



"Encounter," a painting by Stephen Greene done after he abandoned figurative for abstract art in the late 1950's.

Stephen Greene, 82, Painter With Distinctive Abstract Style

By ROBERTA SMITH

Stephen Greene, an abstract painter who whose sensuous brushwork and half-buried symbols synthesized elements of several postwar movements into a distinctive style, died on Nov. 18 at his home in Valley Cottage, N.Y., where he had lived for more than 40 years. He was 82.

Throughout most of his career Mr. Greene was a respected odd man out among New York painters. He knew everyone, taught at prestigious schools and almost always had a dealer. Starting in 1947 with a show at the Durlacher Galleries and ending in 1998 with a show at the David Beitzel Gallery in SoHo, he had 26 solo gallery shows in New York. But he was never affiliated with any of the painting styles that regularly rolled off the assembly line in the city, and he once said that his art supported him for only two years of his long career. Admirers of his work sometimes lamented that he tended to be characterized as "Philip Guston's student and Frank Stella's teacher."

Mr. Greene was born in New York in 1917. By age 20 he was studying art at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League. He briefly attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va., and then transferred to the University of Iowa in Iowa City. There he met Guston, known for his restrained Renaissance-inspired treatment of political themes, who began teaching there in 1941.

Mr. Greene earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1942 and a master's in 1945. After World War II he said he wanted his pictures to reflect "the terrible things that are happening in a beautiful world." In works like "The Rack," "The Flagellation" and "The Burial" (the last painted in 1947 and acquired by the Whitney Museum of America Art in 1949), he took medieval and Renaissance Passions as his model, depicting maimed figures and coffins in fresco colors and ambiguous stage-like settings.

Mr. Greene continued to work figuratively into the mid-50's, his love of Renaissance art reinforced by four years at the American Academy in Rome. But his work began to change around 1957, when he heard the critic Clement Greenberg lecture on ab-

stract painting. Mr. Greene later said the experience was like "a bad movie" that "sent chills running down my spine," and made him realize that he could no longer draw from the figure.

By 1960 he had developed his mature style, which combined elements of the biomorphic, Surrealist-flavored early stages of Abstract Expressionism and its full manifestation with the scale, fluidity and glowing hues of Color Field painting. Although this style did not achieve genuine formal originality, it was an impressively complex fusion: unfailingly intelligent, sure of touch and gorgeous of color.

Mr. Greene combined different techniques — for example, loose atmospheric brushwork with smaller

An odd man out, but well regarded in the New York art world.

more hard-edge shapes — and sometimes representational elements like an eye or a hand to imbue the formal achievements of the New York School with an unusual aura of poetic tension and personal, almost narrative intonation.

He began teaching painting in 1954 at Princeton University, where his students included Mr. Stella, and Mr. Greene taught for many years at the Tyler School of Art of Temple University and the Art Students League. He had several surveys of his work, beginning at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1963, and is represented in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Gallery in London.

Mr. Greene's wife, the writer Sigrid de Lima, whom he married in Rome in 1953, died on Sept. 19. He is survived by his daughter, Alison de Lima Greene, curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.