



ROBIN EGG BLUE

By Robert Moses
The Leigh Gallery, Chicago

Alexandra Donner

Introduction to the Visual Arts
Research Paper

Robert Moses grew up near San Diego, California in a highly artistic environment. His mother worked as a portrait colorist and retoucher, and the young Moses was, in his own words, “fascinated by the process, especially the coloring with oils on photos.” (Moses) Despite this fascination, however, he did not consider art as a career. He chose instead to focus on receiving on formal education, seeing it as “more practical and valuable.” Moses earned both a Bachelors of Science in Microbiology and a Masters of Science in Astronomy from the San Diego State University, and during that time worked in the foodservice industry as a waiter and bartender. Even with this busy schedule, Moses managed to incorporate studio art classes into his workload, and did so throughout his college career. These classes were met with success, and he received several rewards and public displays of his art in response to his efforts. After leaving school, Moses worked as an adjunct instructor of astronomy at local community colleges, but continued to pursue an interest in oil painting, which he describes as his favorite medium. Working alone in a “self-study of classical techniques,” Moses was recognized in the art community but wished to expand, eventually deciding to attend art classes at a community college. Moses describes this experience as “very inspiring,” one he will “always treasure.” This instruction he received during this time period “brought [his] understanding of technique and artistic vision to a new level” and he began selling his work and showing it in local galleries, evening receiving commissons from private collectors. When his wife was offered a tenure track position at Michigan State University, Moses moved with her to East Lansing and found a new market for his work. The result was several solo shows as well as placement in local galleries, although he continued to send work back to his connections in San Diego. In recent years, Moses has shown work at the Leigh Gallery in Chicago, the East Lansing Public Art Gallery, the Otherwise Gallery in New Lansing, the Joseph Anthony Studio in San

Diego, the Southwestern College Art Gallery, and the Mesa College Art Gallery, as well as being published in *Mesa Visions*, a Journal Publication of Art & Literature from San Diego Mesa College. (Moses, Moses Art) In an online gallery (robertmosesart.com) maintained by the artist, one can witness the full spectrum of Moses' work, ranging from the surreal and hauntingly skeletal figures of "Flexibility" to the succinct and strangely violent imagery of "Robin's Egg." "Robin's Egg" possesses a sister piece not shown in the online gallery, or in Moses' words, another "iteration of the same idea." This second half of the series, named "Robin Egg Blue" is perhaps even more striking than the first.

Currently on display at The Leigh Gallery on the Northside of Chicago, "Robin Egg Blue" is an extremely salient oil painting on canvas that uses somewhat minimal subject matter to convey an extremely distinctive and even haunting mood. In the upperhand left corner, a warm glow is portrayed with rich and highly saturated yellows, oranges, and reds. This creates a sharp contrast against the dark value of the background, and its comparatively large weight serves as the initial focal point of the piece. The glow sheds light on several objects below it and to the right, moving the emphasis downwards as the eye travels across the piece. These objects rest more or less at the center of the canvas, creating another focal point for the viewer. In the foreground, a small blue egg rests in a modified vintage egg cup. It has been cracked, and the shattered pieces of the shell fall on a diagonal to the right, creating a violent but nevertheless aesthetically pleasing line from the top left corner to the bottom right when viewed in conjunction with the orange glow. Slightly behind the egg rests a silver spoon that reflects both the orange hues of the glow and the pale blue tint of the egg, creating contrast between the warm and cool colors and adding a feeling of depth to the painting.

One of the most effective aspects of “Robin Egg Blue” is the balance created between the glow in the upper left corner and the fragments of egg shell in the opposite corner. (The Leigh Gallery) As mentioned earlier, this symmetrical balance creates a very beautiful implied line across the diagonal of the piece, allowing the viewer to absorb the work in its entirety beginning with the source of the light and following its rays onto the subject of the painting. The diagonal’s placement from left to right makes the piece extremely pleasing to the eye, and evidently planned as such, as culturally a vast majority of the work’s audience would be accustomed to reading in this same pattern. At the same time, however, the pale blue egg and spoon create a less prominent balance of their own, with the cracked and jagged top edge of the egg sloping downwards on a diagonal from right to left towards the spoon resting on that same line behind the egg. Although this angle is far more shallow than the heavier diagonal from left to right, together they do create a series of implied triangles, which are characterized by the areas in the piece that have no subject matter, and are instead filled by an unvarying black background.

Light and color are very much entwined within this piece, but together they make up another extremely impressive element of “Robin Egg Blue.” While the images themselves create balance within the painting, the colors used by Moses to portray each individual aspect of the painting have a balance all their own. The light source of the piece, the large orange glow in the top corner, is rich and highly saturated, with bright warm colors that give off a confident and exuberant appearance. The egg, in contrast, seems pale and fragile by comparison, broken and imprisoned in the almost painful-looking egg cup. The spoon behind the egg is heavily shadowed, allowing the egg and cup to take center stage, but its reflective surface

shows a conflict between the bright orange and intense warmth of the light and the cold blue of the egg's surface. This adds to the understated feeling of violence within the piece, despite the fact that the inanimate objects that make up its subject matter portray no perceptible action.

As is the case with so many works of art, the meaning behind “Robin Egg Blue” is left to the viewer. Moses himself claims that he is “resistent to state meaning” as he sees it, leaving his work to be regarded purely from personal thought and experience. The presence of the egg is to be viewed as a portrayal of the “ideal form,” and “Robin Egg Blue” itself is an experiment with the “implicit act of breaking that form.” (Moses) With this in mind, the manifestation of violence within the piece becomes ever more apparent. The egg, this ideal form, is held captive within the spiked cup. Its presence there appears almost sadistic, with sharp contrast occuring between the smooth, curved surface of the egg, and the wicked spikes containing it. Particularly interesting is the fact that the egg is not that of a chicken, regularly consumed in such a fashion, but rather it is the egg of a robin. The distinct coloration of the robin's egg adds contast to the color scheme of the painting as well as contributing to its meaning. An egg, regardless of species, could be seen as an ideal form. Moses' choice of a robin's egg, however, adds another element to the piece. Not only is the egg held captive and put through apparent pain and violence through its breakage, but the robin's egg also portrays an extremely natural object, destroyed through the very human act of breaking it with a spoon. This brings to mind the conflict between humanity and nature, as well as the destruction of natural miracles such as a robin's egg for human gain. Whether or not this is the true meaning of piece remains somewhat unclear, but Moses, with his extensive background in the sciences, supports the idea in mentioning that he is intrigued by the “questions of rationalism

and its effect on our perceptions,” (Moses) using the ideal form, in this case an egg (although cubes or similar shapes are used in his other works,) to explore these concepts. He says that there is “a certain level of violence” even in the “mundane act” of cracking an egg. (Moses)

Despite the fact that “Robin Egg Blue” is a contemporary piece, it is more reminiscent of Dutch still life painting, such as that of Pieter Claesz, than it is of its fellow “contemporary” works. Pieter Claesz, known as the father of the Haarlem still life style of painting, (Biesboer) lived and worked during the Dutch Golden Age. Claesz was born around 1597 in Berchem, near Antwerp, and moved to Haarlem in 1621, where his son Nicolaes Pieterszoon Berchem was born. This same son would go on to become a famous painter of landscapes, and in some opinions Claesz is best remembered simply as his son’s teacher. His paintings, however, show an unprecedented level of talent in realism, and were among the first of the Haarlem still lifes, or ‘breakfast’ style of painting. Claesz’s works, usually of very familiar household or kitchen objects, were created using a very limited or even monochromatic palette, relying on subtle focuses of light and shading to portray their meaning. (Encyclopedia Britannica) Like “Robin Egg Blue,” these pieces were extremely metaphorical, often placing skulls in and amongst everyday objects as a symbol of human mortality. (The National Gallery of Art) Moses’ use of a robin’s egg within a familiar setting is decidedly evocative of this train of thought, and portrays the same eerie mood through the contrast of subject matter. The warm glow at the top left of “Robin Egg Blue” also mimics several of Claesz’s still lifes, who favored a similar angle of light in many of his works. Pieter Claesz’s “Breakfast Piece” shows this similarity especially well, and even contains a goblet made of a brassy metal similar to that of the egg cup in “Robin Egg Blue.”

Allegory and historical context aside, “Robin Egg Blue” is above all an extremely beautiful and unusually memorable painting. Long after viewing it, one remains captivated by its elusive message and intricate play of color on reflective surfaces. The pairing of familiar and wildly natural objects creates a dichotomy that captures the viewer’s imagination; the piece sends a drastically different message to everyone that sees it. To some, it could be a nostalgic recollection of childhood long past – the excitement of finding robins’ eggs and the comfort of a perfectly presented egg cup for breakfast. To others, it is a radical statement against human interference in nature and the violence of destruction. In my opinion, this versatility is exactly what makes “Robin Egg Blue” such a masterful piece. It is subtle, even understated, and yet it grabs and holds the attention purely for this reason.

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