

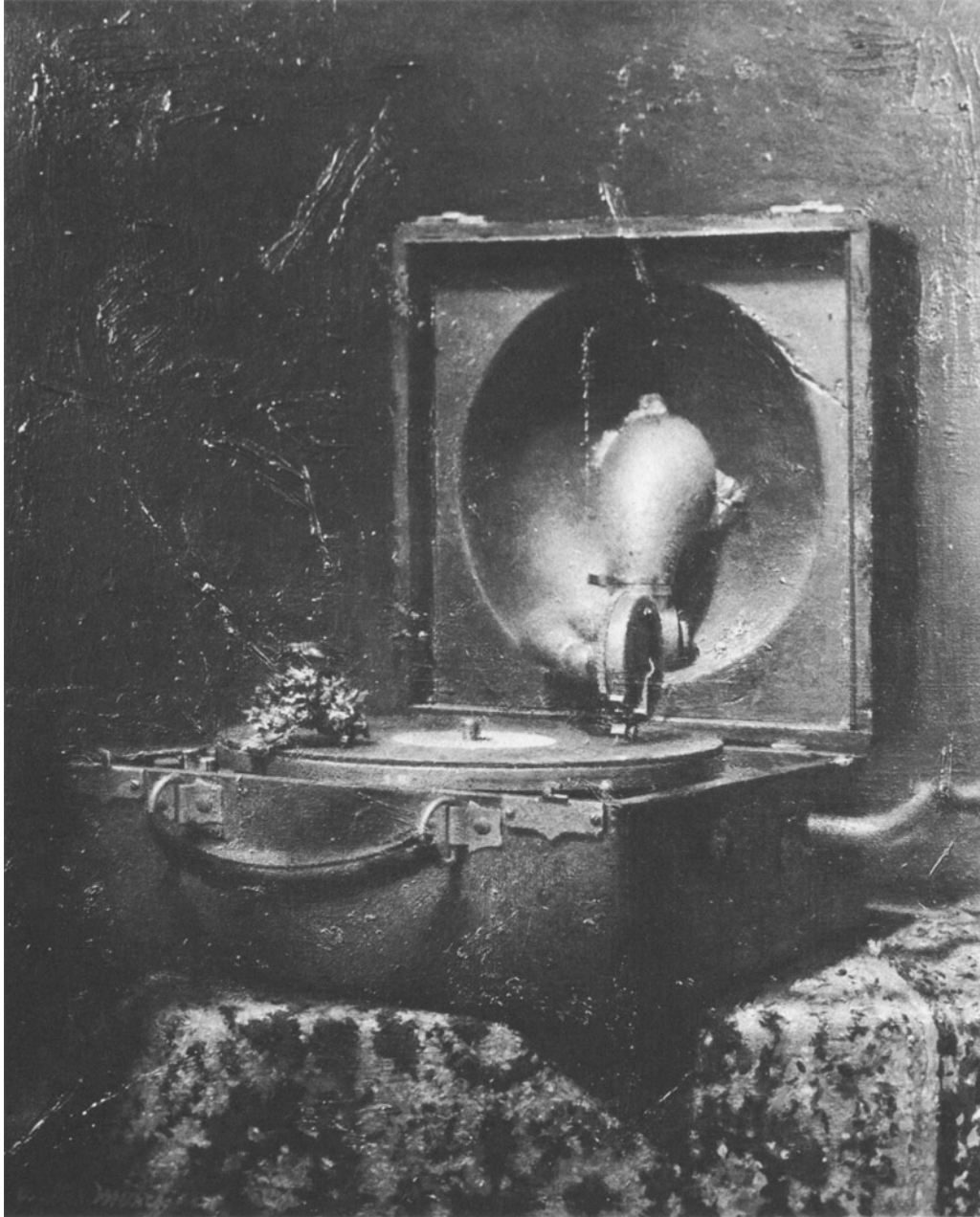
Walter Murch

Essay by [Daniel Robbins](#) (1932-1995)

(scanned copy of the 1966 catalog for Walter Murch A Retrospective Exhibition by the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design) Some of the other exhibition sites for this show included: Boston University, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum

Please note: This catalog is long out of print and most likely impossible for most people to obtain. This scanned pdf has no formal permission or copyright to any of the images or text and is being made available to the public as fair-use for educational purposes, free to any painter and art lover who wishes to find out more about this important American artist, that sadly, very little attention has been given and limited information has been made readily available over the years.

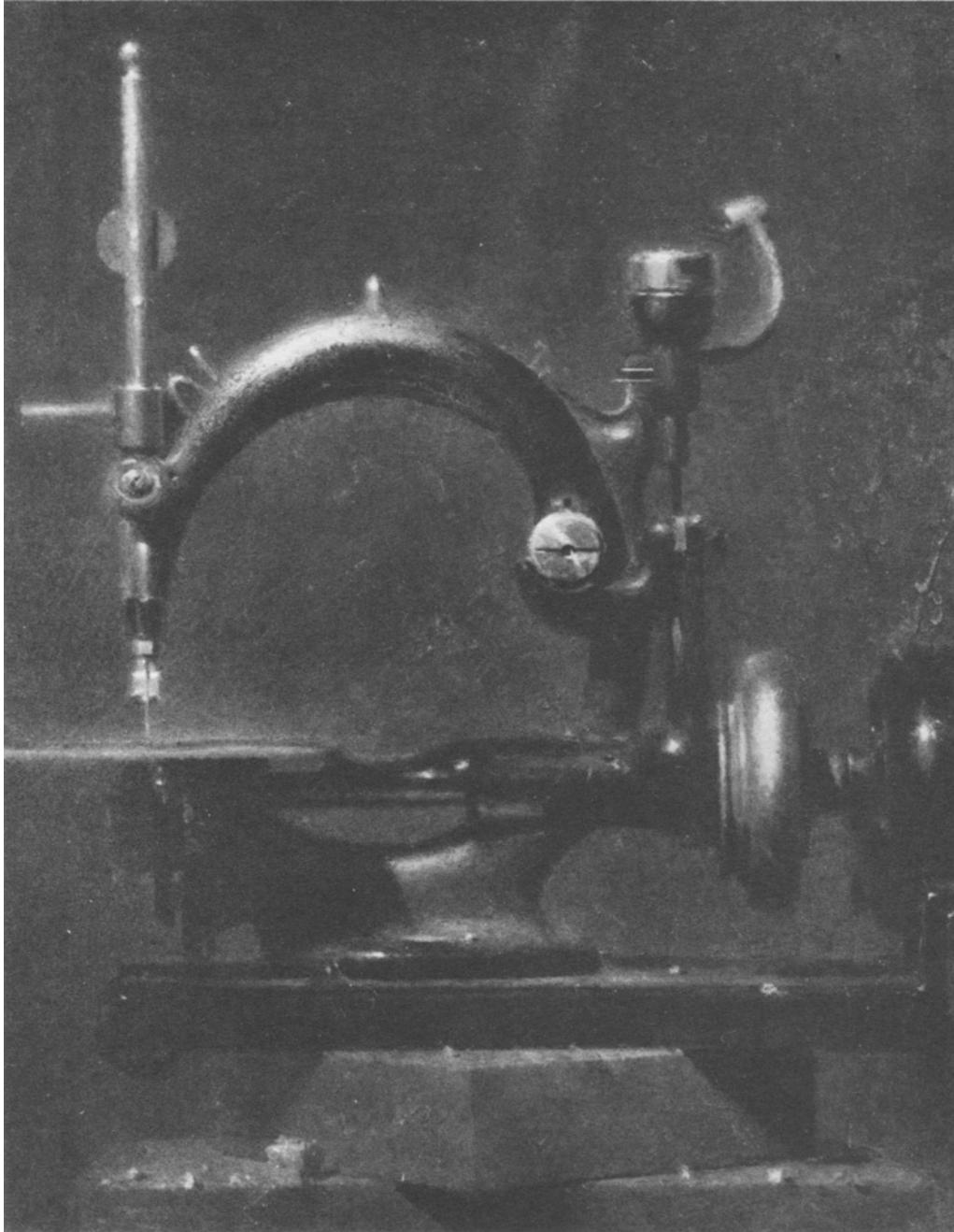
Also the original catalog had no images along with the essay, they are shown separately. Included a few other paintings and photos that were not in the original catalog in the hopes they would be of interest.



The Circle ca. 1948 Oil on canvas 26 x 21 1/2 inches (cover image of the Catalog)

For twenty-five years the paintings and drawings of Walter Murch have been part of American art. They have been classified as Surrealist, Magic Realist, Romantic Realist, or plain Realist. Their fastidious technique has been admired, even while some of the pictures have been dismissed as illustrations. Walter Murch has been compared by both admirers and detractors to Andrew Wyeth, yet he has also been compared to Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, and Jim Dine. Certainly this is a very curious state of affairs. Murch's art does have something in common with photographic realism, yet it also relates to Abstract Expressionism; and finally, with extraordinary consistency, his work parallels, indeed anticipates, some recent object painting.

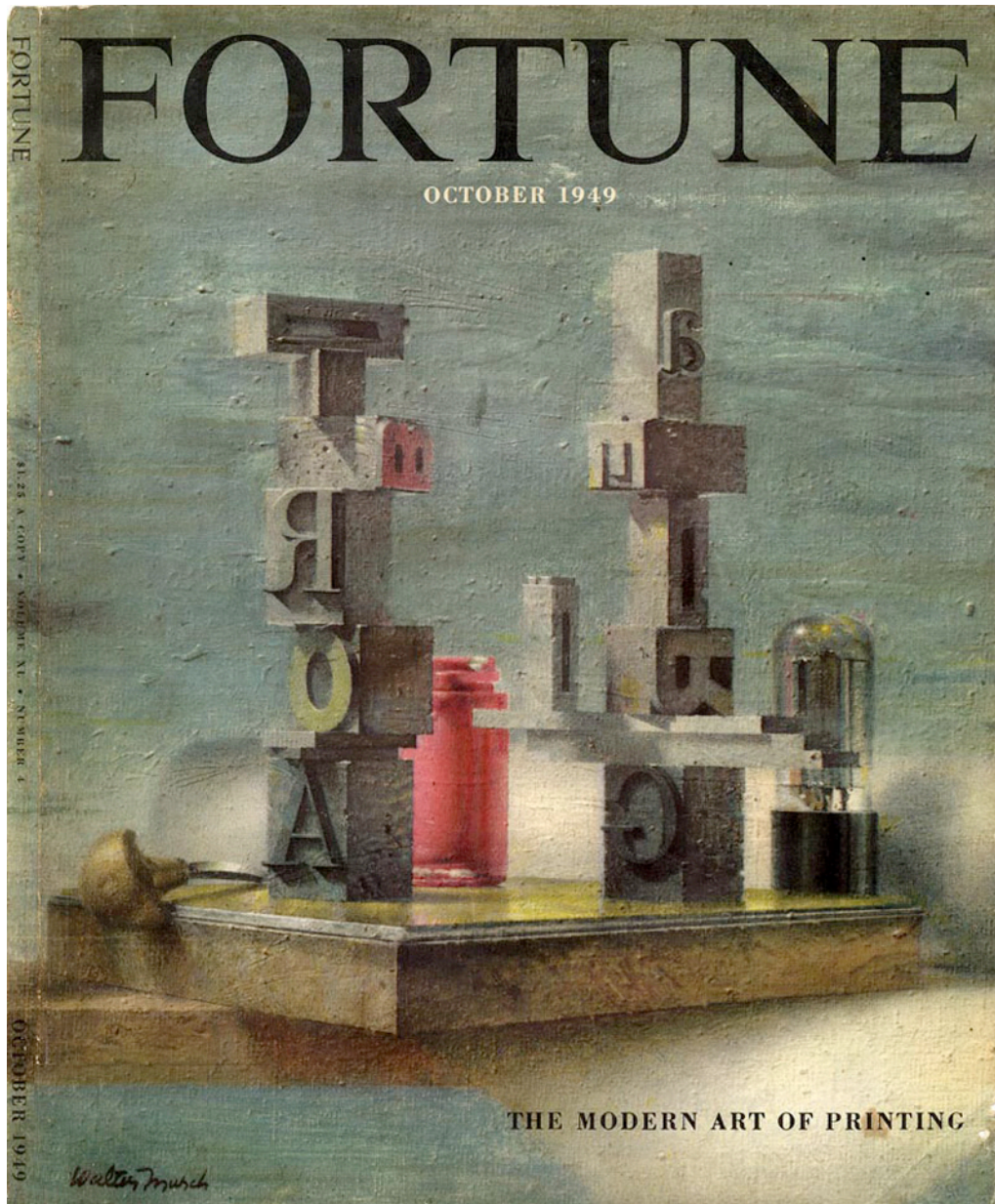
Murch's choice of subjects has scarcely changed during all this time, and although his manner of painting has developed, has improved, has become mellow and richer, he is still fundamentally the same artist he was when Betty Parsons gave him his first one-man show in 1941. For this day and age that is almost a record! Contemporary art measures out crises after crises in style changes, and revolutionary new ways of seeing supported by dialectic systems of theory grow and flourish so that the least deflection can mark a heresy or start a sect. During all these crises—virtually unclassified and unattached, because he has been classified so many ways—Walter Murch has painted his solitary way, quite detached, though by no means remote, from the turbulent mainstream that contained most of his contemporaries. Could such painting have occurred in America mainly during the post World War II period and bear any valid relationship to life, when all the rest of art, which has been so amply discussed and heatedly argued, so often demonstrated as relevant, when all the other art, from Jackson Pollock to Frank Stella, is so patently different from Walter Murch's art?



Sewing Machine, 1953 Oil on canvas, 25 ½ x 19 ½ inches

The question of Murch's solitude is not pertinent only to its relationship—or lack of relationship—to the development of postwar American painting. Critics and historians customarily attempt to situate a style in relation to what is happening generally in art and what preceded the present. The significant movements in American painting all have antecedents in European and American history; Cubism, Abstraction, and Surrealism have provided the background for today's dominant styles, while social realism—and even regionalism—has been a steady undercurrent, sometimes feeding even abstract painting with overtly poignant elements. Every important painter appears to emerge from the accomplishments of older artists in respect to a number of crucial

elements in his style, as Gorky learned from Picasso, as Rauschenberg learned from De Kooning, as Pollock absorbed elements from Benton and fused them with a Surrealist theory and technique exemplified by Masson and Ernst. The relationships are never simple because they are total, instinctive as well as intellectual. It is not very often that a contemporary painter finds his principal stimulus and education to art—which is necessarily his conditioned experience of contemporary life—in a painter who lived several hundred years earlier. Today someone who was to draw his whole visual experience from Raphael or Rembrandt would be not merely anachronistic but bad. An artist like Francis Bacon, who overtly makes use of Velazquez themes, uses the more remote past the way Picasso used Delacroix or Brahms used Haydn as a springboard for a style and content inextricably woven to the more recent past; in Bacon's case the recent vision stems from Surrealism, especially Matta. Across all of history, the painter's vision and feeling can link with a past visual experience and momentarily tie it to the present. The determining factor, however, must be the present, otherwise the work rings hollow and is irrelevant. Murch's painting has an undeniable visual connection to Chardin's, and this link has become clearer as Murch has developed. Is this an anachronism that can be tolerated? The late Giorgio Morandi also recalled Chardin, but at the same time, his art grew out of Cezanne and Cubism, and the closer connections dominated, or at least adjusted, his affinity for the 18th-century master. Thus, when one says that Morandi recalls Chardin, one does not mean that Morandi looks like Chardin. There are factors in Murch's painting that are immediate, only they are not so recognizable as in Morandi's case because the recent past of American painting is less understood—less visible than the European tradition built upon by Morandi.

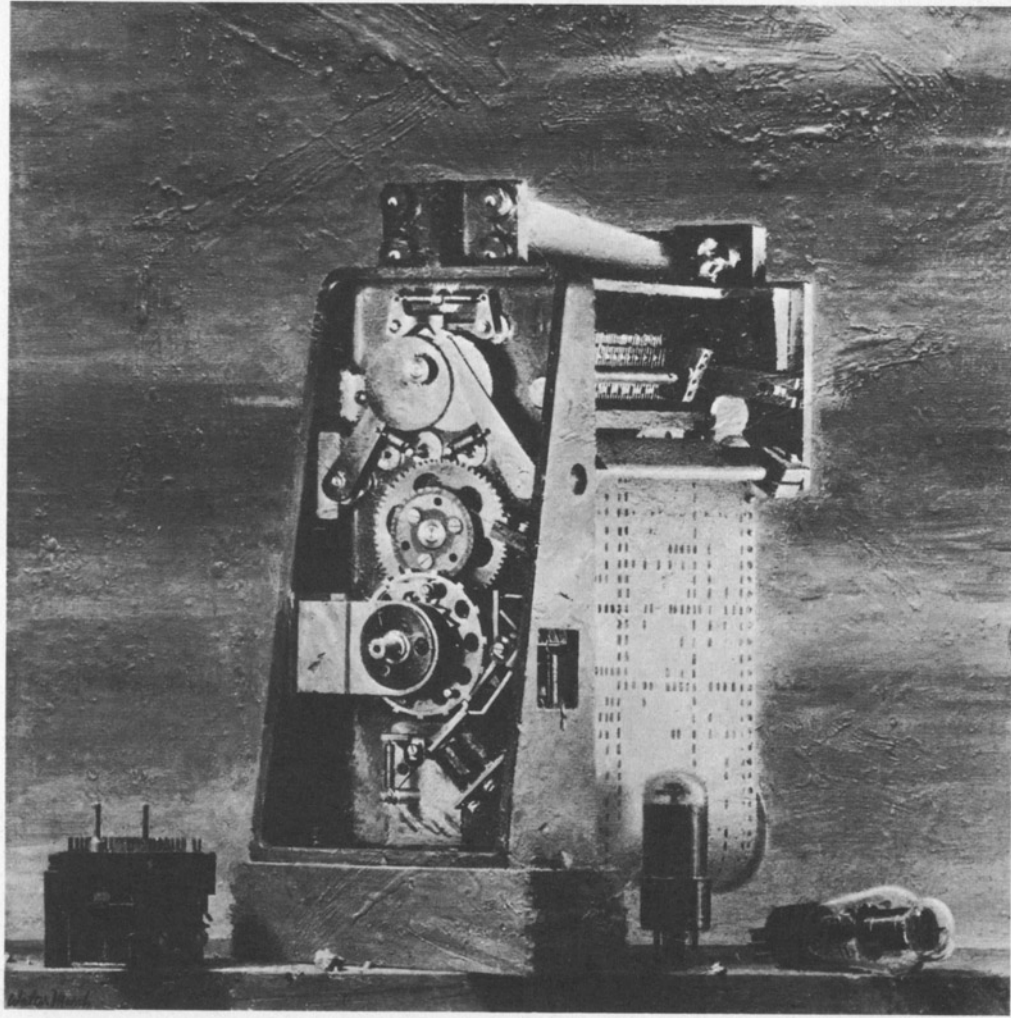


What small, select reputation Murch enjoys among the popular element in today's art world comes from his pictures of machines and objects, collected to a great extent by a new sort of patron, the American corporation. Paintings by Murch are owned and indeed jealously guarded, by banks, chemical companies, business machine manufacturers, pharmaceutical houses, publishing firms, steel manufacturers, and makers of household wares. There are almost as many Murch paintings held by U. S. industry as are collected by museums, and the great companies awoke to Murch's qualities—if indeed that is what they awoke to—before the museums. Murch's work appeared on the cover of Fortune magazine eighteen years before it appeared on the cover of Art in America! But the reasons for this journalistic scoop are complex; the art world may indeed not have thought Walter Murch central to the activity of American painting, but it is not likely that the business world thought so either. They may have thought his work was agreeable, manageable, understandable illustration above all,

suitable—and some may have hung it in high executive offices as an integral, possibly untroubling, element in the decorative scheme, chosen very much like a particular chair or a desk, an indispensable fixture. These "corporation" pictures are all of machines or of machine-like things. Inland Steel treasures a painting called Time Clock 1954-55 (not in the exhibition), although it is not a working time clock of the sort that office or factory workers have, or had, to punch. (It looks more like Verne Blossom's Parking Meter 1964 [Museum of Modern Art] only less descriptive.) It is not a machine that works or performs a function. In fact, it is really recognizable as a machine only in the most general sense. This kind of subject matter and its totally non-specific quality is the salient contemporary quality in Murch's work, the element that irrevocably stamps him as a man who lives now and whose vision is attuned to his environment.



Calculator, ca. 1945 / unidentified photographer. Walter Tandy Murch papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



The Calculator ca. 1949 Oil on board 20 x 20"

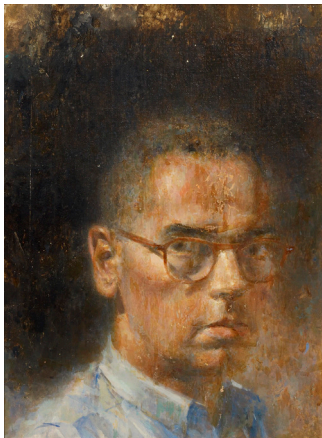
There is a well-developed tradition in 20th-century painting of the machine style. In fact, there are many machine styles and it is important to see how Murch's work fails to fit into any of them. There is first of all the machine invented by Duchamp, a sardonic, witty, rather bitter symbolic reduction of human values, especially human love, to mere mechanical functions. Picabia's machine drawings are similar to the Duchamp type; so also—with less malice—were Morton Schamberg's. In the work of pioneering modernists there was a second, equally important and more exclusively artistic, credo involved in the engagement of the machine. This resulted from the acknowledged appreciation and delight in form as form, the result of an anticipated realization of one of the major aesthetic tenets of abstract art: that form alone carries meaning, that in the context of art, even the functioning machine might be appreciated aesthetically for its visual properties as form apart from function. This attitude arose from a sense of historical position. A second and related aesthetic of the machine, much more popular, less sophisticated and restricted, and indeed Utopian or at least optimistic, was the movement in which Leger, and Ozenfant and Le Corbusier's Purism attempted to equate machine perfection with art. In this vein much painting of the twenties attempted

to reduce ordinary phenomena to the standardized (hence generalized) perfection of machine design. Yet, another still more influential machine aesthetic even more naive, was the aesthetic of form and function, the second dictating the first, and leveling of all art activity to an equation with good and rational design. Machines and packages, cities and houses, all man-made effects were believed subject to the laws of good design; machines were displayable not as titanic symbols of might, the power to control nature, but as beautiful examples of rational, workable control. This super arts and crafts modernism reached its apogee between the wars, but the attitudes it generated are still strongly felt in design schools.

Walter Murch's machines have very little to do with any of these earlier engagements of the machine aesthetic. His machines are neither new nor old, nor more properly, does it matter if they are. He will paint an electron microscope or a teakettle, a C-clamp or a metronome, something elegantly designed by machine aesthetic standards, or something that has totally escaped design reform—all in the same way. He will even paint stones, bricks, fruit or bread in a style indistinguishable from his "machine style." He is now quite familiar with the attitudes that were once prevalent in advanced intellectual and artistic circles with regard to machines, but this was not a part of his growing up as a painter.*

(* A few years after he came to New York he got a job illustrating Stuart Chase's *Men and Machines* (1930) and although the drawings he made were black-and-whites more reminiscent of Rockwell Kent than Moholy-Nagy, presumably he read the book and started to learn what the issues were. They do not seem to have interested him very much.)

The way Murch grew up and became a painter is important, for it is a career pattern probably unlike that of any other artist deserving attention, and it explains to a large extent why he is so different. The way he lives and works now is perhaps explainable only in the context of his biography, and even his rather retarded and queer relationships to mainstream movements can be understood only on the basis of his personal history.

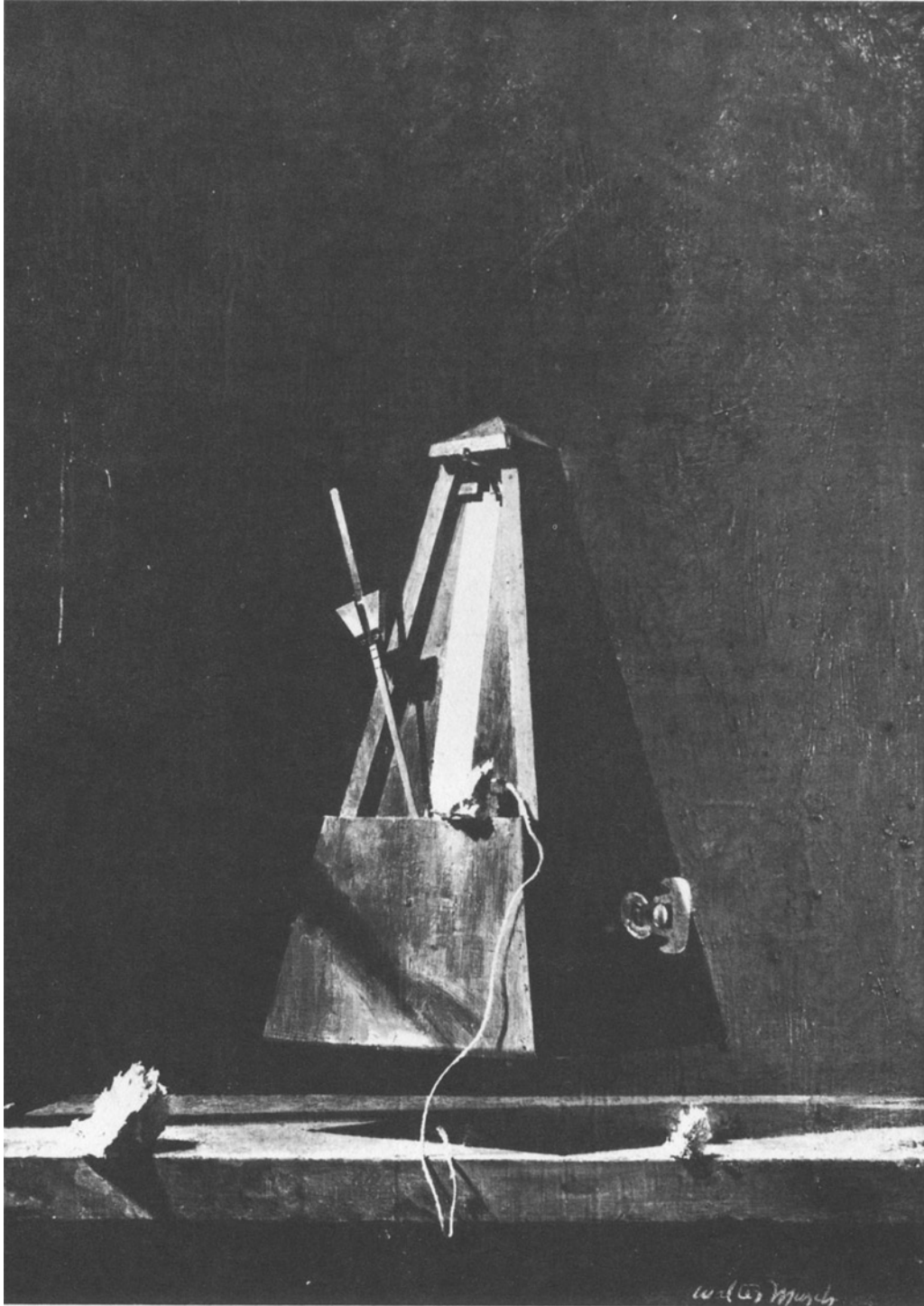


Self-Portrait

Walter Murch was born and reared in Canada, entering life on August 17, 1907, the first child of Walter Murch and Clara Louise Tandy. Both parents had also been born in Canada, which is a very different country from the United States today. Sixty years ago,

however, these differences were even more pronounced. The vast undeveloped province of Ontario with only the southern rim tilled into rich and self-sufficient farming communities bred a life so sheltered, so tranquil, and so straight-laced that the people who lived there had little desire for change; they were suspicious of the city, resenting its noise, distrusting its crowds and unexcited by the work offered in its factories or offices. They were genuinely content with the unruffled and reasonably prosperous rural life. Laid out in perfect right angles, the farmland boundaries had been drawn over hills and across ponds, cutting the land into large and absolutely regular tracts. Each house built of smooth hardbaked red brick was as self-sufficient as possible, and even a tiny town like Walter Murch, Sr.'s home, Bolton, which existed to service local farms, was tolerated only from necessity. If any cultural values were cultivated in rural and strongly Protestant Ontario around 1900, they were directed towards the printed word, not the visual arts.

The Murch family lived in the town, not on a farm, and at the age of 17, Walter, Sr., the youngest son of his family, was sent to Toronto to train as an apprentice in the jewelry and watchmaking business. After a few years of late 19th-century hard work and application, he established his own shop in Toronto, called, quaintly, "The Two Little Jewelers." It still exists. But first it thrived and Walter Murch, Sr., soon opened a second and then a third store. He was a bachelor, he was prosperous, he had a horse and carriage, and even a launch that could accommodate twenty people. But in Toronto, to find as many as twenty pleasure seekers who might cruise on a Sunday was a difficult proposition. Everyone was in church. Successful in business and not finding it as absorbing as it had perhaps at first promised, Walter Murch, Sr., indulged in a hobby. He went to the Toronto Conservatory of Music to study singing. The head of the voice department was Rechab Tandy, a man of the world manqué, whose abilities and instincts pulled him one way, but whose tradition and locale held him firmly in place. Characteristically English-Canadian, this talented man, who had worked in Kingston as a stone carver in order to help launch his singing career in New York, who became worldly enough to join the Church of England (despite his great-grandfather's spiritual legacy as a leader in Yorkshire, England, of the Rechabites, a fundamentalist sect whose main idea was abstention from all the usual vices, with a premium on alcohol and tobacco), who did tour (accompanied by his pianist daughter, Clara Louise) principal North American cities, and even London, clung tenaciously to the idea of abstention from all stimulants and carried his presumably-shed Rechabite prejudices into his singing, for he refused to sing songs with questionable subject matter no matter how much he admired the music. Thus, he never sang opera and, unbelievably, toured the world singing only religious or patriotic songs!



Metronome, 1946 oil on canvas 21 x 15 inches

Paris, the influence of quiet, principled, rigid, moralistic English-Canada was immense. A Canadian artist or intellectual, of which there were then very few, could not live in a closed circle composed only of others like himself, nor could he earn his livelihood exclusively by his art or writing. He lived outwardly much as anyone else, going to work and returning, chatting amiably with his neighbors about daily events, weather and crops, or business and local politics. Were he to stay home in his study or studio, his

neighbors might soon start to present to his wife pots of cooked meals, convinced that the man of the house was disabled and the family too proud to ask for help. Public exhibitions, recitals, publications were few, and years could pass before anyone suspected that a musician, a writer, or a painter lived next door to his own snug house.

Walter Murch, Sr., the successful watchmaker from rural Ontario, who sang as a hobby, became engaged to Clara Louise, the daughter of Rechab Tandy, about 1900. They were engaged for three years before they married. Murch, Sr., bought a house, No. 1 Vermont Avenue; it was an old house, and although quite close to the downtown Toronto area where the first jewelry shop was located, it had once been a farm house, and was built of that curious northern hard red brick that seems to glow an eerie salmon color when late fall produces dark skies.

This is the house that Walter Tandy Murch, the artist, remembers, and he remembers it with a detailed accuracy that is perhaps part of his own character but possibly also part of the still environment, the silence of residential Toronto even today. Many details of his childhood environment cropped up years later in his paintings. He remembers a complex internal communications system of shiny metal tubes that enabled people in different parts of the house to talk without shouting. The tubes were buried in the walls, but in each room a concave metal disc, silver-plated copper, presented itself. One would put one's mouth to the disc and blow a whistle, the call to conversation. When the system was removed around 1919, because the family thought it was dated, Murch, who has never lost his childhood fascination for mysterious gadgets, regretted its absence. Yet there were other things to take its place, Edison wax phonograph cylinders, a Victrola with a horn, dozens of curious objects from a new technology that interested him only because of the odd-looking machines it produced.



Walter Murch's studio with still life items

"I vividly recall the incredible store on Queen Street," he comments some fifty years later. It was jammed with jewelry, with rings laid out in trays', with diamonds and precious stones, with hundreds of watches and clocks all ticking a complex contrapuntal rhythm. The flat above—once living quarters—had meanwhile been vacated, and become a furniture-cluttered suite of wedding parlors associated with the business, and the work room was an apparent jumble of tools and glasses, or cushions

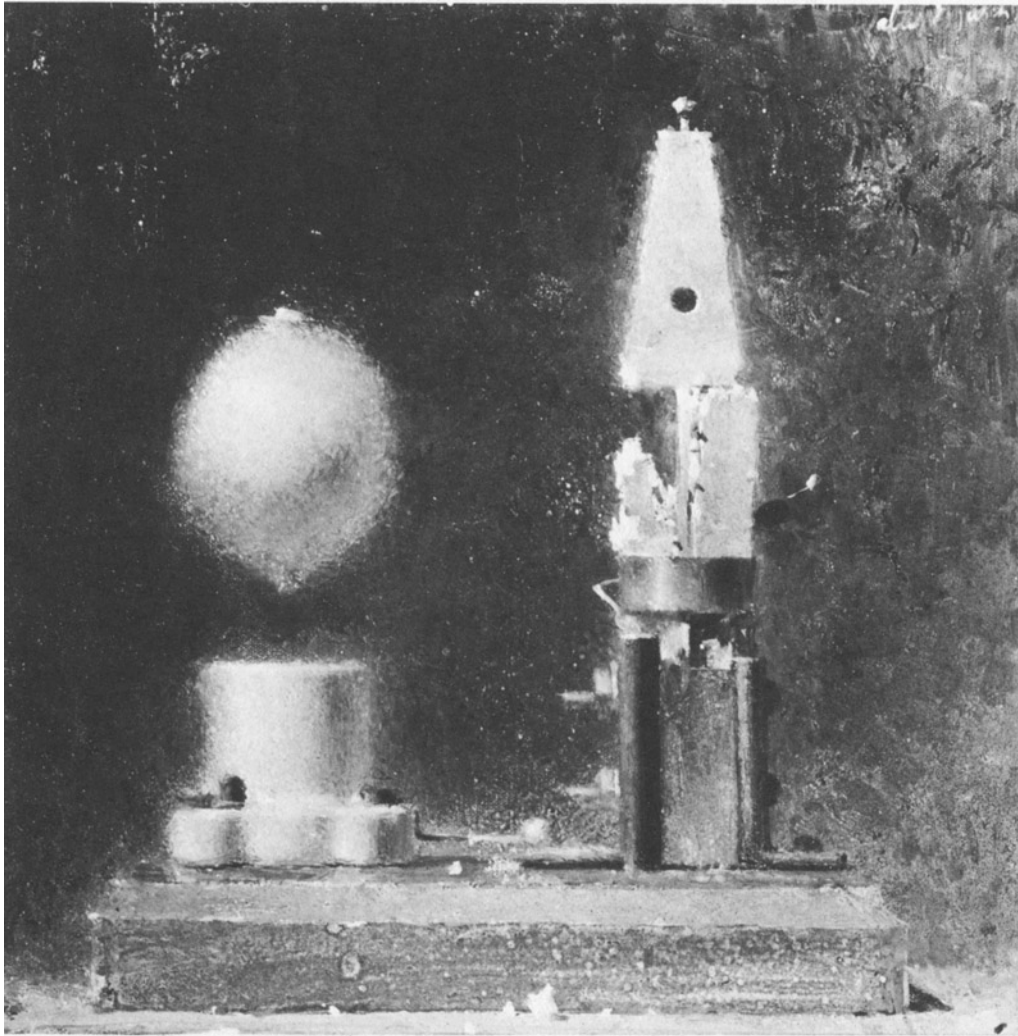
of every size, small awls and screwdrivers, hammers and tweezers. Into this improbable but very real environment Murch remembers the athletic young parson who roared up on a motorcycle to conduct ceremonies in the wedding parlors, and comments that in those days it was the thing for parsons to have spirit: it went with their evangelicalism. The cycle driving Reverend J. D. Morrow, he recalls, had a prodigious singing voice that could be heard above the engine's roar, above the clatter of the machine as it zoomed along the wooden paved streets. (The wooden streets also were interesting, for the wood was not laid in boards, but rather in circles or octagons about 8 or 10 inches in diameter and perhaps 8 inches deep.)

When he began school, Murch turned out to be a fair student who relied heavily on an extremely keen memory for poems and literature and things seen. He startled a teacher by his ability to recall all the counties that bordered Lake Ontario, including those in the United States, and this he had done simply by visual memory of the map. He was very bad at penmanship, however, perhaps because he had been forced to change from being left-handed to right-handed, and he found arithmetic torture. He admired those with facile hands, especially an older cousin who could write with both hands in opposite directions, and even upside down ("like Leonardo"). Another factor became increasingly evident as his education progressed: he was an acute stammerer, and never worse than when on display, on all too frequent occasions in those days of recitations in regular school and, of course, Sunday school.

As a child and an adolescent he suffered agonies for this inability to speak fluently. To use the telephone was deadly; but, typically, a torture that he forced himself to endure. He felt that because he stammered, it was difficult for him to be heard, that no one would really listen. In Toronto Technical High School, a school chosen for him by his mother, he tried to choose, as often as possible, classes in woodworking, in machine shops, with a noisy lathe; he also learned architectural drafting. He loved this manual training, liked especially to work silently and thought about finding something to do in life where he would not be obliged to talk. He remembers visiting Kingston with his grandfather Rechab and walking silently through the streets as Rechab would point to an architectural fragment, an urn, or a ballustrade and say, "I carved that." Quiet work.

In addition to stammering, Walter Murch was big. He grew up to be well over six feet tall, but as a boy he was not only tall for his age but also fat. When called "fat" or "stutterer" by derogatory schoolmates, he fought and, surrounded in the schoolyard, he wrestled two classmates at once into submission and gained respect and friendship on the basis of his physical strength. He could beat almost anyone in a fair fight. When some workmen had left a lead block in the street one day, the whole class tried to move it; only Walter Murch could.

He developed a deep, even urgent, sense of personal failure or success about everything, but within a strict code of fair play and essentially gentle behavior. Although shy, he stubbornly led a normal social life, forcing himself to dances, which he eventually came to enjoy; he played football, he drove a car, he took summer jobs often far from home in order to meet the challenges of people who were strange and whose respect he did not yet have. Challenges were sought out, the unexpected, the new and unfamiliar, the areas where problems would have to be overcome. As a youth he deliberately placed obstacles in his course to see if he could cope with them.



Taking-Off (The Take-Off) ca. 1952 Oil on Board 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 inches

During his last year in high school, he earned enough money to pay for his college tuition; yet he had no motivation, did not require money, had no particular idea what he was going to do in life. In his family environment there were many things he could do admirably, and for which recognition and praise came easily. Inevitably, he took music lessons and played in the school orchestra; he was asked to give violin recitals, and did; he even played on the radio. But, although he was good, he knew he was not the best—his brother, for example, was much better—and he did not want to go into music. He was not especially interested in his father's business; perhaps he felt his big hands would have been absurd handling the tiny parts of watches, rings, brooches or necklaces. Besides, his father was not particularly attached to the business and sold it in order to retire when he was only 62.

The Murch family admired artists. From Rechab Tandy and his daughter to the grandchildren and their father, they especially admired the performer, perhaps even more than the piece of music. A virtuoso performance still impresses Murch. The cold nerve of a performer who could communicate his art before so many people, never

losing poise and equilibrium, never thrown by a cough or a thousand pairs of riveted eyes, these were qualities that Murch found little short of amazing. He remembers hearing De Pachman play when he interrupted his performance after a passage to comment on how beautiful it was. To carry off such an act, from whatever motive, seemed the height of courage and conviction to Murch!

On graduating from high school Murch had no interest in going to the University of Toronto; indeed, he had no idea of what to study. One afternoon, he remembers, his mother turned to him and said, "What about art school, Walter?" With this almost desultory question was launched one of the most singularly dedicated and straightforward artistic careers of our time. Until then, Walter Murch had scarcely enjoyed a formal acquaintance with the visual arts, nor had he any direct experience with creating it. In grade school there had been a drawing class, of course, but this consisted of the children copying their teacher's blackboard-drawn model. Searching his memory further with a certain strain, he now remembers that when he was about six years old a maid in the household had bought little squares of cotton cloth on which flowers, houses, insects, and animals were already indicated, and that he had been very happy to finish this do-it-yourself needlepoint. An aunt had once a roomer who paid his rent with a sketchbook and then disappeared, and Murch, admiring the various landscapes and still lifes, had taken it to the high school art teacher to find out if it was any good. Of the great names in art history he knew a few, but had never seen their paintings. Of contemporary art, even in Canada, he was almost totally ignorant. He may possibly have heard of The Seven, but that was all.

What other painter has admittedly entered art school because his mother casually suggested it might be a good idea? Walter Murch entered the Ontario College of Art in the fall of 1925; he entered it without ambition and with no real intention of becoming an artist. Located next to the Grange, that is, the Art Gallery of Toronto, which had been founded twenty-five years before but which was far from the lively and rich museum it is today, the school had the best teachers—the best painters—in Canada, including several of Canada's avant garde, The Seven, led by Arthur Lismer, Frederick Horsman Varley, A. Y. Jackson, Robert Harris, and J. E. H. (Jock) MacDonald, a pioneer North American abstractionist.

The first class was in drawing, and the first drawing Murch made for Lismer was a line rendering of a kitchen chair, the line handled so that it suggested modeling. It was proclaimed the best drawing in the class. He was elated, but it was his only success for many months. The problems were mostly still-life subjects, occasionally a nude. Regularly Lismer took them to the Royal Ontario Museum to draw objects from the cases and sometimes, but not so often as might be expected from a well-known landscapist, he took them out to draw from nature. Each drawing was graded, either by Lismer or by his two assistants. The second class was called Design, and Jock MacDonald had his students making book covers; the designs became abstract, although based on leaf motifs and never referred to as abstract. The third class was Crafts: wood, brass, and metal work. The problem was to make a box with a fitted lid, and to design and paint on the lid and sides. The fourth class was Modeling (not sculpture, but modeling), and was taught by a sculptor named Emanuel Hahn, whose brother was a cellist, so he had an influence on Murch. He looked at Murch's big hands and said, "You have a sculptor's thumb," suggesting he go in for sculpture. Murch

thought for a while that it might be a good idea; he did have, he mused, strong hands. In that class he learned about Rodin, whom he admired greatly.

After an entire year in art school Murch still had attempted no painting. "I felt the need for supervision," he recalls. This came in the required course in watercolor painting, a class he remembers as having been taught by a man (Fred Haines) who consistently made only landscapes with cows and who taught a progression of technical formulae. During the entire year he made about eight or ten watercolors. Each was graded according to its fidelity to the subject, its degree of "watercolor sparkle" (presumably a freshness and delicacy), its correctness and variety of textures and its accuracy of color. If any of these points were deficient, the teacher might say "nice, but not true." Finally, the work had to have scale, but since perspective was also taught in drawing class, this quality did not depend solely on the watercolor master, and was not so faithfully applied as a standard of grading. Drawing from the Antique Cast was also a second-year course (sometimes taught by Varley) and it was important to Murch because, through it, he first experienced rebellion. Of about sixty students in school, familiarly called the O. C. A., a very small percentage, perhaps four or five, affected rebellion. They wore rough clothes, smoked cigarettes, neglected to cut their hair. Some of these were older students. Feeling that drawing of casts was mere duplication and hence no answer to the question of becoming an artist, they decided to go their own way in second-year antique drawing. School, they felt, ought to be a place to try things out, to experiment. Harold Kihl, who later went to the Art Students' League with Murch, was the leader with whom they would adjourn to a nearby Child's restaurant and talk about Kokoschka and Cezanne, neither of whom were then familiar to Murch. They would tell stories of the already legendary Tom Thomson, the greatest Canadian landscapist, who had provided the prototype for The Seven's paintings. They would pick apart the obvious in local painting, reserving a special loathing for exhibitions given by the Ontario Society of Artists. Against the violent opposition of most of the faculty the drawings they made in cast class were abstract. They were saved from being expelled only because their seriousness and intensity was so obvious, even appreciated, because they, especially Kihl, could draw easily and beautifully, and because they had a redeeming love for the old masters. They were also sheltered and encouraged by Arthur Lismer, whose studio in an old church became one of their meeting places, almost a revolutionary cell—yet, since the scene was Toronto, a cell where the rebels broke up to play badminton on the lawn and whose most influential agitator lived in a rectory. Lismer was, and still remains, a hero to Walter Murch.

By March of that second year Murch's art education and his interest had progressed considerably, but he decided that if he wanted to pass the course—and he did—he had better settle down and make some drawings that his teachers could approve. With this in mind, he promptly made a charcoal drawing of the Antique Faun, and was rewarded, for the second time in two years, with the commendation that it was the best in the class. He started to paint in oil, small landscapes on board and portraits of his brothers. He remembers that local exhibitions were mostly dominated by landscape painting and he felt that he was not executing school exercises when doing something other than still life.



Enlarged Doll 1965 Oil on canvas 48 x 32 inches

Sometime in 1926 there was an exhibition of avant-garde American painting at the Art Gallery of Toronto. Murch remembers seeing for the first time works by John Sloan,

Glenn O. Coleman, Reginald Marsh, Kenneth Hayes Miller, George Bellows, Maurice Prendergast, Thomas Hart Benton, and Kuniyoshi. He recalls how intensely he and his fellow O. C. A. students and faculty disliked it, in part of course, because it was American. They found it harsh, blatant, coarse and vulgar, all characteristics associated with the United States anyway. They especially hated Marsh but, despite this, were so fascinated that they sent to New York to find out who had been his teacher. With relief they returned to the more familiar artists with works around Toronto: Sir William Orpen, Frank Brangwyn, Alfred J. Munnings, Paul Nash, and Wyndham Lewis. British modernism was at least beautiful, cultivated, intelligent! Yet, swept in the current of time and listening to Lismer talk, they always came back to Tom Thomson, the hero, the man who had created something uniquely Canadian and who had romantically and mysteriously disappeared from his lonely canoe in the Algonquin Park wilderness. The students liked the idea of a Canadian art, much as their counterparts in every country then sought national roots; but they also sought young country vigor, despising the effete!

By this time Murch was aware that he actively wanted to be an artist. He could not read enough books, see enough reproductions, and although he knew it would take a long time to be an artist, to accept the hard work necessarily involved, the life had gripped him, and he was content. Accordingly he accelerated his program, enrolled in night courses, and began to think of going to New York. He subscribed to Studio magazine (published in London) and he wrote for catalogues from the Art Students' League in New York. Studying reproductions, his initial reaction to Marsh—disgust—had turned to great admiration and he planned to study in New York with Kenneth Hayes Miller because Miller had taught Marsh. Sometimes he painted in the manner of Benton, sometimes he consciously imitated Orpen, Zak, and Nash—all from reproductions. in Studio—and his horizons expanded to take in Morris Kantor, Maurice Sterne, Bernard Karfiol, Eugene Speicher, Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler. He saw also reproductions of Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky, Klee, and De Chirico, but did not admire their work, wondering why European painters felt obliged to distort and deform. Could they not, like the Americans, achieve expression without such coldly tortured effects?

This was the state of his development on the eve of his departure for New York on a visit that was intended to be only for one summer; he expected to return to the O. C. A. in the fall and finish what remained of his third and fourth years. He had cousins who lived in the Bronx, and stayed with them, going to operas and musical comedies, visiting the Metropolitan Museum and returning to it again and again. On an impulse in August, 1927, shortly before he was expected to go home to Canada, he answered an advertisement that had been placed in The New York Times by the Montague-Castle Stained Glass Company, submitting a portfolio of realistic drawings and book covers produced for the O.C.A. To his surprise, he was immediately hired at \$25 a week as an assistant stained-glass designer. Only nineteen years old, he had a job in art and was delighted; so was his family. None of his friends had contempt for the job, as they would have had for advertising work, but instead respected the making of stained glass as an ancient and honorable craft. Murch was given old designs, generally based on those in the great French cathedrals, to copy on a one-inch scale. It was work in India ink at first, conventional designs in medallions or pointed arches: chalices, crosses, Jesse trees, scrolls, candelabra, stars of David. It was pleasant, easy work and when he

was promoted to rendering the design in watercolor, he enjoyed shellacking the finished work to make it look like glass and breaking the realistic design with black linear patterns that indicated where the leading should be.

So began Walter Murch's double life: a bread-earning career and an independent continuing education. The dual nature of his life did not become clear until well into the Depression years, when the problem of self-support became much tougher, but it began to dawn after he had worked almost a year for Montague-Castle. It took that long for him to realize that stained glass was no longer a creative art, at least as practiced by Montague-Castle, and it took longer to realize that in the 20th-century economy it would be difficult indeed for stained glass . to be creative under even the most ideal circumstances. More directly, however, he was troubled by the fact that his work was so unoriginal.

In mid-fall of 1927 he signed up at the Art Students' League to resume his studies. Kenneth Hayes Miller's class was already full so he had to study painting with Von Schlegell and thought his criticisms were both good and pointed. In January, however, he was allowed to transfer to Miller's class where, to his surprise, he found it dull and uninspired, and Miller himself stiff and unapproachable. After working with Miller for over two months, he had been spoken to by the teacher only once, and then with the short statement, "very interesting." Murch, who doesn't anger easily, gradually became furious with the League, with its cultivated attitude of the tough, uncommunicative teacher, and its implied theory that if the student was any good he would stand up and fight back. It was all right to have played the minor rebel in a Canadian school, but to be forced into the mold in New York was quite another matter, and against Murch's temperament. He ended his formal art education by leaving the Art Students' League after one year, but his real art education was just beginning.

The single undisputed value of any art school is the fringe participation in the art world that lively students and teachers who are serious artists manage to enjoy. This atmosphere was inevitably strong in New York, and Murch began to learn "the scene." While at the League he had heard of a certain Arshele Gorky who had disputed an article written by Stuart Davis. He had heard that Gorky, who taught a class at the Grand Central School of Art, was different, so he enrolled in Gorky's drawing course—a class of about twelve people meeting once a week. Gorky prescribed a certain size of paper large—about 14 x 18, and made everyone begin with lead pencil, then charcoal. Murch's first drawing for Gorky, of a nude, was done in his best O. C. A. manner. Gorky looked at it sympathetically and said, "Never more draw like that." It was an attempt to duplicate the observed thing; Murch believed that the artist was supposed to be able to do it, every leaf, every bark strip, every detail, especially in pencil. But Gorky said, "You don't use a pencil like that!" Gorky explained that the medium or the artist must be allowed to take over. Gorky was the first person to tell Murch that the medium was interesting in itself, not merely a vehicle for something else and the idea of a lead pencil as medium was a revelation! The second session in charcoal began to go better, all formulas were jettisoned, details disappeared, Gorky approved and gave encouragement. He brought his own paintings to class, he talked constantly about Cezanne and even took Murch to the Metropolitan to make him understand Cezanne. When, at the end of the semester, Gorky left the Grand Central, Murch studied painting with him privately for about two years, at his studio on Washington Square South. They

went out a lot, on ferries, up to the Bronx, in Central Park, around the docks. Gorky would look down side streets and at groups of rocks and trees often waving his hand and saying, "all wrong." He meant that the given, the observed could be wrong; he criticized views that were dull, or insipid. He dared to criticize nature! Murch thus began to learn what art was, and how it could be superimposed on the given; he began to sense the infinite possibilities and endless relationships between the observed, himself, and something that Gorky was certain about: Art. "At first I admired his painting because I admired him—his feeling of assurance and confidence." Then he became deeply attached to the painting.

Gorky also introduced Murch to the work of Seurat, made him see and comprehend Picasso and, one after another, almost all of the great European Moderns. Murch came to have a fondness for Pascin, and as these retarded affinities developed, one by one, the once admired Americans sank in his estimation. First, of course, Miller, then Speicher, then Leon Kroll, then Brook, Biddle, Karfiol, finally even Marsh. Gorky said there were only three American artists—Stuart Davis, Charles E. Prendergast, and Albert Pinkham Ryder. The year the Museum of Modern Art opened with four French Moderns—Cezanne, Seurat, Van Gogh and Daumier—he and Gorky went often together.

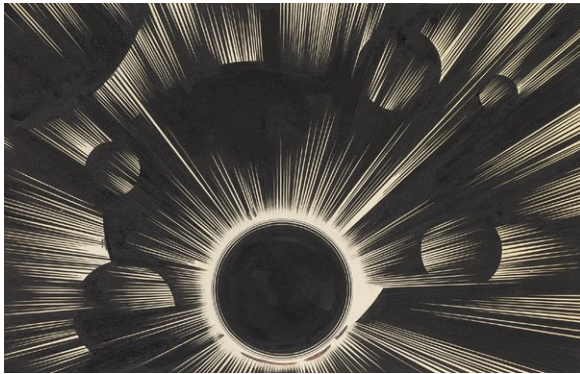


illustration from *The Mysterious Universe* Stuart Chase, The MacMillan Co., New York, 1929 ink on board 15.4 x 11.9 cm (image) Estate of Walter Tandy Murch

In 1931, sick of the stained-glass factory, he quit to try to support himself by free-lance work. Through an editor he had met at Vanguard Press—for whom he designed occasional book jackets (*Dark Power*, *Lead and Likker*)—he was commissioned to illustrate Stuart Chase's *Men and Machines*, which was featured with a large Murch illustration on the front page of the *Times'* Book Review section, thus paving the way for other illustration jobs, notably Sir James Jeans' *Stars in their Courses*. A little earlier he had his first one-man show on the lower East Side near Tomkins Square Park, at the Christodora Settlement House where he was living and teaching, a show featuring many of the drawings for the two well-known books. At Christodora House, a combination settlement and home for indigent intellectuals, he met the poets Anna Hempstead Branch, Edwin Markham, and Padraic Colum. He also met Katharine Scott, a Canadian too, the daughter of missionary parents, who was then working at the Ethical Culture School. They were married on December 26, 1930

Despite his initial success, free-lancing became increasingly difficult as the Depression

worsened. Unable to afford further study with Gorky, Murch had to leave his classes, although he continued to see him from time to time for the next decade. He took a job in art and lettering at Lord & Taylor for \$18 a week and worked there (with one leave of absence—a trip to Mexico in 1934) for five years, until 1936. The hours were long, often until midnight or 1 and 2 in the morning, making posters slanted toward fashion drawing, designing shops within the store, working with architects and carpenters. At the same time he tried to paint independently (for instance a 1933 self-portrait, now in the collection of Pennsylvania Academy) but found it more and more difficult. Occasionally he got a free-lance commission such as the typically 1933 cover of Joseph Schlossberg's *The Workers and their World*, published by the American Labor Party. This is almost unique in Murch's work, which except for a few park benches and mournful drawings of the Third Avenue el rarely reflected the growing dominance of socially conscious art.

Meanwhile, work at Lord & Taylor's was remarkable experience. Murch tasted the bitterness of seeing how transitory, even expendable, were his long labors; he saw hours and days of work on ribbons, scrolls, filigrees, buds, baskets, bouquets—always softly pastel, never dramatic, never meaningful—used briefly and then crated out to the trash heap. All that time, all that paint all used up and just to sell goods. But he kept working, complaining only to his wife. Through Lord & Taylor's he met and worked with Raymond Loewy, and finally, because of Loewy's influence, he began once again to get enough free-lance work—mostly in decorating stores—to quit his enormously time-consuming job with just one department store. He had also met Desha, a fashion artist who worked at Lord & Taylor, and was a friend both of Gorky and of Betty Parsons, who had just returned from Paris. Through these friendships began Betty Parsons' continuing interest in Walter Murch's work.

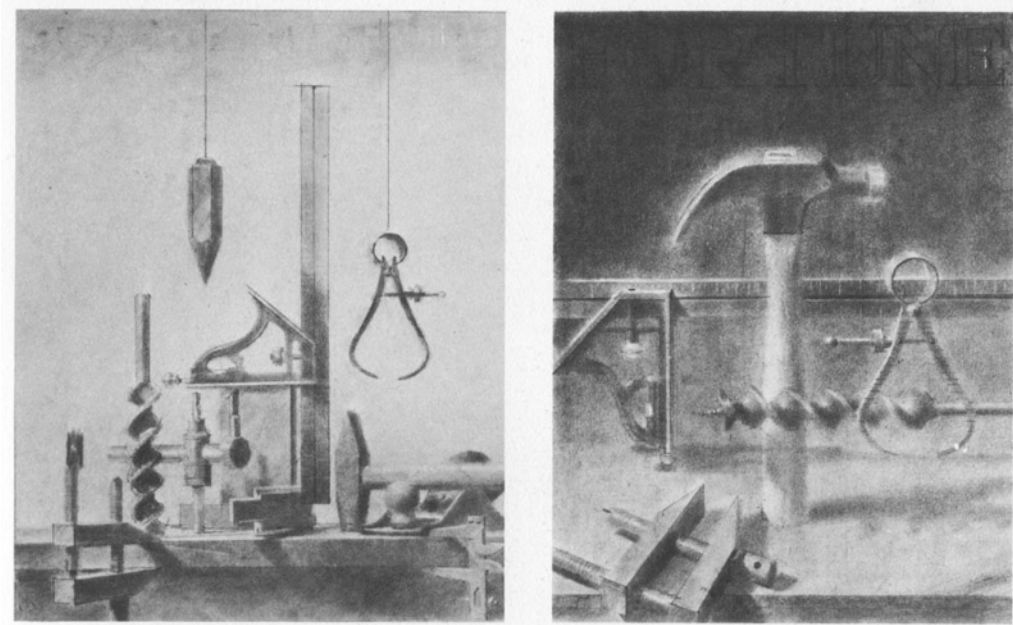
The Federal Art Project was getting launched and was already doing a great deal to help the few artists who were Murch's friends, providing a way to live that also respected their individual artistic principles. As a Canadian citizen, however, Murch could not participate in the project, a situation that caused him more and more regret. Sustained by his wife, whose Canadian values were akin to his own and who reminded him that too much talk and not enough work on his own was a self-made trap, he persevered for he already believed that all labors became part of the work.



Store awning painted by Walter Tandy Murch, ca. 1945 (from the Archives of American Art Image gallery for Walter Tandy Murch)

From 1936 through 1950, Murch supported himself and his family by a variety of freelance activity, none of it very congenial to him but all of some interest to his development. Until his first Betty Parsons show, then at the Wakefield Gallery, in 1941, his commissions grew out of contacts he had made while at Lord & Taylor: commission for Best's, for Bloomingdale's, for McCreery's department store. He made immense murals, like the Christmas windows for McCreery's in 1938, each twenty feet high; he specialized in cartouches, balconies, shutters, obelisks. His work came to the attention of a fashionable decorator, Rosemary Dudley, and he began to get commissions for murals in the lobbies of fancy apartment houses, and to decorate dining rooms or suites, even a giant mural for the Tuscany restaurant on 38th Street and a restaurant-coffee bar for Gertz in Flushing, in what he now describes as a blend of Eugene Berman and Piranesi. Work of this nature, on an immense scale, led to more commissions, and just before the war Murch produced renderings for the chic Viennese Roof at the St. Regis Hotel, decorated by Anne Tiffany and Lawrence Colwell. The owners, Vincent Astor and Serge Obolensky, were impressed, and commissioned him to execute the wall decorations for another restaurant-night club in the St. Regis—the Russian Room. This enterprise gives some idea of how an artist in the decorating business had to function. Obolensky had a vision of what he wanted; in a room of 300 running feet, with walls 9 to 12 feet high, he conceived a running pattern of dark blue and bursts of white and gold, "built in forms" of horses, sleighs, soldiers in uniform, Russian fur hats,

cockades, fashionable ladies; the sleighs and troikas were dashing around the room. Murch's job was to execute the vision, not to conceive it. He worked for over two months, painting in oil, on immense, loose pieces of canvas, and it was hardly finished, mounted in place and opened to the public when the Russians marched into Finland. Consequently, Murch had to change the Russian Room into the Hawaiian Room, an equally vast and expendable vision of Diamond Head, palm trees, water, and surfboarders.



Two Projects for Fortune Magazine 1948 Pencil on paper 13 ½ by 11 inches

Even today Murch does not resent the commercial work he did during the thirties and forties. After all, it kept him alive. Typically he did it willingly, even eagerly, and did it as well as he could, all the while knowing perfectly well that it was utterly meaningless for the simple reason that it was never an end in itself. As his immense mural tasks for various enterprises became known, he began to be approached by the big companies for smaller works: ads to be placed in the national magazines. These were produced in a curious fashion, but one more compatible with his personal convenience. He had nothing to do with the layout, which was conceived by the advertising director, but he could stay home in his studio and paint or draw his given subject: a telephone receiver, used by AT&T; cool Schaefer beer cans; a series of objects—pitcher, tap, funnel- for Goodyear; or shot glasses, highball glasses, whiskey bottles, for Four Roses—ice crystal clear, moist drops clinging to the glass. He treated these components in his own way, but never knew how the completed work would finally look whether indeed it would be used, or what combination of the objects he painted would be ultimately assembled, or what text would accompany the ads. For example, as late as 1952 he was asked to paint a series of penknives, and quite contentedly did so, ultimately to see in the Saturday Evening Post, Time, Newsweek and Collier's the individual knives all assembled and arranged with the text, "Which one belongs in a sailor's dungarees?"



Walter Tandy Murch ca. 1965

All these years, from 1936 on, he continued to paint for himself and to visit the galleries. As his commercial work was virtually anonymous and jobs were barely frequent enough to keep him going, there was only a minimum danger of not having enough time to work seriously. The danger of course existed; to a less realistic person, it would have been more of a threat, and more of a temptation, but to Canadian-born Murch, shy, diffident, unworldly, the world of admen and decorators was as remote as the world of painters,

critics, dealers, and patrons. The extent to which their worlds and modus operandi are similar has still not dawned upon him. Perhaps most important was the fact that instead of dictating the specific style wanted, the companies chose him for his own style, and allowed him to do his part of the work pretty much as he wanted to. Furthermore, for several reasons this small ad work was more satisfactory to Murch than big decorative murals for restaurants and department stores had been. There was also more time for his own painting and for looking at the art in New York City. Murch had become aware of the Julien Levy Gallery, where he first saw the work of Picabia, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, Dali, Magritte, and Delvaux, and from which he especially remembers Duchamp's Large Glass. At Brummer's he saw the painting of Pierre Roy. Surrealism impressed him, attracting him simply because he saw objects put down—a glass, or a birdcage—that meant something other than what they were. In Pierre Roy's case he was doubly impressed because Roy was, he discovered, a doctor—not a painter. Murch felt that he himself was not a painter either, if painter meant a man who was totally free to paint as he wished and had to do nothing else. Discovering that there were very few painters like that, he greatly admired ordinary people who did remarkable things, men whose lives were apparently spent in a trade or profession with all their evident obligations, and yet who worked beyond these ties and limitations to produce things that were ends in themselves, to create art.



Portrait of Joseph Cornell 1940-1941 Oil on board, 10 x 8 inches

Frequenting Julien Levy's gallery during the late 1930's, Murch got to know Levy, and also he got to know a remarkable man who led more than merely a double life: Joseph Cornell, who, in addition to having an unusual family life and his own art, was then

doing freelance work for Harper's Bazaar as well as teaching at the Traphagen School of Fashion Design. In contrast to most of the people whom Murch admired and who influenced him, Cornell seemed unconvincing as a person; he lacked self-confidence, seemed weak in voice and manner, and was self-effacing to an astonishing degree. "He played himself down to such a point," recalls Murch, "that you had to be very alert to hear what he was saying." Cornell, a Surrealist by nature, collected things: oddments, junk, old photographs, old movie prints and negatives. He started to give some to Murch, these brownish prints of faded European splendors, empty piazzas, architectural fragments. These became sources for Murch, only he did not know it at first. Probably Cornell's giving him old photographs was responsible for his interest in his own old snapshots. A snapshot he had taken on Old Orchard Beach in 1933, during an eclipse—one that had not turned out very well and had been badly developed at a local drugstore—became the source for the 1943-44 painting, *Eclipse*.



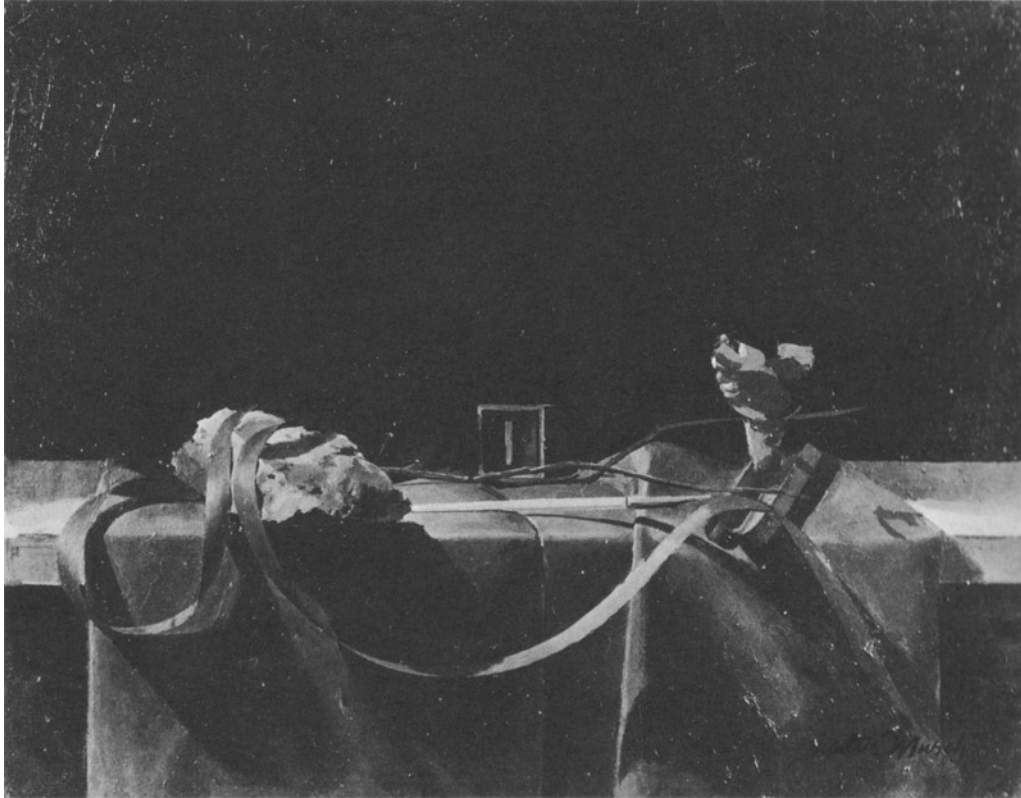
Eclipse, 1944 oil on canvas 12 x 16 inches

There was, Murch found, curious significance to everything that Cornell did. Cornell gave him a strange pen case, which he kept for three years and finally put into the painting *Still Life with Red Ribbon*. When it had been used, Cornell took it back. Cornell gave him a flagellant, a wooden cup-shape on a hammer-like handle, with knotted cords attached, to which were affixed little cylinder shapes on the ends of children's play blocks. It still hangs in Murch's dim and cluttered studio on Riverside Drive, perhaps because Murch is still using it, in a symbolic way that Cornell understood when he gave it, but that Murch did not understand until long afterward. He attempted to paint it, but was unsatisfied with the results; for twenty-five years he has kept it under his eye.

Murch, who painted Cornell's portrait and gave it to him, received it back after one year. Cornell said, "You made me look too thin." Murch was enthralled by Cornell's work, and perhaps because Cornell seemed even more incapable of coping with life than he himself (although he had already been exhibited), he wanted somehow to help him. In addition to Levy and Brummer, and decorators and their clients, by this time Murch knew several artists—straight painters who lived by teaching. One was Bradley Walker Tomlin, then teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, whom he persuaded to invite Cornell up to Sarah Lawrence to show him some work. When Tomlin eventually told Murch that he thought the Cornell objects were curious, but couldn't see the good of them, "They don't mean a thing," Murch discovered, rather obliquely, his own definition of art. What he considered his painting, as distinguished from the murals and ads, was defined by Tomlin on the basis of Cornell: "the manufacture of a completely useless thing."

To the question "Was Walter Murch a Surrealist?" one must answer "No." He never believed in Surrealism, was never fully aware of its complex doctrines and theory, and was almost totally unaware of its political implications. Nevertheless, he was heavily influenced by it because he admired the audacity and effort of making real what was not. Then, too, in assessing Surrealism's influence on Murch one must consider not only that he admired Surrealists' daring to paint the impossible, but also that he could not fully accept the artifice of Dali or Berman, and that his Canadian conscience was fundamentally troubled by the decadence courted by Surrealism. Rather shamefacedly he will admit having been vaguely disquieted by the fact that "it appealed not exactly to evil, but to the existence of a certain morbid or unnatural curiosity." Pressed, he has said that he always felt it was "too rotten."

Although he never tried, or desired, to paint a dream, the idea of it had tremendous appeal and certain typical effects of Surrealism appeared in his paintings. A very few works, like *Driftwood* (of 1941, not in the exhibition), exploited the typically deep space of Surrealism. Many others brought into deliberate juxtaposition objects that were incongruous in such associations, a characteristic still found in Murch's painting. A car lock might be set upon a few rocks, or a lemon or flower juxtaposed with a machine part. Yet no shock arose from these combinations, no vibrant incongruity livened these canvases because, on reflection, the painted objects brought together did not seem so very disparate, so altogether from different worlds. The combinations did not jolt the spectator into an unfamiliar world that could only be explained by unconscious associations; nor did the paintings conform to an easily satisfying context of anecdotal reality, for they never hinted at a story or program. Like Chardin, Murch annihilated the textures and the associations of his still-life elements, treating a flower or a lemon in exactly the same way as he treated a light bulb or a carved lintel.



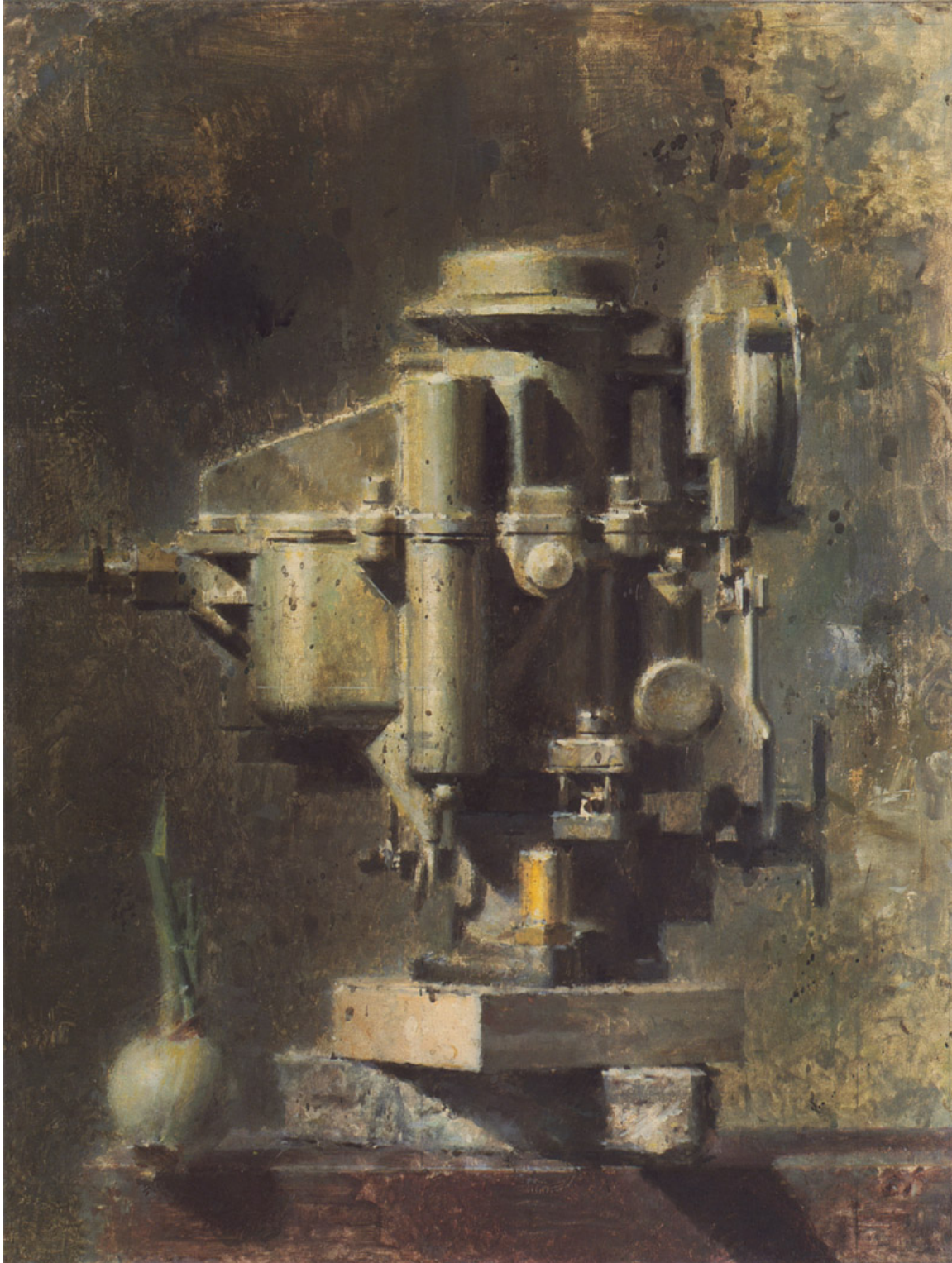
Still life with Red Ribbon 1945 oil on canvas 14 x 19 inches

After the 1941 and 1947 shows of his work presented by Betty Parsons, Murch's friends, including Surrealist-oriented painters and Julien Levy, gave some thought to the problem, "What shall we call him?" Levy pondered the question and said, "Romantic? Maybe yes." Romantic implied in those days a nostalgia for the past, and a bringing together of objects of sentimental significance. Murch did use ribbons, on occasion even a rose. It was known, by this time, that many of the objects he painted—like clocks—could easily be associated with the facts of his biography. James Thrall Soby had coined the term "Magic Realism" in the late 1940's to encompass numerous American artists whose work skirted the fringes of Surrealism, men like George Tooker, Bernard Perlin, the early Stephen Greene, Alton Pickens, and visions where the visual scheme could be logically explained in terms of reality as possible and convincing, but where the effects wholly transcended the depiction because anecdotal description could not explain the meaning of the paintings. Murch was frequently grouped with the Magic Realists.

In the meantime, Murch, through his participation in the Betty Parsons Gallery, began to be acquainted and friendly with a number of artists who eventually became leaders in the Abstract Expressionist movement. His first show at Betty Parsons' then-new space on 57th Street¹ was actually hung by Barnett Newman, whom he had known since the early 1940's. Newman is a painter for whose work and judgment Murch still has the highest regard and, already by 1947, Newman was one of the most influential abstract artists, had joined in founding the 8th Street Club, initially as a school of abstract art. Newman, Murch recalls, was responsible for at least one of the titles of a Murch

painting, *The Monolith of Time*, for he was sensitive to the imaginative resonance of the work and capable of thinking up apt titles, as Murch was not. Murch went occasionally to the Club in those early days, brought there by his respect for Newman. He remembers Mark Rothko discussing whether it was permissible that some part of a painting be recognizable, like a pyramid, or square, or geometric form, and concluding that such a reminiscence was acceptable as an unknown echo in the artist's mind. Murch tried to apply this doctrine to his own painting, but did so in quite a different fashion. Rothko was thinking, if Murch recalls correctly, in terms of named geometric forms, while Murch's analogy was as follows: an egg is an egg as a cube is a cube, but both an egg and a cube can be other things as well—more than a familiar object, more than a named or extant shape; any shape can be what it is, but has a chance to remind you of other forms "that we don't know about."

Murch followed the new American abstract painting avidly. Rothko's painting seemed to him "the cross-section of an unknown part of the Universe"; and the space established by Clyfford Still, grand and vast, elicited amazement for its technical accomplishment. He knew Theodoros Stamos, George McNeil, Jackson Pollock, and in their work at last saw realized Gorky's admonitions to him of fifteen years earlier. Gorky had said let the artist or the medium take over; in Pollock he felt the painter had become the medium. When he looked at the paintings of Pollock in the late 1940's, he was surprised that form could emerge once the rectangle was defined on the wall, surprised that it was so orderly, that the effect came from color and rhythm, "a beat, like the pounding of blood." From conversation, he knew that Pollock painted out the accidents that looked like features.

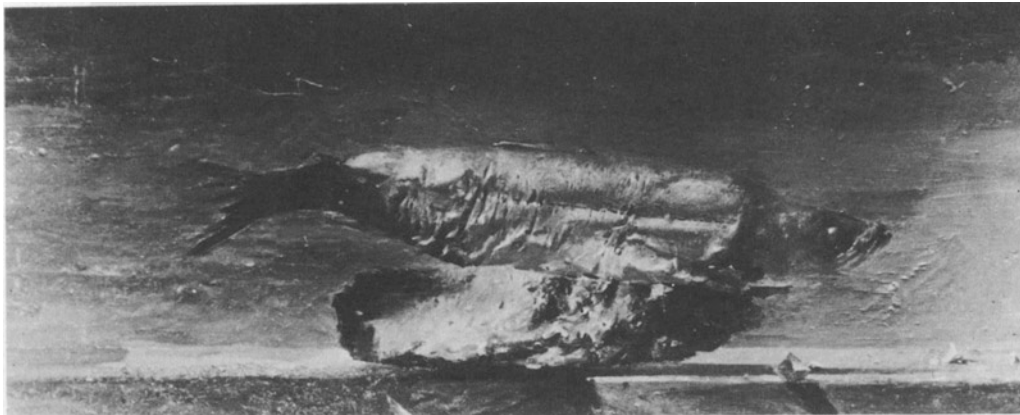


Carburetor 1957 oil on canvas 32 ½ x 27 ½

Murch, whose experience with covering large surfaces had been limited to decorative schemes or show windows, understood why size was so important to the new painting. He was not, however, tempted to paint big himself (50 inches across is about the

biggest canvas he has ever made) for by this time he knew that his own art needed the stabilizing force of the object. Off and on since the late 1920's he had I tried abstraction and never found that it gave him satisfactory expression. Yet, sympathetic with the new American painting, he always strove to let the paint take over, to let it dominate both himself and his perception of the object. His painting remained small, in part because the sharp mental separation he had enforced between his own work and commissioned work had created binding habits in his private working processes; in part because his studio was small; but most of all because his personal vision involved a precise view of things examined at very close range. Murch had long ago found that proximity changed the nature of objects. "You can look at a thing so close that it ceases to be itself," he says, and with this conviction, developed so naturally out of his life, pattern, his background, education, admonishments, he anticipated one of the principal effects of recent object painters like Jasper Johns or Jim Dine, even—in a limited way—of newer artists specifically identified with Pop Art, like James Rosenquist or Roy Lichtenstein.

In much the same way as every literate person has commonly experienced the total transformation of an ordinary word by either trying to spell it or, for some reason, by looking at its printed existence in a strange context, Murch sensed, sometimes even before starting a painting, the queer effect of the potential relationship between certain objects and himself. His problem became not one of merely painting the object, but one of creating a visual embodiment of the relationship. One can never tell when a written or spoken word will suddenly wander from its presumably firm anchoring in language to become a peculiar, even haunting, sound and sight, a totally new and strange experience. Yet it continually happens. Similarly, while everyone can recall a word slipping out of its normally precise verbal function, becoming meaningless, it rapidly falls back into place and generally stays there for months and years. To oblige the dislocated experience to occur visually, simply to happen, is one of Murch's uncanny abilities



The Smoked Whitefish, 1947

What makes something paintable? Ruling out imitation or duplication entirely, Murch feels that every painter needs something to convince himself that he is making a painting, making art. For Murch, this conviction depends on his ability to establish a relationship with an object; but he feels, for example, that the late Franz Kline needed "that stroke," or that Magritte's painting only began after he accepted the fact that "an

eye is an eye." Certain objects instantly became a painting, but with others, it took a long, long time for Murch to imagine , them as paintings. For example, a key work of 1947, *The Smoked Whitefish*, resulted from Murch having passed a New York delicatessen at night, when he saw the fish through a window bathed in white light. Instantly he saw it as a painting: he did not see skin or flesh, but gold; not even gold paint, but real gold. In a flash the work of art existed mentally, but, as words inevitably fall back into context, the found work of art can just as quickly cease to exist, and the problem of creating it again may be long and difficult, as it developed in the case of *The Smoked Whitefish*. Murch says, "I have always felt that certain things were paintable—wood, marble, cloth, jewels, metal, stone, alabaster, black marble, rust." The availability of these things is a fact established in his mind over many years. "I would imagine them within a rectangle, like an already formed painting, not a dream, but a painting based on the idea that it could be done." Yet the imagined painting was an effect, a state of feeling; it still had to be painted, and in the process, the imagined work was likely to change. Murch recalls Faulkner saying in an interview about some long-finished story, "I did it and I wouldn't change a word—but perhaps I would." The artist has, he feels, a dream of perfection at the outset. It may never live up to the idea, but the work of art is the truth, it is the reality that replaces the dream. The reality, he believes—and he believes this absolutely—is discoverable only in the process of working. Pollock was right, he made Gorky come true. "But when I use an egg or a light bulb, I am not discovering the egg or bulb, but discovering the work of art. The subject must be completely absorbed into the painting." Consequently, for Murch it no longer matters if he uses the same objects repeatedly. "Among objects, one thing is almost as good as another. I suppose the decision is based on looks at the moment, usually no great emotional reaction; it just looks right. A certain arrangement seems possible."

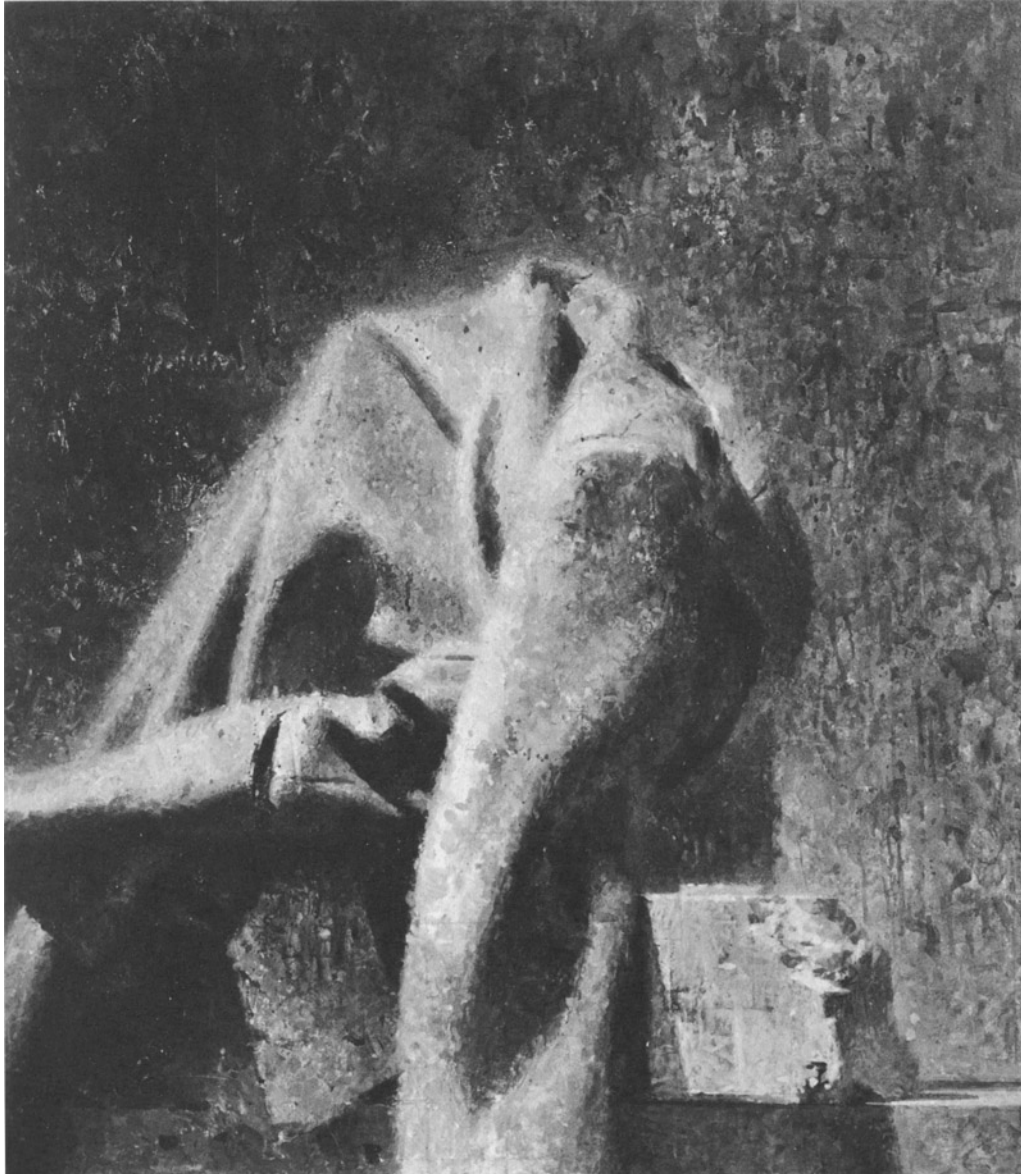


Bread and Cloth, 1965

The Murch painting owned by Lee Ault, *Bread and Cloth*, 1965, (Cat. No. 66) exemplifies some of his special working problems. Many years before, Murch had made a painting of bread and cloth (Joslyn Museum, Cat. No. 21) and after forgetting about it, a new impulse to do bread had developed in his mind for several years. He recalls that an expression, almost a chant, possibly a rote from student days, "Chardin's bread," went round his head for months. He made a little sketch long before he finally went out and purchased eight loaves of bread. Why eight loaves? In order to begin with a perfect, or near perfect, uncut loaf. It was surprising how different each was, for, removed from their cellophane wrappers, one had a sag, another a slope, another a dent in the heel. He wanted one that had risen evenly. Why take it out of the

cellophane? In order to see the bread as a solid rectangular form with a curved top, in order that its color be stronger; the sides would have been distorted had it remained in the package, the form would have been destroyed. The hard work in the painting was the establishment of the form in the space that was created in the painting, and since each painting has a different space, a different set of problems, Murch says that the one and only constant problem is, "Can it be done?" What had he hoped for when he began Bread and Cloth? "To make a miraculous loaf of bread, a loaf that wasn't bread," he acknowledges. Did he succeed? Murch does not know. He is often surprised by the reaction to his pictures. They lead their own lives after they leave his studio. Similarly the loaf itself—which still remains placed high on the molding in Murch's object-cluttered studio—has remained inviolate, hardened against mold and rodents, impervious to the normal life or function of a loaf of bread

In each of the many title changes that a Murch canvas undergoes—and they undergo many because of the artist's initial unconcern for either the meaning of a title or the convenience of one as it might simplify future identification problems—one can follow the gradual process of meaning accruing to a painting.

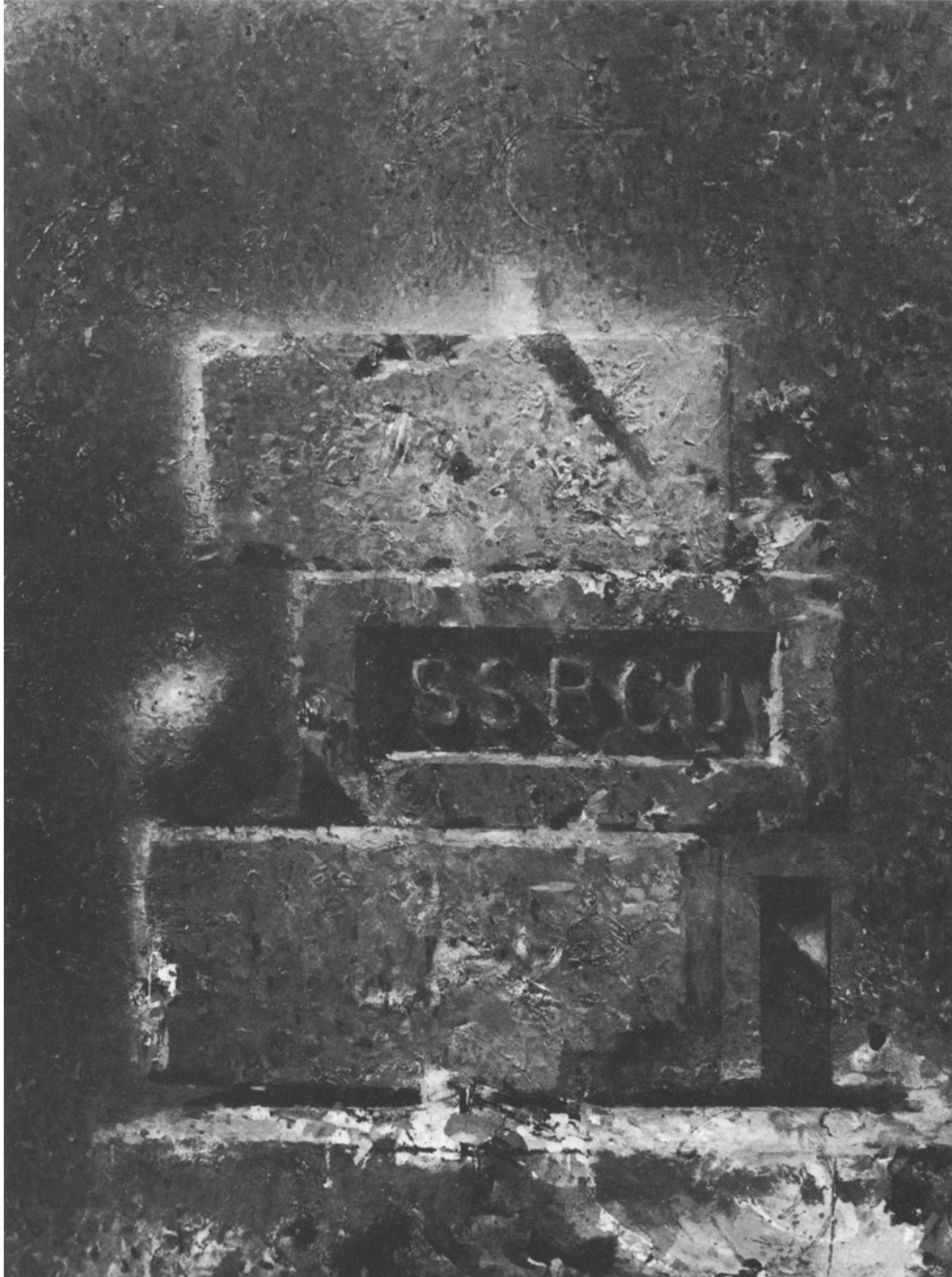


Stone Jacket 1962

Thus, *Stone Jacket* was not a stone jacket to him when he painted it. He had not thought of it being like stone until someone in the gallery reacted, and gave it its name. The Toledo Museum's *Taking-Off*, in which a light socket is located below a lemon, was brought into the gallery without a title, as Murch paintings usually are. Someone named it *The Take-Off* because the lemon was a take-off, a pun, on the absent light. Subsequently the picture became *Taking-Off*, perhaps because the lemon seems to float above the socket. The *Chase Manhattan* drawing, Brooklyn, 1964, was the second rendering (the first is in the Union Carbide Collection and is three years earlier) of an architectural fragment found in Brooklyn. By calling it Brooklyn, a certain—perhaps temporary—set of associations is brought into play in the mind of the observer. It is true that over the years, as the term "Romantic Realist" has faded from art-critical usage, the titles of Murch paintings have tended to become less romantic. Betty Parsons would be less likely to name a drapery study *Last Supper* now than she would have in

1946-47. So, in their way, the titles are an unwitting index to how Murch was regarded over the years by people who cared very much about art and movements or trends within art. It is not at all impossible that the flat, matter-of-fact titles of the last few years owe their genesis to the changed situation in American art, to the acceptance and popularity of object painting, to works such as Johns' Flashlight and Light Bulb or Dine's 4 C-Clamps. It is even possible that Murch's present relevance to American art owes its evidence to the impact of object painting. Beyond any doubt, Walter Murch has been painting a particular kind of object or machine for years, and the material belongs to him. His whole life demonstrates it. Even more important, however, he has been painting in a certain manner for a long while. He has had the facility, rare in the world today, to develop a wholly personal style while intellectually absorbing and responding to every major current in contemporary painting. Almost everything significant that has happened in art since the 1930's has played a role in the formation of Murch's painting. The so-called American regionalists and the Canadian Seven gave him his first appreciation of the power of art; the experience of Gorky's teaching gave him his fundamental idea of painting; Surrealism gave him some theories and a worldly education; Joseph Cornell indirectly gave him his concept of purpose; Abstract Expressionism allowed him to observe many of his feelings about art realized in the work of others, and to know with certainty that as sympathetic as he might be to its goals, he was already too formed and too personally committed to his own vision to become an obvious part of the newer tendency. It also directly enriched his painting techniques. Finally, Pop Art's focus on the banal or, more truly, object painting's resurrection of ordinary still-life subject matter has given him a chance to be recognized by the "fashionable" art world, for it has provided the mainstream context so frequently needed by critical writers.

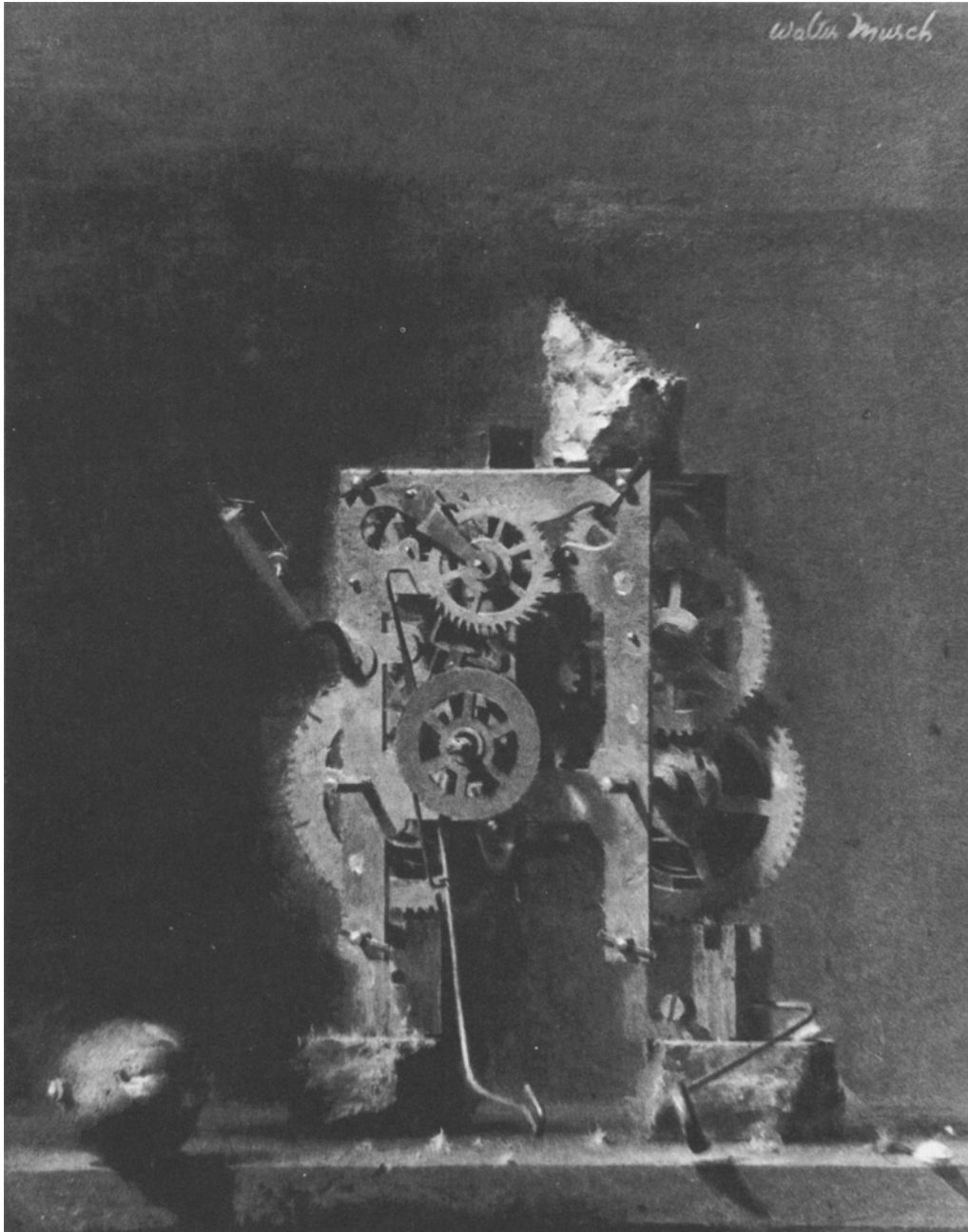
From about 1950 Murch began to enjoy a modest success and was gradually enabled to shed the onerous obligation of earning his livelihood through commercial or commissioned work. (It is worth noting, in passing, that there is an evident difference in quality between the commissioned work and the paintings that were exclusively for himself.) He was offered, and accepted, teaching jobs, first at Pratt Institute and New York University, then at Boston University and Columbia University. He began to be called on as a juror, for he became known as a man whose absolute honesty—intellectual as well as moral—and non-partisan judgment could be relied upon. These qualities have also imbued his teaching with surprising success and his students, disparate as they are, with an almost incredible loyalty—but a loyalty that does not encompass imitation.



SSBCO ca 1961 oil on canvas 24 x 18 inches

All of these things would not have happened had Murch not been Murch, a Canadian reared in Ontario. Although he has lived in the United States since 1927, and become an American citizen, he is the most significant Canadian painter since Tom Thomson. Although he would eschew the nationalist bent that was the flavor of the midtwenties when he was a student at Ontario College of Art, his province, his native city, Toronto, his family, formed him in just such a way that he, and only a few others, could pass through a lifetime of conflicting styles and not merely retain, but develop, a unique artistic personality.

In the Christian Science Monitor, October 26, 1965, Murch wrote: "I don't know how I got by with the things I thought. I was extremely slow, but that was reinforced by the people and life I had known in Canada and the widely held belief that no one had anything to say until he was forty. There, the idea of an apprenticeship had been accepted as the rule, and with it the assumption that when the time is right you'll have something to say. Although I was accepted in New York at twenty, the earlier belief was so firmly implanted that I continued working out my life as an apprentice until I reached my forties." This seems to be true not only of Murch but also of the objects he sees, the memories and impressions he recalls, the very thoughts that he utters. He is never satisfied with the incomplete and, no matter how slow or difficult, he will carefully build from the bottom up until each word, or sequence of logic, or brushstroke is in place.



The Clock 1950 Oil on illustration board 21 ½ x 16 ½

Murch's modesty is evident in his painting as in his life. Over and over he will stress, "I am only the artist" and "whatever interest I have in using an object is only an excuse for me to put down paint." He will talk about Vermeer or Chardin with the same admiration he has for Tworkov, Pollock, or Johns. He will attempt to analyze the formal frontality of earlier painting with the same intensity that he uses to explain why he likes to draw and paint on old wallpaper: because it is something in art and in life that started before him, something that he continues.

Perhaps he will take an important place in mid-20th-century painting. Chardin was admitted to the French Academy rather grudgingly as a painter of still life and genre. No

one thought there was anything heroic about what he did. Walter Murch, if academies still existed, might just get elected, for although he, too, has eschewed the heroic, he has persistently pursued and developed a personal vision, a vision that is always individual but contains the quality of a man and artist.

DANIEL ROBBINS