

Cicada

Rob Evans, (b. 1959)

1998-2000

Acrylic and oil on canvas

H. 40" x W. 120 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum

In trust to the James A. Michener

Art Museum from Mrs. Joyce

Tseng



Rob Evans: Art and Science, Mystery and Metamorphosis

“With Cicada the idea began in 1994 with a small sketch of a cicada shedding its skin on a tree branch - inspired by the memory of the cicadas’ song vibrating through the treetops on the ridge at Roundtop each summer and finding their papery translucent skins on the bark of the trees. The idea of metamorphosis and change intrigued me and became especially relevant later that year as Roundtop, a place that seemed would always be a permanent and enduring fixture in my life, was sold out of the family and was completely remodeled and changed by its new owner. Suddenly the concept behind the painting took on a powerful new meaning and relevance - it became a way of dealing with and expressing my sense of loss over this place which was an enormous and important part of my childhood. In a way it became a realization and acceptance of the fact that all things, no matter how permanent they may seem, are ephemeral, and that life is in a constant state of flux. In a wonderful way the cicada metamorphosing became a metaphor for this process and I used it as the central image for the triptych.”

Looking Questions

- Make a list of everything you see in this image, starting from the left of the painting and working to the right. Include all the textures, colors, shapes and objects you see.
- What do you feel is the most important part of this painting? Why?
- Light and dark create many contrasts in this image. Where do you see light? Where do you see dark? What kind of mood does the light and dark create?
- What time of year is depicted in this painting?
- This painting has many openings, showing you views beyond. Look through some of these openings. What do you see?
- How would you describe the sense of space and distance in this painting?
- Why do you think this artist made his painting so long and thin? Do you know of any other art forms that are also long and thin like this?
- How does the artist contrast the natural world with human made objects in this work?
- What do you notice about the depiction of outdoor and indoor places in this painting?
- What signs of life do you see in this work of art? Do you see any signs of death?
- Is there a story in this painting? If so, who or what are the “characters”?
- Does this painting remind you of anything in your own life, in a book or story you have read, or in a dream you have had?
- Have you ever heard the word triptych? Is this painting a triptych? How can you tell?

- How does this painting make you feel? Why?

Themes

Cicada addresses a variety of themes for discussion and lesson planning. These include:

- Transformation
- Metamorphosis
- Storytelling
- Focal Point
- Life and death
- Life cycle
- Narrative
- Symbols

Key Vocabulary

- Landscape
- Symbol
- Narrative
- Still life
- Contemporary
- Triptych
- Cicada
- Realism

About the Artist

Rob Evans was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1959. He grew up in Maryland, and currently lives near Wrightsville, Pennsylvania. After graduating from Syracuse University in 1981, he moved into a nineteenth-century farm above the Susquehanna River in central Pennsylvania. This farm, surrounded by acres of an old growth oak forest, was once part of a larger property owned by his grandparents. Evans had spent summers there, roaming the woods, collecting insects, bones, old bottles, and all kinds of other artifacts. This property, known as “Roundtop,” and its natural landscape, are the starting point for many of his paintings.

Evans is influenced by the quality of light, intimate spaces, and dramatic use of light and dark found in the work of seventeenth century Dutch painters: Rembrandt, Vermeer, and van Ruisdael. He is inspired by 20th century American realist painters Edward Hopper, Grant Wood, Andrew Wyeth, and Charles Burchfield because of the dreamlike realities they create in images of everyday life. Influences leading to his use of the multi-paneled format include David Hockney’s photo montages, early Dutch altarpieces, and the powerful narrative works of his teacher at Syracuse University, Jerome Witkin. Evans enjoys the unusual points of view found in films of Alfred Hitchcock and illustrations by N.C. Wyeth. He admires the rich surface texture of paintings by Jackson Pollock for his rich and energized surface texture, and the depictions of atmospheric light in nineteenth century American landscape paintings.

Evans’ paintings are in the collections of the James A. Michener Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Corcoran Gallery, the Allentown Art Museum

and the University of Delaware. His artwork has been featured in exhibitions across the United States and abroad, including the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. His meticulous and intriguing paintings and drawings have been featured in numerous publications and discussed on public radio and television.

About this Artwork

Rob Evans combines people, objects, and places to create mysterious, autobiographical and metaphorical paintings. When creating *Cicada*, he drew on his vivid childhood memories of the years he spent at his grandparents' farm, which was called "Roundtop," located above the Susquehanna River in Central Pennsylvania. When the main house on the property sold out of the family in 1994, Evans began working on *Cicada*. He hoped the painting would serve as a monument to the house and all its memories and as a statement to the fact that all things will eventually change, no matter how permanent they may seem in childhood.

Evans works on his paintings for a very long time. His starting point is often a small sketch made in response to something in his daily routine that catches his attention or imagination - something small and simple like a leaf or a ball, or something large and complex, like a river or a doorway. He also makes sketches about passing thoughts, memories, and ideas. He keeps all of his sketches in a sketchbook, where they may sit for months or even years before being used in a painting. Periodically, he looks through his sketchbook to refresh his memory and keep his ideas alive in his mind. Eventually, many of his sketches take root in large-scale paintings.

Cicada began in 1994 with a sketch Evans drew of a cicada on a tree branch shedding its skin, and grew over a period of three years into a large triptych, or three-panel painting, made with acrylic and oil paints on a canvas that is ten feet long. He placed the cicada in the center section, adding his memories of an evening spent watching fireworks from the porch of his grandparents' home on the left and of the interior of the house on the right. The panel on the right includes a glimpse of the Susquehanna River through the rear door as well as a view of an empty wheelchair seen through a different door. The wheelchair belonged to his grandmother, who lived in the house for many years.

Cicada is full of symbols, things chosen to represent other things or ideas. The child entering the scene at the left reminds us of life's beginnings. The wheelchair in the doorway on the right symbolizes old age and disability. The fireworks burst with the energy of youth, yet we know they are short-lived. The empty wheelchair is like the empty cicada shell – both are reminders of previous lives now over. In the center is the cicada, a large insect (commonly known as a locust) that matures under ground in cycles of 5 to 17 years. The cicada symbolizes the never ending cycle of life and metamorphosis. In the distance, the river underscores the constantly flowing nature of life. By skillfully weaving symbols together such as these from his past that contain many layers, Evans creates a dreamlike narrative painting in which time is compressed and viewers can find their own meanings and associations.

Surprisingly, *Cicada* was exhibited in seven different museums before it was completely finished. Evans worked on the painting between each exhibition, allowing it to evolve, like a cicada, over time. He also mixed mulch, pumice gels, and glass beads into his paint and sanded

the surface with an electric sander to create a patina, or special surface that shows long use or age.

Compare and Contrast

Elementary

- In *Cicada*, Rob Evans presents the theme of metamorphosis, or the change of form or nature of an object into a completely different object. Graphic artist M.C. Escher also presents this idea in his 1937 woodcut entitled *Metamorphosis*. Look carefully at his print (www.mcescher.com). How can you compare Evans' *Cicada* with the Escher work? What similarities and differences can you find? How do both artists depict change? What is the mood of both works?

Middle School

- The *Voyage of Life* series was painted by Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School of painting, in 1840. In this series, Cole depicts the four stages of life: childhood, youth, manhood and old age. His images follow a voyager who is traveling along a river in a boat. The youngest child departs from a dark cave and the oldest man enters the heavens through the sky. Find images of these works on the National Gallery of Art website (www.nga.gov). How does the depiction of the cycle of life in *Cicada* compare with Thomas Cole's version, painted over 150 years earlier? How would you compare the world view of these two artists after analyzing their paintings?

High School

- In *Cicada*, Rob Evans shows us images that symbolize the natural cycle of life and death. How have other artists throughout time depicted death? Research this theme, and develop some connections of your own.

Related Fine Arts Projects

Elementary

- Create your own triptych. Show a transition through time from the left panel to the center and to the right. In *Cicada*, Rob Evans chose to include people, places, and things that were meaningful to him. What will you choose to represent in your work?

Middle School

- Today we see triptychs almost daily in the form of brochures that advertise events, institutions and programs. Combine what you know about triptychs and graphic design to create an autobiographical, tri-fold brochure about yourself at different stages of your life. Use hand drawn or computer-generated images, or a combination of both.

High School

- A triptych is defined as a painting or carving that has three side-by-side panels or canvases. A triptych can also be defined as a work that is represented in three parts. Create a work of art in any medium that will ultimately fit one of these two definitions. Share your work with your class.

Related Visual Arts / Art History Projects

Elementary

- Rob Evans uses the shape of his canvas and the images he paints to tell a symbolic story about his childhood. Tell a story from your childhood by creating a series of drawings, like a comic book. While working on your book, research appropriate graphic novels that are also autobiographical.

Middle School

- Look at *Transference II*, 1987 and *Plymouth*, 1983 by Rob Evans (www.robevansart.com) and *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, 1658 and *The Music Lesson*, 1662 by Johannes Vermeer (www.essentialvermeer.20m.com). Describe the unique quality of light and space in all four paintings. What is the role of windows and people in the paintings?

High School

- Rob Evans works on his art over long periods of time, often sharing his creative process with others by exhibiting art work “in progress.” Research other artists who also have included the audience in watching an original work of art change as it is being made. Is this a modern or old fashioned invention? Does it appear in art forms other than painting? Cite examples of this practice throughout history.

Interdisciplinary Connections

Language Arts

Elementary

- Insects are fascinating to many artists and writers – not just Rob Evans! Read the following poems about insects. Combine the cicada theme with the idea of change or metamorphosis by creating an original story about an insect and how it changes your life.

“Forgiven,” A.A. Milne, *Now We Are Six*, 1927.

“Ladybug, Be Good,” Norma Farber, *The Earth is Painted Green*, 1994.

Insect Soup: Bug Poems, Barry Louis Polisar, 1999.

Middle School

- Metamorphosis is a recurring theme in many Greek myths, including the story of Narcissus, the story of Daedalus and Icarus, and the story of Demeter and Persephone. (See: *D’Aulaire’s Book of Greek Myths* by Ingri and Edgar Parin D’Aulaire, reprinted 1992). How do metamorphosis and the natural cycle of life emerge in these tales? Examine these themes in the mythology of other cultures - mythology from other cultures – e.g., Norse, Celtic and Hindu.

High School

- Compare the cycle of life as depicted by Rob Evans in *Cicada* with the cycle of life and human civilization portrayed in Ovid’s (43 BCE to 18 CE) *Metamorphoses* (www.larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/xeno/ovid1.htm). Consider metamorphosis as a universal principle that guides human events, as well as the expressive language and images found in poetry and art.

Social Studies / History

Elementary

- In *Cicada*, Rob Evans uses everyday objects as symbols. In the contemporary world, we see symbols every day. A red octagon symbolizes stop, for example, and a red circle with a diagonal line through it means that something is prohibited. Walk around your neighborhood and photograph symbols that are easily recognized. Look for common symbols in newspapers, magazines or on the Internet. Create a display of your findings.

Middle School

- During the European Middle Ages and Renaissance, triptychs became essential works of art. Research religious architecture during this time period. Why were triptych altarpieces so common? What features made them so popular? Do triptychs appear in religions other than Christianity? Are there contemporary examples of triptychs?

High School

- Hieronymus Bosch created a triptych entitled *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in 1504 (www.museoprado.mcu.es/home.html). Like *Cicada*, Bosch's painting tells the story of life and death in three panels. Describe how Rob Evans' painting reflects a twenty-first century view of life and death, and how Bosch's view reflects sixteenth century beliefs.

Science

Elementary

- The song of the cicada is unique, and all cicada songs are species specific. Compare the sound-producing mechanism inside the body of a cicada with another sound-producing mechanism – either animal or human made. What do these mechanisms have in common?

Middle School

- Insects pervade every region on the planet. As part of your environmental studies, research insects that are native to your township, county, state or country. In addition, learn about species that have been introduced for scientific or political purposes. Describe the impact of all species on your ecosystem. How do all these insects help your ecosystem? How do they hurt your ecosystem? How would the ecosystem change if even one of these species were removed from the earth?

High School

- Do advancements in medical science always improve a person's quality of life in later years? How does the health care industry today extend life and prolong death? Using scientific research, write a persuasive essay describing the relationship between health care, quality of life, and death and dying today.

Additional Resources:

The following resources were collected in July 2007.

www.artlex.com (Website of art vocabulary filled with examples from art and history.)

Maus: A Survivor's Tale, Art Spiegelman, 1992 (Art Spiegelman's graphic novel featuring cats, mice, and a powerful memoir of a Polish Holocaust survivor and his family.)

www.memory.loc.gov (Website of the Library of Congress, containing complete holdings including printed materials and photographs.)

www.metmuseum.org (Website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.)

www.michenerartmuseum.org (Website of the James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA.)

www.learn.michenerartmuseum.org (Website of *Learn with the Michener Art Museum* featuring work by Rob Evans.)

www.nga.gov.au/warhol (Website of the National Gallery of Australia traveling exhibition entitled *After Image: Screenprints of Andy Warhol*.)

www.pantheon.org (Award winning encyclopedia of mythology, folklore, and religion.)

www.robevansart.com and www.robevansart.net (Comprehensive website and netsite of *Cicada* artist, Rob Evans.)

Credits:

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