

## **Harry Brorby's Artistic Progression and Influence: 1945-1973**

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Harry Brorby was a man who at one time was a large part of the West Michigan community, an artist who exhibited works in places like Detroit Art Institute and The Museum of Modern Art, a person who in recent past has fallen into obscurity. He left the legacy of his *Yellow Series*, a few notable prints, and sixteen boxes of personal items and information. In this archival wake, I seek to explore Harry's progression as an artist, from his college years to his final prolific artistic endeavors as a painter. When rebuilding an artist's legacy from primary resources, one often runs into the problem of balancing facts and conjecture. My approach to this topic centers around building a possible trajectory of Harry's artistic endeavors through the usage of primary sources, and art history to provide a wholesome yet distinct perspective on Brorby's ambitions and progression.

### **The Harvard Years: academic papers (1943-1950)**

Harry's undergraduate career was a source of intellectual exploration. He academically matured during a time of great artistic innovation with the burgeoning of Abstract Expressionism. Abstract Expressionism was a major American art movement that gained international influence, which means Harry began his art career amidst a pivotal time in art history. Even more, Harry began his academic career at Harvard during the last two years of World War II. Little is known about the specifics of Harry's endeavors at the Pennsylvania Academy at Harvard. We know he studied at the Oxbow Summer School in 1945<sup>1</sup> and took a year off in 1947 to paint in Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently the content of his artwork from 1947-48 reflects his experience at Oxbow and his travels to Mexico. Beyond timeline information, glimpses of objective information on Brorby's artistic views are seen in a handwritten manuscript detailing his artistic roots, and some of his academic papers during his final years at

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<sup>1</sup> Brorby, Harry. *My Roots Are*, N.D. manuscript. The Harry Brorby Collection, Hope College.

<sup>2</sup> Need to find source, taken from timeline

the academy. The content of these papers will be discussed first to provide context for Harry's academic interests and allow for parallels to be drawn with his artwork.

Both of Harry's art history essays recovered from the archives aimed to compare two works of art from contemporary artists of his day. First, in May 7, 1949 Harry submitted a paper for his fine arts 170b class comparing the color lithographs, *The Tightrope Walker* by Paul Klee, and *Athena* by Georges Braque (Figures 1-2).<sup>3</sup> Harry's essay overall is a strong piece of intellectual discourse. His writing style displays a cerebral form of sincerity. Through much of the paper Harry deconstructs the artists' individual usage of line and, in doing so, also draws assumptions about the artists' dispositions. Two specific statements in his thesis mark this transition of line quality informing artist disposition. Harry states,

Braque, with his masculine, and resulting planar relationships; Klee, with his very brittle, precise, subtle, more suggestive approach. In this case, Braque is the extrovert, dealing with decorative shapes, their suggestive mystery not quite so demanding, whereas Klee focuses on his inner world of suggestibility, thereby using content as one of his more important elements.<sup>4</sup>

It was a bold move for Brorby to assert that an artist's line quality speaks back to the artist's frame of mind. Though there is other evidence (that will be addressed later) to suggest that Harry had a particular interest in the psychological aspect of artistic creation. He hints at this further stating, "The line used is more sophisticated than the thick outline of Braque, being much thinner and more delicate. The effect is not as decorative as Braque's, and it is used with more suggestibility, more realistic significance (at least in a psychological sense)."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brorby, Harry. "1) *Paul Klee, Tightrope Walker* 2) *Braque Athena*." Essay. The Harry Brorby Collection, Hope College

<sup>4</sup> Brorby, 1) *Paul Klee*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Brorby, 1) *Paul Klee*, 1.

It is difficult to know the exact nature of the assignment in which Harry's essay was written in response to. Assuming that the assignment at some level was a visual analysis of two works, Harry took a formally specific angle for his response. He chose to relate the formal qualities of line back to the mindset of the artist. A year earlier in another essay of similar comparative format, Brorby explores this notion of artistic disposition. His essay titled, *Max Beckman and Marc Chagall — a study of temperaments* compares the works, *Head of a Woman* by Max Beckman and *Acrobat with a Violin* by Marc Chagall (Figures 3-4). Harry says at the end of the first page, "There is a quiet humility, as compared to the gaudy sweetness of Chagall. There is sweat and suffering—Beckman loves to suffer—but there is great refinement in it. Beckman is the roll of thunder, Chagall is the flash of lighting."<sup>6</sup> His analysis of Max Beckman's work goes beyond content again towards Beckman's psychological state of suffering. Brorby later states, "The woodcut is very well suited to Beckman's pained, sensitive expression. It is a medium for masters of selection, a selection exploiting the accents to their greatest degree of psychological and structurally functional usefulness. Beckman is such a master."<sup>7</sup>

In both essays, Harry displays this fondness for humility and suffering. Both Paul Klee and Max Beckman reveal this authentic quality of rawness to them. Both works have uneasiness about them. Looking at Harry's works during this time in some ways resonate with these qualities. His work *Mexican Landscape* (figure 5) is particularly apt example of these qualities.<sup>8</sup> The line quality of this piece contains this aggressive rawness, which makes it initially difficult

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<sup>6</sup> Brorby, Harry. "Max Beckman and Marc Chagall — a study of temperaments" Essay. The Harry Brorby Collection, Hope College

<sup>7</sup> Brorby, *Max Beckman and Marc Chagall*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Brorby, Harry. *Mexican Landscape*, 1948. Guache, pen & ink, and pastel on paper.

to distinguish the landscape portrayed. The subject matter is modest and sober landscape of a Mexican countryside. Though Harry's abrupt, diagonal marks transform the tranquil subject matter into a threateningly grim scene.

### **Artist Roots Manuscript: past influences on Harry**

Apart from Brorby's academic writing endeavors, he jotted his 'artistic roots' so to speak on a few pieces of small stationary. Based on the dates written, Harry most likely would have written this reflection in the late 1950's to early 1960's. In this document, Brorby breaks his roots into three separate categories: painters and lithographers that he came into contact with at Ox Bow Summer School; the work and teaching of Mauricio Lasansky when he was doing his masters in printmaking at The University of Iowa; and the New Mexico Santos.<sup>9</sup> With each of these influences, he attaches certain aesthetic qualities and artistic methodologies that he learned.

In the first category he states:

(1945)The work of Chicago painters Francis Chapin, Max Kahn, Eleanor Coen, George Buehr, and Milwaukee artist, Robert Von Neumaun. I studied with them at Ox- Bow Summer School of Painting in Saugatuck Mich. [Emphasis on color, paint quality, spontaneous expression, figure interpretation (Robert Von Neumaun)].<sup>10</sup>

Based on Harry's description, the statutes posed by the artists he worked with at Ox-Bow have strong leaning towards Expressionism. With Expressionism, artwork serves to invoke a subjective emotional experience as opposed to realistically documenting subject matter.

Emphasis is placed individual experience and perspective of a piece. Brorby's paintings after 1945 emulated these emphases. An apt example is Brorby's painting *Mexican Cityscape* (figure 6), created in 1947.<sup>11</sup> The exact medium is not confirmed, though both visually and contextually it is allegedly gouache on paper. The viewer 's attention is initially struck by the vertical lines in

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<sup>9</sup> Brorby, Harry. *My Roots Are*, N.D. manuscript. The Harry Brorby Collection, Hope College.

<sup>10</sup> Brorby, *My Roots Are*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Brorby, *My Roots Are*, 1.

the foreground, suggesting a balcony view of a city. The piece has raw material quality to it. The crude black vertical lines contextually become a handrail based on the perspective of the city in the middle and background. There is a painterly application that provides a visceral overview of the city environment, while still reminding the viewer of the paints material nature. The saturated colors nod towards an effort to capture essence of color within the cityscape. Overall this work seems to simultaneously invoke an otherworldly sentiment and a material physicality through his heavy mark making and sodden color application.

Upon further research into the artists mentioned by Harry, Francis Chapin's work stood out in his similar aesthetic to Brorby's paintings from the late 1940's. Chapin's painting, *Wet Afternoon* (figure 7), strongly parallels the aesthetic of *Mexican Cityscape*.<sup>12</sup> The heavy/course quality of the lines that make up the trees in *Wet Afternoon* closely mirror the textural surface of the vertical balcony. Both retain areas of saturated color and contrasting patches of untouched whitespace peaking throughout. The amounts of similarity between these pieces confirm Brorby's aesthetic absorption of some of the techniques and ideology of Chapin's work.

Beyond influence from Chapin, Harry's undergraduate work has geometric tendencies. This deconstruction of subject matter is apparent both in his landscapes and portraits. Two fitting examples both from January 1948 are, *Houses of The Worker*<sup>13</sup> (figure 8), and *Young Girl in Communion Dress*<sup>14</sup> (figure 9). In *Houses of The Worker*, Harry choose a subject matter of simplistic mission style houses that have a static rigidity to begin with. In his drawing, he pushes this frontal composition further into abstraction through simplified forms in the surrounding

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<sup>12</sup> "Wet Afternoon by Francis Chapin." *Wet Afternoon by Francis Chapin on Artnet*. Artnet Worldwide Corporation, 1 Jan. 2015. Web. 13 Apr. 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Brorby, Harry. *Young Girl In Communion Dress*, January 1948. guache, oil paint, and varnish

<sup>14</sup> Brorby, Harry. *Houses of the Worker*, January 1948. guache, and pen & ink on paper.

landscape. This aesthetic decision makes the work feel flatter almost as if the houses and land were stacked on top of each other as stratified layers. *Girl in Communion Dress* achieves an even greater flatness. The girl's stiff teardrop shaped head and stern neck make for an austere mood. The vertical heavy line demarcating the center of the face speaks back to the cubism of Picasso. Even more, the perceptive lack of background space gives the piece a planar quality.

The later part of Brorby's undergraduate career was shaped by his experience at the Oxbow Summer School. From what I surmise, Harry's interest and journey into abstraction came into full force after his involvement there. Up until his entry into University of Iowa, all of the documented artwork that is in the Harry Brorby collection consists of paintings, drawings, and mixed media. This being the case, Brorby must have acquired some interest in printmaking to elicit a pursuing a Masters degree in printmaking. Robert Von Neumann and Max Kahn both worked in printmaking. Could have Brorby's interest arose from their influence, or are there other sources for his trajectory towards printmaking, or were their other motivations?

### **University of Iowa: Harry's graduate career in printmaking**

Meanwhile, by chance in 1949, several publicized opinions and printmaking exhibitions created a timely recapitulation of the forties. Una Johnson, Curator of the Brooklyn Museum and the guiding spirit of its displays of contemporary prints, wrote in the foreword to the catalogue of the Third National Print Annual Exhibition, "Rarely, I believe, have individual jurors been more sympathetic and more concerned about the contemporary artist and his work. The modern print has come out of its precious portfolio and onto the wall where it holds its own with other works of art. . . . It is well suited to capture and record the tempo and mood of our time." Her commentary confirmed that modern prints were more welcome and culture of America.<sup>15</sup>

During the same time Harry was graduating from Harvard, contemporary printmakers were breaking the boundaries of past assumptions regarding the position of printmaking within the

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<sup>15</sup> Watrous, James. *American Printmaking: A Century of American Printmaking, 1880-1980*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Madison: U of Wisconsin, 1984. 168. Print.

assumed fine arts hierarchy. Avant-garde processes, content, and aesthetics pushed printmakers towards artistic precedence. In my opinion Harry's timely position and resource base allowed him to see the potentiality of printmaking, which played a major role in his decision to pursue a Masters in printmaking under Mauricio Lasansky at University of Iowa.

“Mauricio Lasansky had launched the seminal program enterprise in intaglio printmaking at the University of Iowa...The felicitous developments that derived prototype for programs and workshops at many colleges and universities after his students fanned out across America to teach intaglio.”<sup>16</sup>

In other words, for Harry to be under Lasansky, it meant that he would be a part of the cutting edge methodologies of printmaking during that time.

After Harry's enrollment at The University of Iowa, his artwork took a distinct aesthetic shift. From what is known, Lasansky experimented with every technique know at the time on the same plate. Successive experimentation on his plates created a complex layering effect.<sup>17</sup> In addition, often Lasansky's content was heavy and at times even grotesque. His more well know prints displayed the atrocities of the Nazis during World War II. This combination of content and textural complexity makes for visceral imagery.

Harry's work during his MFA program combines the layered, overworked aesthetic of Lasansky with Harry's burgeoning interest in the geometric abstraction of forms. Most of the evidence for Brorby's transition towards geometric abstraction is seen in the progression of his prints and paintings. Harry's etching, *The Cornfield* (figure 10), created in 1951, is a fitting example of his aesthetic transition.<sup>18</sup> When comparing *The Cornfield* to *Mexican Landscape*

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<sup>16</sup> Watrous, James. *American Printmaking: A Century of American Printmaking, 1880-1980*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Madison: U of Wisconsin, 1984. 161-162. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Overvoorde, Chris. "Interview with Chris Overvoorde." Interview by author. March 25, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Brorby, Harry. *The Cornfield*, 1951. etching and engraving.



(figure 5), a distinct shift is made towards the emphasis of shape and form over line.<sup>19</sup> In *Mexican Landscape*, line weaves in and out of descriptive mark making, it acts as unifying element rather than a driver of content. However in *The Cornfield*, line serves to describe the form of the crops amongst surrounding dark value, and provides textural interplay between outlines and filled shapes. The effect of this interplay creates a tension between perceived and imagined form. Aside from function, the crisp line quality produced from etching gives a subtly contrived rigidity to the crops in *The Cornfield* that is not evident in *Mexican Landscape*.

Two years later, Harry's painting titled, *Germantown Mansion* (figure 11), overtly moves toward geometric abstraction.<sup>20</sup> Almost all descriptive elements of mansion in the painting are reduced to simplified conglomeration of squares, rectangles, and triangles. In *Germantown Mansion*, Harry started moving beyond content into the realm of non-objective painting. This similar aesthetic is deconstructed further in his later work, *Sleep* (Figure 12), which seemingly simplifies a figure into two, texturally rich rectangles. With regards to the archives, *Sleep* is the closest painting in date to his subsequent *Yellow Series*. The formal qualities of abstraction in *Sleep* are approaching the *Yellow Series* in non-objectivity, but their still a wide gap between the two.

### **New Mexican Santos: Exploration of Meaning Beyond Religiosity**

The third link the bridges this gap is his interest in New Mexican Santos (religious imagery). New Mexican Santos is distinctive type of Christian religious iconography that originated in Spain. Often this imagery consisted of wood carved, and painted saints created as

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<sup>19</sup> Brorby, Harry. *Mexican Landscape*, 1948.

<sup>20</sup> Brorby, Harry. *Germantown Mansion*, 1953, oil.

instructional tools for telling bible stories.<sup>21</sup> Harry states in his *My Roots* manuscript, “New Mexican Santos. (Frontality, strength of imagery, simplicity of a sculptural concept, expressionistic figure interpretation in terms of a ~~simplified~~ geometricized style, color and pattern.”<sup>22</sup> From the artwork that has been discussed, figures 9, 10, 11, and 12 all display elements of Harry’s described influence of the New Mexican Santos. Though there is the curious case of Harry’s sculptural series: *Nur People*. In this series Harry creates assemblages that serve as cultural vignettes of the Nur people. A sculpture by Harry called, *Woman Washing Clothes* (figure 13), displays this less than life size, mixed media assemblage of materials composed in a scene.<sup>23</sup> In isolation to Harry’s other work, this sculpture seems to be obscure and unrelated. But when paired with Fray Andres Garcia’s *El Santo Entierro* (Christ in the Sepulcher) (figure 14), Harry’s approach suggests a stronger relation to the New Mexican Santos. There is the connection of preservation. Garcia’s work is preserving the religious memory of Christ, while Harry’s work is preserving the cultural memory of the Nur people. I would suggest that Harry was interested in the aesthetics and function of the New Mexican Santos. He was interested in the idea of venerating and or preserving memory through artistic manifestations. However, I do not believe sculpture held Brorby’s interest for long. In a summary of an interview with Mary Porter, a good friend of the Brorby family, it was recorded:

Harry and family moved to NM/AZ because he was not finding the inspiration he needed to continue his work here and he was moving heavily in the direction of artifacts from that area... of I would suggest that Harry found sculpture to be too literal, so he decided to push non-objective painting to its limits with his final yellow series. He was a collector of American Primitive Art from the west- NM, AZ even South America. He collected: Santos Crucifix, Altar fronts from itinerant missionaries, tribal masks from Central

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<sup>21</sup> *Santos: Enduring Images of Northern New Mexican Village Churches*, 28. 1st ed. Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Brorby, *My Roots Are*, 1

<sup>23</sup> Brorby, Harry. *Untitled Sculpture (Washing Woman)*, N.D. assemblage

America and Mexico, Death Carts from flagellants-religious fanatics who do penance made carts to draw up mountains with a skeletal figure and a tuft of hair on the head inside- a religious custom in Mexico...<sup>24</sup>

I would suggest that after some time Harry lost interest in creating sculptural work because it was too literal for him, so he decided push the limits of non-objective with his final *Yellow Series*.

### **The Yellow Series: testing the non-objective limits**

Arguably one of the most prolific and esoteric endeavors of Harry Brorby's career, the *Yellow Series* has a conjectured span of six years from 1967 through 1973. During this time he created dozens of paintings, sketches, and watercolors. Many of his is paintings created consisted of canvases completely covered in bright yellow pain with select areas of white space outlined in black paint. Without context it is almost impossible to figure out the context or meaning of these painting because of their non-objective nature. Brorby's painting, No. 15 (figure 15), aptly displays the mysteriousness of his series. Mary Porter provided more information during her second interview regarding the content of Harry's yellow series. In the summary of her interview it states, "She discussed his method of painting his yellow series. He would lay down black marks and then work inward with yellow. He would work and rework the same theme over and over. When he was in Tucson he began working on a series that involved bricks and corners."<sup>25</sup> *No. 15* in context of this quote speaks back to brickwork, with yellow signifying the brick, and the black outlined spaces of white signifying the grout. From this evidence I would argue that

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<sup>24</sup> Porter, Mary. "Interview with Mary Porter," Interview by Amanda Bennick, Nancy Laning, and Sai Wang. February 9, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Porter, Mary. "Interview with Mary Porter," Interview by Amanda Bennick, Nancy Laning, and Sai Wang. February 13, 2015.

Brorby seemed to be interested in the interplay of the form and line of brickwork and the tension between physicality and representation.

Taking the following suppositions in account, Harry Brorby's progression as an artist proves to be a reasonably logical evolution from representation to abstraction, though much can still be learned about the reasoning behind his later work. Brorby's investigation of line, form, and meaning exhibit bravura of artistic exploration. In the end, Harry demonstrated himself as an artist who pushed the formal and conceptual boundaries of representation and abstraction; a man who deserves a place in the cultural history of West Michigan.

**Images**

Figure 1  
Paul Klee  
*Tightrope Walker*  
1923



Figure 2  
Georges Braque  
*Athena*  
1932



Figure 3  
Max Beckmann  
Head of a Woman

Not Available

Figure 4  
Marc Chagall  
*Acrobat with a Violin*  
1924



Figure 5  
Harry Brorby  
*Mexican Landscape*  
1948



Figure 6  
Harry Brorby  
*Mexican Cityscape*  
1947



Figure 7  
Francis Chapin  
*Wet Afternoon*  
N.D.



Figure 8  
Harry Brorby  
*Houses of the Worker*  
1948



Figure 9



Harry Brorby  
*Girl In Communion Dress*  
1948



Figure 10  
Harry Brorby  
*The Cornfield*  
1951



Figure 11  
Harry Brorby  
*Germantown Mansion*  
1953



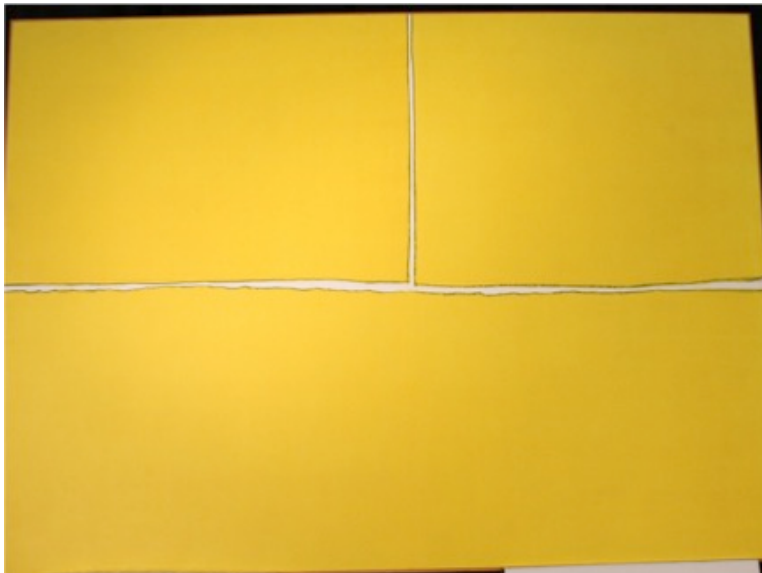
Figure 13  
Harry Brorby  
*Untitled (Woman Washing Clothing)*  
1964-1967



Figure 14  
Fray Andres Garcia  
*El Santo Entierro (Christ in the Sepulcher)*  
Late 18<sup>th</sup> century



Figure 15  
Harry Brorby  
*No. 15*  
1969



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