

Henry J. Dietrich as a Painter

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Henry J. Dietrich's work has not been subjected to systematic formal analysis. The following is only an initial compilation of what art reviewers, critics, collectors, and others have noted in his work.

His studio work was narrow, intellectualized, non-self-reflective, and rich, filled with his quest for form, line, color, tension, and balance. This rooted him clearly in the philosophic tradition and challenges of Matisse – the search for balance, the management of color, the dynamism, the clarity of line, the “eye,” and the reliance on seeing as a child.

In many ways, Dietrich's work was consistent with the core elements appearing in Matisse's “Notes of a Painter”, 1908, dealing with matters of expression, interpretation, representation, temperament, composition, simplicity, scale, essentials, relations among colors, and color sensations. Elderfield notes of Matisse that

“...he was alone when he began to discover that the very colored stuff of which paintings are made can have an independent reality no less bodied and emotionally charged than the forms paintings depict. Others came to join him, and it might be expected that the magnitude of his discovery was such that it would have been emulated. ” (John Elderfield. Henri Matisse: a retrospective. The Museum of Modern Art. New York, 1992)

Surprisingly few emulated later Matisse, as Modernism followed other paths. Yet, Dietrich worked on these same problems, but with his own novel and captivating solutions, as he fashioned his own artistic voice. As he matured and aged, Dietrich painted with increasing simplicity, surety, and more dynamic colors. He was devoted to visual sensation, to bright colors, elegant patterns, and harmonious forms but detached from subject and passion. He increasingly rejected objective natural details in favor of what Elderfield calls “a condensed whole orchestrated by purity of line.”

As he did not produce purely abstract art, he also did not produce realistic art. Many of his predecessors and contemporaries captured on canvas and kept frozen in time recognizable actions, exertions, tensions, moods, events, human relationships, and human values, such as the power of muscle, industry, effort, and exhortation. Viewers of these works can easily imagine the actions, sounds, and smells in the minutes preceding, during, and after such an event, whether it be a bullfight, a dance, a drama, a storm, or a confrontation. By contrast, Dietrich produced works lack storyline and passion. Indeed, their lack was a deliberate achievement as he saw it. He invested himself in visual problems and solutions as formal artistic issues, rather than as self-expression, assertion, or communication. He painted for no one else than himself. He often noted that success was “arriving at a solution that, given the problem, can be no other.” Having achieved

the solution, he did not turn it into a commercial signature, but moved on to another problem to be solved.

In this, he was like those artists whose work he most admired, deliberately creating effects and even emotions in viewers through technical solutions to visual challenges without himself having to feel or rely on those emotions to create these effects. He viewed his products as decorative objects. He saw value, not weakness, in decoration. His paintings were intended to be seen, to hang on walls, and to be lived with as objects.

Dietrich produced abstracted representational art. Relying on somewhat recognizable objects and persons that suggested or approximated something in reality, he produced little non-objective art. The reality of these objects, however, was totally subordinated to his principal artistic interests of design, form and color. The paintings are thus ideal, unrealistic, yet representational. They retain minimal natural shapes or forms but in recognizable idealized ways. It is the way many children represent reality, as non-theoretical abstracted images of objects in nature. However, for Dietrich, the objects' subject matter is irrelevant and arrayed in colors that rest entirely on artistic imagination, not the colors or arrangements that occur in nature

Indeed, Dietrich loved the drawings of children. He always volunteered to judge art competitions for children, just for the pleasure of seeing the unschooled naturalness and innocence in how they represented objects and themselves. Many aspects of his paintings are typical of the ways children perceive and depict reality. While the themes and visions of a child's eyes pervade his work, it did not produce a faux-child's untutored art, but disarmingly and deceptively sophisticated paintings.

Reviewers, art critics, and owners find Dietrich's paintings or the objects in his paintings to be lighthearted, funny, happy, positive, optimistic, whimsical, or witty or to be expressing these feelings and attitudes. However, these responses are far more the projections of the viewer more than the intent of the artist. Dietrich's palette was replete with light, with happy and energetic colors, and untroubled natural forms and objects. But looked at candidly, the persons and creatures depicted are essentially without mood or emotion; most express nothing, yet the paintings evoke positive responses. His skill in inventing and rendering positive or innocent natural objects in brilliant colors and simple lines inevitably triggers these responses.

Dietrich needed neither the appreciation nor the commentary of others, although he responded with some pleasure when people expressed delight at new pictures emerging from his studio, each a better solution than the preceding ones. Owners of his paintings take tremendous enjoyment in having them displayed strategically in their homes, but sense little of the overall sweep or development of his work, the advances he made, the traditions from which he derived, or his significance as a modern artist. This is due, in large part, to their not having the opportunity to see more than a small number of his current paintings at any one time.

Dominant characteristics of his work include, in the main:

- Manifestly beautiful (or decorative in the classic use of that term)
- Images -- dynamic, daring, shocking, demanding, brilliant, vibrant, intense, bold, optimistic, witty, cool, calm, fresh, confident, disciplined, surprising, and memorable; arbitrariness of subject matter; a minimal treatment of natural detail (e.g., facial features, breasts, hands, fingers, feet, fins, dogs' bodies); absence of mood or emotion; simplicity and essentialism
- Colors -- pure acrylic colors drawn from the growing, now immense, array starting in the 1960s; colors unrelated to their normal appearance in nature; control of background color and "empty" spaces, white being a critical color
- Line and Surface -- mastery of line, curve, proportion, and balance; few tonal differences; absence of shadows, depths, subtle shadings, and perspectives; clarity and precise delineation and formal order; a flat-plane surface, with no differentiated brush strokes or sculpted texture; multiple focus points

In particular, he pursued an experimental, experiential non-theoretical approach to adjacent colors – unnatural, intense, opposing yet harmonious, surprising, and startling without disturbing. The result is paintings that are deceptively simple and require numerous viewings to recall correctly.

Dietrich's work changed markedly over time. The American response to his work of the late 1940s, in his first exhibition at the MH de Young Museum, suggests how "European" and derivative his initial post-war work appeared. While he had not lost his skills as a draftsman after the ten lost years in China, it took him perhaps 15 years to find and refine his own artistic voice. Then, it was expressed in the dynamic and startling forms it took for another 30 years. He produced a class of paintings traditionally called "decorative", a now outmoded term to describe work marked by an absence of visual or thematic violence, where the images demand and reward attention by providing continuous and pleasing surprises.

While easily divided by the objects represented, his work is not divided into distinct periods. The changes seemed more to emerge seamlessly into increasing vibrancy, clarity, and simplicity to, many times, achieve a truly startling breakthrough. The advances in his work are in composition, line, form, and the juxtaposition of color. In general, over time and regardless of subject, his paintings reflect his own changes:

From	To
Mythic and private images	Recognizable everyday objects
Intellectual themes and signs	Child-like perceptions
Complex forms	Simpler, purist, but startling forms and proportions
Crude, irregular, and ugly shapes	Graceful curves and lines
Small color fragments	Large, flat, single color blocks
Cluttered arrangement of colors	Precise color arrangements
Drab and muted mixed colors	Bright, dynamic, pure, primary colors
Oils on wood	Acrylics on canvas

Viewable from near distance
Natural forms and faces
Minimal perspective and shading
Detail in natural objects

Viewable from far distance
Abstract forms and features
Flat, shallow, surficial images
Loss of detail

In the biographical sketch, it is noted that Dietrich had vision in only one eye and somewhat dim vision in the other. In his youth, Dietrich wore a monocle in his better eye, more a vanity rather than an optometric necessity. When he could afford it, he turned to wearing glasses. He could both see and portray perspective, though in his later works he made his paintings increasingly foreshortened or flat.

Dietrich produced his advances with intentional method, rather than momentary inspiration. He drafted the forms, internal dimensions, and relationships of a painting on a small piece of white paper, a sketchbook, or transparency paper with a pencil. He would then produce a small-scale version of a painting, most commonly 12 inches by 18 inches; here he would test the colors and shapes. For some images, the small painting sufficed, because it was the correct scale. For others, he would experiment with alternative sizes and dimensions, producing one or more large renderings of the image, most commonly 40 inches by 40 inches, 36 inches by 48 inches, or 40 inches by 50 inches.

It is startling how different the paintings appear when seemingly only the scale of the rendering has changed. The same forms and colors are significantly altered when only the scale has changed, probably due to the difference in the reflectivity of larger blocks of color, some quite intense, that changes the way the eye receives or perceives the image.

However, regardless of scale, what Dietrich routinely sought and found was balance. A useful exercise when examining a Dietrich painting is to mask any portion of the painting and evaluate what remains. What remains is imbalance. Everything in a Dietrich painting has earned its way onto the canvas. Balance is the universal single answer to many questions such as, Why are there funny appendages on his fish? Why do blocks of color appear above or below his most fantastic creatures? Why do his figures and objects routinely extend beyond the edges of the canvas? Why does he re-work the same forms and layouts? Why does his signature appear where it does in different paintings?

Dietrich experimented with different colors for the same forms and/or change the relationships of the forms; thus, he would test several alternative solutions to the same problem he set for himself. He restarted his painting career with watercolors, then moved on to oils on cardboard and wood in Shanghai. He created texture, body, and depth in his early use of oils on canvas in the United States. His various solutions were simplified by the immense palette of colors increasingly available in acrylic. When he became aware of acrylics, he was freed to experiment more with pure colors, to avoid the uncertain darkening effect of mixing oils and aging oils, and to lay on color without sculptural depth on the canvas. While, early on, he used acrylics to create textural effects, he soon abandoned these effects.

From the mid-1940s until his death, Dietrich produced about 400 paintings, most of which survive today in private collections. While keeping some photographs and slides of his paintings, Dietrich kept no log of his works, so the exact number, sequence, and location of his products cannot be determined. Some of his early works appear in museum and the gallery catalogs and in black-and-white interior photographs of his paintings on museum walls and home interiors. Those paintings he disliked or considered unfinished he destroyed, perhaps 10%. A few years before his death, he and a handyman went through many of the paintings he retained, destroying a number that he found inferior until the assistant, in tears, refused to destroy any more beauty. Only a handful of the surviving paintings are unsigned and undated, indicating his view that a painting is still unfinished. In addition to his paintings, a large number of small drawings, sketches, exercises, and cartoons survive, along with his draft children's books.

This body of work makes one wonder what accomplishments he might have made and recognition he might have received had he not been a refugee, totally lacking in art supplies for the entire decade of his 20s and then so distant from the marketplace during the subsequent 35 years.