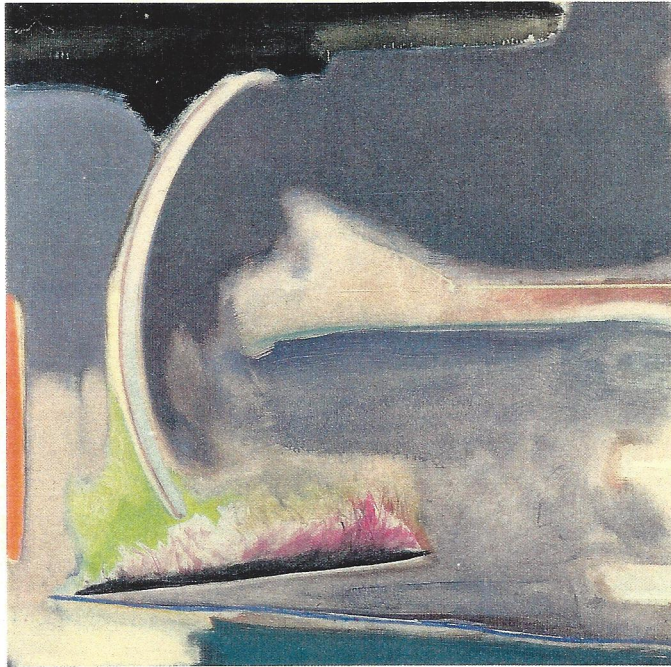


stephen greene



a decade of painting

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**edited by Robert Doty
with text by Dore Ashton**

akron art institute

exhibition schedule

Akron Art Institute, Ohio

May 7—June 18, 1978

The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio

July 1—August 15, 1978

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

September 17—October 15, 1978

The Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire

October 28—November 26, 1978

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Stephen Greene's work has evolved slowly during his career. When change occurred, it was profound. A very independent and solitary person where his work is concerned, Greene has always controlled and drawn upon a growing reservoir of emotions and thoughts. "I have my own voice," he wrote in 1961, and that assertion has always guided his life and his art. The integration of a deeply felt belief in life forces, with a consummate skill as a draughtsman and colorist, has resulted in a body of work which is significant both for an inherent sense of beauty and passion, as well as a consistent regard for the authority in the act of creating. Greene knows the craft of painting and reveres the mission of portraying the marvelous and spiritual aspects of life. His work is a significant accomplishment informed by the humanistic values which are found in great art through the ages.

A wide respect for Greene's work is indicated in his exhibition record and the list of paintings in public and corporate collections. But his work cannot be fitted easily into any movement or trend. Indeed, his highly individualistic temperament and outlook keep him free of labels and alliances, and his work has been excluded from many exhibitions which reviewed recent modes and fashions in painting. Therefore, this exhibition is intended to make his work available to a wider audience while celebrating the achievements of a major American artist.

Throughout the project, we have benefited from the interest and assistance of the artist, who has participated in every phase of the selection and organization. We are also indebted to Marilyn Pearl and the staff of her gallery for lending many works and coping with many problems. Maria Graubart assisted with the bibliography. The exhibition and catalogue were made possible by the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency, and the aid of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Pearl. The exhibition program of the Akron Art Institute is realized by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council. We are most grateful to Budd Harris Bishop, Stephen Rosen, Moussa Domit and Patterson Sims for their help and encouragement. The loans from the artist and his gallery were augmented by the gracious co-operation of William Zierler, Wayne Andersen and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Our very deep gratitude and appreciation go to Dore Ashton for both allowing us to re-print her perceptive essay on Greene for the catalogue of the exhibition at The Corcoran Gallery of Art and for contributing an afterword which reflects on the recent work.

Robert Doty
Guest Curator, and
Director, The Currier Gallery of Art

foreword

My earliest works were influenced by the Renaissance painters but where they had a profound involvement with the actual world, I was essentially involved in a psychological state . . . †

. . . A psychological state which persists. It takes its moral conflicts from the world and transforms them, founding them in the independent world of the imagination. Stephen Greene is by temperament a meditative painter, a symbolist whose concern with ideas is reflexive and inevitable.

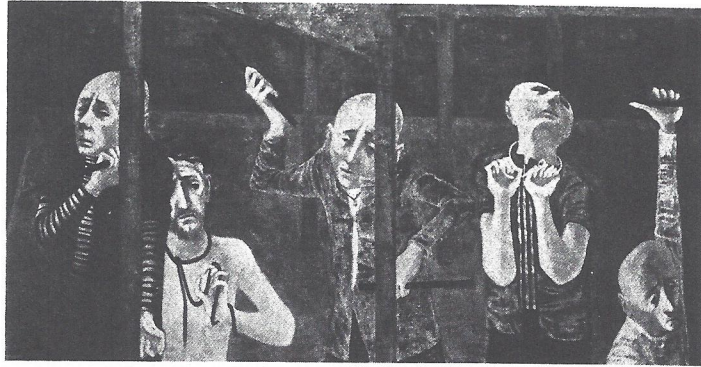
In those days—the days right after the war—Greene was a young painter just out of school eager to confront and “mirror” contemporary ideas. Everything had prepared him for the melancholy thoughts which responded to his earliest insights. It was the moment of existentialism, the moment when man’s fate was somberly assessed more or less in terms of its absurdity. It was the moment when Camus commenced his tormented inner dialogue in which God and the Devil paled in comparison with man himself. “Don’t wait for the last judgment,” he wrote later in *The Fall* (which incidentally inspired one of Greene’s paintings), “it takes place every day.” Camus’ struggle against an inner tide of utter pessimism was familiar to sensitive young artists in those days. “We can’t affirm the innocence of anyone,” Camus said, “while we can affirm absolutely the guilt of all. Each man witnesses the crime of all the others, there you have my faith, and my hope.”

Faith and hope invested so hopelessly . . . but invested. Greene, like others at the time, set out to meet the spiritual paradox head-on. His intention was and is to express the human condition in terms of pictorial symbol, to acknowledge “the terrible things happening in a beautiful world.”

He became, through inner transformation, the tormented witness so sharply drawn by Camus. And like the author, he turned to the story of Christ as the most eloquent legend of man’s guilt.

In painting the events of Christ’s passion, I, in the 20th century, was not returning to another period’s esthetic mode, but dealing with the possible meanings of hallucinations . . .

Symbolists—born symbolists such as Redon—are always concerned with possible meanings of hallucinations. The word itself comes from a Greek root which means



THE FLAGELLATORS, 1946, collection Saint Louis Art Museum

“to wander in mind.” Artists given to symbolism invariably wander in mind, or, in other words, have visions. Greene is no exception. Even when he ceased to transfer his visions directly to the canvas, when instead of an ensemble of identifiable symbols he painted abstractions which became total symbols, the vision was implicit. The symbolist has faith in the idea that what is meditated in the imagination will inevitably yield itself in the work. But in 1946 when Greene painted *The Flagellators* he was still a literal symbolist concerned with the overt meaning of his theme. His style suited the explicitness of his imagery: The painting was stern, hard-surfaced, coldly modeled, and each symbolic gesture was rigidly outlined. The deliberately stylized figures are symbolically imprisoned, tormentors and victims alike—a hallucination leaving little to the viewer’s imagination.

The single work that most influenced me was Hugo Van Der Goes’ “The Dormition of the Virgin.” Each apostle is lost in his own grief. No one looks at the Virgin. This fragmentation of an event is a clue to contemporary thinking.

Fragmentation, alienation, disorientation: the dictum of the contemporary condemned. For several years Greene labored to bring together the immemorial and the actual. He spelled out his ideas using the time-honored, immediately apparent conventions. In his paintings appeared the ladder, instrument of crucifixions and heavily endowed with psychological connotations of desperate upward striving and involuntary descent; the cross; the rope, another crucifixion property as well as a symbol of the serpent of Eden; the two-pronged shape, crutch or augury instrument; the arch, symbol of the vaulted heavens, and finally, man himself, pathetic actor in a terrible drama. All these forms were imprisoned in their outlines.

In 1953 and 1954 while living in Rome, I became dissatisfied with everything I was doing. To turn away from anything that was a scene rather than a presence became important.

The first turning was tentative. Greene released his figures from their linear enclosures, allowed them to be enveloped by an evenly regulated atmosphere in which the short strokes of his brush conjoined figure and ground indissolubly. A mosaic of flickering strokes animated the surface of his paintings. As his hand slowly began to feel the response of brush and color, he left behind illusionistic modeling. Slowly, the presences took shape.

By 1956 when Greene painted another version of *The Flagellators*, he was well on the way to a non-literal symbolism. Still visible are the outlines of the figures, but they are aureoled with pointillated strokes that weave in and out of a shallow space. His preferred symbolic colors—blue for infinity and orange for man's passion—already

HOMAGE TO ABEL SANCHEZ, 1957, collection of the artist



act mysteriously on the retina as only abstract, or non-local color can. Eventually even the human figure achieves the status of a presence rather than a physical fact. By 1957 Greene had obliterated anatomical outlines and subordinated the figure to the mood of his work. His *Homage to Abel Sanchez* while not successful in the abstraction of the figure is a transitional painting of importance. In keeping with the gloomy parable by Unamuno, the theme is expounded in terms of a twilight atmosphere painted thinly—a groundplane of orange overwashed with misty grays—signifying the tragedy in stronger emotional terms than the prone figure alone could.

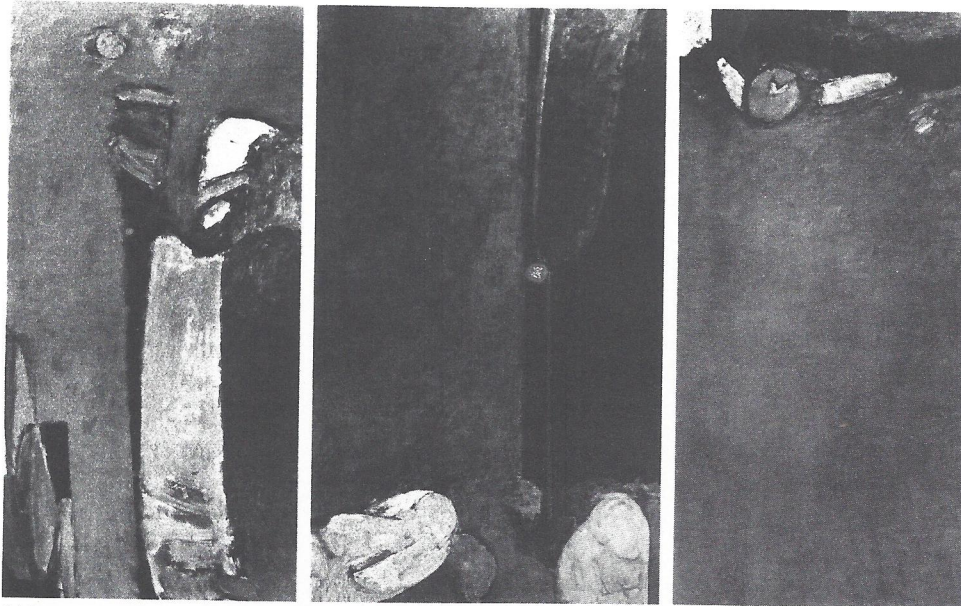
The language of color is not identical with the language of icons—it is more general, and its sources are tantalizingly obscure. When Greene relinquished the descriptive outlines encasing his figures he ceded to the emotional undercurrents of his thoughts and allowed colors to assume an expressive function. Can a man make a color his own? Logically perhaps not. But in the supra-logic that operates in the creation of art, it is not impossible that a painter may release an obsession in the form of a color—a color such as the dusky blue which eventually dominated Greene's imagery. This blue, at times dense and foreboding, at times tender, singing, easily spins itself out into a clear symbol of infinity. Or, on another plane, as symbolic of the Eden of self-contentment which, as Camus saw it, inevitably brings about man's fall.

The compelling triptych *Paradise* of 1958, representing the effective sublimation of iconographical symbols, speaks largely through the blues. They are laid on with a light touch, plane over plane, so that the wafting inner light is dispersed throughout the three panels as a continuum. *Paradise* is infinite.

But what happens in *Paradise* is a terrible drama. And here, Greene no longer narrates the Biblical story, but suggests the familiar symbols in the ambiguous and disquieting terms of modern myth: an atmosphere rather than a stage with particular events.

In the left panel nothing has yet happened, but the dull orange sphere above (sun or apple?) and the powerful vertical below announce the fall. The serpent is suggested in the cobra-like vertical waving menacingly in the center of the canvas.

The center panel is an eloquent indictment. The two culprits huddle at the bottom, shapeless and impotent beneath the weight of the heavy blue above. Here the vertical moves down from the top inexorably (as the ladder shapes with their suggestion of descent) into the heart of the paradise.



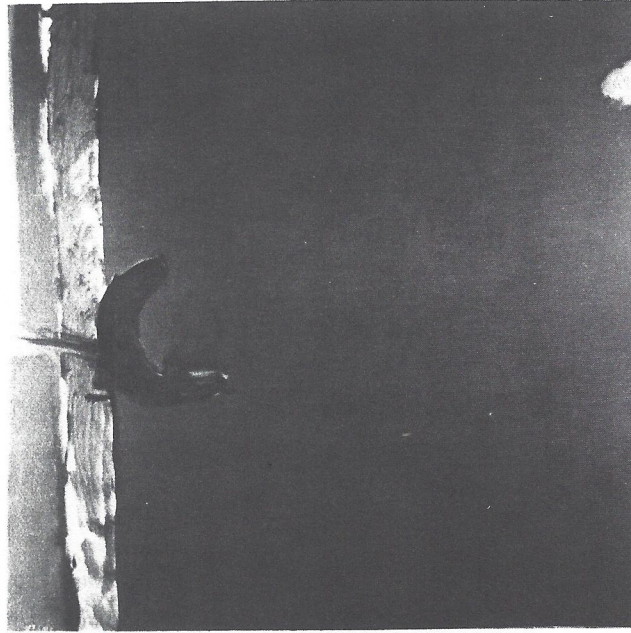
PARADISE, 1958, collection Grey Art Gallery, New York University

The right panel with its audacious sweep of blue emptiness and its curious shapes at the upper margin magnetized almost out of the canvas, expresses the dread and anxiety of the alienated victims. If the shapes above are read as figures, they are falling from grace against gravity—another unsettling vision that recurs in Greene's paintings. He often turns his figures upside down, or places them in curious defiant stances working against the laws of the natural world. The panel, Greene has said, represents "the fall of man in Eden as the foretelling of crucifixions."

As a composition the triptych is bound not only in terms of shape, but saliently in terms of the drenched blues which span the three panels and are something more than environments within which events take place. These blues are constants, the changeless aspects of man's psyche.

I do not want to become a victim of my own myths.

In all of his recent work Greene has turned away from overt meaning. His own myths, or rather, the myths that once had the beginning-middle-end explicitness have become increasingly abstract. The grand themes—man's origin and his fate—now



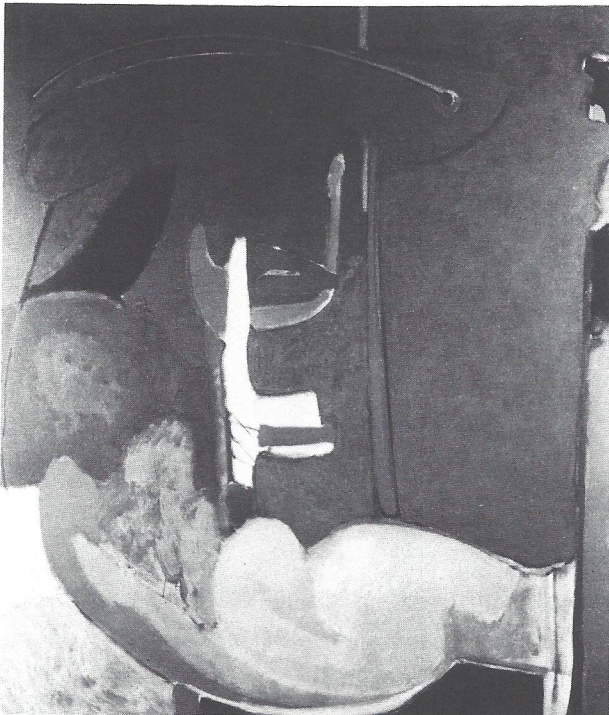
HOWL, 1960, private collection

override specific allegory. Since his is the tragic view, the paintings are without exception uneasy, filled with allusions to isolation, violence and terror. The tension in Greene's recent abstractions, and in many paintings of this period, derives from the irresolvable paradox inherent in painting itself: that the guiding idea, or the concept, and the plastic embodiment live separate lives, contiguous and inexorably yoked, yet holding their delicate balance perilously.

In keeping with his increasingly abstract attitude toward myth, Greene has altered his technique. The thin layers with which he builds his largest surfaces have no trace of the small divisions that once served to animate the surface. Instead there are subtle interplays between light in the underpainting, or sometimes the bare canvas, and the taut planes above it. Large areas tend to spread without impediment into surrounding space. When symbols appear, as for instance the moon shape in *Howl*, 1960, they are ambiguous, provocative. Sexual organs, gaping mouths—a whole series of drawings are titled *Maw*—fixated eyes are brought together with the remnants of Greene's former symbology.

At times the reminiscence of the human figure interjects itself into the strange spaces, as in *Family* with its horizontal woman form below, its symbolic sentinel male at right (a recurrent motif) and leaf and palette shapes suggesting living organs. But along with allusion to the real there is allusion to the fabulous. Eyes, mouths, and the odd thermometer which appears in several of Greene's recent paintings transpose his thought for his painting into the realm of the terrible and the imagined.

A painting of the same period, *Vigil*, is again readable in terms of its symbolism. The forked shape in the foreground carries back to *Crucifixions* and *Falls*. It is at once a crutch, a reminder of the snake in *Paradise*, a bone. But it is no more one thing than the other. Greene's generalizing myths are never obvious. In this picture, for instance, the major arching forms that dominate the composition are like pincers. They recall, again, instruments of torture, but also, Greene's preoccupation with the voracious maw, the hopper which grinds man's dream so fine that only the artist can piece it together.



FAMILY, 1962, collection American Republic Life Insurance Company, Des Moines, Iowa

I do not want to become a victim of my own myths.

His taste for the dream world, his attraction to the marvelous and the terrible, his passion for the equivocal—all characteristic of the symbolist temperament.

His myths because they spring from the symbolist experience which is basically metaphysical can never sit still. Not a victim but a pilgrim, Greene follows his myths into constantly shifting climates. No two images can ever mean exactly the same thing in his paintings.

Dore Ashton
New York, 1962

† all passages in italics are quotes from an article by Stephen Greene in *Art In America*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 1961

†† The essay is reprinted from *Stephen Greene: A Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1963