



In The Embrace of Woman*

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He settled back into his seat and looked out the window at the dark green landscape rolling by. It reminded him of the Tyrol, the gentle hills at the foot of the German Alps, his home. Like home, this land held him in a trance; more than the rocking movement of the train, more than being lost in a daydream that accompany trains he felt soothed by the undulating curves of the hills. Like a lover, the turning earth submitted to his touch. His eyes scudded over its fugitive forms, drawing their rolling line with a special hand on imagined paper.

He wanted the artist's life.

He had to think for a moment and remind himself that he was in a new world. He rehearsed the passage of the last few days, from the train station at Fürth to New York and now south to Palm Beach. How strange it all seemed, too much like a dream. He never felt so excited and so uncertain. What would become of him? He spoke no English. It took some time to find someone at Penn Station who spoke German to direct him to the right train. He went from one ticket window to the next until his queries were returned in his native tongue. An older gentleman knew some German and helped him to the right train.

Now on his way south, he was lost in the mutating forms outside his window and the fantastic drawing they made. Trees flashed by in irregular streams, smudging the outline of the hills into soft patterns. He thought the curving line of hills something of a golden blanket covering the giant body of a woman who lay stretched all the way from New York to Florida. Of course, he thought to himself, she had always been there, hidden in the Alps, the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies. But only now, in motion, did she come to life. From the train window she rolled restlessly in her giant bed. A steam-powered train was designed to get from one place to another in a hurry, and to experience as little of the way in between. The machine was designed by practical men for a practical purpose. That was the ingenuity of men. Yet it revealed to the artist a woman. More powerful than the heaving, monstrous engine which pulled him along and which was now stirring her from her thousand-year sleep. The paradox pleased him.

It was fall, 1928 when Steffen Thomas had come to the United States. He was twenty-two hopeful, looking to make his fortune as an artist. Germany was in a deep depression, not yet recovered from the economic and moral destruction of the First World War. Opportunities were limited. Eight years earlier, at fourteen, he had been a stone cutter's apprentice in a monument company on Fürth. His father had caught his son carving angel faces into the marble foundation of the family house and promptly put him to work as a stone carver's apprentice. If the boy wanted to carve, he thought, let him, he'll get it out of his system. If it does not, there's at least the experience and a foundation for a solid trade. Steffen was expected to be a craftsman, beholding to practical concerns over creative ones.

He did what his Father asked; he learned well. It was an education he could certainly use as a tradesman. His apprenticeship familiarized him with a variety of materials and their use. He learned to carve figurines for gardens, lettering on pedestals, commemorative plaques, and headstones. There was no shortage of work. In the wake of the First World War, there was a high demand for monuments and smaller memorials for the war dead. The experience served him well in America both for commissioned monuments and especially his personal sculptures. But he could not envision that kind of work as his life. Practical concerns were less

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upon the boy's mind than the gentle urgings of his muse. Fine art was luxury in Weimar Germany, and there was no market for luxuries, certainly not for the kind of experiments conducted by a modernist like Thomas. America, by contrast, glowed on the horizon; rich and free, it was full of opportunity. He could control his own destiny, created what he liked and secure his fortune in the bargain.

His romantic vision fueled his desire. Like any boy, he filled himself with fantasies of America's wildness, so different from Europe, domesticated by a thousand years of civilization. Even Bavarian foothills and Alps seemed to have had the ancient and trying roughness smoothed out for them; the spell of nature at home was distant, so much more so than the land across the sea as he imagined it. One of his goals, he thought, when he would finally come and see for himself, would be to meet an American Indian, noble, he imagined, one of the remaining family of beings whose ties to the mystical were still intact. It may be said that fantasy was the ruling principal of Thomas' art. He never lost his sense of wonder in the world, and his imagination of what lay beyond it. Little surprise that he should take an interest in the metaphysical and in philosophy, both of which became fundamental points of departure for his art.¹ But, for the present, he needed a job.

Of the thousands of immigrants pouring into this country, he was one of the lucky ones. Sponsored by, Christian Hoffman, a friend of the family who had come to the United States, Thomas could bypass the usual route through Ellis Island, have a place to live and even, if things worked out, a job. And, within a few days of his arrival in Palm Beach, Hoffman did help Thomas get what he needed, including work, the kind of work for which he was ably suited. He was to sculptor under Aristide Meisner, an urban architect from Austria and the chief architect responsible for the design and decoration of the E.F. Hutton Estate in Palm Beach. Thomas' duties were to carve copies of sculptures and Italian medallions for the entrance gates as well as other decorations needed for the estate grounds. Some of these designs were a few putti and angel faces, interestingly the same subject he had carved in the foundation of the family house in Fürth.

He was proud of his abilities as a craftsman, but he soon became impatient with the work required by Meisner. He bristled at having to spend his time as a servile copyist obedient to the ideas of others. He was bursting with his own ideas and wanted to demonstrate his creative abilities as well as his manual ones. His need for self-expression became so acute that, on one occasion, he could not help himself. He was to carve figures in the Gothic style into the mahogany grille of the Hutton family organ. Meisner admired the Gothic, but Thomas abhorred it. It conveyed too much angst. The chaos of writhing bodies, scrolls and other bits of minutiae stuffed into every conceivable corner disrupted the classical fluidity of line and clear design that had been instilled in Thomas at the Academy. This project he was determined not to do as planned. While Meisner was away on business, Thomas took it upon himself to "improve" the original design. When Meisner returned and saw the results, he was, understandably, appalled. He thought the act unbelievably brash and fired Thomas on the spot.

This incident tells much about Thomas' character. He was impatient with others dictating their tastes to him. *This* was brash. Thomas had a need to challenge what others considered right. The scenario with Meisner would be played out again and again in his frequent, and sometimes heated disagreements with his subsequent

¹ After settling in Atlanta, he became acquainted with a group of psychiatrists at Emory University, an informal group whose members included Bruce Prince, Charles Conner and McRae Temples. Their interests also centered around philosophical questions covering the gamut of human nature and belief. Their discussions were detailed and often heated, a heady experience for Thomas.

More generally, the European avant-garde in the 1920's – Expressionism and Surrealism, especially – also stimulated Thomas' interests in the metaphysical. In the wake of Symbolism, Freud, and Jung, among other things, psychological themes, creation myths, and archetypes buried deep within the human psyche became routine avenues of discovery for modern artists. Thomas was no exception. Like the German Expressionists, he wanted to grasp the nature of the subject, as Emil Nolde put it, "the very essence of things." (*Jahre der Kämpfe*, Berlin: Rembrandt, 1934, p.102). He found the cosmic visions and writings of Blake particularly attractive; he turned often to Paul Klee for his ideas. Klee's statement in his "Creative Credo" (1920) might have been made by Thomas himself: "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible." The relationship of the work of art to concrete reality was tentative at best; the world of the senses was useful only because it was comprehensible, the beginning of the way to the incomprehensible. "Art," for Klee, was only "a simile of the Creation. Each work of art is an example, just as the terrestrial is an example of the cosmic." (*The Inward Vision: Watercolors, Drawings and Writings by Paul Klee*, New York: Abrams, 1959, pp.5 and 7)

Thomas was particularly attracted to the writings of the late sixteenth-century German mystic philosopher Jakob Böhme and his concern with the process of self-knowledge. Such knowledge, he argued, is an inner spiritual phenomenon, achieved by dynamic, outgoing activity – in Thomas' case, the making of art. One's epiphany (inspiration) comes from the inside out since the inner state is the foundation of the visible universe, its essence. Thus, Böhme suggests, self-realization necessitates shaping the world according to the requirements of the soul. Thomas' notebooks have not been investigated by this writer. But they likely contain valuable allusions to Böhme, and are worthy of further study.

clients. In the mid-nineteen fifties he was able to abandon commissioned work altogether. He had come into secure income by prudent investments in the stock market and by the eventual sale of the property at Stone Mountain. He could then tend to his creative side, the seat of his personal intuition and spontaneity, the gentle, fecund muse, which to him was feminine. The crux of Thomas' art rests with this ideal, and explains why he so often turned to women as his subject.

The connection was due mostly to his mother. Where bosses and clients saw their own needs, and where his father saw only skill and packed his son off to an apprenticeship, his mother saw inspiration. His mother gave him the courage to pursue his talent as a fine artist. Because of her he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts in Nürnberg, and later, without his father's knowledge, galvanized his decision to apply to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in München. Thomas loved his father but was devoted to his mother. Her name was Elizabeth, the center post of the family, its meaning, its strength. She was his sustenance and support, the bearer of qualities that would in later years take on mythic dimensions in his art.

Even though Thomas' style and techniques were experimental and widely ranging, his subjects were less so. His most dependable subject, the one that serves as the unifying center of his being, was woman. Like the Expressionist Max Beckmann, whose principle problem was to find "the self, which has only one form and is immortal...,"² Thomas determined the immortal form was feminine. To this form as a symbol of strength, infinite compassion, and inspiration, he dedicated himself. In this respect, Thomas is unusual among modern artists, particularly the German Expressionists. Although an Expressionist with respect to the spontaneous outpouring of his inner being into his art, Thomas' placement of women at the apex of the spiritual cosmos was unlike anything produced by his countrymen in Dresden or München. In their paintings she is hardly benevolent or even confident. Expressionists, like Kirchner and Nolde, painted her as temptress and femme fatale, the castrator of man and the reason for his fall from grace. Their view of woman is much like that of the key influence of the Expressionists, Edvard Munch, who painted endless variations of female vampires and terrified pubescent girls.

In Thomas' view, woman was instead, powerful and compassionate, creator rather than destroyer. She appears again and again as wife and mother, or in more mystical forms of the soothsayer, muse, and madonna. All of them were meant to be understood as aspects of the archetypal feminine, the Great Goddess, creator of earth, the heavens, and the protective, nurturing soul of all mankind.³ She preoccupied him, this ineffable ideal, quite literally embracing him throughout his life. There are a few portraits of specific individuals, but the greater portion of his representations of women are not meant to be read as personalities. Even the portrait of his wife Sara in *Portrait of Sara* (c. 1980), though it began as a portrait, Thomas elaborated on the painting with an image he saw in his imagination, taking the real subject far into the ideal. Her gaze is distant and calm, the face of an angel or saint. The impression is furthered by the cross-hatched "halo" around her head and body. These details suggest that the painting is meant to be read as an icon. In addition, the flowers that frame her body and which mirror the round form of her breasts make her a symbol of life, universal and transcendent, and not the figure of a specific being.

The Greek poet Hesiod wrote of the Great Goddess as "Broad-bosomed, she that is the steadfast base/Of all things."⁴ She is presented by Thomas as large-breasted and monumental. Woman's nutritive powers reside in her anatomy. Large breasts and hips in representations of the goddess in the ancient world are traditional signs of the life force. Her breasts are more than physical attributes, they are magic, the source of divine manna which has created and which sustains nature and humanity. Even though many of the works in this exhibition are diminutive, Thomas' women are usually prodigious figures. Large breasted and ample bodied, they seem larger than life, either with respect to the picture frame, which they often press against, or with respect to other, smaller figures who appear in the picture with them. *Mother and Boy Child* (1978), is but one of many examples. The small rubbing from etched glass called simply *Dance* (c. 1960) is another. It too

² Max Beckmann, "On My Painting," in *My Theory of Painting* (New York: Buchholz Gallery, Curt Valentin, 1941) p. 12

³I say "mankind," because Thomas perceived her through his own mother, his creator and symbol of both physical and demagogic nourishment.

⁴ Quoted in Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston: Little Brown), p.37

reflects the idea of woman's body as substantive guardian, the mother, steadfast, firm and motionless, the center of activity but herself an immovable mountain. The abstracted male figures who dance around her seem no more than mortal wisps, fleeting life forms engaged in ritual gyrations. Their lines suggest time and brevity of life, whereas the form of the mother is more opaque, more static, and thus more lasting. She is an icon, a symbol of enduring grace; and the work itself is an altar raised in her honor.

An aspect of mother, more generally the woman as creator is another theme that occupied Thomas. Even the original mother, Eve, Thomas shows as the first on earth; reversing the Biblical account, she is the creator of man rather than being created from him. In *Search for Eve* (1965), Adam is not a whole being; he is amorphous, still in the process of being formed. Eve is rather the form-giver, the one who brings form and meaning to man. Adam is more abstract, protoplasm in the process of solidifying into human form. In Thomas' works men are often portrayed behind women, as Adam is behind Eve, as if to say that women create life but give solace to men thereafter. Thus the title of the work suggests a search, on one level, for the Biblical Eve, the first mother, not the mortal one but the ineffable the ideal one, and on another level for the idea of motherhood. This search is one of the principal mechanisms that drove Thomas' depictions of women.

Thomas' homage to the procreative aspects of the mother-as-earth can be found in *Reclining Mother and Child* (1951). The mother's breasts, shoulders and knees clearly suggest a landscape. She is both human and mountainous terrain. The small sculpture is the maquette for the monumental bronze designed by Thomas for his home in Stone Mountain. The maquette itself shows little of the intention and meaning that was realized in the larger work. The larger sculpture was set into an environment that linked her and her child with the mysteries of the firmament. The sculpture once sat on a base encircled with sign of the zodiac set in mosaic. The mother was meant to rest at the center of the cosmos, the master of all signs of the heavens, of all destinies. Nestled at their center, the child is secure, a Thomas' idea of the land as mother, and the mother as the solid, sheltering core of life. The theme of recumbent mother holding up her child is a reoccurring one. It served as a metaphor for Thomas' ideal of the earth and creativity. During his years at Stone Mountain, from 1941 to 1971, he busied himself molding the land, laying the foundations and walls of the house and its additions, workshop and foundry. This kind of work he found as satisfying as sculpting, drawing, and painting. The fifty-acre property was itself a work of art that occupied him for nearly twenty years. Over this time, the house and grounds became a continually changing and expanding earthwork, in a very real sense, a massive sculpture of wood, stone, and earth that embraced the artist and his family as the reclining mother cradles her child.

Another manifestation of the *mater familias* in Thomas' work comes in multiple representations of the Madonna. Often she was intended to be understood as such; *Madonna and Child* (c. 1950) is one example included in this exhibition. At other times her identity as the Madonna is less explicit but still unmistakable, as is the mahogany relief, *Head of young Woman* (C. 1985). Despite her generic title, her adoring pose and mantle framing her head recall standardized depictions of the Madonna from early Christian mosaics up to the present. Her calm features and closed eyes signify the kind of peace that comes through inner reflection, a communion with the spirit. Other heads of women, such as *Woman's Head* done in 1935, *Portrait of Sara*, and *Head of a Young Woman* may also be read as another manifestation of the Madonna, this time as the *Mater Dolorosa*. Bearing the weight of her responsibility as care giver, her expression is still one of adoration but tinged with sadness.

In most of Thomas' prints of women and less occasionally in his drawings and paintings, women perform certain gestures that convey them as spiritual beings. The manic gesture of upraised arms and hands that one sees in the *Soothsayer* (c. 1970), reminds us of prayer, a traditional sign of holiness given by priestess and deity alike. The title suggests as much; the soothsayer is one who transcends body and time and is able to see and predict the future. But the soothsayer's sign of arms help up and palms facing forward are an even clearer sign of her powers of divination and prophecy. The gesture of the priestess was meant to recall the shape of the crescent horns of a bull. The crescent is an ancient symbol of female transformation and sexuality; that is, her epiphany as goddess. The crescent horn goes back to Paleolithic times, represented either literally, as a cornucopia carried in the upraised hand of the goddess, or figuratively, as the this silver of the waxing moon.

It is also found in ancient Crete. The roof of the Palace of Knossos was once rimmed with hundreds of pairs of bull horns, symbolizing both the goddess' raised arms and the double arc of her fertile thighs. Ceramic figurines of snake priestess found in Crete often show her carrying her snakes with both arms raised. The famous mural at Knossos of the ceremony of the bull dance shows bare-breasted women somersaulting over the back of a charging bull. It is a haunting image, more than a demonstration of athletic prowess. It symbolizes a rite of passage for women. A leap through the horns of a bull was a demonstration of power, a ritualized act of transcendence.⁵ Thomas' figure was created privately in the artist's imagination; she appeals rather to a broader conception of the goddess than to any specific image from history. Thomas' intuition was his guide. His figures, he hoped, came from the same Jungian unconsciousness as the ancient ones.

The idea of transformation comes across more forcefully in the small woodcut, *Nude on Her Knees* (c. 1975). The figure again raises her arms. She kneels in prayer and in the grips of an epiphany. She is obviously more than just a woman on her knees; she is explosively electric, in the process of being transformed into the pure life force. The frame surrounding her barely contains her vigorous figure floating in a highly energized field and intensifying the emotional experience. The print conveys the raw power common to German Expressionist woodcuts, which vibrate and struggle against the limits of their often diminutive size. Like the Expressionists, Thomas wanted an art that emanated directly from the pre-civilized unconscious. The religious arts of the Gothic north, including the twisted bony Christs of Grünewald, carved wood altars. Stained glass, and woodcut, and the arts of Africa and Oceania, all were understood by the Expressionists to evoke a raw psychic energy, the "intense and often grotesque expression of energy, of life," according to Emil Nolde.⁶

The magnetic halo that sets off her ample body is a powerful visual device conveying energy. Thomas' goddesses frequently radiate with cosmic energy, as if the center and cause of a nuclear blast. Their phosphorescence is also reminiscent of the mysterious glow that emanates from living things one sees in Kirilian photographs. It is the kind of light that is a natural occurrence (the life force). But such a light that surrounds a body is more than tinged with the supernatural. It is a dynamic form of mandorla (the almond-shaped glow that radiates from holy figures in Byzantine mosaics). In Christian art especially, such a sign indicates the passage from mortality to immortality and the attainment of divine grace. The radiant light that issues from Thomas' women signify the transcendence from earth to heaven, the domain of gods and, even more (in the symbolism of the prehistoric world), of Great goddess.⁷ This light occurs often in Thomas' prints and drawings. We see it in *Soothsayer*, *Nude on her Knees*, *Mother and Boy Child*, *Bather* (c. 1970), *Reclining Female Nude* (1980), and, in various degrees in other works. It occurs also, if more subtly in *Crowned Figure* (1960). Intriguingly, she assumes the attitude of one who has been crucified but who is also dancing, the mixture being another – and rather elegant – way of stating the idea of transcendence.

Another form of transformation in the artist's women is where they melt into near abstraction, suggesting the nearest visual representation possible of the goddess herself. Thomas' large painting, *Astarte and Her Sister Allah*, is one of several works in which the artist explicitly deals directly with the figure of the goddess – in this case two of them but really meant as one. Through a series of wide, blood-red lines, Thomas has Astarte join

⁵ Ram's horns also play a role in representations of the Great Goddess. Ancient clay tablets found in Palestine show nude goddesses with their hair worn in a flip that is remarkably like hair styles worn by women in the 1950's and 1960's, which were faithfully transcribed by Thomas in his portraits of women. In the ancient world, this style was meant as a graphic representation of the ram's horns. In the Old Testament (Deut. vii, 13) the Great Goddess is referred to as "Astarte of the Flocks." Roman historians Lucian and Herodian both say that the Goddess was represented with horns. In modern times, the mound of Ashtoreth Karnaim near Gilead, England is still known as "Ashtoreth of the Horns." This history may or may not have been known to Thomas, but its coincidence with many of his portraits and drawings of women is most intriguing.

⁶ Nolde, from "Jahre der Kämpfe," (Berlin: Rembrandt, 1934), p. 102

⁷ The blast may also be a visual interpretation of Böehme's *Blitz* (Flash), one of seven qualities or energies in nature. the *Blitz* occupies a central position in Böehme's model. The seven energies consisted of two triads, one "Upper", the spiritual domain of "Love," "Expression," and the eternal "Kingdom of God," and the "Lower," consisting of things and their interactions. These he differentiated as "Contraction," "Diffusion," and "Rotation." The energy of the *Blitz* is the collision of the two triads, the spark or epiphany, so to speak, that occurs in the transference from one triad to the other. Thomas evidently used this scheme to suggest transcendence in many of his pictures of women.

her sister at the hip, as if passing the procreative essence from one to the other. The essence, in this case, is more abstract, one might even say more cosmic, than most of the artist's other representations of Women. Rather than coherent bodies they seem more like twin galaxies in the process of mutual creation. Their name declare them both to be not only goddesses, but goddesses of the heavens. The crescent shapes of their vaginas and breasts are the shape of horns and of the slivered moon. Astarte and Allah were worshiped at one time or another in the Middle East as the goddess of the moon; their symbol, the crescent, and still be seen as the sign of Islam. Allah was originally an Arabian goddess, Al-at or Al-llat, who as later (like Astarte) masculinized, this time as the god Allah of Islam. One might think of them as sisters not because of any filial relationship but because of their shared loss of womanhood. Astarte, however, still lives in myth as a woman and to have put Allah in her company effectively reasserts Allah's forgotten femininity. In effect, they are each two sides of the same being, the same individual capable of replicating herself, redoubling her sexuality, which is her power. Their manic gestures are given not to an unseen deity but to each other. Their gestures are self venerating, back and forth. Worship is thus a closed circle, an emphatic statement of self-sufficiency in their union, two distinct beings acting as one.

In every tribe and civilization since prehistory, Astarte has born many names. She was the principal goddess of the Semites, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Arameans and, as Horus, the horned goddess of the ancient Egyptians. She was the fertile Earth itself, the mother of all life. In the Old Testament she was know as Ashtoreth, the goddess whom King Solomon dedicated his temple. To the Greeks she was Rhea, the daughter of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth). The Mycenaean called her Demeter, goddess of spring. The Romans knew her as Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and the mother of Persephone, the herald of spring with her annual rise from the underworld. Creator of Heaven, she was also identified with the dead. As the "Queen of Heavens," she was the mistress of the stars, believed to be the dead hovering in the night sky whom she clothed in mantles of shimmering light. Her planet was Venus, thus linking her with the goddess of love – both sexual and divine. The Arabs called her Ashtar, "Venus in the Morning." With the minor shift in inflection, she was known as Ishtar to the Babylonians and Assyrians, whose graven image was the star invoked by kings to guide them to victory in battle.⁸ The Christian world knows her as the Virgin, intercessor for humankind in Heaven. Thomas incorporates them all in this image, perhaps reconciling in the two figures of Astarte and Allah the multiple variations of the identity of the goddess figure throughout history.

An important aspect of the goddess is her ability to not only comfort but to inspire. The Muse was one of the first forms of the goddess that Thomas explored and, in many ways, the most significant, for she is the one who gives birth to and nurtures the creative impulse. Thomas' *Muse* (c. 1928) is just such a work. It is one of two sculptures the artist saved from among the hundreds he made as a student at the Academy in Munich.⁹ That he kept her clearly indicates the importance of her form and symbolism. As a form, *Muse* is elegant; the serpentine line of her hair and her understated features combine to create an effect of peace and joy in quiet reflection. She is not outwardly expressive; entirely the animating spirit, she is the artist's source. She cannot be identified with any one of the Muses in the Greek pantheon, nor was she meant to be. Like the Graces, the original nine muses were thought of as one, a singular figure "of one mind," says Hesiod, whose "...hearts are set upon song and their spirit is free from care." They serve to inspire, from the Latin *inspirare*, literally the opposite of expire, to breathe in. The Muses swell the empty soul with joy. "He is happy whom the Muses love," continues Hesiod. "For though a man has sorrow and grief in his soul, yet when the servant of the Muses sings, at once he forgets his dark thoughts and remembers not his troubles. Such is the holy gift of the Muses to men."¹⁰ Thomas may have anticipated the value of his *Muse* before ever coming to America, and her placid features no doubt came to his rescue many times

⁸ Paradoxically, her title of supreme creator proved to be her undoing as a goddess. She became a devil in Christian literature by writers who interpreted her in the Old Testament as one who challenged Yaweh. Anyone other than Yaweh was considered a false god and assumed to be a denizen of Hell. She was thus deposed from her throne by Christian theologians and subsequently masculinized. In 15th and 16th century texts she is known as Astoreth or Astaroth, the "Prince of Hell." In a further twist, her role as creator was given to a mortal, the Virgin Mary. The archetype of the Great Mother could thus be kept without conflict.

⁹ The other is called *Laboré* (c. 1927-28), a bronze representing a mother and her two children.

¹⁰Op.cit.

since. One instance is the lithograph *Head of a Woman* (1935). Here she is more specifically a mother, but the resemblance to the *Muse* is close enough to warrant comparison. For one of his figures of women he wrote an ode to one, describing her as “Venusian-like...mysterious in countenance [and]...stately, shapely, and sacrosanct,” the words of a worshipper who wishes to overcome the limitations of the senses and traverse deeply into the imaginary, into her “chamber of the inner sanctorium.”¹¹

In family groups, the adults are more often women than men. In many of these works, the father is conspicuously absent. In Thomas’ microcosm, man is neither a participant nor even potent; he is most often a peripheral observer of the family group, the one who stands behind the mother, or like a child the one supported (held) by her. One might speculate that Thomas subliminally banished his father from the family group, that his impulse was Oedipal rather than a considered aesthetic or moral position. However, Thomas rarely produced significant work that was not fully thought out. More likely, when the male appears, his nature is inverted, turned inside out. Beneath his tough shell he is the man-child, no longer innocent and all the more needful; he is a metaphor of the more-often seen boy-child cradles in the mother’s arms. Thomas was confident enough with his own masculinity to reveal the essence of man in such a way. His hands and frame were larger and his manner imposing. He relished in terms of physical power. His art was conceived and carried out with determination, and with a firm belief in his own convictions. The tendency toward monumentality in his art also suggest a masculine drive for power through size, a symbol of himself in relation to others in his presence; he was happiest when he had an audience. In his private life he was the typical father, head of the family whose word was rarely disputed. Yet woman was to him a spiritual force, the one to whom the inner man looks for strength. In art, men need not appear. Man is physically strong and provides material support in real life. But in art, woman provides an immaterial but loftier form of sustenance, and thus she always plays the key role.

Thomas was absorbed in the almost infinite ways to present his women, immersed in his desire to find their every possible aspect, embraced by the thought of a woman’s tenderness, grace, love and inspiration. His embrace did not come from any single person but from an idea. There are other archetypal roles Thomas found in his women than are presented here. A far more extensive study than the above is required to present them all in any detail. However, these roles may be found by the discerning observer. I suggest rather looking at the works themselves and let yourself be embraced by their variety and richness.

¹¹ Steffen Thomas, “Ode to the Painting of a Woman,” in Andrew E. Hayes and Alan Z. Aiches, *Steffen Thomas: The Freedom of the Figure* (Wilmington, North Carolina: St. John’s Museum of Art, 1983), p. 38