



French, Jared (1905-1988)

by Joyce M. Youmans

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Dissatisfied with merely describing the material world, American painter Jared French devised a pictorial language to explore human unconsciousness and its relation to sexuality.

Most of his works consist of strange, statue-like, somnambulant figures with eerily blank facial expressions positioned in austere landscapes and plazas. Rendered in a technique so precise that they seem more real than real, French's paintings capture and maintain the viewer's interest and imagination.

At Amherst College in 1926, French met artist Paul Cadmus, who was briefly his lover and who became a life-long friend. After leaving Amherst, French took a job on Wall Street and then toured Europe with Cadmus between 1931 and 1933.

During the 1930s and 1940s, French was a member of the Cadmus circle that included such gay literary and artistic figures as George Platt Lynes, Lincoln Kirstein, George Tooker, Glenway Wescott, and Monroe Wheeler.

In 1937, French married artist Margaret Hoening, his and Cadmus's mutual friend. Cadmus did not seem upset with the marriage and the three were soon collaborating as members of the PAJAMA photographic group (the name of which was comprised of the first two letters of each of their given names).

The photographs taken by French, Hoening, and Cadmus are particularly important for documenting the gay and artistic community coalescing at Fire Island in the period from 1937 to 1945. The Fire Island pictures influenced French's painting during the 1940s and 1950s.

Carl Jung's *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* also heavily influenced French's artistic output. In this book, Jung proposes the existence of a collective unconscious, defined as an ancient memory inherent in the human mind. According to Jung, each individual inherits the combined knowledge and experience of the entire human species throughout its millennia of existence.

Appropriately, then, archaic art from ancient Egypt and Greece inspired French's visually repetitive human figures, which represent the whole of humanity and, by extension, its mental state.

An analysis of French's paintings reveals the central role sexuality plays in the artist's conception of humanity. In the tempera painting entitled *Washing the White Blood from Daniel Boone* (1939), American Indians symbolically wash away Boone's European ancestry to make him part of the collective unconscious, here represented by the Indians' culture that, compared to that of the Western world, is archaic.

Boone's metamorphosis includes a sexual awakening. Surrounded by incredibly muscular, nearly nude male Indians, he stands in the middle of the canvas, arms outstretched, wearing obtrusively feminine underwear: tight, light pink hip-huggers laced up the center with a dark blue ribbon. This scenario suggests that the painting is an exploration of Jung's concept of the *anima*, or man's repressed feminine aspect.

French addresses the *anima* in other works, including the tempera painting *Woman* (1947). In this work, a female figure appears to rise magically from the sea, a symbol of the unconscious, in the background. After her strange birth, she physically multiplies. French evokes the mysterious power of the *anima* by seamlessly weaving four different views of the figure into a single composition.

During the 1960s, French radically altered his imagery. He began drawing fantastic biomorphic creatures that, at first glance, look like weird rock formations. On closer inspection, however, fragments of human torsos, heads, pelvises, and genitalia emerge. These later works create the impression that primordial energy heaves on anthropomorphic landscapes.

French made paintings out of only a few of these arresting drawings. In one such work, entitled *Nest* (1968-1969), a mass of fleshy, cartilaginous forms appears to mutate atop a seaside cliff. Somewhat horrifically, this hermaphroditic creature, made up of orifices, buttocks, faces, and spines, seems to have impregnated itself and is hatching its egg on a nest of flesh and bone.

Throughout his career, Jared French produced a fascinating body of imaginative art. His artistic development is palpable; while his earlier works capture psychological states of being, his later drawings and paintings seem to transform the human body into a symbol of spirit.

Strange and, sometimes eerie, his works probe into a deep, subhuman layer of the psyche. They seem just beyond reason and understanding, and consequently, prove incredibly engaging to the viewer.

However, in the latter part of his career, French fell out of favor with art critics and art collectors. At the end of his life, he was living in Rome, virtually in seclusion.

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