

History and Analyses of *Watch* by Gerald Murphy

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Gerald Murphy, the artist of *Watch*, was born in Boston in 1888 and died at the age of seventy-six in 1964. He met his future wife, Sara, during his childhood, and the two were married in 1915. Murphy moved to France in 1921 to live among the elite socialites, where he was swept up in the Jazz Age, making friends with influential writers and artists such as fellow American expatriots F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, and Spaniard Pablo Picasso.

Murphy's painting career began in France with quick lessons from the futurist artist Natalia Goncharova, in between working on sets for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In 1925, using oil on canvas, Murphy created *Watch*, his most monumental work of art with massive dimensions of 78 ½" by 78 7/8" inches.

By 1937, both of Murphy's sons had tragically died, one from tuberculosis and the other from meningitis of the spine, and their daughter was in a boarding school. Murphy and his wife moved back to America, and after the move, Murphy never painted again, dedicating his time to saving his father's leather business, the Mark Cross Company.

Over time, a majority of the known Murphy paintings disappeared with the common belief that it was Murphy's own carelessness that resulted in their loss. In 1960, the Dallas Museum of Contemporary Art revived Murphy's work and the existing seven of his known fourteen works were put on display. Today, the Dallas Museum of Art owns and exhibits in its American Painting & Sculpture Collection, *Wasp and Pear* (1929) and *Watch*.

The painting *Watch* focuses mainly on the internal workings of a pocket watch also displaying parts of the face of the watch. Filling a majority of the canvas are circular gears of varying size and pieces of the watch. All the pieces of the watch are painted in opaque tones of gray, black, and white except the rim of the pocket watch and small sections in the background, which are highlighted in a warm brown and gold. This dichromatic distinction in the otherwise cool painting draws attention to the structure of the pocket watch itself. A vertical line beginning with the stem-wind and progressing down the painting divides the artwork into a balanced piece.

The painting appears somewhat flat, caused by geometric overlapping of the circular mechanical parts, along with the rejection of any perspective systems. However, through the use of horizontal lines across the bottom of the piece, in addition to the shading on the stem-wind, multi-dimensionalism shows through. Further, the contrast of warm and cool colors looking “inside” the watch, gives the work depth. The painting is strictly geometrical, defined by curved and straight lines. Numbers and letters appear in only three spots in the work: once in the top left area of the center pocket watch with the numbers 483689; a second time in the middle left side of the painting, showing the numbers 30,40,50, and 60; and a third time in the top right corner of the painting, which shows the Roman numerals II, III, and IV on the detached face of the main pocket watch.

In interpreting Murphy’s painting, *Watch*, shown is a very chaotic and mechanical representation of time. The face of the pocket watch is removed and cropped in the corner, revealing the inner workings of the watch. As a member of

the superficial elite society, the pocket watch stands as a symbol for the class from which Murphy came.

“All art is in part about other art”(Barrett, 198), and Picasso’s Cubism movement slightly influenced Murphy’s *Watch*. Murphy’s work reflects synthetic cubism by the flatness of the painting and the idea that a real object painted looks slightly different than it does in reality.

Although the artwork is chaotic, it emanates a sense of organized chaos, playing with the idea that time is fleeting and uncontrollable while also very precise and constant. Murphy represents this duality of time and in his work symbolizes the human emotion linked with time itself. The circles and gears found in the painting create a constant motion in the painting, again much like time itself.

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