

Franklin D. Watkins

Jean Charlot

TRIED and true men acting on juries are seldom expected to render judgments as drastically upsetting for established values as those of which we will be the abashed witnesses on the day of the Last Judgment. Yet such an incident happened when a Carnegie jury in 1931 gave to Franklin D. Watkins, unknown American, the first prize at the Pittsburgh International. It was of course blamed on cocktails, but there is reason to believe that this judgment will hold good for some centuries to come.

The net result was that on the two or three further occasions in which he publicly exhibited, Watkins was a ready target for the bitter denunciation of well-meaning critics. They especially attempted the sabotage of his grandiose mural, *Man Crushed by the Machine*, a humanistic work that linked him through Delacroix to the great Venetians, reminding one forcefully of Tintoretto.

This is the trouble with Watkins; he is a necromantic painter, whose familiarity with the Dead makes the good neighbors suspicious. Engrossed in his own pursuits, he does not try and emulate the white horses of the art galleries, forgets to take part in the hurried confabs and huddles from which new-fangled movements emerge. Watkins, nearing forty, has not had yet a one-man show. He works with the utmost hesitancy, destroys or hides most of his work, apolo-

gizing profusely for the bare dozen pictures that he dares at all show.

This humility is of course born of pride; but it is true also that all his paintings may be said to be unfinished in as much as the life that permeates them makes them ever shifting; they will never become static, resign themselves to being a decorative scroll, or a self-contained volume.

Whatever the actual subject matter, the permanent presence in his pictures, the dramatic actor, is the atmosphere. It is the common denominator that links all things together. Its bulk measures space, it defines the shape by contact, and the movement by its own resistancy. In this painted world things never exist in themselves, as museum pieces in a showcase, but mixed and intermingled and related. The bodies Watkins depicts acquire a kind of elastic consistency, they are in the ectoplasm stage where shape is dependent on movement. His is a very complete world indeed where the credibility of movement strengthens in turn the idea of space and implies the existence of time.

This peculiar philosophy too relative for sculpture, too didactic for music, is eminently suited to the medium of paint. Watkins shuns the sculpturesque definition of volume through black and white, suggests it through imperceptible transitions of value from color to color. The eye, meanwhile it absorbs the volume, never loses contact with the color sensation.

However articulate his grammar, Watkins does not delight in it, but uses it soberly as a tool. The message he wishes to carry to the onlooker is not that of a good painter, but primarily that of a man of passion. The mood is as pre-eminent in his paintings as it is in lyric poetry. And it is this mood which grasps and disintegrates the subject to serve its own human aim as completely, but more beautifully, as the impressionistic light did immolate the subject to scientific superstition. In his "Blues" the negro is recreated from

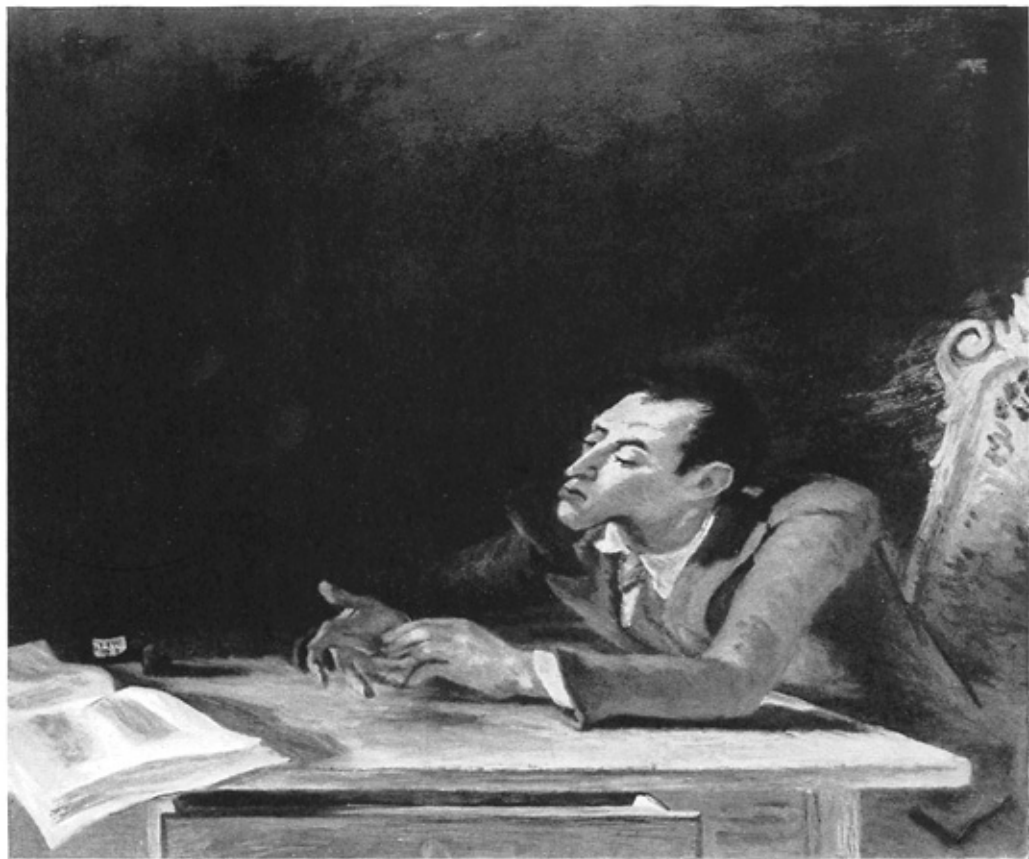
within, endowed with a syncopated body, the whole dark scheme being miraculously suggested by cream and buff and white. In another paradox, "A Lady Holding Flowers", a daemonic mood transforms a Victorian bodice and bouquet into the repellent spikes of some tropical fish. Or he tackles the problem of man in relation to the universe in his "Boy" so studious, dwarfed by a hypertrophied background as is a Chinese sage by a towering abyss.

Few terms of the aesthetic jargon in vogue could fit at all a description of Watkins' paintings, so removed are his aims and means from the orthodox modern path. The good artist of today builds up with paint an organism with members as carefully interjoined as are the cogs of a machine. His naive assumption being that such a body will somehow suscite its own soul. But the miracle more often fails to happen and the picture remains a most complete corpse. Watkins uses an opposite method, somehow more sound in its inception. He builds up a spiritual core which when strong enough accretes its own body. This metaphysical quality of his work has repelled most of the critics who spoke of him. They pointed to the fact that he was not an architectural painter, and thus unfit for murals. Watkins is certainly not a fresco painter, yet he proved himself a mural painter of the first order both in the panel shown with such negative success at the Museum of Modern Art, and in the huge godly Hand that he still keeps in his studio. His mature philosophy, even though embodied into quasi-impalpable modulations of color, could give any wall an architectural strength unequalled by all the make-believe robots of his more "constructive" colleagues.



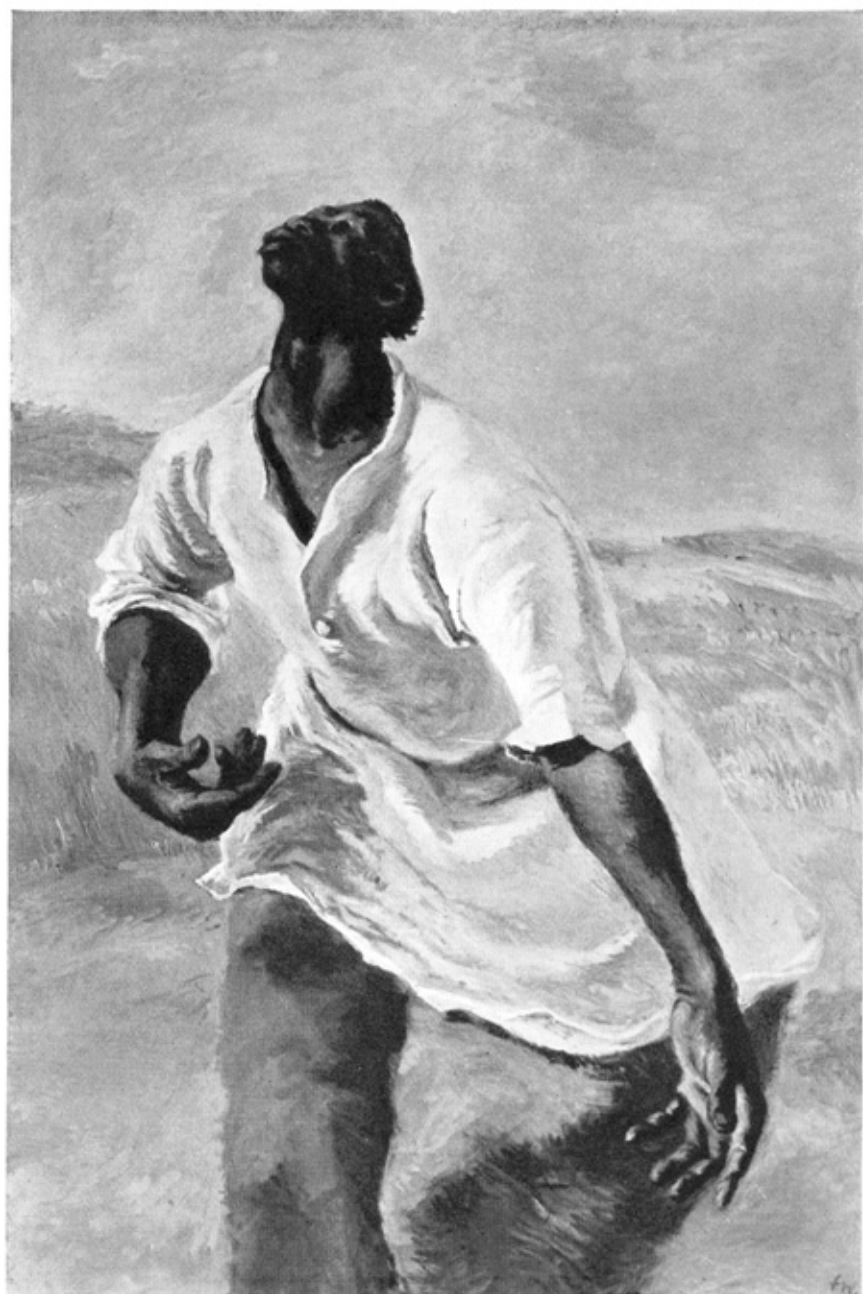
SCREEN

Franklin Watkins



SOLILOQUY

Franklin Watkins



NEGRO SPIRITUAL

Franklin Watkins

HOUND & HORN



Masks of Ezra Pound	R. P. Blackmur
p. 241 Franklin D. Watkins	Jean Charlot <
Cotton Mather: A.D. 1700	Katherine Anne Porter
Six Poems	Alexander Blok
The Burning Cactus	Stephen Spender
Matisse Murals in Merion	Dorothy Dudley
The Space House	Frederick Kiesler
Dancing in Thibet	Harrison Forman
Younger American Novelists	Martha Gruening
Letters from	England, Ireland, France, Russia

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