

1974

# Beyond Noah's Arc, Ten Panel Polyptych

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pdm

BEYOND NOAH'S ARC

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TEN PANEL POLYPTYCH

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(TITLE)

BY

DENNIS D. BERGER

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1974

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS . . . . .	iii
INTRODUCTION. . . . .	1
BEYOND NOAH'S ARC - TEN PANEL POLYPTYCH	
Chapter	
I. THE PROCESS OF PAINTING <u>BEYOND NOAH'S ARC</u> . . .	2
Evolution of <u>Beyond Noah's Arc</u>	
II. SOME HISTORICAL POLYPTYCHS COMPARED TO <u>BEYOND NOAH'S ARC</u> . . . . .	11
Introduction	
Broderlam	
Campin	
Bosch	
David	
Van Der Weyden	
Memling	
Michelangelo	
Rubens	
Delacroix	
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	16

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate		Page
I.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Sept. 24, 1973. . . . .	4
II.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Rough Sketch Outline. . . . .	5
III.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Oct. 15, 1973. . . . .	6
IV.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Oct. 22, 1973. . . . .	7
V.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Oct. 24, 1973. . . . .	7
VI.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Oct. 30, 1973. . . . .	8
VII.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Nov. 10, 1973. . . . .	9
VIII.	Beyond Noah's Arc, Alternate Arrangements of 10 panels. . . . .	.10

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the problems which were encountered during the conception, progress and conclusion of a ten panel mural. This mural came to be called Beyond Noah's Arc. It was titled this because, while searching for a title, it came to mind that the near centered arc format of the mural, with flowing forms and shapes in and out of the arc, seemed to have some sort of futuristic relation to the Biblical story of Noah's Ark.

In Chapter Two of this paper, a brief description is given of previous painters who have been concerned with polyptychs. These polyptychs are then compared to the author's polyptych, Beyond Noah's Arc.

## CHAPTER I

The phenomenon of perceiving the identity and meaning of art should be an important and significant goal in an artist's work if it is to be a goal at all. Unfortunately, no artist can depict the process of perception, a conscious awareness of objects or images through the senses, if it occurs in an infinite field but must be painted on a limited plane. If an artist tries to paint perceptual processes, the painting becomes a diagram of perception. Perception is further complicated by the fact that no two paintings are alike, and each painting is subject to a symbolic interpretation which the viewer brings to bear on objects and their location in space. When an artist uses his imagination in the depiction of a painting which has dream-like qualities and remembrances of people, places and things, it becomes a problem to record these in paint. There is an additional problem of the possible chasm between the viewer's limited relationship to the work and the much more involved relationship the artist feels for it.

In the seventeenth century, Dutch still-life artists could assign meaning, such as vanity or appetite, to realistic objects without compromising the concreteness of the things shown. However, this cannot be done without a shared set of symbols as those which existed and which were commonly understood in the seventeenth century. Some sign systems that we now have in common are provided by advertising and the mass media. Since these sign systems are fallible and imprecise as symbols, they can present the contemporary artist with a communication barrier between his work and its viewers, particularly if the work is abstract.

In Beyond Noah's Arc, a mural consisting of ten canvases, the intention was to convey a set of different distances or planes as well as possible multiple viewpoints for different images in separate frames. There is no direct correlation between the scenes depicted and an ideal point of view from



which the spectator can occupy the equivalent of the artist's original viewpoint. There is, in other words, a dissolution of vantage point so that the spectator is put into a kind of nowhere. The total effect tends to delay awareness of total relationships and tends to minimize the realization of the forms themselves. This means the opposite of the making real of something imagined. This is probably the case in Beyond Noah's Arc. It was evolved through imagination and putting together sketches. It was transformed as it progressed through the changing of forms, ideas, and more sketches. Painting the mural was a commitment which proved to be very exciting, rewarding and draining. Beyond that, it was a unique experience to work on a multiple panel painting.

The idea of using many different images, in a personal style, on a two-dimensional surface, to evoke interest and mystery in the mind of the viewer seemed very important.

A quality of "thereness", or being able to see images painted as realistic impressions that are non-photographic, is the stylistic quality of the canvases. Examined at close range, there is no intricate detail, but, at the optimum distance, the imagery becomes very strong. This was of great importance in the work. This is comparable to the viewing distance necessary in looking at a billboard or many large scale objects.

Many problems are encountered when doing a painting of any size. One problem is the distance required for optimum viewing. If the viewer is too far away, the work cannot be seen. If he is too close and the work is not detailed, more distance is required. This presents problems in displaying a work. An optimum distance can be achieved by walking towards a painting and waiting for it to come into focus. At that point, stop and look.

In Beyond Noah's Arc, the whole painting is based upon visual imaginings which are to be recognized at different rates of speed, depending, more or less, on how one looks at the painting and comes to attach importance to different areas.



## EVOLUTION OF BEYOND NOAH'S ARC

As the painting progressed, it was photographed in six different stages of development from the beginning to completion. This was to show progression, as well as what my original ideas were and how they were altered or enhanced by the addition of new material.

During the three month working period, many problems occurred which caused frustration but which ended or lead to putting forth effort and much thought and devotion.

In the beginning, figuring out the size was a problem, since the objective was to do an extremely large piece which would be visually impressive but not extremely heavy. This led to the use of heavy weight cotton duck canvas and one by three inch pine for lightness and strength. After construction of the ten thirty-three by forty-five inch canvases, they were primed several times with a latex emulsion ground, then sanded.

Complete sketches were not made, so that the painting process could proceed naturally without the inhibition of pre-determined drawing ideas. First, the framework was sketched and painted. Then, rough outlines of images were lightly sketched on the canvas.

PLATE I  
Sept. 24, 1973



Having a number of sketches caused a problem of wanting to use too many different images and deciding how to combine related images. After editing and rearrangement, different sketches were combined into one draft with an outline form, using different frames for different images.

PLATE II  
Sketch of Draft  
Outline of Painting



A working location, with enough room and light, caused some difficulty since room was also needed for the entire length of the canvases to be put together for study, sketching, photographs and an overall compositional outlook. As the painting progressed, work was done on two or three adjacent canvases at a time. The reason for this was not only that it was easier, but also, it seemed necessary to get the painting to "work" as smaller units as well as a total of ten.

With the suggestion of distance and value contrast, it was painted with the same emphasis on all panels and viewed in one whole piece.

With an impression of reality as a basis, placement of images on different planes, weaving through a dark framework, was used. The ten panels were then related by means of a subdued color pattern that seemed to flow as shown in the next photograph, PLATE III.

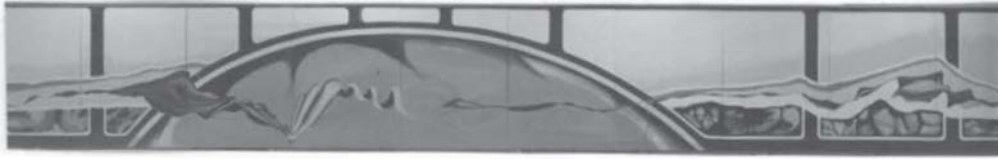
PLATE III  
Oct. 15, 1973



This plate shows the overall outline and two veins to the right and to the left of the arc. Images under the veins were painted early to see how the solid forms would work with the idea of leaving the majority of the upper framework open.

The next work was on the center arc section. The intention was to have the center section of light images in contrast to a dark background. New sketches on the canvas connected the images from the right and left veins, through the arc section.

PLATE IV  
Oct. 22, 1973



A great deal of time was spent experimenting with photographs taken through the lens of an opaque projector. After placing various materials on the tray of the projector, the effect, when looking through the lens, was photographed. Among the materials used in experimenting were mesh netting of varying consistencies, water, ink, dye and fluids of varying density, fabrics and food substances prepared and placed to create varying degrees of transparency. After studying the photographic results, images were put on canvas that related to the biomorphic photographs. Use of the projector was helpful in finding the right arrangements of forms and images and as a testing procedure.

The next photograph, PLATE V, shows how images were applied to the canvases.

PLATE V  
Oct. 24, 1973



Forms that were found through experimentation were then directly projected onto the central arc of the ten panels. This was done to get ideas about possible overlapping forms and value contrasts.



The mural became one large experiment. To get started on the center section, the majority of the previous light ground was painted dark. Then, fish netting was placed on the canvases and arranged to give an appearance of movement or a flowing effect. Next, a light coat of cream spray paint was applied through netting. After the paint was dry, the netting was removed. The unusual textural forms were then worked into by painting out and glazing over sections of the forms. The unusual forms that evolved out of this process gave many possibilities for progression of the center section of the mural.

What was happening in the mural suggested countless possibilities on canvas for future paintings as well as numerous directions this piece could take. They were then narrowed down to a single flow of forms.

Experiments were in size, proportion, image, color, form, and shape, technique, use of texture, as well as thought process on a large scale.

The source of much of the painted imagery was certainly subconscious and perhaps surfaced only through imagined thoughts, barely remembered or barely forgotten impressions. This seems to describe the nature of the forms in Beyond Noah's Arc. Personal feelings in the images are of flight, movement, air, water, life and death. The intention was to relate them into a continuous flow, passing through a make-believe world.

In the next photograph, PLATE VI, many additions are shown which were made in order to pull together the entire format. This was probably the largest step. Images needed to be joined, refined and made to flow more elegantly and more naturally. Many small adjustments were also made at this point.

PLATE VI  
Oct. 30, 1973



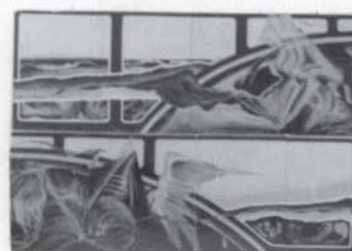
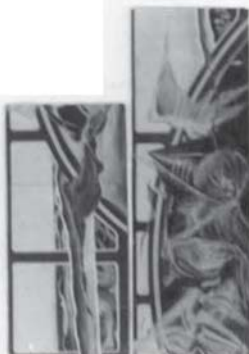
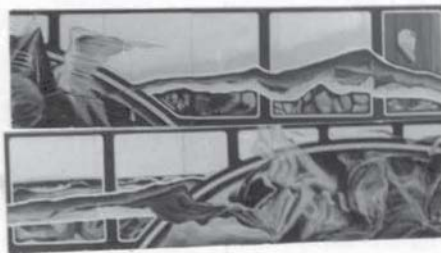
Previous mention was made of the intention of creating layered planes. From these planes, in the frontal arc portion, forms were to emerge from the dark, then run into the side tunnels or veins as shown in the next photograph, PLATE VII, which is Beyond Noah's Arc in completion. Portions of forms overlap the framework and project back into space through the framework. Each frame was intended to be identifiable separately, even though they also merge. Everything under the veins was to convey the appearance of existing on the same plane. The arc portion is to appear as the closest portion to the viewer, while the cloth images flowing out of the center into the veins are intended to be on another plane farther back and closer to the framework. At the far right, the door with the note, is to be set into the framework. The oceans at the far left are to be at a distant level or plane which leads to the infinite sky above and even farther back than the sky on the right. Tendrils flowing out of the center and around the framework above are intended to make the posts of the framework seem closer.

PLATE VII  
Nov. 10, 1973



Another objective during the painting process was to keep in mind how each panel would hold up as an individual painting. Along with this, the idea of having various combinations of separate panels in different orders occurred. Consideration was given to the possibility that the surface should be divided in half and stand the mural on end. Possible arrangements are shown in the following illustration, PLATE VIII.

PLATE VIII  
Illustration Showing Alternate Arrangements





## CHAPTER II

### SOME HISTORICAL POLYPTYCHS COMPARED TO BEYOND NOAH'S ARC

The practice of multiple panel painting flourished until the nineteenth century. The Churches used murals and multiple panel painting as decoration for their places of worship which accounted for interest and concern for this form of painting.

Some of the oldest surviving wall paintings belong to the so-called Romanesque period. Dominant qualities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Early Gothic Period, may be broadly described as human, tender and realistic. Painters responded to architecture because of the large wall space provided.

In the Late Gothic Period, panel painting declined and emphasis was on subject matter such as popular religious themes. Some of the largest in size and the most impressive subjects in wall painting were those of the Last Judgement. Themes closely related dealt with doom, hell and condemnation. From the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, panels and series paintings with themes of the life of Christ were used. In those periods, churches were the only patrons of painters. <sup>1</sup>

Medieval painters made no distinctions between different techniques. Painting was still painting whether it was on a wall in lime-bound pigments or on canvas or a panel in egg or oil-bound pigments. At that time, large mural paintings were executed by many men. Their pigments were hand-made from natural substances such as earth, mineral and vegetable sources. <sup>2</sup>

Following are brief descriptions of the works of some important painters throughout history and aspects of their work which are in some way comparable to or related to Beyond Noah's Arc.

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<sup>1</sup>CAIGER, A. - SMITH, ENGLISH MEDIEVAL MURAL PAINTING  
(LONDON: Oxford University Press, 1963),  
p. 103

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 127

The majority of their works consist of altarpieces, or retables with adjustable panels: diptychs, triptychs, and polyptychs. The subjects were borrowed from Christian dogma, the life of Christ and the lives of Saints.

Melchoir Broderlam painted The Annunciation and the Visitation and The Presentation and the Flight into Egypt from 1392-99. Both fit together in their outer shape, but the imagery does not flow together when they are side by side. The two separate panels depict religious scenes.

Robert Campin's painting, The Annunciation, c.1427, depicts religious subjects with each of three frames functioning as a separate painting. This triptych has deep changing perspective with evident contrasting value patterns. Each panel is aligned with the others. Images are apparently designed to fit into separate frames within the format.

Campin's The Descent from the Cross, c. 1427, is quite the opposite of The Annunciation although the formats are identical. Its images are equal in value and contrast as the subject flows across the three panels. The religious subject seems unbound by the framework.

Jerome Bosch's Temptation of St. Anthony, late 1500's, consists of three panels in a rectangular format with the image flowing across the panels. The imagery accomodates the breaks in the panels as it does in Beyond Noah's Arc.

Bosch's triptych, Garden of Delights, late 1500's, has the same format and qualities described immediately above. It's extreme complication and detail overlap each panel and in this, possesses qualities similar to Beyond Noah's Arc.

Gerard David's paneled triptych, The Baptism of Christ, 1500-1509, is side by side in format. The subject appears as one painting with overlapping divisions, which does not cause distraction. The side panels appear on a different focal plane, closer to the viewer and comparable to the shifting focal planes in Beyond Noah's Arc.

Jan Van Eyck's twelve panel polyptych, the Adoration of the Lamb, finished in 1432 at Ghent Cathedral, is a monumental painting

measuring twelve by sixteen feet which has a style throughout of expressive symbolism. When it is open, the top layer has one plane, while the bottom images are in perspective. When it is closed, it is like another completely different work. Similarly, the intentions of Beyond Noah's Arc were to use the panels separately or in other arrangements to, in essence, appear as different works. Van Eyck's polyptych has an extremely nice flow of forms and contrast of images. His framework comes off as the closed plane while still working with his images to add perspective.

Roger Van Der Weyden's monumental polyptych, The Last Judgement, done in the fifteenth century, is a complete work both open and closed, consisting of nine inner panels and six outer panels. Subjects inside flow from one frame to the other while outside, when closed, they are separate but related in subject matter. Van Der Weyden, a painter of light, uses a central arc very similar to the one in Beyond Noah's Arc. His panels are hinged at the top section and at the bottom sides to form a rectangle with a square on top when it is closed.

Hans Memling's triptych of The Marriage of St. Catharine, 1479, consists of five panels with a biblical theme that carries throughout the three panels. It is hinged at the sides and closes to form two panels outside with separate images, but related in theme. The idea of this presentation seems to add a second dimension. Outer panels are similar in composition while inner panels have a central focal point as in Beyond Noah's Arc. This seems to be true of most polyptychs.

Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, 1508-1512, is a transcendent masterpiece. The relation of the overall sections in the ceiling are not visually connected but are continuous themes from the Bible. He had many problems with the nature of his materials, working conditions and suiting his imagery to the three-dimensional space he was provided. The framework of the zigzagging sections is column-like bands. The value pattern in his imagery of flesh and drapery is subdued but appears to have an overall contrast.



Peter Paul Rubens' altarpieces were for churches with themes of religion, strife and war. His triptych, Raising of the Cross, done in the seventeenth century, can be compared to Beyond Noah's Arc in that both possess related images, are divided by framework, and each single panel contains strong separate imagery. In his lifetime, Rubens worked in many styles. All of those styles are incorporated in this piece.

Delacroix's painting, Still Life with Lobsters, 1827, is the only painting that was found that directly resembled the style of Beyond Noah's Arc. The similarity is found in the imagery and in the paint quality. Also, both involve a generalized painted image with the illusion of reality. In Delacroix's still-life, wings project back into space. Delacroix stressed passages that impressed him most, that are lodged in his memory and gave a direction to his thinking. This seems to be very closely related to the way Beyond Noah's Arc's imagery evolved, like fertile imagination, governed by an enlightened judgement. To be original seems to involve a preservation of a character of nature in harmony with one's own concept.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing has been a documentation of one artist's experiences in creating a polyptych.

The creation of Beyond Noah's Arc included many different aspects. After the initial conception, the painting process evolved by means of revision and alterations of drawn and painted images, and photographic experimentation. During the process of painting the mural, some technical problems arose due to the unique nature of the imagery and the format.

During the three month working period of Beyond Noah's Arc, study was made of historical polyptychs and they were briefly compared to Beyond Noah's Arc.

Although Beyond Noah's Arc was not the first multiple panel painting in existence, as became apparent in studying the work of earlier masters, it was the first this painter had attempted. The experience proved interesting and rewarding in terms of academic commitments as well as giving inspiration for future work.

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