

Maxfield Parrish, Dream Castle in the Sky, US, 1908, 71.25, G334

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Questions:

1. How does this painting make you feel?
2. Please describe the images in this painting.
3. How do the colors work together for you?
4. What do you see that relates to music? (the theme for the tour)

Main Points

- Maxfield Parrish was an American painter and illustrator in the first half of the 20th century; he turned from illustration (the Golden Age of American Illustration was 1895-1929) to painting and was part of the School of American Imagists
- The American Imagists were proponents of naturalistic styles in art and rejected academic conventions; they also valued individual craftsmanship and decorative elements
- He is known for his saturated hues and idealized neo-classical imagery
- Parrish became a household name, known for his calendars and other commercial art, and particularly for his painting “Daybreak” that was reproduced in numerous prints

Biography (1870-1966)

Born in Philadelphia, he was the son of painter and etcher Stephen Parrish. When in Europe recuperating from typhoid his father taught him to draw; his parents encouraged his talents. He illuminated letters he wrote from London and Paris during 1884-1886. Parrish attended Haverford College, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Drexel Institute of art. His artistic career lasted for more than half a century and helped shape the Golden Age of illustration and the future of American visual arts.

Parrish lived his entire adult life at his New Hampshire home/studio at The Oaks with his wife, who died in 1953, and with his mistress and model (Sue Lewin). His wife spent substantial time documenting African American slave songs and traveled regularly. Six years after his wife died, and he had not married his mistress, she married her childhood sweetheart at the age of 70. Ironically, his hand froze from arthritis when he learned of her marriage (at the age of 90). Earlier in his life he suffered a number of setbacks including serious illness, a nervous breakdown, a son's suicide, and a fire at his property.

Launched by a commission to illustrate Mother Goose in Prose in 1897, his repertoire included many prestigious projects including Poems of Childhood,

Arabian Nights, Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics, and other illustrated books. His earliest illustrations were in black and white. In the 1910s and 1920s he had numerous commissions from popular magazines including *Heart's*, *Colliers*, *Scribners*, and *Life*. He also worked as an advertiser for companies that included *Wanamaker's*, *Fisk Tires*, *Colgate*, and *Oneida Cultery*. For a number of years he lived off royalties brought in by the production of posters and calendars. In 1931 he declared he was “done with girls on rocks” and focused on landscapes. He would build models of landscapes, using various lighting setups and then would photograph the preferred view as the basis of the painting.

His Art

Parrish's art features dazzlingly luminous colors. The color “Parrish blue” was even described in a F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. Kurt Vollegut referred to “Maxfield Parrish light” coming from the treetops in his book, *The Sirens of Titan*. These results were achieved by a technique he called glazing, whereby bright layers of oil color separated by varnish are applied alternately over a base. The base was usually a blue and white monochromatic underpainting. He would add depth by photographing, enlarging, and projecting and tracing objects or images, cut them out and then place them on the canvas, covering them with thick, clear layers of glaze. When light was shined on the painting it would penetrate the transparent glazes, reflect off the white base and mix the final colors. His palette used colors that incorporated the cyan printing plate -- blue, green, brown, and purple in various shades and tones.

The proportions and internal divisions of his compositions were calculated in accordance with geometric principles such as root rectangles and the golden ratio. He was influenced by Jay Hambidge's theory of Dynamic Symmetry. His inspiration also derived from Japanese art, including delicate lines and gentle tone and color.

Influences On and By Parrish

There is an interesting set of links of Parrish to the world of music. First, a number of musicians have used variations of his artwork or art inspired by him, including the *Moody Blues*, *Madonna*, *Elton John*, and *Enya*. Second, Parrish had a predilection for music and painted while listening to classical music. His model stated that “music was the one transcendental element which inspired him while working.” Finally, he had a music room at *The Oaks* where *Isadore Duncan* once danced.

Parrish also influenced pop art through the use of intricate optical and geometric designs. A 1964 exhibition at the *Gallery of Modern Art* in New York called him “Grand-Pop.” In addition, twentieth century artists as varied as *Jasper Johns* and *Andrew Wyeth* found that aspects of Parrish's art and methodology inspired them.

Parrish himself was influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, particularly Frederic Leighton and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Other influences on his art included William Morris of the Arts and Crafts movement, the Art Nouveau of Mucha and Beardsley, and the Symbolists Puvis de Chavannes and Odilon Redon. The influence of these artists is seen in the decorative element of his art with intricate detail, as well as an emphasis on the value of individual craftsmanship.

Dream Castle in The Sky (no image; see others at the end of this OOM)

This painting was commissioned by James J. Storrow for the main hall of his home in Lincoln, Mass in 1908. Storrow was a prominent investment banker in the Boston area and was instrumental in forming General Motors. He also served on the Boston City Council. In 1901 he campaigned to dam the Charles River and create the Charles River Basin, and to preserve and improve the riverbanks as a public park. The basin eliminated tidal harbor pollution and odors. Storrow Drive, a highway that runs along the river, is named for him although he never advocated it and his wife was in vocal opposition.

Parrish's art combines naturalism, fantasy, and romanticism as is seen so aptly in this painting. As noted above in the description of his technique, this painting includes various hues of blue and the related colors of brown and purple. To the right is Pan with a rapturous expression, holding a panpipe and dreamily viewed the castle in the sky in the background. The painting is luminous in color, creating a visionary view with abstracted flora yet also naturalistic details. The first Parrish painting bought by the Metropolitan Museum in 1965 is titled "The Errant Pan," and is a dramatic contrast to our painting, with fast running waters and a disheveled pan. Interestingly, the MIA painting is in almost a lunette shape that may have been dictated by the space in Storrow's home.

Bibliography

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Daybreak:



Errant Pan:



Life Magazine cover