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The Descent From The Cross: A Painting By David Folley

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Editor's note to readers:

My Dear friend Alan Thompson wrote this commentary to assist the viewer with their appreciation of the painter's work. The commentary is recorded here in its original format (i.e., without references).

February 2001

The Descent From The Cross: A Painting By David Folley

Prologue

How could such innocent and holy man be treated thus?

What forces of the Devil tore him from us?

Why was the Saviour of our peace?

Condemned to die upon a wooden cross?

How can we live when there is such great loss?

All's black as night,

A hideous sight,

Our hearts awash with crying,

As our Lord hung dying.

And now with Spirit gone, is flesh and bone alone,

While we, aghast at what we have to do, in misery grey,

Carry the vehicle of our hopes away.

To some damp cave.

The Painting

David Folley has painted *The Descent from the Cross*, the melancholy depth of hopelessness, in a major work of heroic proportions. It is a large canvas painted traditionally to inspire the viewer to contemplate all that had culminated in what seemed at the time to be the final act of a tragedy. The viewer cannot share the utter despair of the participants in the painting because he or she knows what they didn't - that the body will be resurrected.

The way David has painted the body expresses the physical suffering Christ endured, whilst the dripping blood from the wound the soldier inflicted on Him, is shown as a rainbow. The explanation of this is that God told Noah that the rainbow was the sign of the new covenant with the earth. This is just one of many examples of Christian iconography illustrated in this work.

Mary, looking up at her son, is depicted as a modern provincial character in the manner we have associated with Stanley Spencer. Behind Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, with a moustache, is painted in blue to denote spiritual love, constancy, truth and fidelity.

At the extreme right hand side of the picture, the Revd. Raymond Chudley, who commissioned the painting, is shown in the traditional fifteenth century role of the donor, kneeling in prayer, with his attention fixed upon the body of Christ.

Facing him is the artist. He has included himself, portrayed as holding a broken spear as if to suggest that he had been responsible for the wound in the side of Christ. He is balancing precariously on a skull, a *memento mori*, signifying the transitory nature of life and also reading across to Calvary, which is derived from *Golgotha*, which is Hebrew for *skull*. He is also 'pregnant' with a foetus, which the artist sees as humanity giving birth to the Christ within, and transforming themselves into Sons of God rather than sons of man.

From the bottom of the painting is an outstretched arm, which just fails to touch Christ's hand, because the hand is withdrawn. This is intended to signify man's desire, through science, to explain the laws of the universe and so become almighty. He is almost there but cannot touch. There is a visual tension between God and man.

Narrative and iconography

The painting makes a coherent overall impression when we first see it - there is the obvious body of Christ, the cross and the mother. There is also the impression of medieval surrealism. Beyond this is the recognition of narrative in that the viewer can successively concentrate attention on the various elements of the painting. There is further dimension of iconography - many objects, animals, flowers and colours all with meanings associated with historical religious paintings or with biblical quotations.

The artist's intentions

The artist has painted in such a way as to inspire the viewer to contemplate the historical and mystical human presence of the Christ taken down from the cross after the crucifixion. Quite apart from the subject, it is not a comfortable painting - it is quite disturbing as one tussles with the juxtaposition of forms and colours.

This painting has been influenced by a number of artists;

El Greco - his extraordinary ability to transform mystical experience into the spiritual.

Grunewald Mathias - integrated medieval legend and symbolism with recognition of renaissance perspective and presentation of spatial relationships. His use of exaggerated gestures and bodily forms heightened the emotional impact of his paintings

Donatello - in the Magdalene, he emphasized the dramatic impact of extreme ugliness through the distorted expression of religious emotions in the gestures and poses of the human body

David says 'I sum up this painting as being made up of a composite of the works of great masters of the past. Not copying them slavishly but developing my own concept of individualism with emphasis on vivid imagery, technical refinement, complex iconography and innovation'. He goes on 'I am a twenty-first century romantic with a belief in the spiritual and redemptive possibilities of art. This exploration is the foundation of my romantic associations with the aesthetic tradition of Northern Romantic painting'.