

WALTER QUIRT

(1902-1968)

THE ROMANCE OF THE ROCKS, ca.1940

This painting by seminal American Modernist painter, Walter Quirt, is as compelling and enigmatic as its title might suggest. In fact, I'm not absolutely certain its title was contributed by the artist. "The Romance of the Rocks" is written on the back in what one of Quirt's adult son's described as *"my mother's writing."*

When consulting with esteemed American art historian, critic, and author, Peter H. Falk, (who's also an advocate of the artist's work and revival of his legacy) he stated "*The Romance of the Rocks' seems like an odd title for this scene. A clue is that it's also the title of a natural history book published in 1912 by Reverend Charles Albert Hall [1872-1965] a Swedenborgian minister of The New Church, writer, and lecturer.*"

Its mysterious title's origin notwithstanding, it's a fascinating composition, redolent with Quirt's fascination, if occasionally conflicting feelings, with Surrealism. By the late 1930s, Quirt had grown disillusioned with Surrealism as a movement, and yet kept experimenting and evolving; no doubt now being more *"influenced by his participation in Freudian analysis from 1935 to 1939, under Dr. Margaret Fries."* Though the artist disavowed the label of Surrealist, Quirt retained his admiration and practice of automatism, one of the defining tenets of this radical avant-garde movement as established by its founder, Andre Breton and explained here by Prof, Mary Towley Swanson (1939-2004), Guest Curator **Walter Quirt - A Retrospective, 1980**, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, *"...a type of automatic painterly writing on canvas that produced compositions with multiple focal points."* -

I've been unable to find an illustration of this specific painting in my research, which isn't unusual as the artist's legacy was largely obscured, and many paintings lost, in the five decades that followed his passing in 1968. However, as educated guesses go, I'm relatively confident about the period of its creation. Again, quoting Professor Towley Swanson, *"One approach in Quirt's painting from 1940 to 1941 depicted figures melding into environments that resembled loops of material and jagged rocks and foliage...related to the early paintings shown at the Julien Levy Gallery, which used dramatically posed figures and backdrops that looked like stage settings."*

That description certainly seems to fit ***The Romance of the Rocks***, in its richly painted tableau of multiple figures. Note the two female figures on the right: The standing figure facing the seated, stolid matronly figure, who seems to be receiving them, is comprised of three profiles, while the figure furthest right is comprised of two; their arms now forming a large profile looking downward. The male figure standing alone at far left, remains distant and aloof, like a silent invisible observer, his head almost lost in shadow, with what appears to be a shield dropped at his feet.

Regardless of Walter Quirt's disillusionment with Surrealism, the artist's incorporation of its central tenet of automatism, his personal journey through psychoanalysis and the deep unconscious well of the artist's creativity, served him beautifully. This painting is as brilliant an example of Quirt's personal, eclectic practice of surrealism as any I've encountered in my

research, representing the artist's estate since 2015 and the ongoing revival of his legacy and market.