

“Paul Lancaster *Immersed in Nature*”

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As Myron King told me several times, Paul seemed to have an exact picture laid out in his mind, down to the finest detail. He would start to paint in the upper left-hand corner of the picture and work across a canvas. It was as if he were copying a picture, but it was all coming from the image he saw in his mind's eye... as though peeling a Polaroid picture.

Working in the little spare time he had, Paul began to create paintings that caught the attention of the local art critics. Citing a beautiful painting by Paul of the four seasons, art critic Clara Hieronymus wrote in the *The Nashville Tennessean* on June 2, 1963:

*"The blue of winter, the pale yellow-green of spring, the dark shadowed greens of summer and the orange gold of autumn combine in Paul Lancaster's painting of the four seasons... it is a happy picture. To see it one would not suspect the heartbreak that lies behind the untroubled serenity. The artist, 32 year old Paul Lancaster will not be painting his odes to leaves and trees for a long time to come. Nor will he walk along creek banks or across summery fields, reflecting on the look of yellow sunlight on leaves or the fact that blue or purple shadows cluster in the dense foliage of tall trees. Lancaster is to spend coming months, perhaps a year at Veterans' Hospital where he was confined with tuberculosis earlier this spring."*¹

Thus in 1963, Paul found he had lots of time to paint. It is not certain, but reasonable to assume, that while working among the sick in the Army hospital wards, he had contracted tuberculosis. By the time Paul had seen a doctor, he had a very advanced case. His doctor told him he already had a substantial hole in his lung and there was nothing to do but to remove part of it. He spent over a year in a VA hospital. Wonderfully in this disaster, Paul found a blessing: plenty of free time to paint.

Paul's sister Ophelia appreciated his efforts at painting and brought him some painting materials at the hospital. Again his products were presented to Myron King, who was impressed enough to offer to sell a few.

When Paul was released from the hospital in 1964, he took a job at Lyzon in the framing shop doing "whatever." It was a rather unusual working relationship, which continued on and off for nearly 30 years. King designated a small area on the second floor of the shop where Paul could be alone to create his works of art. Paul would work at creating art that was sold in the Lyzon gallery and for which he was to receive a small commission. From time to time he would work in the frame shop assisting with various aspects of framing and even carving handmade frames.

Working at Lyzon became a family affair. Paul's father-in-law Clarence Stringfield had begun to work there about two years earlier. Paul's wife Lorene started there in 1965. Soon their daughter Ramona joined in, then her husband, and much later their oldest daughter.

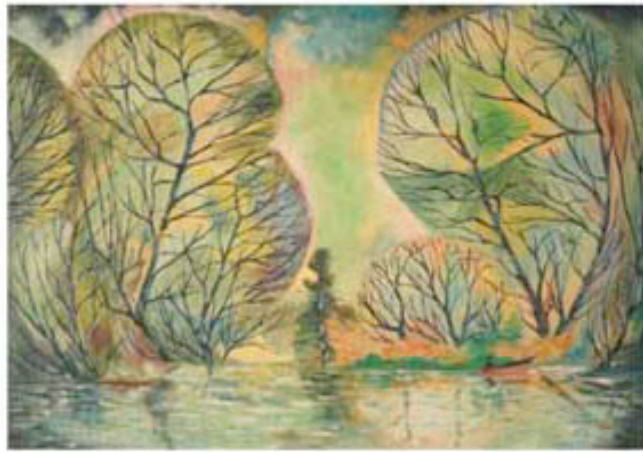
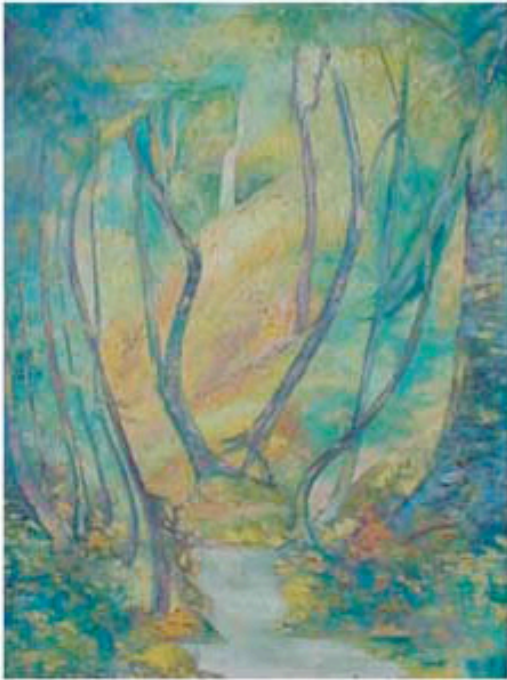
The Lyzon exhibited Paul's work continually and gave him numerous solo shows. They also exposed his work through outside exhibitions, but neither Paul nor the Lyzon kept solid records that would document his numerous shows through the years. The best we can do is capture some of the exhibitions from news accounts and reviews, such as the previously cited review by Clara Hieronymus in June 1963. She provided an account of the upcoming "Tennessee Primitives" exhibit at the Nicholas



Lancaster, 1963



Lancaster in Lyzon studio, ca. 1960s



Left: **Forest Scene** 1963, 24 x 16, oil on canvas

Right: **On the Lake** ca. 1970, 12 x 16, oil on canvasboard

Roerich Museum in New York City in January 1964 where Paul was exhibited along with William Edmonson, Clarence Stringfield, and Fairy Locke Newman.²

Lyzon also attests to a show at the Parrish Museum and work subsequently placed in their permanent collection, but the dates are not recorded. The same is true for the Birmingham Museum of Art and Bloomsburg State College Museum in Pennsylvania.

In show after show, Lancaster's art was well received and both the essence of his artistry and central thematic core of his work resonated with critics in a very consistent pattern. Paula Lowell Hooker described a local show in July 1969:

"The most outstanding feature of almost every Lancaster painting is the ubiquity of the woods. Probably 90 percent of the artist's works explore forest scenes: dewy woods at dawn, eerie woods at dusk, fertile woods in springtime, withered and dying woods in wintertime. And in every case, the woods materialize as a cobweb of entangled, intricate branches and vines encircling a central subject. Often that subject is small children at play or young women in peaceful solitude, but occasionally it is something as incidental as a single shaft of sunlight piercing through the web like maze. Lighting and shadows are crucial facets to the overall mood in Lancaster's art."³

Radio station WPLN featured Paul as its December 1971 Artist of the Month and the staff critic wrote:

"Paul Lancaster is a singular combination of man and artist...he may be called a truly 'natural' artist. His quiet and unassuming presence is indicative



Lancaster, 1971



Night Bathers 1907, 32 x 44, oil on canvas

blue shadows of dusk, and convey the rosy glow of sunset in tones ranging from pink to orange. He invents intricate surface patterns to adorn tree trunks, leaves, moths, and butterflies. All manner of exotic flowers bloom along vines and branches, even in impossibly wooded glens. Many of the forms in his paintings are limned with a dark outline that seems to vibrate like the rustle of a breeze or hum with aliveness like an electric wire.

The paintings exude a pleasing and soothing quality, due to Lancaster's mastery of complementary colors and straightforward compositions, but they are not still. Standing transfixed in front of a Paul Lancaster painting, one finds one's eyes being lead involuntarily around the canvas. Close looking will often reveal tiny figures in the distance, but it is the tree bark crawling under one's gaze and the alive-seeming entanglements of vines and butterflies that rivets one to the spot.

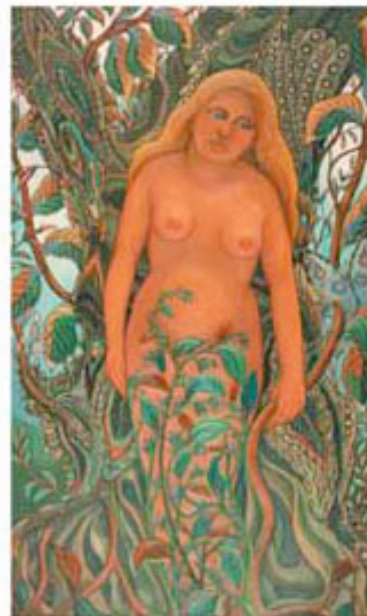
Lancaster, like many self-taught artists, is extremely meticulous. As a result, his works are startling in that they appear so technically accomplished. Without formal art training, Lancaster has absorbed visual information from the study of books and exhibitions. The smoothly rounded forms, soft skin tones, and exoticism of his female figures are no doubt derived from multiple sources, among them the works of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Paul Gauguin, but their wings and robes signal their presence as fantastic idealized creatures: angels, princesses, wood nymphs, and faeries.

For one whose work is nature-based, Lancaster spends little time outside, more comfortable in his studio fantasy world than anywhere else. His invented landscapes crackle with verdant energy as plants and flowers seem to crawl and move — signaling that they reside in the dream state of the imagination. And that is where Lancaster has probably dwelt most of his life. Absorbing the magical aliveness of his childhood Tennessee countryside and fascinated by the desert moonscape during the time spent in the west for his military service, Lancaster has always drawn inspiration from the world around him. But it is the mysterious spark of creative energy that compelled him to produce an "illuminated manuscript" of his own poetry at age 20 that continues to propel him forward.

In the "outsider art" context, few other artists seem quite as accomplished or as dedicated as Paul Lancaster. His works are highly finished and well composed. He spends hours on each piece, continuing to make work that is increasingly bold and visually complex. The cohesive thread that runs through his long career can also be found in the work of the most successful professional artists.

Lancaster, then, is something of a paradox, balancing as he does between two worlds. He is a reclusive visionary who lives and works in an urban center with an increasingly sophisticated local art scene. He is attuned to the history of art, but he is also a quick study, highly sensitive to the world around him and incorporating things he has intuited or experienced in his own life. Paul Lancaster draws on all of these things to create his ideal world, a place of serene beauty where nature is at its most verdant and prolific and the female figure in the landscape seems to embody the harmonious coexistence of humans and natural habitat once practiced by his ancestors.

Susan W. Knowles



Golden Forest Nude 2001, 40 x 24, oil on canvas