving a description from the artist:

Clowns and Kings deals with materialism, in the broad sense and the way in which 'spiritual values' are ignored. The 'kings' in the picture are the rich and powerful men of this world, the 'clowns' are the poor fools who lust after what the kings have got. Alone among them, with his commitment to the truly spiritual, stands the Artist (a self-portrait of Rattner).¹³

¹² AAA, Reel D205B, frame 187.

¹³ Quoted in Bades, 15.

Detesting the materialism of contemporary society, Rattner frequently lamented humanity's neglect of spirituality and inner existence. He firmly believed that the transition toward intellect during the Renaissance caused humans to look to the external world for answers, whereas medieval society focused on turning toward the inner world of the spirit for guidance. Consequently, the artist believed that this dependence on the physical world had led to a disintegration of spiritual values and diminished artistic imagination.

Rattner continually referred to himself, in paintings and writings, as a clown in the art world. *The Clown No. 4* (1964) depicts this metaphor literally, with an all-white clown, presumably Rattner, standing before a canvas painting (Fig. 47). Near the end of his career, the artist wrote to his sister Jennie: "[An artist] has to die in misery to get a smell of compassion. . . . I like to laugh at myself and admit I am the last of the old Fools—the living clown of the art world. Picasso admits he's a clown too—but laughs another kind of laugh than I do because his mouth is filled with gold teeth," meaning that Picasso has been able to enjoy overwhelming success while alive.¹⁴

In *The Emperor* (1944) (Fig. 48), Rattner explored more thoroughly the materialism and bestial nature of rulers that he touched on in *Clowns and Kings*. A grotesque portrayal of an emperor, this image depicts an obese ruler in profile with a disfigured face, surrounded by abstracted playing card suits in the background. In describing this painting and Rattner's view of world rulers, Leepa wrote, "The arbitrariness of their decisions, even their very functions, is like a game of chance, as indicated by the deck of cards distributed across the top

¹⁴Letter to Jennie and Lou Allen (March 9, 1970). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1423.

of the canvas.”¹⁵ Rattner’s own description that accompanied a reproduction of the work in a 1945 issue of *Magazine of Art* was, “The quintessence of emperors—including the Hitlers. The colors are reds, yellows, golds—colors associated with power and wealth.”¹⁶ The painting exudes greed and gluttony, and the harsh, deep red, and orange palette evoke violence and bloodshed, themes that preoccupied the artist during World War II.

Two other works from this period, *City Still Life* (1943) (Fig. 49) and *People on Sixth Avenue* (1944) (Fig. 50) relate to Rattner’s belief in modern society’s preoccupation with the material, external world. *City Still Life* represents the clutter of contemporary life within a surrounding cityscape, with humanity at the bottom of the pile of papers, musical scores, a guitar, books, and numerous other items. The text “All Is Vanity” is barely visible in the center of the composition, referring to the materialism that guides daily life. *People on Sixth Avenue* shows figures walking down a busy New York street. A man on the right carries a red post or board, similar to depictions of Christ carrying the cross. Near the center of the procession are a bride and groom, a motif Rattner also incorporated in the newspaper in *The Sun*, in *Clowns and Kings*, and in several other compositions of the early 1940s. For Rattner, the couple suggests kinship and domesticity, which he shared with his own wife, and may have symbolized the hope and need for contentment and comfort during turbulent times. Above the group is a swarm of numbers, which convey a market. The

¹⁵ Leepa, 49.

¹⁶ Rattner, “An American from Paris,” 313.

almost robotic, mechanized figures seem to proceed through everyday life unaware of their surroundings, consumed by the material life that hovers above them.

Near the end of World War II, Rattner executed a few very simple paintings in 1944, eliminating extraneous figures, in order to bring human suffering to the foreground of his compositions. These two compositions of three-quarter figures, *Martyr* (Fig. 51) and *Lamentation* (Fig. 52), both depict the fractured body of Christ covered in sores, perhaps paying homage to the victims of the Holocaust. In *Martyr* a winged angel in blue, possibly representing the Virgin Mary, embraces an anguished Christ. In the second composition, Christ looks heavenward, clasping his hands in prayer as he pleads for the suffering to end. Although simple, these compositions communicate a powerful message through Rattner's effective use of gesture and distorted, faceted forms to suggest the anguish of suffering. At this time the subject of Job, a Hebrew Bible symbol of suffering and endurance whose faith was severely tested, entered Rattner's work for the first time in *Job* (1944) (Fig. 53). Similar to *Martyr* and *Lamentation*, this painting focuses on a single, monumental, seated figure with a fractured, wounded body. Turmoil surrounds him, and he cradles his head in his hand in a gesture that signifies defeat. In addition to his adherence to Christian imagery, Rattner continued to depict Job throughout his career to represent suffering in modern society.

For Rattner, Christ was a universal victim, symbolizing the thousands of Jews suffering and dying under Hitler's regime. At this time, American knowledge of the Holocaust was becoming more widespread as accounts

gradually gained more coverage in newspapers. As Rattner read the accounts, he cut out the articles and pasted many in his journals from this period. While Allied forces gradually reclaimed territory that had been overrun by the Nazis, Rattner carefully recorded the peace mission. In May of 1945, Rattner expressed relief that Hitler, who had reportedly committed suicide in Berlin when he realized Germany's impending defeat, could no longer wreak havoc on European Jews. That year he painted *Song of Liberation* (1945) (Fig. 54) as a tribute to those now free of the terror of the war. In this work, three people are seated around a table: the figure on the right strums a guitar—a symbol of joy and free, creative expression—while the man on the left gazes upward, perhaps heavenward, in a gesture of prayer. His right hand rests on a piece of paper, perhaps a news account of the end of the war. A third figure stares blankly ahead. In the foreground flickers Rattner's ubiquitous candle of hope.

Although comforted by the end of the war, the artist continued to mourn those who had suffered. While his 1945 painting *Pietà* (Fig. 55) is less violent than the slightly earlier Christ compositions, the work is a sorrowful depiction dedicated to those who mourn the suffering of loved ones. After Christ's dead body is brought down from the cross, people surround him, with their heads buried in their hands, as the Virgin Mary crouches at his feet, mourning for her son who has died at the hands of religious persecution. Although the war was over, suffering and sorrow continued as knowledge of the breadth of the death and destruction became more widespread.

In the early 1940s, Rattner had searched for a way to express his intense feelings concerning the death and destruction of World War II, as well as his own

personal history of suffering. As briefly discussed in Chapter One, Rattner had experienced discrimination as a child. In August 1945, he passed through the Hudson River Valley by train. The lush landscape of the valley brought back memories of the artist's childhood in Poughkeepsie. Contrasting the beauty of the natural landscape with the cruelty he and his family suffered during his childhood, Rattner wrote:

... the nature of man here, the life he has constructed for himself is not in harmony with this kind of beauty. My memories of this Paradisiac [sic] land, where I was born and raised are filled with ugly images—of suffering, misery, mistreatment by these reactionary minded hating people who maintain a position of political and civil ownership totalitarianism in these parts (as far as I know—at least as far as my personal experience is proof of). I ask myself 'why since your return from Europe (late 1939) have you not at least revisited once—this land of your birth and growing years . . . ?' and I reply to myself—'because of the kind of human being who drove me and my folks away—and the memories of what I suffered here.' Were I to go into details here—of my experiences throughout those years, the images brought back to communicable form again would seem more like pure invention—nightmares to which these small-minded americans [sic] of this community, the first to loud mouth the voice of 'our way of life'—would cry out 'un-american' [sic].¹⁷

In a poignant letter written to his sister in 1954, Rattner recalled their childhood suffering and its relationship to the Christian iconography that surfaced in his work in the 1940s. He wrote the letter after he had traveled through Poughkeepsie on a return trip to New York City:

... we went all around our early childhood neighborhood—and how deeply moving it was to go over the very ground pa and ma and all of us once spent such intense moments of our existence.
Oh how sad it was for me. And I showed it all to Esther and pointed out the details as my memory could resee them in every minute photographic way. This is the first time I saw Pokeysie

¹⁷ AAA, Reel D204, frames 854-55.

[sic] since I left it so many years ago and how it hit me to relive all those dramas of terribleness and joys. I touched the ground of our 36 Union St—where mother made her garden of flowers around the house. I went to see our old barn on Front St. and it was still there. . . . Oh I went over all the streets in our Chevy. . . . yes all thru [sic] the Pollack [sic], Italian section too—up and down those streets where in winter the ice kept me in a continuous struggle to steady the horses and wagon forever sliding and getting stuck. Then the river near the Yacht Club and the docks where we used to go in swimming—it all was brought back to me so vividly so sharply—so poignantly!! Now it all is desolate—poor poverty stricken—decrepit [sic] devastated. No new [buildings] all the same ones but falling apart now and sad sad. Why after 40 years hasn't that town elevated itself—into a semblance of betterment? Why has it allowed itself to disintegrate? . . . We at least did not let ourselves slide down into disintegration. Oh How glad I am I went away—and to France those 20 years of a beautiful life! How I resent the people of Pokeepsie [sic] and hate the anti semitism and meanness they let out on our father and mother and upon us. Tell Lou R. [his brother Lou Rattner] this is what I put in my crucifixions!¹⁸

Lou Rattner, a practicing Jew, failed to understand why his brother would focus so intently on Christian imagery. Lou often told Abraham that his works are “not of our Book,” implying that the artist’s imagery contradicted their Jewish heritage.¹⁹ However, with his adherence to Christian imagery, the artist did not intend to deny his Jewish heritage. Rattner’s Christ compositions were simultaneously political, religious, and autobiographical in content. They were neither documentations of a religious events nor creations of devotional images. Rather, it was the expressive and symbolic capabilities of the motif that held the Rattner’s interest. He wrote, “. . . if its [sic] a crucifixion I paint—the motive has nothing in common with the religious event—only an outward presentation of

¹⁸ AAA, Reel 1212, frames 976-77.

¹⁹ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (February 1956). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1168.

the symbol-metaphor-dirge of all the inner responses I feel to my lifes [sic] experience."²⁰

A deeply spiritual, creative individual, Rattner wrote and lectured extensively about "religious" art and his philosophy of painting. He believed that through religious content—whether Jewish or Christian—he could unite viewers and instigate change toward a more humane society. He wrote, "The religious work of art seeks to translate that fine emotion of our spiritual aspirations, and tries to express that Faith the artist has as a conviction that all men should be bound together by a common human sympathy and that we are all one with God."²¹ For Rattner, God was non-denominational and served as a uniting, rather than dividing, factor.

However, Rattner also stated that the subject of a painting should not be confused with the "motif" of a painting—the motif being the artist's primary motivation for creating a work of art. For example, by using Christian subjects in paintings executed during World War II, not only did Rattner use the subject as a uniting force, but the subject also allowed the artist to express his motif, which was the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust and the bestiality of human nature. In 1944 he stated, "The subject can be one thing—yet in the painting itself the complete opposite would be expressed. A religious idea may appear to be the subject for ex[ample] yet the motif would be the human forces expressed. A painting of the head of Christ could very well be the interpretation of the

²⁰ Letter to Jennie and Lou Allen (April 14, 1955). AAA, Reel 1212, frames 1056-57.

²¹ Written by the artist on October 16, 1947. AAA, Reel D203, frame 504.

ignobility of man.”²² In a radio broadcast interview in 1943, Rattner had discussed his use of Christ as a symbol in his paintings:

When I paint a picture of a crucifixion, for example, I am not interested in an actuality of a documentary historical event, primarily. I may be concerned with the implications of the conflict within man between good and evil, of the grandeur of man’s aspirations as opposed to his miserable self-indulgence. . . . Incorporating them into the painting of a Crucifixion, it becomes the world with which every man is familiar and feels—and allows him to project himself into the concept of the Crucifixion—the idea of it. He and I can then become one in sympathy with each other, and can share each others [sic] understanding. He can feel with me the grotesque brutalities, ever ready to dominate our more tender and finer natures.²³

Greatly affected by the end of the war and the United States’s atomic blast over Hiroshima on August 5, 1945, Rattner saw the New Testament’s prediction of the apocalypse coming to fruition. As *Revelations* had predicted, humanity would inevitably cause its own destruction. He later lamented, “The nightmare of Hiroshima-Nagasaki got me started—but the war was over—no, the war was not over—no, the war is not over. Maybe it’s the way of civilization to have the air filled with the torment, anxieties, fears, doubts . . . the inevitable violence, collision, war, the sinister end.”²⁴ Rattner had foreseen the apocalyptic ending to the war, yet he had always viewed apocalyptic destruction as an opportunity for a new beginning. However, after the immense destruction of the bombing of Hiroshima, the artist was not entirely optimistic. Pondering the future—with its

²² AAA, Reel D204, frame 748.

²³ Radio interview with Samuel Kootz (May 2, 1943). AAA, Reel D205A, frames 1267-69.

²⁴ Quoted in Frank Getlein, *Abraham Rattner* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1960): 7-8.

new atomic weapons—Rattner asked, “But what about the future—what about man. Will he continue his inhuman tendencies and end by destroying civilization and man—or will this help lead him to Higher levels of decency and force him to establish a lasting peace?”²⁵ Throughout his lifetime the artist remained skeptical as to whether peace could ever be achieved.

Although Rattner returned to more placid imagery after the war, such as the domestic interior depicted in *Woman Cutting Bread* (1946) (Fig. 56), the artist continued to follow news accounts, which revealed further details about the Holocaust. He occasionally returned to images of suffering and destruction as new information surfaced, as in *Conflagration* (1947-48) (Fig. 57), which depicts a town erupting in flames with spectators cheering on the blaze. Years later, as more information on the Holocaust was released, Rattner continued to research what he termed Hitler’s “crime against humanity.”²⁶ In the 1960s, the artist gathered clippings pertaining to recent findings at concentration camps in Germany and Poland, including a story about the discovery of “scrolls” at Auschwitz listing daily statistics of the numbers of Jews gassed in October 1944 and an article about the discovery of a Hebrew diary in which was written, “Keep searching. You will find many things among our ashes.”²⁷ Rattner noted in his journal that the statistics recorded on the scrolls revealed that 8,000-10,000 Jews were gassed and cremated at Auschwitz every twenty-four hours in

²⁵ Journal entry (August 6, 1945). AAA, Reel D204, frame 842.

²⁶ AAA, Reel D205A, frame 326.

²⁷ Ibid. Clippings pasted in 1963 notebook. Rattner states that the clippings were from “An Auschwitz Story” by Neal Ascherson in *The Observer*, April 7, 1963.

October 1944, which was not even the most rampant extermination of Jews undertaken by the Nazis. So affected by these and other accounts of extreme inhumanity, Rattner never abandoned the theme of Jewish suffering in his work.

CHAPTER V

In Memory of Bettina

After the end of World War II, Rattner typically depicted more placid imagery, such as still lifes and domestic interiors, reminiscent of his years in France. In contrast to the tormented images of Christ he painted during the war years, Rattner's post-war imagery focused more on the feeling of tranquility that resulted from the war ending. For example, the painting *Woman Cutting Bread* (1946) is similar to his genre scenes of the 1930s, yet composed with the geometric, structural framework characteristic of his style of the 1940s. However, while not imbued with the dramatic suffering of the artist's earlier Christ compositions, *Woman Cutting Bread* remains melancholy and lacks the lighthearted air of similar Parisian subjects. Although the war had ended, the devastation of the war years instilled in the artist a prolonged despondency that culminated in 1947 with the unexpected death of Rattner's wife.

In April 1947 Bettina died suddenly of a kidney infection. For years she had supported Abraham's artistic endeavors, and the two had been inseparable since the early 1920s. Over the course of their marriage, Bettina—whom Rattner often referred to as BiBi or Betty in his letters and journals—offered him continual encouragement and was the devoted companion who lifted her husband's spirits during financial difficulties, frustrations with his artistic career, periods of depression, and the misery of war.

Following Bettina's death, Rattner was overwhelmed with grief and unable to paint. Numerous letters to close friends and family members and journal entries document his sorrow over her premature death. He missed

Bettina's presence in his studio, as she had often sat in a chair behind his easel, watching him paint and sharing insights about his work. After months of sorrow and lack of progress, Rattner returned to his easel in the summer of 1947, realizing that Bettina would wish for him to continue with his work; after all, she had championed his career for over two decades. In a letter to Bettina's brother, Rattner wrote,

But the realization that now there remained but that one objective and purpose for me . . . to fulfill her (Bettina's) plan and dream— . . . our mutual aspiration, and what we considered—and she did especially to be a divine aspiration, to produce the work she had hoped for . . . that achievement—which she felt to be sacred inevitable sum-total of all our combined love and sacrifices, and strivings—together—the flowering of all our long years of effort . . . and which she always took it upon herself with so deep a devotion and really religious singleness of direction and purpose . . . this was her great God's work . . . I was merely a tool an instrument thru [sic] which her spirit and God's became manifested this beautiful objective of hers—and mine—ours . . . but she wanted it to be a Great Work—a most high achievement—something transcendent [sic]—the masterpiece—THAT was her objective—her SOUL purpose. When that thought penetrated my obscured mind—I became clear—then I knew that THAT was indeed my one duty. . . . THAT was what now I must do. . . . if God left me on Earth to remain here without Betty (except in spirit) then He had that one purpose. . . . I therefore felt that urge driving me to obey promptly . . . and this became my one dominating and consoling idea . . . the reason now for continuing on this earth at all. . . . I had to return immediately to my N.Y. studio.¹

Returning to his studio, Rattner began to paint work reminiscent of his Christ compositions of the early 1940s. These solemn images both commemorate Bettina's life and mourn her death. Many of Rattner's paintings from this period of the late 1940s and 1950 bear the artist's inscription "To

¹ Letter to Allan Bedwell (August 22, 1947). AAA, Reel D204, frames 1076-1080. Rattner had been visiting family in California, which explains the reference to returning to his New York studio.

Bettina,” as a means of dedicating these works to her memory. Rattner wrote about these works in a 1947 letter to Bettina’s sister, “They will each be a lasting memory to her—and a constant reminder of my love and reverence for her—even long after I am gone.”²

Figures Waiting (Fig. 58) (1947) is the most poignant and well-executed of these compositions. The inscription “to Bettina” is clearly visible on the far left side of the canvas, just above the wooden table. An interior scene depicting a group of figures seated at a table, *Figures Waiting* focuses on a woman dressed in blue positioned in the center of the composition. With sorrowful eyes, she suggests Christ’s mother. Traditionally depicted in blue drapery, the Virgin Mary represented the artist’s own anguish after Bettina’s death. As in many Old Master depictions of the Virgin Mary, such as Rogier van der Weyden’s renowned *Escorial Deposition* (circa 1435), the woman’s head is shrouded in white. Like the Virgin Mary, who waited in anguish after Christ’s death, the artist was left waiting after Bettina’s death for some sort of comfort from the devastation he was experiencing. Shortly after Bettina’s death, Rattner wrote. “. . . I keep waiting for God’s presence [perhaps a reference to the title *Figures Waiting*—to keep me from the darkness, and the tossing, and the needs—for even to be able to talk out the deep intimate personal thoughts and feelings seems now denied me. . . .”³ Although melancholy in mood, *Figures Waiting* does suggest the hope

² AAA, Reel D203, frame 543.

³ Letter to Thalia Malcom (November 11, 1947). AAA, Reel D203, frames 532-33.

of life after death, symbolized by the illuminated candle upheld by the standing figure on the left.

In Bettina's memory, the artist painted at least two pietàs in 1948 and 1949 (Figs. 59, 60) to express his overwhelming grief. While the later composition verges on abstraction, Rattner's style of the 1950s onward, the 1948 composition is similar to *Martyr* and *Lamentation* in its rendering of profound anguish by focusing on a sizable figure in the foreground.

Rattner could not imagine life without Bettina. Appreciating the supportive role she played in his life, Rattner wrote to a friend, "The only real satisfaction I have . . . is that in these latter years she saw some proof [his artistic success in the 1940s] that her Faith was not in vain—and that she shared the victories she knew would come. She was the only one who maintained that belief in me and gave me the moral support to carry on . . . while the rest of the world treated me like a Pariah."⁴ Rattner found some relief in the fact that Bettina had witnessed a growing appreciation and recognition of her husband's work in the 1940s. She had stood by him, and he felt guilty because she had sacrificed so much financially in order for him to continue his career as an artist. (Apparently, Abraham and Bettina had agreed not to have children, as they were not stable financially.) In 1945 he had told Jennie that Bettina had been "a wonderful Rock of Gibraltar—and prophet," in support of his artistic endeavors.⁵

⁴ Letter to Jeanette Eaton (October 24, 1947). AAA, Reel D203, frame 529.

⁵ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (February 1945). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 361.

While consumed with feelings of sorrow, Rattner struggled to paint, knowing that Bettina would want him to continue. In a letter to Jennie, he outlined his mission: “I have to complete Bettina’s and my combined purpose—I have to do God’s will—paint the pictures he and she want me to do.”⁶ To honor her with his work was the only way that Rattner could consider going on with life and with his career.

His January 1948 exhibition at Rosenberg’s gallery was dedicated to Bettina and included many new works bearing her name as an inscription. The exhibition received high praise, and a 1948 poll in *Look* magazine voted Rattner as one of the most important painters working in New York at that time. Featured in this exhibition, *Figures Waiting* received special recognition. In summer of 1947 Rattner began work on this composition, the first major painting he created after his wife’s death. While executing the painting, Rattner wrote in August an intense entry in his journal about his re-emerging creativity and his belief in Bettina’s presence in the studio:

Later got going at painting on “Men Waiting” [later titled *Figures Waiting*]⁷—and a strange thing came over me as I worked—as tho [sic] I were in a trance and Betty was right there with me and I kept working right up until dark without realizing it. Then suddenly it came upon me that I had worked and I was exhausted but so sure that God and Bettina had been right there in me that I burst out into a hysteria of crying and praying and got on my knees in gratitude to God and Bettina.⁷

⁶ Letter to Jennie Rattner Allen (August 12, 1947). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 428.

⁷ AAA, Reel D204, frames 1051-52.

After seeing the exhibition at Rosenberg's, Rattner's friend Ramon Guthrie praised *Figures Waiting*, writing "I did however see 'People Waiting' [sic] for the first time. I won't try to fumble for words to say what it means to me, but to know that there is a man in our own age who can have such vision and understanding is a wonderful thing. It is a mighty prayer of faith and hope and love and grief, at once person and universal—a Pieta an Annunciation and a Pilgrim to Emäus all in one."⁸ Rattner quickly responded, "I am so glad you liked that work. Yes it came from the black depths. Life isn't the same—all that's [sic] left is the work. May God give me the strength too to carry it to some fulfillment."⁹

In 1947 and 1948, Rattner painted with increasing intensity and attended classes and daily religious services of various faiths and denominations, including metaphysics classes, the Christian Science Reading Room, and various synagogues, to cope with his grief. The artist maintained that "Always it was for God and for my love of Bettina that I worked," and that his wife's memory was the driving force behind this outburst of creative energy.¹⁰ Finding solace in his work, Rattner wrote to fellow artist Carl Holty (1900-1973) in July 1947, "... a new kind of strength seems creeping thru [sic] and over me—and Bettina is

⁸ Letter from Ramon and Marguerite Guthrie (September 2, 1948). AAA, Reel D205A, frame 144.

⁹ Letter to Ramon and Marguerite Guthrie (September 13, 1948). AAA, Reel D205A, frame 146.

¹⁰ Letter (November 24, 1947). AAA, Reel D203, frame 553.

directly and deeply within the pit of this new mould.”¹¹ On a mission to honor her life and her dedication to him, Rattner wrote to one of Bettina’s fashion correspondent colleagues, “And so it is my determination now to pray forever to God for his willingness to see this plan achieved—and to consecrate my whole everything to this end as a dedication, and sacred mission now left me to do as a monument to her—to my most beloved and beautiful Bettina.”¹²

After the exhibition at Rosenberg’s, the response to Rattner’s return to Christian imagery in the late 1940s continued to be favorable. When works from this period were shown at the Arts and Crafts Gallery in New Orleans in April 1948, the artist received a letter of high praise from an Episcopalian minister who visited the exhibition. The Reverend exclaimed, “I have just returned from the Arts and Crafts Gallery where I have been capitulated to an ecstatic height of serenity in viewing the paintings of one A. Rattner! . . . May I say that your religious pictures of the Christian emphasis were particularly fascinating to me, and your ‘Three Heads’ (1948) [work unknown] was magnificent.”¹³ This statement reveals that Rattner’s use of Christian imagery was, not surprisingly, well received by Christian visitors. Unfortunately, there is very little information that documents the Jewish community’s response to these compositions. Quite a few of Rattner’s works from this period were purchased by prominent Jews. For example, Edith and Milton Lowenthal acquired several of Rattner’s finest

¹¹ AAA, Reel D204, frame 999.

¹² Letter to Mabel Green (August 22, 1947). AAA, Reel D204, frame 1085.

¹³ AAA, Reel D205A, frame 11.

compositions, including *Transcendence*, *Figures Waiting*, and four other canvases and two drawings. Six of these eight works owned by the Lowenthals in the 1940s incorporate Christian imagery, which suggests, as Messinger point out, “that the universal message intended by the artist was understood by the Lowenthals, who themselves had strong ties to the Jewish community.”¹⁴ Rattner was at his best and most critically well-received when he turned to Christian imagery, as its inherent personal symbolism allowed the artist to achieve highly expressive, emotional compositions that had broad appeal.

Two crucifixions from this period, a drawing and a painting, are remarkably emotional works that bear inscriptions to Rattner’s late wife. The drawing (Fig. 61), very similar to the earlier drawing *Study for a Crucifixion* (1942) (Fig. 18), reveals a contorted Christ figure depicted simply, yet dramatically, with head dropping forward. Although the cross is not depicted, it is suggested by the shape of the crucified body rendered with scribbled, gestural black lines. The painting *Study for a Crucifixion* (Fig. 62) depicts several crucified victims and bears two inscriptions: on the front, “In memory Bettina,” and on the reverse, “In memory of my beloved Bettina.”¹⁵ In addition, Rattner once again turned to Job, as seen in a 1949 painting (Fig. 63), to depict a tormented figure consumed by anguish. This painting also includes an inscription on the face of the canvas. In the lower left, the inscription is visible in mirror image, “In memory of Bettina.”

¹⁴ Messinger, 36.

¹⁵ *Des Moines Art Center: Selected Paintings, Sculptures, and Works on Paper* (Des Moines, Iowa: Des Moines Art Center, 1985): 179.

One of his most complex paintings dedicated to Bettina is *Hands Upreaching* (1947) (Fig. 64). One of two versions of this theme, *Hands Upreaching* was purchased by the University of Nebraska, in Bettina's home state. The painting illustrates Rattner's exquisite use of color, as well as his expressive translation of religious themes. A large hand, symbolizing the hand of God, descends from the heavenly realm to meet with a group of upreaching hands from the earthly realm. The curly-haired figure in the lower left represents Rattner, who desperately stretches both arms toward God's hand in an effort to escape the earthly realm of suffering. The left side of the canvas is executed in darker colors, while the right side of the canvas is awash with brighter colors and sparkling stars. This suggested division between left and right—the earthly and heavenly realms, respectively—was borrowed from medieval and Renaissance depictions of the Last Judgment theme, in which the damned fall toward hell on the left and the blessed rise to heaven on the right.¹⁶ Reaching down toward the artist, the two angelic figures hovering above him are somewhat ambiguous, yet the more feminine of the two (the lower one) may represent Bettina.

Bettina's death also instigated Rattner's use of masks as symbols representing his inability to disguise his feelings. Masks appear throughout his work of the late 1940s, evident first in the mask-like faces of the figures in paintings such as *Figures Waiting* and then more conspicuous in paintings such as

¹⁶ Jon A. Nelson, "Abraham Rattner, *Hands Upreaching*," *The American Painting Collection of The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery*, eds. Norman A. Geske and Karen O. Janovy. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988): 154. This catalogue makes an unfortunate mistake in both the catalogue entry and in the exhibition checklist: the essayist refers to Rattner's deceased wife as "Bertha" instead of Bettina.

Row of Masks (1949) (Fig. 65), which depicts four costumed figures in garish masks. In a letter to Bettina's sister, Rattner referred to the mask he wore to conceal his sorrow: "I wear a mask quite regularly as I move around among people in person. As soon as I speak the spirit of the mask doesn't seem able to come thru [sic] convincingly. And in writing a letter I just cannot wear the false face—or be false within—'joy', 'abundance'—and the song and dance of the light and gay sparkle of words, seems shallow and not consistent with my spiritual state of being."¹⁷

Although Rattner continued to mourn Bettina's death throughout the late 1940s, the artist married sculptor and printmaker Esther Gentle (1905-1984) in 1949. After his return to Christian imagery in the late 1940s and 1950, Rattner's style became more abstract, turning away from the mature figurative expressionist style of the war years. While his style changed, his dedication to themes of human suffering continued, both on a personal level and on a more universal scope.

¹⁷ Letter to Margaret B. Cairns (November 13, 1947). AAA, Reel D203, frame 535.

CONCLUSION

Putting the Christian Themes of the 1940s in Context

Abraham Rattner's work of the 1940s endures as his most memorable achievement because it was based primarily on emotionally provocative catalysts: the second world war and the death of his first wife. Never again would Rattner achieve comparable critical acclaim, and his success among private collectors in the 1940s was unparalleled during the remainder of his lifetime. Yet after the 1940s, Rattner led a productive career as an artist and educator. He continued to exhibit his work extensively in the United States and abroad, including a retrospective exhibition at the University of Illinois (1952-53) and exhibitions at The Art Institute of Chicago (1955), The Whitney Museum of American Art (1959), and other notable institutions. He was a well respected artist and was asked to jury exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the University of Illinois, and countless other institutions. He held teaching positions at the New School for Social Research in New York City, Michigan State University, Yale University, and the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, and was praised by his pupils as a devoted and insightful instructor.

Rattner continued to turn to Christian imagery throughout his career, such as the painting *Composition in Blue, No. 1* (1962) (Fig. 66), which depicts an almost abstract, highly faceted crucifixion flanked by two figures. However, these later images were not nearly as compelling as those of the 1940s. The artist also began to focus more on themes from the Hebrew Bible, such as the figures of Moses and Job. In addition to his two-dimensional work, Rattner became involved with architectural commissions and executed a stained-glass window

for the Chicago Loop Synagogue, mosaic columns for a synagogue in Cleveland, a mosaic of Saint Francis for a church in Centerville, Ohio, and others.

Issues of humanity always dominated Rattner's work. In the 1960s, he worked on the "Six Million" series (see, for example, *Six Million No. 4*, 1963, Fig. 67) about the six million Jews who died during the Holocaust. Primarily executed in black on a stark white canvas, these abstract works approach the theme of human suffering in a gestural, expressive manner, as opposed to the artist's symbolic, metaphorical language of the 1940s. These drawings demonstrate the artist's life-long preoccupation with anti-Semitism and Hitler's destruction.

In Paris in 1969, Rattner executed another series focusing on issues of victimization and suffering. Titled "The Gallows of Baghdad" (see, for example, *Who Shall Bear the Guilt*, 1969, Fig. 68), this series was inspired by a radio report indicating that the Iraqi authorities had sentenced to death sixteen people, including nine Jews, whom they believed to be spies and saboteurs in the service of Israel. Some reports stated that the people were hanged in the public square amidst crowds of cheering spectators. Rattner began to create with a fury not unlike his reaction to World War II in the early 1940s, executing approximately two large triptychs, one large canvas, and forty drawings on the theme. The artist recalled,

Shortly after our arrival [in Paris], I heard over the radio about the Baghdad executions. I was deeply shocked. What exasperated me was not the hanging per se. After all, history knows many hangings since the book of Esther. It was the rejoicing of the crowds, their fanatic exaltation, this ugly, vicious outburst of inhumanity that inflamed and infuriated me. I went to work at once and . . . I did, in less than two months, 38 paintings [and drawings] on this subject. I feel that in them I have told something

of my deepest experience in life, namely that fanaticism—this opposite of humanism—can make beasts out of man.¹

From Paris Rattner wrote in a letter to Jennie, “When the hangings of Jews in public hit me—I had to strike back—as I always must do.”²

Throughout his career, Rattner remained drawn to social issues, to which he then responded in his art. However, few of his responses to social injustice were as powerful as those of the 1940s. Shortly after the 1969 Iraqi tragedy, Rattner was greatly distressed over the horrible display of anti-Semitism at the 1972 Olympic Games. In a letter to Jennie from Paris, he lamented, “I am writing under the depressed feeling from the Olympic tragedy. No comments needed except my personal wish that I could or were able to do something in the way of pitching in against the terrible display of Anti-Semitism. I hope God will fire my creative capacities.”³

Acknowledging the artist’s Jewish heritage, it may seem peculiar that Rattner’s most powerful body of work is based on Christian themes. Rattner considered himself neither a practicing Jew nor Christian. Nevertheless, letters to friends and relatives reveal that he celebrated both Jewish and Christian holidays. He mentions Christmas in one letter, Passover in another. For Rattner, spirituality did not dictate a strict adherence to one particular denomination, but rather, a set of values that traversed barriers set by organized religion.

¹ Quoted in Mocsanyi, 4.

² Letter to Jennie and Lou Allen (March 14, 1969). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1388.

³ Letter to Jennie and Lou Allen (September 9, 1972). AAA, Reel 1212, frame 1522.

Moreover, the Jewish artist's use of Christ as a victim carried universal impact as a symbol of religious persecution.

However, Rattner remained deeply connected to his Jewish heritage throughout his career. His parents' troubles, and their ancestors' persecutions, were an integral aspect of the artist's identity. When he heard tales of the eradication of Jews under the Third Reich, Rattner saw his own face and those of his family in place of the European Jews'. Their heritage was his heritage; thus, it was both good fortune and his parents' foresight that had allowed him refuge from the Holocaust.

After the 1940s, Rattner followed expressionism into the realm of abstraction and his provocative human figures became more embedded within their surrounding non-representational forms, as in *Composition in Blue, No. 1*. In her 1956 review for an exhibition of Rattner's recent paintings at the Rosenberg Galleries, art critic Barbara Guest praised the artist as a "real professional." However, she criticized his recent abstract work for being somewhat repetitive and not natural for an artist who works so successfully with the human figure.⁴

Typically this later, abstract work by Rattner falls short in comparison with the powerful figurative imagery of his 1940s compositions. Although the artist continued to explore complex subjects, his earlier works from the war years emerged within a more intriguing socio-historical context and today reveal multiple layers of interpretation. Not only are they engaging on an iconographical level, but they are interesting formally, in terms of color and

⁴ Barbara Guest, "New Paintings at Rosenberg Gallery," *Art Digest* 30 (March 1956): 59.

composition, and they are extremely powerful works that express the horrors of war and humanity's suffering. Rattner's radiant, expressive Christ compositions painted during World War II remain the prolific painter's most significant accomplishment and today endure as a unique facet of modern American art history.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. *Kiosk*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 31 1/4 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

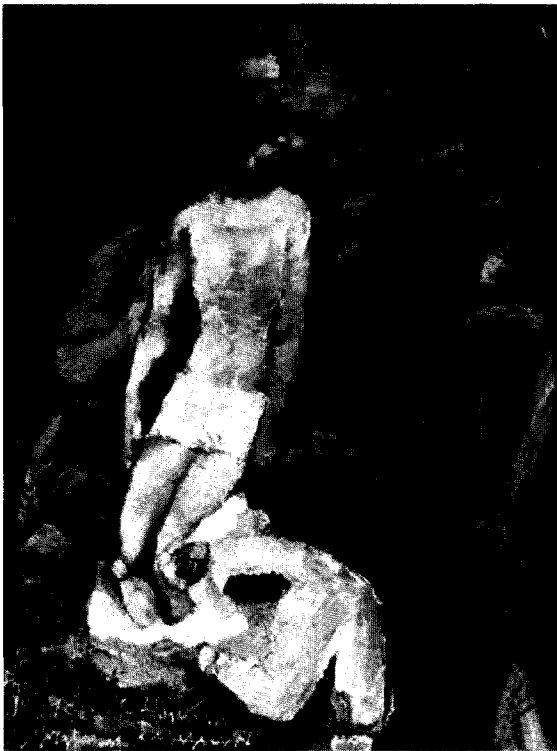


Figure 2. *The Descent*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 15 x 12 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jack A. Hannah, Washington, D.C.

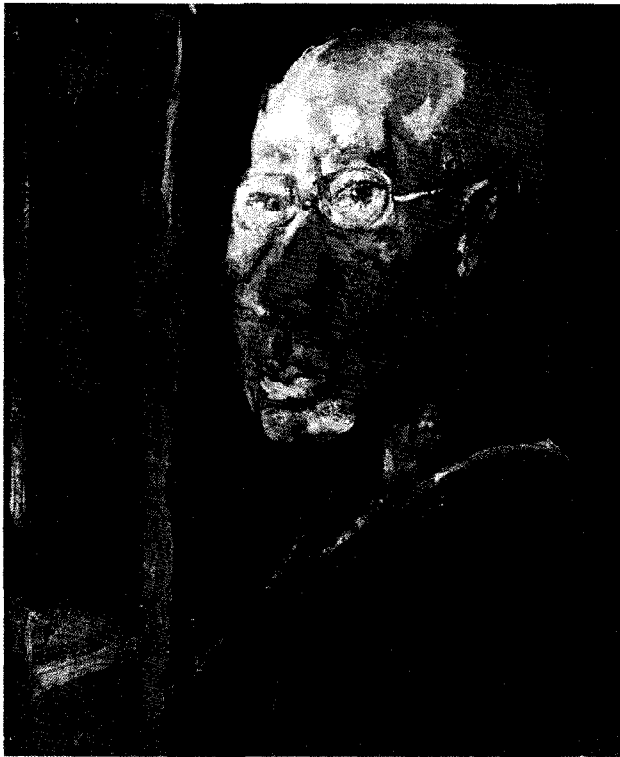


Figure 3. *Portrait Study of Henry Miller*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 4. Photograph of Abraham Rattner (foreground) with painter friends at Giverny, France, 1921.



Figure 3. *Portrait Study of Henry Miller*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 4. Photograph of Abraham Rattner (foreground) with painter friends at Giverny, France, 1921.



Figure 5. *Bettina Bedwell*, 1921–22. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 31 3/4 inches. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.



Figure 6. *Fête Bretonne (Brittany Festival, France)*, No. 41, 1924. Oil on canvas. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.

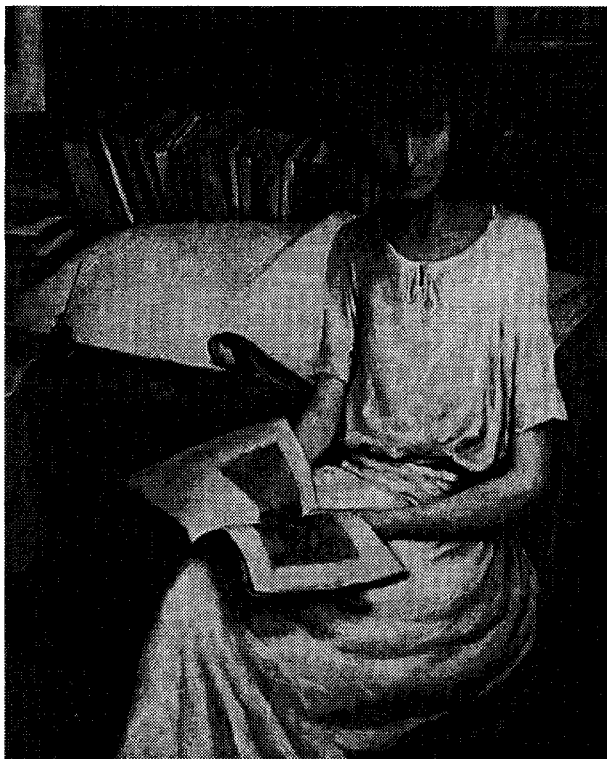


Figure 5. *Bettina Bedwell*, 1921-22. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 31 3/4 inches. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.



Figure 6. *Fête Bretonne (Brittany Festival, France)*, No. 41, 1924. Oil on canvas. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.

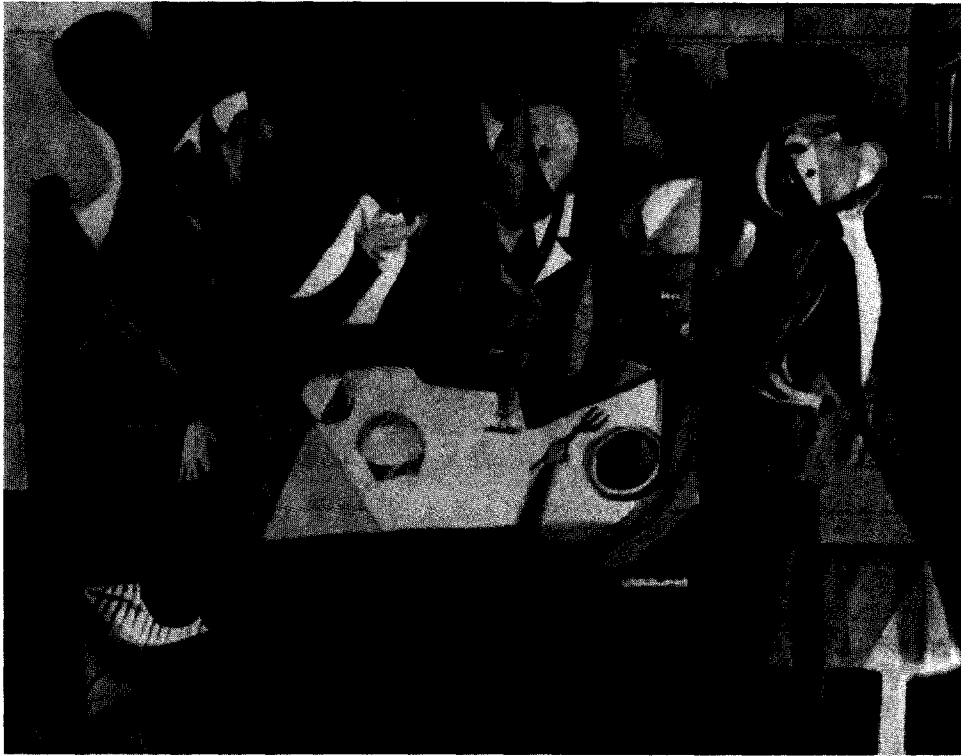


Figure 7. *Pourquoi*, 1924. Tempera on paper, 11 1/4 x 15 1/8 inches. Private collection.



Figure 8. *Bacchanal*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 28 3/4 inches. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.



Figure 7. *Pourquoi*, 1924. Tempera on paper, 11 1/4 x 15 1/8 inches. Private collection.



Figure 8. *Bacchanal*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 28 3/4 inches. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.



Figure 9. *Girl with Hoop*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 39 x 51 inches. Private collection.



Figure 10. *Mother and Child*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 39 3/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 9. *Girl with Hoop*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 39 x 51 inches. Private collection.



Figure 10. *Mother and Child*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 39 3/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

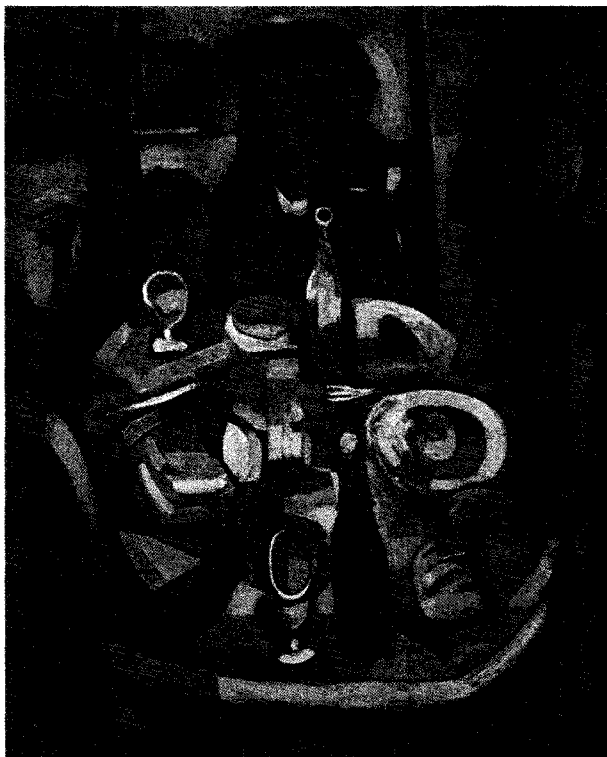


Figure 11. *Workman's Lunch*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 1/2 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 12. Photograph of Abraham Rattner in his studio at 15 rue Cauchois, Paris, date unknown [late 1930s].

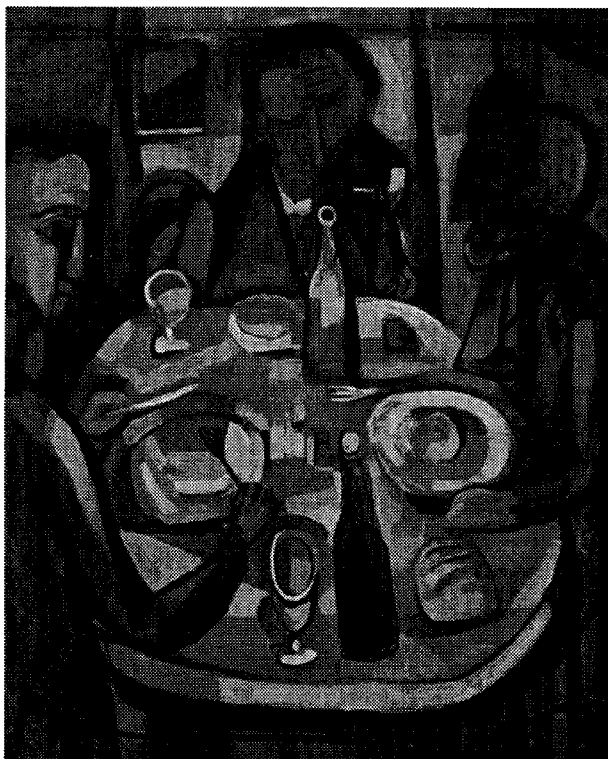


Figure 11. *Workman's Lunch*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 1/2 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 12. Photograph of Abraham Rattner in his studio at 15 rue Cauchois, Paris, date unknown [late 1930s].



Figure 13. *Fire*, 1937. Color lithograph.



Figure 14. *Fantasia*, ca. 1938–39. Repainted. (Photograph, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

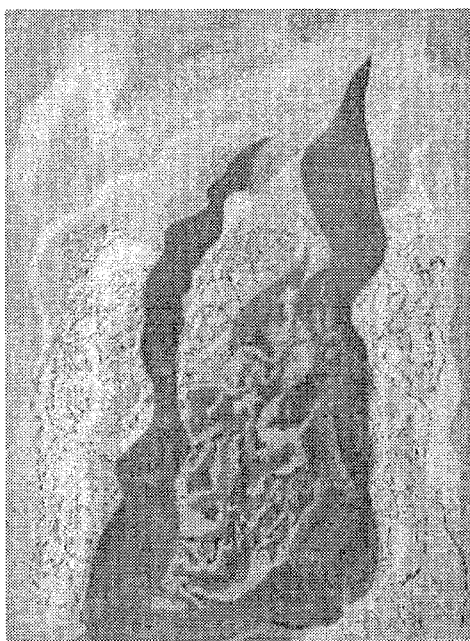


Figure 13. *Fire*, 1937. Color lithograph.



Figure 14. *Fantasia*, ca. 1938–39. Repainted. (Photograph, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)



Figure 15. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Oil on canvas. Approx. 102 x 128 inches. Louvre, Paris.



Figure 16. *April Showers*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York.



Figure 15. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Oil on canvas. Approx. 102 x 128 inches. Louvre, Paris.



Figure 16. *April Showers*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York.



Figure 19. *Crucifixion*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 17 x 14 inches. Collection Alfredo Valente, Sea Cliff, New York.

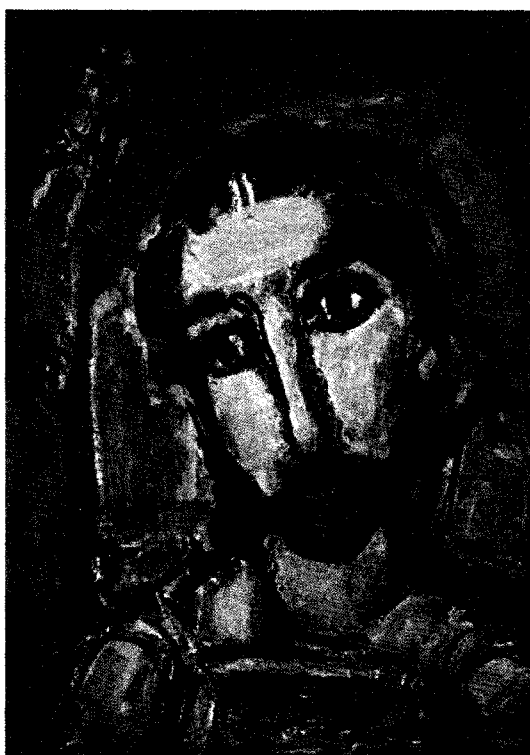


Figure 20. Georges Rouault, *The Head of Christ*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 104.8 x 74.9 centimeters. The Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 19. *Crucifixion*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 17 x 14 inches. Collection Alfredo Valente, Sea Cliff, New York.

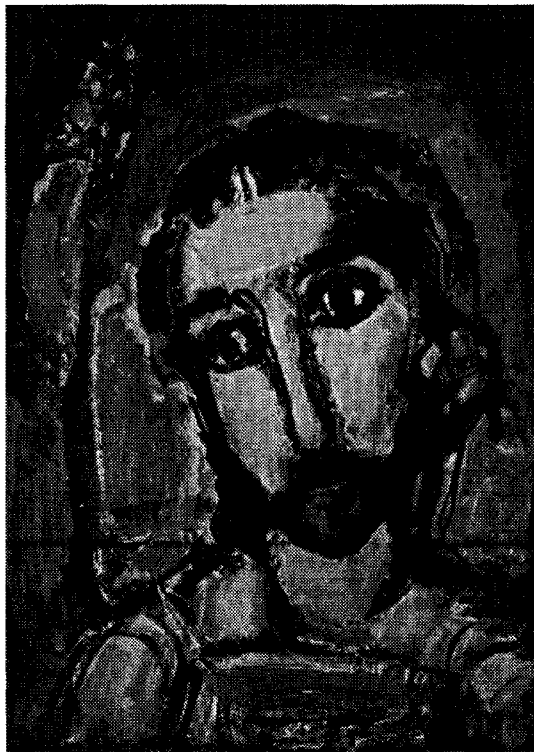


Figure 20. Georges Rouault, *The Head of Christ*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 104.8 x 74.9 centimeters. The Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 10. *Mother and Child*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 39 3/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 21. *Darkness Fell All Over the Land*, 1941-42. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. N. Galantiere Collection, New York.



Figure 10. *Mother and Child*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 39 3/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 21. *Darkness Fell All Over the Land*, 1941-42. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. N. Galantiere Collection, New York.



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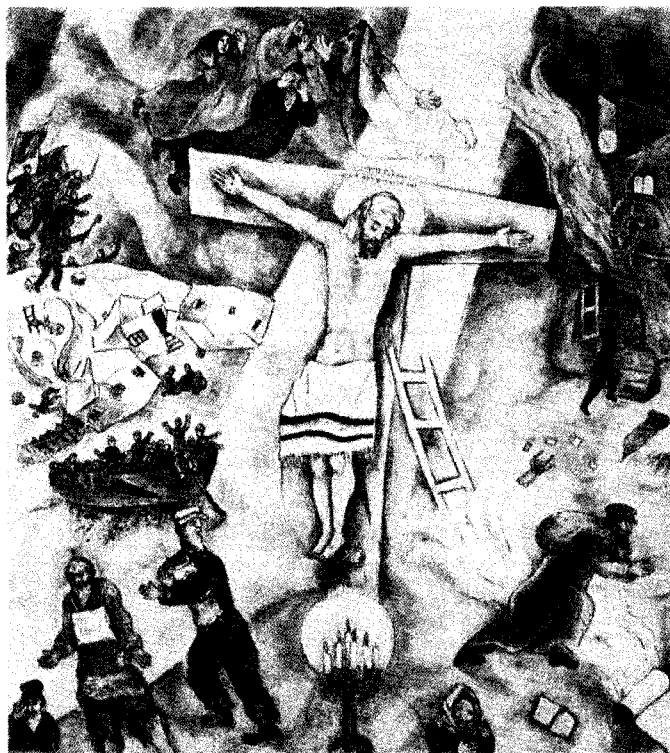


Figure 22. Marc Chagall, *White Crucifixion*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 55 x 45 1/4 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 21. *Darkness Fell All Over the Land*, 1941–42. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. N. Galantiere Collection, New York.

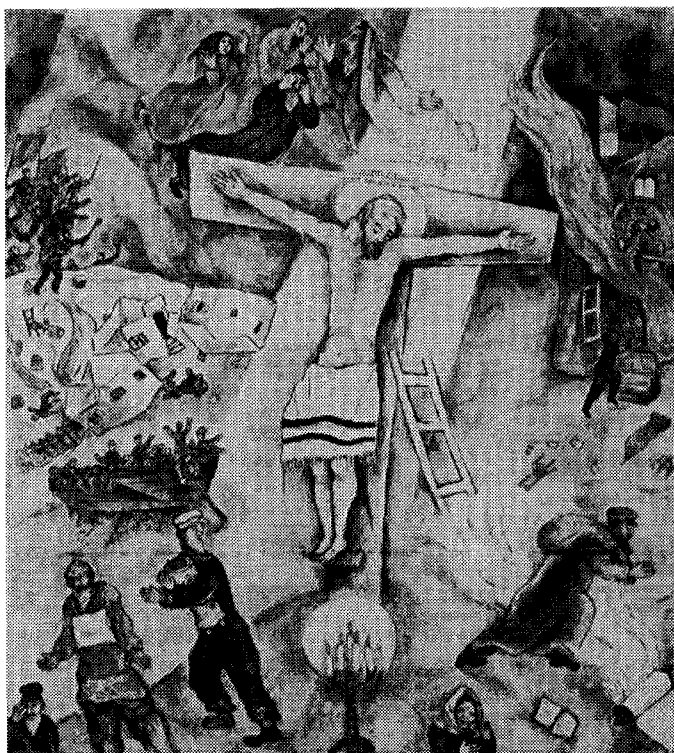


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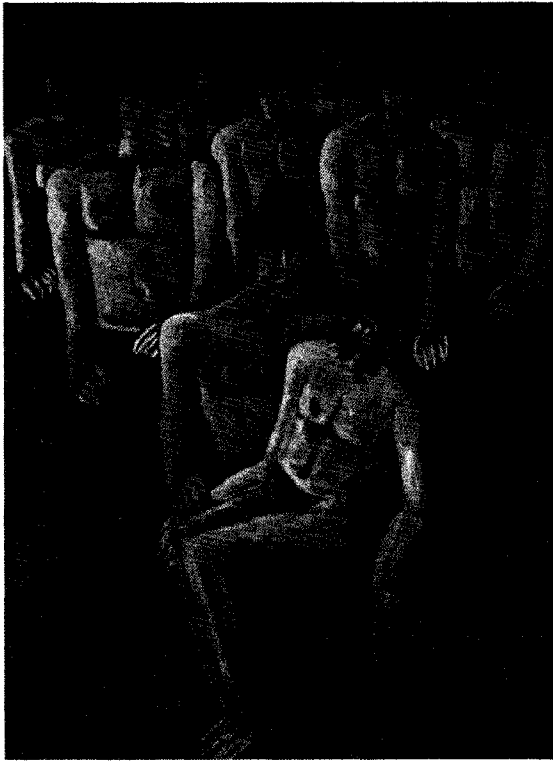


Figure 23. Marsden Hartley, *Christ Held by Half-Naked Men*, 1940-41. Oil on fiberboard, 40 1/8 x 30 inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.



Figure 24. Walter Quirt (American, 1902–1968), *The Crucified*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 50 inches. Collection Durlacher Brothers.

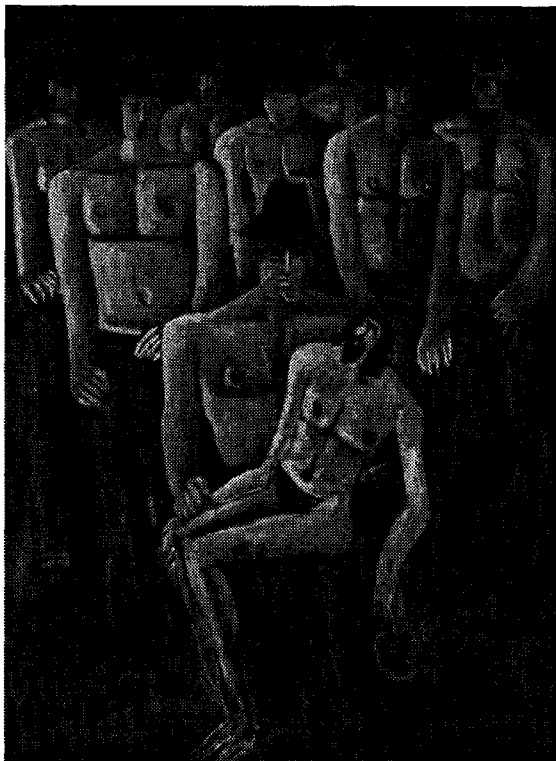


Figure 23. Marsden Hartley, *Christ Held by Half-Naked Men*, 1940-41. Oil on fiberboard, 40 1/8 x 30 inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.



Figure 24. Walter Quirt (American, 1902–1968), *The Crucified*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 50 inches. Collection Durlacher Brothers.



Figure 25. Rico Lebrun, *Woman of the Crucifixion*, 1948–50. Duco on board, 96 x 48 inches. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

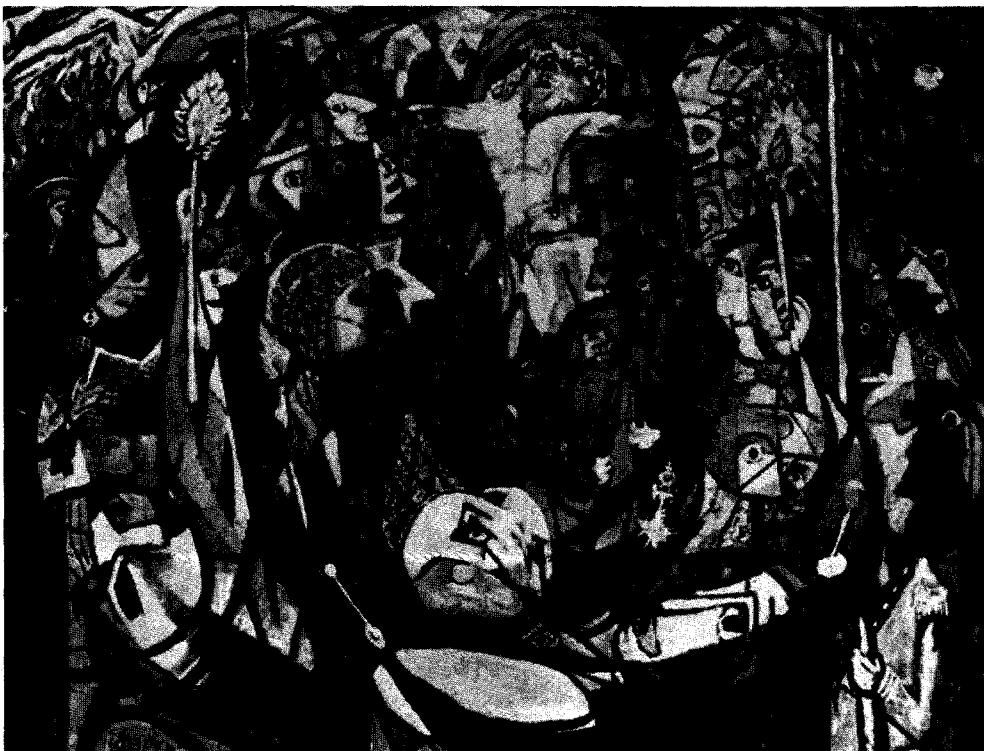


Figure 26. *A Place Called Golgotha*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 37 1/2 x 51 inches. Collection of Modern Religious Art, Vatican Museum, Vatican City.



Figure 25. Rico Lebrun, *Woman of the Crucifixion*, 1948–50. Duco on board, 96 x 48 inches. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

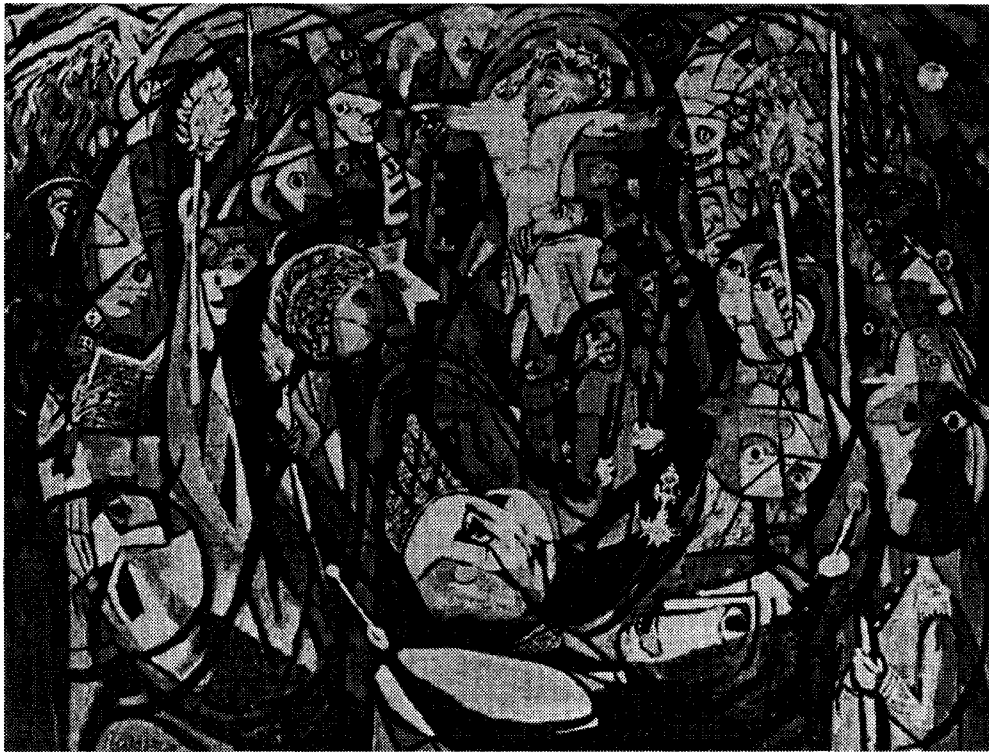


Figure 26. *A Place Called Golgotha*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 37 1/2 x 51 inches. Collection of Modern Religious Art, Vatican Museum, Vatican City.



Figure 27. *The Judges*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 39 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 28. *Among Those Who Stood There*, 1944. Etching on paper, 6 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 27. *The Judges*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 39 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 28. *Among Those Who Stood There*, 1944. Etching on paper, 6 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

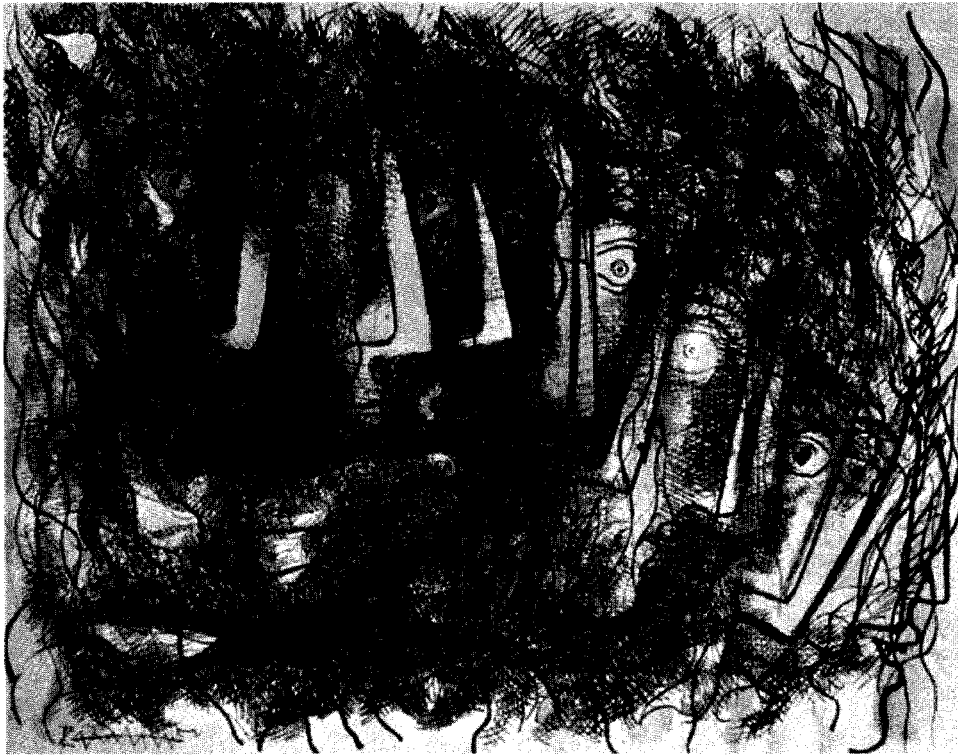


Figure 29. *Frightened Faces*, 1943. Pen and India ink on paper, 17 x 22 inches. Private Collection.



Figure 30. *Place of Darkness*, 1941–43. Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 58 1/2 inches. Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington.

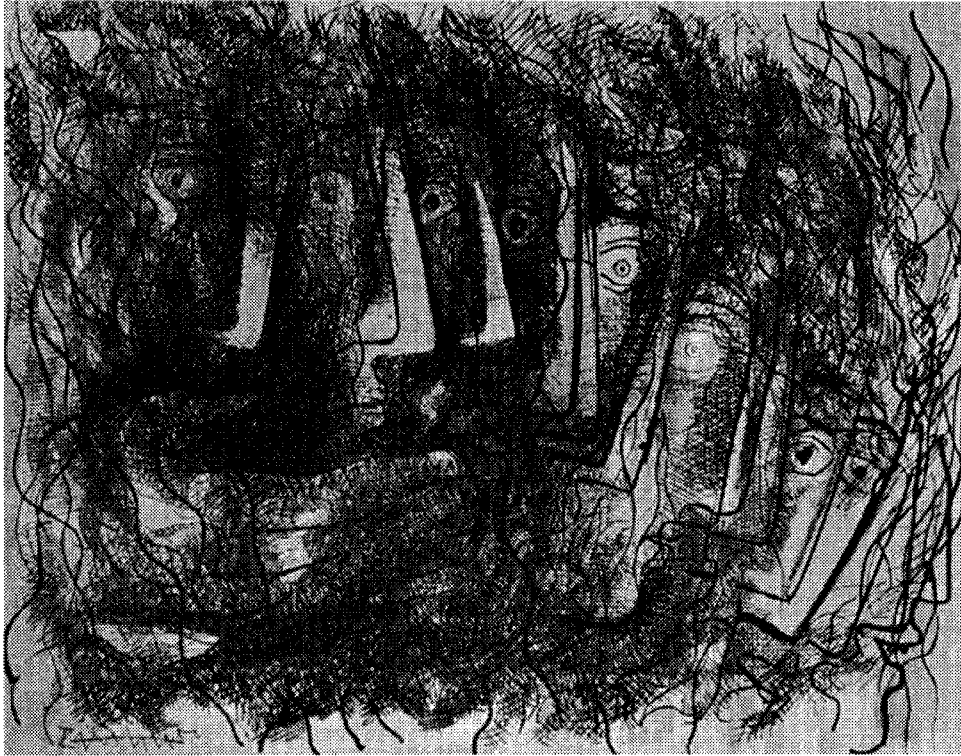


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Figure 30. *Place of Darkness*, 1941-43. Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 58 1/2 inches. Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington.



Figure 31. *Apocalypson*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 32 inches. Courtesy the Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York.



Figure 32. *Descent from the Cross*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 31. *Apocalypson*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 32 inches. Courtesy the Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York.



Figure 32. *Descent from the Cross*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 33. *The Survivors*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 34. *Air Raid*, 1942-43. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 28 3/4 inches. Private collection.



Figure 35. *The Sun*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 31 7/8 inches. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 36. *Crucifixion*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 31 x 25 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 37. *Christ and Two Soldiers*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 1/2 inches. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, New York.

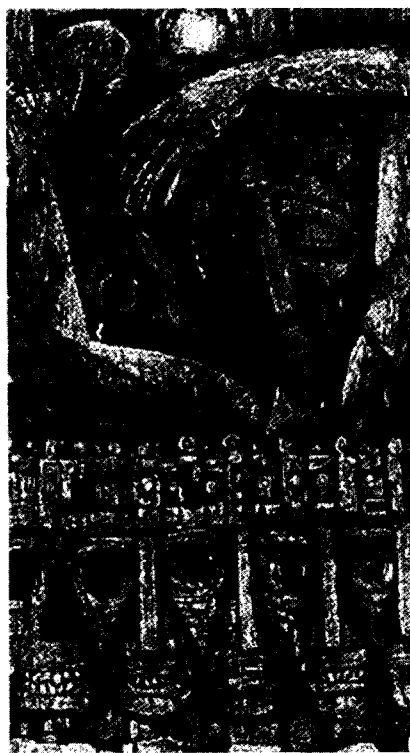


Figure 38. *The Jeweled Christ*, 1943. Oil on synthetic board, 28 x 15 7/8 inches. Collection of the Estate of Edith A. Lowenthal.



Figure 39. *Design for the Memory*, 1942-43. Oil on canvas, 35 x 18 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 40. *Procession*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 25 x 36 inches. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, New York.

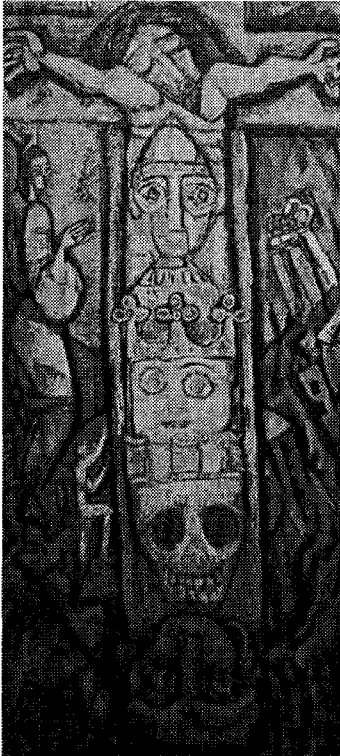


Figure 39. *Design for the Memory*, 1942-43. Oil on canvas, 35 x 18 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.

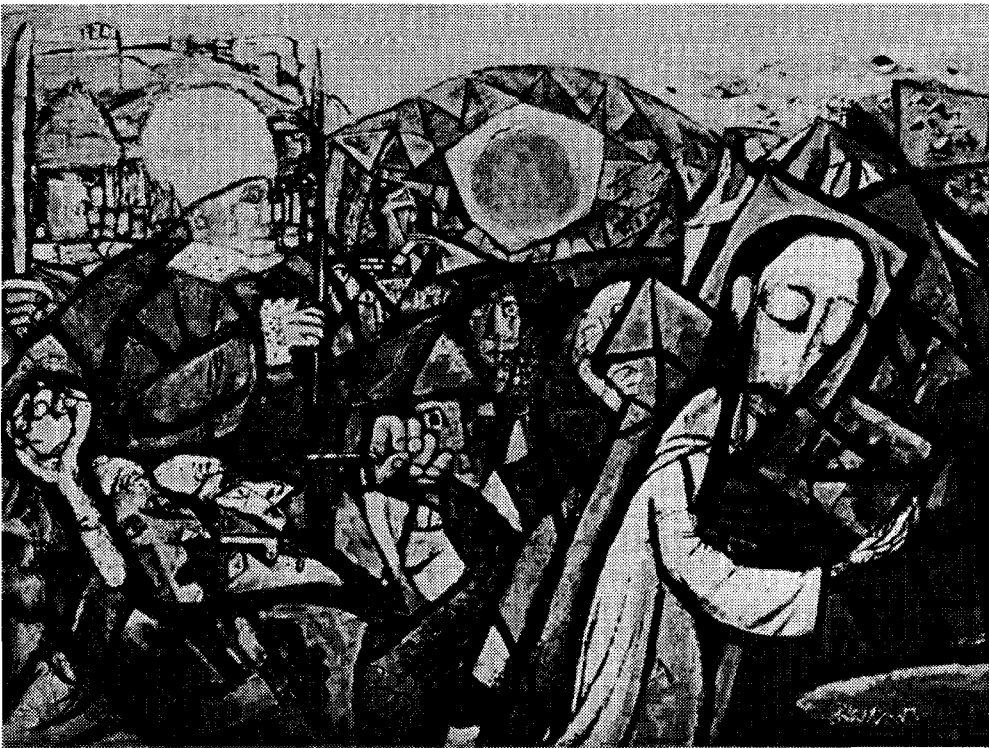


Figure 40. *Procession*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 25 x 36 inches. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, New York.



Figure 41. *Transcendence*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 39 3/16 inches. The Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Figure 42. *Hallucination*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 37 1/2 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 41. *Transcendence*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 39 3/16 inches. The Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Figure 42. *Hallucination*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 37 1/2 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 43. *Composition—Five Figures*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 3/8 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.

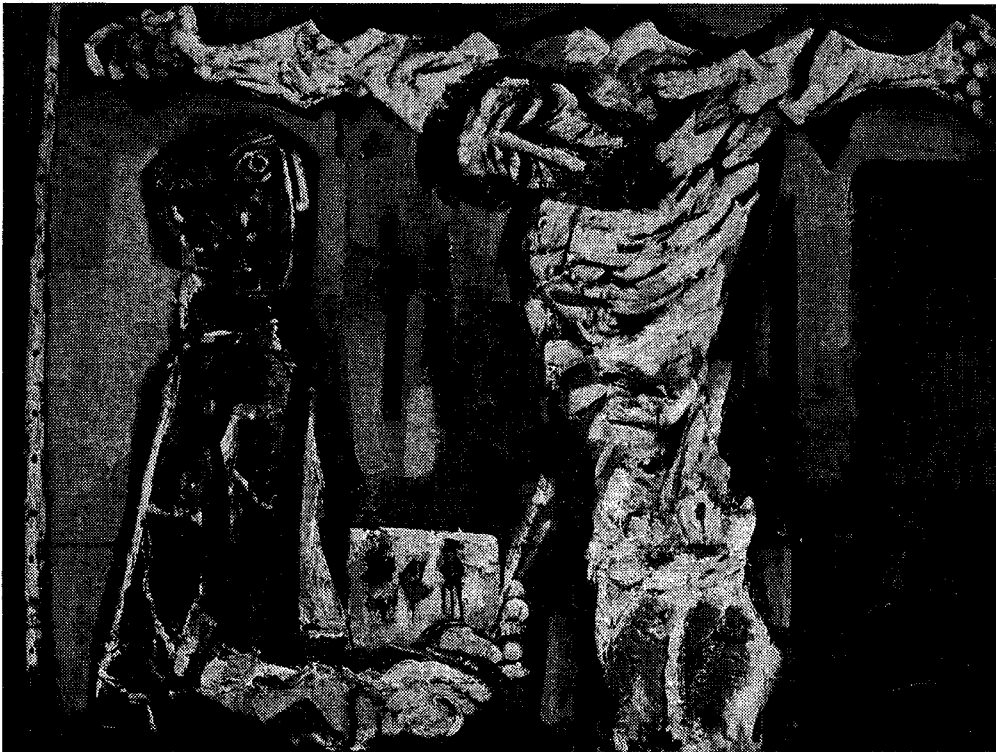


Figure 44. *Deux Personnages*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 89 x 116 inches. Location unknown.



Figure 43. *Composition—Five Figures*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 3/8 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 44. *Deux Personnages*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 89 x 116 inches. Location unknown.

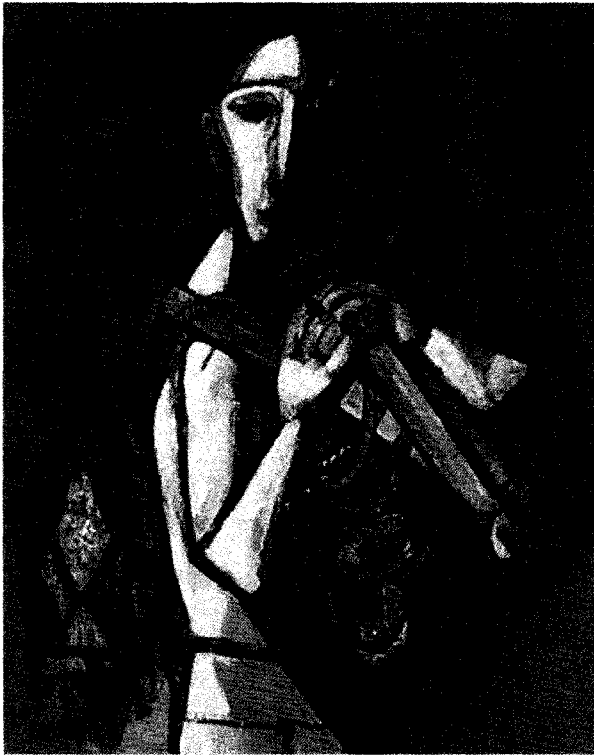


Figure 45. *Fisherman*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 5/8 inches. Collection of the Estate of Edith A. Lowenthal, on extended loan to the Brooklyn Museum.



Figure 46. *Clowns and Kings*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 51 1/4 x 38 1/4 inches. The Tampa Museum of Art, Florida.



Figure 45. *Fisherman*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 5/8 inches. Collection of the Estate of Edith A. Lowenthal, on extended loan to the Brooklyn Museum.



Figure 46. *Clowns and Kings*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 51 1/4 x 38 1/4 inches. The Tampa Museum of Art, Florida.



Figure 47. *The Clown No. 4*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 1/2 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Richard P. Tatar, Gloversville, New York.



Figure 48. *The Emperor*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 2/4 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Figure 47. *The Clown No. 4*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 1/2 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Richard P. Tatar, Gloversville, New York.



Figure 48. *The Emperor*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 2/4 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Figure 49. *City Still Life*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 28 3/4 inches. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.



Figure 50. *People on Sixth Avenue*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 49. *City Still Life*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 28 3/4 inches. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.



Figure 50. *People on Sixth Avenue*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 inches. Collection Earle Ludgin, Chicago.



Figure 51. *Martyr*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 32 x 23 3/4 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 52. *Lamentation*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 29 x 21 1/4 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 51. *Martyr*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 32 x 23 3/4 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 52. *Lamentation*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 29 x 21 1/4 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 53. *Job*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 77 x 51 inches. Private collection.



Figure 54. *Song of Liberation*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 31 3/4 x 39 1/2 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 53. *Job*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 77 x 51 inches. Private collection.



Figure 54. *Song of Liberation*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 31 3/4 x 39 1/2 inches. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries Inc., New York.



Figure 55. *Pietà*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. Collection Rosalie Berkowitz, New York.



Figure 56. *Woman Cutting Bread*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 39 x 32 1/2 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 55. *Pietà*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 1/2 inches. Collection Rosalie Berkowitz, New York.



Figure 56. *Woman Cutting Bread*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 39 x 32 1/2 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 57. *Conflagration*, ca. 1947-48. Oil on canvas. Collection of John J. Carney, New York.



Figure 58. *Figures Waiting*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 59 inches. Collection of Madison Art Center, Wisconsin.



Figure 57. *Conflagration*, ca. 1947-48. Oil on canvas. Collection of John J. Carney, New York.



Figure 58. *Figures Waiting*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 59 inches. Collection of Madison Art Center, Wisconsin.



Figure 59. *Pietà*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 15 x 18 inches. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, New York City.



Figure 60. *Pietà*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 38 1/4 inches. Private collection.



Figure 61. *Crucifixion*, late 1940s. Pen and ink on paper. Dimensions and location unknown, (Reproduced AAA, Reel D205, frame 308).



Figure 62. *Study for Crucifixion*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 24 inches. Des Moines Art Center, Iowa.

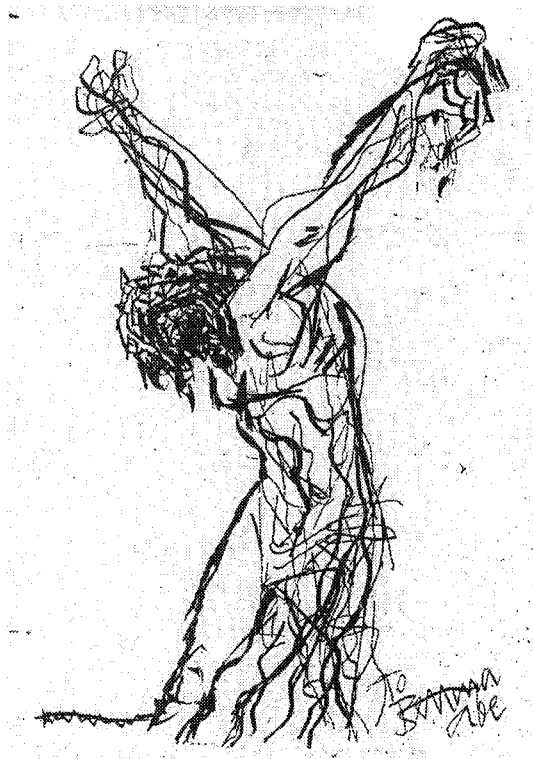


Figure 61. *Crucifixion*, late 1940s. Pen and ink on paper. Dimensions and location unknown, (Reproduced AAA, Reel D205, frame 308).



Figure 62. *Study for Crucifixion*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 24 inches. Des Moines Art Center, Iowa.



Figure 63. *Job*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 51 1/2 inches. Washington University Art Gallery, St. Louis.



Figure 64. *Hands Upreaching*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 38 3/16 x 51 3/16 inches. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



Figure 63. *Job*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 51 1/2 inches. Washington University Art Gallery, St. Louis.



Figure 64. *Hands Upreaching*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 38 3/16 x 51 3/16 inches. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



Figure 65. *Row of Masks*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 32 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Cohen, New York City.

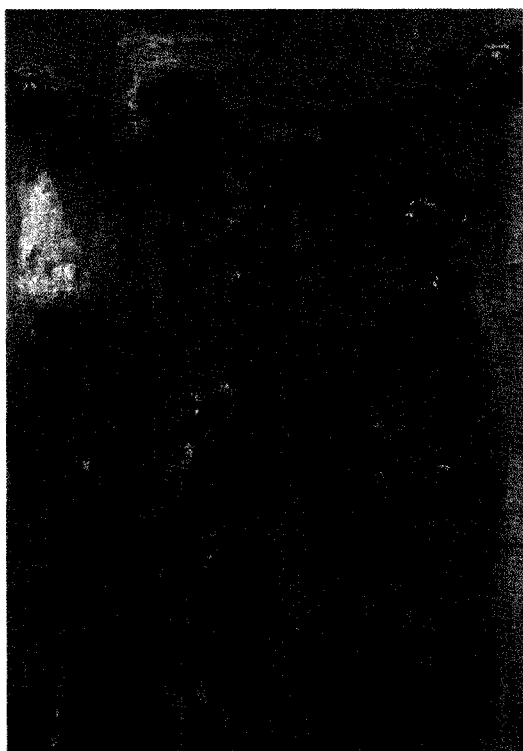


Figure 66. *Composition in Blue No. 1*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 76 3/4 x 51 inches. The Commerce Trust Company Collection of American Art, Kansas City, Missouri.



Figure 65. *Row of Masks*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 32 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Cohen, New York City.

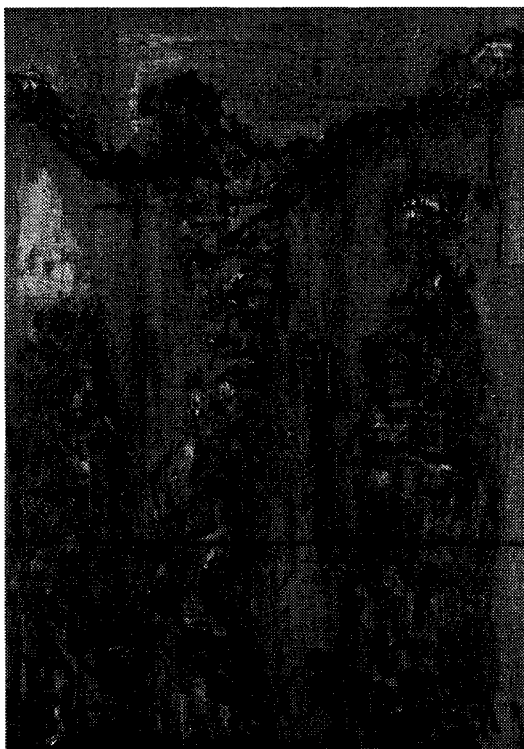


Figure 66. *Composition in Blue No. 1*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 76 3/4 x 51 inches. The Commerce Trust Company Collection of American Art, Kansas City, Missouri.



Figure 67. *Six Million No. 4*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 51 1/4 inches. The Leepa-Rattner Museum, St. Petersburg Junior College, Florida.



Figure 68. *Who Shall Bear the Guilt (Baghdad Series)*, 1969. Gouache, 41 x 29 1/2 inches. Private collection.