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# NOIR

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WINTER 2016

10¢

A PUBLICATION  
OF THE FILM NOIR  
FOUNDATION



## THE DANCE OF DEATH

BALLET IN FILM NOIR

by IMOGEN SARA SMITH

## HARD LUCK DOGS

ANIMALS AS INNOCENT  
BYSTANDERS

by SHARON KNOLLE

## THE LAST OF SHEILA

NOIR ... OR NOT?

by ROSEMARIE KEENAN

## UNDER COVERS OF DARKNESS

THE CLASSIC PULP COVER ARTISTS

by STEVEN KRONENBERG

# NOIR CITY

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**T**he Film Noir Foundation is a non-profit public benefit corporation created as an educational resource regarding the cultural, historical, and artistic significance of film noir as an original American cinematic movement. It is our mission to find and preserve films in danger of being lost or irreparably damaged, and to ensure that high quality prints of these classic films remain in circulation for theatrical exhibition to future generations.

That's the high-toned legalese. Here are the facts: Even as the high-tech revolution lets us own vast film libraries on DVD, the risk grows greater all the time that 35mm prints of some films will fall into disuse and eventually disintegrate—especially lesser-known titles that have slipped through the cultural cracks, but are worthy of rediscovery.

To date, the FNF has fully funded the restorations of *The Prowler* (1951), *Cry Danger* (1951), *Try and Get Me!* (1951), *Too Late for Tears* (1949), *Woman on the Run* (1950), *The Guilty* (1947), and *Los tallos amargos* (1956), and initiated and partially underwritten the restoration of *Repeat Performance* (1947) and *High Tide* (1947), and financed 35mm preservations of *Nobody Lives Forever* (1946), *Three Strangers* (1946), *High Wall* (1947), *The Hunted* (1948), *The Window* (1949), *Southside 1-1000* (1950), *Roadblock* (1951), *Down Three Dark Streets* (1954), *Loophole* (1954), *The Underworld Story* (1950), and *Cry Tough* (1959), plus the Argentine films *El vampiro negro* (1953), *No abras nunca esa puerta* (1952), and *Si muero antes de despertar* (1952). The FNF's 2015 film restoration, *Los tallos amargos*, is now on the international film festival circuit. You can read about its NYC premiere here ([see page 9](#)). Planning is now underway for the FNF's 2016 35mm restoration!

As a focal point of the classic film noir revival, the Foundation serves as a conduit between film companies and repertory cinemas still eager to screen these films in 35mm. Revenues generated by NOIR CITY ticket sales encourage studios' film archives to strike new prints of films that are at risk of disappearing from public view, either through neglect or scarcity. Once these films are unearthed and returned to circulation, the chances exponentially increase that they will be reissued on DVD, available in pristine, affordable form for future generations of film lovers.

NOIR CITY, the annual San Francisco Film Noir Festival, began in January 2003. It immediately grew into the largest film noir-specific yearly event in the United States, the centerpiece of the Film Noir Foundation's public awareness campaign. Viewers are drawn every January from all over the world, eager to submerge themselves in a ten-day extravaganza of rare films, special guests, music, literary tie-ins—a communal celebration of all things noir. Since then, NOIR CITY festivals have become an annual event in six other U.S. cities: Austin, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.

Please consider supporting our mission with a donation to the [Film Noir Foundation](#).

# NOIR CITY<sup>®</sup>

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# MELANCHOLY BABIES

TRACING THE CHARACTER TRAITS OF ARTISTS IN NOIR

Marc LeSeuer

**F**ilm noir intersects with the history of Western art in a number of different ways. Primarily, individual works of art are used to reinforce our judgment of characters in the films. For example, the paranoia that infects small-time criminal Shubunka (Barry Sullivan) in 1947's *The Gangster* is buttressed by the inclusion of a detail from Francisco Goya's Black Paintings on the wall of his apartment. In a similar fashion, the mentally disturbed sculptor Jack Marlow (Franchot Tone) in *Phantom Lady* (1944) has amongst his home decor the most famous signifier of artistic instability in all of Western art – the self-portrait Vincent van Gogh painted after cutting off the lobe of his ear.





The original artist's "pose" — Albrecht Durer's engraving *Melencolia 1* (1514)

In many films, art is directly linked to villainy. In *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) smashes through the art collection of the depraved Dr. Soberin in his search for the "Great Whatsit." Portraits of women, it's often argued, exhibit an oppressive force upon men, especially in 1944, as seen in three significant noirs that year: *Laura*, *Woman in the Window*, and *Phantom Lady*. Author and art professor Kent Minturn has pointed out specific formal/technical correlations between film noir expressionism and the Abstract Expressionist movement, noting that the two disciplines borrow from each other<sup>1</sup>. In addition, it's has been suggested that Hollywood's left-leaning directors and writers used politicized painter Diego Rivera's *The Flower Carrier* as a symbol of political solidarity subtly introduced into the set dressing. The painting can be seen in *The Woman on Pier 13* (1949), *In a Lonely Place* (1950), and *The Prowler* (1951) -- all made at different times at different studios.<sup>2</sup>

What has been missing from the discussion is a consideration of the artists themselves. For the most part, whether they are painters, sculptors, writers, or composers/musicians, the overriding characteristics that emerge are instability and obsession, bordering on madness. It can be argued, however, that this vision of the disturbed artist is a social construction that goes back to the Renaissance, its most distant roots planted in Classical Antiquity. This construction was absorbed not only by noir writers and directors, but the whole of Western society itself.

The origins of the "maladjusted artist" are found in the astro-

1 Kent Minturn, "Peinture Noire: Abstract Expressionism and Film Noir" in *Film Noir Reader 2*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini

2 Frank Krutnik, "A Living Part of the Class Struggle" in *"Un-American" Hollywood*, ed. by Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, Peter Stanfield



Diego Rivera's *The Flower Carrier* (1935) — most ubiquitous wall decor in noir

logically oriented theories of the Greco/Roman world. The Ancients believed that an individual's personality was determined by the astrological arrangement of the stars at the time of birth. In other words, their "sign" established their temperament. This, in conjunction with the four elements, four seasons, four times of day, four phases of life and, most importantly, the four fluids, establishes one's basic personality traits. (The Four Freshmen come much later.) As a result, the four temperaments are the Sanguine, the Choleric, the Phlegmatic and, most importantly for our purposes, the Melancholic. With this temperament you are born under Saturn, your personality is despondent and unpredictable, you suffer from an overabundance of black gall (best you don't ask). In the Middle Ages, it was believed that the human condition was balanced and measured ... at least until the Fall of Man.

Up to the late Renaissance period, Melancholy, due to its unpredictability, was feared and to be avoided. But in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this anxiety was mitigated in an intriguing way. The primary court philosopher for the Medici, Marsilio Ficino (1433 - 1499), had brought about a major reinterpretation of the Melancholic temperament, one that had major implications thereafter for the art world. Ficino found a passage in Aristotle's *Problemata XXX* that forged a connection between the Melancholic and exceptional talent in the arts and sciences. He then analogized this with the Platonic idea that artists were possessed of a "divine madness." *Voila*, the package was complete. Artists, regardless of the actual sign they were born under, now felt themselves required to act in accordance with the irrational dictates of Melancholy. Indeed, the late Renaissance generation was one of the most eccentric in Western history, wallowing in the Saturnian temperament to extreme degrees.

There also began a visual tradition in the arts of representing those believed to possess genius, including artists—with their hand or fist to the side of their face or jaw, elbow on a table, or (in the case of Rodin's "Thinker"), the knee. The most analyzed version of this is a print by Albrecht Durer called *Melencolia 1*. This became the go-to pose for the representation of major thinkers, and was maintained



**Hangover Square** — George Harvey Bone (Laird Cregar) takes drastic measures when Nettie (Linda Darnell) compromises his art

into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Raphael depicts Michelangelo in such fashion at the School of Athens. Rembrandt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century used it, as well. As artists extracted themselves from the academy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the motif was perfect for expressing the pose of the bohemian artist. Théodore Géricault depicts his fellow Romantic, Eugène Delacroix, in this manner. It was even absorbed by the newest of media then available, photography, as works of Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) will attest. Edvard Munch entitled a work *Melancholy* and Picasso used the motif, if not the title, at least twice.

This specific pose aside, it seems as though the idea of the eccentric, absorbed, and irrational artist had become a trope by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and film noir narratives continued the tradition. Furthermore, many artists' biographies of the Renaissance bare a striking resemblance to creative characters in noir films.

**IN HANGOVER SQUARE (1945),** Laird

Cregar plays George Harvey Bone, a composer/pianist obsessed with his work, yet on the verge of failing to finish a concerto that will further his career. This seeming contradiction between dedication to work and the inability to complete it is easily traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup>

century. One Bartolomeo Torri was so consumed by his anatomical studies, "filthy anatomy" as a biographer called it, that he kept limbs and pieces of corpses under his bed and was summarily evicted (losing a rent-controlled apartment). An assistant of Torri's was so disturbed by his master's collection of skinned and dismembered bodies, described as "melancholy operations," that he broke down, lost his memory, and suffered epileptic fits. In similar fashion, Bone suffers from "black moods" and has a complexion to match, perhaps the result of an excess of "black gall" (or the crash diet the actor would die from). His doctor recommends a better balance of work and play, to which Bone responds, "Music is the most important thing to me." Having killed people during his black-outs, Bone is eventually tracked down—while he's performing his triumphant concerto, some neo-Beethoven bombast that links him with that most driven of 19<sup>th</sup> century composers. When the police close in, he continues

playing as the concert hall burns down around him. Obsessed to the end, oblivious of his surroundings, Bone dies for his art.

The psychopathic sculptor Jack Marlow in *Phantom Lady*, played by Franchot Tone, creates semi-primitive portraiture and even

**The idea of the eccentric, absorbed, and irrational artist had become a trope by the mid-20th century and film noir narratives continued the tradition.**



**Phantom Lady**— Ella Raines offers a hand to sculptor Jack Marlow (Franchot Tone), suffering a black spell brought on by his artistic temperament (and murderous arrogance)

has a stone headboard for his bed, which may be contributing to his chronic headaches. He also appears to have a fixation with his hands, which he gazes at while espousing his thesis, “A pair of hands can do inconceivable good, yet the same hands can do terrible evil. I wish I didn’t have to use my hands to hurt other another human being.” A very 16<sup>th</sup> century attitude: the distancing sense of superiority he has to other people. He says, “People hate me because I’m different from them,” and later, “When you’re born with my gifts you can’t afford to let them [other people] get in your way. What is any life compared to mine?” Not unlike Michelangelo, who complained of not having any friends or workmates in spite of “doing good with all my heart.” He complained that there was something in his nature “some trick of temper or madness...that gives them an excuse for speaking evil of me and my character.” He goes on: “Melancholy is my joy and discomfort is my rest.” This distrust and distance from mankind among High Renaissance artists reached its apex with Leonardo da Vinci, when he warned his brother that by having a child he had “created a watchful enemy who will strive...after liberty which can only come into being at your death.”

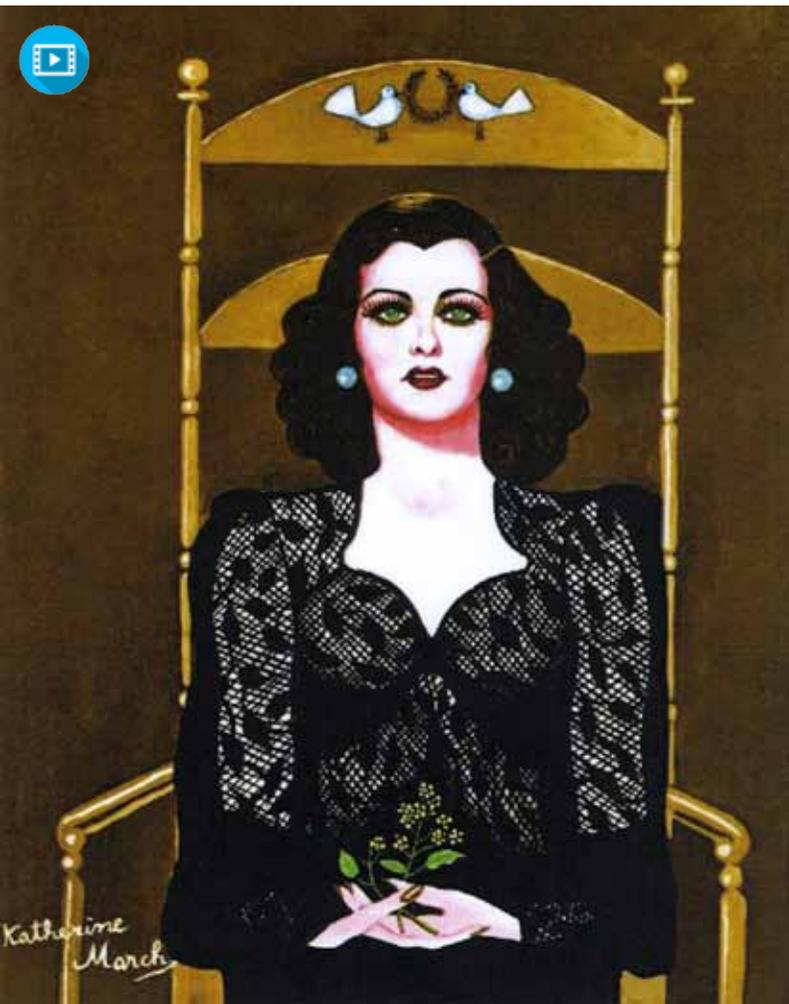
## Michelangelo ... complained of not having friends or workmates in spite of “doing good with all my heart.” He complained that there was something in his nature “some trick of temper or madness...”

Norman Clyde, the painter played by Robert Mitchum in *The Locket* (1946) seems to possess a measured personality, until some of those artistic characteristics received from the Renaissance flare up. Alas, one could argue that the most irrational artists associated with the film were the art consultants, who had Mitchum painting in styles that ranged from 1930s’ Social Realism to Surrealism. He tops this off with a commissioned society portrait that could bring tears to the Keanes’ eyes. Again, Norman Clyde’s cavalier attitude towards possible clients finds its source in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Accounts were legion of artists keeping benefactors waiting for years for the completion of a commissioned work. When Clyde is offered \$500 for a work, this artist, who’s still teaching for a living, ups the price to \$5,000. His abrupt suicide has no famous antecedents in the Renaissance, but the act had become more common among artists by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What examples of suicide that do exist were often associated with cases of “extreme melancholy,” but this doesn’t seem to apply to the Norman Clyde character.

Another painter who raises interesting questions about an artist’s personality, in relation to his art, is Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson) in *Scarlet Street* (1945). Cross is a cashier who falls in love with a manipulative young woman who disrupts his placid life. He is also a ‘Sunday painter’ who continually irritates his wife with his “dabbling.” An interesting issue arises when one looks at the



Painter Norman Clyde (Robert Mitchum) fields an offer for a painting of his muse (Laraine Day) in *The Locket*



John Decker's painting of Joan Bennett from *Scarlet Street*, signed by "Katherine March"

actual paintings produced by this most placid of artists. They seem to combine a detailed realism with some truly symbolic additions. One has a large snake stalking a woman within a detailed urban setting. It's sort of Max Ernst (with a really bad hangover) meets the Ashcan School. Yet, in spite of his plodding personality, the work itself may be the most modern painting in the history of film noir.

Of all the artists who occupy major roles in noir films, it's the writer Dixon Steele, played by Humphrey Bogart in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), who uses most all the tropes inherited from the Renaissance to explain, if not excuse, the actions of his character. He is violent, jealous, has a raging temper, and is consumed by writer's block that he blames on the Hollywood system. One is reminded of the Renaissance artist Piero di Cosimo, who became so "strange and eccentric that nothing could be done with him. Flies enraged him and even shadows annoyed him."<sup>3</sup>

When Steele finally does start to write, he obsessively labors day and night and actually strikes the traditional pose of melancholy—elbow on the table and hand to the side of his face. He seems quite aware of his erratic behavior. Twice he refers to his "artistic temperament." A friend describes him as "a genius and a sick man." He is said to possess a "superior mind," but also a special "brand of abnormality." In defending himself from the charge that he killed a hat-check girl and threw her from a moving car, he ironically says,

"We so-called creative artists have a great respect for cadavers... we treat them with utmost reverence, put them on soft beds, on fur rugs or leave them lying at the foot of a staircase." As irreverent as Bogart's tone is, this does put him within the lineage of Renaissance artists such as Silvio Cosini, whose interest in necromancy led him to make a jerkin of human skin, and, wearing it over his shirt, he believed it had great virtue.

Of all the noir artists, Dix Steele benefits most from the slack bestowed upon creative types, a space granted to artists from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on. His agent describes him as having a "tremendous ego" yet someone else says, "He's a writer. People like him can afford to be temperamental."

None of this is to insist that the writers and directors of noir were conscious of the origin of this heritage of artistic excess, though that possibility does perhaps exist with the Europeans. Nonetheless, even Fritz Lang soon learned that American audiences were impervious to traditional symbols that were taken for granted in the Old World. Rather, it seems sensible to suggest that this pervasive tradition of the eccentric artist was inherited by noir creators on an unconscious, intuitive level, and for that it's all the more pervasive. ■

*Marc LeSeuer is a professor of film and visual studies at California College of the Arts, Oakland.*



Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart) — "a genius and a sick man"

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*, p. 69. All references to astrological theory and 16<sup>th</sup> century artists come from this book.