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## A Tribute to Paul Cadmus

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## Appreciation

### A Tribute to Paul Cadmus

Philip Eliasoph

After his customary afternoon walk down a country lane in Weston, Connecticut, Paul Cadmus died quietly at home during the evening of December 12, 1999, without any illness other than advancing age. He was five days short of his ninety-fifth birthday. Two weeks earlier at a private birthday bash at the DC Moore Gallery on Fifth Avenue, more than three hundred friends and colleagues had showered him with praise.

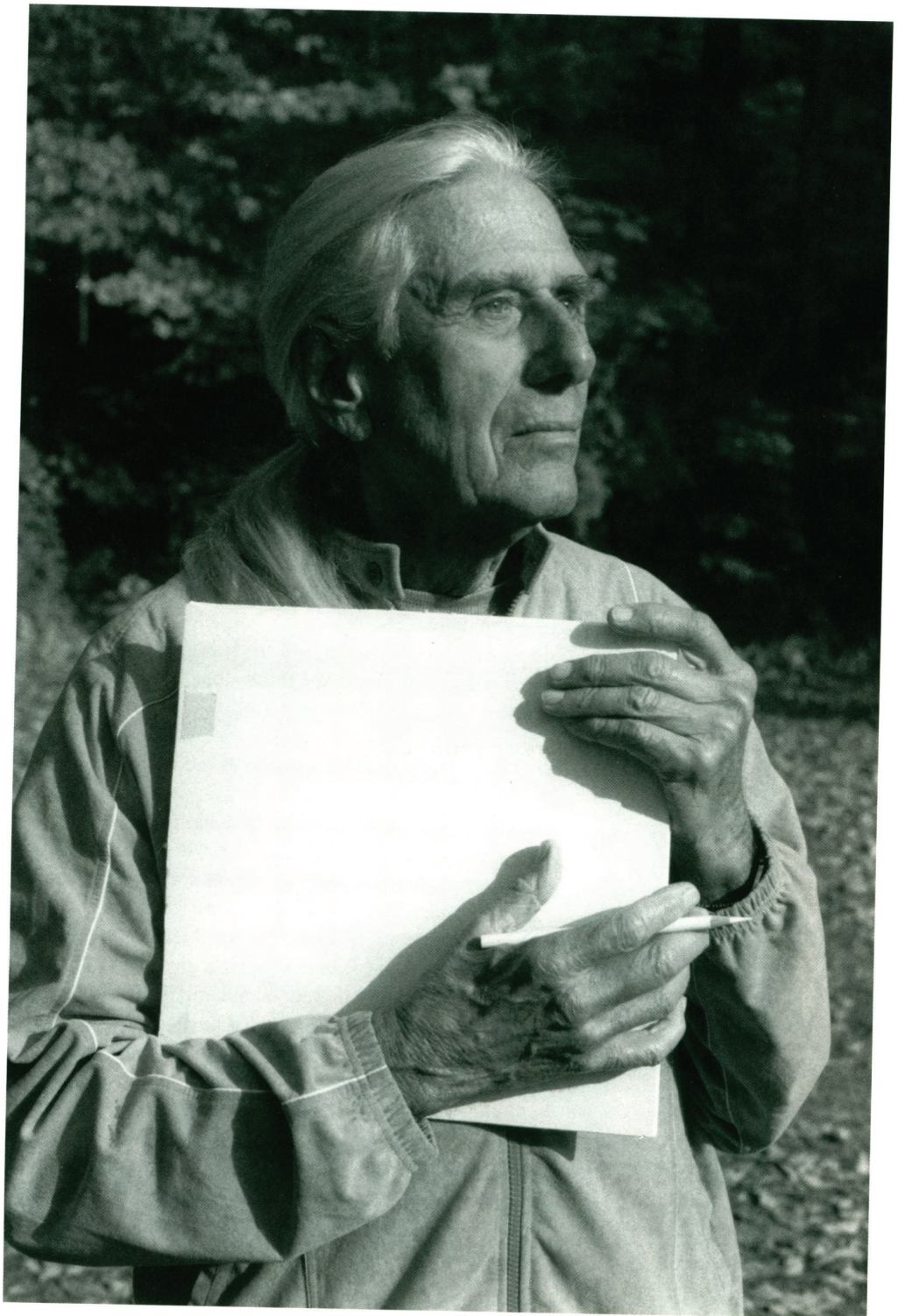
Two days before his death, Paul Cadmus, his companion of thirty-five years, Jon Anderson, my wife, and I had also celebrated Paul's birthday over lunch at a French bistro in Fairfield, a short drive from Weston. On the occasion Paul was insouciantly dressed, his signature purple silk handkerchief tucked in his breast pocket. His thick white hair fell over his shoulders, and his clear blue eyes shone. His features were rugged and handsome. He told us that the doctor had said there was nothing medically wrong with him. Nevertheless, he acknowledged his mortality—"all the fuss it will needlessly cause others." He was also worried about his inability to perform daily chores and flustered about "not being able to thank everyone appropriately."

Over two and a half decades, I had come to know Paul as an unfailingly cordial and generous friend and mentor. I first learned of his work in an art history seminar when my professor had shown Cadmus's prescient painting *Playground* (1948). Jolted by the adolescent rage depicted in it, which would preview by more than a decade the gang violence of the Broadway musical *West Side Story*, I knew immediately that I would write my doctoral thesis on Paul Cadmus. Several weeks after the class, I climbed the five flights of a Brooklyn Heights brownstone to be greeted warmly at the top landing by a radiant Mr. Cadmus.

Over the years our conversations generally turned to Italian Renaissance art. Since Paul and Jon were unwilling to fly, they had not been to Europe since the 1980s. Therefore, during my frequent visits to Italy, I had sent Paul postcards of various details from Luca Signorelli's masterpiece, the Orvieto Cathedral frescoes. From the postcards Paul arranged a Signorelli collage on his bulletin board, with overlapping lute-playing angels, whip-snapping demons, and flayed skeletons. I also searched for postcards of fragmentary images of any Piero della Francesca painting or fresco I could find. In particular, I looked for details of faces, for example, of the Queen of Sheba or the risen Christ. Paul often wondered: "Why did Piero paint the eyes off kilter, with the left one usually dipped below a level horizontal plane?"

Sometimes we discussed recent exhibitions Paul had seen in the Northeast. He was enthralled by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1999 survey of Ingres's portraiture ("all

Roger Arvid Anderson, *Paul  
Cadmus*, 1993. Silver gelatin  
print



Paul Cadmus, *A Night in Bologna*, 1958. Egg tempera on fiberboard, 129 x 89 cm (50 ½ x 35 ⅛ in.) Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Sara Roby Foundation

pure reason and lucidity”) and expressed satisfaction at seeing drawings exhibited at the Frick Collection and the Morgan Library. Our “art talks” usually ended with Paul pointing out details he had discovered in a Caravaggio, Jean-Léon Gérôme, or Thomas Eakins painting in a current museum exhibition.

Discussions about contemporary trends were pointless. Paul was uninterested in twentieth-century movements and declared himself beyond the boundaries of any avant-garde. Yet he was a paradox, au courant on a number of progressive political and cultural issues, while unequivocally rejecting the modernist ethos. A master of academic realism, he aspired to be a “good literary painter” who depicted complex human scenarios with the economy of an E. M. Forster novel. Paul knew almost every word of his English friend’s short novels by heart. Along with fellow artists Jared French and George Tooker, Cadmus lived and worked in obscurity in Greenwich Village during the 1940s and 1950s, unfazed by Manhattan’s burgeoning action painting.

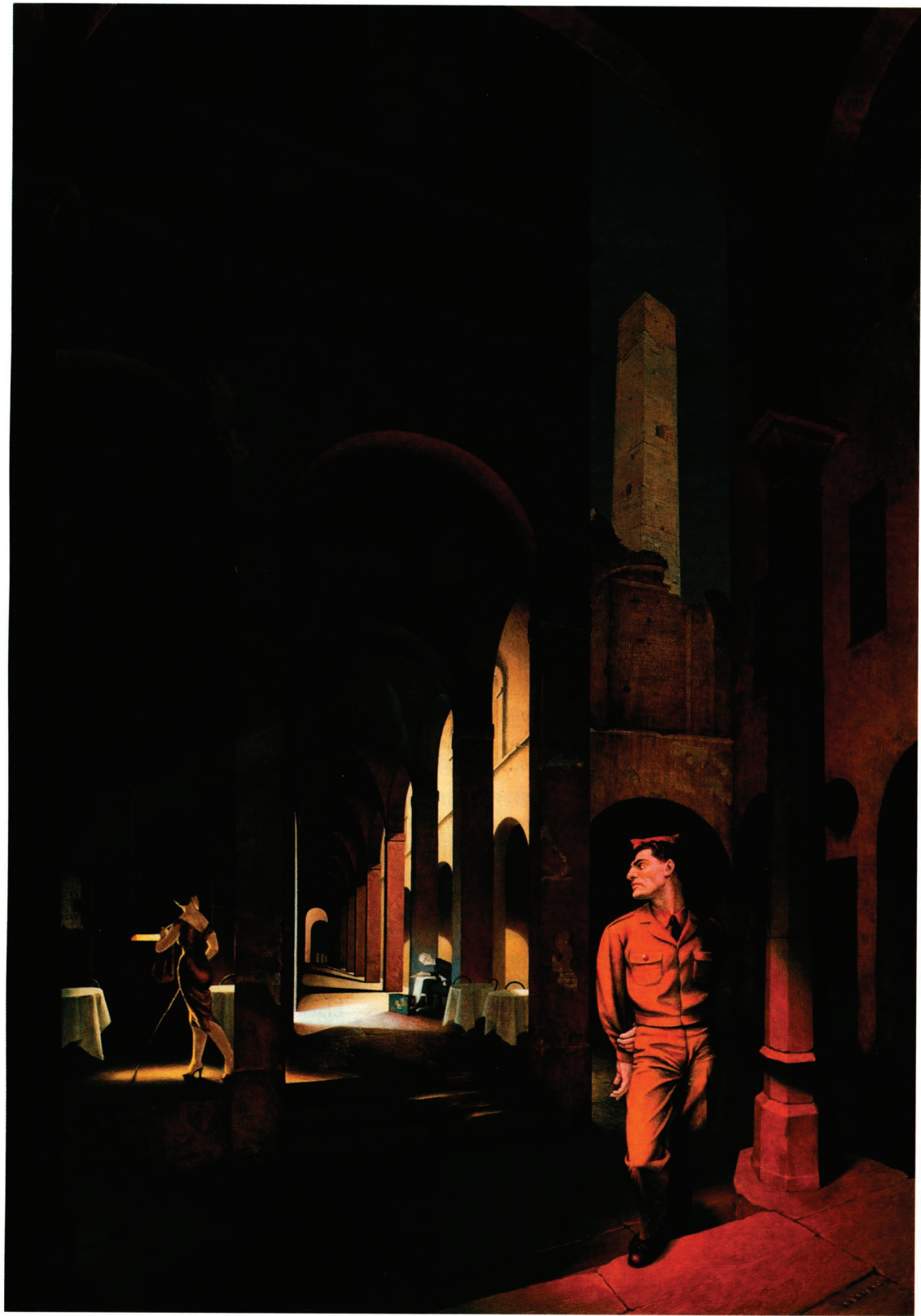
He believed that “overproduction was the characteristic vice of the modern artist.” During a long life of uninterrupted labor, he signed fewer than 130 paintings. After 1941 he employed the painstaking Renaissance painting technique of egg tempera and finished an average of two paintings a year. In his 1945–49 series *The Seven Deadly Sins*, influenced by Giotto, Bosch, and Bruegel, he reduced humanity’s malevolence to seven harrowing panels. These unforgettable paintings symbolically link the fears of the medieval mind with the apocalyptic realities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

More than a decade earlier, in April 1934, Cadmus had been thrust unexpectedly into the nation’s front-page headlines. He was the enfant terrible at the eye of a censorship storm with Washington, D.C.’s Corcoran Gallery of Art. The Corcoran had organized a highly publicized exhibition sponsored by the New Deal-funded Works Project Administration. Commissioned by the Public Works of Art Project, which was folded into the WPA, his painting *The Fleet’s In!* exploded like a bomb in a comedic opera. U.S. Navy admirals fulminated, newspaper editorials and cartoons chortled, and Cadmus, who was being paid \$29 a week by the federal government, delighted in becoming a household celebrity overnight.

He was burned at the stake of public opinion for portraying uniformed American sailors on shore leave. His trenchant social satire catches them carousing with prostitutes and participating in a homosexual pickup. He had often observed “young farm boys in Signorellian skintight uniforms” on New York’s West Side piers beginning their weekend leave, assisted by cheap bathtub gin and predatory hookers. “I never intended to shock anyone. I was merely expressing the shock I felt watching this debauchery,” he explained. “As an unknown artist at the time, I benefited from the censorship controversy—and I am eternally grateful to that offended admiral.”

The murky legal matters surrounding the scuttled painting came to my attention decades later. Apparently, President Roosevelt’s cousin, Henry Latrobe Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the Navy, lifted the offending work from its hook at the Corcoran and sequestered it in his home. At his death in 1936, the painting was bequeathed to an elite all-male bastion, the Alibi Club. For more than forty years, the painting was installed over a fireplace mantle in the club’s I Street townhouse.

In 1980, threatening to send in federal marshals to reclaim government property, a group (including myself) wanting to mount a Cadmus retrospective, along with lawyers and General Services Administration representatives—stewards of WPA-era artworks—liberated the painting from the club’s posh prison. There could be no greater satisfaction in my career than standing next to Paul in 1981 when he was finally reunited with his painting at his first and only career retrospective, which was organized by Miami University Art Museum in Oxford, Ohio. He was seventy-six years old. “The last time I



actually saw *The Fleet's In!* was when I delivered it to Juliana Force [regional head of the Public Works of Art Project and director of the Whitney Museum of American Art] at the old Whitney Museum [in Greenwich Village] in March of 1934," he sighed.

Curator and director of the Whitney from 1935 to 1971, Lloyd Goodrich wrote a foreword to the exhibition catalogue. Goodrich concluded that "this first full-scale retrospective exhibition is a much-needed presentation of one of our most individual and gifted artists." After its Oxford debut, the show traveled to five museums around the country.

Pinned above my desk is a photomontage from the "American Art" entry of the 1941 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which included images of "Famous Paintings by Modern American Artists." Cadmus was represented in the august company of Grant Wood, Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry. Yet the arts literature between 1945 and 1980 contains scanty discussion of him. How could an artist who had attained impeccable credentials—major museum purchases, representation in a string of Whitney Museum annuals, record-breaking attendance of more than seven thousand visitors to his first one-man show in 1937—have vanished into thin air? His near invisibility might help to explain the miniature painting *Dancer* (1945), which is less than two inches square. "I suppose I must have felt like disappearing at the time," he said. What had contributed to this disappearance was the New York art world's dramatic shift during the postwar years toward an anti-academic, pro-abstractionist stance. The arrival of abstract expressionism eclipsed this magic realist master of Renaissance-inspired Florentine *bel disegno* and École des Beaux-Arts methods of life drawing.

During a playful conversation, I once asked Paul: "What if you were at the retrospective and there was a fire, and you could snatch one painting to rescue from the flames?" He responded quickly, "*Night in Bologna* is the summa of my career." Painted in 1958, it synthesizes every element of Cadmus's allegorical, narrative-driven imagery. Powerful sexual and psychic tension locks three people in a triangle resembling Piero's *Flagellation*, the image he considered "the most perfect painting in the world." *Night in Bologna* depicts a farce of miscalculated seductions. An Italian soldier yearns for a curvaceous female hooker; she, in turn, tries to seduce a crewcut American tourist (Cadmus?), while he gazes back at the Italian man with envy.

Cadmus experienced renewed appreciation late in life, justly attributed to the greater tolerance about sexual orientation in the last decades of the twentieth century. He said to me: "If only my works could become better known without me as a personality becoming better known, then I could enjoy my enlarged reputation more than I do." Though never hiding his homosexuality, Paul was often torn between public and private issues of sexual intimacy versus politics. Instinctively, he fought intolerance by donating his valued drawings to AIDS benefits and by receiving honorary awards on behalf of numerous gay alliances.

He denounced "the labeling of artists—black artists, women artists," and loathed terms such as "gay composer Tchaikovsky, anti-Semitic composer Wagner" and called labels "a kind of gossip." He declared, "Gayness is not the *raison d'être* of my work." He pleaded to those engaged on the frontlines of militant gender politics to respect that he was from a generation for which reticence and discretion signaled an unspoken ethical code. And he thought that we should keep our attention focused on what really matters—the art.

In an idiosyncratic career that spanned seven decades, Paul Cadmus endowed his paintings, drawings, and etchings with his remarkable vitality. Equally at home with American bohemians, English intellectuals, and guardians of the grand tradition of the French Académie des Beaux-Arts, he should be regarded as the most overlooked major American artist of the twentieth century. For me, the words of Thomas Eakins, another exemplar of academic realism, best captures, albeit sadly, the spirit of Paul Cadmus: "My honors are misunderstanding, persecution, and neglect, enhanced because unsought."