

Peter Blume

By Stephen May

Peter Blume: Nature and Metamorphosis, currently on view at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) until April 5, is the first retrospective of the American Modernist Peter Blume (1906-1992) since 1976. It comprises 159 works, including 56 paintings and 103 drawings. The exhibition reveals Blume's central role in the development of American Modernism and examines his impact on late Twentieth Century narrative painting.



(Previous Page) "Torso with Tiger Lily," 1927, invoked the admiration of Surrealists, who tried to claim Blume as one of their own. But the artist always rejected such categorization, preferring to follow his own independent course. PAFA director Harry Philbrick observes that "While Blume was aware of that European movement [Surrealism] early in his career, he does not fit neatly into that category, or, in fact, any other." Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth.

(Below) Keys to Blume's creative process were innumerable, meticulous sketches, such as "Rock and Stump," 1942. He used black chalk and graphite, stumped with incised lines on cream wove paper, to execute this 18 1/3 x 16-by-22 7/8-inch drawing. Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, N.J., gift from the collection of Millard Meiss, Class of 1926, and Margaret L. Meiss.

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Throughout his career, Blume crafted elaborate allegories that dramatize the growth of cities, the creative process, cultural memory, political power and regeneration. A consistent theme in his work is metamorphosis — whether in nature, manifested in dreamlike imagery, or as a working method traced in the numerous drawings and studies he made for compositions.

Blume was not a prolific painter but rather concentrated his efforts on a relatively small number of carefully conceived projects, each involving a long period of exploratory drawing. After 1930, Blume preferred to focus on ambitious, often large-scale, slowly developed paintings that explore multi-layered themes and express major concerns of the Twentieth Century. "Nature and Metamorphosis" features focus sections that examine several major projects that occupied Blume over many years. Blume developed these large-scale, meticulously designed paintings by thinking through drawing. Each was preceded by dozens of working drawings in a wide range of media made with surprisingly



Diverse approaches. Through this process, Blume discovered the formal structure and iconographic content of his major works, including “Tasso’s Oak” (1957-60) and “The Rock” (1944-48).

“Tasso’s Oak,” 1957–60, Blume’s largest painting — 81 by 96 inches — is dominated by the remains of the famous tree under which Sixteenth Century poet Torquato Tasso is said to have sat in vain hoping to be honored by the pope for one of his poems. Eventually the handsome memorial to the poet’s vigil withered and died, and was bolstered by supports. Blume depicted it surrounded by ordinary folk — women knitting, children playing, a couple leaving and two nuns arriving — seemingly oblivious to the famous landmark. The distant vista, punctuated with church spires, was entirely made up. Collection of Mr and Mrs Armand G. Erpf.

(Next Page) For years Blume labored on a work marking the end of World War II and recognizing efforts to rebuild Europe from the devastation of that conflict. “The Rock,” 1945–1948, represented, Blume said, “the continual process of man’s rebuilding out of a devastated world.” The large painting — 575/8 by 743/8 inches — includes a fire around a crumbling building on the right and men at work on the left on a new structure. In the center, workmen labor on a rebuilding project, accompanied by a worshipful woman, arms outstretched toward the jagged, towering rock in the center. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Edgar Kaufman Jr, 1956.



(Right) Responding to an early morning view of Manhattan's Queensboro Bridge, Blume painted "The Bridge," 1928, filled with Cubist dynamism, angular accents, an implausible path of tugboat smoke between bridge tiers, toylike forms and unusual color choices. The work was promptly recognized as an important contribution to a new wave of Modernism that appealed to proponents of American works over their European counterparts. The oil on canvas measures 30 by 24 inches. Courtesy of Edith H. and James A. Fisher.

Drawing on a wealth of new scholarship in American Modernism as well as numerous unpublished archival collections, the exhibition considers the relationship between automatic drawing and precise painting in Blume's practice, his relationships with an international community of artists and writers and the political background of his imagery. A





Referring to "Home for Christmas," 1926, an early Blume work, art historian Frank Anderson Trapp once observed, "The mode is distinctly 'primitive,' in a charming and convincing little vignette...[that] is altogether true to the visual nature of the time and place." Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, gift of Ferdinand Howland.

Hallmark of his work from all periods of his career is its capacity to carry multivalent meanings, always rooted in human experience, but privileging the transformative power of the imagination.

Curated by Robert Cozzolino, senior curator and curator of Modern art at PAFA, the exhibition will travel to the Wadsworth Atheneum, where it will be on view July 3 – September 20.