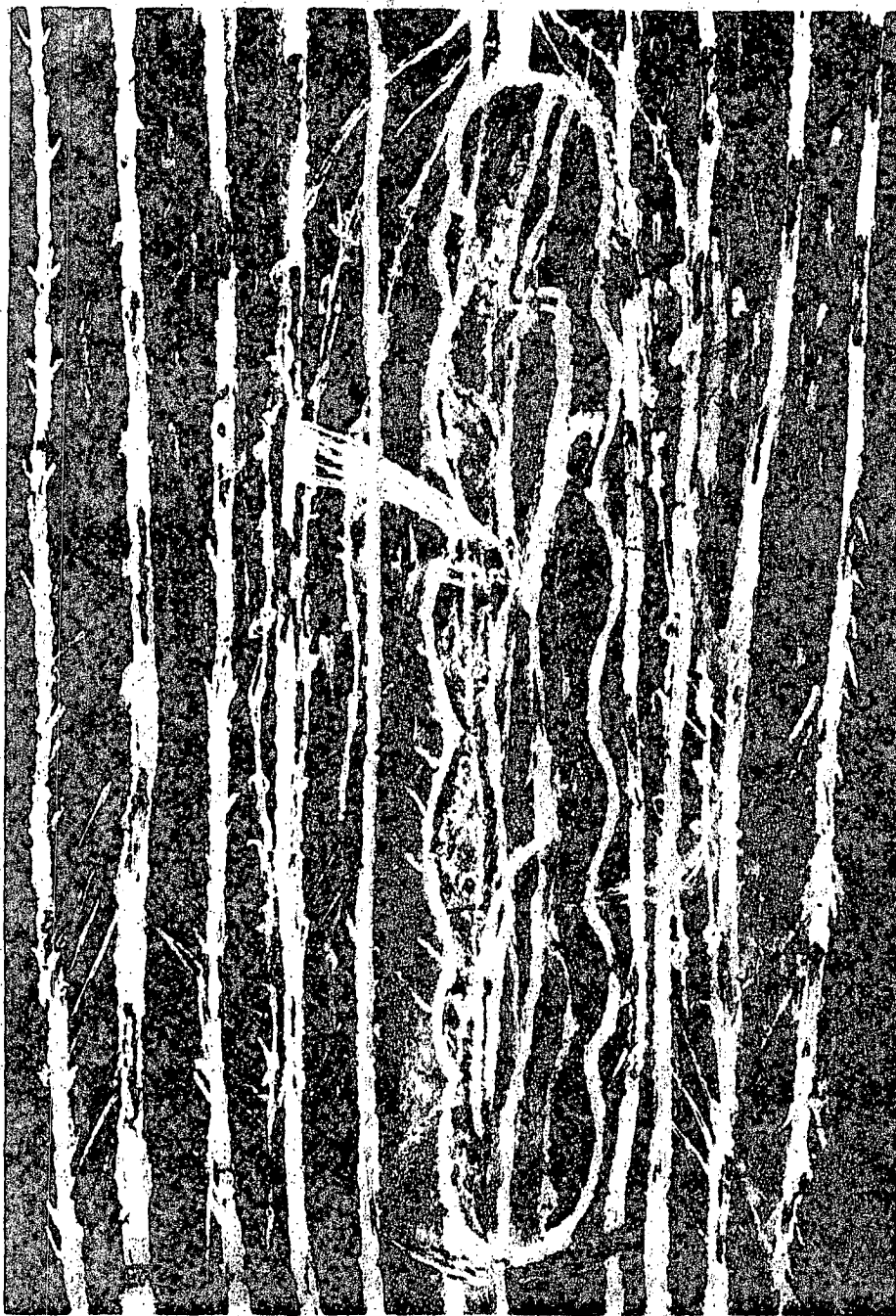




Empress, 1961
oil on canvas, 39 1/4" x 40"
Coll: National Gallery of Canada

connotations, for their intimation of the function of lines as manifestations of force, however vagrant. They are also still striking for their insistent suggestions of almost secret motions and rustlings, of curtains or grasses or even nightskies about to part. These perhaps culminate with the National Gallery's *Empress*, 1961, where hints in several slightly earlier paintings turn at the center of this into intimations of a figure, a figure that seems to be trying to burst its way out of a papyrus swamp. The stem-strips are all bursting into curious filaments that will gradually become a hallmark of Meredith's drawing and painting style throughout the following decade, and the repeating curves of so much later painting are

also clearly stated here.

Things very soon began to open up for him and his palette moved to the most brilliant saturations imaginable, though first and at intervals for some years afterward, he liked to pair, multiply or contrast simple variations of a trident-like figure in black on, say, a yellow ground. These figures could be read according to one's own fancy as Vishnu symbols; as X-rays of tulips or as the skeletal hands of marsupials. These "tridents" seem to have begun the release of a large vocabulary of private but interesting symbols and simultaneously a disciplined effort to develop a syntax for their sensible presentation. This could now and then take on surprisingly baroque guises.

In the way of non-twin brothers who have sometimes an affinity for similar data but interpret them quite differently, the orb exploited by Ronald appears as a circle in Meredith's work in 1964, to be developed in a series of brilliant inventions sustained over a long period. Some have called this a mandala and there is actually a painting of 1967 called *Karma*, but it is already present in the dazzler called *Crusader* (Op mightn't have exhausted itself so fast had it had a fraction of the energy and freedom crackling here) and is paramount in such major works as *Atlantis*, 1966, and *Ulysses*, 1968. The circles can disintegrate into fans and ribbons or become minor accompaniments to ciliated floating shapes that look like huge cut gemstones. The insistent point about the paintings of the years 1958-68 as they look in this show is how ripe they have grown.

The general symmetry and the settled imagery began, however, to give way to new ideas. There was for instance (not represented in the show) a series of large color-field paintings on which a line of contrasting hue wandered as apparently vagrant as an illuminated ion coursing across a cloud-chamber. Then a new but energetic restlessness announced itself in such paintings as a large untitled canvas of 1970 dominated by a lattice-like form. This next shattered itself into amorphous, strongly spiked forms apparently moving at great speed and these quickly abandoned all straight lines or definable angles.

The paintings of the last three years are immense. They tend to employ only two but two richly modulated colors (note that Meredith has throughout stuck to old-fashioned oils which he can use with the translucency of watercolors and a plasticity impossible with acrylics) together with menacing clouds of black on white ground. *Japan*, 1972, is a false triptych which suffers somewhat from disjunctions where there should be none. *Toshiro* (1973: the titles are arbitrary) is more satisfying for containing the whole of its explosive force within a single frame. The force of imagery here is both cataclysmic and ambiguous, partly cosmic, partly sexual, partly the devastation of solar explosions, partly the irrelevance of fragments of wheels. But this freedom is exhilarating. One feels a development something like that experienced in moving from the dense textures and self-obsessive, unresolved solemnities of a Berlioz to the serious clarities of a Mozart prepared to face up to greater mysteries than those imposed by his more conventional libretti. I certainly don't mean by this apparently unhistorical statement to imply retrogression. Anyone who listens to late-hour radio programs will follow my sense.

The paintings are accompanied by sixteen drawings in pencil or the colored inks favored for their brilliance by this artist. They, at any rate those that are directly related to paintings, bring us to a most peculiar ambiguity in the work of John Meredith which I for one do not