

Seton Hall University

eRepository @ Seton Hall

The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian
Studies Vol. III

The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

1958

Abraham Rattner, Painter of Anguish

Barry Ulanov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/jcs-bridge-III>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

ABRAHAM RATTNER, PAINTER OF ANGUISH

THE modern painter is like a man on tiptoe. He hovers over objects, looking always for a new point of view, usually over the heads of others and often over his own. His is no longer the perspective, so hard won, of the Renaissance, of Alberti, of Piero della Francesca, of Mantegna. His is rather a point of view at once remote from the things seen and very close to their centers.

The modern painter is a formalist, a man deeply respectful of the tools and materials he uses. He has anatomized media and genres to the extent that every change of thickness in a line, of degree in a circle, of tone in a color, speaks urgent meanings to him. For the perceptions that have come to him in the course of such rigorous analysis of all that is involved in the process of painting, he has relinquished the skills which once enabled painters to reproduce the world of objects with photographic accuracy.

The painter of our time has given up much that was discovered and developed in the past. But he has also recaptured an understanding of the nature of his art that is really of a high order of wisdom. He has learned once again that a painter deals in surfaces; he knows once more that his is a two-dimensional picture plane. This is something we must concede to the modern artist. We must recognize with him that the visual arts are confined for all practical purposes to two dimensions, length and width. We realize, of course, that paints have depth and that a canvas, as indeed everything that exists in space in this atmosphere, has three dimensions. But what we see in the reconstructions of the painter is reduced to flatness, the flatness of two dimensions which can be destroyed or emancipated by the imagination. Either our eye is tricked into seeing the world as we normally experience it, in three dimensions, in elaborate perspective, or we go beyond the familiar and common objects to that world of inner values with which the

contemporary painter is so much concerned.¹ We understand his "need to see an equilibrium of color—design—form . . . to create a something which becomes a kind of crystallization of his spirit-feeling," as Abraham Rattner expresses it. We make an effort, then, to understand the process of abstracting this equilibrium, of creating this *something*, "out of the nature, the God created one—without going back to old ways if new means help in revealing the deeper meanings in new found clarity, simplicity, strength."²

The purposes of such a painter as Abraham Rattner are more metaphysical than physical. The world he seeks to sketch, to build up in color and line, is not made up, he tells us in his journals, of "the physical values which exist in the real world of nature." He does not direct his gaze at all to the details that give an object its external life; he is much concerned with showing "how he saw the object, without necessarily showing everything pertaining to the object." For him, "no two artists will see the same object in the same way." And so he exclaims: "Long live the artist's freedom!" His is, then, "a reality which is deeper than that which our eyes and our capacities to weigh and measure can grasp." His reality, he tells us, is "in back of the shadows."

In his search for inner reality, Rattner has been at war for a long time with what he calls "the oppression of reality." He sees man crippled by a consciousness of time and space, and an empty and al-

1. Inner values have always been the concern of painters. But painters whose work has been confined to the data of the senses, or the dictates of the conventionalized imagination, have not often penetrated beneath surfaces or enabled their viewers to do so. The revelation of the individual at work in the painting has not been profound in a hunting scene, for example, or a narrative of nymphs in a forest glade. The modern artist, concerned with form as a means of releasing the figures and fragments of his artistic consciousness, conducts a constant battle against the imprisoning forces of the unmodulated senses and the unexplored imagination. For a brief but excellent examination of this burden of the painter, see Conrad Fiedler, *On Judging Works of Art*, trans. Henry Schaefer-Simmern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), iii, 54-56, written in 1876 but altogether apposite to this discussion today.

2. Most of the quotations from Abraham Rattner in this article are taken from the introduction by Allen S. Weller in the portfolio that accompanies twenty-four full-page reproductions of Rattner's work, issued in 1956 by the University of Illinois Press, to commemorate a two-year period during which the artist was in residence at the University. The two statements by Rattner are parts of an enunciation of artistic creed, a text that accompanies an architectural drawing (no. 12 of the full-page reproductions) and appears once again on the cover of the slipcase in which the portfolio and single pages are bound. The commas in these quotations have been added.

most meaningless search for material perfection: "The beautiful actualities of a world already outgrown and passed by new necessities and new ideas, are not to be indulged in for very long—unless we take them as directing forces for the future, not as drugs or escapist things, but to make us more intense and alive and aware for the new world looming up all around us." But, he cautions, "the dreaming of a future may also be an escapism." We must realize that "everything is *now*. The constant *now*. No time in spirit."³

Thus Rattner sets out on his several journeys, his attempts to catch at the very least adumbrations of the "constant *now*." Time is always the present for Rattner, and in time he is always seeking and finding, seeking to turn the outside inside and discovering the real world within. With the discovery, it becomes his task to make some coherent transformation that will turn the inside outside once again so that in the reality of matter the reality of the spirit will be revealed. It is almost as if he were following the hard, clear, and beautiful prescription of Franz Rosenzweig and of a passage from Deuteronomy that Rosenzweig quotes. Man, the philosopher says, "may act according to the requirements of the world as it is today. That day, the day when action is required, lets him understand what he must perform. The realm of time is the proper arena for his action. He does not need to wait until truth has risen from the depths. Truth waits for him; it stands before his eyes, it is 'in thy heart and in thy mouth,' within grasping distance; 'that thou mayst do it'" (Deut 30:14).⁴ Hence it

3. Quoted in Weller, *ibid.*, pp. 6, 4, 8. The same point about the perils of a literal-minded representation of the world of objects is made by many contemporary painters. The late Fernand Leger was particularly eloquent in his dissection of this approach to painting:

"'What does that represent?' has no meaning. For example: With a brutal lighting of the fingernail of a woman—a modern fingernail, well manicured, very brilliant, shining—I make a movie on a very large scale. I project it enlarged a hundredfold, and I call it—'Fragment of a Planet, Photographed in January, 1934.' Everybody admires my planet. Or I call it 'abstract form.' Everybody either admires it or criticizes it. Finally I tell the truth—what you have just seen is the nail of the little finger of the woman sitting next to you."

"Naturally, the audience leaves, vexed and dissatisfied, because of having been fooled, but I am sure that hereafter those people won't ask any more of me and won't repeat that ridiculous question: 'What does that represent?'" (From a talk given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935, quoted in *Artists on Art*, ed. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, New York: Pantheon, 1945, pp. 424-425.)

4. Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*, trans. T. Luckman, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York: Noonday, 1953), p. 81, a translation of *Das Büchlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand*, written in 1921,

is that Rattner draws his figures in prayer, in ecstasy, "within grasping distance" of truth: hands clenched and beating upon the breast, or open and imploring; faces trussed in heavy binding lines that proscribe clear expression, but not ecstasy; feet biting the ground, almost fighting it. Thus does Rattner fix the emotions of his figures, in attitude and gesture and grimace, in ecstasy or in anguish, or both.

The anguish of Rattner's people is that of Moses in contemplation of God, of Job in prayer, of Christ on the cross. There are other figures in Rattner's world; they all seem to be arrested in the midst of their reliving of the Passion, all the clearest analogues to the crucified Christ, all suspended one way or another from a cross.

A reason for the persistent impression one has in Rattner's work of the imagery of crucifixion is the way he has chosen to model his figures. They are almost all unalterably fixed in place with the rigidity of figures of mosaic or stained glass. They move with the angularity of the men and women who people the initials of medieval bibles and lend drama to their margins.

Rattner's Moses and Job are so squared and flattened in space, their limbs so stiffly articulated, that their necks appear to be broken and their heads set at right angles to their bodies. The effect of this sort of anatomy is not grotesque, however, or in any way crudely primitive. It is rather a further acting out of anguish: The broken neck makes almost irresistible comparison with Christ bent in agony on the cross. And certainly, as one contemplates the three great figures, one sees unmistakably a continuity of gesture and an equilibrium of meaning, though Christ's head bends downward and Moses' and Job's go up.

There is more to grasp than a continuity from one of Rattner's

eight years before Rosenzweig died. For this Jewish philosopher of existence, words have a concrete function much like Rattner's "equilibrium of color—design—form"; they inaugurate a line of inquiry which starts with some thing and ends with no thing—with God: "The language of the individual, so far merely a personal world, begins to blend into the language of a people, and in turn the language of a people blends into that of mankind. And things are drawn along in the wake of this movement, proceeding from the single object designated in the Here and Now toward a more highly integrated world-order, toward the ultimate order" (*ibid.*, pp. 79-80). In his emphasis on the present, Rattner is indeed very close to Rosenzweig's thought: Man, says the philosopher, "is in possession of the moment and so he has everything" (p. 77). "The proper time then," he concludes, "is the present—today." But "to avail himself of today, man must, for better or worse, put his trust in God" (p. 81).

works to another. The line of congruence reaches back, beyond Rattner, bluntly and brilliantly, to one medieval work after another. For example, a most persuasive comparison can be made with the illustrations of the twelfth-century Winchester Bible. There one sees in the Elisha receiving the mantle of Elijah the head of Rattner's Moses; in the David slaying the bear and the lion (see 1 Kg 17:34-36), and in an initial for the Book of Micah, an opposite number of the frightened, pleading Job, in wilderness and depth of feeling.⁵ One finds these figures again in a fourth-century Moses in the catacombs of San Callisto in Rome, for example, where Rattner's kind of heavily sculptured face appears, and his color too.⁶

It is not necessary to insist upon influences; it is important to see the resemblances. With the early Christians and those of the middle period, with the artists of the Roman catacombs and Byzantine mosaic and twelfth-century English bibles, he has in common the ecstatic view within. Like his suitably anonymous counterparts, Rattner shells and husks, removing from the world its familiar surfaces, making it fresh again to look at, to contemplate. In this way his drawings and paintings do not merely evoke the past; they confirm the universality of its artistic *habitus*.

With such a goal and such an achievement, why such anguish? The answer is simple enough: "Self-realization and self-sacrifice go together." He says he wants "only the created work that comes out of a searching, introspective vision . . . art which questions our time, our way of life, our human qualities—of the low so-called degraded as well as the lofty, the aspiring, the noble."⁷

The means are the means of faith, the means of the spirit: "With much hard work, sacrifice of one's time, largeness of mind and great warmth of heart, the inner sensibilities will manifest themselves into an appreciation that will surpass all understanding. A painting if it is achieved at all is made with the help of God. It is as inexplicable as a flower, the song of a bird, electricity, atomic power, or love." It is a work, Rattner tells us, of "metaphoric transfiguration," the result of

5. See *The Artists of the Winchester Bible*, ed. Walter Oakeshott (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), plates III, XX, XXI, XLII, XLIII.

6. See *The Bible in Art* (New York: Phaidon, 1956), plate 109, Moses striking water from the rock, and the detail of the fresco, reproduced in color following plate 112.

7. Quoted in Weller, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

the painter's mingling with the world about him, moving "sleep-walker like, in and through and with the forces of [the world's] reality, submitting to the experiences with the deep and terrifying forces of its inner spirit, of its magnitude, at once overpowering, sustaining, and elevating—demanding and creating in him courage and faith. Then when he finds himself in the pit—in the arena—the spectator as well as the gladiator, before a frightening spectacle, at once terrifying and magnificent, how can he help the manifestation of his terror, wonder, anguish, stupefaction and suffering?"⁸

One easily understands helplessness in the face of such experience. One may not so easily grasp the transformation—or, even more, the transfiguration—of existence in the colors and lines and flattened dimensions of a modern artist. There is so much one must give up to do so: the conventions of perspective and photographic representation, the niceties of innocuous landscape and inoffensive still life, the pleasant superficialities of portraits that stay safely on the outside. There is so much one must take on: the contemplation of inner realities, the humiliation of outer failures, the broken neck symbolic of the Crucified. These are the losses and gains of Rattner's world; these are the things one sees, this is what one becomes, standing on tiptoe, hovering over objects, with this painter of the anguished.

RATTNER'S WORLDS

THE inhabitants of Rattner's paintings come directly from Rattner's world, or rather his several concentric worlds with their single axis of anguish.⁹ One world, as one might expect of a painter of our time,

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

9. Fashions in philosophy, particularly those which give to a few words or a whole vocabulary a specialized meaning, tend to rob the very words which become fashionable of any meaning at all, special or general. Such a word is "anguish" as it has been inflected by followers of *Existenzphilosophie*, and especially by those who follow the coinage, if not the thinking, of Martin Heidegger. It is not used here in its fashionable or cocktail-party appropriation, meaning almost nothing, nor in Heidegger's sense of an inescapable emptiness, the void which is the inevitable metaphor of an objectless existence, an existence without essence. Anguish, as one finds it portrayed in Rattner, is the result of incompleteness, of a lack of fulfillment for which there is an answering potency at the very least. The direction of the "moment" in his paintings, the impulse underlying the "constant now," is toward eternity, a permanent existence which will answer the anguish by removing its cause. In these portraits of the anguished, then, there is a religious

is Paris, the Paris of painters: the Beaux-Arts and other academies whose acquaintance he made as the result of a traveling fellowship granted him by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1919; friendship with Picasso and Braque, Miró and Derain and Leger, and other painters whose acquaintance he made and whose respect he won, particularly after his first one-man show in Paris in 1934; the close companionship of men in other arts, notably Henry Miller, with whom he traveled across the United States, when both returned to this country from France, in 1940. With these painters of Paris Rattner has in common an intensity of color and of line that may equally elicit torment or delight in the viewer.

Another of Rattner's worlds is that of the city and the city planner. He was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, and was interested at an early age in architecture, engineering, and city planning. Before going on to study as a painter at the Corcoran School in Washington, the Pennsylvania Academy, and Paris, he spent a year and a half at the George Washington University School of Architecture. The influence remains a significant one. He continues to make architectural drawings, although allegorized. He continues to plan cities of man in which the salubrious elements are contributed by architects and artists and window cleaners, although the wiping clean is accomplished by figures who are not quite human. Are they figures of love, of mercy? At least it is clear that they do God's work.

But whether in the city, in the grime and clutter of a "stock yard of people, gathered in multitudes devouring each other, like the trees in the forest, each keeping the sunlight from the other," or out in the open sun on a Long Island farm or at the sea, on Martha's Vineyard, his people, his city, his land, and his sea are generally incomplete, unfulfilled, in anguish. One fulfillment is at hand, overhead, just beyond: Redemption. Over and over, Rattner returns to this theme, the theme of fulfillment. His contribution to the Artists for Victory exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1942 was, appropriately enough, a "Descent from the Cross." In 1943, he painted a "Jewelled Christ," in which the terms are clear. At such a time, he said, "facing a second world war, I could not be an escapist painter. . . . The jewels are selfishness and the figure of Christ represents self-

content which is entirely missing from the nexus of nullities which chains Heidegger's world.

lessness."¹⁰ His Martha's Vineyard "Fisherman" is of Galilee as well. He has engraved a portion of the crowd watching the Crucifixion, painted "Christ and Two Soldiers," and more than one Pietà and Crucifixion. The crowning figure of Abraham Rattner's painting, in every medium, with any matter, is anguish personified, anguish typified, anguish redeemed.¹¹

RATTNER'S THEME

THERE are many ways to discover this central theme in Rattner's work. One can inspect a variety of his paintings when he exhibits, as he does regularly, at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in New York. One can examine his paintings in the permanent collections of museums seriously concerned with modern art in this country and abroad. One can sift through old programs of his shows and group exhibitions of which he has been a part, and look up articles by him or about him. But most important, obviously, is to be confronted by the paintings themselves. This is an opportunity which, fortunately, one can have today outside the precincts of the museum as well as within them. The voices of silence are eloquent indeed in the portfolio and full-page reproductions, so handsomely produced by the University of Illinois. While hardly cumulative, in range of subject matter or technique, for a career as long-lived and many-sided as Rattner's, this collection does offer a more than casual introduction to the artist. Here one is confronted by him, boldly, clearly, arrestingly, in pictures and in words. Together, the texts and reproductions make a remarkably satisfying journal of an artist, with excellent glosses and connecting rhetoric contributed by Allen S. Weller. The monolithic drawing of a hand that supports Rattner's patriarchal name, Abraham, on the large title page

10. Abraham Rattner, "An American from Paris," *Magazine of Art*, XXXVIII, 8 (December 1945), p. 312.

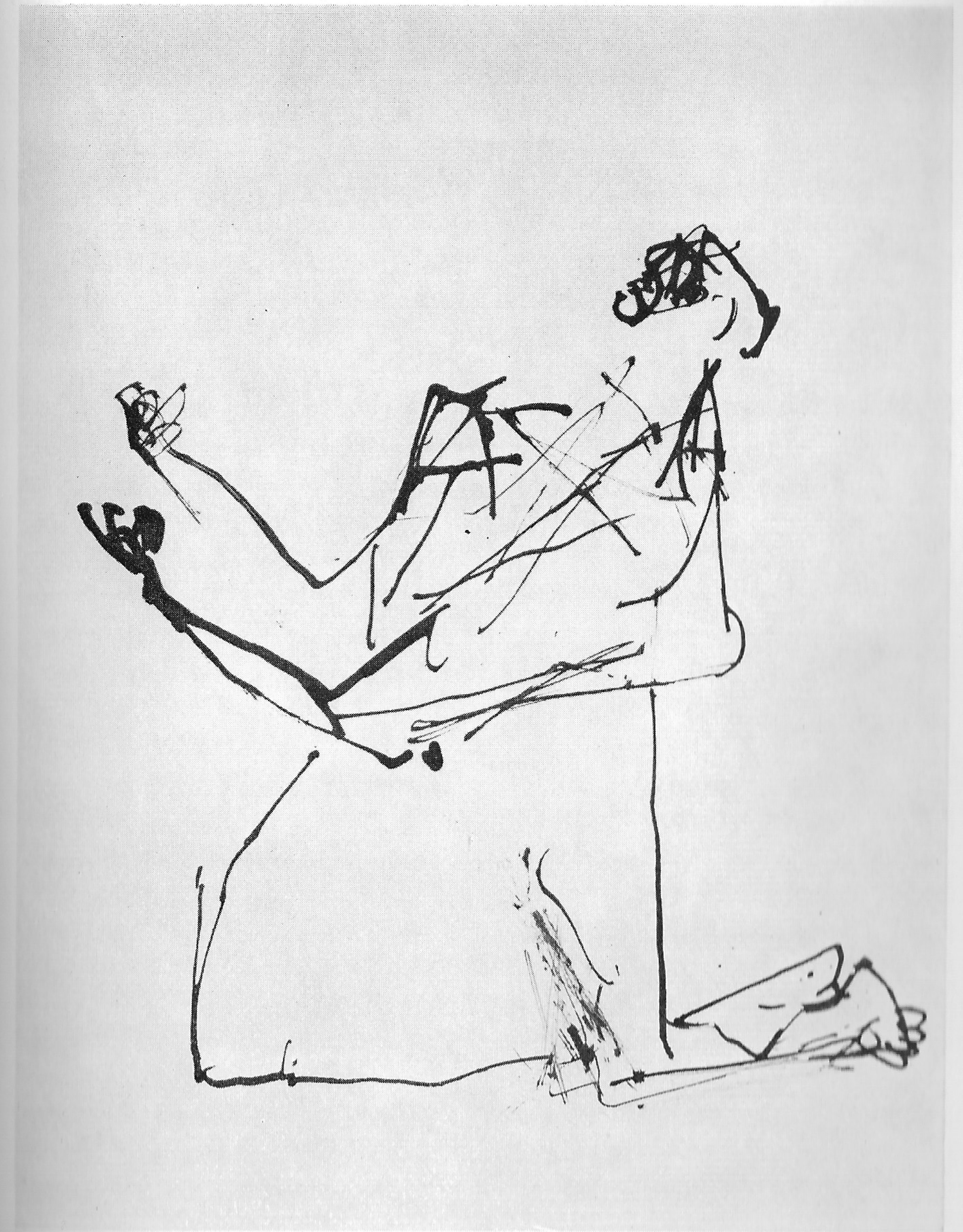
11. Abraham Rattner, then, combats the element of vacancy that the modern philosophers of existence call *Angst*, "anguish" or "anxiety," or *Nichts*, "nullity." It is a combat through compassion, for which the most suitable iconography, obviously, is the Crucifixion and the Pietà, the redemptive work of Christ. All that is missing is the transfigured Christ, and with Him a transfigured humanity. There is in Rattner's thinking and painting more of the immanent God than of the transcendent. He offers much to Christians in his plastic meditations on the indwelling God. But the ultimate fulfillment, though not outside the reach of his visionary subjects, seems still to elude him. He is not, after all, a Christian painter, though so often a painter of Christ.

of the portfolio, speaks well, speaks accurately, for the whole project. It is open, candid; it has elements of grandeur; it possesses qualities of the sculptural and the architectural.

Necessarily, with a painter so articulate in words, one thinks of other arts as one examines these skillfully made reproductions of pencil sketches, pen and ink as well as brush and ink drawings, washes and oils. The texts are supplied by Rattner himself on occasion: a poem, more interesting for its calligraphy than its contents, celebrating the journey through America with Miller; a prophet's head fully equipped with prophetic utterance; an architectural drawing translated and expanded, verbally, into a philosophy of art. The other arts come directly from Rattner's lines and blocks of color. Sometimes his figures are so close to those of a sculptor they seem to be hammered and clawed and chiseled out of their settings of paper and paint. The colors, as others have remarked, are cut and shaped and planed like the panes of stained glass in a Romanesque or Gothic church; and this is as true of the chunky fragments that make up the "Composition with Old Shoes" (1956) as it is of the fine mesh of the "Study for Window Cleaner" (1954), the diamond-shaped prisms of "Job" (1950), the precisely serrated and segmented "Farmscape" or the similarly geometrical "Moses," both painted in 1955.

Other arts, other worlds. There are in this collection several styles, several sets of themes. In the earlier work, notably "Skaters" (1930), "Adam and Eve" (1945), and the evocations in pen and brush and ink of the 1940 trip, one sees a thread of influence or parallel conviction that draws Rattner into line with the generality of artists of our time, his teachers, his friends, his associates. In the later pieces, those of the last ten years, an identity leaps forth from the pages, not a new one perhaps, but a more meditative one, and, because more reflective, more likely to draw a thoughtful response from the viewer. Now one is no longer tied quite so firmly to the physical and, one might add, the mental, restrictions of the painter's personal world. No longer need he insist on a Whitmanesque verbal effusion to lend drama to his voyages. Now the texts, all of them, are everybody's texts; the terms universal.

The Christ of these years, of the studies as well as the complete works, has a direct connection with the crucified Christ hanging over church altars, the figure held immobile in His mother's arms in sanc-



ABRAHAM RATTNER: Kneeling Figure



ABRAHAM RATTNER: Moses



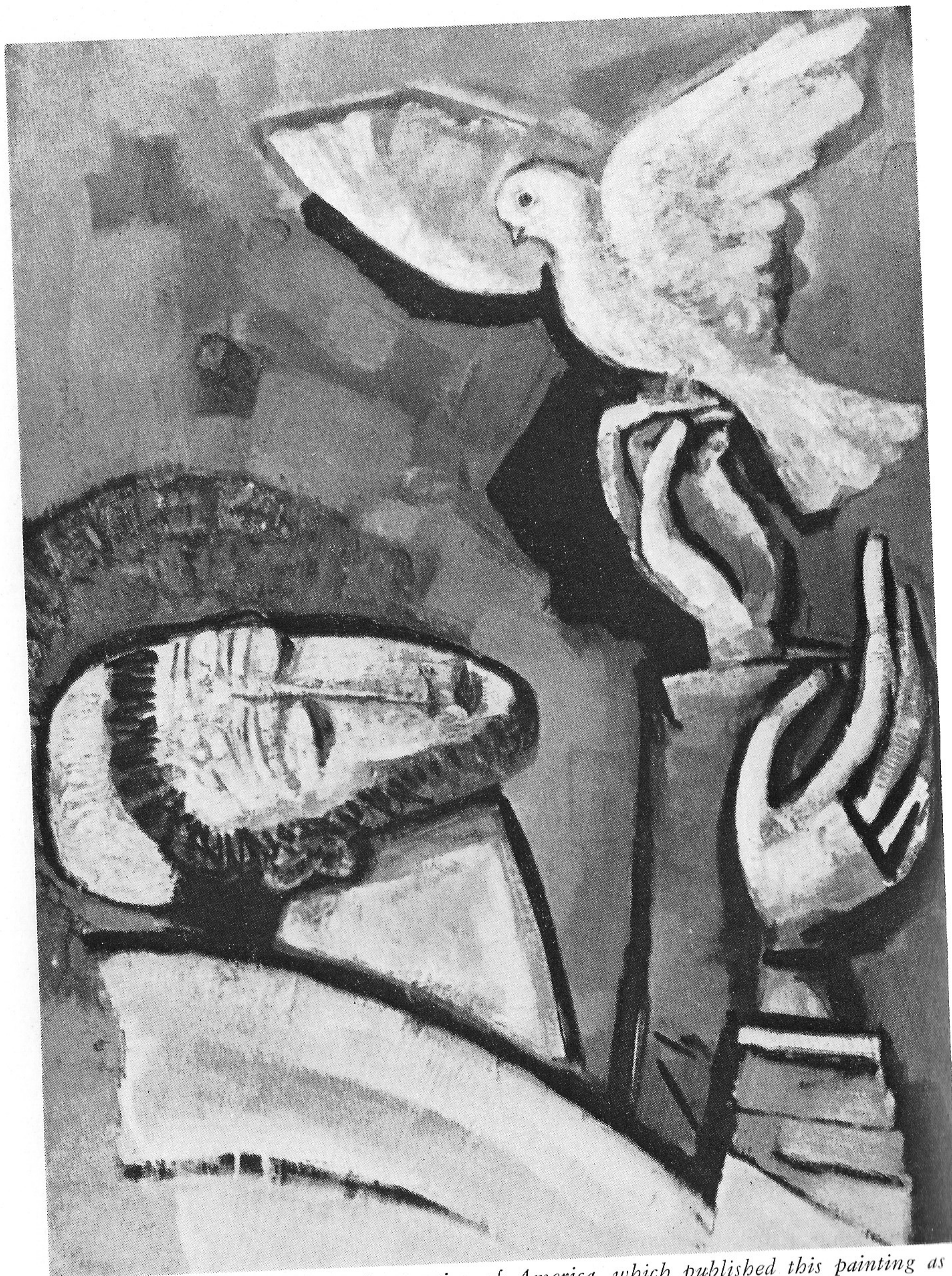
ABRAHAM RATTNER: Job



WINCHESTER BIBLE: Elisha Receives the Mantle of Elijah

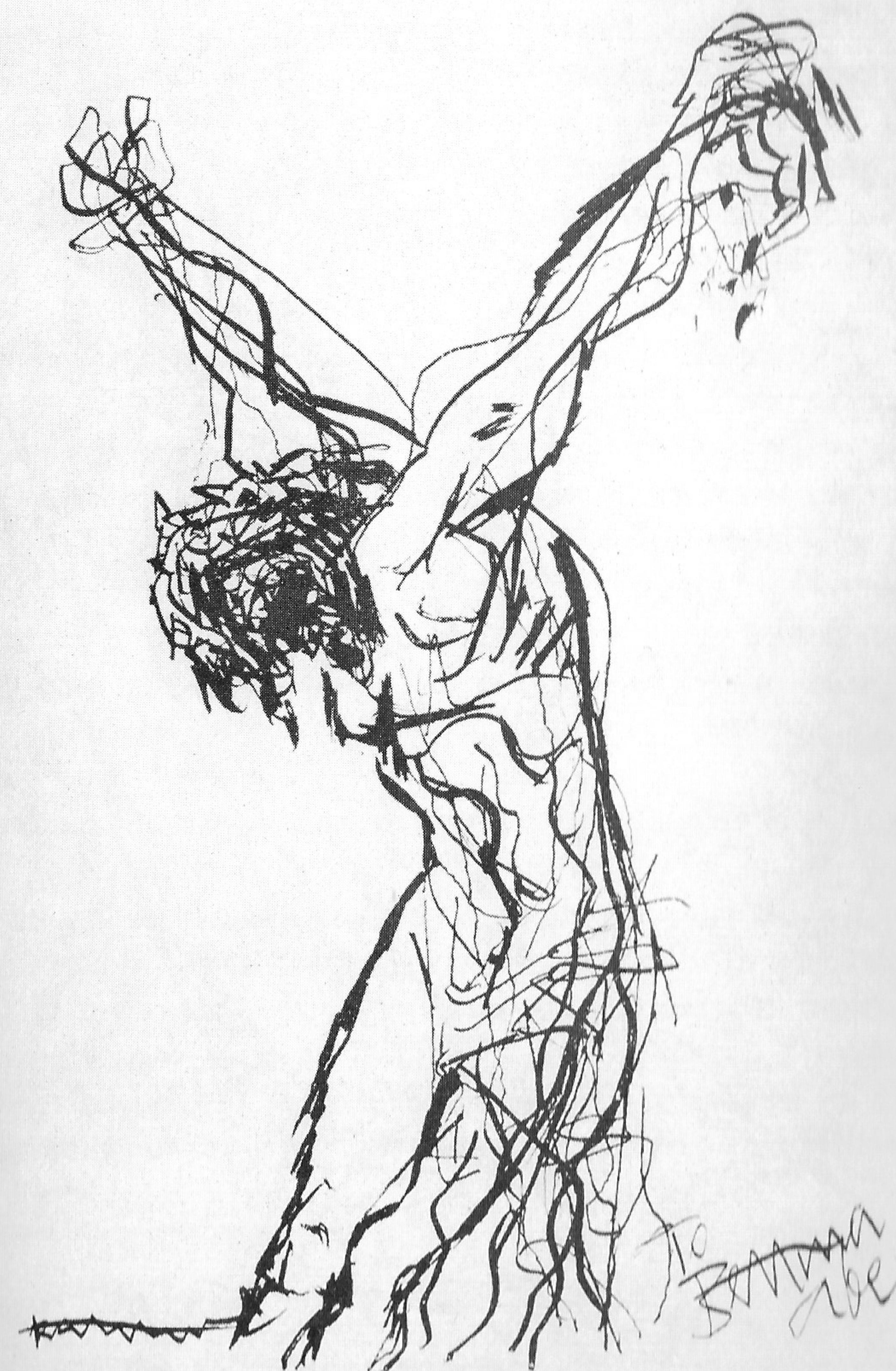


WINCHESTER BIBLE: David



By courtesy of the Container Corporation of America, which published this painting as one of its series of advertisements Great Ideas of Western Man

ABRAHAM RATTNER: St. Francis of Assisi



ABRAHAM RATTNER: Christ on the Cross



ABRAHAM RATTNER: Pietà

tuaries and ambulatories and side chapels the world over, the Redeemer of so many stained-glass windows. Even the very personal symbolism has a becoming universality, intended or not. The "Window Cleaner" is clearly an artificer of great public works: Suspended somewhere in space, as window cleaners so often seem to be, he performs miracles; he plans and acts for all. Rattner's old shoes, like Charlie Chaplin's, are eloquent of some futility, some failure; unlike the motion-picture clown's, however, these shoes possess an abstract beauty. A figure of anguish, caught in zigzag lines that look like a translation of the atmosphere of a Kafka novel into plastic terms, emerges as "Christ Surrounded by Thorns" (1952): I say "emerges" because we are told in the notes that this was not the original title, but was "suggested by the intense and violent character of the composition."¹² Technique itself is redeemed: The fine undulating line of "Skaters" has deepened in intensity and frequency to become a texture suitable to the subject of an apocalyptic "Figure in Flames" (1952). The change of subject is of the order of cancan dancer to majestic vision; the change in technique is much less sweeping, but no less effective.

Everything, now, seems to move Rattner's painting into larger, more dramatic focus. Whether because of so many years of making bold, incisive lines or of so many adaptations of the figure and theme of the Passion, or simply because of an innate sympathy with and understanding of the anguished of the world, this painter has become a spokesman for all of them. He has rediscovered in the two Testaments the iconography of the persecuted and the powerless and its most effulgent, most moving witnesses: Moses, Job, a prophet, Christ, and even modern types of the Saviour to set beside the old.¹³

12. Weller, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

13. The symbols of sympathy and understanding in Rattner's painting are clear enough. Through his figures much is accomplished toward the end of commiseration and compassion. As much again is achieved in the form which Rattner's painting takes, in the very lines, colors, textures, in the balances and imbalances of his compositions. Piet Mondrian, the most severely formal painter of our times, pointed effectively to this purposeful employment of design in a 1941 essay, "Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life":

"... the function of plastic art is neither descriptive nor cinematic. It is not merely a means of enjoyment amidst an incomplete life, or a simple expression of that life even in its beautiful aspect. All this is incidental.

"Art is the aesthetic establishment of complete life—unity and equilibrium—

Three of these figures, Job, Moses, and the prophet, are matched men, not only brothers in experience, in conviction, and in intensity of feeling, but with heads constructed on the same model, with eyes staring at something approaching a transcendent vision. They have not a little in common with Rattner's St. Francis, though his eyes are half-closed and theirs wide open; though a bird has engaged the saint's attention and, with the exception of the tablets of the Law tightly clenched by Moses, nothing tangible has caught their interest. But actually, all of Rattner's men and all of his scenes and all of his inanimate objects in recent years are closely related, no matter what dissimilarities and variations of emphasis and accent separate them. Discovered in anguish, they linger with us that they and we may find surcease from suffering. It is a considerable compliment to painting in our time and to this particular painter to say that that is, some of the time at least, the accomplished end of his art.

free from all oppression. For this reason it can reveal the evil of oppression and show the way to combat it.

"Plastic art establishes the true image of reality, for its primary function is to 'show,' not to describe. It is up to us to 'see' what it represents. It cannot reveal more than life teaches, but it can evoke in us the conviction of existent truth. The culture of plastic art can enlighten mankind, for it not only reveals human culture, but being free, advances it."

See *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art and Other Essays*, in the series *The Documents of Modern Art* (New York: Wittenborn, 1945), p. 39. The resemblance between these statements and those of Rattner quoted above and their close relationship to the point of view of this article should be self-evident.