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When it debuted at the Armory show in 1945, Philip Guston's *If This Be Not I* was hailed a success by critics and the artist alike. While more recent commentators have presented primarily allegorical readings of the painting, critics of the time praised *If This Be Not I* for the formal strength of the work. The canvas was also seen as a sign of Guston's successful engagement with the European avant-garde and, in particular, with the work of the German painter Max Beckmann. In what follows, *If This Be Not I* will be

examined as it relates to Guston's foremost concern when the painting was created: the construction of space.

Upon the painting's completion, Guston felt that he had finally mastered easel painting.¹ Although he would later produce artworks in concentrated one-to-two hour sessions, in the 1940s Guston was far from prolific. He worked almost an entire year on *If This Be Not I*, at one point making major changes and completely recomposing it.² It was also one of the biggest easel paintings he had attempted to date, measuring 42 ¼ x 55 ¼ inches.³ Once finished, the painting, previously referred to simply as "the large picture," was given a title based on a nursery rhyme.⁴ In the unsettling tale, an old woman questions her own identity after changes are made to her outward appearance by another. The title, like the painting, thus refers to a narrative, albeit one that remains enigmatic and fragmentary.⁵ Most accounts of *If This Be Not I* focus on its mysterious portrayal of nine children at play in an urban landscape. Surrounded by detritus such as a stray light bulb and torn newspapers, the figures wear mystical amulets and playful dress (striped pajama tops, a makeshift crown). For all their depicted movement—arms raised, pulling on a cord, winding a blindfold, or ringing a bell—the children appear frozen in time. The mood of *If This Be Not I* is one of pervasive melancholy, underscored by the haziness of its color and exemplified perhaps in the detail of the dead branches crawling up a central pillar, stifled by the very binding intended to help them grow straight and tall.

¹ Likely based on conversations with the artist, Dore Ashton makes this claim regarding Guston's mastery of the medium in her *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 65.

² See correspondence between Philip Guston and Alan Gruskin, Midtown Galleries Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Reel 5383.

³ Only *Holiday* (1944) was comparable in size, albeit a vertical format.

⁴ "The Old Woman and the Pedlar," in *The Real Mother Goose* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1916).

⁵ See David Anfam, "Telling Tales: Painter Philip Guston's Career Examined," *Artforum* 3, 6 (May 2003): 13.

Shortly after the painting's debut at the Armory show, German-born art historian H. W. Janson, then instructor of art history at Washington University and the head of its art collection, purchased *If This Be Not I* as part of his major campaign for the acquisition of modern art.⁶ In his writings, Janson presented Guston early on as an exception to the throngs of American painters churning out work in self-imposed isolation from European developments.⁷ Because Janson saw Guston as a painter unusually engaged with European art, his work provided a complement to that of other artists Janson added to the collection, such as Max Beckmann; in 1951, Janson argued that Guston's work illustrated Beckmann's legacy in the United States.⁸ In fact, in the late 1930s, Guston had seen an exhibition of Beckmann's paintings at the Buchholz Gallery in New York, and later acknowledged an interest in his work.⁹ Not coincidentally, because of their shared advocates, Beckmann eventually replaced Guston on the faculty of the Washington University School of Fine Arts in 1947. In his typical fashion, Beckmann invented a term for his predecessor, arrogantly calling him a "big Beckmanjaner," the German equivalent of a follower or devotee of Beckmann.¹⁰

Guston, however, was not simply a follower of Beckmann. The most striking affinity between the two men's painting lies not in their well-known recourse to personal symbolic content but in their shared concern with the construction of pictorial space. Both Guston and Beckmann explicitly emphasized an investment in spatial problems in statements about their painting. While hard at work on *If This Be Not I*, Guston claimed that "space with its whole scale of near and far must become as charged with meaning, as inevitable to the composition as a whole as the figures themselves."¹¹ Guston was also struck by Beckmann's paintings of the early 1920s, in which space was, as Guston called it, "compressed" and "loaded."¹² The nine figures in *If This Be Not I* are contained within a space much like a proscenium or, as Janson called it, the "porch of a tumble-down

⁶ H. W. Janson. "Modern Art in the Washington University Collection", (St. Louis: Washington University, 1947): 6, 11. For more on Janson and his role, see Sabine Eckmann, "Exilic Vision: H. W. Janson and the Legacy of Modern Art at Washington University," in *H. W. Janson and the Legacy of Modern Art at Washington University* (New York: Salander O'Reilly Galleries; St. Louis: Washington University Gallery of Art, 2002). The note on page 50 that *If This Be Not I* was purchased in 1946 is erroneous. The receipt of sale is dated October 11 and was paid on November 2, 1945. Midtown Galleries Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Reel 5383.

⁷ See H. W. Janson, "'Martial Memory' by Philip Guston and American Painting Today," *Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis* (December 1942): 34-41.

⁸ H. W. Janson, "Max Beckmann in America," *Magazine of Art* 44 (March 1951): 92.

⁹ Ashton claims Guston saw Beckmann at the Buchholz Gallery in 1938 in *A Critical Study*, 64, 73. Later authors have dated the visit to 1939. See, for example, Robert Storr, *Philip Guston* (New York: Abbeville Press, 196), 14. Curt Valentin, director of Buchholz Gallery, held exhibitions of Beckmann's recent work in both 1938 and 1939, so either date is a possibility.

¹⁰ Cornelia Wieg, *Max Beckmann seiner Liebsten. Ein Doppelportrait* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 107.

¹¹ Guston as cited in Rosamond Frost, "Guston: Meaning out of Monumentality," *Art News* 43 (February 1, 1945): 24.

¹² Ashton, *A Critical Study*, 73. A prime example of such work is Beckmann's *The Dream* (1921), now in the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum. As opposed to the work later that decade, these canvases, while crowded with depicted objects, are more restrained in their brushwork and feel more closely related to Beckmann's graphic work at the time.

house.”¹³ In fact, the structure seems almost like a ship with two large masts, fabric draped from a rope like a sail, and wooden slats of flooring. One critic in early 1945 noted that Guston’s newest interest was the painting of space, “but the hard way, without compositional props or perspectival aids.”¹⁴ The careful placement of large and small objects at various angles in *If This Be Not I*—from an upside down coat rack to a massive door—lend a sense of layered depth. Forms are flatter and less volumetric than in previous paintings by the artist, and their sheer number creates a claustrophobic effect akin to Beckmann’s signature work. Indeed, Guston’s array of imagery functions as much as structural markers as personal allusions.

The spatial complexity of *If This Be Not I* is further heightened by Guston’s attention to texture, or what one reviewer called “richness of surface.”¹⁵ Critics praised Guston as a colorist and for his ability to create contour without sharp-edged lines. “Now, for the first time,” wrote Janson of *If This Be Not I*, “the evocative power of the work springs as much from the richness and depth of its color as from the design.”¹⁶ By restricting his palette to a few colors (primarily grays, blues, whites, and the occasional burnt sienna) and painting wet-on-wet, Guston created tonal modulations and depth.¹⁷ For example, in the far left register of the painting, directly above the head of the reclining boy, is a plane of textured color resembling wood grain. It is painted on top of a grid of lines resembling a grate, which winds up and back into space at an oblique angle. Behind it, an open door creates the only opportunity of escape from the cluttered surroundings. In the painterly quality of this layering, *If This Be Not I* has more in common with Beckmann’s work from the 1930s, the very canvases Guston would have seen at the Buchholz Gallery. In other words, both artists created not just figural but textural depth by painterly means, thereby charging space itself with “meaning.”

If This Be Not I plays a pivotal role in Guston’s development both because he proclaimed himself a master of the medium upon its completion and because this sense of mastery was extremely short-lived. In 1946, Guston expressed public dissatisfaction with the canvas *Sentimental Moment* (1944), which had earned him first prize at Carnegie the year before.¹⁸ Lacking the complexity of *If This Be Not I*, the earlier canvas depicts a single figure against a singular backdrop. With *If This Be Not I*, Guston had internalized the problem of space and began to move in a different direction formally, albeit with strikingly similar subject matter. Janson described Guston’s work after *If This Be Not I*, while still figurative, as nonetheless making “no distinction any more between figures and setting, between the formal and representational aspects of the design.”¹⁹ And, although Janson did not view this move critically, Guston was apparently so dissatisfied

¹³ H. W. Janson, “Philip Guston,” *Magazine of Art* 40 (February 1947): 55. The 1944 *Holiday* also takes a porch as its defining structure, as do the aptly titled *The Porch* (1946–47) and *Porch II* (1947).

¹⁴ Frost, “Guston: Meaning Out of Monumentality,” 24.

¹⁵ Emily Genauer of the *World-Telegram*, as cited in “Our Box Score of the Critics,” *Art News* 43 (February 1, 1945): 28.

¹⁶ Janson, “Philip Guston,” 55.

¹⁷ For more on Guston’s technique, see Storr, *Philip Guston*, 111.

¹⁸ “Philip Guston: Carnegie Winner’s Art Is Abstract and Symbolic,” *Life Magazine*, May 27, 1946, 90–92.

¹⁹ Janson, “Philip Guston,” 56. The example Janson refers to is *Night Children* (1947).

with these canvases that he destroyed much of his work from the St. Louis period.²⁰ His forms moved ever closer to the picture surface and, eventually—unlike Beckmann, who remained committed to figuration until his death in 1950—Guston turned to complete abstraction. Today, due to the success of Abstract Expressionism on the American art scene, Guston’s abstract canvases of the 1950s, such as *Fable I* (1956–57) in the collection of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, remain his best-known work.²¹

²⁰ Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston by his Daughter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 37. Details about exactly which works were destroyed are difficult to reconstruct. A photograph featured in *Life Magazine* of Guston in his studio (see footnote 18) with a number of canvases from 1946 hints at the extent of the destruction.

²¹ Guston infamously returned to figuration around 1968 under very different terms.