

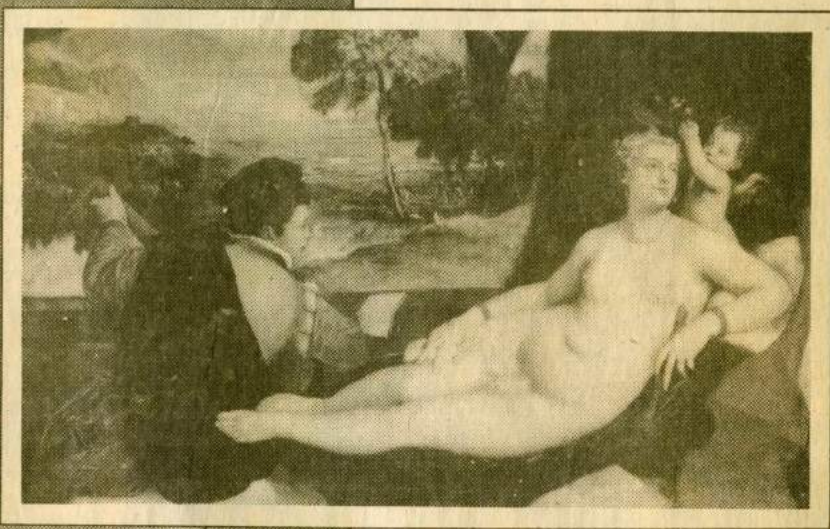
FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 1988

Weekend

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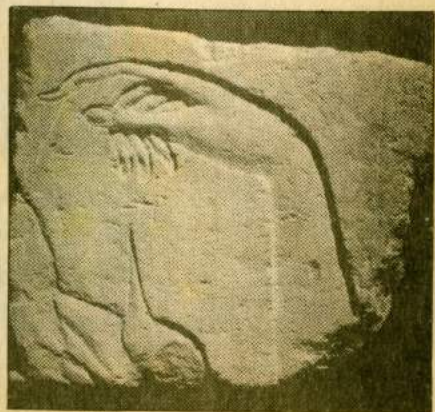
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The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad

During her walk through the Metropolitan Museum, Dorothea Rockburne, left, views the "Aphrodite" sculpture in the Greek and Roman galleries. Above, "Venus and the Lute Player," an oil by Titian, found in the Venetian paintings section. Below, "An Act of Worship," from the Amarna reliefs, in the Egyptian gallery. Bottom, detail from "Madonna and Child With Saints," by Giovanni di Paolo, among the Sienese paintings.



A New-World Painter Views the Masterpieces Of Old-World Innovators

This is the first article of an occasional series in which artists will discuss work in New York museums that has special meaning for them and their art.

By MICHAEL BRENSON

FOR Dorothea Rockburne, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a special place. She worked there part time for several years after arriving in New York in the mid-1950's, tagging objects for the Egyptian department and helping out in the finance office. She studied the collections of Greek and Egyptian sculpture and Italian painting.

"At that point the museum was desolate," Ms. Rockburne, an abstract painter, said. "There was nobody in it. You could come and draw here for hours and hours and no one would bother you."

The museum has certainly changed. It is a lot larger. It is now often crammed with people. Many artists still draw in it and depend upon it. But artists may not wander the galleries and corridors and feel the museum and all the works in it are theirs, as Ms. Rockburne did then.

Yet the Metropolitan is still the institution, more than any other, that enabled her to develop her thinking about geometry and space and establish dialogues with the art of the past that she maintains still. When she was asked to choose a museum, it was the Met. Last Saturday, she became a guide.

She started with Greek statuary, then moved to Pompeian painting, Venetian painting, Siene painting and Egyptian reliefs. All the art she spoke about depends upon geometry and an unusual way of using it. She is deeply involved with perspective. She is deeply involved with light. She insists on the value of words like "ecstasy" and "beauty" that are as forbidden in the art world now as they were when she began as an artist 40 years ago.

This visit to the Met let her know how far she had traveled. "Thirty years ago," she said, "I was causing myself all this pain. I did not know if I would be able to contribute to the body of art, and it seemed because I was a woman that I would never be shown. Now I am being photographed on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum, and it is a wonderful moment."

Ms. Rockburne speaks slowly, rhythmically, so softly that her firmness and feeling for provocation are easy to miss. In the one gallery where it was possible to sit, she stood. When talking about art that has lived with her a long time, she immediately found a particular distance and kept it, tending to move only from side to side, along a plane.

The Greek and Roman galleries are in the southern part of the museum, on the main floor. "Aphrodite" is a weathered Roman copy of a fifth-century Greek sculpture. It is

upright, voluptuous. The rounded volumes of the stomach and breast seem to grow or swell out of the columnar body. It may have been found in the Tiber.

"It used to be called 'Hera,'" Ms. Rockburne said with a smile. "Things change names, I've noticed, over the years."

"I spent a lot of time looking at this statue and actually drawing it," she said. "I analyzed it a lot in terms of the Golden Section" — the proportional system invented by the Greeks that she studies and never stops marveling at — "which I was just becoming interested in."

"There's something I find about the sculpture that is, and that I find to this day, thrilling. There is something about this curve and this straight line. It also seems to me in some

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A Modernist Looks to Geometry

"My work is not spontaneous," Dorothea Rockburne said. "I learned to work from studying, and I am inspired by other people's work."

Ms. Rockburne was born in Verdun, Quebec. She went to art school in Canada, then attended Black Mountain College, the celebrated experimental arts institution in North Carolina, where her daughter, Christine, was born. She arrived in New York in the mid-1950's, living first on East

89th Street, then moving to SoHo.

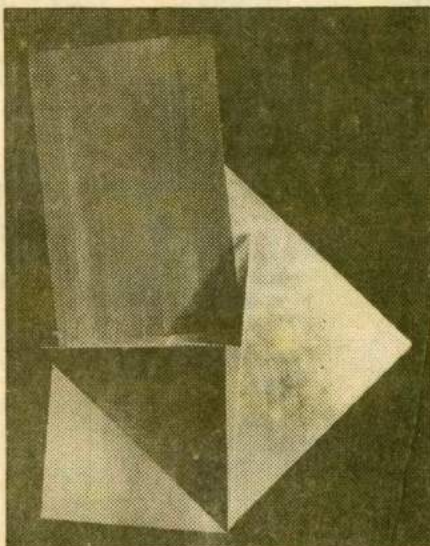
In the mid-60's, she danced with the experimentalist Judson Dance Theater, where she worked with Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris. Dance, she says, enabled her to identify herself with — in some sense to inhabit — the squares and rectangles of her paintings.

In the late 60's, she was a close friend of Sol LeWitt, who, like her, was involved with mathematics and perspective, and Mel Bochner, who was also making art out of the most ephemeral materials. Other friends were Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse and Brian O'Doherty. They are a distinguished and fearless group.

Many of her "Egyptian Paintings," from 1979 to 1981, are white; they were exhibited on white walls. Canvases fold and unfold like drapery and flowers — almost like origami. The paintings are at the same time in profile, like hieroglyphic processions, and frontal, like Pharaonic statuary. They are pure and concentrated, sensual and austere.

Her New York gallery show last month was called "Pascal and Other Concerns." The paintings included the richest golds and the warmest oranges and blues. The arrangements tended to be both compact and ascending. There was a play between square and triangular canvases, painted squares and triangles, closed and open surfaces, solid and translucent color. The work is declarative and sure: Ms. Rockburne titles her paintings near the beginning of the pictorial process. It is also a journey, along edges, across surfaces, into shapes, through art.

M. B.



"Pascal, State of Grace" (1986-87), an oil paint and gold leaf on linen, by Dorothea Rockburne.

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way to relate a lot to the East. I love the belly.

"The thing that interested me so much about it is not just the esthetic value, but when you look at it from the side, it's almost a square. You don't think of the body as being square, you think of it as being thin. And it's really formed out of a rectangle. It's formed out of a block of stone, and it's very clear. This concept of taking a rectangle and, as Michelangelo once said, releasing it, is very appealing to me."

All of Ms. Rockburne's work is rigorous and elegant. Verticality is important. No matter how much a painting may seem to open and flower, it also climbs and holds the wall. When her paintings suggest hieratic figures, regality goes hand in hand with grace. The search for the perfect balance between an ever-richer spectrum of feelings and ideas produces a pitch that is unusually high and very much an artistic signature.

"When I was growing up in Montreal in the 40's," she said, "much of the art that I was surrounded with was ugly. Art brut, for instance, was being encouraged in art school. I was told that art always started out looking ugly, and then it got beautiful with time, and I was noticing that it really didn't. I felt and feel defiant and rebellious in those areas and not like following. I made an early decision to fly in the eye of the hurricane and study the classics. That's why I took the job here."

Ancient References

There was a brief stop, near the entrance to the Greek and Roman section, to view a badly damaged Pompeian panel. Against a red background are two figures, a naked man and a clothed reclining woman. The face of the woman, particularly the eyes, reminded Ms. Rockburne of Egyptian mummy portraits. She finds in the work a way of drawing in painting — a way of using line almost spontaneously and independently but always in harmony with shape and color — that reminds her of de Kooning. She also finds in the immediacy of the woman's face and eyes, almost jumping out of the background, something of a prototype for a de Kooning woman.

Venetian Painting

Moving to a gallery of Venetian painting at the back of the European painting section on the second floor, the pictorial issues remained very much the same.

Veronese's "Mars and Venus United by Love" includes a naked woman and a seated man who seems to be trying either to wrap a blue drape around her or to take it off. Behind them is a statue with a lewd expression on its face. To the right is a cherub trying to restrain a horse, which seems jealous of the attention its master is devoting to his lady. The compressed, unbalanced space helps make the scene not so much erotic as dirty.

"If you draw the cross down the center," Ms. Rockburne said, "and then you divide it down the middle, and then again across in a kind of classic grid for where the action is taking place, and then you divide the two halves again so that you are getting quarters, it's a very staid kind of grid. And yet it has all of this de Kooning space going on in it. Why is the nude three times as big as a horse — without actually dealing with perspectival space? It's very curious, it's very Mannerist."

"I also think it's a very perverse picture. Look what she's doing with her nipple. He's pulling this robe over her genitals. I mean it's all very weird. There's a kind of Mannerist statue going on in the background. It's very bizarre. And it has some innocent title. Also, she's a great nude with only her bracelet on, and her pearls."

Doesn't the nude suggest Manet? "Well, Manet's 'Olympia' and also the 'Déjeuner sur l'Herbe,' to me, are Mannerist paintings," she said. "It has something to do with the space,

something to do with the perversity of the subject matter. I think Mannerist painting, when it's at its best, spits, but in a gentle way."

Asked to define Mannerist space, she replied: "It is kind of voluminous. It's always kind of going up, up, and things get congested, and there is no exact vanishing point. However, it is not a flat space, and Mannerists tend to fool around with head sizes, very often making them much smaller, as in the Greek manner."

Directly across the gallery is Titian's "Venus and the Lute Player." Its subject is a Neo-Platonic argument about the relative merits of sight and sound. A young man playing a stringed instrument at the left looks at a nude woman holding a wind instrument at the right. In the background is an Arcadian landscape, perhaps suggesting the perfection to which sight and sound should aspire. The space, like the argument, swings back and forth.

"The musical instrument is in perspective," Ms. Rockburne said, pointing to the stringed instrument alongside the woman, "and so is the handle of the other stringed instrument. Everything else is going this way" — she swung her hand to the right — "or that way," swinging her hand to the left.

In front of the Titian, Ms. Rockburne spoke about perspective. "As I was looking at these paintings, we're talking mid-50's, early 60's, I was thinking a lot about space and perspective, and how to reintroduce perspective in a new way. That's always been an itch I haven't been exactly able to scratch."

Perspective at that time was "absolutely out," she said. "All painting was flat, and people talked about space in painting, talked about light colors coming forward and dark colors going backward, and they'd say the front of that painting is coming forward. I never understood what they were talking about because a painting is a flat canvas. If you're not



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using actual perspective, to read those things into it seemed to me rather bizarre."

Throughout her career, Ms. Rockburne has been trying to combine flatness and perspective. Although her paintings may suggest transparency and interiority, they are flat. They do not suggest a Renaissance window on the world. They move sideways and up, along the plane of the wall. But her triangles and diagonals also suggest perspective movement. The combination helps make the paintings fast and slow, searching and still.

Sieneese Inspirations

If perspective is a primary concern for Ms. Rockburne, light is another. She has used gold leaf in her paintings. One of the characteristics of Sieneese paintings — including those a few galleries away in the Metropolitan, such as Sassetta's "Madonna and Child With Angels" and Giovanni di Paolo's "Madonna and Child With Saints Monica, Augustine, John the Baptist and Nicholas of Tolentino" — is a gold background.

"I certainly was inspired to use gold by seeing the gold in Italy, in the churches, especially when there's low light and the gold has not been tampered with," Ms. Rockburne said.

The feet of St. John the Baptist in the painting by Giovanni di Paolo are almost phosphorescent. "To really get a true color, you get it by more than one layer," she said. "To me, immediate painting was not an advance — keeping in mind that I love van Gogh, and I am not condemning what other people do — but for me I wanted to do what he did in those feet, but in a new way, again reinvent it."

What did he do? "Through that use of the classic green underpainting and then overpainting with a pink glaze and allowing the green to show through — just in parts — perhaps it was done the other way around but I don't think so — it allows for a kind of rounding of the forms, and a description of what he is doing, and it stops them from being flat. It creates a luminosity."

One of Ms. Rockburne's favorite paintings is Giovanni di Paolo's "Creation of the World and the Expulsion From Paradise," in the Robert Lehman Wing on the ground floor. The painting is small. It includes a huge wheel — like a "target" of Ken-

neth Noland or Jasper Johns — which Ms. Rockburne believes is the "wheel of the world, of life." The wheel is rolling toward Adam and Eve, driving them out of the garden.

"There's something about the simple geometry of it," she said. "It's divided in half, and it's got a circle filling more than one-half of it. And then there's a mystery going on, a metaphysical mystery, and I don't know what it is."

"But also I see the expulsion from the garden, which is a classic subject. It's very curious to me to paint the angel and then to put a flower over the genitalia in that way; it's so odd, isn't it? There are lots of little nuances. I find the color in this painting just extraordinary, the way the wheel is — the blue and the gray and the white and the red and the green — it takes a lot of color range."

Ms. Rockburne's responses are very much those of a painter. She cares little whether a sculpture is a copy, whether a painting was executed by several hands, whether re-

liefs are so fragmented that the whole cannot even be imagined. What matters is the object in front of her and her eye.

"I am not an art historian," she said in the Egyptian gallery just off the main entrance, where her tour ended, surrounded by Amarna reliefs. "My looking at these things and seeing things in them that are useful to me has nothing to do with presenting a sense of art history. It's only the things that I am taking in a personal and passionate way to use for myself. You know, I did a series called the 'Egyptian Paintings,' which have to do with the way the light falls, especially when you are outside in Egypt. In the white things, where you find the shadow and the line, there's a third color that occurs, which is alive and dazzling, and . . . it's those kinds of things. What is interesting to me are the objects and how they relate to my inner voice."

Ms. Rockburne spent four weeks in Egypt in 1981. She was asked how her "Egyptian Paintings," made before the trip, could have actually been in-



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fluenced by Egyptian light.

"There's an aspect of my personality that I don't understand," she said. "As I was making the paintings, I was following an inner knowledge. I knew how those things were, and when I saw them they were exactly that way. When I saw the light falling on bas reliefs, particularly of Ramses, they were exactly as I knew they would be. Particularly the way the light hit those curved surfaces. I truly do not know how I knew that."

For Ms. Rockburne, Egyptian art is a passion. "My fascination with Egyptian art began with a book my mother had when I was a child," she said.

The 25 fragments of reliefs from Tell el Amarna, Akhenaton's capital city, which she visited, are in one small gallery. They date from the 14th century B.C. They depict ceremonial rituals. The paint on some of them is still visible.

The Amarna reliefs are dynamic and flat. The feeling for line is so elegant and sure that line becomes a force in itself. The succession of nearly identical movements, of arms, or legs or pheasants, creates an insistent, almost hypnotic rhythm. They suggest Eadweard Muybridge's sequential photographs of the body in movement. Ms. Rockburne describes some Egyptian works as "Muybridgelike constructions."

What may be most surprising in these reliefs is the understanding of positive and negative space. The space between figures has as much vitality and importance as the figures themselves. It not only frames hands and heads, but also creates a sense that the figures are protected and guarded by air.

Ms. Rockburne believes that Egyptian reliefs "really address the kind of space that happens in analytic Cubism and in Seurat." She sees the space in these reliefs as a "tight space," she said. "It's a space that very often takes in all sides from a frontal view."

Just as surprising is the sense that the stone has a glow. "I looked at the Egyptian things from the Brooklyn Museum, and I looked at them and I looked at them because they were so beautiful, and because the way they draw light to themselves — now this gallery here has incandescent lighting, and they're still drawing light into themselves — and I think that luminosity, as in the Sieneese paintings, is working like a glaze.

"It pulls the light in and pushes it out, and it bends it, and it creates lines, and it's doing this wonderful dance of light, and I looked at them for these beautiful, beautiful things, and it took a long time to realize that other people had always been looking at these things, and not only had they been looking at them, but they had been utilizing them."

From her respect for ancient and Renaissance art, it is not surprising that Ms. Rockburne does not believe that art progresses over time. Or that she does not believe in rupture. "There is none," she said. "It's not possible. There is no anti-art. There's only art. It doesn't matter what anybody says. The Urinal is a beautiful object and an empowered object, because Duchamp isolated it, and it has a kind of light in it that I find very similar to the Egyptian wall reliefs."

Miracle of Vermeer

After leaving the museum, the conversation continued over soup and coffee. Ms. Rockburne again recalled the beginning of her career:

"Life was moving me in the direction of wanting things that were harmonious and beautiful, because that was the most radical thing I could do at that time. I felt that things that were surrounding me that were beautiful, in music and ancient art, were ecstatic and so beautiful that it hurt, and I wanted to move my work in that direction — like Glenn Gould's last recording of the 'Goldberg Variations.'"

After speaking about paintings by Masaccio and Malevich as examples of ecstatic art, she was asked about Vermeer. "I am passionate about Vermeer," Ms. Rockburne said, "again because of the bending of the light."

"When light comes in through the window in Vermeer," she explained, "it illuminates a very specific area, but the actual way in which the available light in the room is picking up that area is the way in which the layers of paint are put down, particularly — I don't know what he did with white but it's quite miraculous — so that the light is trapped between layers, so that the light, although while in the painting it is very often coming in from the left, through the window, the way in which you're really feeling the thrust of it is completely frontally, it's coming at you this way. It's like Borromini putting

light, twisting light down the staircase.

"What interests me in Vermeer is how much I need him. When I see his paintings, I think I'm looking at some ultimate truth, and I need it in my life to make my life complete."

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