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Burri Makes a Picture

By Milton Gendel

Resistance to traditional classification is a commonplace in all art and has become almost a professional mannerism in modern art. Post-Impressionist mixed mediums, Cubist collage, the assorted materials of Dada and Surrealism, two-three-and four - dimensional constructions, the cult of the *objet trouvé*, all progressively reduced the formal distinctions between painting, drawing, relief, mosaic and sculpture that had withstood even the insistent fusions of the Baroque. By now the distinctions have become so-blurred that the jury of a recent international drawing competition felt obliged to include a definition of drawing in its invitations-to candidates - a celluloid and wire "drawing" might have copped one of the prizes, to the discomfiture of the approved pen-pencil-and-paper contestants.

The attempts of critics and historians to "explain" artists by analogy or by cramming them into neat pigeonholes, instead of aiming to re-create the individual physiognomy of their work, are defeated by Houdini-like evasions. The artist may be bagged, but if he is alive, with an effortless motion he'll be out of sight in the underbrush the next moment, clearing new ground while the critic or historian holds the bag.

The Italian painter Alberto Burri often "paints" pictures that have little or no paint in them. Expert in the ways of underbrush, particularly its cast skins and tissues, he has created many pictures in a medium of old sacks, bits of rag and string, which he redeems with a sort of Franciscan piety. Although the incorporation of actual materials in a picture is a familiar practice, the nature of Burri's materials still occasions shock or protest. A Milanese collector who prides himself on the completeness of his collection of contemporary Italian painting has steadfastly resisted the idea of including a Burri. To defend his judgment he has classified Burri as a non-painter: "Painting? Filthy sacks! Mold! Garbage!" Even appreciative art chroniclers are apt to be amused by his technique (which sometimes includes sewing) and the materials employed. Reviews of his shows have been titled "Burri Patches a Picture" or "The Doctor-Painter Sticks to Sutures."

Solitary by temperament, Burri is indifferent to categorizations of himself or his work. Tranquilly convinced that he has come home to painting, he treats references to his abandoned career as a physician without a tinge of regret, and rejects suggestions that his was a romantic decision. With playful humor he will reply to an acquaintance's apologetic or provocative request for medical advice by saying that he is always glad to prescribe but cannot promise the latest remedies. Ten years ago, while a prisoner of war in Hereford, Texas, he made up his mind to be a painter and quit medicine. His serenity about the rightness of his choice survived the barrage of protests from family and friends that greeted him on his homecoming to the ancient walled town of Città di Castello, in Umbria. It was counted tragic to write off, at the age of twenty-nine, years of study and the status of a professional career, particularly that of a doctor, for something so uncertain as painting. "For his own good" he was urged to think it over, to set up practice and paint on the side - evenings and Sundays. His reply, which must have taxed the patience of his advisers, was, "I will not be a Sunday painter." One ally, a cousin who is a musician, accepted Burri's decision, invited him to Rome and tried to put him in touch with art circles.

Never gregarious, and shy of prepared positions - as a medical student at Perugia he had decided to specialize in tropical medicine, with a view to practicing in Africa - he remained outside the usual orbits of the Roman art world. As his painting, begun as a recreational activity in the prisoner-of-war camp, rapidly changed from the first nostalgic Umbrian landscapes and figures to the early examples of his non figurative work, he gradually got to know the few friends he has today, who include a chemist, a physicist and an architect. Although marked traces of the clinical eye may be discerned in some of Burri's paintings, his scientific training has not given him any special interest in his technique. If anything, by some obscure displacement, science is reflected in his affinity for scientists, and it is his friend the chemist who goes searchingly into the properties of the glues and plastic cements used in the paintings, while Burri casually accepts the recommendations.

Aside from Burri's seclusive bent, he literally has no time for social life, since he spends most of his waking hours painting. He lives and works in a neon-lighted three-room basement studio in the Porta Pinciana section, a part of Rome whose fashionableness does not figure on his personal horizon. Not a frequenter of cafés, he rarely goes to sit among the movie folk, the oilmen and the exquisites of nearby Via Veneto, but has his café espresso at a modest bar around the corner from the studio or, for visitors from the outside world, telephones to have it brought in. In keeping with Burri's air of dedication, the studio is thick-walled, whitewashed, neat and ascetic. Stacks of canvases lean against the walls. Two finished paintings are propped on an easel; another easel carries a record-player loudspeaker. Jazz and modern concert-music records lie on a table next to a book on musical theory. The only decoration in the room is a lyre hanging on the wall. The neatness makes an island of the heap of rags and scraps that Burri consults like a reference library of shapes and textures as he works. Generally he has several pictures going at the same time. A nail in the center of the far wall serves to hang the canvas he is working on, not so much for the painting and cementing, which is most often done with the picture flat on the floor, but to get a clear view of what has been accomplished. He backs off through the arch that divides the studio and sits on a couch, the position farthest from the canvas.

This summer Burri, who had been working on a series of compositions in variations on black, decided to do a *sacco rosso*, a painting in sacking and red. (In speaking about his work he has adopted a simple terminology that covers the major directions explored in his ten years of painting. He refers to his "sacks" [*sacchi*], "molds" [*muffe*], "blacks" [*neri*], "whites" [*bianchi*], "reds" [*rossi*], "crackles" [*craquelés*], and to combinations of any of these.) While he was selecting a large rectangular stretcher from a stack against the wall, the idea of working with a very large red area insistently presented itself, and just eluding consciousness was a correlated idea which emerged as he stretched and fastened a piece of thin black cloth, bought in a dress-material shop, horizontally across the stretcher. The second idea was to vary the red area with protuberances. Before stretching and securing the cloth vertically, he twisted a length of thick wire into a double curve, inserted it behind the fabric and nailed it to the stretcher. The cloth now swelled up in two places on the right.

It first occurred to Burri to create real swellings in the picture plane in 1949, when he spent several months painting in a shepherd's hut at Le Fienae, a lonely spot in the mountains near Città di Castello. To increase the effect of tension he was aiming at in a painting composed of ovaloid and parabolic forms in grey, black, brown and white, he inserted two small branches crosswise between the stretcher and the canvas. Drum-head taut and highly varnished, the canvas came forward in a prominent hump, conveying the desired feeling of strain. Burri added this procedure to his technical repertory and frequently makes use of it. For one thing, it is a logical extension of his practice of punching holes in some of his pictures, either literally or by suggestion; for another, it is a major expression of his treatment of the picture as an object in itself, and in this sense his paintings verge on constructions and sculpture, inviting the spectator to walk around them.

Burri's paintings are seen most clearly as manipulated objects while he is working on them. He rejects the usual formal relationship between painter and painting, where the canvas remains fixed and the painter moves around. With Burri, both he and the canvas are in movement. The canvas is laid on the floor, dragged across the room, propped up in a corner or hung on the wall. It is attacked from the front and from the rear. Often it is a canvas only in the generic sense, consisting of untreated fabric progressively built up with cement, sacking and tempera.

After Burri created the two swellings for his *sacco rosso* picture, he placed the canvas on the floor and, using a house painter's one-inch brush, quickly laid in a large red area, covering the right-hand side. The red, a washable tempera put out as a house paint under the trade name "Idrol," was a matt scarlet, and the hasty brushwork allowed the black ground to come through. Burri then consulted his heap of rags and sacks and pulled out a large remnant of a burlap bag torn partly up the middle, with a long vertical split on the right and a pink "R" stenciled at an angle in the center. This he cemented on the left side of the canvas, using "Vinavil," a plastic cement that dries transparent. Stretched toward its upper right corner, the weave of the burlap formed an irregular pattern further varied by wrinkles, and the vertical split opened in a double parabola. Dangling threads were removed except along the split, where they were cemented into place. Above he cemented a narrow rectangular piece of warmer hued, coarser-grained, raveled sacking. A long trailing end of this piece was carried roughly parallel to the main burlap area and was left in high relief, to cast a shadow.

When the plastic cement had dried, the canvas was hung on the wall and the red area was repainted to make an even surface. Below the R-figure the left-hand edge of the tear was folded back and cemented under the burlap. In the vertical space created, Burri tried a long narrow strip of white cloth he had smeared with dark red. At this point one of the rare visitors to the studio appeared and disconcerted Burri by asking whether the R-figure and its appendage were meant to suggest the head and neck of an animal or bird. Although a number of the *sacchi* composed in the past utilized literary associations, particularly one painted in 1949, which is built up of stenciled burlap fragments from American-aid shipments, Burri has tended to eliminate what he calls "extraneous factors"; if he does still occasionally use a piece of sacking with a stenciled letter or word (as in the case of a composition which includes the word "GENOA") he maintains that only formal considerations are involved in his choice and that no reference to anything outside the picture is intended.

Mulling over the disturbing suggestion that he had created a zoomorphic figure, he pulled the redsmeared "neck" away from the canvas and tore it to bits. This was not, however, to remove the offending figure, for he had not yet decided on the merits of the allegation. He pasted the pieces back in place in a sort of mosaic "to obtain a surface in the same plane," since the whole strip with its accidentals created an undesirable movement in depth. The red area on the right was then extended to cover all the canvas between the lower edge of the burlap and the bottom of the picture, except for a patch at the upper right of this area, left as a black ground for a small semi-circular tear. While the paint was drying Burri replaced the canvas on the floor and opened a can of American plastic which he had been told - and this appears to amuse him - is used to make airtight envelopes for storing airplanes and vehicles. With a spatula he laid a mass of the viscous plastic on each of the two mamelons created by the wire form behind the canvas. The new red area was then given a second coat. The picture was put back on the wall and Burri backed away to study what had been accomplished. The black ground on the right reached into the red field to a point below the upper mamelon and down along an irregular line broken by brush strokes. Reacting to the tentative relationship between the large section of burlap, still set in a black field, and the red field, Burri considered eliminating all the remaining black on the right side of the picture. To begin with, he painted out, in red, the small arm of black ground reaching to the upper mamelon. The plastic blobs

on the protuberances had become tacky and it was time to proceed to their "*slabbramento*", a term often used in the sense of "opening a wound." With a palette knife incisions were made in the blobs along the curving ridge of the swellings, and the edges of the plastic were retracted and secured with straight pins (later removed). On the lower swelling the *slabbramento* had created a firm glutinous ring that suggested, the viscid secretions of budding water-plants; the ring above, also reminiscent of organic processes, looked like proud flesh. Dissatisfied with the upper *slabbramento*, since the plastic had dried improperly and could not be manipulated into a suitable shape, Burri scraped away the entire ring and laid on a fresh mass. The black ground remaining on the right side of the picture was now painted red, which established the composition as a large red plane balancing a smaller black ground, broken by areas of sacking and linked to the red by the pink R-figure and the red and white scrap mosaic. But, after some reflection on the couch, Burri took the first step to eliminate the black as a ground functioning in depth, by extending the red into the small semi-circular tear in the lower left corner of the large burlap area. He also cemented a dangling edge of burlap across the mouth of the tear.

Several days elapsed while Burri made one of his periodic visits to Città di Castello, to which he is drawn regularly by sentiment and his passion for hunting, as well as by the fact that it is one of his major sources of supply for materials. A friendly mill-owner of the town saves worn sacks for him, and these are particularly useful when finds have been rare in the streets of Rome. When he got back to work on the *sacco rosso* not only did it strike him that the R-figure "did not look serious," but he saw that its pink hue clashed with the rest of the composition. He cut the burlap straight up along the right-hand edge of the scrap mosaic, and tearing the fabric left along the top of the R he folded under and cemented the flap in a curve, thus leaving an irregular black pentagon at the top of the mosaic. The remaining part of the R was covered by a piece of deeper-hued burlap, smeared with resinous plastic and cut so as not to impinge on the pentagon or the black parabolic shape to the right. An intricate play had now been established between the pentagonal and parabolic forms, linked by the overlaid band of sacking but pulling away from each other and each acting as the dominant form in its half of the burlap area. In turn the mosaic strap tied these areas into the red plane, where the two swellings made a counterpoint to the shadowy pentagonal and parabolic hollows.

Continuing the progressive elimination of the black ground, Burri extended the red plane to include the narrow horizontal space between the upper edge of the large burlap area and the curling strip of sacking above it. Before continuing the red plane to include the wider space above this strip, he studied the upper left corner of the picture for some time. There the black ground was broken by the ragged ends of a band of burlap following the upper edge of the canvas as far as the median line. Burri pulled away loose bits, cemented in a flat piece which reduced the black corner to a narrow horizontal strip, and by manipulating and cementing raveled edges created a rough whorl of burlap tangential to what remained of the black ground. Still dissatisfied with this section of the picture, he left it to take care of other details.

A thick coat of Vinavil was applied to the mosaic to make it shine and sparkle in key with the glutinous mamelons. To preserve and fix it permanently, the main area of sacking received a thin coat of Vinavil, which darkened it slightly without making it shiny and to some extent flattened the texture. The burlap areas above were treated the same way. Where the R-figure had been pulled back to make a new shape, the black ground remained glue-mottled. Except for the upper edge, this was painted over with opaque black water-base paint. The black paraboloid was also painted in this way, leaving only a small mottled half-moon at the bottom. Burri now saw that the dark red of the mosaic strip went badly with the prevailing scarlet of the picture. It was "too obvious . . . too bold . . . too crude." He brushed in a rough vertical of the scarlet along the right edge and center of the strip, and painted across its tail so that in color, if not in surface and texture, it fused with the entire

field. Little more than a suggestion of the original white mottling remained. The whole of the mosaic was given another thin coat of Vinavil so that in certain lights it would appear darker red.

Meanwhile Burri decided that, unlike the mosaic strip, the upper left-hand corner was not too bold, but too uncertain. It drew attention without being able to hold it, and upset the balance of the composition. He painted a piece of burlap scarlet, and fitted it into the corner. After some reflection he removed half this piece, leaving the corner black. By rearranging the strands of the burlap whorl below, and adding a patch of red to its center, he made it strong enough to function in the system of relationships established by the glutinous mamelons and the black shapes.

For several days the picture hung on the wall while Burri worked on other canvases. Occasionally he would study it from the couch. An elusive dissatisfaction finally crystallized in his decision to remove the shiny plastic from the swelling in the upper center. Made prominent by the plastic, the swelling "crowded the canvas and pushed it to the left." He repainted the scraped area and set about framing the completed picture with narrow strips of wood. The last problem connected with the painting was whether to frame it in red or black. Burri painted one strip red and another black, and tried them alternately. The black compressed the composition and "matched" the black shapes too neatly. The red looked right and was adopted. The picture was then titled *Rosso 1, 1954*.

As in many of Burri's works, the content of the picture may evoke connections with the healer's art. Materials in the process of dissolution are arrested in their decay. The organic suggestions are offered in a variety of straining tissues, stained, pitted, erupting, rugose, glabrous and fuzzed. Whether these refer to the operating room, the stretched skins and masks of animals slain in the hunt, or the peculiar relics of unknown martyrdoms, the points of reference remain glimmering. Though Burri may unexpectedly reinforce an associative link by speaking of *Rosso 1, 1954* as a *Gobbo Rosso*, or "Red Hunchback," on the whole he considers that the manifest content of his painting must take care of itself; he is a painter, a solitary, a hunter, who eschews conjecture on his unconscious processes: "The words don't mean anything to me; they talk around the picture. What I have to express appears in the picture. In this one I have worked with a big red space that is expanding forward and in all directions. With the other elements it is involved in a whole chain of pulls and tensions. But this is only the architectonic structure. For the rest I have nothing to add."