

## The Artistic Roots of Henry J. Dietrich

by Thomas D. Lonner, Ph.D.

I accepted the responsibility to assure that Dietrich's paintings would be seen and shared after his death. "Why me?" I asked myself. Then a mutual friend and owner of some of his paintings told me that he had once told her that "Tom got it," meaning that I understood what he was after and had accomplished.

I could not imagine what he had meant. It had been easy to admire and cherish the paintings without having to "get" them. When viewed under bright studio lights or daylight, these paintings demanded attention. Each said, "Look at me, look at me." Reviewing the bulk of his life's work after his death produced and still produces sensory overload. One can remember perhaps seeing a certain painting before, but there are simply too many that make too many demands to keep them all in mind at once.

Dietrich did not write about his art and did not find it worthwhile to discuss it except as technical and intellectual challenges, snippets now and again about the challenge of placing "hot", brilliant, shocking, joyous, and unnatural colors side-by-side without resulting discord and similar challenges. After his death, I determined to explore the roots and accomplishments of his work. Exploring was easy, because he left some obvious clues in his paintings and in his library, the most direct of which was his admiration for the late advances of Henri Matisse. While the roots of many paintings are readily found, others are clearly without precedent.

His life occupies a very particular period in the history of modern art. The exact dates and places of the uncontrollable major life transitions in his life dictated his development as an artist. He began his formal art education at age 17 at Kunstschule Reimann in Berlin. Founded as a private college of arts, crafts, mode, fashion, and decoration by the prominent sculptor/designer Albert Reimann in 1926, Kunstschule Reimann was host to many prominent faculty and students, among whom were caricaturists Alwin Kinkelin and Erna Schmidt Carroll; photographers Werner Graeff, Kurt Mill, and Wilhelm Maywald; lithographers Fritz Ahlers and Moriz Melzer; painters Robert Rehfeldt and Emmy Stahlmann; and fashion designer/painter Helen Ernst. In 1938, Reimann escaped Berlin for London and architect Hugo Haering took the leadership role to keep the school alive. The name of the school was changed to Kunstschule des Westens.

This was a very dynamic and thorough art school, replete with excellent teachers in theory, history, media, and technique. The school provided him with a full curriculum in classical and modern art theory. He was quite familiar with and appreciated the masters. His teachers respected HJD's talent, one telling him that he could become great painter. HJD completed three years at Kunstschule des Westens, essentially fulfilling his basic curriculum, although students could remain at the school for their lifetimes, should they have wished.

I could not discover what specific art influences were advanced in the Kunstschule in those few years. Nazism oppressed modern arts, resulting in the removal of many moderns from the walls of German museums and the curriculum of art schools. It is likely that, while certain books and prints may have become less available in the Kunstschule, such works were owned and shared among the students, their families, and the faculty. What is known is the breadth of modern interests and styles that were present in the school with emphases on simplicity, experimentation, caricature, fashion, draftsmanship, and so on. Dietrich's lifelong technical skills were certainly consistent with this schooling.

Equally, older but contemporary and much-admired pre-World War II German realists and neo-Objectivists, such as Otto Dix and George Grosz, had limited influence on his work. These artists detailed the immediate world around them with obsessive and intense feeling -- the recalled horrors of World War I, the great depression in Germany, the raging political, cultural, and class wars of the 1920s and 1930s, and the rise of Nazism. However, given his young age, personality, and total absorption with self and art during the rise of Nazism, Dietrich missed all involvement in the pre-war political and social ferment in Germany. He may have been *in* the times but not *of* the times.

There is no reference to a political event or a political opinion in Dietrich's work, no matter what events he lived through and losses he experienced. His studio was a world unto itself, his place to mount and resolve artistic problems, to be with himself, and to express himself without a trace of alienation or outrage, anger, or despair. He lived outside of history, even though he read omnivorously in the history of rise of Nazism in Germany, both in German and English, to puzzle out how his country and countrymen could have spiraled downward into Nazism. But it is unclear that he needed to "escape" because he may never have considered himself captive to politics or history. The self-sufficiency of art may have blinkered him to these monumental forces and events, like a turtle's shell.

Dietrich was certainly a modern but not a modernist; he remained independent of these styles and markets. He was not only stylistically alone, but essentially uninvolved. He was never a man "in the world" of politics and art. He was insulated from the political furor and racism of Germany from 1933-1938; equally, his years of starvation, cold, fear, and uncertainty in Shanghai found no expression in his immediate post-war art. He often said that there was no purpose in looking for him or his biography in his paintings.

An escapist before, during, and after the war, he poured his psychic and physical energies into constructing an alternative and ideal world of colors, forms, and shapes, ignoring the day-to-day reality not only of others but of himself as well. His subject matter was limited to the immediate untroubled world around him (e.g., his garden, home, wife, and pets), his memories of childhood, his books, his records, and the world of make-believe. The solitude and simplicity of his studio provided him all he required.

There is no surviving record of any of Dietrich work before he fled Germany. His formal art education came to an abrupt end with his escape to China at age 20, when he lost his

teachers, his cohort of aspiring young artists, access to art books, access to original contemporary art and reproductions, and access to the basic art materials he required. After a seven-year hiatus, when he could finally resume painting in the mid-1940s, he returned to certain familiar if dark and dismal themes, surrealistic forms, and muted and muddied colors for his earliest paintings finished in Shanghai and brought to the United States. These drew immediate criticism in America that his work was “too European.”

Political and social commentary, social realism, cubism, surrealism, neo-impressionism, expressionism, and abstract expressionism were elements of the artistic sea in which Dietrich swam. His early post-war paintings and portraits contain hints of these elements but purely as techniques, as he tried one after the other looking for his own career re-start and his own voice. It was as if he had to briefly touch and rapidly traverse each of these evolutionary stages in order to become himself. Missing fifteen years of access and exposure to the evolving modern art while a refugee, Dietrich rediscovered it in the 1950s in art books he could not afford to purchase and rare exhibits he could attend. He used these as a springboard to the development of his artistic voice in the early 1960s.

There is a tendency to place artists in a geographical box, even though modern Western art is truly international. Given his training in Germany, unchanged by his Shanghai sojourn, and general detachment from American influences (even in his cartoons) in his interior life and eye, it is clear (to me, at least) that Dietrich is best considered a highly-idiosyncratic post-War German modernist. Dietrich, like his Fauvist and Modernist predecessors, clearly pursued the potential of color, “brazen color used in a decorative manner, with space molded and defined in paint emphasizing the intensity of color and featured geometrical shapes carved into the two-dimensional picture plane in pigment.”

His work is marked with lucidity, grounded in 20<sup>th</sup> century European art traditions and in the craft technical skills that he had acquired in school but then left behind. As with the later Matisse, his paintings provide “the illusion of a completely full world, where everything from far to near is pressed with equal urgency against the eye,” there is no center, everything is worthy of the eye’s attention, the curves and lines emulate one another from section to section.

Dietrich was clearly drawn to the later Matisse, particularly works completed between the late 1940s and early 1950s, long after he had left art school. His discovery of the later Matisse coincided with his own return to the art world after his refugee hiatus and with the reemergence of esteem for Matisse as a modern artist in the 1950s by younger *avant-garde* artists. In the 1970s and 1980s, Dietrich was influenced by the efflorescence of genius from the aged master; in addition, Dietrich drew comfort from Matisse that he, too, could produce artistic solutions in his 60s and 70s.

The paintings and other media of Picasso and Matisse gave him object images, but his solutions were his own. When I suggest that a Dietrich painting or series of paintings is “after Matisse” or “after Picasso,” I do not imply that he is copying, imitating, or emulating these painters. He borrowed some things and invented many others. From both Matisse and Picasso, he borrowed certain motifs but reconsidered them entirely through

his own approach. With the one exception of Matisse's gouache on paper "L'escargot" 1953, Dietrich's paintings built on objects and images in certain masterpieces but rendered entirely in his own voice, their motifs as springboards for his experimentations in line, color, and balance. His "versions" are as novel as the previous representations of these images, in the same way that these earlier representations are novel versions distinct from the many renowned paintings and sculptures on which they themselves were based.

In examining Dietrich's initial post-war work, there are small signs of early Matisse, Manet, and Picasso and none of the later Matisse. It is likely that he discovered the later Matisse in the late 1950s, from the art books appearing in used book stores in San Francisco. He had a friend, a bibliophile who haunted these bookstores and purchased literally thousands of inexpensive books. Searching in these stores with him provided Dietrich an opportunity to see and ultimately acquire a wide array of art prints and books.

Dietrich's personal library reflects a broad set of interests -- Mondrian, Cezanne, Monet, Manet, Renoir, Utrillo, Picasso, Matisse, Grosz, Dix, Daumier, Kandinsky, Ozenfant, and Miro. He was also a fan of Hirschfield, Steig, and Steinberg.

He attended museum exhibitions and traveling gallery shows, moved by what he considered greatness (although their specific influence is hard to find in his own work) and unmoved by much more. There is no hint of American moderns in his approach. Dietrich was relatively untouched by post-World War II nonobjective abstract painting. Although contemporary American and European modern and post-modern abstract forms and styles were available to him after 1948, very few abstract works suggest that he wished to use the same vocabulary. He viewed much of what he saw as commercial gimmickry and self-promotion.