

## Robert Ernst Marx

### Recent Works: Brilliant, Rebellious, Indefatigable

Four figures stand stiffly against a dark and divided ground. Three face forward, with their eyes, ears, and foreheads alternately highlighted. The fourth is backed up against a wall, symbolically gagged, and stares at the barely visible outlines of a distant bishop. Overhead floats a sightless, wingless bird in white - a mythical apparition, beautiful and foreboding.

This is *Be Careful* (2011), a large-scale oil on linen, that is quintessential Robert Marx. As visually striking as it is pivotal in its message, the painting demands that we look, listen, think, and then speak up – or suffer the consequences.

Robert Marx has constructed his career on a foundation of social, political, and psychological observation, using caricature and allegory to explore humanity's baser side, as well as its innocence: the arrogant statesmen and the indifferent clerics versus the wounded, the fragile, and the confused. Having earned his place in the company of the likes of Hieronymus Bosch and Leonard Baskin, Marx's work is widely recognized and prized by collectors - and owned by major museums including the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D. C.), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), and the Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, D. C.).

Marx himself has always struck me as an unusual man, though he would probably deny it. He is a devoted teacher and a natural storyteller. In an ego-driven world, he remains refreshingly self-effacing while in complete command of his creative voice. He is comfortable with ambiguity and tells us as much, encouraging us to wander through his world and interpret as we will. To that end, he furnishes the space to maneuver – literally and metaphorically – and provides us a pictorial lexicon to do so: cords and strings, ropes and tethers, bird-like beaks and carnival masks, hats and helmets to identify the players. Restraints proliferate in this landscape: circles form the noose, the ringer, the prison guard's keys, the acrobat's apparatus.

In Marx's universe, a precarious tension is the norm, as a tender touch anoints subjects that bristle with import. Eyes are frequently vacant, and speech is systematically silenced. Drawings and etchings are painfully delicate and full of frailty. Cast bronze reliefs and sculpture combine their curvaceous shapes with meticulous details. Marx's painterly palette is both brooding and arresting, its browns and blues punctuated by burnt orange, while surfaces, whatever the medium, are deceptively complex – built and abraded, marked and layered – heightening our desire to approach and explore. The artist surely seeks to provoke and disturb us, and he succeeds.

In these most recent compositions, Marx continues to rely on personification as well as on portraiture, yet his depiction of decay reflects its increasingly insidious spread. Noting that corruption is filtering down to the rank and file, he presents the pastor and the proctor rather than the prelate, the cagey collaborator as well as the hapless general.

In fact, *Collaborator* (2011) is a startling image, as the traitor's face peers awkwardly from a roiling surface, set adrift in a space that holds dangers of its own. *Scholar* (2010) cuts a sorrowful profile as a once learned man finds himself reduced to placid acceptance. Eyes half-shut - he is neither a conduit for information nor a source of vision.

But this isn't entirely a darkening story. *Justice* (2011) appears as a jarred but amiable personality, his wig askew but his color, vigorous. *Mary, Mary* (2011) is a glittering creature – two-faced and irresistible, shuddering and evolving, inexplicably magnetic in the uncertain outcome of dueling selves.

*Gus* (2011), the jester, is an approachable character, and his role remains a familiar theme for Marx. Yet he isn't fearful or frightening as in past portraits. He sports a dandy dunce cap as petal-like swirls flutter out its top. He is masked, but not blindfolded, and free to speak as the monarch's confidante.

If Robert Marx schools us in history, it is for us to apply its lessons to contemporary culture. We may well agree that divisive forces are part of human experience – the desire for power and the aptitude for abusing it, the futility of war and the devastation that results – but Marx explicitly instructs us to take the next step. If lines effectively divide us, couldn't they also serve to save us? If we are in possession of our senses, shouldn't we exploit them?

Ultimately, I take hope in the portrait of *Gus* – poised to exert his influence. I take hope in *Mary, Mary* – who suffers the soul-searching of indecision. I take hope in the portrayal of *Justice* - attempting attentiveness and flush with enthusiasm. I view the *Scholar* with resigned skepticism, and I heed the warning implicit in *Be Careful*.

While these recent works form a clear connective thread in Marx's oeuvre, I also sense a distinct and empowering departure. Robert Marx is pumping up his visual volume – reds are richer, plums more luxurious, jeweled blues and greens enliven his usual somber palette. Vision is sharpened; vacuous eyes are replaced with focus. This is Marx the rebel, Marx the tireless purveyor of cautionary tales, Marx in the brilliant blossoming of insistence: We must bear witness to ignorance and its legacy. We may follow deafly, wait dumbly, act blindly. Or, we can open our eyes, opt for intelligent exchange, and in place of constraints - establish connections.

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