

GENTLEMAN

"THE GOOD INFLUENCE"

More than twenty years ago I began work on what would eventually become this painting, "The Good Influence." I had drawn it out completely and had prepared the paper for painting, but there was something strangely dissatisfying about it. So, without putting a brush to it, I simply packed it away. Years passed, but time and again this subject would haunt me, sometimes on its own, or at other times when I would come across the drawing in one of my portfolios.

When an idea has that kind of staying power, even intermittently, it is good to pay it more attention. Coming across it again last spring at a time when I had just finished a painting and had not yet begun another, I felt ready for it. But this time I saw what the problems were, and the solutions too. At last I could see what had been my source of dissatisfaction so many years before.

That first version was simply too small to inspire the kind of feeling that I had in mind. It needed to be larger, much larger, large enough for a viewer to more closely engage with it. The other problems had actually been virtues in disguise - its extreme simplicity, its pure and abstract facade blocking any kind of visual escape to a distant background and the completely closed nature of the building itself. These elements enhanced my idea of the rural simplicity of the "oldtime religion" which had made this subject so compelling in the first place. I redrew it twice the size of the first drawing and began painting at once, working every day. It was finished about a month later.

I wonder sometimes what took so long? But this was not just another country church, it was the portrait of a particular building with all the effects that time and weather and men could do. Its sheer simplicity dictated the importance of the character of each small element. The more I painted, the more true this became and the more I immersed myself into the painting.

I was fascinated with the whole idea of the fundamentalist view of things, of black and white, the whiteness of the facade and the dark interior behind it. The simplicity of the building itself, with its gothic refinements and its handmade feeling spoke of old country virtues especially in its present state of repair. I think this church had been abandoned in favor of a new building, but had not been neglected. For me, however, my painting also seemed to hint of an undercurrent of potential violence and the almost inevitable vandalism that seems to be the fate of so many abandoned rural structures.

you can see that someone has nailed a piece of plexiglass over the painted window to prevent unauthorized viewing of the interior

generous compliments. I was about to present to an audience of Mexicans, many of them experts, Scott's and my plan of the sacred religious precinct of Tenochtitlan called the Templo Mayor. Our plan was in many ways in conflict with the versions of the Templo Mayor offered by the model displayed at the National Museum of Anthropology and History and the model at the Templo Mayor Museum of Eduardo Matos. To further complicate matters it was now 7 o'clock in the evening. I had eaten only a snack before arriving at the gallery and had gotten no rest or rehearsal time to review my paper.

I had just spent the entire day from 9 o'clock in the morning on a dream tour of the major Aztec archaeological sites in and under the colonial buildings surrounding the Templo Mayor. All these places were off-limits to the public including me and had never been accessible for all the years that Scott and I had been students of Aztec culture. As a guest of Eduardo Matos and Barrera, the archaeologist actually in charge of the digs, I had just experienced an incredible roller coaster ride of finally being able to test our vision of the Templo Mayor with the actual excavations of structures we had only been able to guess at. So little information had been published.

It was a roller coaster ride because many of our speculations on the Templo Mayor were, as I have said, significantly at odds with the official Museum versions. Here on this morning while exploring under the great Cathedral of Mexico, the National Palace, the colonial house of the Marques de Apartado and other important sites, I saw with my own eyes definite confirmation of many of our ideas. But before I could pat Scott and myself on the back, I saw evidence that also contradicted elements of our plan and so much that was simply inconclusive. Such is usually the frustrating result of urban archaeology, especially in a great and busy place like downtown Mexico City.

As I prepared to deliver my paper in spanish just minutes before event I was only too keenly aware that there was no time to digest what I had seen that day or to make needed alterations in my presentation. I had to go straight through with my paper to an audience with Senor Barrera and colleagues in attendance, and other people to whom I was being introduced by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma himself and I no longer believed in some of the information I was presenting. My instincts told me not to deliver a warning caveat. That might negate much of the exciting confirmation