



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

GEORGE MARINKO (1908–1987)

*Harlequin's Holiday*

Oil on canvas board, 8 x 10 in.

Signed and inscribed (at lower right): MARINKO; (in pencil, on the back): HARLEQUIN'S HOLIDAY

Painted around 1940–42

RECORDED: "Triple Exhibition of Chinese, Russian Painting, Home Front Art Will Open Saturday in Local Museum," *The Abilene Reporter–News*, April 12, 1945, p. 10

EXHIBITED: Abilene Museum of Arts, Texas, April 1945, *Art for the Home Front*

George Marinko was the son of a Waterbury, Connecticut brass worker. (Until after World War II, Waterbury was "The Brass City," the leading American center for the manufacture of all things brass.) From 1925 until 1929, Marinko studied at the Waterbury Art School with Louis York, a faculty member of the Yale School of the Fine Arts. Marinko clearly impressed his teacher. In 1929, money was found to send Marinko to New Haven for further study at Yale. He spent a year there,

studying with York and Eugene Savage before the consequences of the stock market crash forced a return to Waterbury. At home, Marinko made a living as best he could. By the mid-1930s, he arrived at surrealism as his personal style.

The path that led George Marinko from a Roman Catholic first-generation immigrant working-class upbringing to surrealism is not at all clear. It is a curious fact that, in the early 1930s, Connecticut was the primary location for the introduction of this European avant-garde style to the United States. In 1927, Arthur Everett “Chick” Austin, Jr. became director of the revered Hartford institution, the Wadsworth Atheneum. In his eighteen years as director (he served until 1946), Austin undertook as his mission the introduction of avant-garde, modernist styles in fine art, music, drama, and dance to the United States. To that end, in 1931, the Wadsworth Atheneum presented the first show of Surrealism in America, *Newer Super-Realism*, featuring the work of Salvadore Dali, Giorgio De Chirico, and Joan Miró, among others. Austin also encouraged the turn toward Surrealism by the Hartford artist James Guy (1910–1983) and his friend and fellow artist, Walter Quirt (1902–1968). By 1932, Guy had left Hartford for New York where he and Quirt produced surrealist art suffused with the ideals of the political left. There is no direct link between Marinko and Guy, nor any obvious political agenda for Marinko’s work. Waterbury is about twenty-five miles west of Hartford. The Wadsworth Atheneum show was widely reviewed, and Austin’s support of avant-garde cultural forms was continual and unwavering. While no evidence links George Marinko with Austin or Guy, it is impossible to believe that the Waterbury artist was not impacted by the events in Hartford.

From 1935 to 1942, Marinko produced works that mark him as a pioneer of American Surrealism. In 1946, in response to a query from the Wadsworth Atheneum as to the meaning of his surrealist art, Marinko wrote to the new Director, Charles Cunningham: “If I am described by my own efforts, the symbolism is subconscious, determined by incongruities. The meaning is left to the observer and is determined by their own experience and perceptibility” (as quoted in Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, *American Paintings Before 1945 in the Wadsworth Atheneum*, vol. 2 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996], pp. 547–48). In 1987, shining a further light on his method with regard to the Wadsworth Atheneum’s 1937 painting, *Of Sentimental Aspects of Misfortune*, Marinko wrote:

My intent was to be as original as possible, and to avoid being influenced by others.... The concept is subconsciously erotic, romantic, perhaps Freudian within the realm of the Golden Mean. There was no conscious attempt to symbolize.... Design was my primary concern with stress on the S-curve.... The title was derived as an after-thought after reading and analyzing the contents (p. 548).

Through the 1930s, Marinko worked to establish his professional career. In 1934, supported by the Connecticut Civil Works Administration, he joined with artist Francis Jamanie to paint a mural for the aldermanic chambers in Waterbury City Hall, which remains in place today. In 1934–35, he made a trip to Europe, traveling on a merchant ship. In 1937, he went to Mexico, and in 1938, back to Europe. In 1936, Marinko received important recognition of his surrealist bona fides when Alfred Barr include a small (8 3/4 x 11 3/4 in.) oil painting on panel, *Inevitable Recollection*, in his historic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*. At the end of the decade, Marinko married a fellow painter, Elizabeth Roberts. In 1938, he was represented at the Whitney Museum of American Art’s “Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Painting,” with *Christmas Night*. In 1939, his *Orpheus and Agony* was exhibited at the World’s Fair held in Flushing Meadow, New York. The early 1940s saw a flurry of activity. Marinko sent paintings with

titles that suggest surrealist imagery to the annuals at the Whitney Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago in 1941 and 1942; to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1941; and to The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, in 1941 and 1944. Tellingly, the 1941 contribution had a title suggesting the regionalist landscape style that would ultimately become Marinko's bread and butter: *New England Winter*. By 1944, Marinko was listing his address as the Grand Central Galleries, New York. He was, in fact, no longer in Connecticut. Marinko enlisted to serve in World War II and spent the years from October 1942 through October 1945 in the United States Army, posted to the Pacific.

George Marinko did not return to surrealism after the War. In 1946, his son was born. From 1945 until 1947, Marinko taught at the Waterbury Art School. He also worked as a director at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, in the early 1950s. In the postwar period he produced a series of wood sculptures and a varied oeuvre of paintings including regionalist landscapes and works in styles that can be generally described as precisionist and cubist, as well as abstract. He painted still lifes in a mainstream modernist style. Marinko was particularly fond of clowns as a subject. In addition to his wood sculptures, he executed a series of masks in mixed media. Marinko returned to Connecticut and remained there, where his work, though appreciated by local collectors and museums, did not attract a wider audience. He continued to paint until he died in New Haven in 1989.

*Harlequin's Holiday* unites a trio of Marinko's favorite preoccupations: landscape, clown imagery, and surrealist elements. The painting shares a palette and a similar landscape with *Reconstruction*, an oil work that Marinko exhibited at the Whitney Museum in 1940 and again at the Pennsylvania

Academy of the Fine Arts in 1944, while he was still in the Army. That suggests a date for *Harlequin's Holiday* of about 1940–42, just before the artist entered military service. After the war, Marinko made a specialty of landscape paintings in a realist style without the notable surrealism of his 1930s work. In *Harlequin's Holiday* the surrealist elements are present but incorporated into a realist landscape. Thus, they are not as immediately apparent as in some of Marinko's earlier work, for example, *Sentimental Aspects of Misfortune* (Wadsworth Atheneum). Still, a closer look reveals a number of the kind of "incongruities" that mark Marinko's work. The left foreground tree hovers in the air, its lower trunk cut in two places with steam coming out of a knothole above. Steam also escapes from two pipes that border the right side of the harlequin's path as well as from a tree in the near distance. The path itself is fractured and cracked, as if subjected to a small earthquake. The landscape composition contains a series of small dissonances that combine with other details to create a mood of foreboding. A black bird, perhaps a raven or a crow, sits on a signpost in the left foreground. Further along the path, on the left side on a small rise is what appears to be a collection of randomly placed tombstones. The largest of these has a shape that echoes the shape of the harlequin's hat. The Harlequin himself, outlined in a white fuzzy aura, seems apprehensive as he sets out on his journey. He looks behind as if to assess who or what might be following him.

George Marinko found an enduring fascination in clowns. Sometimes he rendered them realistically; sometimes he explored the angular geometries of stylized masks and pointed hats. The Harlequin is a folk character with obscure origins in the Middle Ages. It took modern form in sixteenth-century Italian *commedia dell'arte*, was adapted by Moliere in France, and became a staple of Victorian nineteenth-century popular English theater as pantomime and then Christmas pageantry. The character of Harlequin is traditionally a sly, nimble-footed trickster, sometimes the servant of a

gentleman. He is customarily dressed in a colorful diamond-checkered outfit wearing a black mask. Harlequin was sometimes paired with Clown, the two of them competing for the same romantic partner. In addition to serving as a staple of the English theater, the character of Harlequin also attracted painters. Depictions of Harlequin or Harlequin with Clown were painted by Cézanne, Matisse, Renoir, and Picasso. A curiosity of Marinko's harlequin is that he is dressed not as a harlequin, but as a clown. For his "holiday," he does not wear his distinctive harlequin stage clothes. Instead he wears a white tunic and loose white pants—in short, a clown costume, complete with a tall cylindrical brimless "clown" hat. Is this because he is on "holiday" and not wearing his identifiable work clothes? Or perhaps he is Harlequin as trickster.

Harlequin's face is a mask. And all the theatrical and fine arts history notwithstanding, it is highly likely that it was the idea of concealment, of wearing a mask that spoke to George Marinko as he depicted his series of clowns and harlequins. As Marinko took pains to explain, the meaning of his art is located in the intersection of his own subconscious and the perception of the viewer.

From 1959 until his death, George Marinko lived in New Haven where he ran a small framing business, framing his own pictures, and living in a cramped studio above the shop. Though during his lifetime, Marinko's reputation rarely extended beyond his home state, more recently, the pioneering spirit and high quality of his surrealist work has begun to attract a serious reconsideration of his early achievements.