

Stage, Setting, Mood: Theatricality in the Visual Arts

BY CARMEN VENDELIN



Theatricality draws out emotions in the observer. In the performing arts, “stage, setting, and mood”—the use of backdrops, props, lighting, and sound, and the application of the performers’ craft in the physical space of the theater—work together to evoke sensations and sentiments in the audience. In the visual arts, artists employ theatrical, pictorial means to appeal to the senses. Colors, bold forms, and compelling subjects can be called on to elicit an emotional connection between viewer and artwork.

Like performers, visual artists create other worlds in their chosen media. When artists depict actors, musicians, and dancers, they often do so with visual language to create a sense of drama, using techniques such as strong highlighting and shadow, and by positioning subjects to show narrative interactions. Trude Fleischmann in her photograph *Portrait of Toni Birkmeyer* (1935), for example, utilizes dark shadows and highlights to bring out the expressive qualities of the dancer and choreographer’s face. In the exhibition *Stage, Setting, Mood:*



Theatricality in the Visual Arts, artworks that feature high drama, theatrical presentation, and narrative storytelling demonstrate the connection between sensation and spectacle.

The title-wall painting in the exhibition, William Penhallow Henderson's *Holy Week in New Mexico* (also known as *Penitente Procession*, 1919), is highly theatrical. The brothers of the Hispano Penitente Brotherhood have a 400-year history in New Mexico and trace their roots back to religious orders in Spain and Italy. Henderson depicts a reenactment of what is for the Penitente a highly charged, highly emotional scene of Christ's suffering with vibrant color and jagged diagonal shapes that lead the eye through the composition. The drama of the scene works on several levels. It is a passion play, offering theatricality in a religious context. The practice of

self-flagellation may seem shocking to some viewers, heightening the sensationalism. Further, Henderson's use of color, crowding of forms, and employment of an upward diagonal compositional arrangement increase the sense of energy and tension. The artist is able to intensify the drama of the scene by artistic means.

In the visual arts, the style most associated with theatricality is seventeenth-century European baroque art. In baroque painting, the theatricality of a composition was often made literal with the inclusion of a curtain framing the scene, sometimes shown being pulled back by one of the figures. Italian baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini's marble sculptural installation *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52), in Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, goes so far as to include spectators in settings that approximate theater boxes on either side, perpendicular to and witnessing the central action. Baroque art is characteristically dynamic, with undulating forms, diagonal lines, and off-center points of interest that draw the eye on a journey through the compositional arrangement. Bold primary colors and dramatic extremes of dark and light further emphasize spatial relationships and three-dimensional form, adding to the sense of cinematic, stopped motion. All of these elements work to create visceral excitement and emotional response in the viewer.

The eighteenth-century romantic poets developed a literary device, dubbed "pathetic fallacy" by nineteenth-century British art critic John Ruskin, which attributes human characteristics to nonhuman subjects, objects, or natural phenomena. A protagonist's inner turmoil might be sympathetically expressed by a foreboding storm, for example.

Visual artists also show sympathetic harmony in matching setting to mood and imbuing animal subjects with pathos and humanity, as exemplified by many of the artworks in the exhibition. Lloyd Moylan's title *The Breadwinner* (1935–39), for

Opposite: William Penhallow Henderson, *Holy Week in New Mexico* (*Penitente Procession*), 1919. Oil on panel, 31½ × 39½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Edgar L. Rossin, 1952 (83.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark. **Above:** Gene Kloss, *The Sanctuary, Chimayo*, 1934. Aquatint and drypoint, 13 15/16 × 11 in. On long-term loan to the New Mexico Museum of Art from the Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, US General Services Administration (2945.23G).

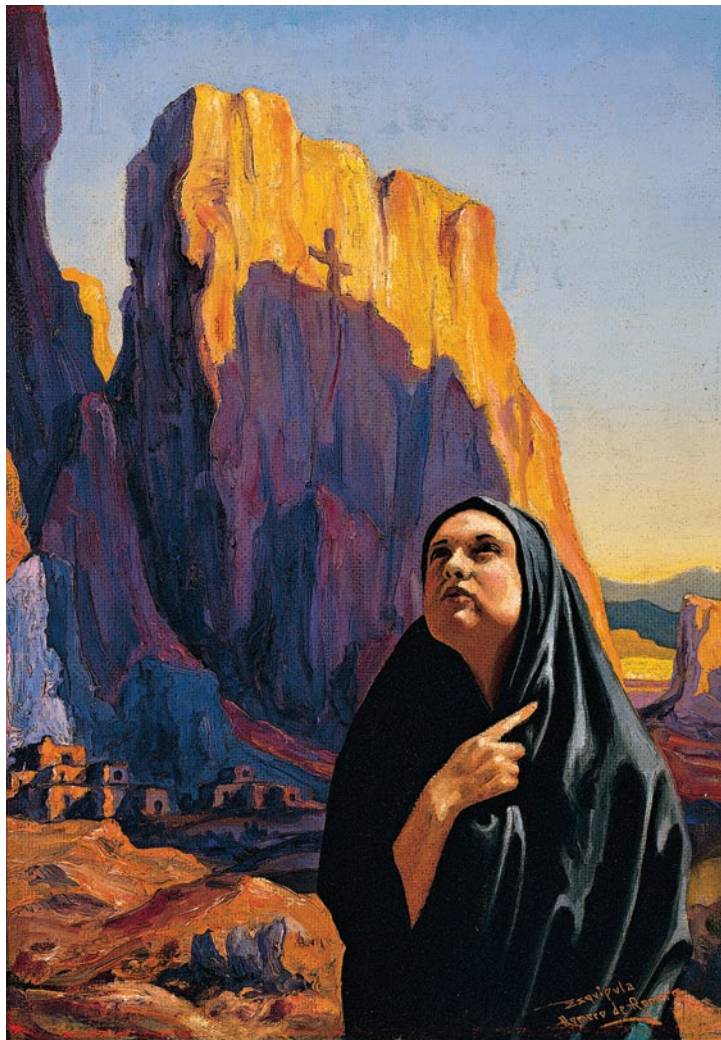
ON EXHIBIT

instance, humanizes the hen and rooster protagonists of his lithograph and implies a narrative. Interactions between figures infer a narrative storyline. Extreme contrasts of dark and light help to convey intensity, as in Gene Kloss's *The Sanctuary, Chimayo* (1934). Artists can also arrange landscape and architectural features as if the location were a stage. The artworks in *Stage, Setting, Mood* date from the late eighteenth century to the present and employ some of the same elements and later developments.

Drawn primarily from the New Mexico Museum of Art's collection, many artworks in the exhibition are recognizably southwestern in theme and demonstrate the theatricality of the mythos of the West and the characteristic New Mexico color and light. The idea of the Wild West is rooted in a nostalgic, mythologized vision of the pre-statehood western United States. Subjects including cowboys, indigenous people, and Hispano Catholicism facilitate feelings of heroism, imagined authenticity, purity, and loss for the viewer.

New Mexico scenery has been described as “dramatic, almost theatrical” (Sharyn Rohlfen Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1913–1935*). Artists have been drawn not only to Hispano and indigenous cultures as subjects, but also to the landscape and adobe architecture. Flat planes of adobe structures can impart a diorama or stagelike quality to the arrangement of flat, two-dimensional surfaces in three-dimensional space.

The townscapes and landscapes selected for this exhibition demonstrate a theatrical approach to nonperformance subjects, employing stagelike arrangements of landscape and architectural features, dramatic lighting to intensify mood, and narrative interaction. For example, the flat planes of James Stovall Morris's structures in the paintings *Velorio* (undated) and *Lightning* (1940) set up a diorama-like space and present buildings as backdrops for the human drama staged before them: a wake in *Velorio* and people out in a storm in *Lightning*. In other compositions, the drama of the natural landscape is heightened with bold colors and contrasts between light and shadow, as in the painting *The Black Shawl* (1933), by Esquipula Romero de Romero, which helps to accentuate the piety of the young woman looking up at a cross.



The exhibition is arranged by subject. “Theatrical Tableaux” shows the ways that artists can create setting and stage. “Tempests and Tensions” features depictions of performers and stagecraft. “Sympatico Spectacles” showcases the landscape and other nonhuman protagonists. “To Be or Not to Be” includes artwork employing the skull as a device for reflecting on both mortality and judgments of morality.

The exhibition comprises close to fifty artworks, including paintings, drawings, photography, prints, book illustrations, ceramics, bronzes, and glass. The diverse range of artists with work in the exhibition includes Augustus Leopold Egg, Francisco de Goya, Zena Kavin, Gene Kloss, Utagawa Kunisada, Eli Levin, Virgil Ortiz, Julius Rolshoven, and Beatrice Wood. Loans to the exhibition include four color etchings of Shakespearean scenes after late eighteenth-century British paintings by Benjamin West and Henri Fuseli, lent from the Messenger

Collection; a nineteenth-century American painting by William Jacob Hays, *A Herd of Buffaloes on the Bed of the River Missouri* (1862), lent by the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma; and a new cinematic cowboy painting by Billy Schenck, courtesy of the artist. ■

Carmen Vendelin is curator of art at the New Mexico Museum of Art. She organized *O'Keeffe In Process* and is curating *Stage, Setting, Mood: Theatricality in the Visual Arts*, which will be on view through May 1, 2016, as a complement to the traveling exhibition *First Folio! The Book That Gave Us Shakespeare*.

Opposite: Esquípula Romero de Romero, *The Black Shawl*, 1933. Oil on Masonite, 17 × 11½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Museum purchase with funds from the Jordi M. Chilson Estate with additional support from the Friends of Contemporary Art, 1999 (1999.17.1). Photograph by Blair Clark. **Below:** James Stovall Morris, *Lightning* (detail), ca. 1940. Oil on canvasboard panel, 20 × 24 in. On long-term loan to the New Mexico Museum of Art from the Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, US General Services Administration (1480.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

