

oldlutheranreinhardtcommiepaintblack

Review of

Ad Reinhardt

By Michael Corris

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Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

Ad(olph) Reinhardt (1913-1967) was a contemporary of Thomas Merton at Columbia University, where they became fast friends while working on the university's humor magazine *Jester* to which Reinhardt (as well as Merton) contributed cartoons. Reinhardt went on to become a prolific cartoonist, graphic artist, and designer in the late 1930s and early 1940s, contributing to leftist magazines, especially *New Masses*, which allowed him to express his deeply held political convictions. Although not a card-carrying member of the Communist Party USA, he certainly was a deeply committed fellow traveler.

It is the burden of Michael Corris's monograph to argue that Reinhardt's early work as a cartoonist and media designer was not discontinuous with his later work as a painter. Furthermore, he is centrally concerned to show that Reinhardt's mature work, while not as universally lauded as that of the major players of the New York School of "action painters" (Pollock, Kline, etc.), was nonetheless of pivotal importance for the next generation of minimalists who were reaching maturity in the 1960s. In that sense, at least, Reinhardt was an axial figure between the already famous action painters and those who were slowly reaching their ascendancy. Thus, Corris does not like to number Reinhardt with the "abstract expressionists" because, while he decidedly was a non-representational artist, he resisted the emotional, "expressionistic" character of their work in favor of a reduction of painting to its barest gesture, culminating of course in the "black paintings" for which he is best known. For Reinhardt, even the colors of Mark Rothko were too – what? – emotional and shimmering.

Merton appears here and there in this monograph (as do Ed Rice, Robert Lax and even Nancy Flagg) but Corris is single-mindedly interested in a close study of Reinhardt himself. His discussion of the interchanges between Merton and Reinhardt (86-91) is interesting (if clumsy – Corris seems to know little about the Christian contemplative tradition, places Gethsemani in Lexington, etc.) only because it places the "black paintings" into some kind of context. Reinhardt appreciated the Zen tradition because it grasped the subtle relationship between fullness and void – an appreciation expanded because in Merton he found someone who grasped what he was attempting to do. Merton saw that one had to really *look* or *gaze* at a black painting to see the Greek cross figure

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of the four squares placed against the black background. Reinhardt's aim in doing these paintings was, at least in part, a polemic against other trends in painting, especially the Rothko lushness and the metaphysical claims made for abstract expressionism. He strove for pure art. Merton, further, understood how critical the concept of darkness and night was in the tradition of John of the Cross with his paradoxical weighing of "dark illumination."

One of the many things I learned from Corris's work is how demanding the creations of the black paintings were. Reinhardt had not only the technical skill to mix the paints he wanted, but the patience in applying them, and the rigor with which he calibrated the tonalities. I have looked at a number of these paintings and it is surprising, first, how matte they are and, second, how subtle the interplay of the forms is. Having read Corris I hope to look again at the paintings with a fresh eye. Through the author's description of the labors of Reinhardt I more fully appreciate the painter's *mot* that "art is involved in a certain kind of perfection." It is crucial to confront the paintings themselves because, as this work insists more than once, photographs cannot capture the subtlety of what the artist put down on canvas.

To say that Reinhardt had "views" is to understate the matter. He wrote polemical essays, voiced strong opinions in public, expressed a certain "going-it-alone" attitude in his relationship to the art "scene." Corris chronicles all this in detail but he provides almost no biographical background in this study. Only parenthetically do we learn that Reinhardt was from New York, that he had a wife and daughter, that he was a college teacher, had been in the navy in the war, and that his politics were decidedly leftist. Furthermore, the dust jacket informs us that Corris wrote without the support of the Reinhardt estate, which may explain why there is not a single illustration in the book, when in fact, especially with reference to his cartooning, the text cries out for illustration. To see Reinhardt's *oeuvre* one must go to Lucy Lippard's 1981 monograph.

Corris's book is about Reinhardt, not about Merton, and even with respect to Reinhardt it supposes extensive prior knowledge of twentieth-century art. Nonetheless, Merton does reappear in the final pages of this study when the author cites approvingly the Joycean description Merton invented to describe his old friend: "oldlutheranreinhardtcommiepaintblack." Corris explicates all parts of that neologism – except for "lutheran"!