

CSF News

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Tracing Schmitt's
"Lost" Paintings

Over the past few years, people have contacted me eager to tell about the work by Carl Schmitt that they own. Naturally, I am gratified to hear of those who appreciate Carl Schmitt and want to learn more about his work and further his legacy. More importantly, those who contact the CSF in this way do a tremendous service to everyone interested in Schmitt.

Although the Foundation makes every possible effort to locate Schmitt's unknown works, many are effectively "lost" and will remain so until the owners themselves contact the Foundation. The photographic record, as well as details about Schmitt's works (dimensions, signature, date and other markings) supplied by these individuals are invaluable in building up our *catalog raisonné*, revealing more of the artist's stylistic development and his contribution to art in the twentieth century. For this we are very grateful.

If you are fortunate enough to own a work by Carl Schmitt, particularly one not found in the website's online gallery, we would be delighted to hear from you! —S.A.S.

"REAL MYTH"

"GOD LOVES MAN. HE GIVES HIM REAL MYTH."

Carl Schmitt called myth "the reality of the artist." For most of us, myth is opposed to fact. Schmitt would not disagree, but would turn this statement on its head.

For Schmitt, myth is a way to know reality that penetrates more deeply than mere fact. The most profound questions man can ask—those about his origin and destiny—cannot be answered by sense experience, nor can history or science offer any definitive solutions.

The answer lies in Myth. "The so-called Myths dealing fundamentally with our origins and ends are Reality." He even says that "the modern realities of Fact are median and comparatively less real than the Myth." Memory, intellect, and imagination hold the key. "Man is unique in creation in that he has vast capabilities for truth, reality—intellectually, logically, intuitively, emotionally, instinctively. And added to this he also has a vast reflective or mirroring faculty called the imagination which records these realities

or translates them in terms of myth. These myths are magnificent testimonies of the spiritual realities and inseparable from them." This imaginative, mythical "translation" of spiritual realities into permanent forms is the task of the artist. The artist translates myth so that we can see the truth contained within it.



We are so much in the habit of dichotomous thought that it would shock us to hear "Christ is a myth" or "The Eucharist is a symbol."

And yet these two phrases are true. What should be added is that final phrase "as well as a reality." For a thing can be both a symbol and a reality at the same time.

When one thinks as a Christian.

Notebook 20 (1958)

Carl Schmitt did not paint any mythological scenes in the tradition of the old masters. One looks in vain for Cupid with his bow. Rather, Schmitt painted the truth *in things*, the truth that is ultimately found in the person of Christ. "We forget that Christ came not only because man needed hope for eternal beatitude but that he was also the historic concrete answer to the desire of the wildest imagination: the appearance on earth of a God-man. History united to myth." When the artist sees this, experiences this, "he reveals...an exact record, a symbolic story of that Prime Experience. It is

then that a god moves among the artists, the artists embrace him and we once more have mythology." —Samuel A. Schmitt

Since Christ there are no more "Prophets"

Since Christ there are no more "Myths."

Now there is only *the* Prophet, and *the* Myth.

Carl Schmitt

REFLECTIONS ON CARL SCHMITT'S LIFE AND WORK

Dennis Helming

It may seem a truism but Aristotle was the first to claim our knowing proceeds from the outside in. First, he says, we perceive in the distance a something. As we draw closer, we make out that this thing moves on its own steam: it's animate. Still closer, we detect the animal is human. And finally: "Oh, it's Fred! He's that tall fellow who lives down the street." We hasten to shake his hand.

But need we stop there? The painter Carl Schmitt did not. Nor did C.S. Lewis with his advice to look "inward and upward." In fact that's what we all do. With repeated contact, we get to know Fred better—his special characteristics and maybe even what

makes him tick. We go from "How come he's there just now?" to "How come he's there at all?"

Indeed the only thing keeping Fred from reverting to non-existence is the merest of threads—but the strongest, too. He neither made himself nor can account for himself. Were his Maker to stop knowing, willing, and loving Fred, he just wouldn't be. The same utter dependence applies to all creatures, visible and invisible. There we have the most radical truth of each component of this teeming universe.

And since there is no divine need to make us, we find no purpose in any of it except God's delight and his desire to share that delight with us.

Yes, the Creator dotes over his handiwork, even as He invites us to the same table. "Be still and see," says the psalmist. To plow ahead blithely with nary a thought for one's origin and destiny is a sure-fire path to confusion and non-fulfillment. If we don't stop and ask what or why a thing is,

The fact is that many are called, but few are chosen.

The painter Carl Schmitt was among the latter. He embraced that call with an artist's passion for beauty. Art is about life, and he committed himself to contemplating it in its fullness and to putting what he saw into his paintings. Rather than prostitute himself by churning out "pretty" pictures or whatever might sell, he'd rather go hungry. In his long life, he

filled hundreds of canvases and far more pages of his note-books, always probing, always experimenting. He was not only a student of the arts, but also a very wise man, perhaps even a prophet—and no mean painter.

For him, art was always more than capturing nature in its glory as seen in light and color. There's hidden drama in every life—in Fred's and certainly in Schmitt's, which was no easy one at all. He spent decades working out



but merely what it can do for us, our utilitarian self-interest crowds out any possible wonder. To wonder is our birthright—and a gentle invitation. Responding to it opens us up to all the greatness and beauty to be found in our world and in the profligate Creator behind it all.

Some are gifted to sustain that wonder despite the hits and misses we all experience. It's that full, astonishing reality of life itself in all its layers that the philosopher, the saint, and the artist are called upon to echo.

how the shadows and dark voids work in relation to light and color—to set forth how life itself triumphs even over death. This was the deeper glory he sought in all his work—that "final kick of beauty" that we find especially in his later paintings. He has shown us how even a teapot in a still life can convey a whiff of transcendence.

Dennis Helming is the author of Footprints in the Snow (Scepter) and The Examined Life (Spence). He lives in Washington, DC.

The Vision of the Holy Trinity, the intuition of this unity, is the nourishment of all life and consequently of the Fine Arts. Upon the degree of intuitive comprehension of the Triune God rests the importance to the world of the message of both the saint and the artist.

Notebook 2-X (1930)

Featured Painting: *St. Francis and the Unicorn*

Every artist is a myth-maker. Every artistic creation is a “fiction”—an untruth that nevertheless puts the truth before us.

All this is worlds away from the ethos of modern science, based upon incontrovertible fact and mathematical accuracy. From the industrial revolution to the digital age, our culture is shaped by science’s amazing success in raising the standard of living and creating a world market of products for us to enjoy. And few escape the incontrovertible fact that is the bottom line. Myth is the last thing we find useful at all.

Art certainly has a place in such a culture: there is, after all, a huge market in art. Works done by those with the artistic gift of seeing beyond the superficialities of our way of life abound. But these artists are children of their own time. What they see either reflects that numbing superficiality or, if labeled “radical,” throw in our faces the ugliness of our culture—and not infrequently the ugliness of their own despair.

Carl Schmitt was a *true* radical: he looked to the root of reality, and neither ugliness nor despair finds echo in his work. There we find only beauty—and with it an optimism about man, life, and yes, even about our culture. This painting can help us get a glimpse of that vision.

The unicorn, in legend, purifies with its horn the waters poisoned by the serpent so all could drink. It could only be caught by a virgin. Though often a symbol of Christ, in Schmitt’s painting it stands for the virtue of chastity. St. Francis represents poverty, as they behold one another in a fantastic landscape.

Schmitt painted this picture when, as an artist, he had worked through two of the three stages he saw in the life of man.



St. Francis and the Unicorn (Purity and Poverty),
Carl Schmitt, 1931. Oil on canvas, 36”x24”

In the first stage he learned to handle the rhythms of color, associated with the joys of life’s origins in the *family*. Its key virtue is chastity. The second stage deals with the light and shadows which reveal man more fully as he enters into *society* and takes on responsibilities and trials. The virtue needed at this stage is poverty as opposed to the avarice and greed that so afflicts our culture.

The third stage deals with the deeper truth that all things temporal must die. The virtue here is humility: the final blow to the pride of life that each of us must wrestle with *personally*. Schmitt was able to reach it some ten years after completing this painting. We see it in those dark voids he learned to put into his mature paintings. He was fully aware that ours is a culture of death, but in his vision of reality, life triumphs over death. He bore witness to this truth precisely in those voids which bring out so much of the stunning beauty of his late works.

—Carl B. Schmitt, Jr.

Reminiscences Hélène Schmitt

The most unforgettable character I ever met was a man of profound wisdom, gentility, and wit. Carl Schmitt was an artist of awesome proportions, baseball fan, philosopher, friend of the famous, a collector of jokes, lover of mystery stories, who grew tomatoes, and raised nine sons and a beautiful daughter.

The spiritual and aesthetic permeated both his work and his life. He frequently painted themes of a religious or mythical nature, always in vibrant colors.

Carl painted in a studio adjacent to his home well into his nineties. He never hurried with his work and each painting was an expression of months of work and hours of walking. He guessed he walked about five miles a day, on average, with each work of art.

The real sadness in his life came with the loss of his beloved wife and sweetheart, Gertrude, in her ninety-second year, and the death of his son Austin shortly before his one hundredth birthday. His faith, he said, “helped him to carry on.” “What I never quite understood,” he said, “was why God was leaving me till last.”

This wonderful man, artist, *bon vivant*, lived a century filled with joy, vibrancy, and youth. His hundredth birthday party was one of the most fun filled times of his life despite failing limbs and hearing. With his keen mind and wit, he enjoyed every moment, especially all the attention and admiration of his nine surviving children and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Carl died in 1989, still living in his beloved Silvermine, a place where he found inner peace and tranquility. He was buried, fittingly, on the anniversary of his marriage, a day he always referred to as the happiest of his life.

Hélène Schmitt married Carl Schmitt’s son Austin. She lives in Inverness, Florida.

When a fact passes into the past or future it becomes myth.

Myth is the stuff of Art.

Notebook 26 (1964)

Supporting the Carl Schmitt Foundation

Thanks to a generous leadership gift and challenge grant from the Chiaroscuro Foundation, the CSF's 2011 multimedia outreach initiative is well on its way.

The Carl Schmitt Foundation has proposed four projects aimed at bringing Schmitt's work to the many seeking beauty and an integrated vision of art and life.

- A handsome "coffee-table" publication of Schmitt's artwork including selections from his writings;
- A series of brief films introducing Schmitt and his art, to be posted on YouTube and the CSF website;
- A longer documentary film offering a broader picture of the artist's life and work;
- An upgrade of the Foundation's current website designed to advance the above-mentioned projects and build a vibrant network of support for the Foundation.

In the past few years the Carl Schmitt Foundation has made significant strides in furthering its mission through

this newsletter, a comprehensive website, numerous articles—both in journals and online—and by means of lectures and other public presentations. Most recently, an impressive exhibition of Schmitt's works, the first dedicated exclusively to the artist in 30 years, brilliantly displayed the breadth and importance of his artistic achievement.

The Foundation now seeks your support to build upon this momentum in 2011. Through the four initiatives outlined above, the Foundation has the opportunity to bring the beauty of Schmitt's art and his profound thinking on aesthetics and life to a great many people.

With the help of a matching pledge from the Chiaroscuro Foundation of New York, the CSF has to raise only \$42,500 to meet its overall goal of \$150,000. We ask you to match the Chiaroscuro Foundation's generosity with your own contribution. Every dollar you give will be worth double to the CSF. Thank you!

*Art is concerned with beauty first
and not with the world of good and evil or usefulness and uselessness.*

Beauty is neither one nor the other.

*One great poem or symphony or painting or sculpture or building or drama or dance composition is
worth infinitely more than a true artist's attempt to right the world.*

Notebook 3 (1932)

The Carl Schmitt Foundation

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