

Coby Whitmore

Ed Koehler Illustration 2

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American illustration changed dramatically during the postwar years. Both editorial and advertising art for magazines underwent a development toward graphic sensibilities played out in a direct and daring painting style. The illustrators who worked and flourished during the nineteen forties and fifties naturally built on the great art of the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, they blazed new trails in exciting ways.

Any number of illustrators could be cited as leading lights during the twenty or so years following the end of World War II but for me there is one who represents that era very well. Coby Whitmore, born Maxwell Coburn Whitmore, Jr., was born on June 13, 1913 in Dayton, Ohio.

Whitmore attended the Dayton Art Institute and by 1932 went to work for renowned Coca-Cola illustrator Haddon (Sunny) Sunblom as an unpaid apprentice. He also studied anatomy at the Art Institute of Chicago and studied under Charles Schroder and Edwin Henry. After his marriage to Virginia Comer, Whitmore went to work for the Chicago Herald-Examiner art department. By 1943 Coby was working at the Charles E. Cooper Studio in New York and from there he was off and running with assignments from Redbook, McCalls, The Saturday Evening Post and other leading magazines. Coby's exceptional skill lead him to a five year contract painting covers for Cosmopolitan. Whitmore also did advertising work for tobacco, soft drink, alcohol, automobile and airline clients, among others.

In a discussion as to what delineates between illustration and fine art, Whitmore's contribution was simple: "If it is done for reproduction, it's illustration; if it is done to hang on a wall, it's fine art." He did express his thoughts that one could be a competent draftsman and yet lack a certain appeal in their work. It is the "appeal" of Whitmore's work that attracts me. What I find particularly appealing are his composition and efficient brushwork. Coby's compositions have a design sensibility that still seems fresh. I find his editorial work more exciting than his advertising work. Editorial illustration, in contrast to advertising, tells, rather than sells. Creating intrigue is essential to the success of an editorial piece. Playing with composition, "shooting" from above, allowing environment to direct the eye, pushing color to affect the reader's mood are techniques Whitmore used with great skill.

Coby also maximized his painting by doing more with less. His gouache illustrations display particularly fine effects as that medium is perfect for a direct approach that minimizes the temptation to overwork a piece. Close examination of Whitmore's brush technique reveals a lot of information with seemingly little effort. A flat swathe of khaki for trousers is convincingly full of folds using a few strokes. A black silhouette of a suit coat pops from the hot pink wall that gives it form. He obviously grasped that painting thoughtfully with values is superior to filling every nook and cranny with every color in the box.

Coby Whitmore wasn't the only artist doing these things. Jon Whtcomb, Al Parker, Lynn Buckham, and many others were doing equally exciting work. I would be thrilled to gaze over the shoulder of any of these fine illustrators. This period saw great advances in the art of storytelling with a brush. Coby Whitmore is always one of the first to come to mind when I consider the work that poured from the late forties into the early sixties. The strange mixture of postwar confidence and angst was told with powerful beauty by masters like Coby Whitmore.

I admire everything about Whitmore's handling of an assignment. In addition to his economy and direct approach more must be said about his compositions and "stage settings". The painting to the left is a remarkable example of directed tension. The woman dominates the scene, but more importantly, she becomes a road map to the hunched man clasping his hands.



Follow her feet, whose shapes form a white arrow (the negative space between them) up her legs, through the orange chair. The purple scarf forms another arrow to her provocative hands and face, with her left hand directing us to the horizontal orange chair that borders the man. He is revealed only as a set of hands and feet. Bold, gray

shadows underscore the mystery and the tension pulsates in those tightly clasped hands.

Who is he? What does he want? What has he done? Is he begging, praying? In despair? This is storytelling at its finest. It is also color at its finest. The scheme is almost split-complimentary. I say almost, because the third color would be green, but here it is cool gray. It is a simple scheme used to great effect. The hot orange chairs form a visual left turn (aided by that well-placed hand) to the mystery man. Simply elegant.

The painting to the right reveals the same intelligent thinking and careful execution (no pun intended, given the subject matter). The victim is sprawled on the floor in a crucifixion pose. The bent legs parallel the shape of the chair with a black shoe pointing us to another mystery man. Again, a tight male hand grasping. Did he do it? Did he find her? Does that hand reveal shock or remorse or revenge? We get a hint from the green shoes barely noticed on the right. Is he the one who did it, leaving the man on the chair in agony? Or is he the cop accusing the caught and defeated murderer? I surely don't know, and that's the beauty of Whitmore. He was a master of crafty storytelling. This is high drama and intrigue at its best. All iced up nicely with a garish, hot color scheme. The main color fields are analogous; salmon to red to light purple, one next to the other on the color wheel, broken only by bits of cool green and blues. The neutrals of the skin serve more as negative spaces fleshing out this terrible scene.



These two pieces display Whitmore's intellectual prowess as much as his painting skill. He doesn't give the story away; he makes me want to read these stories. I want to know what these men did, or didn't do. I'm fascinated that Whitmore made each of these paintings about a

person who is revealed only by hands and feet. The women, while wonderfully painted, are, amazingly, not the main event. They are beautiful maps directing our eyes to the heart of the matter, to the troubled souls suggested only by their barely revealed body language. I could stare at these paintings for hours and learn more than if I read volumes of technical literature. That is why I believe Coby Whitmore was one of the greatest illustrators of the twentieth century. He wasn't singularly great, but he was, in my opinion, second to none.

Coby Whitmore died at Hilton Head Island, South Carolina in 1988 at the age of 75.

Biographical information, including the quote on illustration v. fine art, was derived from Illustration magazine, published by Dan Zimmer in St. Louis, MO

Thoughts and opinions on Whitmore and his work, techniques and theories were deduced by me, by observing his paintings. I am fully responsible for these opinions. No part of this essay was copied or borrowed, other than the aforementioned biographical information and quote.

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