



Contemporary banners as artistic expression
by Robert William Gregg

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
MASTER OF APPLIED ART
Montana State University
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Abstract:

This influence of various interests and experiences and the artistic growth of the author, over a four-year period, carried him from painting through an investigation of serigraphy and textile decorating to fabric collage in the form of banners. The problem in this thesis was to show the correlation of painting and the creating of contemporary banners and to present banners as a fine art form.

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ABSTRACT

The influence of various interests and experiences and the artistic growth of the author, over a four-year period, carried him from painting through an investigation of serigraphy and textile decorating to fabric collage in the form of banners. The problem in this thesis was to show the correlation of painting and the creating of contemporary banners and to present banners as a fine art form.

INTRODUCTION

If this thesis had been completed when it was intended, it would have been in painting. I began work in the summer of 1963 in painting and hoped to complete the degree requirements in three consecutive summers. However, I was unable to complete the work until 1967 and this time-element is an important factor in my evolution from painting to banners. My interest in painting became concerned with texture. Teaching involved me in textile decoration. I felt that the thesis would be more meaningful if it took full advantage of my immediate interests. The revival of the medieval craft of banners as a contemporary art expression captured my enthusiasm. I utilized various textile decorating techniques in the creating of my banners and found that the concepts involved were not unlike those in painting. The materials involved are different, but art elements are always the same; and it is elements that an artist composes into an expressive form.

CHAPTER I

Banners:Origin to Present

The use of banners to announce important events and identify groups and individuals dates back hundreds of years. The visual impact impressed people then as now, as reported in the following passage from an old English ballad, Marmion, which vividly describes the beauty and excitement of banners at the peak of their use.

Nor marked they less, where in the air
A thousand streamers flaunted fair:
Various in shape, device, and hue--
Green, sanguine, purple, red and blue,
Broad, narrow, swallow-tailed, and square,
Scroll, pennon, pencil, bandrol, there
O'er the pavillions flew.
Highest and midmost was descried
The Royal banner, floating wide;
The staff, a pine-tree strong and straight,
Pitched deeply in a massive stone,
Which still in memory is shown.
Yet beneath the Standard's weight,
Whene'er the western wind unrolled,
With toil, the huge and cumbrous fold,
And gave to view the dazzling field,
Where, in proud Scotland's Royal Shield,
The ruddy Lion romped in gold.

Perhaps in the beginning, the spectacle didn't offer such an esthetic experience as this. It is believed that the use of identifying banners or pennons began in Rome during the era of her military conquests. Probably the first signs were rigid standards instead of flexible cloth. Cloth banners became popular during the Crusades, when European armies joined forces under the sign of the Cross and kept their individual identities by the use of pennons, triangular flags attached to spears. The banner mentioned in the poem was a small, nearly square flag which was a mark of honor as it depicted the coat of arms of the owner. During the thirteenth century,

the custom originated in England of flying "vanes" from the pinnacles and towers of castles. Probably this custom was a carry-over from the practice of victorious generals erecting their standards or banners on the most elevated spot of the battle-field or newly-acquired territory, as an act of possession. The practice of identifying with banners became so complex and the shields, badges and seals carrying the intricate devices became so numerous that in order to avoid duplication, heralds were employed. Heraldry was an office of the Royal household in which the officer or herald was charged with certain duties. These included making proclamations and arranging processions on both joyous and sad occasions. But the main duty of the herald was to keep accurate records of the identifying devices and to grant to eligible applicants appropriate devices which were to be composed from standardized elements in accordance with ancient rules and customs. The position of herald constituted a profession of great dignity, and was held in as high regard as law or medicine.

During the Renaissance, banners added color to pageants and military processions. One instance of survival of the function of Renaissance banners occurs twice a year in Siena. It is a procession and celebration in the old tradition with authentic costumes and drums and trumpets. This celebration is called the "Palio delle Contrade" and was originated when the Siennese armies were defeated by Spain and were converted into peaceful groups. They directed their energies to staging civic celebrations and the practice has continued for four-hundred years. The elaborate Palio banners are the most exciting sight in the procession, carried proudly or thrown high into the air and skillfully caught. The action of throwing the

banners into the air takes full advantage of the flowing movement of the material.

Most of this type of banner has disappeared and we see in its place national flags or military symbols. However, banners of another type are widely used. These are the advertising banners and buntings in the larger cities. Gasoline stations, super-markets, theatres, all use this method of attracting attention. This was remembered by Robert Graham, an art dealer in New York, who was faced with attracting the crowds during a newspaper strike. Recalling the use of banners to advertise, he asked the exhibiting artist to paint a huge flag to hang outside the gallery to attract passers-by. Another New Yorker wanted to obtain large, inexpensive, yet good works of art for a series of twenty-six identical ugly government buildings. Her budget was small. Her solution was to commission several artists to design banners, which were then reproduced by a professional flag maker in "limited editions" and signed and numbered by the artists. A slightly different use has been found for banners in Chicago. There, a program was initiated to enhance the downtown area. Huge banners, designed to rejuvenate the city as a place of cultural and human enrichment, are placed at fifty-two sites throughout the city. Chicago, "the windy city", makes full use of the billowy outdoor beauty of the freely-moving, sail-like banners. This civic use of banners in the outdoors illustrates how well-suited the banner form is to coloring our environment.

Indications are that, though colorful and intricate and carefully proportioned, the original heraldic banners were not considered primarily an art form. Their purpose was essentially that of identification. Today

we no longer wear armor and face plates, and we have many less cumbersome ways to identify ourselves. Banners are designed to be enjoyed as art, and they can share wall space with paintings in galleries and other interiors. The American Craftsmen's Council recently announced sponsorship of a show in San Francisco at Museum West devoted to banners. Norman Laliberté, the co-author of the book, Banners and Wall Hangings, and one of America's most versatile creative designers, was design consultant for Vatican Pavilion at the 1963-65 New York World's Fair, where he exhibited eighty-eight of his own large banners. It is becoming increasingly evident that contemporary banners are growing in acceptance as an art form.

CHAPTER II

Account of Creative Exploration

An artist who teaches as his means of livelihood often has a spasmodic personal creative experience. His creative evolution or growth takes place not so much during the times he is actively producing as in his maturing experience and knowledge in between times. He develops ways of teaching new or in-depth concepts which require creative involvement. Being exposed to a myriad of ideas, materials, methods, films and other influences, he must explore the possibilities in each material and motivate his students to the creative use of it. Periodicals, art publications, exchange of ideas with associates and friends, drives, walks, attending art exhibits and absorbing life around him, all color the thinking and influence the responses of the artist-teacher. These influences change as a matter of course, and so his responses change. What excites him today often becomes popular to the degree that it is trite tomorrow. The artist's experiences aren't static. He must react to and reflect the present.

When I began to think in terms of a thesis problem the most important factor to me was to write a thesis that would explain my own thoughts and reactions about personal creativity in the visual arts. I was aware of the need for an art teacher to be involved in the creative process so as to better relate to his students. However, continuous involvement is necessary to establish and maintain fluidity. It was felt that an uninterrupted period of involvement with drawing and painting would eventually lead me to a specific area of painting to be investigated and enlarged upon in the thesis. During my first summer of graduate work I concentrated on drawing and painting as a thesis project. Besides watercolor

and oil painting, I worked in serigraphy and textile decoration. A latent interest in batik led to further investigation and research and experimentation with various dyes and fabrics and to combination of batik techniques with stitchery and appliqué. Working in batik, serigraphy and painting, I found the three areas seemed to merge and become one. Problems encountered in painting were solved in a serigraph. Ideas sprang from one medium to apply to another. When I was working with batik and felt that something else was needed, I could cut a shape from some colored fabric and move it around on my work to try it for effect. This flexibility in the medium was also possible in serigraphy and painting. Also, in applying the wax to the batik with the syringe or quick brush strokes, the action or placement of certain forms or lines suggested further involvement in the composition. This was reminiscent of abstract expressionism, the style of painting in which I was working. These same brush strokes appeared in my serigraphy where I found several ways of achieving interesting textural effects with tusche, glue, and crayon. Texture became one of the most important elements to me. I experimented with thick impasto, building up areas with my palette knife to enrich the surface of my painting. At the same time, the need for textural variety in my textile decorations was satisfied by stitchery or appliqué of contrasting materials. The tactile quality of these textiles was also stimulating and added another dimension to my creative experience.

The second summer of graduate study, I was still interested in texture as an important element in my painting. I tried acrylic paints and found because of the fast drying quality of the material, I could build

texture faster than with oil paint. Most of my painting that quarter had some of this thick acrylic build-up. At this point in my development, it might have been natural to begin adding other materials to my paintings for additional texture. However, my interest in fabrics and textile decoration led me, as a teacher, to investigate periodicals, books and films on weaving, wall hangings, stitchery and related techniques, and my investigations steered me away from my immediate involvement with painting. Stitchery, appliqué and batik decorating technique were introduced to my students. My interest helped generate enthusiasm in them and they in turn broadened my concepts. I became aware of the unlimited opportunities for individual expression.

Because of the many influences that one is exposed to daily, it is difficult to recall exactly when I first became aware of the banner as a specific type of fabric collage. My interest in banners as a form of personal artistic expression has grown as a result of my accumulated experiences and interests to date. Besides these influences, my feeling for this medium has developed through an assimilation of pop, op, art nouveau, and hard-edge painting as they have come on the art scene. These art forms are characterized by clean-cut shapes and/or bright, vibrant color. The art of the Fauves, mainly Matisse and Vlaminck, has always been exciting to me because of these same characteristics. Textiles have textural appeal and variety and are readily accessible in an infinite number of colors and patterns, and they are easily cut into clean, crisp shapes.

The time spent working on banners has been rewarding and stimulating. My first banners have inspired ideas for further designs and techniques to

enlarge my banner-making experience. Banners are a likely vehicle in which I may express myself, as they inherently combine shape, color and texture plus the vital flowing quality of fabric.

Figure 1

This large (45"x60") banner is the same on both sides.
It is machine zig-zagged of rayon sheath-lining material.

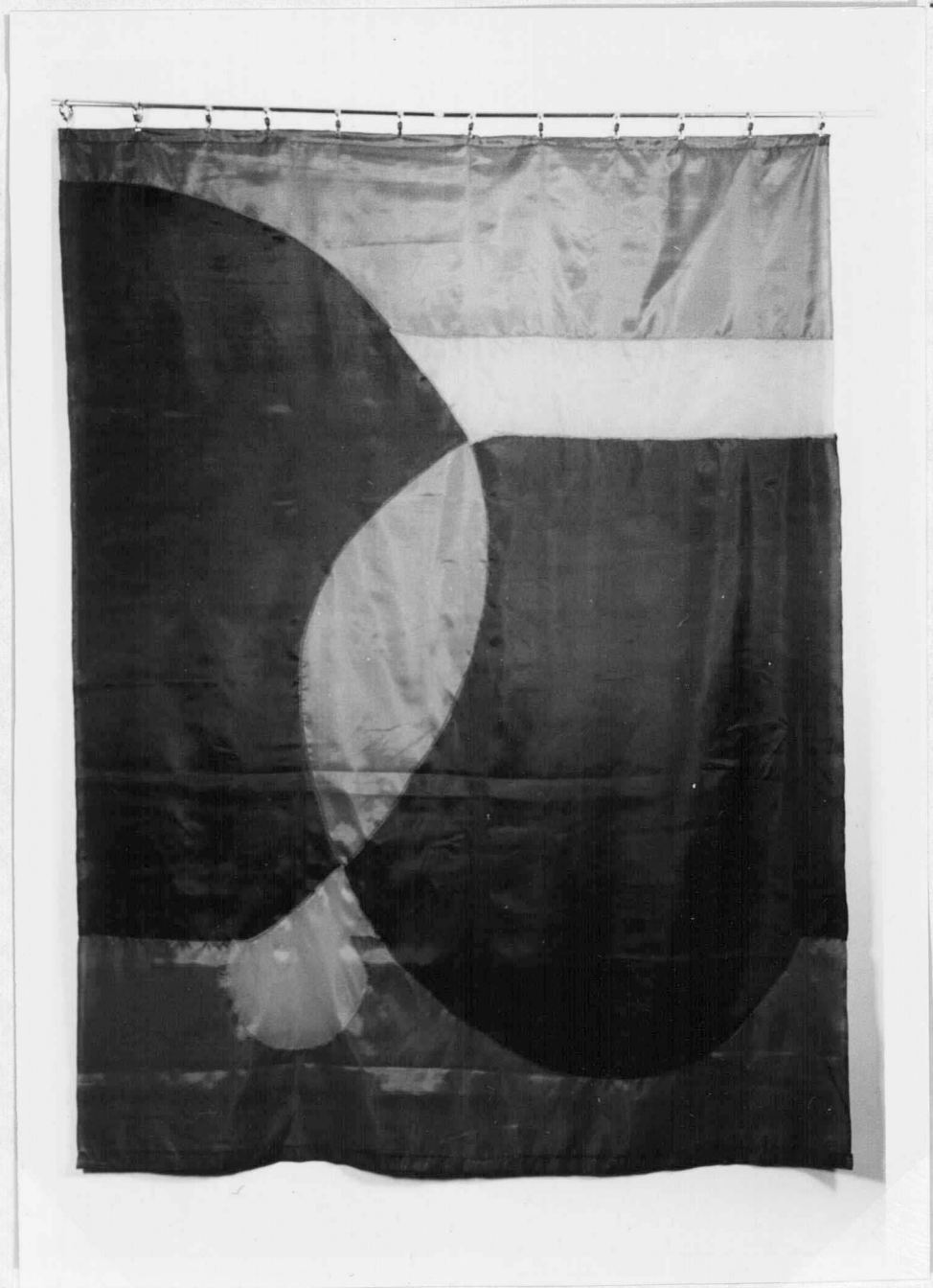


Figure 1

Banner

(45"x60")

Figure 2

This was painted during the first summer of graduate study.

The palette is dark blues and black
with bright areas of yellow and pink and blue.

