

Information on

Paul Cadmus
 American, 1904–1999
What I Believe, 1947–48
 Tempera on panel, 16 ¼ x 27 in.
 Gift of Robert L. B. Tobin
 1999.86



Subject Matter

People of different ages, colors, genders, sizes, and professions crowd this landscape set against a hazy blue sky, mountains, and water, with a lighthouse in the background dividing the painting in two separate yet related scenes. As is typical of his work, Cadmus rendered the figures with great attention to anatomical details. Colors overall are muted, with a realistic range of skin tones. Cadmus has created a narrative painting that may be read like a novel.

The painting's title

A 1938 essay, "What I Believe," by the British writer E. M. Forster inspired the title. Written between the two world wars during the fascist regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, the essay calls for tolerance and goodness over violence and cruelty. In the painting *What I Believe*, love, beauty, and art (literature, music, architecture, drawing) on the left are beacons of light against the dark clouds of war, hate, and selfishness.

Who's who on the left side (see diagram on page 2)

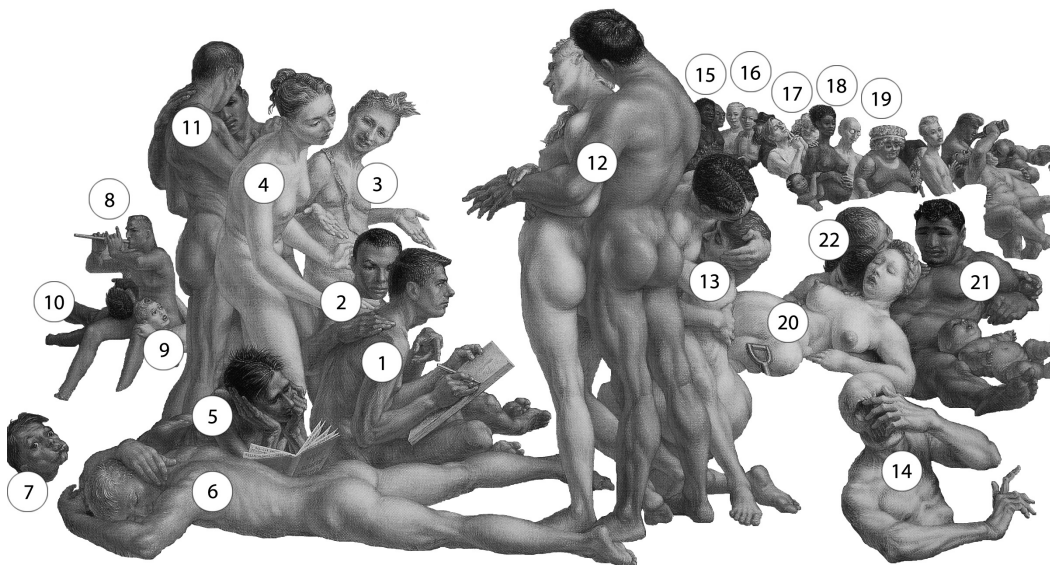
1	Man with drawing board and pencil	Paul Cadmus, the painter himself
2	Seated man with hand on Cadmus's shoulder	Jared French (1905–1988), longtime friend and artist
3	Man behind Jared French holding up his hands	E. M. Forster (1879–1970), British writer
4	Woman next to Forster	Margaret French (1906–1998), artist and wife of Jared French; also close friends with Cadmus for years
5	Man lying down, reading a book with the title <i>What I Believe</i> (also the title of a 1938 essay by Forster)	Possibly painter George Tooker (born 1920). Cadmus and Tooker became involved in 1946 and remained friends later. They traveled to France and Italy together for six months in 1949. Tooker majored in English literature at Harvard and was known to read much poetry. A few lines you can read on the different pages are: <i>I believe in personal relationship, love, tolerance, consideration, pluck, sensitiveness.</i>
6	Man with blond hair lying face down with hand over his head	Possibly young art student (Jensen Yow) who posed for Cadmus and became part of his circle of friends
7	Boy spitting water/water nymph	Possibly George Balanchine (1964–1983), who did a dance in which spitting water played a role
8	Man playing a flute, like a modern day Pan, with a cat on his head and a dog looking over his shoulder	Lincoln Kirstein (1907–1996), Cadmus's brother-in-law, an art critic and patron of the arts; cofounded the New York City Ballet with Russian dancer George Balanchine
9	Woman resting on Kirstein's thigh	Kirstein's wife, Fidelma (1907–1991), also Cadmus's sister and an artist
10	Unknown man resting on Kirstein's other leg	Probably symbolizes Kirstein's bi-sexuality
11	Unknown male couple, standing behind Margaret French & E. M. Forster	Possibly symbolizes homosexual love

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Subject Matter continued

Who's who on the right side

12	Unknown standing man embraces a woman in foreground	Possibly symbolizes heterosexual love; more or less connects group on left and group on right. Another embracing couple crouches behind them (see below)
13	Unknown couple crouched down holding each other, behind center standing couple	Possibly symbolizes pain, sadness, the negative
14	Skeletal person with hand in front of his face and shovel behind him	Gravedigger, symbolizing Death, looks away in horror at sight of people behind him, who represent humanity in all forms, shapes, religions, and races, moving endlessly along, ignoring what's happening behind them; mass of self-centered, lethargic people
15	Four men at bottom of crumbling stones	Four different colors, probably symbolizing four races
16	Profile of a rabbi, next to four men talking to them	Judaism
17	Man with two fingers pointed together at his chin, an ascetic who is praying	Christopher Isherwood (1904–1986), writer and convert to Hinduism, follower of Vedanta Society
18	Pregnant black woman with mixed-race child at her arm	Mother Africa
19	White man with glasses behind black woman	Possibly Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), leader of India known for ideas of freedom for Indians, but not necessarily for blacks. Gandhi spent time in Africa, where he started the first commune, which did not allow blacks. (Note: E. M. Forster also wrote <i>A Passage to India</i> .)
20	Broad-breasted nude woman in middle ground	Mother Earth, Gaia, with boy, girl, man, and baby behind her
21	Man with horns behind Gaia	A satyr, often associated with fertility
22	Boy with head resting on Gaia and holding apple in his left hand, behind satyr's head	Reference to garden of Eden, fall of man



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Subject Matter continued

On the left, the scene is more open than the right side, with fewer figures close to the foreground. At the front, about eight figures form a triangle and, while they all seem to touch one another, each person appears to be unaware of the others. All are nude. Four are standing, two are lying down, and another two sit on the ground.

On the right, the scene is crowded, with most figures in the middle and background. Some are on top of what seems like stacks of stone slabs, with a burned-out structure behind the figures. Men, women, and children seem to walk down in front of the stone slabs. While most are nude, one woman wears a lavender garment and a hat.

Other symbolism

Cadmus included several other symbols to divide his painting more fully between the good on the left and the bad on the right. These include the unknown men building a new construction in the left background, which might signify creativity, new life, a new society, the good, and the positive. The drapes behind them could be flags symbolizing different nations.

The lighthouse in the center background is a symbol of enlightenment; the lighthouse of Alexandria (founded by Alexander the Great) in Egypt. One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, Alexandria was a center of culture after Athens and Rome failed. Forster described it in another book. The lighthouse (light + water) divides the painting between the world of good and the world of evil.

The stone slab construction crumbling down behind the mass of people on the right is a counterpoint to construction being built on the left. The three führer-like military people standing on top symbolize fascism (Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco, demagogues of the 1930s when E. M. Forster wrote his essay), and society destroyed by war. Missiles or warplanes fill the dark sky behind them and are also a counterpoint to the free flying geese on the left side.

About the Artist

Born in New York City, Paul Cadmus grew up in an artistic family and wanted to be a painter from his early years. His father was a painter and lithographer, his mother an illustrator. Both parents had studied at the National Academy of Design in New York, the same school Cadmus attended in 1926. In 1931 he took a trip to Europe with his friend Jared French, a painter he met while attending the Art Students' League in New York in 1928. They visited France, Spain, and Italy where Cadmus was impressed with Early Renaissance artists like Luca Signorelli, Andrea Mantegna, and Piero della Francesca.

They returned to the United States in 1933 after hearing about the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) through Cadmus's sister, Fidelma, herself a painter. Cadmus was immediately accepted into the PWAP, a program of the Roosevelt Administration to assist and encourage American artists during the Depression. Paul's first work, *The Fleet's In* (1934), was removed from a PWAP exhibition after a Navy admiral objected to the way the painter had depicted sailors surrounded by prostitutes. The work consequently was rejected by the PWAP, but had attracted so much attention from the press because of the Navy's reaction that Cadmus became famous overnight. He later said: "I owe that Admiral a very large sum."

As an artist, Cadmus was not only educated in the classical tradition, but also very much influenced by the Old Masters and their techniques. He often used the low (or worm's eye) perspective as introduced by Early Renaissance artists for frescoes painted high on walls of churches and palaces. From the moment he was introduced to egg tempera painting in 1940, he tried to perfect the medium. Popular in 15th-century Italy before the discovery of oil paint, egg tempera is a fast drying and therefore unforgiving material. It does not allow for mistakes or corrections.

In a time when Abstract Expressionism became the leading art movement, Paul Cadmus focused on representational art. He saw reality as the basis of his work and was interested in the human figure as well as in human nature. He was considered an American Scene painter who was known for depicting typical American life in a naturalistic, descriptive style with a critical eye, a sense of irony, and some magic or exaggeration.

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About the Artist continued

Paul Cadmus considered his drawings of male nudes his specialty. He was a master draftsman, even in his paintings. In many works, homosexuality is subtly implied, although only insiders recognized it. Cadmus himself was gay, but he was quiet about it. He led a quiet life with his partner of 35 years, actor-singer Jon Andersson. As bold and expressive as his art was, his personality was gentle and thoughtful. One of his favorite sayings—“Be reticent in your life, then you can be outspoken in your art.”—says it all.

His circle of close friends included painters, writers, and musicians, among them Jared and Margaret French, Lincoln Kirstein and his wife, Fidelma (Cadmus’s sister), George Platt Lynes, Christopher Isherwood, W. H. Auden, George Tooker, and E. M. Forster.

Paul Cadmus’s career spanned more than 65 years. Additional paintings he was known for include *Aspects of Suburban Life: Main Street* (1937), another mural commissioned by the PWAP, but never executed; *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1945–49), to some viewers a graphically disturbing interpretation; *Night in Bologna* (1958), his personal favorite; and *Subway Symphony* (1975–76), a grotesque rendering of New York subway users. Two of Cadmus’s drawings of male nudes are in the McNay collection.

Quote from the Artist

I am a satirist by nature. Satire is the clearest medium I know to express my love of society and my desire through criticism to improve it.

Strategies for Tours

Primary Grades, Upper Elementary Grades, Middle School (ages 6–14): [While this painting is not appropriate for these ages, if students ask about it, take time to explain it.]

High School and Adults (ages 15+): [It might be best to deal with the nudity right away. Explain the tradition of artists’ learning to draw human anatomy by doing nude studies and Cadmus’s great skill in drawing the figure. Explain that the meaning of this picture requires that we view the people in it as representing timeless themes. Clothing would indicate a specific time.]

Let’s take a few minutes to look at the painting and notice a few differences between the left side and the right side. [Allow group to share what they noticed. This discussion may take a long time.] What do you think is the artist’s message? [Explain the painting’s title; see description above.]

How are these figures different from nude sculptures done by the Greeks? [Greek sculptures are idealized figures and faces, whereas these are individualized and recognizable faces. Explain who three or four of Cadmus’s friends are in the painting.] How many art forms can you find represented on the left side of the painting?

[Talk about influence of Early Renaissance Italian painters on Cadmus, explaining egg tempera technique and use of low, one point perspective.] Why do you think Cadmus preferred to use egg tempera (instead of oil paint)? What do you think Cadmus tried to achieve by using the low perspective?

Using the quote from E. M. Forster’s essay found in #5 in the Subject Matter material, discuss how this Cadmus painting depicts the quote.

Sources Worth Consulting

Cadmus, Paul. *The Drawings of Paul Cadmus*. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.

Eliasoph, Philip. *Paul Cadmus: catalogue raisonne: paintings, 1931–1977*. N.p. : P. Eliasoph, 1977.

Kirstein, Lincoln. *Paul Cadmus*. New York: Imago, 1984.