



The Art of Steffen Thomas¹

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THIS book is the product of three like-minded people bound by mutual respect and liking for each other and, above all, a shared appreciation for the work of Steffen Thomas. The pleasure of such an agreeable association alone would have been worth the effort. Unlike my colleagues Andrew Hayes and Alan Aiches, however, I never met the artist. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. In one sense, it was an asset, for I was not overwhelmed by Thomas's substantial personality, and could look at his work without personal prejudice—though I hasten to add, this did not mean suspending my aesthetic judgment, which is no less personal. I therefore set out to select the forty or so finest objects out of a large body of work. These would, I hoped, define the essence of the artist and his contribution. It is not a “balanced” survey or retrospective. In fact, there are several aspects of his career that are hardly touched on, notably welded sculpture, which he produced in considerable numbers but which does not represent his best overall contribution, in my opinion.

On the debit side, I am fully aware that the selection is therefore, in one sense, arbitrary. As such, it does violence to both the man and his art, precisely because there is so much I could not possibly know without having met him. Art historians deal with this dilemma all the time, but it is alien to the curator and critic of modern art, who necessarily rely on close contact with artists whenever possible. The picture I am about to present of Thomas as artist is thus an historical interpretation, and like all attempts of its kind, partly and necessarily fictive. Moreover, I am concerned primarily with issues that are secondary to Alan Aiches' admirable and far more comprehensive overview, which is based on personal insights gained from direct contact with Thomas.

Thomas is not an easy artist to categorize. His date of birth -1906- actually places him between the two main generations who defined German art during the first part of the twentieth century. Moreover, he immigrated to this country well in advance of most other German artists, who came to escape Nazism in the 1930s. Thus, he is neither typically German, nor distinctively American, but rather a cosmopolitan figure whose work would have looked comfortable in a Paris gallery. He nevertheless belongs among a lost generation of German-American artists who achieved considerable reputations in their time, only to have disappeared from the artistic consciousness of today. These included Werner Drewes and Karl Zerbe, both of whom were friends of my parents. Their neglect is unjust but perhaps inevitable in a rapidly changing world obsessed with newness. This exhibition and book seek to redress the balance.

Thomas was brought up in a typical turn-of-the-century German family. It was ruled with an iron hand by his father, who determined the careers of Thomas and his brothers. Around the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to a stonemason by his father without any consultation. The apprenticeship determined Thomas's career, for he decided to become a sculptor. It also gave him a lifelong satisfaction in manual labor. Upon completing his three-year term, he enrolled in the

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School of Applied Arts in Nuremberg, much against his father's wishes. Indeed, the issue was resolved only by a heated confrontation with Thomas's father, a large, tall man.

Thomas then enrolled in the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. His training there was likewise traditional, for it was heavily oriented toward technique as a matter of necessity for an aspiring young sculptor. It emphasized drawing and sculpting, and he took few painting lessons. When an instructor severely criticized one of his models, Thomas refused to show him other works, but he continued to labor on in private at the Academy. This incident was a harbinger of the future, for the artist remained extremely sensitive to criticism to the very end.

Upon graduation in 1928, Thomas determined to come to the United States. This decision was most unusual at the time. His motives for emigrating were surely to get as far away as possible from his oppressive father, but the choice of America seems to have been a Romantic conception picked up from magazines and novels. A family friend in Palm Beach, Florida, sponsored Thomas, who thus was able to bypass Ellis Island. Thanks to a German-speaking ticket agent in New York, he was put on a train bound for Florida. Unable to read the newspaper he had bought, he did not realize that the city had been hit by a hurricane the day before. With the help of an intrepid taxi driver, he was able to locate his sponsor's house. Thomas lived in Palm Beach for a few months working as a sculptor on an estate house that was being built and learning English. He then went back for a brief visit to Germany, mainly to see a girl friend, who had naturally begun to date other men in the meantime. He was not to return there until 1972. He had become an American in spirit, and took his citizenship at the first opportunity.

Thomas moved from Palm Beach for a brief stop-over in Chicago and then for a short residency in Huntsville, Alabama, where he supported himself as an insurance salesman. This experience was to serve him well. He learned the resourcefulness that marked his early career. It also taught him how to present himself publicly and socialize with a wide range of people in his new land. At some point during his time in Alabama, he secured his first portrait commission, a bust of the state's governor—the first of what were to become many portrait commissions that became his chief source of income. Some came through political connections, but most were obtained through sheer effrontery. He would walk into an office and demand to see the "head man," then suggest doing a bust. He also would get public support for a portrait, then help raise the money for the commission—in one case by having school children bring in pennies and nickels.

Thomas was encouraged by a friend from Atlanta to move there in late 1929 or early 1930. He moved into a small house shared by two other young men. Not far away was the home of a young woman whom he met while chatting with her mother about gardening. After a two-month courtship, Thomas and Sara Douglass were married in a civil ceremony. They set up house in the same one in which Thomas had been living, which by now he had to himself. By 1941, Thomas was making an adequate living through portraiture. When the Thomases saw a newspaper advertisement for 50 acres near Stone Mountain at a bargain price, they secured a mortgage and moved to the site. Thomas spent the next twenty years building and enlarging the house, mostly by his own hand, and creating a private world filled with his own creations.

Thomas also successfully sought major public commissions. His most important one was for the large Alabama monument at Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1948. The last such commission came in 1955. The failure to gain the commission for the Civil War memorial at Stone Mountain after 20 years of making proposals was a serious blow. He viewed that selection process as highly political, and he became very cynical of the business of the art world. By that time, however, he was working almost exclusively on his own artistic projects. The sale of the Stone Mountain property to developers in 1971 for a large sum secured Thomas's future. In addition, he made a good deal of money in the stock market through prudent investments, of which he was extremely proud.

Thomas's vision was defined soon after he came to the United States. Though treated virtually as a throw-away, an early bronze head, based on a terra-cotta that languished in his garden for many

years, already shows all the essential characteristics of what I call his “muses”: the idealized women who populate his work throughout his career and form its core. The resemblance to Sara (whom he had not yet met when he executed this model) is striking. The muses are allied to the classical tradition stretching back to ancient Greece, without being specifically classical in appearance. On the contrary, they have a rounded softness suggestive of Matisse, but with an abstractness that arose from Thomas’s youthful Cubist experiments. We meet them again and again, these muses. In their many guises they express an ideal not simply of femininity but of humanity as a whole. Only occasionally are they overtly erotic, and when they are, it is because of some external event that disturbed his vision. Sometimes they are jaunty, even witty, without being merely chic the way fashionable society artists would paint them. The ideal developed with impressive consistency over the entire body of work. Sometimes it is conveyed through the choice of subject itself, which often centers on motherhood and family, but for the most part it is communicated through pose and expression. These can be difficult to “read” as such, since their content is anything but obvious. They nevertheless manage to transmit Thomas’s intent with admirable clarity.

Thomas’s work is highly individual. Of course, it has a playful side. Moreover, he was a keen observer of people, witness his portraits, which capture the character of each sitter remarkably well, and of the world, as the watercolors from his 1972 European trip demonstrate. But for the most part it was guided by his inner vision, so that he had little need for the live model.

Surveying Thomas’s work as a whole, one cannot fail to be struck by its restlessness. This was a man who was not happy unless he was making something. Hence, the vast output and the ceaseless experimentation with every available medium. It also manifested itself as a willingness to adopt aspects of different styles that were natural to him as an artist born and trained in Europe. Thus; one sometimes finds reminiscences of Picasso, Matisse, Moore, Rouault, as well as the German Expressionists and French Surrealists. Such comparisons inevitably work to his disadvantage. They also fail to do justice to Thomas, for he was anything but a derivative artist. In the first place, he could hardly have failed to be influenced by the artists who defined the early twentieth century. More to the point, it is important to understand the role of tradition, both old and new, in his work.

Thomas was a whole-hearted Expressionist, not simply in technique but by temperament. His allegiance was to its underlying approach, which provided a suitable arena for his ample personality. Style was secondary to him. Like technique, it was a means of expression, not an end in itself. For that reason, he was free to change either the style or the technique to suit the requirements of the work at hand - even if that meant reference to other artists. There is, in fact, an underlying logic, albeit an intuitive one, that dictated these choices. It was conditioned by the subject and its personal meaning, but above all by the mood of the artist as he worked on a project. There is also a consistent artist personality at work, even though his output is extremely varied. It shows an endless fascination with the possibilities to be explored in different media, whose techniques he set out to master with real virtuosity. This was, by all accounts, a counterpart to his innate curiosity. More generally, it was tied to the unfolding of his imagination, which took place in the peace of self-imposed isolation.

Given his personality, in fact, he could not have been anything but an Expressionist. It was the perfect vehicle for his impulsive creativity. Surrealism, with its emphasis on psychological spontaneity, complemented this approach, as against the carefully worked-out “program” we associate with classicism. Except for larger, more complex projects, primarily sculpture, he had no need or use for preliminary studies. As with all Expressionists, the results rested on a high level of inspiration—something no artist can sustain all the time. But when he was on top of his game, which was much of the time, Thomas’s successes were brilliant. He clearly understood the strengths and limitations imposed by his method in the quest for “happy accidents,” as he called them. Like a gambler, he lived for the unequalled high of a hit, and willingly sloughed off the failures as part of the game. In his case, the benefits far outweighed the risks, as the prevailing high quality of the work itself attests.

Like any artist worth his salt, Thomas believed unequivocally in the rightness of his path. This was allied to an unassailable integrity, both artistic and personal. At the same time, he was extraordinarily defensive about his work—for reasons that are readily understandable. The creative act is one of the most personal acts imaginable. It exposes one's innermost thoughts and dreams for all to see. Having birthed one's artistic child, having clothed and nurtured it, the artist then is forced to expose it to all the vicissitudes of an often-hostile world. In addition to the separation pangs that any "parent" must inevitably feel, the unkind fate it may meet at the hands of the art public can be extraordinarily painful. The fear of rejection leads artists, like most human beings, to develop the elaborate defenses evolved by Thomas over the years.

Thomas was legendary for his abrasiveness. He seemed to go out of his way to offend patrons, dealers, directors, and prospective buyers—in short, to make enemies of the very people he needed the most. Although he actively cultivated dealers and collectors, he often made such unreasonable demands of dealers that they stopped carrying his work, and he would sometimes ask unrealistically high prices. His relations with museum directors, notably Gudmund Vigtel of the High Museum in Atlanta, were usually no better. He wanted to be regarded as a major artist, and insisted on being treated as one by galleries, clients, and museum people. It is clear that this pattern of behavior arose from purely ego needs. What better way to shield one's work (and oneself) from criticism than to avoid the confrontation altogether by keeping all but true believers from seeing it?

Thomas's personal relationships were no less demanding than his professional ones. He seemed to push family and friends, sometimes to the very limit, as if testing their loyalty to him and his vision. Thus, his children had to struggle to find their own identities. Though to all external appearances he dominated his marriage as well, Sara was, as one friend put it, "the real power behind the throne." She understood that her husband's volatile temper rarely took the form of personal anger and was directed mainly at inanimate objects as a vent for his frustrations. She quietly managed the household, and negotiated relationships that became strained. Surprisingly, she had "veto power" over sales, for she possessed a strong sense of preserving the artist's legacy. Toward that end, she has built a substantial private museum to house his large body of work.

Though he would appear vain and arrogant to outsiders, he was the truest of friends to those who knew him well. Thomas had a loyal following of five devoted friends in particular. Most were associated with the psychiatric unit at Emory University. The affiliation was not unnatural: Thomas's work resonates with fascinating psychological overtones. It began in the late 1950s when the Thomases met Richard Lowrance, a salesman for a medical company, and his wife, Marge, at a class on modern art, of all things, taught at the High Museum by Helen Bullard, its head of education.

Thus began a lifelong friendship that continued when they joined a literary club. Among its members was Sidney Eisenberg of the Emory psychiatry department, who brought other colleagues into the club. The central figure became McRae Temples, who headed the Emory Psychiatric Unit until being sent to Vietnam in the late 1960s. A tall, slender aesthete of refined taste, he assembled a considerable collection of Thomas's most significant work over the years, and induced his colleagues Charles Conner and Bruce Prince to collect as well. Later came Andrew Hayes, who was a professor of education at the University of Georgia at the time he met Thomas.

Thomas was by all accounts an impressive figure, with an outsized personality that commanded the attention of all around him. He was a barrel-chested man of medium height, though he did not gain much weight until he quit smoking in later years. Possessed of great charm and vitality, his was very much a public persona. He was, in a sense, always "on" whenever there was an audience, be it family or friends. The house became the assembly point for his coterie on many a weekend afternoon and holiday. These events were carefully "staged": the living room at Stone Mountain even had a balcony, which he used theatrically. As the center of attention, he was always in control. He directed the events and their flow while "working the crowd."

Thomas was a true father figure, who filled a void in the lives of his closest friends. Temples hated his father; Conner had none; Prince was distant from his father; and Hayes was often in conflict with his. With his strong opinions in all matters, Thomas was authoritative - and sometimes authoritarian. He assumed almost mythical proportion in their minds, something that is reflected in their undying admiration for the man, even on the part of the most objective among them. The same is true of his children and the wives of these men. It is remarkable that the admiration and love Thomas sought to compel from others was given so freely and so fully by those who knew him best. Few people achieve this unless they deserve it.

What fascinated Thomas's friends most was his boundless creativity. He was always making something, whether it was an art object or a shed. This was more than a matter of his Germanic work ethic. Making things was life itself to him. He always said the most important thing to him was to create something every day. More than that, he was able to do anything he really wanted to in later life. His friends openly envied him that unfettered creative freedom, though it is something that the average person fears as alien and threatening. Moreover, he managed to accomplish something that most people would secretly like to do: withdrawal into a self-made cocoon from the world, which he dealt with only as it suited him and on his own terms. Like the one at Stone Mountain, the home in Atlanta (actually two houses joined by a walkway he constructed) became a monument to himself. Although he has been dead since 1990, it retains an overwhelming sense of his presence through the artwork that covers every available inch of wall and table space. The effect is fascinating. Walking in the front door is a very heady experience indeed.

There was a price for this retreat from the world, however. By relying on portrait and monument commissions, by keeping dealers and collectors at arm's length, by refusing to enter the hurley-burley of the marketplace, by venturing out only as it suited him, Thomas cut himself off from outside life. In art as in life, no one can grow without the rich array of experience that life has to offer. Surely one of the greatest lessons in life is that its joys and sorrows are equally essential, indeed inescapable. No less important is the need to confront oneself and life in all their reality. Thomas loved reading, especially philosophy, and his journals are filled with his observations. But reading about life's meaning is not the same thing as learning it through hard-won experience, especially for an artist.

Hence, this magnificent man, so powerful, so wonderfully gifted, did not continue to evolve in his later years, and it undeniably affected his art toward the end. The major series done at the height of his powers, especially the polyester paintings which proved very influential in Atlanta, show what he was capable of doing when a powerful new idea struck him. The trip to Europe in 1972, although undertaken reluctantly and only at Sara's firm insistence, produced an outpouring of watercolors that are among his freshest creations. They pulsate with an almost feverish passion as Thomas sought to capture at night the observations noted in brief sketches during the day. Yet they led to nothing further once completed. The sheer variety and joy of his output would no doubt have been even more dazzling if Thomas had exposed himself to new experiences during the last decade or so of his long life.

Thomas clearly had the capacity for growth, both personally and artistically. The unwillingness to venture into the world at large on a regular basis toward the end was a tragedy, because his work continued to be filled with an idealism, personal as well as philosophical, that is most appealing. He would return to certain favorite themes, notably his "muse" figures, again and again, seeking out new possibilities. Intriguingly, the last works, painted almost on instinct alone when he was nearly blind and in failing health, show him continuing to grope for that last remaining potential.