REVIEW

MASTERPIECE: 'JONAH' (C. 1885-95) BY ALBERT PINKHAM RYDER

Tale Told by a Modern Romantic

BY SIDNEY LAWRENCE

VISIONARY Romantic painters of the 18th and 19th centuries were a breed unto themselves, using nature, literature and the imagination as inspiration for dreamlike imagery. Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917), a New York painter emerging in the late 19th century, was a visionary Romantic who was also modern. His hauntingly crude mythological scenes, landscapes and moonlit marine paintings, at first puzzling to the art establishment, were soon recognized for their simplicity and expressive power. Ryder's works sold for increasingly high prices and became so well regarded that in 1913 they were exhibited in New York alongside Gauguins, Cézannes and Van Goghs in the master section of the Armory Show, America's first major exhibition of modern art. Admiration for Ryder among collectors, curators, scholars and particularly artists—including Marsden Hartley and Jackson Pollock—has blossomed for more than a century.

Ryder's most deeply affecting work is "Jonah" (c. 1885-95), his masterly portrayal of the biblical tale. Now the centerpiece of a gallery of other, smaller Ryders in Washington's Smithsonian American Art Museum, this explosively composed, dark-toned painting, measuring about 2½ feet by 3 feet within a hefty period frame, uses abstract design, clear storytelling and dense, obsessive paint to draw the viewer in. The rewards are many.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of John Gellatly

THOUGH RYDER'S WORKS first puzzled the art establishment, his reputation has blossomed for over a century.

This is not Jonah in the belly of the whale, or "great fish," but a prelude to that biblical episode. A gesturing, folk-art-like God figure appears on the horizon in a blazing halo holding an orb and surrounded by angel-wing clouds. Raging below are the rolling contours of the fierce seas God has created to punish the prophet for defying a divine order to preach in the sinful city of Nineveh. Instead, Jonah has set sail in the opposite direction. Cast out by frightened shipmates, Jonah expresses terror, arms upraised, within the swells outside a bent, dark, roller-coaster vessel that creates a strong diagonal in the composition. On board, the shipmates huddle in fear. A gigantic wave threatens both to capsize the boat and to drown Jonah as the murky, bulbous-headed whale, mouth agape and eyes hungry, moves stealthily toward him.

> A visionary painting of simple, expressive power.

The paint is thick, almost recklessly applied, gloriously messy and richly hued from blue-green to brown to tan to yellowy white. The placement and gestures of the figures within the Munch-like composition, especially Jonah, clarify the tense narrative. Painted in an era when shipwrecks and whaling deaths were objects of public fear, this work could be read as a rumination on mortality. But as readers of the Old Testament know, Jonah emerges from the whale a changed man, redeemed and willing to carry on God's work.

Herman Melville alludes to Jonah in "Moby-Dick," his 1851 book about Captain Ahab's pursuit of the white whale, and one passage could almost describe Ryder's painting: "Half smothered in the frame of the whale's insolent tail and too much of a cripple to swim, [Ahab] thought he could still keep afloat, even in the heart of such a whirlpool as that; helpless Ahab's head was seen, like a tossed bubble which the last chance shock might burst."

That Ryder was born and raised in the whaling city of New Bedford, Mass. (the family moved to New York when he

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was about 20), makes the connection all the more intriguing. But the novel, initially a flop, was not much read or even appreciated until after World War I, long after Ryder had finished the painting, so it is almost certain, scholars agree, that the biblical tale was the artist's sole starting point.

Ryder worked long and hard on this work, his largest to date. "I am in ecstacys [sic] over my Jonah, such a lovely turmoil of boiling water and everything," the artist wrote in 1885 after starting this biblical depiction on commission from a New York collector. In 1890 he was still plugging away, as reported by Century Magazine that year, altering wave forms, turning figures in different directions, adding and then deleting lightning bolts. The article's lithograph reproduction shows a mast and shredded sail on the ship, and Ryder put in, and then painted over, a female figure in a lower corner, as uncovered in a 1980s infrared study. The artist worked another five years, at least, on the work. "The canvas I began 10 years ago I shall perhaps complete today or tomorrow," he once wrote, expressing his belief in art as an organic process. For Ryder, a painting was a living organism "ripening under the sunlight of the years that come and go."

As an artist, Ryder doggedly pursued his own course. Using a menu of impromptu, homemade mediums (cooking oil, tobacco juice, candle wax), he worked in a cramped, one-room studio piled high "with every kind of object—old newspapers, painting materials, soiled cloths, food, unwashed dishes, ashes," according to Lloyd Goodrich, the artist's champion in later decades. "Jonah" was painted amid this clutter, and it can look, with a bit of prodding and eye-squinting, like an old moccasin among discarded dropcloths.

A grammar-school dropout with a history of vision problems, the affable, bearded Ryder loved literature and poetry, which he also wrote and recited, and the operas of Richard Wagner, whose swelling musical cadences can be sensed in many of his seascapes, including "Jonah." Ryder's youthful studies at the National Academy of Design, a grand tour of Europe in 1882 and the intimate tonal landscapes of painter friends in New York also had an impact.

But the sea was Ryder's true passion. Once he found his footing as an artist, he arranged his life so he could study its moods at night from city wharves and on ferry rides to and from New Jersey. On ocean crossings to Europe in 1887 and 1896, Ryder spent most of the time en route sketching the sea from the ship's deck, alighting only briefly in his destination, London, before heading home again. "Jonah" brilliantly reflects the artist's obsession.

Overwhelmed by Ryder's work, one contemporary critic called it "the only successful religious painting produced since the Renaissance."

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