

# Basic Detail Report



## **Title: Bird Watchers**

Date: 1948

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3f00c

Medium: Tempera on gessoed board

Description: Although he was raised in a religious family, Tooker stopped going to church when he began attending art school. Nevertheless, the religious art of the past affected him deeply, as evident in *Bird Watchers*. "I wanted to paint a positive picture," he explained, "a religious picture without religious subject matter. I thought watching birds was a good subject which could get close to a religious picture, but I was not yet ready to make a painting with a religious subject."<sup>(1)</sup> The painting is based on quattrocento Italian prototypes, but the faces are, for the most part, modeled on Tooker himself, his friends, and his family. His sister posed for two figures—the woman on the bridge and the one in the red-cowled coat—and his mother is in the slate-blue coat and hat. <sup>(2)</sup> The painting is most likely set in Manhattan's Central Park. Although the figures are clearly from the late 1940s, Tooker removed

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all excess detail from their clothing in order to emphasize their timeless simplicity. For instance, the topcoat of the main figure has no buttons or buttonholes and becomes a loose robe of indeterminate style. The composition suggests the Crucifixion, with the figures of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, and the apostles and soldiers at the foot of the cross, which is represented by the tree to the right. The panel itself, with its arched top, refers to Renaissance altarpieces. Tooker often plays deep and shallow spaces against each other. The space in "Bird Watchers" opens deeply on the left and is brought up abruptly on the right, as in many works by the artist. To begin the painting process, Tooker transfers the outlines of a drawing to the panel by tracing on a sheet of paper coated with red pigment mixed with water or alcohol. He then applies a medium-toned wash across the surface of the entire panel. As Tooker mixes and applies pigment six days a week to a painting created through this process, the image grows in density, richness, and depth. Such a painting may take two or more months of intense effort before it is finished. Tooker paints from back to front, from the most distant part of the image to the foreground. Like the majority of the works he produced after 1945, "Bird Watchers" is executed in egg-yolk tempera. He applied the paint to untempered pressed-wood board that had been covered with five or six coats of gesso, a fine white ground layer made of powdered chalk mixed with thin rabbit-skin glue. Within the confines of the tempera medium, an artist must work with careful deliberation, precision, and forethought. Thus egg-tempera is just the right medium to showcase Tooker's contemplative sensibilities, which inspire works of art that are intellectually forceful as well as meticulously crafted. By masterfully exploiting the richness and density of that medium, which has played a pivotal role in the history of Western art, Tooker pays homage to the visual past. In so doing, he successfully draws upon traditional themes to enhance his unique contemporary vision. KK Bibliography: Merry A. Foresta, "George Tooker," exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: David Tunkl Gallery, 1980); Thomas H. Garver, "George Tooker" (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1985). Notes: 1 Garver, "George Tooker," p. 22. 2 Ibid. Dimensions: 26 3/4 x 32 3/4 in.