

Close-Up On Art
Michael Connolly



Homage to Louis Sullivan

by Robert Natkin (1930-2010)

Gift to the Palm Springs Art Museum from the Estate of Gladys M. Rubenstein (2014.144)

Acrylic on Linen

Completed 1969 while he was living in New York City

Abstraction

After an early start with portraiture, Robert Natkin abandoned figural work, influenced by the paintings of Paul Klee and the post-WWII Abstract Expressionists. By the late 1950's he placed a "focus on brushstroke, on texture, and on interplay of color and light. Subject matter seemed, suddenly, to have become irrelevant." (robertnatkin.com.) The bulk of his mature works are non-representational, with loose forms and indistinct edges. However, there was a striking departure from this style at mid-career. In the 1960's, in his thirties, Natkin produced works with more defined structure. The Apollo series (starting 1961) explores vertical lines which are loosely drawn and sometimes overlap. The Straight Edge and Step paintings (1965-69), including *Homage to Louis Sullivan*, continue to emphasize vertical lines, but in this series the edges are crisp, created painstakingly and tediously with masking tape. At this time Natkin was inspired by the color theories that Joseph Albers outlined in *The Interaction of Color* but he said that, in the end, he learned more from experimentation than from the book.

Homage to Louis Sullivan reflects his interest in the architecture of Chicago, where he was born, studied at the Art Institute, and lived for several years before moving to New York City in the late 1950's. According to Thomas McCormick, there was more of a taste and market for abstract works in NYC. Sullivan's Carson Pirie Scott department store building of 1899 (see photo above) displays a grid pattern that was a defining design element of the new Chicago skyscrapers

of the late 19th century. Natkin admired the ability of architects to use basic forms of structure as decorative elements. This inspired the grids of Natkin's sharp-edged images of this period.

This painting is carefully structured around dominant vertical lines, like the pillars of a building, along with less assertive horizontal lines that divide most of the work into an irregular grid, somewhat like windows between the pillars. In the center there are two larger vertical bands, one mostly in violet, yellow, and green and the other blue, aqua, and white. On both sides and in a thin strip in the middle, there is a more subtle grid made up of smaller rectangles in comparatively muted colors. Natkin chose colors that are mostly tints, limiting the use of more saturated colors to the thin painted border and a few isolated areas in the body of the image. On close inspection, the viewer can see that colors have been mixed freely within many of the rectangles, resulting in rich, variegated combinations.

After spending time with this painting, viewers will notice the beauty of the color, a subtle rhythm in the grid structure, and a focal point (the red rectangle in the center) in what might initially seem a random composition. This work contrasts strongly with abstract works by other artists of the period that are more improvisatory in their composition.

Works Consulted

www.robertnatkin.com

www.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/arts/28natkin.html

http://www.thomasmccormick.com/artists/robert_natkin