THE ALLEGORICAL STILL LIFES OF

# GEORGE KENNEDY BRANDRIFF

LAGUNA ART MUSEUM

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*Ebb-Flow*

DURING THE PERIOD IN WHICH THE ARTIST GEORGE KENNEDY BRANDRIFF (1890-1936) WAS ACTIVE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, THE LATE 1920S AND EARLY 1930S, ART ACROSS THE COUNTRY WAS BEGINNING TO REFLECT SOCIAL CONCERNS AND A BOLDNESS OF APPROACH WHICH WERE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE *JOIE DE VIVRE* OF EARLIER, IMPRESSIONIST-DERIVED ART.[1] THE SHORT DEVELOPMENT OF BRANDRIFF'S WORK—HE DIED AT AGE FORTY-SIX—REFLECTS THESE CHANGES AS THEY BEGAN TO PENETRATE THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC ENVIRONMENT.

THE AMERICAN SCENE—A NATIONAL movement of the late 1920s and 1930s which concentrated on local subject matter and themes treated in a representational manner—became a force of consequence in Southern California between the years 1930 and 1932. Although painters of the California scene were mainly devoted to making positive portrayals of rural and urban life, some also documented the difficult social conditions of the Depression. One of the chief ways that American Scene painting differed from impressionism was its focus on narrative. [2]

IT WAS ALSO BETWEEN THE YEARS 1930 and 1932 that George Brandriff, who had an active intelligence and a keenly political view of things, developed an introspective art that reflected the social concerns of his day—an art which was a bold departure from his impressionistic landscapes. Brandriff's allegorical still lifes are central to an understanding of the artist and his work and to the artistic milieu of Southern California in the first decades of the twentieth century. According to *Los Angeles Times* critic Arthur Millier, Brandriff painted the still life series in order to dispel the myth that artists could not think. [3]

IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, AS IN THE rest of the country, *plein air* painters had been inclined to making romanticized portrayals of the native beauty. Few painters fought against the inclination toward mere prettiness and many became overly focused on the aesthetic delights of their light-filled scenes. While French impressionism had reflected the rebellious spirit of experimentation and the forging of new territory, impressionism, as it thrived in Southern California, lacked intellectual depth. And though it may have been acceptable in the early days of the art colony not to be intellectually oriented, with the advent of the Depression and the general change toward social concerns there was bound to be a corresponding shift toward content in painting.

BRANDRIFF, WHO IS MOST REMEMBERED for his *plein air* paintings, was an active participant in the lively association of artists who, beginning at the turn of the century, settled in Laguna Beach to paint the breath-taking beauty of the local scenery. He was considerably younger than many of these *plein air* artists and much older than the generation of artists who, informed by the more topical American Scene movement, would change the direction of art in Southern California during the 1930s and 1940s.

UNTIL BRANDRIFF MADE A TRIP TO Europe in 1929, he assimilated the aesthetics and techniques of various late-nineteenth century French styles in his own way under the direction of—and as interpreted by—his Laguna Beach painting companions. While in Europe he gained a new vocabulary studying the old masters and lesser French academic painters whose work reflected the nineteenth century Salon aesthetic. [4]

BRANDRIFF ALSO VISITED THE BRUSSELS museum devoted to the celebrated Flemish artist Antoine Wiertz (1808-1865). [5] Wiertz made startling figurative paintings denouncing the ills of modern society using allegory, a narrative form in which abstract ideas are personified. [6] It is probable that Brandriff's still lifes owe as much to Wiertz and other artists of earlier periods of art history—to antecedents such as the noble, allegorical history paintings of the nineteenth century—as they do to contemporary currents in art.

BRANDRIFF'S ALLEGORICAL STILL LIFES, based on newspaper articles about world events that troubled the artist, were symbolic expressions of general truths about the folly of human existence. They were reflections on religion, marriage, chance, war, economics and artistic achievement. Unusual for the time, they were rooted in history.

LIKE THE LATE-NINETEENTH CENTURY American painter John Frederick Peto, Brandriff made of still life a tragic art. The tonalites of Brandriff's paintings are dark, reflecting the pessimism of the Depression. They do not show a primary interest in surface and texture, the play of light or atmosphere. His still lifes are psychological studies incorporating a private iconography. Though they have the strange mystery of the work of *trompe l'oeil* painters like Peto and reflect the vanitas tradition that was introduced into American still life by Peto's contemporary William Harnett, they have none of the surface illusion or elegance of the late-nineteenth century paintings. [7]

BRANDRIFF'S PAINTINGS REFLECT A concern with man's condition similar to that of the vanitas paintings of seventeenth century Northern Europe, paintings he would certainly have seen in Holland when he visited the country in 1929. Vanitas still lifes contained objects symbolic of the transitoriness and uncertainty of life, and of the certitude of death. The *Memento Mori*, a specific type of vanitas subject, employed a skull which frequently spoke through an inscription found within the composition. Brandriff repeatedly used a monkey throughout his series which, like the skull, expressed the common man's reactions to the events of the time. In this case, Brandriff's "inscriptions" were newspaper clippings incorporated into the mat of the frame surrounding the paintings.[8] Didactic perhaps, the articles would have made his narrative intention

clear to a public that was unfamiliar with such intellectual approaches to art. Without these clippings now, as they were reframed by a gallery in the late 1960s, the paintings retain an anxious ambiguity. [9]

WHAT LED BRANDRIFF TO ADOPT THIS approach to still life is difficult to determine. Scholarship on the art of Southern California painters from this period remains scanty but it does not appear that still life was a popular genre. Emerging in the latter part of the first decade of the twentieth century as a subject of interest for artists exploring post-impressionism such as Edouard Vysekal and Meta Cressey, it seems to have been more frequently employed among those exploring such modernist directions as cubism and abstraction in the 1930s. [10] For a short period, Brandriff himself explored cubist-inspired still life, as well as landscape informed by abstraction. [11]

WITH THE TREMENDOUS FOCUS ON THE out-of-doors and landscape painting, there was little demand for, and even less profit in, still life painting in Southern California. Certainly artists of the *plein air* group employed it as a means of studying light and texture, color and form. Others, such as Paul DeLongpre and Franz Bischoff, specialized in the genre. Bischoff made fragile and poetic still lifes of flowers, an outgrowth of his early work as a decorator of porcelain. [12]

ARTISTS IN CALIFORNIA TO WHOM Brandriff would more likely owe his technique and subject matter were Armin Hansen and Housep Pushman. Hansen's expressionistic and colorful still life work could have provided a technical model for Brandriff. Pushman, who worked in Riverside from 1916 to 1919, made still lifes of Oriental objects that were accompanied by short written descriptions of their allegorical meanings. [13] A small number of Brandriff's still lifes incorporated Oriental objects, and a critic of the time compared the work of the artists. [14]

BRANDRIFF EXHIBITED HIS ALLEGORIES several times. They were shown at the Biltmore Salon in 1933 and at the Pasadena Art Institute in 1934. [15] They were also exhibited at the Laguna Beach Art Association (now the Laguna Art Museum) in 1933, while Brandriff was president. Though never accepted by the art-buying public, art critics Arthur Millier and Sonia Wolfson took an interest in the paintings. In Wolfson's review of the art association showing, she placed the paintings within the great tradition of "propaganda art" beginning with the Greeks, saying that "consciously or not, the artist has always reflected the social structure of his time." [16]

*Respite*

IF BRANDRIFF CAN BE COMPARED TO other socially conscious artists of more modern times, it would be to the early twentieth century Ashcan School painters or the Social Realists painting the American scene during the 1930s, though in many ways their work differed from Brandriff's. Those artists portrayed specific places in a specific time in an almost documentary manner. Brandriff constructed his paintings out of his experience of information derived from the popular media. Rather than taking a documentary approach, he conceived them allegorically, using a symbolic narrative.

AS WELL, BRANDRIFF'S SERIES CARRIES ON a modern tradition that was perhaps first represented in the work of Francisco Goya. The tone of his still lifes is close to the spirit of Goya's *Los Caprichos*, and the work of both artists can be said to be monuments to human folly. Brandriff's paintings are like stage vignettes in which are played out dreadful, one-act reflections of contemporary life.

BUT WHAT IS UNUSUAL, AND CHILLING, IS the way the paintings, particularly those such as *Respite*, express the interpenetration of Brandriff's social and private worlds. They demonstrate that the artist's attitude toward his art and society developed out of his dialogue with the ideas of the New Deal and its attendant liberalism, rather than out of isolation. But, although Brandriff was a reform-minded Republican and quite outspoken about his beliefs, he imbued his paintings with an allegorical ambiguity which softened their biting sarcasm and took them out of real space and real time, seeking a more universal mode of expression. And though they deal with the critical concerns of his day, they simultaneously reflect the artist's tragic, and secret, separation from his social environment.

In 1936 Brandriff took his own life using a small handgun. The situation surrounding his death remains a mystery, though some family members believe that the artist may have been seriously ill and suffering great pain. George Kennedy Brandriff's allegorical still lifes bear a potent, latent awareness of his own mortality.

Susan M. Anderson
Assistant Curator

*Holiday*

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*Footnotes*

1. The author would like to thank Michael McManus, former curator of the Laguna Art Museum, for his input and ideas in the formulation of this essay. I also wish to thank members of the Brandriff family who generously provided access to archival materials. The Laguna Art Museum was recipient of the entire allegorical series in 1988, with the exception of one painting, *Intuition*, also listed among the artist's papers.

2. American art critics and observers of the social scene had since the late 1920s been advocating a native art that did not rely on European models for its inspiration and that more closely expressed the concerns of American society. For more information on painters of the California scene active in Southern California during the 1930s and 1940s, see Susan M. Anderson, *Regionalism: The California View*, ex. cat. (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1988.)

3. "Every Story's a Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, 1933.

4. Changes evident in Brandriff's landscapes and seascapes after his trip to Europe pointing to his interest in the Salon aesthetic were a darkening of his palette, greater strength of design and delineation of form, and a renewed interest in the potentialities of color and brushwork. It was also upon his return from Europe that Brandriff began to explore the still life genre. *Studio Laguna Beach* and *Sunday Breakfast*, both of 1930, were, like self-portraits, intimate looks at the private world of the artist. These paintings set the stage for the still life series Brandriff would begin to make about a year later. They anticipated the almost tragic sense of introspection that the artist's later works would express.

5. Brandriff's wife, Frances, described this visit at great length in her diary of their European travels.

6. Andre A. Moerman, *Antoine Wiertz, 1806-1865* (Paris and Brussels: Jacques Damase Editeur, 1974), p. 8. One of the artist's best-known, and most disturbing, paintings is *The Suicide*, 1854. The painting shows a Michelangesque figure, flanked by two angels, in the act of taking his life using a flintlock pistol.

7. For a short discussion of these American painters see Alfred Frankenstein, *Reality and Deception*, ex. cat. (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1974.) Also see William H. Gerdts, *Painters of the Humble Truth* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981.), for a lengthier discussion of American still life.

8. This was pointed out by Arthur Millier in a review of Brandriff's 1933 exhibition of the still lifes at the Biltmore Salon. "Every Story's a Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, 1933.

9. The paintings were most likely reframed by the Old Town Galleries around 1967.

10. Nancy Moure, *Painting and Sculpture in Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, ex. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980), p. 29.

11. Two paintings in the collection of the Laguna Art Museum are evidence of this: *Shaker*, c. 1932, and *Gargoyles in Babel*, c. 1934.

12. Jean Stern, *The Paintings of Franz A. Bischoff*, ex. cat. (Beverly Hills: Petersen Galleries, 1980.)

13. Nancy Moure, *Painting and Sculpture in Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, ex. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980), p. 27.

14. Sonia Wolfson compared Brandriff's still life paintings to Pushman's in her review of the Laguna Beach Art Association's 1933 exhibition. "Art Show Called Propaganda," *South Coast News*, 17 March 1933.

15. Arthur Millier, "Every Story's a Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, 1933; Pasadena Art Institute, ex. broch., April 22 - May 31, 1934.

16. "Art Show Called Propaganda," *South Coast News*, 17 March 1933.

*Hit Me*

IN 1930, WHEN GEORGE KENNEDY Brandriff painted *Sunday Breakfast*—a surprising and colorful still life of the newspaper comic pages, spread on a breakfast table—he was in the throes of a personal and artistic liberation.

HE HAD JUST RETURNED FROM A HALF-year tour of Europe with his wife, Frances. There he had been exposed to a range of artistic styles and concerns far wider than those he had learned from his teachers, *plein air* landscapists Anna Hills, Carl Oscar Borg, Jack Wilkinson Smith and Edgar Payne.

JUST PRIOR TO THE TRIP, BRANDRIFF HAD tossed aside his dentistry training and his practice in Los Angeles to pursue, full time, a career as an artist. Now he was in Laguna Beach, rethinking life, profession and artistic direction.

*SUNDAY BREAKFAST* WAS A DEPARTURE for Brandriff for two important reasons. It was, along with another picture of the same year, *Studio Laguna Beach*, one of his first attempts at still life after his initial success as a painter of landscape. Even more significant, it was a more personal and symbolic picture than the broadly appealing sea- and hillscapes upon which he had thus far built his reputation. Not only was *Sunday Breakfast* a touching modern genre scene and a glimpse of the artist's personal life, but it made autobiographical reference to Brandriff's brief experience as a newspaper editor and political cartoonist.

BY 1931 BRANDRIFF WAS USING THE newspaper for his paintings in a very different way, drawing upon the news of the day for his subject matter, creating stylized but representational tabletop stories. In his sketch book/diary he called these works, which he painted through 1932, his allegories.

BRANDRIFF SURROUNDED THE allegories with collages of newspaper headlines and articles. These special frames are now lost. One of the few records of one of these early frames is a contemporary review which lists the headlines encircling *Ebb-Flow*, a picture which deals with Russian-American interaction: "Russia Raps American Views," "A.F.L. Against Russia Trading," "Alien Film Folk Plan Quick Exit," "U.S.C. and Stanford Debate on Russia," "Court Studies Reds Appeals,"

*The Wiseacre*

"New Alien Drive Round-Up Near," "Soviet Orders New Grain Tax." Also included was a "Situations Wanted" column.[1] In the painting itself, *Europe Since 1850* is readable on the spine of a book. Occupying the center ground are two figures in Russian folk dress, a toppled statue of Napoleon and a pair of toy soldiers. All are atop a map of North and South America.

THE TITLE OF THE PAINTING, *EBB-FLOW*, combined with the title of the book in the painting, *Europe Since 1850*, refer to the suppression of liberal and nationalist revolutionary movements that swept Europe in 1848[2]. The painting seems to be a statement of Brandriff's conservative politics. The Depression of the 1930s in the United States led to profound questions about the American capitalist system, and opened the possibility of the spread of communism and socialism. The painting suggests that eighty years of history had seen the ebb of traditional European politics and values and the flow of Russian domination, and plays on fears of a communist takeover by placing the Russian peasantry literally on U.S. ground. Brandriff expresses similar concerns about the Depression in another allegory, *Holiday*.[3]

*LOS ANGELES TIMES* CRITIC ARTHUR Millier's contemporary criticism of the allegorical series suggested that the liberal New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt were the topic of Brandriff's painting *Hit Me*.[4] The painting shows a game of blackjack being played by a toy roly-poly clown and an unseen opponent. The (new?) dealer has won all the chips but one, and has the better card facing up. Yet the clown dumbly stands ready to be "hit"—both dealt another card and literally knocked over—once again.

STOICALLY OBSERVING FROM THE BACKground shadows of *Ebb-Flow* and thirteen of the eighteen other still lifes in the allegorical series is the amorphous figure of a monkey. Brandriff surely saw the little statue as a surrogate for the viewer.[5] But it also probably stood for Brandriff.

IN THESE PAINTINGS THE MONKEY IS always an impassive observer, contemplating the news and the drama before him. The still lifes are a

stage on which Brandriff both conducts and observes a drama constructed from his political opinion and personal feelings.

Brandriff's radical departure from the norm in painting left him vulnerable to criticism; he mirrored his concern in two paintings on the subject. One is entitled *Criticism*. It is an excruciating portrayal of an artist/effigy, sprawled across a huge palette, pinned under an enormous male thumb and a typesetter's composing stick—being literally crushed by the weight of a critic's words. The one readable word (though it must be read backwards because the letterpress type has not yet been printed) is *FAILURE*.

The other painting is titled *The Wiseacre* and depicts an empty bowl with spoon, ink pen, notepad, eraser, scissors and ink bottle with corkhead. The ink bottle, pen and paper, along with some books in the background, refer to the act of writing and knowledge while the scissors and eraser allude to the act of taking away, editing, censoring or criticism. The empty bowl with its lack of content acts as a metaphor for the wiseacre/critic, symbolized by the cork-head whose mouth is agape. The wiseacre has as much to offer as the empty bowl: nothing.

Although Brandriff had good reviews for his exhibition of the allegories in 1933 at the Biltmore Salon, there is evidence that he did not receive the response he expected.[6] He was unsuccessful selling the allegories. Although he continued some minor experiments with advanced styles after the allegory series, he eventually returned to painting landscapes and seascapes, the subjects of his earlier work.

*Criticism*

It is true that Brandriff's allegorical paintings owe a heavy debt to seventeenth century Dutch still life painting.[7] There are also precedents in surrealism and dadaism for Brandriff's incorporation of text in his painting and framing. But it is not until the 1970s that we find in photography and painting a comparative use of still life and narrative—one which mixes smaller than life-size effigies with hand-sized objects to tell a figurative story in miniature. Comparable work of contemporary artists such as Ellen Brooks, Laurie Simmons or Manny Farber comes to mind.

Brandriff's incorporation of text into his narrative and his use of history to amplify his opinions about contemporary issues were not, in and of themselves, entirely novel. However, his combination of these devices did develop a pictorial semiotic well in advance of its time.

Bolton Colburn
Curator of Collections

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***Footnotes***

1. Reported in a review of the allegories at the Biltmore Salon by Sonia Wolfson, "Art Show Called Propaganda," *South Coast News*, 17 March 1933.

2. For more information on the European revolutions of 1848 see Jerome Blum, Rondo Cameron, Thomas G. Barnes, *A History: The European World*, (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).

3. The title *Holiday* refers to the bank "holidays"— actually politically and economically expedient closings — of the early 1930s. In *Holiday* Brandriff depicts the removal of a body from a safe by a pair of soldiers. A dying rose in the foreground of *Holiday* may symbolize the decay of finance.

4. "Every Story's a Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 May 1933. The painting is reproduced with a caption that reads, " 'The New Deal' as It Seems to George K. Brandriff."

5. Millier reports that Brandriff called his painting "the common people." Ibid.

6. In his sketch diary Brandriff drew a big circle next to the word, "allegories" and a small sketch of the monkey.

7. In Frances Brandriff's diary of the couple's European trip, she mentions that she and Brandriff visited and were impressed by Dutch painting.