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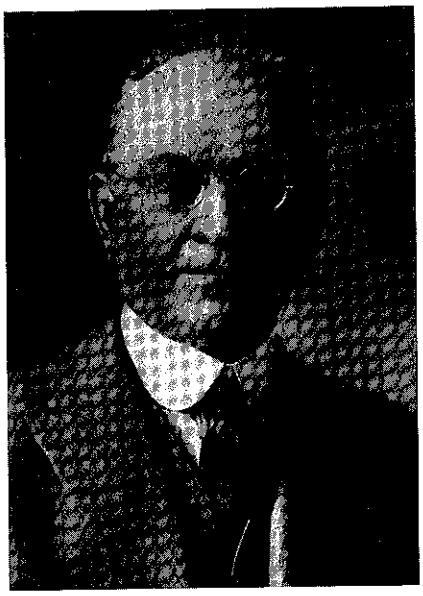
Themes in the Work of Carlos C. Coyle

by Patti M. Marxsen

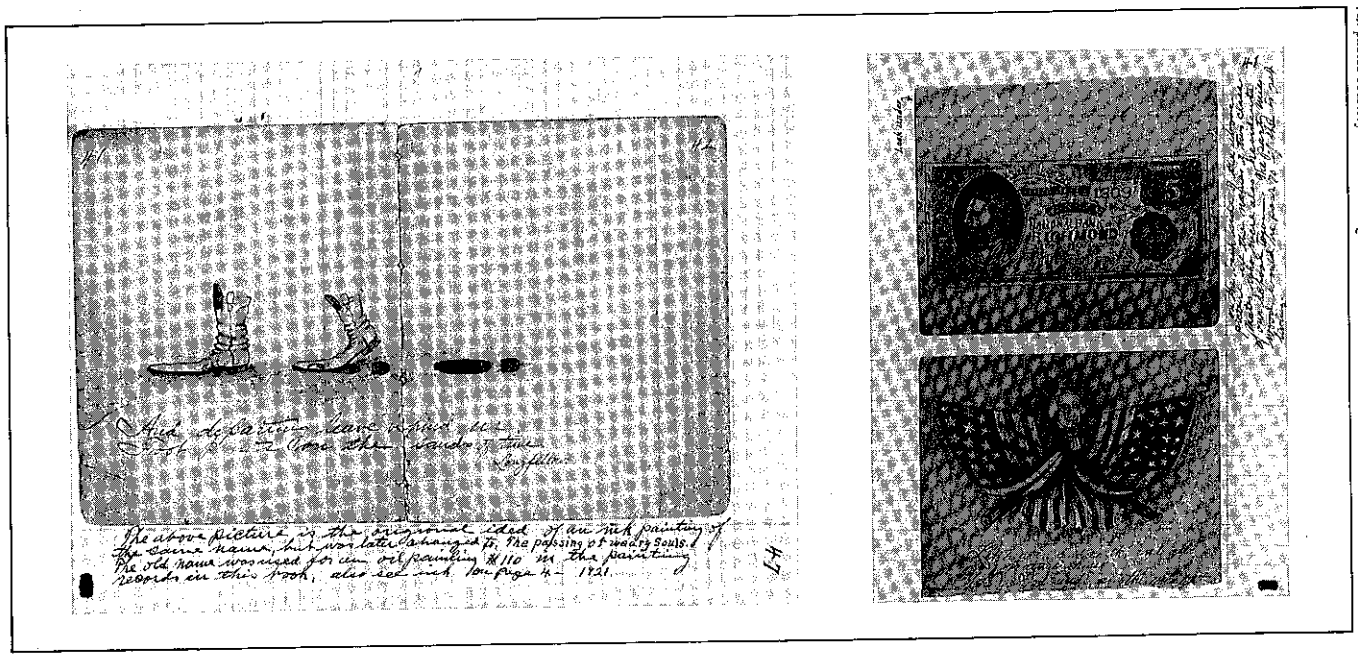
The journey toward an understanding of the work of Carlos Cortez Coyle begins in Berea, Kentucky, that peculiar and picturesque place that serves as a main gate to eastern Kentucky and, indeed, all of the Appalachia. C.C. Coyle was born near Berea in 1871 in a place called Bear Wallow and entered the Berea Foundation School, the forerunner of Berea College, in 1889.

Although he never graduated from the foundation school, the brief months that he spent there are documented in a collection of "school days" sketches that are now preserved in the artist's personal diary. These ink sketches include skillful renderings of realistic subjects such as shoes, money, animals, and books as well as decorative, calligraphic drawings of birds, scrolls, and ribbons. However, the significance of these early sketches lies not in their skill but in their revelation of Coyle's youthful inclination toward the artistic expression of ideas. Typically, these sketches focus on a singular image which becomes a visual shorthand for expressing a larger, and often complex, idea. Many of these ideas surface again and again and eventually develop into major paintings later in Coyle's life.

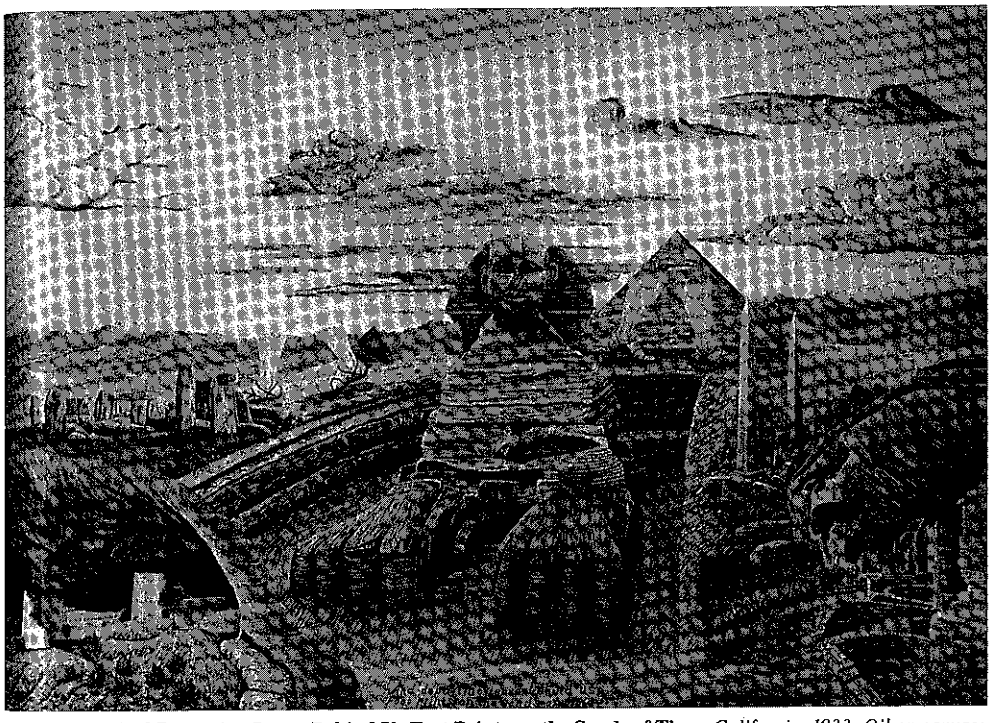


Carlos Cortez Coyle, circa 1929, when he began to paint actively.

Coyle's sketch (circa 1890) of two rumpled boots taking a broad step across the page and leaving a trail of dark footprints was, for example followed by a more elaborate "ink painting" in 1921 which he called *The Passing of Weary Souls*. This "ink painting" was competant and illustrative but in 1933 Coyle returned to this subject and made of it one of his most ambitious paintings entitled *And Departing Leave Behind Us Footprints on the Sands of Time*. This grand-scale



All photos courtesy of Berea College. Berea, KY.



And Departing Leave Behind Us Foot Prints on the Sands of Time; *California; 1933; Oil on canvas; 5'2" x 3'8"; Berea College Art Collection.*

painting addresses the question of the influence of humanity across centuries of time within the context of a dream-like landscape of history encompassing Stonehenge, the Great Pyramids, the Great Sphinx, and the ancient Indian dwellings of Arizona and Colorado.

In spite of the early evidence of talent that we sense in the "school days" sketches, the 47 paintings and 37 drawings in the Berea College Collection were not products of a consistent and progressive artistic development, but the result of a single-minded, often inspired, decade of painting which began around 1929. By then Coyle, whose career was in carpentry and building, had been living in San Francisco for some time. It's uncertain why or when he left Kentucky for the West Coast.

Coyle's own words from that period talk about his interest in art:

> "My drawings have always been excellent and my friends have long advised me to take up oil paintings. I did some oil paintings when I was a boy but my father objected as he wanted me to take up his legal profession which I did not care much about.
>
> Now, at the age of 59 I have started to paint with oil paints. Most artist [sic] are beginning to slow down at this age. After laying down my oil painting experiences aside [sic] for 40 years it is just like starting all over again."[6]

School Days Sketch; *Kentucky; Circa 1895; Pencil and ink on notebook paper; Berea College Library Special Collection.*

But if Coyle felt any uncertainty about "starting all over again" at such a late date, the results of his labors do not betray it. In 1930, Coyle's first complete year as an active, producing artist, he made 59 paintings.

The most important paintings in Coyle's oeuvre, all of which were preceded by carefully-planned cartoons, were painted between 1931 and 1938. This group included nine key paintings that represent the core of Coyle's work and the peak of his artistic powers. Within this group of nine key paintings we find the whole of Coyle's visual vocabulary and the full extent of his thematic repetoire, both of which are dominated by nature, progress and time, and the idealization of women. It is noteworthy that these three ideas, which were so important to C.C. Coyle, can be found, as well, in mainstream American academic art and thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But due to his naive sensibility, Coyle's presentation of these ideas is greatly simplified. Nonetheless, because of their skill, scale, and symbolic power, it is this group of nine key paintings that must form the core of any serious study of C.C. Coyle:

1931 *Our Phantom Chiefs*
1933 *And Departing Leave Behind Us Footprints on the Sands of Time*
1934 *Blazing the Trail*
1934 *The Transformation*
1935 *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Rules the World*
1935 *Peaches and Stone*
1936 *Who is Who When the Light Goes Out*
1936 *Self-Portrait: 65 and 22*
1937 *Calling All Gods*

Attempting to group these paintings into the three thematic categories mentioned above, it becomes clear that one painting may fit into more than one

category. Similarly, the themes themselves often overlap within the same painting. Nevertheless, this particular thematic organization of Coyle's work does facilitate the discussion of complex and interrelated material and is, therefore, preferable to a chronological approach to these works.

It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of nature in nineteenth century America. Painting, poetry, and philosophy elevated the undiscovered American landscape to a spiritual and patriotic experience. Thus, what Joshua Taylor has referred to as "the virtue of American nature" was an integral part of the American mind-set.[7] For C.C. Coyle, growing up in a rural, mountain community which is still well-known for its natural beauty, a love of nature was instilled early in life and, significantly for his art, closely associated with maternal love. A poem that Coyle wrote in 1936, seven years after his mother's death, recalls a stroll with his mother "through fields and brooks" and includes the following stanza that seems to be inspired by the artist's own work as much as by his memory:

> "When we reached the top of the last long hill,
> And we both sat down for a needed rest;
> You pointed out the silver, pink, and gold,
> Of the sunset clouds low in the west."[8]

Although Coyle painted many landscapes and sunsets that relate to this nostalgic passage, perhaps his purest nature painting is *Peaches and Stone*. This group of mothers and children arranged in a classical bathing scene on "the stony beach along the Pacific" represents the artist's first attempt at painting the nude figure.[9] The choppy sea and the ominous sky create an agitated air of expectancy which is balanced by the relaxed and abundant peach-colored women. Nature is presented here as something unpredictable

WHAT IS HE?

Given the mystical/spiritual nature of much of C.C. Coyle's work, it is tempting to view paintings such as *And Departing Leave Behind Us Footprints on the Sands of Time* as "visionary," on the same plane, for example, as Elihu Vedder's *The Questioner of the Sphinx* or Thomas Cole's *Voyage of Life* series. But Coyle's sources are not mysterious enough to justify the "visionary" label. To the contrary, he was influenced by the imagery of popular culture to a remarkable degree and often turned to that nostalgic and sentimental imagery as he searched for responses to the cosmic questions that genuinely dominated his thoughts. Thus, although "dream-like," the painting in question has as its primary visual sources not dreams or other unconscious "visions," but the very tangible and conscious material of everyday life in the 1930's. This included well-known postcards of Stonehenge and Sunday magazine photographs of identical Indian dwellings! Even the Great Sphinx had become an exotic but nonetheless common "household image" from the nineteenth century onward. And the title of the painting can be related to the conscious childhood memory of Coyle's mother reading Longfellow to him at bedtime.[2] Thus the term "visionary," which implies the inexplicable movement of some subconscious or unconscious source, is not applicable to this painting.

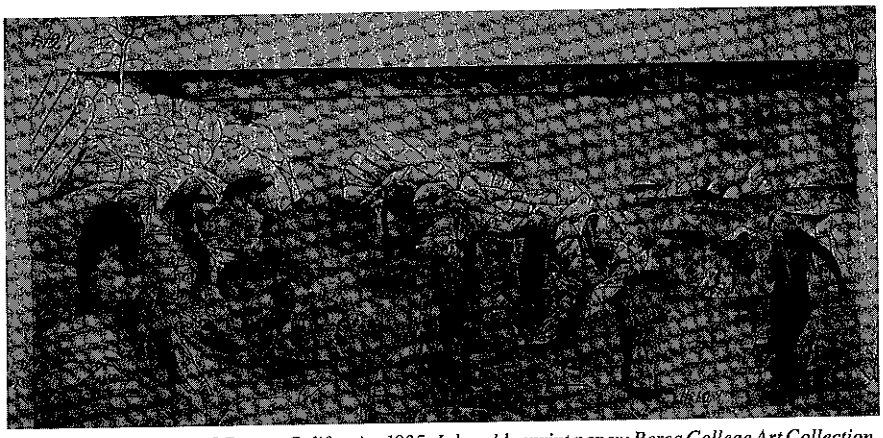
But if C.C. Coyle is not a "visionary" painter, what is he? Indeed, one must be particularly cautious about categorizing Coyle. He had a passing knowledge of fine art, which was based on a book of "100 reproductions" that he had checked out of the San Francisco Public Library, and is known to have exhibited his work in the Golden Gate Exposition of 1940.[3] However, one can hardly view his simplified, symbolic, and grandiose style as characteristic of other fine art of the time. Significantly, Coyle was not *formally* educated in the traditions of fine art and, consequently, did not turn to fine art for the sources of his imagery but instead, as we have seen above, to the imagery of popular culture.

It is equally difficult to label C.C. Coyle as a "Folk" artist with a capital "F." The strictest definition of that well-worn term applies more appropriately to three-dimensional, utilitarian craft-objects which have been passed down through the generations of a particular culture. Needless to say, Coyle's often-bizarre paintings resist this category almost as insistently as they resist the term "primitive" which often suggests African and Oceanic artifacts. Holger Cahill's famous remark echoes over the peculiar landscapes of C.C. Coyle: "The material will define itself if one will allow it to do so."[4] And Roger L. Welsch's insightful distinction "between definition and meaning" reminds us that even if we could agree on terminology we would still be confronted with the problem of understanding works of art that do not, for some reason, conform to preconceived notions and expectations.[5]

For the purposes of discussion, and largely as a result of this process of elimination, I have settled on "naive" as the most useful and accurate term in describing the art of C.C. Coyle. Not only does this term suggest a naive sensibility which "pulls off" the paradox of revealing complex and fundamental truths by simplifying them, but it also relates Coyle to a long line of artists, American and European, whose view of the world has been, essentially, unsophisticated. Thus, the use of this particular term provides us with a viable art-historical context in which to study Coyle.

P.M.

and yet comforting; as something violent and yet, somehow, the fundamental source of all humanity. The Coyle color sense, which was undoubtedly influenced by the harsh and often bizarre color postcards of the 1930's, lifts this scene out of the realm of reality. And the close association that is drawn here between nature, motherhood, and creation adds a characteristic edge of mystery to this otherwise ordinary seascape. Thus, Coyle uses the landscape to enhance the meaning of the work. In Coyle's best work, landscape is rarely an end in itself.



Cartoon for **Peaches and Stone**; *California; 1935; Ink on blueprint paper; Berea College Art Collection.*

Peaches and Stone; *California; 1935 Oil on canvas 5' x 4'; Berea College Art Collection.*

In *Our Phantom Chiefs,* for example, landscape motifs organize and unify the political history of our country. A correct reading of this painting begins with the three Indian chiefs posed majestically on horseback on the highest point in the upper left quadrant of the picture "because the Indians were the rule before the white man came to his country."[10] Letting our eye travel downward to the lower left quadrant of the picture, we find George Washington elevated on a slab of stone and surrounded by "presidents in their military uniforms because their military records was [sic] a stepping stone that lead [sic] them to the presidency." Also in the foreground we find Abraham Lincoln, who was greatly admired by Coyle, clasping the hand of General U.S. Grant. The oblique log in the left foreground seems to frame this corner of American history inhabited by the two most idolized presidents, Washington and Lincoln, and point the way to more modern times, past a threesome in which John Adams chats amicably with Woodrow Wilson and Howard Taft.

The circle of presidents surrounding Thomas Jefferson dominates the right foreground of the painting which recedes back into space and develops into a serpentine path. Standing on the path, waving their hats, we meet Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hoover, and Coolidge. The white, horse-drawn carriage is George Washington's and is echoed, in form and color, by the Capitol Building which seems to rise on the horizon like a morning sun.

Thus, while the placement of the figures and groups of figures in this painting is not strictly chronological, the general movement from the upper left quadrant, downward across the foreground, and then back up along the path *does* develop a relationship between the landscape and an historically accurate

record of the sequence of the 31 American presidents portrayed here. The hills, roads, and ravines that Coyle has created in this picture serve to lead our eye along a fluid line of vision that integrates the numerous elements of the painting. Nature is not painted here for its own sake, but as a means of unifying the specific theme of American presidents and the underlying theme of patriotism which is so brilliantly transferred from Washington's white head, to his white carriage and, finally, to the white dome of the Capitol. Indeed, it is the merging of formal and thematic elements within such a carefully constructed landscape that elevates this picture to what the artist considered to be "my greatest piece of work."

The idea of progress and time seems to permeate almost all of C.C. Coyle's significant work. Perhaps this is because of Coyle's state of mind during his decade of artistic activity. His diary includes several pages of transcribed poetry, including Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," as well as long commentaries on the meaning of life and death. Also, as we shall see, it was his mother's death which seemed to precipitate much of his artistic activity. In short, Coyle was often preoccupied with the passage of time and felt increasingly confronted with his own mortality during his years as an active artist. Thus, in a sense, it is not surprising to find this theme recurring again and again in his work.

In addition to this personal inclination we must recognize the importance of progress as an idea, particularly, in America in the 1930's. The notion that all things and all people are working together toward a better day is, in fact, rooted in Western philosophy. It was taken up later by the Christians and came to be expressed as the spiritual belief that God's good shepherd, Jesus Christ, was leading his flock to truth and goodness. We see the idea of progress reinforced by the vast changes that took place during the Industrial Revolution and, later, by Darwin's theory of evolution. In 1933 the Chicago World's Fair called itself "A Century of Progress" and took a long look back on the myriad changes that had occurred in the previous one hundred years.

It was in 1933 that C.C. Coyle completed *And Departing Leave Behind Us Footprints on the Sands of Time* which also took a long look back at some of the most remarkable technological accomplishments of mankind. *Our Phantom Chiefs* too, as we have seen, is far more than a documentary picture. The upward sweep of the pictorial elements of the painting implies the progress of our nation which is embodied in this parade of presidents.

In *Blazing the Trail* Coyle sets out "to show the advancement of civilization from the dark ages until now" by focusing on scientific progress.[11] There are six allegorical figures in the picture, the most important of which is the woman standing on top of the world holding a torch "which gives light to reason as we advance onward through darkness yet unexplored." A small girl in the picture is "sweeping away many

Our Phantom Chiefs; *California; 1931; Oil on canvas; 8'3" x 6'1", Berea College Art Collection.*

Blazing the Trail; *California; 1934; Oil on canvas; 4'8" x 7'1"; Berea College Art Collection.*

of the old foggy idea [sic] that cursed the people for thousands of years" which are represented by bats, horseshoes, and other symbols of witchcraft and superstition. A man and a woman holding the earth represent science that prevents us from rolling backward. Another woman with a telescope, the key symbol of scientific knowledge in the painting, symbolizes young eyes that see far into the future while an old scientist records what these young eyes see. This picture is typical of Coyle in that it takes a cosmic view of the universe and attempts to present that cosmic view within a highly structured symbolic language. It addresses the theme of progress and time more directly and systematically, but no less enthusiastically, than many of the artist's works.

Perhaps C.C. Coyle's most memorable paintings fall under the category of the idealization of women. As with the worship of nature, the idea of sacred motherhood blossomed in nineteenth century America and grew into a tangled briar of religious beliefs, moral attitudes, and social customs that came to define a woman's ultimate purpose as a devoted life of self-sacrifice to home and family.

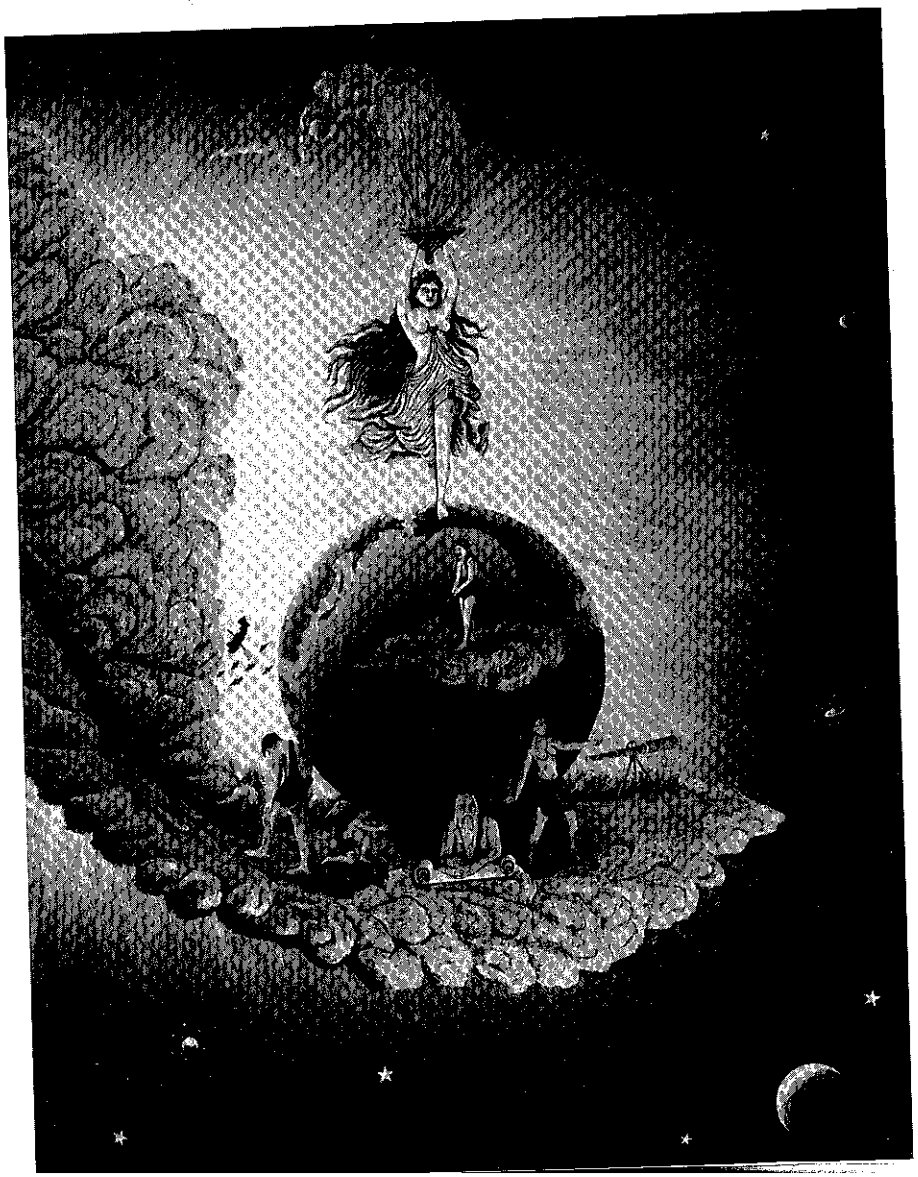
Coyle was profoundly influenced by this "cult of domesticity" in both his personal and artistic life. Indeed, the one event that we can clearly identify as pivotal in the life of C.C. Coyle is his mother's death in August of 1929. Not only did he begin his diary as a result of this profound loss, but it was then that he began to paint in earnest as well.

Until now, the importance of Mary E. Coyle, and especially of her death, to the artistic life of Carlos Cortez Coyle has not been fully recognized. Although, in his initial article on Coyle, William Mootz identified "a Victorian idealization of womanhood [and] a complete devotion to the institution of motherhood" as major themes, he did not elaborate on Coyle's intense preoccupation with his own mother, particularly after her death.

For example, Coyle's diary includes a large, studio photograph of his mother directly opposite a similar photographic portrait of himself. Preceding these pages are two large pages filled to the rim with verses and inspired thoughts recorded faithfully on every Mother's Day from 1931 to 1936. For example, on May 10, 1931 he wrote a short, memorial essay about his mother that included the following passage:

> "Mother mine: if you could just take me in your arms once more, just like you did of old, press a kiss upon my head, where the curls have long been gone, and rock me to sleep, Mother, rock me to sleep, for I am so tired and alone since you went to rest."[12]

Elsewhere in the diary we find the long romantic poem, mentioned earlier, which was written by Coyle in 1936 in remembrance of his mother. It is significant in the understanding of his art to note that Coyle associates his mother's presence, in this poem, with the beauty and wonder of nature:

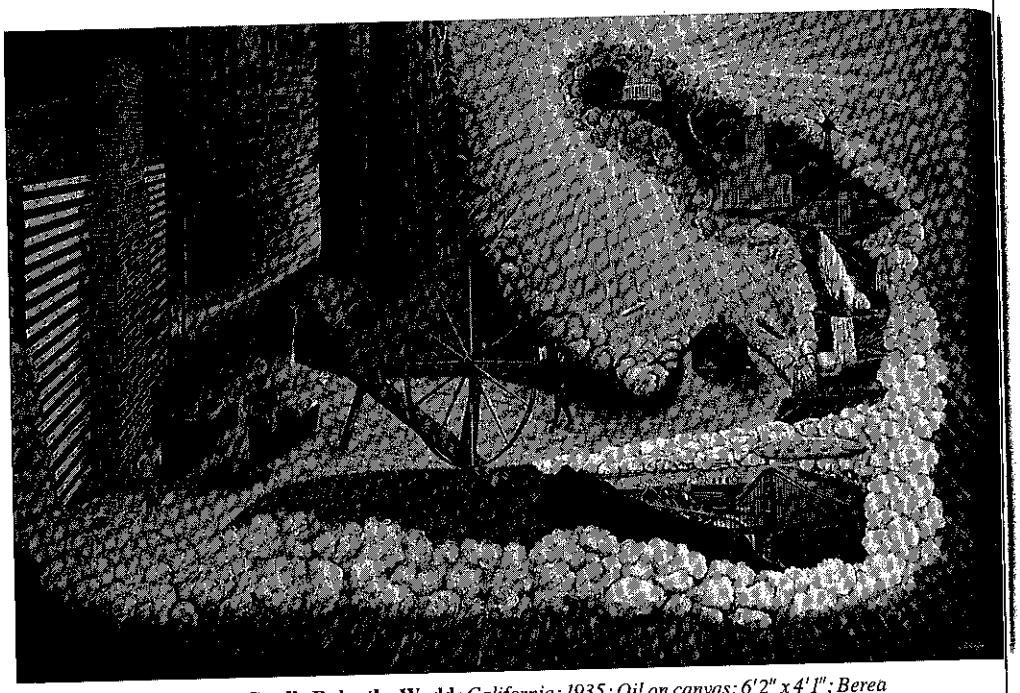


"We gathered flowers as we strolled along,
Through the meadows and fields of soft green sod;
Our clothes became yellow with golden dust,
From the pollen of the golden rod."[13]

In short, C.C. Coyle's attachment to his mother, at least after her death, amounted to nothing less than a fixation and in many ways this intense and unresolved emotional relationship energized his painting and often exerted a direct influence on his subject matter.

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle Rules the World is, for example, a partially autobiographical painting that includes a domestic vignette of a mother surrounded by her young children set in a typical eastern Kentucky landscape of pine forest and log cabin. The nineteenth century poetry that lends itself as a title to the painting is clearly illustrated here in cosmic proportions.[14] The man-made objects and constructions that sweep upward in the painting toward the capitol building in Washington, D.C., recall *Our Phantom Chiefs* and are intended to symbolize progress – another example of that theme – and "the achievements of man with a wealth of talent and training combine [sic]." Nonetheless, the true source of all creation, motivation, and accomplishment in the ostensibly male-dominated world is clearly the mother.

Even the most audacious of these paintings, *The Transformation,* seems to relate to Coyle's attitude toward his mother and, by association, toward women in general. Surprisingly, this painting depicts the extreme opposite of the nurturing, devoted woman that he portrays in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Rules the World.* In *The Transformation,* womanhood is an evil and seductive force that began with Eve. This painting suggests that Coyle, who had married a woman he met at the Berea school, Hattie Mae Bratcher – they had three children – may have suffered from a divorce or other such trauma. It was, unfortunately, almost inevitable that he would suffer so bitterly sooner or later given the idealized and unrealistic notions of womanhood that he expresses elsewhere.



The Hand That Rocks the Cradle Rules the World; *California; 1935; Oil on canvas; 6'2" x 4'1"; Berea College Art Collection.*

In spite of C.C. Coyle's late development, it is clear that he possessed a firm sense of himself as an important artist, at least in his later years. In addition to the paintings and drawings, the Berea College Collection includes a signature panel in Coyle's fluid hand-writing such as one might use at a major one-man exhibition. And, not insignificantly, the gift of Coyle's paintings was followed by the personal diary. This diary is, perhaps, the most important source of information about C.C. Coyle's artistic life. It covers the period of time during which the artist painted most actively (1929-1940) and includes the sketches, poetry, essays, and commentaries that have been referred to above.

The story of how this diary and these remarkable paintings came to be at Berea College is interesting in itself. In November of 1942, the Berea College Art Department received a hand-written letter from C.C. Coyle in which the writer announced that he had just shipped "4 crates of oil paintings as a gift to your gallery."[15] Coyle was 71 years old at the time and suffering from a heart ailment. Because he did not expect to live much longer, his generous gift "to the land of my birth" might be viewed as a final bid for immortality.

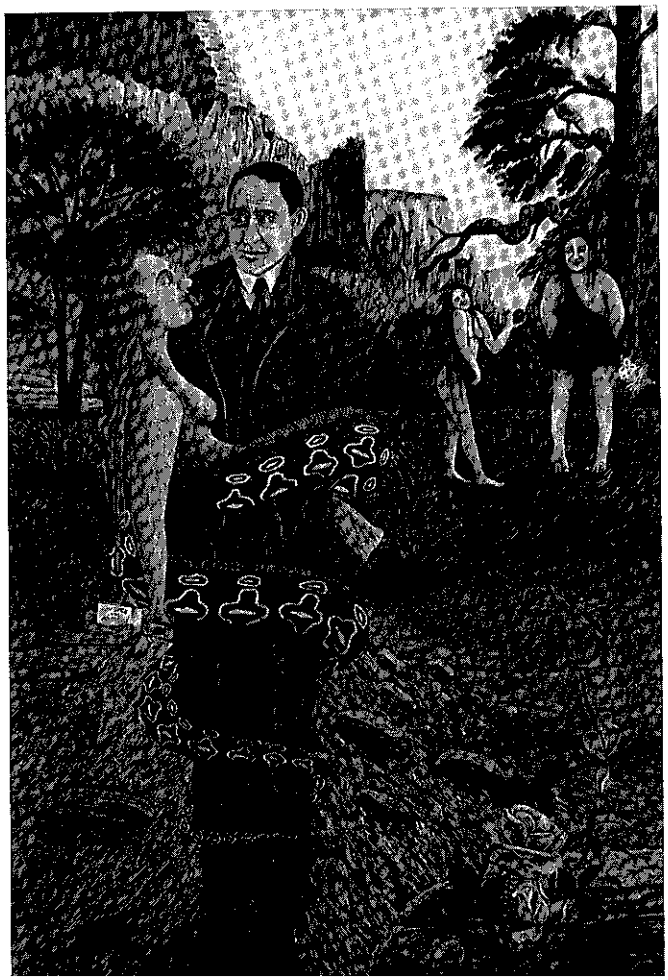
Ironically, Coyle was still alive seventeen-and-a-half years later when, in 1960, Thomas Fern of the Berea College Art Faculty creaked open the four crates of paintings and promptly contacted William Mootz, then Art Editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal.* Mootz's article and two-page color

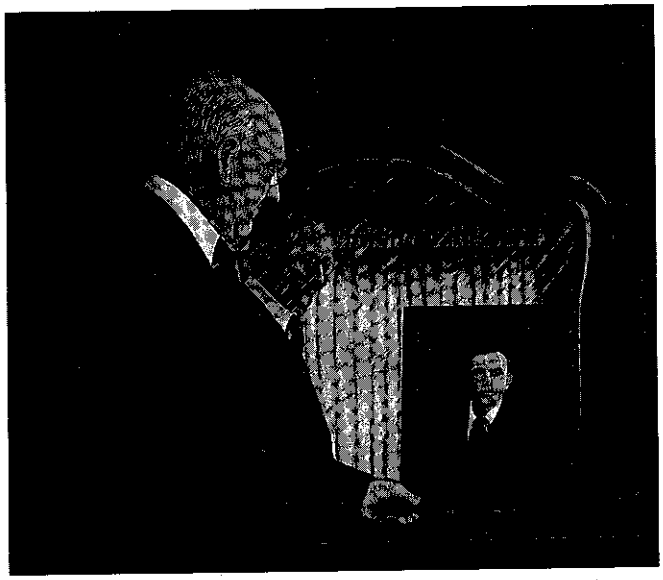
spread in the *Courier-Journal Sunday Magazine* in August of 1961 was the first item of public recognition that Coyle received for his "beloved paintings." The artist died eight months later in Leesburg, Florida at the age of ninety, almost twenty years after writing his poignant letter to Berea College, but satisfied, at last, that his paintings were recognized and valued as art. Through these powerful paintings, C.C. Coyle continues to make his "foot prints on the sands of time," and we, the spectators of his art, are just beginning to understand and appreciate his contribution to American painting.

Patti M. Marxsen lives in Lexington, KY, where she teaches junior high school and writes frequently about art. The Berea College Collection of C.C. Coyle's work was the subject of her M.A. Thesis at the University of Kentucky in 1985. Marxsen is currrently working on a novel.

NOTES

1. Carlos Cortez Coyle, *Diary,* B:20. Unpublished document in the Special Collections Department of the Berea College Library, Berea Collections. (Read forward, Direction A, then turn the book over and begin again in the opposite direction, Direction B.)
2. See Coyle, *Diary,* B:34½ for the poem written by the artist in which this memory is recorded.
3. The paintings that we know Coyle to have exhibited at The Golden Gate Exposition are *Wyoming Round-Up* and *Mark Twain's Cabin.* Neither of these is included here in the discussion of Coyle's most significant work.
4. Holger Cahill, "What is American Folk Art?," *The Magazine Antiques,* May 1950, 356f.
5. Roger L. Welsch, "Beating a Live Horse: Yet Another Note on Definitions and Defining," *Perspectives on American Folk Art,* ed., M.G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, (The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum 1980) 218f.
6. Coyle, *Diary,* A:1.
7. Cat. Joshua C. Taylor, "The Virtue of American Nature," *America as Art,* National Collection of Fine Arts (Washington), 1976, 108f.
8. Coyle, *Diary,* B:34½.
9. Coyle, *Diary,* Entry #128.
10. All quotations in this discussion of *Our Phantom Chiefs* are from Coyle, *Diary,* Entry #100.
11. All quotations in this discussion of *Blazing the Trail* are from Coyle, *Diary,* Entry #114.
12. Coyle, *Diary,* B:34.
13. Coyle, *Diary,* B:34½.
14. "They say that man is mighty,
    He governs land and sea,
    He wields a mighty sceptre
    O'er lesser powers that be;
    But a mightier power and stronger
    Man from his throne has hurled,
    And the hand that rocks the cradle
    Is the hand that rules the world."
    — William Ross Wallace (1819-1881)
15. Coyle's letter is on file in the Berea College Art Department.





Self-Portrait: Age 65 and 22; *California; Oil on canvas; 3' by 3'1"; Berea College Art Collection.*

The Transformation; *California; 1934; Oil on canvas; 3' x 4'6"; Berea College Art Collection.*