

Arnold Friberg: Twentieth Century Master of Spiritual Realism

BY ALEXANDER STARR

Arnold Friberg's prolific career can best be described as a lifelong pursuit to faithfully capture the truest expressions of human pathos through carefully crafted narrative form. The artist's body of work spans almost ninety years, from his adolescent days creating original comic strips and sign painting to internationally recognized print advertisements, Hollywood epics, religious and patriotic masterworks, and royal portraiture. Friberg consistently challenged himself to reveal the vital nature of his subjects reacting to the vibrant worlds he formed around them. His style is firmly grounded in a spiritual realism that draws the viewer's attention with meticulous detail and heightens the experience of the narrative drama of the scene.

When the Land Was His, painted in 1984, is a shining example of Friberg's mastery at work. Far from a stereotypical rendering, the native chieftain and his horse are distinct individuals adorned with faithful recreations of intricately hand-crafted vestments. Friberg spent hours researching and studying authentic artifacts in museum collections to ensure accuracy in the composition. The still moment of the scene allows for full appreciation of the painstaking work necessary to hew and sew each brilliantly rendered article, driving the viewer to contemplate the rich artistic tradition of native culture while considering the devastating loss of these traditions to come. Friberg considered

this painting his second royal portrait, completed after he was given the honor of painting the Prince of Wales in an equestrian portrait some years before. The majesty and quiet nobility of the chieftain is immediately apparent as the viewer absorbs the totality of the rich adornments and stoic pose of the subject. Friberg expertly communicates with seemingly effortless technique. Eschewing the thick impasto and heavy brushwork typical of many artists in the twentieth century, Friberg's surfaces are smooth, obscuring his brushwork and allowing the deep richness of his colors to draw the eye around each scene. The artist once said of his technique, "...At first I stay within the Earth colors, mostly in a warm, rather neutral tone. Then I gradually add more and more color, working toward the shades I want to appear as the painting grows towards completion... gradually, a glowing richness develops that is commonly associated with the traditional realistic paintings of the great masters."



When the Land Was His

The 'great masters' are an important consideration for understanding Friberg's body of work in the context of art history. A clear influence can be found in the French painter Gustav Courbet (1819-1877), who scandalized Paris society in 1850 with his famous composition, *A Burial at Ornans*, choosing to recreate a solemn scene of a commoner's funeral. The subjects of the painting were all faithful portraits of the townspeople of Ornans, recreated at a monumental scale that, to that point, had been reserved for depictions of nobility or religious allegory. Throughout his career Friberg strived to bring the individuality of his subjects to life as well, building on Courbet's tradition of Realism, while searching deeper to also display the spiritual essence radiating beneath the surface. Friberg achieved this goal via a keen understanding of motion and gesture, developed through thoughtful observation of human and animal forms.



A Burial at Ornans by Gustav Courbet

Friberg's command of narrative movement is at the forefront of *Her Calf*, a western scene that captures the concern of a mother cow after her calf is scooped up by a nearby cowboy to prevent it from drowning in the river. The strength and weight of the mother cow is palpable as she strains her neck to the side, looking up at the calf and rider with concern. The cowboy contrasts this sudden motion with a relaxed and stable posture, offering reassurance, while his mount recoils in dismay, desperate to avoid the sharp horns aimed at his side as he leaps to a safer position. This split-second moment of drama and human-to-animal communication is only possible through Friberg's deliberate compositional structure and deep perception of movement spurred by emotion.



Her Calf

Here, connections can be made to the storied Western genre scenes created by N.C. Wyeth, who imbued many of his paintings of cowboys and livestock with intense motion and highly dramatic compositions. Wyeth's images successfully convey the often frenetic movement common to the Western way of life, but frequently omit the individuality of the subjects in favor of greater intensity and action. Friberg finds a way to harness this energy and constrain it just enough to let the personality of his subjects shine through. His expertise in human and animal anatomy was crucial to achieving this control. He once said of his work, "When people say they can feel the energy in my figures, it is because the stress of the anatomy is right. In my pictures I use the body in much the same way as trained dancers use their own bodies – as a dramatic and expressive force."

Friberg utilized his knowledge, keen observation, and masterful technique to create an enduring body of work and left an indelible mark on American culture in the twentieth century. To this day, *The Ten Commandments* film, which Friberg helped create as lead costume designer and pre-production visualization lead, is the eighth most financially successful film of all time. A print of the painting that many consider to be his magnum opus, *The Prayer at Valley Forge*, hung in the Whitehouse for the entirety of Ronald Reagan's tenure as president and is one of the most immediately recognizable images in American culture. Friberg achieved these successes, and others, through his lifelong commitment to respecting his subjects and faithfully reproducing the spirit within them.



Cutting Out by N.C. Wyeth