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Hyman Bloom

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Hyman Bloom was one of the most important and influential American painters of the mid-20th century. Along with his fellow Boston Jewish painter Jack Levine and the Germanborn Karl Zerbe, he was a leading practitioner of Boston Expressionism, a school that combined symbolism, religious themes and social commentary.

His work, which reflected his Eastern European Jewish heritage and his fascination with mortality, earned him high praise in the 1940s, when the Abstract Expressionist painters Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and the art critic Clement Greenberg jointly declared him "the greatest artist in America". Changes in fashion eclipsed his reputation from the 1950s, but by the time of his death he had won renewed admiration.

He was born Hyman Melamed in 1913 in Brunaviški, a village in southern Latvia, then still part of the Russian Empire. In 1920 he emigrated with his parents and brother Bernard to the US; his two eldest brothers, who had preceded them, had already changed their surname to Bloom. His Orthodox Jewish family found a home in the West End of Boston, where there was a sizeable Jewish community. As a child Bloom wanted to be a rabbi, and his father searched in vain for a teacher to train him for that role.

By his teenage years, however, it was clear that Bloom's future lay elsewhere. He studied painting at the West End Community Centre under the innovative teacher Harold Zimmerman, who encouraged him to eschew live models and to paint from memory. Also among Zimmerman's students was another talented Jewish boy of Eastern European heritage, Jack Levine, who was to become a lifelong friend of Bloom. The two boys were subsequently taught by the Harvard art historian Denman Ross, who granted them a stipend to pursue their studies of painting. Bloom's later involvement with the Federal Art Project, directed by Holger Cahill, brought him to the attention of Cahill's wife, Dorothy Miller, curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She included 13 of his paintings in an exhibition entitled *Americans* 1942.

Bloom won acclaim for his baroque flair and bold use of colour; qualities that would typify his work. Over the next decade or so, he was widely exhibited: at the 1949 Carnegie International and the 1950 Venice Biennale, where his paintings hung alongside works by De Kooning and Pollock. In 1954 he enjoyed a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

By the 1950s, however, Bloom's work was beginning to fall out of fashion, largely because he persisted with figurative painting at a time when Abstract Expressionism was in vogue. His former critical champion Greenberg withdrew his favour, and his work was increasingly neglected. This was ironic since it had been a profound influence on the new movement: De Kooning stated that he and Pollock regarded Bloom as "the first Abstract Expressionist in America".

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Bloom, however, did not follow fashions; moreover, his subject matter was often disturbing. In the 1940s he had produced a series of grim post-mortem paintings, depicting corpses with gaping wounds. These paintings, which have been compared to the work of Francis Bacon, drew on his experiences working in the mortuary of Massachusetts General Hospital, but have also been interpreted as a Jewish artist's response to the Holocaust.

Certainly, Bloom returned repeatedly to Jewish subjects — synagogues, cantors, the Torah, and especially rabbis, whom he depicted in a series of paintings stretching from the 1930s to the 21st century. The centrality to his work of his ethnic and religious heritage at times provoked hostile comments. The critic Hilton Kramer, although himself a Jew, scathingly opined that Bloom's work was like "finding gefilte fish at a fashionable party". Yet Bloom's relationship to Judaism was ambivalent. His depictions of rabbis were, he said, a kind of self-portrait, yet he acknowledged the irony that his work contravened the Jewish prohibition against images. Personally, he moved away from orthodox belief and towards agnosticism.

The variety of his work made it unwise to pigeonhole him simply as a Jewish painter. He also essayed paintings inspired by his fascination with the occult creed of theosophy. For a decade from 1962, he abandoned paint in favour of charcoal drawing, influenced by the art of Song Dynasty China. Latterly, he depicted the forests of Maine, and produced a series of eccentric, strikingly colourful still lifes.

From 1983 Bloom lived in Nashua, New Hampshire, where he continued to paint into his nineties. In the last two decades of his life his work was gradually rediscovered: he enjoyed retrospectives at the Fuller Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts, in 1996, at the National Academy of Design in New York in 2002, and at the Danforth Museum of Art in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 2006-07.

Bloom was twice married. He is survived by his wife, Stella, whom he married in 1978. They had no children.

Hyman Bloom, painter, was born on March 29, 1913. He died on August 26, 2009, aged 96

Photo Captions

Rabbi with Torah (1945) — Bloom often depicted synagogues, cantors and rabbis despite his agnostic leanings

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