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**AUTHOR'S STATEMENT**

I met William Halsey in the summer of 1997 when I worked for his family, photographing and cataloguing slides of William's life's work. Before that summer, I had never known a modern artist, watched a painter work continuously, or studied one individual's life work. Each morning, as I entered the family home and studio on Fulton Street in downtown Charleston, I saw William, painting ferociously with oil sticks. Some days he worked calmly, completing soft, loose, abstract compositions. Other days I found him scrambling, tearing works to shreds, often cursing the paper, the materials, his art. But regardless of his mood or the style of the finished piece before him, 83 year old William Halsey always looked invigorated, passionate, and focused. Every day, he strove to achieve something new in his art--something I often could not see or understand, but something I could not help but feel as I watched him paint.

That summer experience, unloading 4' x 5' canvases, unwrapping art school studies, and finding old portraits and paintings of Charleston and Mexico, deeply moved me. Each day as I pulled different works of art from dusty racks and hidden portfolios, I realized that I was uncovering a house full of art that had a life in itself. And I felt strongly that the reclusive 83-year old artist, working diligently in an open studio room next door, had a hidden life worth uncovering, too.

I did not know anything about William Halsey when I began working for him. Aside from having an extensive knowledge of his work, I still did not know much about his past life when I left Charleston at the end of the summer. But I always had a strong feeling about his

artistic devotion. When Halsey died on February 14, 1999, I decided that I wanted to pursue a thesis on his life--hoping there would be enough information to produce a substantial body of written material. The family generously welcomed my research efforts and provided me with unlimited access to Halsey's work, notes, scrapbooks, and personal belongings.

Unfortunately, artists like William Halsey often do not have extensive records, biographical data, or written texts. Information rests in family members' memories, scrapbooks, disorganized archives, and the art itself. Finding the correct date, the lost painting, or even the right word to define the meaning or the style of an unknown body of work is challenging, but the result is indescribably rewarding. At the heart of every painting described, celebrated, and studied in art history is the creative spirit and soul of an individual artist. This spirit links together all of the styles, movements, and objectives of art, past and present. My thesis is intended to provide a partial introduction to the life, work, and spirit of William Halsey, a reclusive Southern painter, often called the "Dean of contemporary art in South Carolina."

As a college professor and local modernist, Halsey is credited with teaching and inspiring hundreds of younger artists and individuals to pursue and support contemporary art; however, as a devoted painter and abstract artist, Halsey has not yet been credited (beyond the Southern region) with producing an important body of work that could provide a unique and alternative insight into modern American art of the 20th century. Through the seven hundred or so paintings and drawings I photographed in the summer months of 1997, I discovered a wealth of work in one American's development in art: a testimony to freedom and creative independence.

Though not a political painter, William Halsey did survive and experience the aftermath

of two world wars, the great depression, the New Deal, integration in the old South, and the complete remodeling of his historic hometown. His artistic responses to these experiences and events provide insight into understanding the regional perspectives and developments of 20th century American art. This thesis is designed to present the spirit and work of William Halsey, and to encourage the exploration and rediscovery of other unknown artists whose forgotten work could contribute to our comprehension of 20th Century American art.

His home town, did not relate to realistic studies of picturesque Charleston street scenes. Instead, his interests demanded a close study of color theory, geometry, and artistic media.

Upon leaving Charleston in 1935 for the Boston Museum School, Halsey discovered new techniques and artistic influences. He spent countless hours in the Boston Museum, studying the works of Matisse, Dufy, and Bonnard, artists who would inspire the styles of his early works.<sup>1</sup> In Boston, he learned academic principles and found support from teachers and the progressive art market. Here, he began an artistic career that would continue for over sixty years. Chapter One of this thesis recounts the development of Halsey's art education, from his first drawing lessons in Charleston, through his experiences at the Boston Museum School and his fellowship studies in Mexico. These pages explain how the young Charleston artist acquired an interest in modern art and subsequently broke free of the "prevailing influences of the Old Charleston Picturesque style of painting."<sup>2</sup> His life-long determination and devotion to pursuing

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<sup>1</sup> William Halsey and Corie McCallum, interview by Liza Kirwin (27 October 1986, Oral History Interview for the Archives of American Art, Washington, DC).

<sup>2</sup> Morris,

## INTRODUCTION

William Halsey was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1915. At a young age, his artistic talent and interest was made evident to family and teachers, who encouraged him to pursue drawing and painting in the traditional styles of local Charleston artists. Halsey's inspiration for art, however, found in the colors, textures, and ruins of his home town, did not relate to realistic studies of picturesque Charleston street scenes. Instead, his interests demanded a close study of color theory, geometry, and artistic media.

Upon leaving Charleston in 1935 for the Boston Museum School, Halsey discovered new techniques and artistic influences. He spent countless hours in the Boston Museum, studying the works of Matisse, Dufy, and Bonnard, artists who would inspire the styles of his early works.<sup>1</sup> In Boston, he learned academic principles and found support from teachers and the progressive art market. Here, he began an artistic career that would continue for over sixty years. Chapter One of this thesis recounts the development of Halsey's art education, from his first drawing lessons in Charleston, through his experiences at the Boston Museum School and his fellowship studies in Mexico. These pages explain how the young Charleston artist acquired an interest in modern art and subsequently broke free of the "prevailing influences of the Old Charleston Picturesque style of painting."<sup>2</sup> His life-long determination and devotion to pursuing

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<sup>1</sup> William Halsey and Corrie McCallum, interview by Liza Kirwin (27 October 1986, Oral History Interview for the Archives of American Art, Washington, DC).

<sup>2</sup> Morris,

a career as an artist is evident in the early statements and letters included in this chapter, along with explanations of the development of his personal style, and his discovery of important subjects and interests.

Chapter Two addresses the best-documented decade of Halsey's career: the 1950s. From 1948 to 1960, Halsey exhibited his work regularly in New York and completed several commissions for local and national synagogues, buildings, and publications. The reviews of these exhibitions, and the historical accounts of his commissions and activities of the time, provide necessary insight into Halsey's participation in the larger art trade outside the American South. This chapter presents an extensive chronology of Halsey's role in the most critical period of American art history: the development of Abstract Expressionism. Furthermore, it addresses the stylistic developments and changes that emerged in Halsey's work over the decade, and assesses his primary interests and influences. This chapter lays the foundation of dates, lists of works, and important events of Halsey's career in the 1950s.

Chapter Three recounts the explosive development of Abstract Expressionism in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Tracing the origins of the movement through its collapse in the early 1960s, this background information is organized to show how Halsey's career path and involvement in art paralleled many of the mainstream artists' developments. Assessing the limited but established canon of Abstract Expressionism, this chapter employs arguments that support broadening the academic scope of this art movement to include the excluded artists--namely women, African-Americans, and homosexuals. This theory proposes that the accepted historical record of Abstract Expressionism (which revolves around a select group of ten to

fifteen white males who resided in New York in the 1940s and worked with similar styles and techniques) omits painters from other backgrounds. Chapter 3 suggests that William Halsey, a Southern painter bound to his native region, could also be included in the group of participating artists who did not meet the historians' established criteria for acceptance in the Abstract Expressionist canon. Furthermore, the chapter explores the effects of exclusion, arguing that because artists were omitted from art history in the 1950s, their names and works were relatively forgotten by the mainstream art trade. Consequently, their later works and developments in art have also been ignored. The conclusion of this thesis suggests that if artists like Halsey who continued working in isolation away from art markets and media attention can be rediscovered, then Abstract Expressionism can be more fully understood in its broadest American context.

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Shedletsky, ed., *Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America* (New York: Parsons School of Design, in association with University of Washington Press, 1994) 12.

<sup>4</sup> William Halsey, interview with Martha Severens, 1 April 1993, interview for exhibit: William Halsey, 1999. Collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina.



## CHAPTER 1

Popular artists grow old in glory more or less deserved, while the unrecognized, if they are to ascend to their own demands, work very hard indeed. For an underappreciated artist, still working is a testimony to the power and the primacy of art itself and a necessary hedge against deflation. Good artists, known or unknown, can't retire, they mustn't, for they remain professional. . . which means, total dedication to substantiating quality and total personal investment for its own sake.<sup>3</sup>

Until the month of his death in February of 1999, William Melton Halsey continued to work daily in oil stick on paper, producing strong abstract compositions in bold, characteristic reds and yellows (Fig. 1). These final works were the closing expressions of more than sixty years of artistic fervor and unwavering dedication to abstract painting. Even at age eighty four, Halsey completed two or three of these small paintings each day, working diligently in an open studio room, scratching, smearing, and drawing. "There's no subject," he said, "No center of interest: no head, no figure. All over space and color space--an arrangement like stained glass. I like oil-sticks on paper; I can revisit them in a day. I frequently go back and work things out."<sup>4</sup> For Halsey, returning to the studio each day to begin a new piece or to continue working on another became a necessary function of daily life. He frequently told family and friends that

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Shedletsky, ed., *Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America* (New York:Parsons School of Design, in association with University of Washington Press, 1994) 12.

<sup>4</sup> William Halsey, interview with Martha Severens, 1 April 1998, Interview for exhibit: William Halsey, 1999. Collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art; Greenville, South Carolina.

making art was his reason to get up every morning.

For over seventy years, Halsey lived in the Southern historic port of Charleston, South Carolina, a city well known for its antebellum homes and Confederate landmarks. The third son of Ashley and Eleanor Loeb Halsey, William Melton was born on March 13, 1915 in his mother's family home at 51 George Street in the historic downtown district. For most of his life, Halsey lived within walking distance of his birthplace, but one could never accuse him of conforming to the ideals and traditions of the surrounding community. In a conservative, historical setting, William Halsey became an unconventional contemporary painter, devoting himself to abstract compositions. Until recently, his painting style found little support in Charleston's art galleries and artists' groups, yet Halsey continued to work and teach there in order to educate and introduce the local public to examples and ideals of modern art.

Despite notable success in prominent New York galleries and opportunities to exhibit in major museums, Halsey refused to leave his native town. Just as he remained loyal to the school of abstraction, he also remained loyal to Charleston. The rough textures, fading pastels, peeling plaster and decaying structures of the city, combined with the clean lines and unique architectural styles of the historic district, provided him with a strong sense of color, design, and forms he could use throughout his career. Halsey later described the inspiration in his home town: "Growing up in a Charleston impoverished and neglected, surrounded by flaking plaster, mortarless brick walls, old tiles, and rotting wood, I saw them as delight rather than decay. Ever

\* Martha Severens, *William Halsey, Essay* (Greenville, SC: Greenville County Museum of Art, 1999) 13.

† Murris, 9

since, I have carried on a love affair with fragments, shards, ruins, bits of past civilizations.”<sup>5</sup>

Halsey's love of broken and worn materials encouraged his later interests in textures, sculpture and collage, but the local colors and street scenes inspired his early drawings. He was introduced to the idea of drawing cityscapes and street corners by Elizabeth O'Neil Verner, a prominent Charleston artist who was his first art teacher. Verner recognized Halsey's talent when he was just thirteen, after his mother showed her the copies he made of living room paintings.<sup>6</sup> Young Halsey's work impressed Verner, who graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and returned to Charleston to continue her work and teach art classes at the Charleston Museum. Noting Halsey's strong sense of line and proportion, she encouraged him to take her free classes and accompany her on her drawing outings in downtown Charleston. While Verner taught the young student basic techniques and processes of etching and engraving, her major influence was in making him work from life, to paint and draw what he could see in the world rather than what he could copy.<sup>7</sup>

Verner's influence is evident in Halsey's early watercolors and drawings (Figs. 2 and 3). Her emphasis on the everyday local street scenes, often including figures of women walking, emerges in Halsey's compositions. Although his view and treatment of the subject are markedly different, it is clear that while accompanying Verner on drawing sessions in the city,

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<sup>5</sup> Halsey's artist statement in *Changing Images: 1936-1987*, an exhibition sponsored by the Piccolo Spoleto Festival at Beth Elohim Synagogue, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Severens, *William Halsey, Essay* (Greenville, SC: Greenville County Museum of Art, 1999) 13.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, 9.

Halsey found a personal interest in rows of houses, building facades, street corners, lamps, and passersby. Halsey continued to use the cityscape as one of his primary subjects through the mid 1950s, but the images changed as he experimented with new painting styles.

Halsey discovered abstraction in 1930 while studying under Edward I. R. Jennings, one of the few modernists in Charleston. Jennings, who trained at Columbia University under Arthur Wesley Dow, introduced Halsey to modernist theory and ideals of form and color harmony.<sup>8</sup> Under Jennings' instruction, Halsey produced one of his first non-representational paintings entitled, *The Live Oak* (Fig. 4). Employing curves and colors similar to Jennings' (Fig. 5), Halsey created a stylized image of an oak on a hill-like cliff, overlooking fields and a mountain range beneath a gradated sky. An advanced composition and style for such a young student, this work suggests Halsey was motivated at a young age to break from what he later called, "the prevailing influence of the old Charleston picturesque" style of painting.<sup>9</sup>

When Halsey was eighteen, he became interested in seeking broader training at art schools in the North. However, his family, disapproving of his plans to attend art school, convinced him to seek art education nearby. In 1932 he reluctantly enrolled at the University of South Carolina where his uncle, William D. Melton, had served as president. At the University, he actively pursued painting and became involved in the school theater, frequently working on set designs. Despite his efforts to find serious artistic challenges and instruction, within two

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<sup>8</sup> Severens, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, 11.

years Halsey completed almost all of the art courses and felt unchallenged and restricted by the conservative department. At the time, the University of South Carolina offered no life classes, and the instructors strongly discouraged Halsey's attempts to hire nude models on his own.<sup>10</sup>

Feeling unchallenged and bored with the curriculum and general education requirements, Halsey decided to leave the University.<sup>11</sup>

After leaving the University of South Carolina in 1934, Halsey attended a summer art school at Boothbay Harbor, Maine where he took landscape classes in pencil and painting. When the program ended, he returned to South Carolina and moved to Greenville to take life classes under the prominent local portrait artist, Margaret Moore Walker.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly unsatisfied with his instructors and impatiently awaiting an opportunity to study outside South Carolina, Halsey began applying to art schools. At this time, he wrote to Laura M. Bragg, former head of the Charleston Museum, including a mature personal statement on his expectations for art instructors and art school:

I want somebody who will not so much instruct me, tell me *what to do*, as help me to do *what I want to do*. I need primarily a great deal of work from the nude model, just ground-work in draftsmanship, and contact with real artists, modern artists who know what's going on in the world of art. For Charleston, though I love her very much as a city, is, as you know, still practically in the china painting era, as far as art is considered. I don't want to be influenced by other artists, imitate popular advanced methods, but I want to see what's going on, get a thorough foundation, and then

<sup>10</sup> Kirwin interview, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, 10.

come back and work out my own method for myself. Whether I'm a modernist, non-objective, or realist, I want to say what I've got to say in my own way. Perhaps I haven't anything to say yet, but I believe I will have something some day.<sup>13</sup>

Focused for a nineteen year old aspiring artist from Charleston, South Carolina, Halsey possessed a strong will and devotion to further his passion in art. His dedication to modernism and interest in studying out-of-state withstood criticisms from Charleston friends and discouragements from local teachers who did not support or understand his need to leave South Carolina. Even Elizabeth O'Neil Verner, who studied in Philadelphia, wrote to Halsey when he was considering New York art schools, urging him to stay home:

I think the best thing I can think of for you is to stay in Charleston for one year and work out your salvation here. I do not know of any artists in New York who have been more successful than the Charleston group, and by this I do not speak of myself but of Edward von Siebold Dingle, Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, Anna Heyward Taylor, Alfred Hutty and others. You would in no way rival or conflict with any of this group but to my mind would be a great addition to it. . . I think very often we make the mistake of going too far afield.<sup>14</sup>

Despite local pressures to remain in South Carolina, Halsey decided to pursue studies in the fall of 1935 at the Art Students' League in New York. However, the summer of 1935, Halsey met Russian stage designer Sergei Soudeikine, who convinced him to attend the Boston Museum

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<sup>13</sup> William Melton Halsey, Charleston, to Laura M. Bragg, Pittsfield, 11 August 1934, transcript in the *Bragg Papers*, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth O'Neil Verner, Charleston, to William Melton Halsey, Charleston, 23 May 1934, *Verner papers*, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

School. Soudeikine worked as the principal set designer for the Metropolitan Opera, and came to Charleston to make drawings of the city for the first production of *Porgy and Bess*. He encouraged Halsey to apply to the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts because his friend, Alexander Iacovleff, was the director there. Halsey later explained, "Discussing art and art schools, Soudeikine remarked that he would recommend only one art school in the country: the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts."<sup>15</sup>

Impressed with Soudeikine's personal work and knowledge of art, Halsey took his advice, applied and enrolled at the Boston school. He studied there from 1935 to 1939, under Alexander Iacovleff, Lewis Rubinstein and Karl Zerbe. From 1935 to 1937, Iacovleff instructed Halsey in basic principles of composition, draftsmanship, perspective, anatomy, and fresco painting. (Figs. 6 and 7). This strictly academic and traditional training was of particular benefit to Halsey, who lacked the artistic background many of his fellow students shared. Remembering his early days in Boston, Halsey later recalled, "Moving to Boston gave me a terrific inferiority complex because I realized a lot of the students there came out of high school and were from the Boston area, and these students several years younger than I was had good training. In their public schools they had art education, which we never had in South Carolina, and they also had access to the Boston Museum and classes at the Museum School . . . I felt as if I was behind, which I was, and it took me a while to catch up."

Halsey worked diligently to master basic skills and concentrate on specific mediums.

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<sup>15</sup> Morris, 10.

During his first year of classes, he enrolled in a fresco painting course, even though Iacovleff thought he was not advanced enough for the class, and became proficient enough to work as a class assistant during his second year.<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 1937, he focused upon these classroom skills to complete his first commission, which was part of a government W.P.A. project to restore the historic Dock Street Theater in Charleston.<sup>17</sup> For decorative renovations, Halsey created frescoes for the bar room, courtyard, and the doors of the theater. "None of what I did was original," he later said. "The murals in the bar room were adapted from some of Hogarth's prints from the *Rake's* series, because they were the right period, the fresco in the courtyard was taken from the masks of comedy and tragedy from an old theater in Charleston, and the decorations over the door were period pieces too . . . but I was very excited about getting a commission to do anything at all."<sup>18</sup>

In the fall of 1937, after completing an active summer in Charleston, Halsey returned to the Museum School to discover newfound appreciation for his work. Alexander Iacovleff had resigned from his position as director of the Museum School, and German-born painter Karl Zerbe replaced him. Zerbe immediately showed interest in Halsey's work, and recognizing his experience and proficiency in the fresco medium, awarded him a position as Assistant Instructor of Drawing and Painting Fresco during the 1938-1939 academic year.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Severens, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Severens, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Kirwin interview, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, 11.



Under Zerbe's instruction, Halsey began teaching and working under a revolutionized curriculum at the Museum School. Comparing the different academic approaches of Iacovleff and Zerbe, Halsey later said, "Zerbe was a total contrast. He was primarily a painter and was interested in paint and color and not in draftsmanship, so we [students] got a very different viewpoint." Halsey repeatedly insisted that he valued his educational experience at the Museum School because it combined two years of instruction in academic draftsmanship with another two years of technical introductions to color and texture. In 1960, he commented on the benefits of his education: "My art training was traditional, and I am glad it was. I am convinced that the best modern painters are those with traditional backgrounds. Before you can depart from anything, you must know what you are departing from."<sup>20</sup>

Halsey also credited his experience at the Boston Museum School with encouraging him to submit art to museum exhibitions and teaching him the benefits of traveling abroad. During his fourth and final year, Halsey's painting, *Condemned*, was selected by the jurors for the Eighteenth International Exhibition of the Art Institute of Chicago. This honor marked Halsey's first inclusion in a major museum exhibition. Furthermore, upon his graduation in May, the Boston Museum school bestowed upon him their highest honor, the James William Paige Fellowship for study abroad.<sup>21</sup>

Awarded only when the faculty agreed upon a worthy student, the Paige Fellowship was

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret Harold, *Oil Paintings and Why They Won the Prize* (Nashville, TN: Allied Publications 1960): 20.

<sup>21</sup> Morris, 12.

presented, on average, every four or five years. Its stipulations required that it be used for two years of travel and study in Europe, so Halsey made preliminary plans to rent a studio in Paris for the fall. On June 5, Halsey married fellow South Carolinian and Museum School art student Corrie McCallum in Boston, and the two made plans to move to Europe. They immediately took their honeymoon to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where Halsey worked on his second commission, a set of three frescoed panels in the geological room of the Berkshire Museum. Laura M. Bragg, former director of the Charleston Museum and new director of the Berkshire, commissioned the work, and simultaneously offered Halsey his first one-man exhibition at the museum in July. Through this exhibition, Halsey met Hudson D. Walker, a prominent gallery owner in New York, who agreed to represent his work in the Hudson D. Walker Gallery for one year.

The promise of further study on the Paige Fellowship, museum experience and gallery representation indicated that Halsey might soon find success in the American art scene. But historic events would interfere. War broke out in Europe, and one of the first ships torpedoed carried a Boston Museum School student. The school immediately said it would not be held responsible for putting students in danger in Europe, and consequently withdrew the fellowship.<sup>22</sup> Desperate to save the scholarship, Halsey and his new wife asked for permission to use the grant in Mexico. Reluctantly, the school agreed to ignore the European stipulation and honored their request, urging them to set sail for Vera Cruz<sup>23</sup>

In September of 1939, Halsey and McCallum settled in Mexico City. They found a

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<sup>22</sup> Kirwin interview, 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Morris 12-13.

sizable villa with an extra room for Halsey's studio at Calle del Fresno 162, in Villa Obregon.

The artists immediately began studying murals and color in the city. Halsey enrolled in classes at the Academy San Carlos, and contacted Diego Rivera, who lived and painted nearby.

Although the couple originally wished to spend these early years studying art in the more well-traveled cities of Europe, Halsey later said their experiences in Mexico made him a stronger artist. Instead of viewing and copying works by Old Masters, Halsey studied textures, color tones, village life, and cultural history, influences continuously present in his later works.

Color washes, textural layers of paint, incised lines and worn edges reappear consistently in his paintings of the 1950s through the 1980s. Halsey noted that the similar rustic treasures of both Charleston and the small towns of Mexico inspired these techniques and compositional themes, and he credits his two-year sojourn in Mexico with inspiring his use of strong colors--particularly reds, yellows, and oranges. Speculating that he would not have learned or embraced this sense of color if he had studied in Paris, Halsey recently said, "The kind of color I use is strong or primitive, intense color--something very present in Mexico, not present in Europe."<sup>24</sup>

While Halsey continued to work in Mexico in January of 1940, the Gibbes Art Gallery in Charleston hosted Halsey's first one-man exhibition in South Carolina. The show traveled to the Norfolk Museum and the Lynchburg Art Gallery in Virginia. At the same time, the Domus Gallery in Mexico city, run by German architects who featured avant garde furniture, also honored the American student with a one-man show, and the Hudson D. Walker Gallery

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<sup>24</sup> Severens, 14.

continued to exhibit his works in New York City.<sup>25</sup> As Halsey continued to produce art and develop styles each day, the works he created in Mexico became strikingly different from those he continued to exhibit and sell in the States. Freeing his hand from tight, academic drawings, Halsey responded to lively street scenes, figure studies and landscapes with quick brush strokes and loose representations (Figs. 8, 9, and 10). In his *Self Portrait*, 1940, one sees his newfound bright colors, sense of light, and enigmatic, graffiti-like etchings (Fig. 11). Halsey included these scratchy, street scribble images, probably adapted from graffiti, hieroglyphs, and ceramic decorations, in the background of his self-portrait. These inclusions suggest the influence and inspiration these scrawlings had on Halsey during this time. He used these lines to add energy to flat areas of space, and he would continue to use such calligraphic language as his personal artistic alphabet through his last piece. In this sense, Mexico, and the Mexican culture, became his consistent lifelong subject. At age 70, Halsey described his inspiration: "Mexico seems the whole orientation of my life and work."<sup>26</sup>

In the eighteen-month period Halsey and McCallum lived in Mexico, Halsey produced more than seventy-five paintings.<sup>27</sup> These works included images of Mexican street life, portraits of neighbors or friends, arranged still life compositions, and loose, expressive reactions to the surrounding nature and environment. When his Paige Fellowship ended in March of 1942,

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<sup>25</sup> Morris, 14-15.

<sup>26</sup> Kirwin interview, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, 14.

Halsey and McCallum were forced to return to Charleston, despite their longing to stay in Mexico. They arrived in Charleston with only 25 cents and a new baby girl named Paige after Halsey's Boston Museum School Fellowship. Immediately the young family moved in with Halsey's parents. Within weeks they employed themselves by teaching art classes in their home, but found few permanent job opportunities.

With no stable income, Halsey and McCallum looked to nearby cities for teaching jobs. In September of 1942, Halsey took a position teaching painting and drawing as the Director of the Telfair Academy in Savannah, Georgia. In November, the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences sponsored a one-man exhibit of his work. However, as the War progressed, Halsey's position was terminated, and he reluctantly joined the war effort as a timekeeper with the Southeastern Shipyard Corporation in order to support his family.<sup>28</sup> From June 1943 until mid-1945, Halsey produced art, but removed himself from the academic art world. Despite the hiatus, one of his older paintings, *Little Girl Posing*, was included in the Twenty Second International Exhibition of Watercolors at the Art Institute of Chicago in May of 1943. The work was chosen for the show's commemorative poster (Figs. 12 and 13), although it did not receive any specific honors at the show.<sup>29</sup> The subject, a girl from Halsey's class in Charleston, poses among platforms and studio blocks. Halsey's brush strokes, simple and gestural, outline a modeled figure highlighted in yellow, contoured in browns. The portrait captures the form,

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<sup>28</sup> Morris, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Little Girl Posing* is now a part of the Dreher High School collection in Columbia, South Carolina.

posture, and gaze of a young child. Museum critics recognized the skill employed in the work, and their encouragement inspired Halsey to begin painting regularly again.

In May of 1944, Halsey's son, David Ashley, was born. To support his growing family, Halsey began painting regular commissions of restaurant scenes and tourist attractions for publications of the *Ford Times* and *Lincoln-Mercury Times* monthly travel guide magazines. From 1944 to 1961, he continued to complete small sketches of specific restaurants, Charleston gardens, and historic landmarks for these publications. Occasionally, he wrote the accompanying articles on the history and attractions of Charleston, but Halsey contributed to these publications purely for the added income. His primary artistic interests of the time revolved around the larger art markets and exhibitions in New York and Boston, to which he submitted entries for annuals and group shows.

In 1947, *Back Street Charleston* (Figure 14) was included in the October Pepsi-Cola Annual at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This painting resembled street and village scenes Halsey produced in Mexico. This abstracted composition of a Charleston city-scape included juxtaposed buildings and vegetation, including sharply angled trees, overlapping rooftops and a local church steeple. Halsey continued to paint and draw similar images of his native city for the next three years, completing colorful, semi-abstract street scenes and row houses markedly different from other Charleston artists' pastel and watercolor interpretations. These images were not well-received in the local art markets, which did not support modernist techniques or abstraction. But newfound attention in New York encouraged Halsey to work again, straining through his artistic struggles to develop new styles and techniques in his work.

Halsey later said of this period, "I didn't know what the hell I was really after. Then, I began to do some things that were more personal . . . more individual and I got this feeling that there was a perfect solution to every painting. I began to look at the whole thing like a scientific process with the idea that if I worked long and hard enough in the development of a painting I would ultimately achieve a total and perfect balance."<sup>30</sup> Halsey began to spend months and years on single compositions. Painting small pieces of paper and attaching them to surfaces, Halsey would experiment with color, texture, shape, and their subsequent effects on compositions. Adding layers to canvases, he built surfaces and texture to construct structures beneath images. To support heavy surfaces, he began using masonite and wood paneling, rather than canvas. These media allowed him to scrape paint away from areas, incise lines and patterns, and reveal underlying colors. With this technique, Halsey created complex geometric patterns and strong linear designs.

Incorporating newfound textures and layers of paint into his first major series of paintings, Halsey created compositions of Charleston street scenes and row houses. He copied the flat patterns and shapes of the cityscapes and streets, filling their corners with blues, reds, and greens. Evident in his 1947 painting, *After Rain* (Fig. 15), Halsey often simplified buildings and windows to rectangles, triangles, and squares. These shapes often described the shape and color of a simplified neighborhood street or view of town.

These cityscape compositions, which revealed Charleston's architecture in terms of color

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<sup>30</sup> Morris interview, 1972.

and texture, did not impress many native Charlestonians in the late 1940s; however this work did attract attention in the larger art markets. In 1948, Halsey's street scene, *Night Houses* (Fig. 16), was included in a respectable group show in a major gallery in New York. This event marked his introduction to the mainstream modern art scene in America, and served as his initial opportunity to gain widespread recognition for his work.

As Halsey left Boston for Mexico in September of 1939, he appeared on the verge of recognition in the competitive New York art scene. Yet, Halsey's two-year study in Mexico, though invaluable to his later work, was the first instance of the artist's geographic isolation--a pattern that would be repeated in his later career. By removing himself from the center of developing art movements and distancing himself from the art market, influential gallery owners and wealthy benefactors, Halsey may have missed opportunities during a critical period in American art history.

Yet, Halsey's years in Mexico were undeniably influential and important for his career. As he traveled throughout Mexico, gathering subject matter for paintings and inspiration for work, he developed a personal palette and style that he would keep and develop throughout his lifetime. These years of isolation, away from teachers and exhibitions, encouraged Halsey to follow his own artistic instincts. When he returned to the States, he faced an empty market for art teachers and painters in the South, but his experience and prolific work in Mexico laid a foundation of inspirations, colors and textures he would draw upon throughout his career.

In 1948, when Halsey returned to Charleston from Savannah and began to paint again, he used the techniques, patterns, and palettes he learned in Mexico to address new subjects and



**CHAPTER 2**

In 1939, William Halsey met Hudson D. Walker, a prominent New York gallery owner who agreed to represent his work. It was a promising introduction to the art market, for at the time, Walker represented other leading artists such as Marsden Hartley, Will Barnet, and Alfred Maurer, all of whom were attracting attention from the art trade. As Halsey left Boston for Mexico in September of 1939, he appeared on the verge of recognition in the competitive New York art scene. Yet, Halsey's two-year study in Mexico, though invaluable to his later work, was the first instance of the artist's geographic isolation--a pattern that would be repeated in his later career. By removing himself from the center of developing art movements and distancing himself from the art market, influential gallery owners and wealthy benefactors, Halsey may have missed opportunities during a critical period in American art history.

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In 1946, when Halsey returned to Charleston from Savannah and began to paint again, he used the techniques, patterns, and palettes he learned in Mexico to address new subjects and

themes. By the late 1940s, Halsey began painting anew and became anxious to exhibit his work in broader venues. He submitted works to competitions and annual shows at major museums, and in September of 1947, his work was selected for the annual "Paintings of the Year" exhibition, sponsored by Pepsi Cola at the National Academy of Design. Halsey's painting, *Back Street Charleston*, (Fig. 14) was one of 159 paintings included in the show, which filled the galleries of the National Academy and housed works by recognized artists Max Weber, Louis Bosa, Edward Chavez, and Andrew Wyeth.<sup>31</sup>

Although the "Paintings of the Year" exhibit received mixed reviews, the show was an important event for Halsey as it marked his reemergence into the New York art market. The artist's previous representation at the Hudson D. Walker Gallery had terminated when the gallery closed in 1941. Although no records exist to suggest Walker ever granted Halsey a one-man show, it seems that their association led to Halsey's later exhibitions in New York. According to Corrie McCallum, sometime in the mid-1940s, Walker introduced Halsey to Bertha Schaefer, an interior designer and owner of the Bertha Schaefer Gallery. Schaefer had begun to represent many of Walker's former artist-clients, and accordingly, she agreed to show Halsey's work. She first included one of his paintings as part of a group show entitled *Fact and Fantasy* in July of 1948. This exhibit, located in the heart of the New York gallery market at 32 East 57th Street, also included fellow artists Milton Avery, Will Barnet, Ben Zion, Alexander Bing, Adolph

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<sup>31</sup> Jo Gibbs, "Pepsi Cola Opens 4th Annual--Long on Prizes, Short on Competence," *Art Digest* 22, 1 October 1947: 9-11. The show continued through November 2 at the National Academy, then traveled to the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery (Nov. 21-Dec. 21), the Cordoran Gallery (Jan. 15-Feb. 22) and the Toledo Museum (Mar. 14-Apr. 18).

Gottlieb, Marsden Hartley, Alfred Maurer, and many others.<sup>32</sup> Each artist contributed one work to the show, which traveled after opening in New York. Halsey's entry, *Night Houses* (Fig. 16), attracted immediate critical acclaim. Comparing Halsey's work to that of better-known artists of the show, Alanzo Lansford of *Art Digest* entitled his review of the exhibit, "Newcomers Outshine Veterans":

The group show at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery includes new works by artists previously seen at this gallery and also introduces several artists new to 57th Street. By a good margin, the outstanding painting of the show is from the brush of a newcomer, William Halsey. All sorts of superlative adjectives could be invoked to describe his *Night Houses*, a crisp, knowing semi-abstract with the suavest of color relationships.<sup>33</sup>

This review appeared just one week after the Container Corporation of America used a reproduction of Halsey's painting, for the company's full-page color advertisements in *Time*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, and *Newsweek* magazines (Fig. 17).<sup>34</sup> The ad read, "SOUTH CAROLINA--annual purchases: \$2 billion--mostly packaged." To publicize the company's products, the Container Corporation had begun a progressive advertising campaign in 1937 that used art by modern artists from different states and countries.<sup>35</sup> Ben Shahn, Man Ray, Fernand

<sup>32</sup> This show (June 6-July 30) also included works by Messie Boris, Peter Busa, Bernice Cross, Worden Day, Lillian Dubin, Joshua Epstein, Siv Holme, Chet la More, Ary Stillman, N. Vasileff, and Ione Walker.

<sup>33</sup> Alanzo Lansford, "Newcomers Outshine Veterans; Fifty Seventh Street in Review," *The Art Digest* 22, 1 July 1948: 19.

<sup>34</sup> The ad appeared on page 70 of *Time Magazine's* June 21, 1948 issue; on page 92 of *Business Week* and *Newsweek* June 21; and page 117 of *Fortune Magazine*, July.

<sup>35</sup> "Modern Art in Advertising; exhibited by the Container Corporation of America," *Bulletin of the Portland Museum of Art*, v 9, November 1947: 1.

Leger, Henry Moore, Willem de Kooning and Arshille Gorky were among the artists commissioned to complete paintings, drawings or designs for the project. These artists, along with hundreds of their contemporaries, contributed to the campaign in an effort to use industry and advertising to publicize modern art. Fernand Leger, writing on the "relationship between modern art and contemporary industry" for the forward of the exhibition, *Modern Art in Advertising 1949*, explained why he and other artists welcomed the opportunity to exhibit their art in industrial advertising:

More and more industrialists are seeking to obtain the contribution of creative artists of their time. This is very significant and important from various points of view. First of all, because of this fact, our work can penetrate into a sphere which, in general, is not very accessible to our plastic creations. . . There still exists an almost complete break between popular taste, which is full of good intentions in its desire to understand, and our modern work which is appreciated only by a minority of people. In turning to us for help, industry will enable us to establish a connection between the collective masses and the art of their time.<sup>36</sup>

Although Halsey's painting, which portrays a low country cabin, was not directly commissioned by the Container Corporation, it was used to show the art of an up-and-coming contemporary Southern painter who had not yet been recognized by the New York art trade. Therefore, its publication did relate to Leger's concept of the relationship between industry, advertisements, and art: "collective masses" who might never see a Halsey could view and interpret his modern

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<sup>36</sup> "Modern Art in Advertising: designs for the Container Corporation of America," *J.B. Speed Art Museum catalogue*, 4. Compiled by Egbert Jacobson of the CCA and Katherine Chandler. Exhibition designed by Herbert Bayer. Exhibition included 102 designs for the Container Corporation.

work from afar.

Just months after Halsey's work circulated throughout the country in prominent magazines, he also gained national recognition at the Fifth Annual Pepsi Cola Art Competition at the National Academy.<sup>37</sup> Roland McKinney, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and juror of the exhibition, awarded Halsey one of four \$1500 regional fellowships designed to fund "promising but needy talent." In applying for the grant, Halsey wrote honestly, disclosing that he did not need the money to study in a foreign country or fund a change of scenery--he needed financial security that could enable him to do his own work while living with his family, interpreting his own home town. Upon receiving the fellowship, Halsey maintained his proposal. He worked diligently, completing paintings of city-scapes and row houses in Charleston, and consequently accumulated an array of works for future exhibitions and competitions (Figs. 18 and 19).

In 1949, Schaefer included Halsey's work in a second annual group show entitled *The Modern House Comes Alive*. This exhibit, now part of the permanent collection at Cornell University, was designed to show viewers how painting, sculpture, and ceramic pieces could be used in home decor. Along with Halsey's painting, Schaefer included furniture by Wharton Escherick, ceramics by Key-Oberg, paintings by Lee Krasner, Marsden Hartley, Ben Zion, Will

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<sup>37</sup> *Art Digest* 23, 1 October 1948: 9-11; according to Jo Gibbs' report, this exhibition received positive reviews. Other artists included were Karl Zerbe, Isabel Bishop, and Andrew Wyeth. After leaving the National Academy on October 31, the show traveled to the Milwaulkee Art Institute from November 19 to December 26; the Des Moines Art center from January 15 to February 15, and the Butler Art Institute form March 15 to April 17.

Barnet, and Siv Holme, and sculpture by Fred Farr and Lekakis.<sup>38</sup> Designed as part of Schaefer's interior decorating projects, the exhibit promoted her interest in introducing modern art to creative home decorating schemes.<sup>39</sup> A graduate of Mississippi State College for Women and Parson's School of Design, Schaefer worked primarily as an interior decorator. She designed furniture and fabric patterns, and used her gallery as a site to promote talented artists whose work could be bought at reasonable prices and displayed in the home.

Schaefer's personal interest in pattern and design may have attracted her to Halsey's early work, which combined strong colors, geometric figures, and varied textures. She urged Halsey to move to New York in the 1950s so she could introduce him to clients and take buyers to his studio. Halsey refused, but Schaefer continued to include his work in solo and group exhibitions for over ten years. During that time, she displayed his work alongside paintings by well-known artists, Marsden Hartley, Alfred Maurer, Ben Zion, Cameron Booth, Will Barnet, Hale Woodruff, Lee Krasner, Balcombe Greene, Sue Fuller, and Worden Day. Schaefer clearly believed Halsey's work warranted respect in the art world. Initially, the press agreed.

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<sup>38</sup> According to Schaefer's gallery records, located at the Archives of American Art in Washington, DC, the exhibition dates were Sept. 20- Oct. 16. The show also included architectural design by Carl F. Brauer; Reisner and Urbahn; Elder, Raymond and Breck; and Edward D. Stone. Landscape design by Evelyn Poehler and James Rose. Interior design by Bertha Schaefer. Furniture Design by Harold Bartos, Devon Bennett, Wharton Escherick, Jens Risom, Alexander Styne. Ceramics by Grover Cole, Key-Oberg, Helen C. Phillips, weavings by Emily S. Belding, Abbie J. Blum, Grete Franke, Baroness Galotti, Estelle Heller, Maria Mundell, David D. Tauber. Paintings by Will Barnet, Ben Zion, Bernice Cross, Worden Day, Lillian Dubin, William Halsey, Marsden Hartley, Siv Holme, Lee Krasner, Chet La More, Dwight Marfield, Alfred Maurer, and Vasileff. Sculptures by Wolfgang Behl, Fred Farr, Lekakis, and Hilda Morris.

<sup>39</sup> "Modern House Comes Alive," *Architectural Forum* 89, October 1948: 10.

His paintings received positive reviews and notable attention, particularly in the early 1950s, when Schaefer granted Halsey his first one man show in New York from May 21-June 9, 1951. The show ran in correlation with another group *Fact and Fantasy* exhibition, to which he contributed *Facades*<sup>40</sup> Although the group show received little attention, Halsey's eighteen casein and oil paintings attracted positive responses from the press.<sup>41</sup> Many of the well-known critics of the period wrote encouraging reviews of the works, agreeing that "semi abstract paintings, nicely balanced in design," marked an "auspicious debut by a promising artist."<sup>42</sup>

In the *New York Times* review on May 25, Aline B. Louchheim wrote under the title, "Five Art Displays in Galleries Here":

William Halsey brings casein and oil paintings to Bertha Schaefer Gallery which are distinguished by sensitive handling and informing sentiment. Most of these paintings are based on the world of appearance. Ruins, houses in the night, rock forms, aquariums and carnivals come under the artist's scrutiny. But what the young artist sees serves only as a starting point for refreshingly simple and rather poetic semi-abstract images. Mr. Halsey, who was born in Charleston, has had some experience with mural painting. His murals appear at the Dock Street theater and the tabernacle Building of the Beth Elohim Synagogue in Charleston as well as in the Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Mass. It is perhaps

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<sup>40</sup> *Fact and Fantasy* exhibit included artists Will Barnet, Ben-Zion, Alexander M. Bing, Cameron Booth, Peter Busa, Bernice Cross, Norman Daly, Worden Day, Lillian Ubin, Fred Farr, Sue Fuller, Balcomb Greene, William Halsey, Marsden Hartley, Siv Holme, Linda Lindeburg, A.H. Maurer, Wallace Mitchell, Isaac L. Muse, Ary Stillman.

<sup>41</sup> Halsey Exhibition included *Clown, Rock Forms, Onlookers, Southern Sunset, Night Houses, Structures, Mexican Landscapes* (lent by the Baltimore Museum), *View From a Train Window* (lent by Ball State Teachers College), *Dream Shape, Aquarium I, Aquarium II, Flight, Carnival, Facades, Nocturne, Ruins, Winter Light, Crab*.

<sup>42</sup> "Goings on About Town," *New Yorker*, 16 June 1951: 11.

this training that accounts for the firm, disciplined structure of his work and his use of pleasing, romantic color for architectonic as well as mood-evoking effects.<sup>43</sup>

Further support came from Carlyle Burrows of the *Herald Tribune*, who entitled his review "Poetic Color" on May 27:

William Halsey's work at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery is a pleasant reminder of the worth of reality to an artist who has the gift to enliven it with feeling. Many of his paintings are of effects, in themselves poetically enjoyable--such as the shimmer of life in an aquarium, or the suggested moon glow upon building facades. This artist affects no more or less than a studied simplification of his material, passing over complexity in order to achieve a direct and disciplined abstracting. But what he communicates is distinguished by a sensitive approach to painting itself and by effects of pleasing and imaginative color.<sup>44</sup>

In the summer issue, the critic for *ArtNews* addressed Halsey's hometown inspirations, and commented on both the Southern and Mexican influences on his work. Undoubtedly, the critics found the artist's responses to these personal locales sincere, and recognized the strength of Halsey's subject and style. One wrote:

William Halsey, whose paintings in oil and casein are seen for the first time in New York, has responded to his native South--he paints and teaches in Charleston--with a feeling for its lyrical atmospheres. Especially in his large caseins he has developed impressions of small town facades into fluid overlapping patterns. Transcending this consistent decorative interest, however, are several oils in which severe planal transparencies are used incisively to imply space with surprising effect, as in *Mexican*

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<sup>43</sup> Aline B. Louchheim, "Five Art Displays in Galleries Here," *New York Times* 25 May 1951: 25.

<sup>44</sup> Carlyle Burrows, "Art Review," *Herald Tribune* 27 May 1951: 59.



*Landscape*, or to underscore human interest, as in *Southern Sunset* and *Onlookers*.<sup>45</sup> (Fig. 20)

In the June issue of *Art Digest*, Margaret Breuning noted inconsistencies in Halsey's work, but praised individual paintings and complimented his use of color. Breuning offered a sharp critical analysis, suggesting Halsey's variety of form and medium presented aesthetic confusion:

Paintings by William Halsey seem to indicate he is going in different directions at one and the same time. *Southern Sunset*, just edging objectivity, is carefully brushed into gleaming surfaces, while the grouping of rhomboids and square in *Mexican Landscape* is executed in heavy impasto. Semi-abstractions and non-objective canvases are both included. Some of the most successful paintings are *Flight*, in which bird forms appear through a heavily woven tapestry of acutely related planes; *Aquarium II*, vague, yet affording an impression of forms floating in water behind imprisoning glass; *Dream Shape*, with its heavy bars of green and thrusting rectangles held into effective pattern. In all the work, the artist's color is an important asset, accentuating design lending vitality to the canvases.<sup>46</sup> (Fig. 21)

Robert M. Coates, another well-known critic for *The New Yorker*, added another positive critique:

At the Bertha Schaefer, there's the first local one-man exhibition of paintings by William Halsey. These are mostly landscapes, possibly slight in concept but done in a style whose emphasis on flat-pattern, two-dimensional development gives the artist a good chance to deploy his feeling for vivid color and effective design. I especially admired *View from a Train Window*, with its effort to convey a sense of the buildings wheeling past; *Night Houses*, with

<sup>45</sup> D.S., *Art News* 50, June-July-August 1951: 51.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Breuning, "Exhibition, Bertha Schaefer Gallery," *Art Digest* 25, 1 June 1951: 18.

decorative with its moonlit facades; and the well-organized *Winter Light*.<sup>47</sup>

Halsey's first exhibit was well-received. Yet, despite encouraging critical acclaim, the artist was unsatisfied with his work. He later said: "When I looked at all this stuff and everything was more or less based on geometric shapes, triangles, etc. . . and everything was cut out, I thought, 'Why can't you do anything that's open, irregular, or indefinite.'" and that's when I started trying to do things with irregular shapes or ragged edges."<sup>48</sup> Halsey began working more abstractly, using collage and thick textures, but as he developed these new styles and techniques for painting, he also began employing his old skills as a mural painter. In 1951, he accepted a commission to complete a 370 square foot mural in the foyer of the new Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Temple, designed by architect Percival Goodman. Halsey's mural consisted of three scenes, derived from passages in Exodus 3 which describe "the wandering of Moses with the sheep, the burning bush, the angel of God rising from within the flames, and the retreat of Moses (Figs. 22 and 23).<sup>49</sup> Although the architect's brother, Paul Goodman, a well-known poet and intellectual, assembled the thematic material for the mural, Halsey designed and painted the panels alone. He depicted flat, simplified figures, assembled upon a predominantly blue and green framework of linear, geometrical designs. The composition, unified by a

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<sup>47</sup> Robert M. Coates, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker*. 2 June 1951: 8.

<sup>48</sup> Morris interview, 1972.

<sup>49</sup> Avram Kampf, *Contemporary Synagogue Art: Developments in the United States, 1945-1965* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966) 130-31.

decorative web of strong lines linking together planes of color, the burning bush, the tree, the Tablet of the Law and the figures, presents an abstract and symbolic scene.<sup>50</sup>

The Baltimore mural is another example of Halsey's work in mural and fresco media, but it also presents an important illustration of Halsey's influences from the modern art trade.

Details of his studies for the composition show that Halsey experimented with dripping and splattering paint at this time, employing action painting techniques to create background compositions (Fig 24). Furthermore, this commission also marks a notable event from Halsey's period of participation within the established Abstract Expressionist movement. In completing his mural, he joined a number of other artists who also introduced modern art into contemporary synagogues and Jewish community buildings of the time:

During the 1950s and 1960s, approximately one thousand new synagogues were consecrated in the United States, a significant number of which directly commissioned work by Abstract Expressionist artists. The synagogue projects provided the opportunity for many abstract artists to work on large scale and important commissions. Such noted sculptors as Herbert Ferber, Ibram Lassaw, David Hare, and Seymour Lipton and such painters as Robert Motherwell and Adolf Gottlieb collaborated with architects on synagogue projects at this time.<sup>51</sup>

Halsey was probably aware of the murals and tapestries Gottlieb and Motherwell had created for B'nai Israel, a synagogue designed by Percival Goodman in Milburn, New Jersey in 1951. Here,

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<sup>50</sup> Kampf, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Janay Jadine Wong, "Synagogue Art of the 1950s: A New Context for Abstraction." *Art Journal* 53, Winter 1994: 37-43.

Motherwell created a sixteen-by-eighteen foot mural in the foyer of the synagogue, illustrating the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Diaspora, the Ark, and Jacob's Ladder. Gottlieb designed the Ark curtain, later sewn by the women of the congregation (Figs. 25 and 26). This "pioneering collaboration between modern architect and the modern artist" at B'nai Israel "was considered such a success that Goodman was encouraged to undertake similar collaborations."<sup>52</sup> His next project was the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Temple, where he worked with Halsey, Arnold Bergier, and Amalie Rothschild to design the art and architecture of the synagogue. Sculptor Arnold Bergier designed the Hannukah Menorah and the decor around the Torah Ark. Amalie Rothschild, a local weaver, designed the tapestries for the Ark.

The artists' and architect's studies and plans for the Baltimore temple were collectively exhibited from February 19 through March 17 in a show entitled, "Synagogue Art," at the Jewish Museum in New York.<sup>53</sup> Although the exhibition was small, the work did attract the critics' attention. A reviewer for *Art Digest*, commented, "Halsey's mural consists of strongly colored, stylized figures which resemble those of Byzantine and early mediaeval art, and illustrate the crucial and meaningful events of ancient Jewish history."<sup>54</sup> Another critic for *ArtNews* noted: "Masquettes for a mural by William Halsey, now in process in the temple lobby, show a pictorial visualization of *Moses and the Burning Bush* and *The Promised Land*. Flatly treated, the willowy figures stand or move across a wall space rather arbitrarily segmented by diagonally

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<sup>52</sup> Wong, 36-37.

<sup>53</sup> *Art Digest* 26, 15 March 1952: 21. Exhibition Dates: February 17- March 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Art Digest* 26, 21.

divided areas of bright, decorative color.”<sup>55</sup>

Halsey spoke on a panel at the opening of the “Synagogue Art” exhibition in February, and his painting, *Aquarium*, was included in the Third Annual American Watercolors, Drawings and Prints exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in October and November; however, for most of 1952, Halsey remained in Charleston, teaching art classes at the Gibbes Art Gallery. In October, he applied again for a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He proposed plans to study mural painting in Italy and France, and included a six-page summary of his objectives for using the fellowship. In the application, he described his previous experiences teaching, curating, portrait painting, and completing, “assorted jobs necessary for living and supporting a family.” He acknowledged the benefits of teaching and painting on commission, but he also relayed his needs to explore new worlds and find new inspirations: “From teaching art, and from related work often in itself uninspiring, a painter can learn a great deal in the way of discipline and control, both mental and technical. . . but there comes a time in the process of any creative worker, a stage when a period of freedom is necessary for consolidation of ideas and for renewed thought and study.”<sup>56</sup>

The Guggenheim Foundation did not grant Halsey’s fellowship request, but Halsey’s 1952 application provides insight into the artist’s mind set, when in the early 1950s, amid positive reviews and pressures from art patrons, he decided to remain in Charleston. Halsey

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<sup>55</sup> *Art News* 51, March 1952: 57.

<sup>56</sup> *Art News* 51: 28.

wrote:

I was born in Charleston and I came back here because I felt strongly that there were too many artists in a few areas and too few artists in small cities and towns and that I could be vastly more useful in my native state than any place else. If there was a more general distribution of creative artists working in smaller communities, there would be a wider interest in and understanding of contemporary art in this country. I plan to continue my work and teaching here and the growth of my own painting and thinking will have more than an individual meaning, since it will make my influence and instruction of greater value.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the persistent recommendations of Gertrude Rosenthal, Roland McKinney, Percival Goodman, Karl Zerbe, G.H. Edgel, Bertha Schaefer, Hudson Walker, and James Johnson Sweeney, Halsey chose to continue living in South Carolina.<sup>58</sup> But the deliberation and confusion surrounding his career interests and regional location undoubtedly affected his painting during this time. As he began to work in more abstract compositions, Halsey started to employ thick, impasto techniques, but his results were sometimes inconsistent and overworked. Between 1952 and 1954, Halsey worked to eliminate representational images in his paintings, and slowly, his compositions became color studies of space and shape.

Employing his new painting techniques with casein on Japanese paper, Halsey created *Idols* (1953), an energetic composition of soft, semi-opaque layers of yellow, browns and grey-

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<sup>57</sup> Morris, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Rosenthal was the general curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art; McKinney, the consultant of American Art at the Metropolitan and curator of the Pepsi Art Competition; Goodman, architect of many Jewish synagogues in the 1950s, Zerbe, painting instructor at the Boston museum school and prominent exhibiting artist, Schaefer and Walker, gallery owners, and Sweeney, director of the Guggenheim.

blues, defined by gestural outlines (Fig. 27). About the same time, he also experimented with different uses of texture, combining nets and string into his layers of paint. In *Incantation* (1952), Halsey used flat, pink netted patterns over underlying shapes of green, orange and black (Fig. 28). These abstract compositions, markedly different from his earlier scenes of row houses and cityscapes, were influenced by the new images of Abstract Expressionism that were emerging in New York at the time. Responding to Pollock's whimsical brush strokes and Rothko's soft, undulating color studies, Halsey developed a new abstract style.

In 1953, Schaefer exhibited his new work in another one-man exhibition. The show included twenty-two paintings employing Halsey's old and new techniques.<sup>59</sup> The critics neither praised nor scorned them. Instead, they dispassionately acknowledged Halsey's skill and technical proficiency without registering genuine reactions to his work. Stuart Preston, critiquing for the *New York Times* wrote a complimentary, but simple analysis of Halsey's techniques. "William Halsey's abstract paintings and monotypes indicate that he is possessed of a pleasing decorative sense, expressed chiefly through color and that he knows how to manipulate texture."

Similarly, Robert Goodnough, writing for *ArtNews*, addressed Halsey's textures and techniques, but refrained from praising his style or compositions:

William Halsey's latest oils and gouaches approach abstraction and

<sup>59</sup> Exhibition included: *Circus, Hieroglyph, August Windowshade, Idols, Incantation, Icarus, Tropic, Celestial, Strata, Depths, Fire Dance, Wraiths, Textures, And Moses Covered His Eyes, Angel of Death, Red Lines, Black on Yellow, Conflagration, Moon and Nets, To the Lighthouse, Trawlers, and Volcanos*. Exhibition dates: January 5-24.

semi-abstract in a variety of ways. Some depend on heavy, straight lines crossing and intercrossing as they extend across the canvas, with color layers underneath; others are similar but deal with interlocking curves; still others exist through flat areas of color with little use of line. Within these structures, landscapes and figures are recognizable and some through repeated overpainting have acquired heavy textures. *Moon and Nets* in blues and lavenders, because of the texture and heavy curving lines, appears like a stained glass window--the nets acting more as abstract shapes than as recognizable objects. In another picture strings and mesh have been layered into wet pigment, then painted different colors.<sup>60</sup>

Dore Ashton, of *ArtDigest*, also provided a mixed review. She criticized Halsey for overworking his paintings, but acknowledged his ability to produce balanced and creative compositions:

Having discovered texture, Halsey concentrates on integrating string, mesh, and netting in abstract gouaches and oils. Though competently handled, these paintings frequently strike one as labored and groping. Recognizable textures arbitrarily introduced, heavy overlays of color and form, seem to weigh down these compositions. However, when Halsey is good, he is very good. Several gouache abstractions here reflect his complete understanding of compositional principles.<sup>61</sup>

Despite lackluster reviews from the critics, jurors of the major annual exhibits continued to select Halsey's entries in their 1953 shows. His paintings were chosen for the *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Sculpture, Watercolors and Drawings* at the Whitney Museum of American Art from April 9 to May 29, and for the *Seventeenth Biennial*

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Goodnough, *ArtNews* 51, January 1953: 45.

<sup>61</sup> Dore Ashton, *Art Digest* 27, 1 January 1953: 22.



*International Watercolor Exhibition* at the Brooklyn Museum from May 13 to June 21. He was also included in regional exhibitions, including the *Eighth Southeastern Annual Exhibition* at the High Museum in Atlanta and the *Seventh Annual South Carolina State Exhibition* at the Gibbes Art Gallery in Charleston.

In 1954, Halsey worked in Charleston completing a 96-foot long mural for the local Sears, Roebuck and Company store on Calhoun Street. The mural, presented by Sears as *The Charleston Story*, consisted of four panels and contained images from the history of Charleston. The panels were created on canvas and stretched over plywood set into the wall. Each section was approximately 5' x 25' and contained overlapping images of Charleston's historical trade markets (Figs. 29 and 30).<sup>62</sup> Halsey entitled the panorama of murals, "Trade Builds a City," basing his images and scenes on the production and exchange of Charleston's historic commodities. A loyal native of Charleston and a descendent of families who had lived in Charleston since the 1700s, Halsey was an obvious choice for the commission. He researched the history of the city and compiled many images of local trade through the centuries, to complete a final product which presented a rich and inclusive consolidation of creative images in an accurate chronology of past events.

This mural provided shoppers with a rhythmical visual interpretation of their local history, but the final product did not benefit Halsey. Creating this mural undoubtedly distracted him from completing his own work developing abstract interests. Executed in a flat, geometric

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<sup>62</sup> *The Charleston Story* was moved to the Charleston Museum in 1972 when Sears closed the Calhoun Street branch. The panels were destroyed in a fire at the museum in 1980.

and more realistic style, the mural recalls Halsey's earlier paintings of row houses and cityscapes, not the geometric, free-form abstractions of his mid-1950s work. Clearly, Halsey's hiatus from progressive development and exploration in abstract expressionism affected the quality of his work during this time, despite his continuous involvement and production for the New York gallery scene in these years.

Upon completing the murals, Halsey returned to New York in September of 1955 for the opening of his third major exhibition at the Bertha Schaefer gallery. This two-man exhibit, which also included Manolo Pascual's sculptures, attracted little public attention from the press. One critic, writing for the Sunday Art Exhibition Notes section of the *New York Times*, assessed Halsey's work: "On the other hand William Halsey's abstract caseins at Bertha Schaefer's yield images. These are vague, diffuse and distorted, it is true, but they are found in nature, whether in the swaying greens of woodland or in the hallucination."<sup>63</sup>

Another critic for the same newspaper wrote a more apathetic review:

To the returning art season Bertha Schaefer gives recognition by presenting together the works of two artists, William Halsey, whose abstract paintings are shown, and Manolo Pascual, whose metallic forms are exhibited. Both these artists are well up with the times. Halsey's work, which stems from the cubist-abstract organization in his *Ideograph* or city scene, also takes its idea, as in *Sierra* from modern expressionist art which stems from natural experience. There is much fluency in these works and considerable texture, but the moods are not electric or richly fascinating.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Preston, "New Shows With Wide Variety." *New York Times*, 25 September 1955:10x

<sup>64</sup> "Art Exhibition Notes." *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 September 1955: 57.

Commenting later on the negative reviews of his mid-1950s work, Halsey explained the inconsistencies and confusion that attracted later criticism in the press:

I was down. I got thrown off base because I was too impressionable. I started looking around and everybody was doing abstract paintings, abstract expressionist paintings and I had to try to be with it. All of a sudden, I was trying to turn out a lot of stuff. . . Bertha Schaefer was basically an interior decorator and I listened to her at times when I shouldn't have. The 1953 and 1955 shows weren't really as good and they weren't as honest as the first one. In the long run though, it did me a lot of good.<sup>65</sup>

In the late 1950's, Schaefer continued to include Halsey's work in her annual *Fact and Fantasy* exhibits, which regularly included Will Barnet, Cameron Booth, Sue Fuller, Balcomb Greene, Gertrude Greene, Hale Woodruff, and Fred Farr.<sup>66</sup> In 1958, she gave him his last small gallery show in New York. *3 Painters and 3 Sculptors*, which also included artists Alexander Bing, Joseph Konzal, Jorge de Oteiza, Nicholas Marsciano, and Raymond Rocklin, was exhibited at Bertha Schaefer's gallery from October 7 through 25. Stuart Preston, reviewing the show for the *New York Times*, wrote a brief synopsis of the show: "Three painters and three sculptors are participating in the group show at Bertha Schaefer's, 32 East Fifty-seventh Street. In the nonobjective painting trip, Marsciano's forceful expressiveness and Halsey's richly colored geometric endeavors make a stronger impression than Bing's densely clotted miniatures."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Morris Interview, 1972.

<sup>66</sup> The dates of these exhibits were : *Fact and Fantasy* 1955: May 23-Aug. 26; *Fact and Fantasy* 1956 :May 28-August 24; *Fact and Fantasy* 1957: May 27 through August 23; *Fact and Fantasy* 1958 :May 26-August 22.

<sup>67</sup> Stuart Preston, *New York Times*, 10 October 1958: 12x.

This final review marked the end of Halsey's critical reception in New York. Although he continued to submit works to annual exhibits and shows, he soon focused his time only on his work, family, and students in Charleston. However, in retrospect, Halsey did pursue an active career in New York during an exciting period of Twentieth-Century American art, and although his position and contribution to the movement may not appear significant to general art historical accounts, his Southern perspective and subject matter does present an interesting interpretation of American abstract art.

twentieth-century American art, brimming with optimism and patriotic egotism, fueled the ambitions of middle-aged artists who wanted to seize the creative opportunity of the time and formulate a new art. These artists, calling themselves the New York School,<sup>10</sup> resided in New York and worked "at roughly the same stage of personal development."<sup>11</sup> Together, their individual works developed a "new artistic movement which managed to ingest into an assimilated European modernism a new-found, native energy and confidence."<sup>12</sup>

The first new movement in art to emerge after World War II, this work incorporated "solid elements of abstract form with intense personal emotion; the oblique reflection of a metropolitan locale, of its energy, dynamism, and human degradation, its visual confusion,

<sup>10</sup>Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), 23.

<sup>11</sup>The first generation of the New York School generally acknowledged in art history texts is Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Adolf Gottlieb, Robert Rauschenberg, Barnett Newman, Arshile Gorky, Ad Reinhardt, and Hans Hofmann.

<sup>12</sup>William Fineburg, *The Years 1940: Strategies of Being* (London: Calderon and King, 1995).

<sup>13</sup>John G. Johnson, *American Art of the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972) 231.

## CHAPTER 3

Bertha Schaefer gave William Halsey long-term representation in her gallery during a critical period of American art history. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, a strong art society and market emerged in New York, inspired by the recent arrival of prestigious European painters and the simultaneous gathering of a group of American artists committed to inventing an original style of painting.<sup>68</sup> Postwar American sentiment, brimming with optimism and patriotic egotism, fueled the ambitions of middle-aged artists who wanted to seize the creative opportunity of the time and formulate a new art. These artists, calling themselves the New York School,<sup>69</sup> resided in New York and worked “at roughly the same stage of personal development.”<sup>70</sup> Together, their individual works developed a “new artistic movement which managed to inject into an assimilated European modernism a new-found, native energy and confidence.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Fineburg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (London: Calmann and King, 1995) 33.

<sup>71</sup> Sam Hunter, *American Art of the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972) 231.

functional order, and most significantly, the concept of the work of art as a liberating and vital action to which the artist is committed with his total personality.”<sup>72</sup> Later called “Abstract Expressionism,” this style of work employed bold, passionate brush work and expressive gestures in large-scale compositions that captured the “act” of painting--the direct and spontaneous process of brushing, slinging or dripping paint onto the canvas. Rejecting recognizable subject matter and controlled composition, these painters placed American art “at the forefront of the international avant-garde for the first time.”<sup>73</sup>

Although preliminary works of the Abstract Expressionist group first appeared in the mid- 1940s, the movement gained momentum in 1947 and 1948. Simultaneously, William Halsey had his first exhibit at Bertha Schaefer’s gallery in 1948 in the *Fact and Fantasy* group show which also included the work of Adolf Gottlieb, Marsden Hartley and Will Barnet. The opening of the exhibit brought Halsey to the city where he could see the innovative works of his contemporaries and encounter the widespread media attention that supported the modern art movement. Critics hailed the new artists’ work and magazines published countless articles and reviews on Abstract Expressionism. Consequently, Halsey responded to the new art and began incorporating the techniques into his works, a creative decision that sometimes identified him as a follower of the New York School.

By 1950, Abstract Expressionist artists enjoyed a largely favorable press, ample

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<sup>72</sup> *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, Edited by David and Cecile Shapiro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 23.

<sup>72</sup> Hunter, 231.

<sup>73</sup> Fineberg, 31.

exhibition space, and a supportive sales market.<sup>74</sup> Yet by this time, Halsey, like other young artists who did not reside in New York, was already excluded from the exalted circle of male painters who would dominate the American art scene for the next decade. With the exception of Clyfford Still and David Smith, outsiders who maintained strong ties with artists and galleries in the city, all of the major painters of the movement lived in New York and had been there since 1940. Although most were not from the city (only Newman and Gottlieb were natives), they had been working with and near each other for years, and most had studios on Tenth Street and Broadway in Greenwich Village. Many of these artists first collaborated in the late 1930s, when Stuart Davis, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, David Smith, and Mark Rothko all worked on Government-sponsored Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) commissions in New York.<sup>75</sup> Although these artists received minimal pay for their projects, the “government patronage offered artists dignity, a sense of value, and a place in American society producing murals, easel paintings, and sculptures for public buildings and parks.”<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the group art commissions also formed a stable community of artists for the first time, especially in New York.

The Abstract Expressionists in Greenwich Village met frequently to discuss art and exhibitions throughout the 1940s at organized artists’ meetings, the Waldorf Cafeteria and the

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<sup>74</sup> *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, Edited by David and Cecile Shapiro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 23.

<sup>75</sup> Fineburg, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Fineburg, 27.

Cedar Street Tavern. In 1948, Baziotas, Motherwell, Still and Rothko organized the "Subjects of the Artist" School, where artists could lecture to students on Friday evenings. The school closed after one semester, but New York University professors Hale Woodruff, Tony Smith and Robert Iglehart reopened the loft to the public for lectures and discussions, renaming the meeting site "Studio 35."<sup>77</sup> It closed two years later in 1950, presumably because questions from the public made meetings monotonous; yet months earlier, an alternative and exclusive meeting group for artists and critics formed at 39 E. 8th Street. Known as "The Club," this discussion circle provided "a place where artists could escape the loneliness of their studios, meet their peers to exchange ideas of every sort, and find mutual support."<sup>78</sup> Charter members included Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, Ibram Lassaw, Leo Castelli, Harold Rosenberg and Philip Guston.

Many of the artists who became Abstract Expressionists joined the Club, forming a large but select band of the "elite" artists of the day. But Halsey, separated by his geographical distance from New York and his late arrival to the progressive art scene, was never a member of "the Club." He had been a college student in Boston, learning perspective and color theory when the prominent artists laid the foundation of their New York School. He was traveling and studying on scholarship in Mexico, then working at a Savannah shipyard and giving art lessons to Charleston students when the pioneers of American Abstract Expressionism--Pollock, Rothko,

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<sup>77</sup> Shapiro, 48-49.

<sup>78</sup> Irving Sandler, *The New York School: the Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978): 31.



Still, Hoffman, Motherwell, and Baziotes--had their first one-man exhibitions at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery between 1943 to 1946.<sup>79</sup> When Halsey finally began to exhibit with Schaefer and experiment with new painting styles and techniques, he was a latecomer to a growing crowd.

By 1949, "more than a dozen Abstract Expressionists achieved 'breakthroughs' to independent styles" which attracted critical response and widespread interest.<sup>80</sup> Halsey earned a handful of positive reviews from his first one man exhibition in 1951, yet the members of the first generation of the New York School were simultaneously "receiving growing recognition nationally and globally, to the extent that American vanguard art came to be considered the primary source of creative ideas and energies in the world."<sup>81</sup> Halsey enjoyed his participation in the New York art scene, but in the large scheme, he was only part of a small section of the contemporary gallery market of the early 1950s. While he was earning limited recognition in New York, Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, were being elevated to "art history's pantheon."<sup>82</sup> Yet despite his absence from Abstract Expressionist artist groups and schools, Halsey did follow a parallel path of artistic development akin to that of the well known New York artists. He too participated in the W.P.A. projects of the late thirties, working in the Dock Street Theater in Charleston, South Carolina, one of the few government sponsored projects in the state. Although

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<sup>79</sup> Hunter, 229; Leja, 20.

<sup>80</sup> Irving, ix.

<sup>81</sup> Irving, ix.

<sup>82</sup> Irving, ix-x.

W.P.A. projects were not as readily available to Halsey--fifty to seventy five percent of the W.P.A. commissions went to artists working in New York--he was nonetheless involved in the works that gave momentum, support, and unity to American artists.

Furthermore, in the late 1930s, just as Pollock, Rothko, Still and other young artists found inspiration and guidance from the great European artists and intellectuals such as Mondrian, Duchamp, Leger, Ernst, and Matta--who moved to or visited New York during the war years--Halsey also found direction from his European teachers at the Boston Museum School.<sup>83</sup> Karl Zerbe, who introduced Halsey to color theory and nominated him for the Paige Fellowship, was from Germany and had pursued a traditional academic program in Munich and Paris. Lewis Rubinstein, who instructed Halsey in drawing and design, had studied in Paris with Fernand Leger and Amedee Ozenfant.<sup>84</sup> These educators encouraged Halsey to explore European modernism and the art of other cultures, just as the older Europeans inspired the younger New York School. Consequently, their guidance led Halsey directly to artistic discovery in Mexico City from 1939-1941.

In Mexico, the Latin American and Pre-Columbian civilizations greatly influenced the young Halsey, who developed a unique passion for their culture, art and color schemes. He would later use symbols and calligraphic imagery derived from Mexico, just as many of the Abstract Expressionists used images of mythological figures and insignias of other primitive

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<sup>83</sup> Hunter, 229.

<sup>84</sup> Severens, 12.

cultures. Halsey's interest in Mexican life and art, particularly with regard to his interest in fresco painting, was not uncommon for artists of the time. The painters included in the New York School were also heavily influenced in the 1930s by the work of Mexican artists, particularly by the murals of Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Andre Breton (working in Mexico). In 1936, Jackson Pollock worked as an apprentice in David Siqueiros' Union Square workshop and learned experimental techniques using "unorthodox materials (Duca paint) and novel techniques of application, including the spraying, splattering, and dripping of paint."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, artist Ben Shahn worked with Diego Rivera on the controversial mural in Rockefeller Center, mastering methods of fresco painting and principles of large scale compositions.<sup>86</sup>

Rather than work as an apprentice for a Mexican artist, Halsey explored his own ideas and techniques while in Mexico, but his independent studies and observations led to later work which would reflect cultural influences. In 1952, he used his knowledge of Mexican murals and his experiences with fresco painting to complete the three-sectioned mural in the vestibule of architect Percival Goodman's Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Temple. This commission introduced him to an important movement in contemporary synagogue art--an architectural movement that incorporated works by some of the more prominent Abstract Expressionist painters. Robert Motherwell, Adolf Gottlieb, Ben Shahn, Helen Frankenthaler, and Ibram

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<sup>85</sup> Fineberg, 22-23, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Fineburg, 23.

Lassaw also collaborated with Goodman in the early and mid 1950s. These artists primarily designed menorahs, tapestries, and windows, but Halsey, who worked on one of the architect's earliest designs, was one of the first artists of the postwar period to create a mural in an American synagogue.

While working on the mural, Halsey was also active in the gallery market, exhibiting in group and one man shows for Bertha Schaefer. As the newspaper and journal reviews illustrate, he received positive critiques in the early 1950s--particularly for his 1951 show. Halsey attracted less attention from the press in later years, but his reception was relatively consistent with the widespread critical responses of the time. The excitement from the press and critics that surrounded Abstract Expressionism peaked from 1945-1953, and after the mania subsided, reviewers paid less attention to works by new artists, and critics became less satisfied with the development of the movement. Although Abstract Expressionism was the dominant style of painting until 1960, critics began noting its collapse in the late 1950s. Clement Greenberg later said the movement ended in 1962, but began "to lose its vitality well before that."<sup>87</sup> Agreeing with Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg also commented that "Abstract Expressionism was, like Adonis. . . prepared for burial."<sup>88</sup>

Art critics and historians, weary of the "painters who converted [the movement] into a formula and gave it a professional finish and polish" soon opened their arms to the newest style:

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<sup>87</sup> Shapiro, 24-25.

<sup>88</sup> Shapiro, 25.

Pop Art.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, the Abstract Expressionist movement ended, and writers and art historians began to assemble the lists of significant artists, paintings, and sites of the period. In compiling material for this segment of art history, writers utilized the selective opinions of prominent critics, namely Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Assessing the art and artists they found most important and "original" for the time, Greenberg and Rosenberg consistently wrote about some ten to fifteen painters. DeKooning, Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, Still, Gottlieb, Newman, Gorky, Reinhardt, and Hoffman, later joined by Baziotes, Kline, and Guston, became the accepted founders and members of the movement.

Recently, art historians have begun to re-explore Abstract Expressionism and have expanded the list of players. Artists, like William Halsey, who participated in the New York movement but were excluded from the short list are now being examined. In studying the gallery and museum records of New York in the 1940s and 1950s, and attempting to restructure the meaning of the movement and reconstruct who was involved, these scholars have discovered the overlooked. Consequently, they--notably Ann Gibson and Michael Leja-- argue that art historians may have omitted important artists, artworks, and aspects of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

In studying the background of William Halsey and his participation in the New York art scene in the late 1940s and 1950s, it appears that he was actively involved in some of the important art events of Abstract Expressionism. It is apparent that he earned respect from critics

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<sup>89</sup> Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Order Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1997) 111.

<sup>89</sup> William Rubin, "Younger American Painters," *Art International* 4, No 1, 1960: 25.

and scholars, and found a place in the gallery market alongside well-received artists of the period. However, it is also obvious that after 1960 he attracted little attention from the press and became a forgotten artist, almost reclusive in his secluded home and studio in Charleston, South Carolina. Yet the potential importance of William Halsey's work should not be overlooked. Understanding his art, and the art of other excluded artists from across the United States, can provide an insightful and meaningful appendage to Twentieth-Century American art history.

In her 1997 book, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, Ann Gibson investigates the lives and works of artists omitted from the art historical accounts: namely women, African-Americans, and homosexuals. Her research questions the established school of Abstract Expressionism and argues that "in its redefinition of styles and themes, Abstract Expressionism also neatly invalidated the products of those who were not among America's most powerful persons: white heterosexual males."<sup>90</sup> Gibson attacks the limited scope of the history of the New York School, which includes only white, middle aged male painters who worked in similar styles and techniques. Although she does not discredit the well-known Abstract Expressionists (their recognition is indeed well-deserved), she eagerly addresses the need for diversity in the Abstract Expressionist canon. Furthermore, she examines the viewpoints of the critics and historians who determined the "great" artists of the 1940s and 50s, analyzing the "goals of the institutions that enshrined their opinions and their works."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1997) xix.

<sup>91</sup> Gibson, xxxvii.

Further Claiming that the scholars who defined Abstract Expressionism excluded artists of different backgrounds, painting styles, and interests, Gibson wrote:

The Abstract Expressionist rhetoric of presence was defined through resistance to language, methods designed to convey that the art they made responded to the thoroughness of their convictions, redemption of the decorative through monumentalism, the employment of feminine sexuality as transgressive, and the polyphony of multiple meanings. Formalism, connoisseurship, and existentialism shaped these practices, defining the structure of works and ways of thinking about them. Yet, at the same time, the success of these strategies and themes in affirming values that supported an aesthetic elite of white heterosexual males distorted the potential of those strategies and themes to empower work that affirmed other identities, other experiences, and other relations to power.<sup>92</sup>

Arguably, William Halsey's art, with its Southern identity, focus, and influence, could also be included in the group of "visually and thematically rich and challenging works . . . excluded from extensive consideration" in American art history.<sup>93</sup> His biographical background and artistic interests did not follow the established art standards. Like the women, African-American, and homosexual artists of the 1940s and 1950s, Halsey found his subject matter in his personal experiences--ranging from artistic exploration in Mexico, to color studies of his beloved Charleston. Using the historical Southern town as his inspiration and motif, Halsey presented stylistically and thematically different expressions in abstract art. But his aesthetic interpretations of Charleston do illustrate a notable creative response to regional heritage.

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<sup>92</sup> Gibson, xx.

<sup>93</sup> Gibson, xx

Furthermore, his bold color abstractions and collages present a strong, linear artistic development that matured aside from the pressures and distractions of the media and art markets.

Halsey pushed his artwork forward according to his own instincts and ideas. Disinterested in selling, exhibiting, or promoting his art, Halsey focused himself completely (after 1960) on teaching and producing new work. Using the academic principles he gathered in his early career, and the inspirations he discovered and revisited in Mexican and Mayan cultures, he pursued an original and uniquely personal artistic development. Although this “unique” development did not attract art historical attention during Halsey’s lifetime, recent scholarship is beginning to rediscover the lives and works of regional artists like Halsey.

In the 1994 exhibit, *Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America*, Stuart Shedletsky sought out and presented the work of thirty-two older artists from across America who continue to devote themselves to producing art despite their lack of notable “success.” Addressing the American prejudices that encourage art historians and curators to ignore and overlook artists over age sixty who did not work or exhibit in the traditional art localities, he wrote:

Nonmainstream developments can no longer be dismissed as having no importance for the art viewing public. It is not true that artists not in the mainstream simply failed to get in the mainstream. In fact, regional developments, isolated lineages, reconsidered positions, and late self-realizations are authentic aspects of American art. Refusal to acknowledge careers that developed and nourished outside media-approved developments or politically correct associations is to refuse American art its integrity.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Shedletsky, 13.



Without a doubt, William Halsey belongs to this group of unknown artists in America whose work should be re-explored by art historians in order to disclose the overlooked painters and sculptors who have contributed to modern developments of American art. Although his work cannot be credited with starting a new art movement in the twentieth century, one can acknowledge its potential importance for understanding a broader context of American abstract art.

*New York art scene:* Despite his eagerness to participate in contemporary art movements, he did not feel comfortable in the urban art centers of America. Commenting on New York in the 1950s, Halsey later said, "I didn't like it there and it wasn't my atmosphere or my background. Charleston was an area that I understood, even though it was conservative."<sup>60</sup>

Halsey chose to remain in his hometown for over sixty years of his artistic career. During this time he produced a massive amount of work, inspired by his local surroundings, his interests in primitive cultures, and his responses to creative isolation. Although his career and lifestyle were uncommon to native Charlestonians, Halsey's attitude and approach to producing art was consistent with critical opinions on how an artist should work. Clement Greenberg wrote, "The American artist has to embrace and content himself, almost, with isolation if he is to give the most honesty, seriousness, and ambition to his work. Isolation is, so to speak, the natural condition of high art in America."<sup>61</sup>

But this "natural condition" of Halsey's geographical location and painting style did not

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Jack Morris, 1970.

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Rose, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Praeger, 1975) 4.

## CONCLUSION

Devoted to his native Charleston and convinced that his strongest artistic inspirations came from the colors and textures of his hometown, William Halsey refused to move to and join the New York art scene. Despite his eagerness to participate in contemporary art movements, he did not feel comfortable in the urban art centers of America. Commenting on New York in the 1950s, Halsey later said, "I didn't like it there and it wasn't my atmosphere or my background. Charleston was an area that I understood, even though it was conservative."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Jack Morris, 1970.

<sup>96</sup> Barbara Rose, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Praeger, 1975) 4.

attract art historical attention in the 1940s and 1950s when Halsey first appeared in the mainstream art market in New York. Instead, writers and critics of the period preferred the ten or fifteen white male artists who resided in New York and socialized in elitist artist groups. This small circle of artists came to represent the Abstract Expressionist movement, a critical period in American art history “believed to mark the coming to maturity and independence of the visual arts in the US. . . .and the quintessential artistic embodiment of the qualities and ideals that the nation’s mainstream, middle-class culture holds dearest: individual freedom, boldness, ingenuity, grand ambition, expansiveness, confidence, power.”<sup>97</sup>

But in defining the movement that expressed these essentially “American” qualities, art historians did not consider another major aspect of American culture: regional development. Across America, in newly emerging cities and towns, artists employed modernist theory and “were deeply committed to producing their own vital strain of art.”<sup>98</sup> These artists produced personal, expressive works of art that employed progressive techniques of the time, yet their art was overlooked because they were not working in the right place at the right time. Consequently, their art continued to be overlooked for the following decades. In failing to attract the attention of the critics in the 1950s, they lost the opportunity to experience “success” in the art trade. Furthermore, in some respect, they lost the opportunity to experience fame in later years, because critics and historians, satisfied with the short list of important artists and the

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<sup>97</sup> Leja, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Susan Landauer, *Paper Trails: San Francisco Abstract Expressionist Prints, Drawings, and Watercolors*, Exhibition catalogue (Santa Cruz, CA: The Art Museum of Santa Cruz County, 1993) 9.

straightforward restrictions of the movement, ignored and overlooked their work, assuming that because such unknown work was not worthy of recognition.

Conceding that the canonical record of Abstract Expressionism is incomplete, art historians must begin to readdress Abstract Expressionism to include the forgotten artists, some of whom continue working today. William Halsey's strong body of work is one testament to the need for further exploration in the study of Abstract Expressionism and American modern art. He represents the enduring artistic spirit of the 20th century, a figure we should not continue to overlook in art history.

Figure 1



ELIZABETH O'NEILL VERNER, 1883-1979:  
*In the Shadow of St. Michael's*, circa 1930; etching, 10 x 7 1/2 inches. Gift of the Greenville  
County Museum of Art, Greenville; Museum purchase.

Figure 1

Figure 2



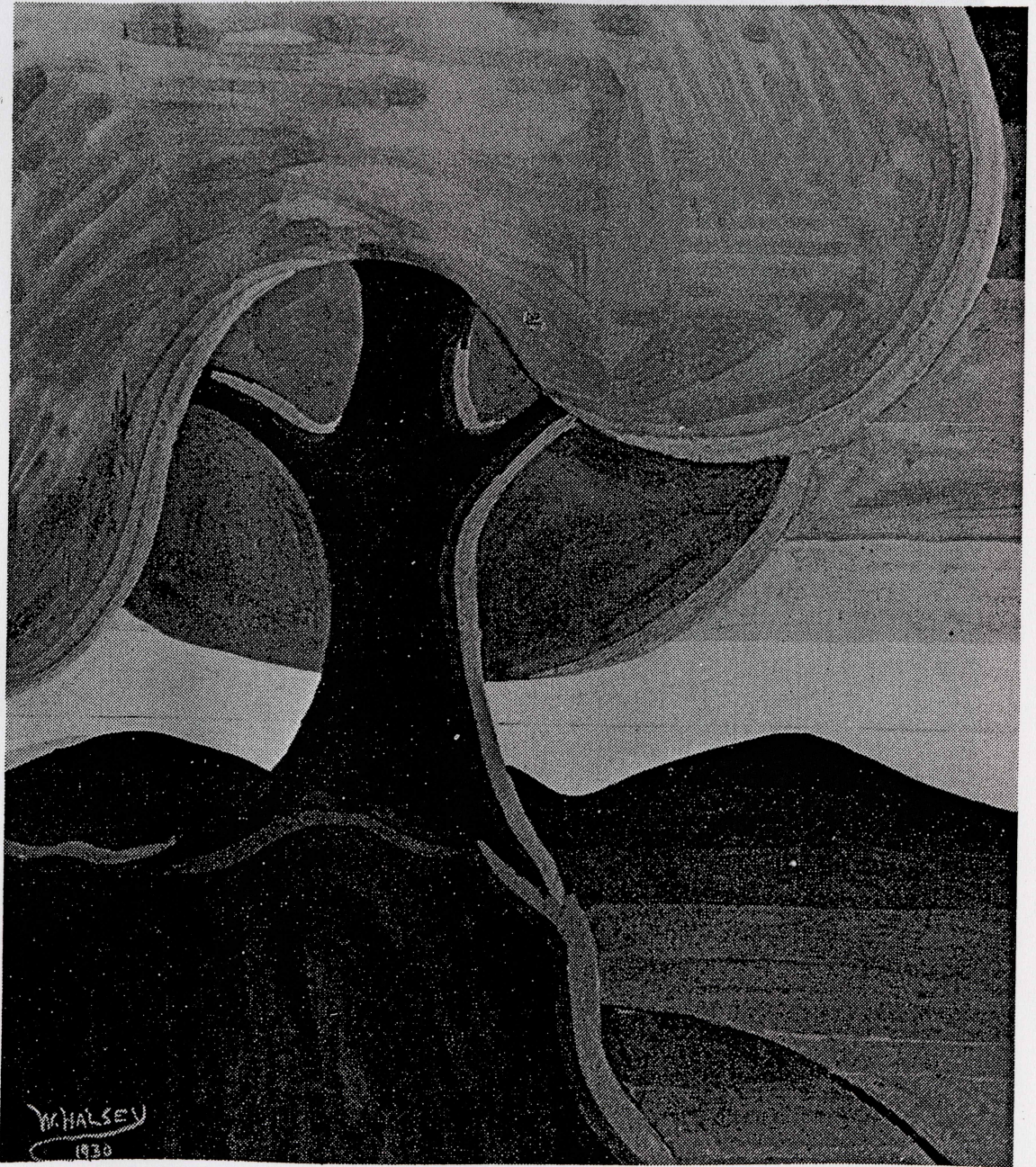
ELIZABETH O'NEILL VERNER, 1883–1979

*In the Shadow of St. Michael's*, circa 1930; etching, 10 x 7¾ inches. Collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville; Museum purchase

Figure 2



Savannah, Georgia c. 1943  
Figure 3



Collection: Miss Laura M. Bragg

*The Live Oak, 1930  
Figure 4*





EDWARD I. R. JENNINGS, 1898–1929  
*Forms*, 1929; watercolor on paper, 12 x 9 inches. Collection of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association, Charleston

*Figure Study, 1928*  
*Figure 5*



View from A  
Figure 7  
Figure Study, 1938  
Figure 6



*View from a Studio Window, 1937*  
*Figure 7*



Conversation on a Bus, 1941  
Figure 8 Mexican Art, 1940  
Figure 9



*Mexican Girl, 1940*  
*Figure 9*



Path Up the Hill, Mexico  
Figure 10

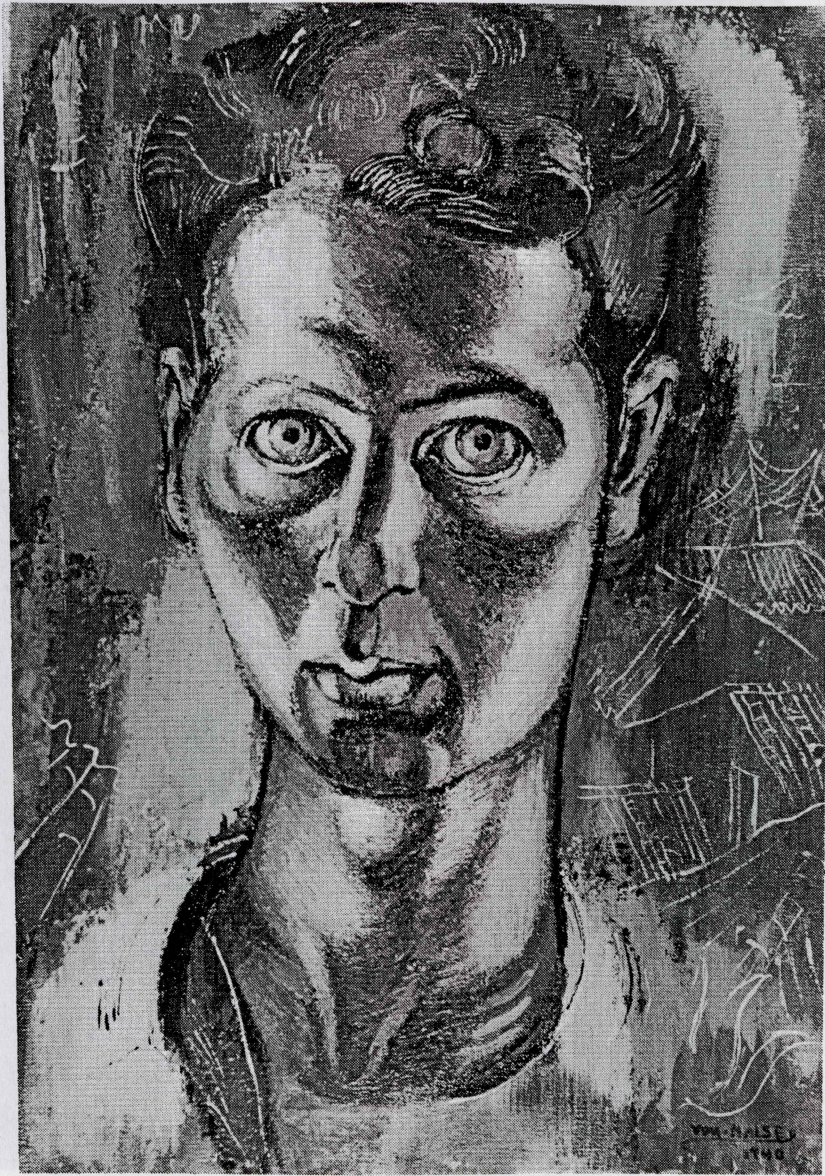


Fig. 10

*Self Portrait, 1940*  
*Figure 11 (M. Halsey)*



Collection: Dreher High School

Fig. 14

*Little Girl Posing, 1942*  
*figure 12*





Figure 13



WILLIAM MELTON HALSEY (born 1915)

147. *Back Street, Charleston*, 1946

Oil on Masonite, 19 by 26 (48.3 by 66)

Signed lower left: *Halsey*

Collection of the artist

figure 14

figure 15

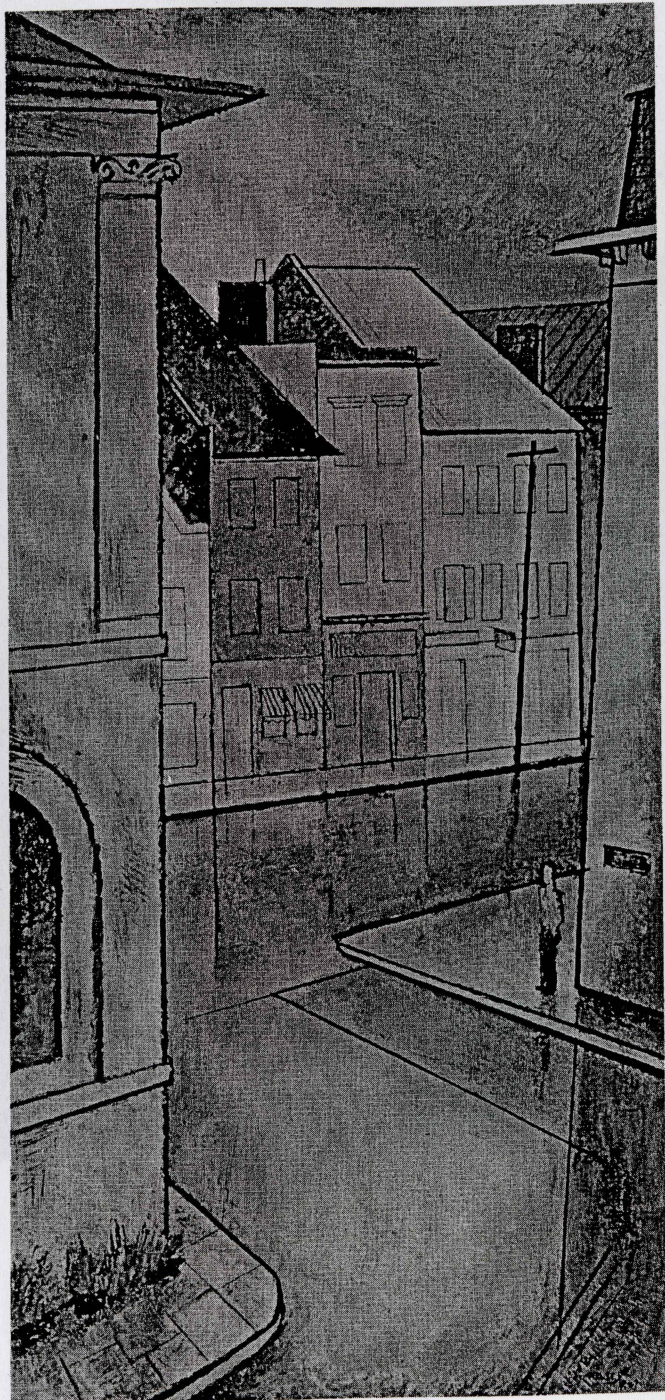
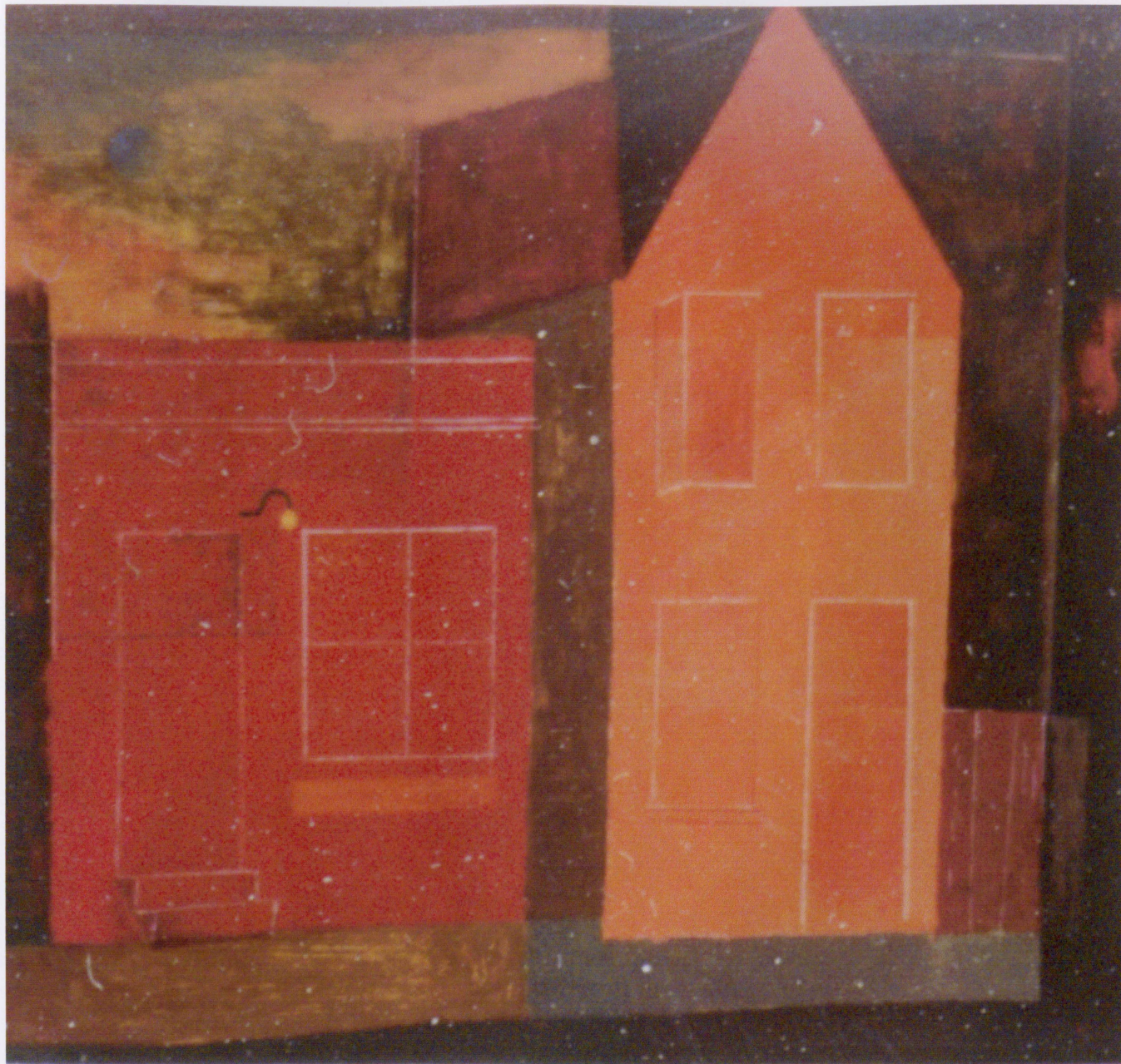


Fig. 20

Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Kimball Gray

*After Rain, 1947*  
*figure 15*



Edward Hopper, Night Horses, 1948  
Figure 16



*Container Corporation of America,  
Advertisement, 1948*

*Figure 17*



*End of Town, 1953*  
*figure 18*



*Blue Hill, 1956*

*Figure 19*



*The Onlookers, 1949*  
*Figure 20*





*Flight, 1951*  
*Figure 21*



Baltimore Synagogue Mural  
Figure 22



Baltimore Synagogue Mural, 1952  
Figure 23



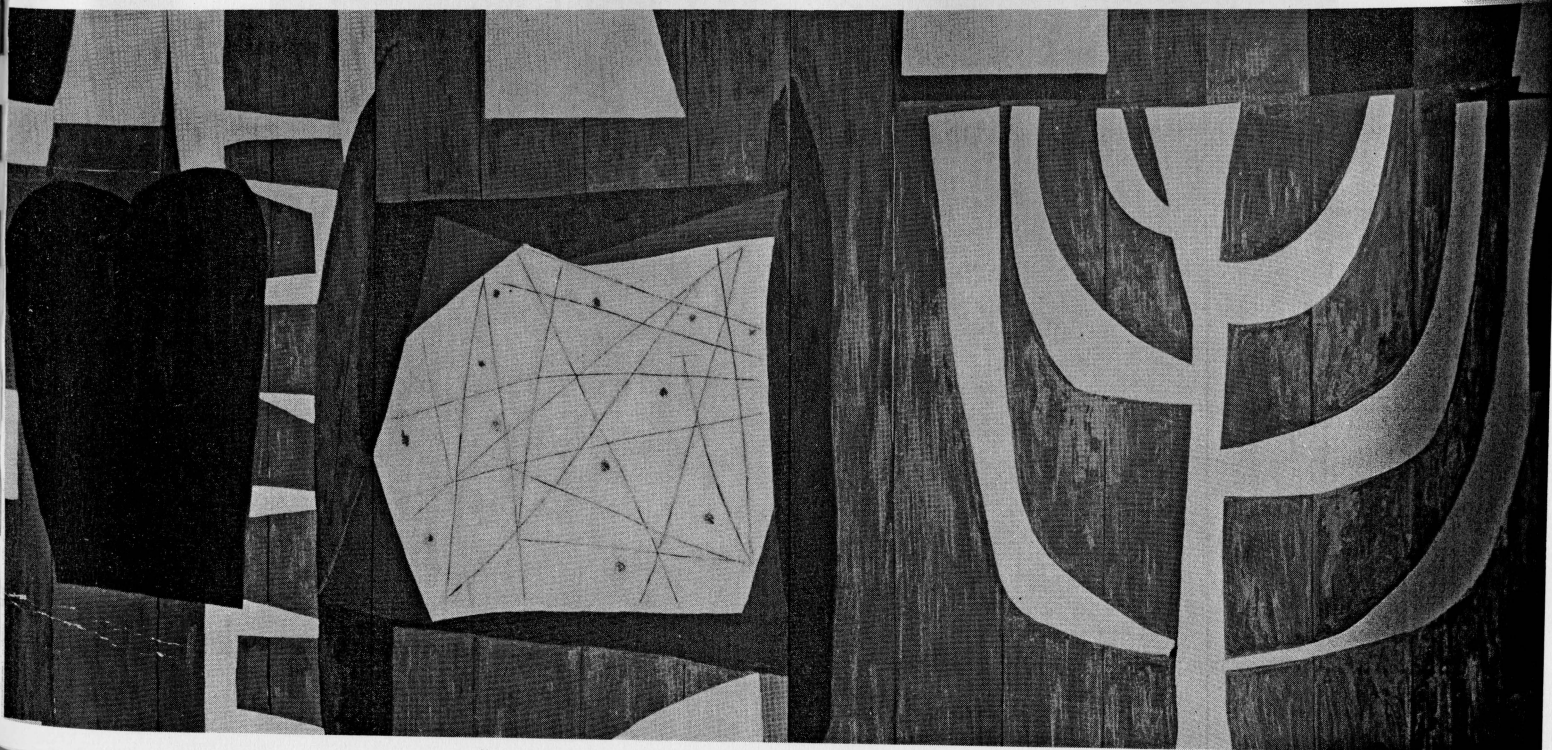
*detail of mural  
figure 24*



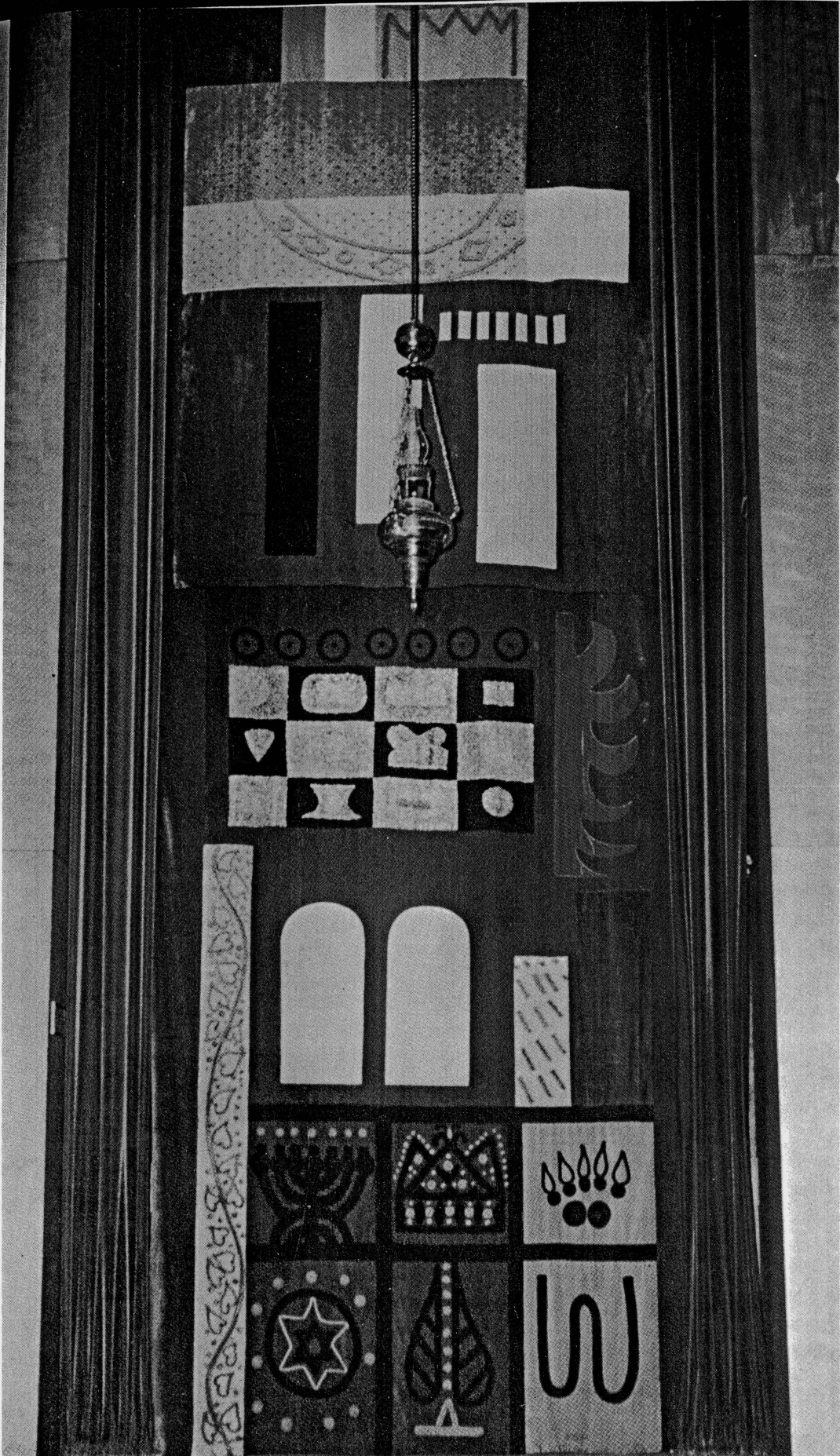
Vestibule with mural. Congregation B'nai Israel. Artist, Robert Motherwell.

*Figure 25*

The walls of the temple, mural, oil on masonite, 8' x 16', 1952. Artist, Robert Motherwell.



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*Bottlecap  
figure 26*



*Idols, 1953*

*figure 27*



Encantation, 1952

figure 28





tions. Schooners floated it from water-driven mills down tidal rivers to Charleston where agents shipped it to the markets of the world.

Eliza Lucas, at seventeen manager of her father's estates, experimented with the culture and processing of indigo and in 1774 shared her seeds and knowledge with neighbors. The plant-derived textile dye became the second large trading crop

channeled through Charleston.

Cotton cultivation, first recommended by the Lords Proprietors, rivaled rice and indigo only after 1790 when the invention of the gin brought mechanization. In 1833, the locomotive "Best Friend" and the Charleston to Hamburg railroad cemented the link between seaport and cotton country.

*Figure 29*

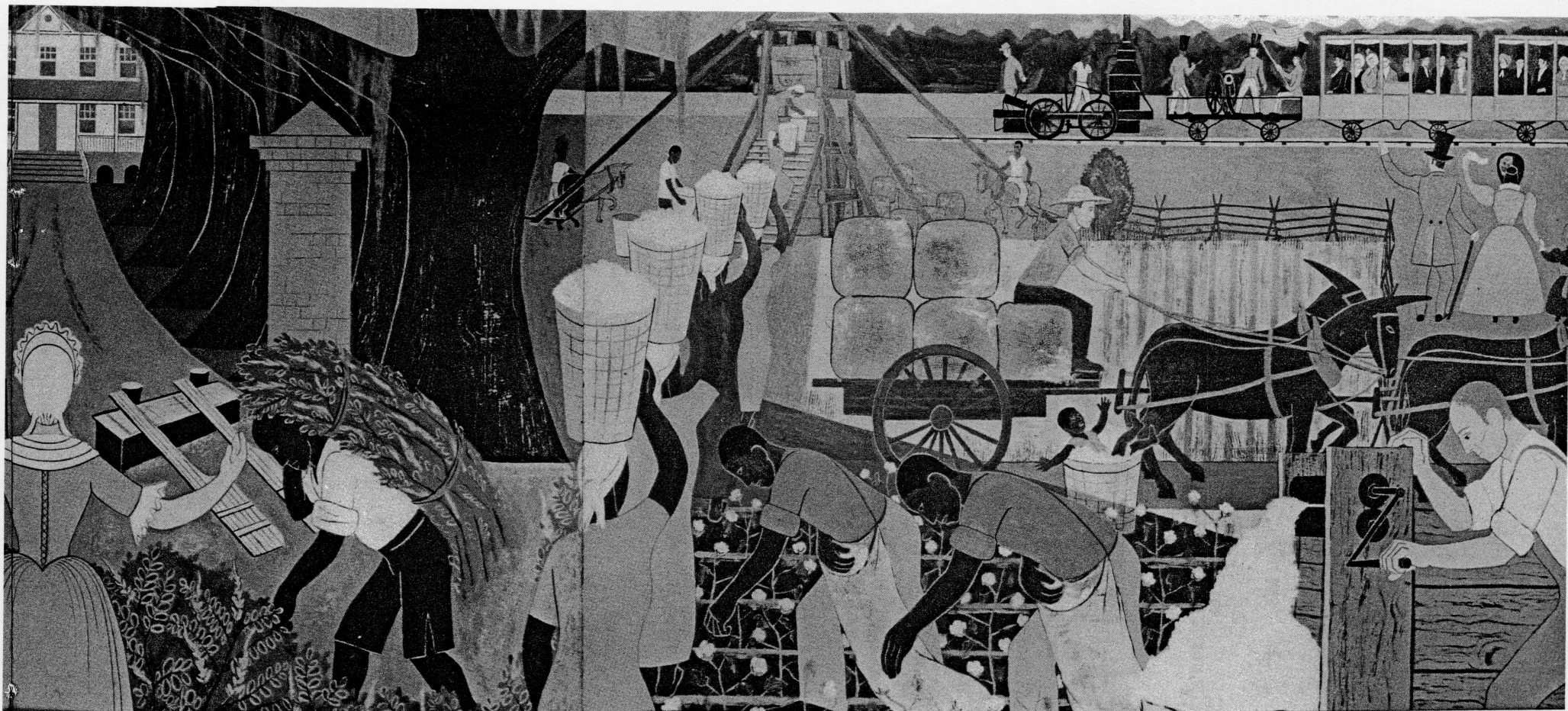


Figure 30

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