



Figure 1. Philip Campbell Curtis, *The Parade*, 1965, Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Clare Luce Booth.

***Parade* In Review,
an interview with Philip C. Curtis**

Philip Campbell Curtis's *Parade*, 1965, (Figure 1) is a significant example of the artist's early mature work. The painting is representative of a body of works that concerns itself with an obscure communal ritual – the procession or parade.¹ Curtis, a figurative artist, developed his style during the 1950s, reaching artistic maturity around 1960. Since then his *oeuvre* has remained remarkably consistent in both style and iconography. *Parade* introduces both substantive and technical hallmarks of Curtis's work, including his cast of Edwardian characters and his precise, highly-glazed style. These elements form the basis of a personal iconography by which Curtis expresses his views on man's existence.

Curtis was born on May 26, 1907, in Jackson, Michigan. He graduated from the Yale School of Fine Arts in 1935 with a four-year certificate in painting and moved to New York City, where he worked for the Works Project Administration as an Assistant Supervisor of Mural Painting. From early 1936 to 1941 he participated in a federal art project which established art centers around the country; his first assignment was Phoenix, Arizona.

In Fall, 1941, he enrolled at Harvard for further training as a museum curator, a course he abandoned when war broke out in December. For the next several years he served in the Office of Strategic Services, Washington, DC In 1947, at age forty, he began his painting career in earnest when he moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, where he has resided since.

Significantly, *Parade* is the first major painting in an ongoing series treating the subject of an elusive ritual procession symbolic of universal human isolation in an irrational world. While this theme pervades in Curtis's work, his statements about man's helplessness and alienation are especially effective in the ritual processions. The communal rituals emphasize alienation on a universal scale, as opposed to the private rituals such as marriage and courtship, found elsewhere in Curtis's paintings, which render isolation more personally.

In *Parade* a sparse crowd of Edwardian-clad men, women and children watches as a circus parade passes



Figure 2. Philip Campbell Curtis, *The Wanderers*, 1960, oil on board, Phoenix Art Museum. Gift of Virginia Ullman.

in review. An elephant drawing a lion cage leads the parade, followed by several musicians and a chariot. A lone woman hornplayer at far left is the last member of the company to pass through a curiously placed arch. Like a proscenium arch, it establishes a convenient point of entry for the procession. The modulated sky and high horizon line create a flat background with a shallow space, confining the subject close to the surface of the picture like a stage curtain. Bare trees line the parade's route, further constricting the space on either side of the parade. Each figure is isolated and uncommunicative. The circus parade is an eerie temporal suspension.

Parade is the first ritual procession which successfully conveys the idea of communal alienation. In *Wanderers*, 1960, (Figure 2), the earliest example of an obscure ritual, Curtis has scattered the figures along crossed paths; the clearly independent movements of the wandering musicians indicate no intended cooperation among the individuals. Thus, the cacophony of unorchestrated sounds produced by the various musicians is amusing, but harmless. In *Parade*, however, the intentional inversion of the community event is psychologically disquieting. Here, the circus parade, normally associated with stimulating march rhythms inciting the cheering throngs, is met by an uncomfortable silence and stiff spectators. The participants exhibit neither a unified communal spirit or purpose. Instead, the somnambulant participants continue on a course of unexplained origin or destination. The bare trees become ominous, suggesting a cage as real as the lion's.

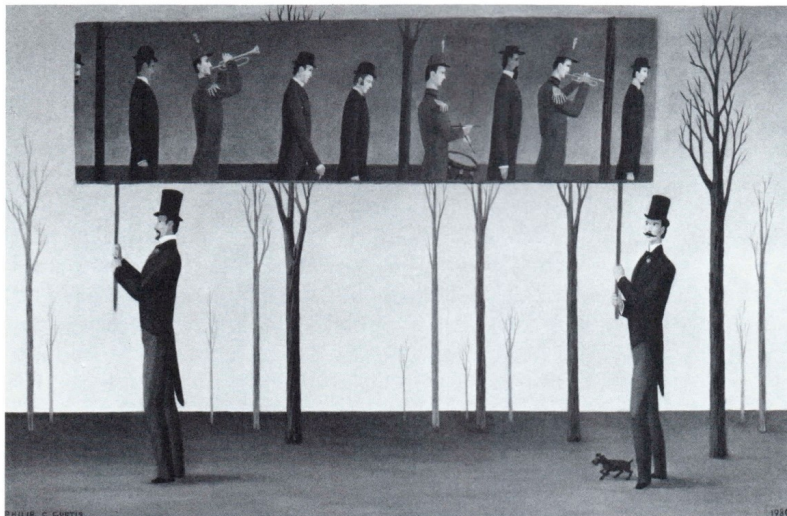


Figure 3. Philip Campbell Curtis, *Two Way Parade*, 1960, oil on board, Phoenix Art Museum. Gift of Philip C. Curtis.

The otherworldliness of *Wanderers* is created by the imaginative style of clothing, irrational scale and distortion of both the figures and their random movements in an anonymous space. In *Parade*, disorientation becomes more acute by employing Edwardian or turn-of-the-century fashions, removing the participants from immediate experience. Again the vast anonymous space punctuated by lifeless trees contributes to the mysterious, dreamlike atmosphere.

A comparison of the two works reveals the progress of the artist's motifs and imagery. In the five years between the paintings, Curtis's ideas mature from an amusing comment on disharmony in 1960's *Wanderers* to a more clear and compelling statement about the displacement of man in 1965's *Parade*.

Though Surrealism and Magic Realism are terms readily applied to Curtis's work, neither label accurately describes it or serves an instructive purpose. Curtis's subjects are not erotic or frighteningly bizarre, like the Surrealism associated with Dali. Curtis paints in a sharply focused manner, but unlike the Magic Realists, his paintings lack the realistic exaggeration of ordinary experience.

Curtis's work bears an affinity to that of such Surrealists as Tanguy, in the use of vast, monotonous landscapes, and Magritte, whose repetitive, bowler-hatted men are anonymities. The frozen characters, confined in a shallow, perspectival space, are redolent of Piero della Francesca, whom Curtis has admired and studied since the early 1930s.

The ambiguous or obscure ritual is a major theme in postwar figurative painting.² Curtis, through his exploration of ritual may be linked to a number of contemporary figurative artists who similarly focus on the figure placed in strange situations or performing inexplicable actions to convey human dislocation.³ These artists have maintained a commitment to comment over form using styles that combine characteristics of Naturalism, Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism.⁴

With *Parade*, Curtis summarizes the elements he uses throughout his *oeuvre*, the subtle tension based on peculiar juxtapositions using repetitive characters involved in strange events. Subsequent works treating the theme of a recondite communal ritual are based on the ideas and images synthesized in *Parade*.

In the light of the highly personal iconography and elusive nature of Curtis's work, the following excerpts from an interview, conducted 1 October 1985, both provide primary material for an understanding of the artist's choices of subject matter and document ideas behind several of his paintings. In the first part of the interview Curtis discusses his artistic training and describes his role as an early administrator of the Phoenix Art Museum; his answers to the remaining questions comment on his work.

Q: What was New York in the 1930s, with so many artists in one place?

Curtis: It was a great experience. When I was in Yale I knew very few painters outside of the damn school. The instructors didn't even talk about contemporary art.⁵ Well, they mentioned Cezanne, just as a hapless sort of a guy who didn't fully develop. So when I went to New York within thirty days I knew practically all the painters who were there. Everything was new to me.

Q: You mean after coming from a traditional school?⁶

Curtis: That and Michigan which didn't have much in the cultural way, especially where I lived.

Q: Who were the artists that you found particularly interesting?

Curtis: Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky were both quite prominent. I knew Gorky. Pollock was there, but nobody knew him then. He was a painter and I was in the administration. I knew a lot of people, but I was in on a different level. We all knew each other because we were all in the pot together. The commercial galleries were not recognizing this breed at that time.⁷ We knew them on the projects and saw their work there. We collected all these paintings, we – the program – did. And we made them into exhibits and some of them came out here. They went all over the country. The exhibits at that time were a pretty damn good image of what was going on in the whole country. It was a network.

Q: How did you initially get your job as a supervisor in the mural division with the WPA.?

Curtis: They had a percentage of artists who they could hire who weren't on relief, and these were usually the administration people and that's where I was. I guess I knew somebody and they put my name on a list and I was hired. It was a great program. I stayed only a couple of years with this project in New York. Then a new program was formed to set up art centers all around the country. That appealed to me very much. I joined it and came to Phoenix.

Q: Was there an art center here at the time?

Curtis: No. They had sketching classes for the members and an exhibit once a year at the State Fair. The so-called Fine Arts Society didn't have an administrator, and they requested it. They were the group that is in back of the museum now.

Q: When you arrived, setting up a regular exhibition program was one of your major tasks?

Curtis: Sure. We had twenty and thirty exhibits a year, maybe more. The exhibit program was good. There was a lot of interest in the idea of a center, and classes, too. It was a matter of organizing and getting a board together with regular meetings, and to get some men on the board. There was only one man on the board at the time and it was confined to just a tea party approach. What we needed was a building. In Washington, they told me the best thing to do, or the only thing to do, was to get the busiest businessman in town interested in things, so he'd run it or be present. And that was Walter Bimson.⁸ He fit the description. It worked out well, too; he saw to it that the building was financed and built. We had agreed together that Frank Lloyd Wright should do the job. When I left town he said that he'd go out immediately and give him the job. Which he did – and then the war came along. There were some people who didn't like Wright and they formed another committee and hired one of Wright's students. The building that's there now is all right but with Wright, it would have been known.

Q: Being an administrator at that time was rewarding enough to put off your own painting?

Curtis: Yes, I was willing to quit painting for it then. I was young, I thought I'd live forever. I didn't think of anything serious like that. I knew I was going to paint but I didn't know when. It wasn't too bad, it expanded my interests.

Q: Was it the interruption of the war that gave you time to rethink your career choice?

Curtis: Yes it did. I went to Washington to work with the Office of Strategic Services. They hired architects,

painters, movie makers, sculptors and photographers; it was a very high class group of people who were important in their fields. So I met a lot of people I wouldn't have met otherwise. And my interest in Surrealism really started there because one of my friends knew more about Surrealism than Freud. I used to hear about it day in and day out and I became fascinated. I was just forty after the war. Then I remembered how peaceful it was out there. That's why I came here. If I lived in New York, I knew I'd be involved with fifty thousand other artists. And then Abstract Expressionism was developing and I wasn't too interested in that. I tried some. It was fun for an hour or so but I couldn't imagine devoting a career to it.⁹

Q: Do you see any connection between your work and the work of the Abstract Expressionists?

Curtis: Well, I guess there is probably some relationship. The abstract people were just different, it's hard to get any meaning out of their things. It's just a general statement of well-being or confusion. It's an emotional experience.¹⁰ I'm very design-conscious and was brought up in this Renaissance idea of designing; it's a very complicated matter?

Q: You have stated that at the start of your painting career you had difficulty amassing enough paintings for a show. Then the Curtis Trust was formed by Lewis Ruskin in 1960.¹¹ How influential, was the Trust for your career?

Curtis: It was *very* important. Ruskin was very sophisticated and it gave me a group that were friends talking for me and pushing me. I wanted to get into Knoedler's, which was a very good gallery. So they arranged it.¹²

Q: Would it have been much harder for you to gain representation on your own?

Curtis: I would have tried, but I guess it would have been more difficult without their help.

Q: The trust gave you three years of uninterrupted painting. Would you describe the Trust years as your formative period?

Curtis: No. By the time I had entered into this agreement I knew pretty much exactly what I wanted. That was one good thing about not starting until you're forty. You're a little more mature than you would be otherwise. I didn't waste a lot of time.

Q: *The Ball Players* (1950-54) private collection) is one of the earliest examples with the Victorian or Edwardian characters that reappear throughout your paintings.¹³ What are your reasons for choosing this era?

Curtis: For one reason, it was really the beginning of the Industrial Age and all our troubles started about that time. Another reason is I liked the costumes, and their houses were interesting to me and their whole way of life. I'm sure I've put my meanings into it because I haven't really been concerned with what they thought instead. A lot of things that I like or use are those things that seem pointless to me.

Q: By pointless, do you mean your perception of their behavior, customs, or dress which then are transformed into your visual absurdities?

Curtis: Yes. I just don't want to do current things. Or put current uniforms on them. I want the images to be removed from the present.

Q: Your grandparents lived in one of those Victorian gingerbread houses, didn't they?

Curtis: Yes, it was fun for a kid. It had a tower you could go up into and all kinds of secret places that were left over and used in some way or another. It was a good show. I think as a child I liked it because it was more of a plaything, you could enjoy it more. When we moved into our final house, it was so plain. I wasn't very pleased about it.¹⁴

The Victorian period has a different meaning from the young people's ideas now. It's a fascinating period to me.

Q: Are you referring to their societal attitudes compared to ours?

Curtis: Yes, the codes are so solid and in place that there's a little brainwashing going on there.

Q: As an example, in *Fruit Tree* (1968, a private collection) the roots of a live tree imprison a woman's head and shoulders, and her neck is bound by a rigid collar. This

suggests to me that the woman is confined by her societal roles as a woman. Is this correct?

Curtis: Yes, that's the way I felt. She's the Eve of the Adam and Eve story; she's sort of trapped by the myth and giving out the fruit.

Q: Your work presents human relationships most often by depicting recognizable rituals.

Curtis: Yes, that's right. The rituals fill in a lot of blank space.¹⁵

Q: The observer is obviously an important figure in all your paintings. Am I incorrect in assuming that the observer is more than just a compositional device?

Curtis: No, you're right. The observer is the contact with the viewer. The dogs are also sometimes observers. I don't use them as an animalistic version of myself but I can put myself in their place. I give the dog an intelligence superior to the people he's around.

Q: It's not the dog as an animal but the dog with another spirit who has no control over his situation?

Curtis: That's right. He could leave but he doesn't – he wants to see how it's going to end.

Q: A number of your paintings deal with the rituals of marriage and courtship. In *The Bride's Descent* (1973, Phoenix Art Museum) the bride is completely alone. Her total isolation in a situation which is normally associated with joyous celebration makes this painting extremely unsettling. Should one think that you have a pessimistic view of marriage.?

Curtis: Well, marriage and other things, too, but I don't think I'm bitter about it.

Q: Loneliness and people who never communicate are always present in your work: is this a general statement about the loneliness of humans?

Curtis: Yes. Well, a good deal of us are, sure. We forget about it from time to time but it's still there.

Q: You say that you try to keep your work as simple as possible. Do you believe that the statements you make are obvious, or should be obvious to the viewer?

Curtis: Well, I've found out that it didn't make to much difference if it's obvious to them in another way. And that's just as important.

At one time I explained a painting to somebody who had just paid a lot of money for it and the explanation ruined it for him. He was disappointed that he didn't see it that way – it took the glow off of it. I know that there are a hundred interpretations that can be made, so I've given up talking about it. I can't follow a painting around and keep explaining it. There are a lot of interpretations. A psychiatrist once sat down and gave me six in a row. So that's why I don't explain my paintings. I prefer to just paint.

Q: By making your statements elusive, are you creating a visual exercise for the viewer?

Curtis: Yes, confronting him with a lot of questions.

Q: Although your paintings do not refer to specific events, I believe they are based on personal experience. Do you abstract personal events and translate them into your cast of characters? For example, in *Wanderers* (1960, Phoenix Art Museum, Illustration 2) an assortment of musicians pass one another at a crossroad. This act, symbolic of a major decision, suggests a very personal meaning since 1960 was the same year the Trust was formed, placing you at a turning point or crossroad in your career. Is my interpretation that *Wanderers* depicts a personal event correct?

Curtis: It was somewhat of a subconscious thing. It started out as a concert I went to. The event seemed significant to me. Of course I've been to concerts and it never bothered me before, but that night it did. The people were so damn regimented in this act of putting on music, which didn't turn out to be very well done. The painting grew out of that evening.

Q: That painting displays such marvelous comic touches especially by the contrast between the one enormous figure who strikes a very tiny triangle while two miniscule figures struggle to carry a giant bass drum.¹⁶

Curtis: Yes, that tickled me.

Q: Most of the instruments you use are those which you might find in a band. Is there any reason why you chose those instruments over the orchestral ones?

Curtis: I like the big band instruments. Some are monstrous, though not very musical – they just make noise.¹⁷ Most of my instruments are not accurate, although some musicians have said that they're amazed by how much I know about instruments. There's no way those things could work. I deliberately go crazy on instruments and nobody seems to notice.

Q: Some of your paintings include pipe organs.

Curtis: Yes, when I was a kid I had to stay quiet while Mother was holding rehearsals. Those things are huge. She played one in church. I was impressed by them.

Q: Do the pipe organs have anything to do with the circus organs?

Curtis: They look as though they should be in the circus, too. Well, they are in a religious circus.

Q: You use a lot of circus imagery in your paintings.

Curtis: Yes. That's another escape people like. It's a whole world of escape. The circus was quite a spectacle and I was looking at it as a kid. I'm sure adults liked them too. The circus was one of the highlights of the year. Our town wasn't very big, but the biggest shows stopped there. The trains are part of the act, too, because they moved by train. They'd come in early in the day and start putting it together right then. By the next morning the tents are all up. Then the parade starts. These were the only parades I got to see. They'd have an afternoon performance, than an evening performance and before the show was over half the tent was down and moving out. That was as good a show as any was. It was wonderful.

Q: The circus, then, emphasizes the fine line between illusion and reality, since its purpose is to present wonderful illusions.

Curtis: Yes, and it's more effective, too, when they use the tents and then you've got an environment which is different from anything that you usually live in. So you see things that go on in that tent in a magical way.

Q: In the parades, such as the 1965 *Parade* in the University Art Museum of Arizona State University, you refer

to illusion and reality by juxtaposing the spectators and the circus performers, making them interchangeable. How is this significant to you?

Curtis: Well, it's just that nothing is ever for sure. That's just the way life is.

Q: It doesn't matter if we wear the uniforms or not?

Curtis: Yes. We're just a part of it.

Q: In *Two Way Parade* (1980, Phoenix Art Museum, figure 3), the parade of two large figures seems to be the real parade while the two-dimensional parade on the banner appears to be an illusion. Is this a reference to the problem of distinguishing between illusion and reality?¹⁸

Curtis: Yes, sure.

Q: Your frequent depiction of this illusion recalls a statement you made twenty years ago, in 1957:

I paint in the midst of a world where living is a very strange phenomenon, realities get stacked up one on top of the other. I found myself concerned with this.

Curtis: Yes, that statement still expresses my concerns. I try to create a dream world. That is needed because the everyday world is pretty dull, broken-down, no design, no stimulating color. Everything is accidentally colored, the same way they build cities. They just build them. For a while in those Victorian houses, there was an awful lot of craftsmanship that went into it. And it gave a lift to the dullness of everyday life.

