

UNTITLED (SURREALIST WHITE FIGURES W/BLACK MAN), c.1939
Oil on Canvas, 12" x 15"

PROVENANCE

Purchased by private collector, date and origin unknown.

Consigned by the private collectors estate to Frederick Holmes And Company.

While not originating from the artist's estate, it has been confirmed as authentic by the Walter Quirt Family Estate.

CONDITION

The painting had been professionally re-lined likely decades ago by its original owner. It's been recently inspected by a professional conservator (details on request) in Seattle, cleaned and lightly revarnished, and is in excellent condition.

NOTES

Extremely rare painting circa late 1930s when Quirt begins to transition from "social surrealism" to an exploration of more explicitly surreal figuration and landscape that we later see in the larger, bolder canvases of the early/mid 1940s. While the surrealist works of the early-mid 1940s were less ideologically explicit or dogmatic, this painting retains one of the artist's predominant social concerns found in his social surrealist work: racism.

The "RADICAL PAINTER"

Decades before Black artists were exhibited in today's reform-minded American galleries and museums, before the term "civil rights" was a familiar cry for racial justice, before miscegenation laws were repealed, when Jim Crow segregation and lynching were still common in America, Walter Quirt used his voice and Social Surrealism to advocate for racial equality.

As the secretary of the John Reed Club, an organization of leftist writers and artists calling for social change, Walter Quirt was outspoken in his work about social, economic, and racial disparities in 1930s depression-era America. It was this pioneering genre that drew the attention of avant-garde gallery owner, Julien Levy, who gave Quirt his first solo show in New York in 1936, describing the artist at that time as "a radical painter."

Quirt continued to be represented and was a prominently exhibited artist with the Julien Levy Gallery for over four years, 1936-1940. It was during this time that Quirt became known for his pioneering "Social Surrealism" and became identified by arts writers, critics, and curators as one of the first American Surrealists. Levy was renowned in New York and critical art circles as the one of only a few galleries in NYC known for their nearly exclusive representation of European Surrealism and avant-garde artists, like Dali, Duchamp, Magritte, Matta, Ernst, and others. (Quirt was, along with Man Ray, Sandy Calder, and Joseph Cornell, among the minority of American artists represented

by Levy.) So while the artist often dismissed the influence of the Europeans, instead crediting his American contemporaries and the Mexican muralists as influences, it's nevertheless fair to assume that some – if not much – of this (then) “radical” aesthetic was absorbed by Quirt.

AMERICAN SOCIAL SURREALISM

Walter Quirt became a celebrated artist for the first time in the 1930s as one of a small handful of painters who'd embraced the tenets of European Surrealism as a means of expressing their concerns about social and economic inequities, labor rights, and specifically (in the case of this painting) racism in America. This new movement, primarily led by Quirt, also included Louis Guglielmi and James Guy as the influential contributors.

In the 1982 American Art Journal publication titled, AMERICAN SOCIAL SURREALISM, art historian and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) Curator, Ilene Susan Fort wrote, "*Racial equality was a popular cause among the leftist groups. Early on, Quirt began delineating the plight of the Negro. In 1933, he did a sketch for a proposed John Reed Club mural, NEGRO REVOLTS BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIVIL WAR (now lost) and the following year, the more surreal BURIAL* Quirt's *BURIAL*, 1934, (Oil on Gesso on Board, 6.5" x 7.75") (Permanent Public Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York) was also featured in their 2019 publication, *AMONG OTHERS: BLACKNESS AT MoMA*. "*Walter Quirt's tiny painting BURIAL was purchased by (MoMA Director, Alfred) Barr for the collection in 1935; workplace exploitation, the ravages of poverty, and the plights of Black Americans were recurrent themes for Quirt, a Communist Party member who liked to illustrate Capitalism's intrinsic inequities with surrealist devices. BURIAL confronts its viewer with an extraordinary funeral for the period: the despairing protagonists constitute an integrated mourning party. And what do they mourn if not an entire community lost to symbolic and actual neglect by the enclosing American society?*" (Pg.29)

THE PAINTING

In *UNTITLED*, c.1939 (*SURREALIST WHITE FIGURES W/BLACK MAN*), the scale is in keeping with much of Quirt's earlier work. Canvas and oil paints were expensive and hard to come by during the depression, and its 12" x 15" dimensions reflect the artist's frugality. The standing and walking figures in the composition border on the grotesquely Dali-esque. They hold sticks which could reference crutches, a detail seen in several of Dali's paintings or could perhaps be sticks meant to oppress the central figure they surround. It's relevant to this entire narrative to note the male figure in the center of this painting; contrasted in prisms of deep and light blue from the others in pastels, and with short wavy hair, is clearly a Black man. He stands upright and without the cartoonishly grotesque features of the others, his arm draped around the Picasso-like cubist female; something likely intended as a provocatively, defiant gesture at the time by Quirt.

While the style of the painting differs from *BURIAL* and other earlier examples of Social Surrealism, which were more “on-the-nose”, it is clearly a Surrealist image, with its

subject and ideological narrative of racial justice, subtly front and center. By the late 1930s, Quirt had become somewhat disillusioned with the Marxist-influenced Surrealism. So while still retaining his empathy for the marginalized in the larger context of American society as we see in *UNTITLED, c.1939 (Surrealist White Figures w/Black Man)*, only now the style is more overtly surreal and free of the dogmatically ideological. In spite of his abandonment of explicit “social surrealism”, the artist still maintained his support of marginalized communities and defiance of racism and bigotry.

Walter Quirt, constantly experimenting and exploring the myriad genres of Modern which were evolving in mid-century America, continued to integrate surrealism into many of his paintings throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. From the early 1950s through the end of his career, Quirt’s painting became more diverse and eclectic, while still retaining the signature quality of a mature artist in command of line, color, and brush.

In 1960, he was given a traveling retrospective, produced by The American Federation of Arts, which was exhibited in seventeen cities, 1960-1962. Walter Quirt’s work was featured in seven Whitney Annuals and Six MoMA group shows. His paintings and works on paper can be found in the permanent public collections of over thirty prestigious museums and public institutions. His letters and papers were recently accepted by The Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

Frederick R. Holmes