



# MachineMan

*By Robert Templeton*

# The Work of Robert Templeton

A Testimony To The Transportation Age

## Interstate 80



Oil on canvas, 60"x36", 1963

# Interstate

In the 1960s, when Robert Templeton showed his paintings and constructions of roads, trucks, and windshields at the Baner Gallery in New York, the country was in the grip of an enormous highway building boom that brought about a profound change in the American landscape. Just consider the fact that in the year 1900 there were fewer than 200 miles of paved roads in the United States, and today the highways run coast to coast. Ten or twenty-thousand years from now, when archaeologists dig through the rubble of our civilization, they will surely marvel at the immensity of our road system and mark us as the highway builders, just as the ancient Egyptians are labeled the pyramid builders.

As the new highways connected the large metropolitan centers, they roused the remotest regions from their somnolent isolation, and opened them to the dynamics of economic growth. Templeton's work is solidly grounded in that period. The energy of his imagery is palpable. Even now, looking at the canvases forty-five years later, one senses the charged atmosphere of something big happening. In 1950 there existed only two superhighways, the Pennsylvania and the New Jersey turnpike, making a cross country trip an arduous endeavor. Now the new highway system was bringing about unprecedented mobility, and with it the explosion of the cities into suburban sprawl.

Templeton uses the ribbons of highway coupled with repeat images of truck and driver to portray speed and high energy. Trucks, cars, and highways become the metaphor for fast-paced contemporary life. Templeton loved to drive. He thought nothing of driving from New York to Atlanta or St. Louis, or even across the entire continent. The open road had a liberating effect on his spirit - once behind the wheel it was as if all care fell away from him. The exhilaration he felt is joyously expressed in his 12x17ft installation 'TEMPLETON WAS HERE', for which he uses large replicas of car side mirrors superimposed on the outline of the US as people would use little flags on a map to indicate where they had been. By showing only a fraction of the landscape in each mirror reflection he created a landscape of the imagination so that the viewers are free to superimpose their own reminiscences of a cross-country drive.

When Templeton returned to his native Iowa in 1963 after years of study, first at the Kansas City Art Institute, then at the Art Students League in New York, he fully intended to leave the bustle and noise of the cities behind and settle back to paint the peaceful countryside of his childhood. But he soon realized that was not possible anymore. Not only had he changed, but so had the country. Ribbons of interstate highways were being cut through the cornfields; the roar of trucks shattered the stillness of the land. The simple pleasure of setting up his easel on a hill to paint a peaceful pasture was just that- too simple. He had to find another way.

There is such a thing as the landscape of the mind from which we bring to the physical landscape around us the baggage of our experiences - we know too much to approach it with the innocence of a child. The din of the outside world intrudes into the remotest, even idyllic regions of the country, because it is in our head. Because of this Templeton found that a peaceful painting of a homestead in the rolling hills of Southwestern Iowa is a hoax, since it, too, is plugged into the economic stresses that tug at the well-being of the whole country. Such a painting could not come close to expressing the complexity of modern life. Templeton had to find a new approach to portraying this high-energy, pulsing society of ours. In a large abandoned Legion Hall over the drugstore in the small town of Corning he found his way. He converted the space into a studio, and there he created more than twenty works in little over a year's time, working feverishly, often stripped to his shorts, when the Iowa summer sent the temperature in the hall soaring to a hundred degrees.

The druggist saved him more than once from dehydration by climbing up the stairs to check on him and bring him cold sodas.

Eleven of the works were constructions of panel board, metal frames and aluminum pipes replicating windshields, car and truck mirrors, some in shadow boxes, one free-standing, all welded by Templeton with the help of his brother Darwin in his brother's welding shop. In addition to these, the oils on canvas depicted country roads, or the interstate as seen from the inside of a car. One of the oils of an iron trestle bridge was selected for inclusion in the juried 1964 Mid-America Annual at the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City and was prominently featured in publicity about the exhibition.

All the works have in common a sense of high energy. Through the use of repetitive images and the depiction of huge trucks at various distances, Templeton gives us a sense of power in motion, while the driver's reflection in the truck mirrors is deliberately left a blur, emphasizing his anonymity and isolation, machine and man fused together in high intensity performance. To achieve the effect of a fleeting moment as the truck passes by Templeton had to hold back on his usual way of

painting faces in fine detail.

For Templeton the feverish pace of production continued until the end of September 1964, when the work had to be delivered to the Baner Gallery in New York in time for the October opening. Luckily the summer heat left off at the end of August. The free-standing truck mirror was completed, the large windshield construction with truck horn was hanging from the ceiling, and the oil paintings were drying well, except for 'Driving on the Interstate', which had to be loaded wet into the station wagon for the three-day trip to New York.

The gallery gave the exhibition the title "L'Homme Machine" (Machine Man). The critics said 'This work presents an American phenomenon in a refreshing manner uncommon to the seacoast schools' (Betsy Polier, Park East); '...he especially likes to deal with the theme of contemporary living' (TIME Magazine); 'Robert Templeton concentrates on man, the idea is good, the approach frequently ingenious...' (John Canaday, New York Times); '... the artist employs paint with warmth, and his constructions done with real rear-view mirrors, are striking.' (New York Herald Tribune). The work was reproduced in newspapers and art magazines, such as the New York Times and Art News, even long after the show.

Templeton was pleased with the critical attention the show got. But in hindsight it must be said that somehow we all, the critics, and curiously enough Templeton himself, missed the main point, mostly because it was right under our noses: we were all living in the middle of the explosion of the transportation age, and it found its artistic expression in Templeton's work.

## Leonore Templeton

Woodbury, May 1, 2009

## Truck Mirror Construction



Multimedia, 46" high, 12" base, 1963

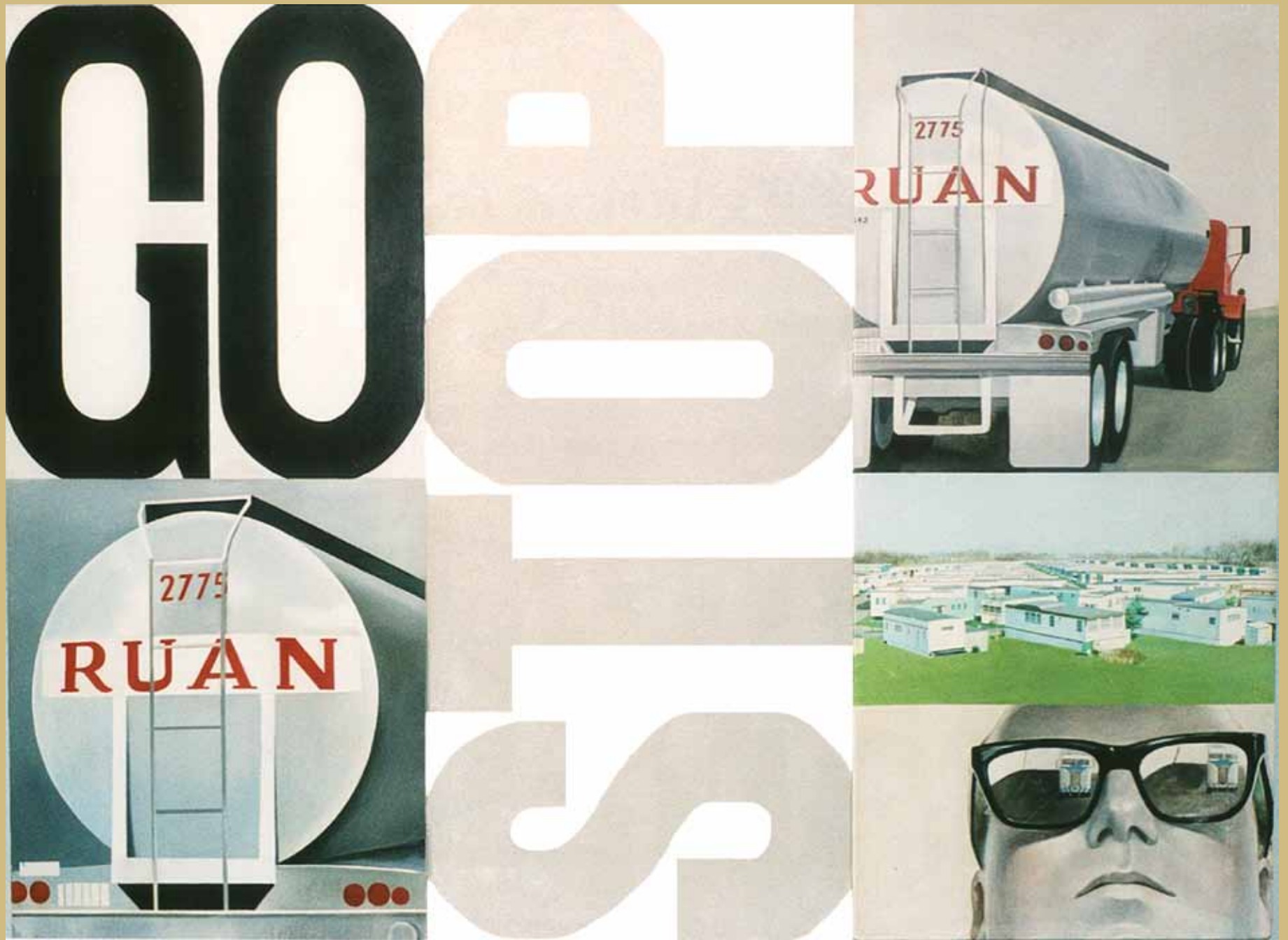


## Mother and Child Driving



Oil, 38"x20", 1963

# Stop Go



Acrylic on three wood panels, 9'x7', 1964

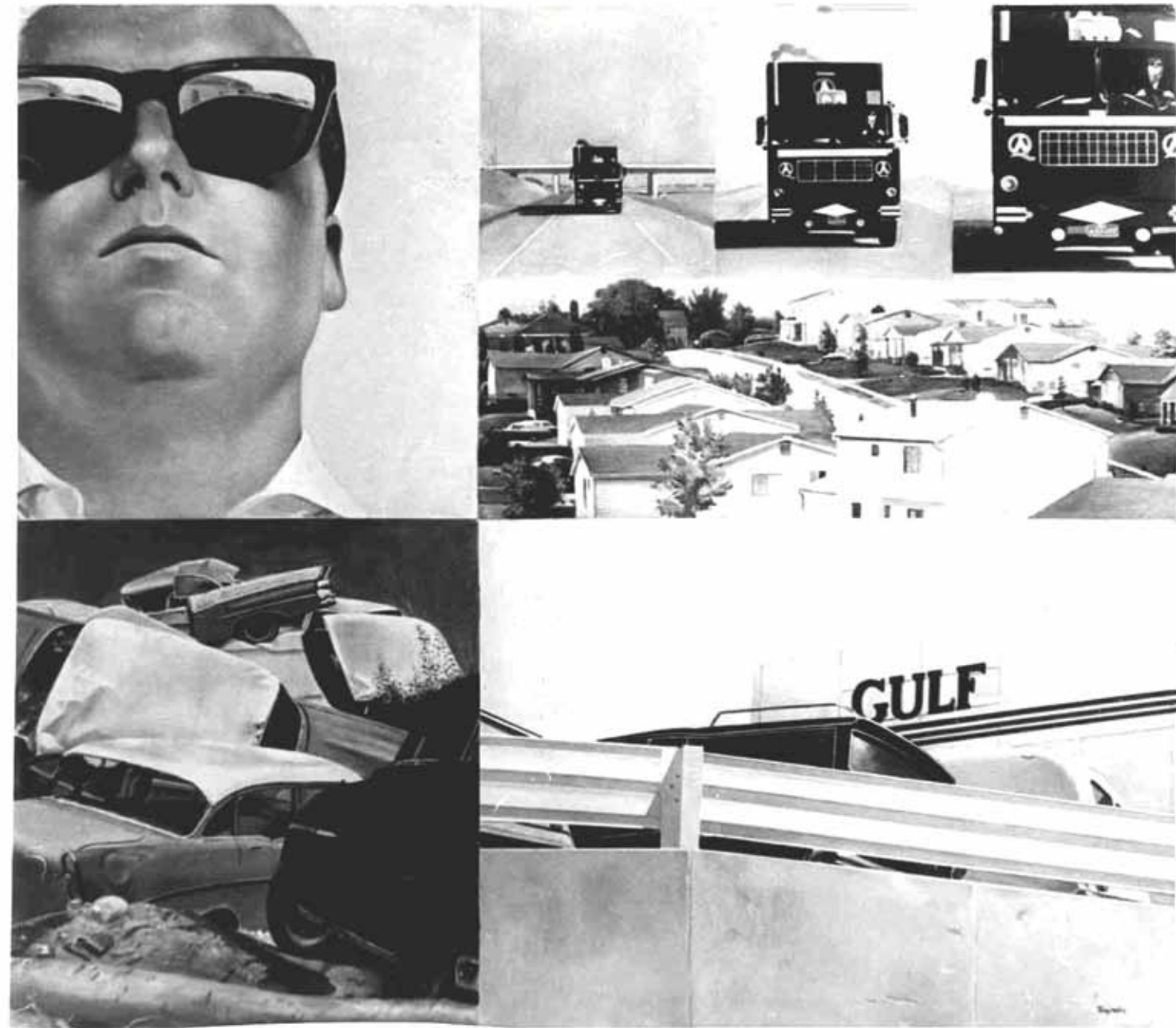
# Go Stop Go



Silkscreen, 48"x38", 1965



# On The Interstate



Oil, 96"x84", 1965

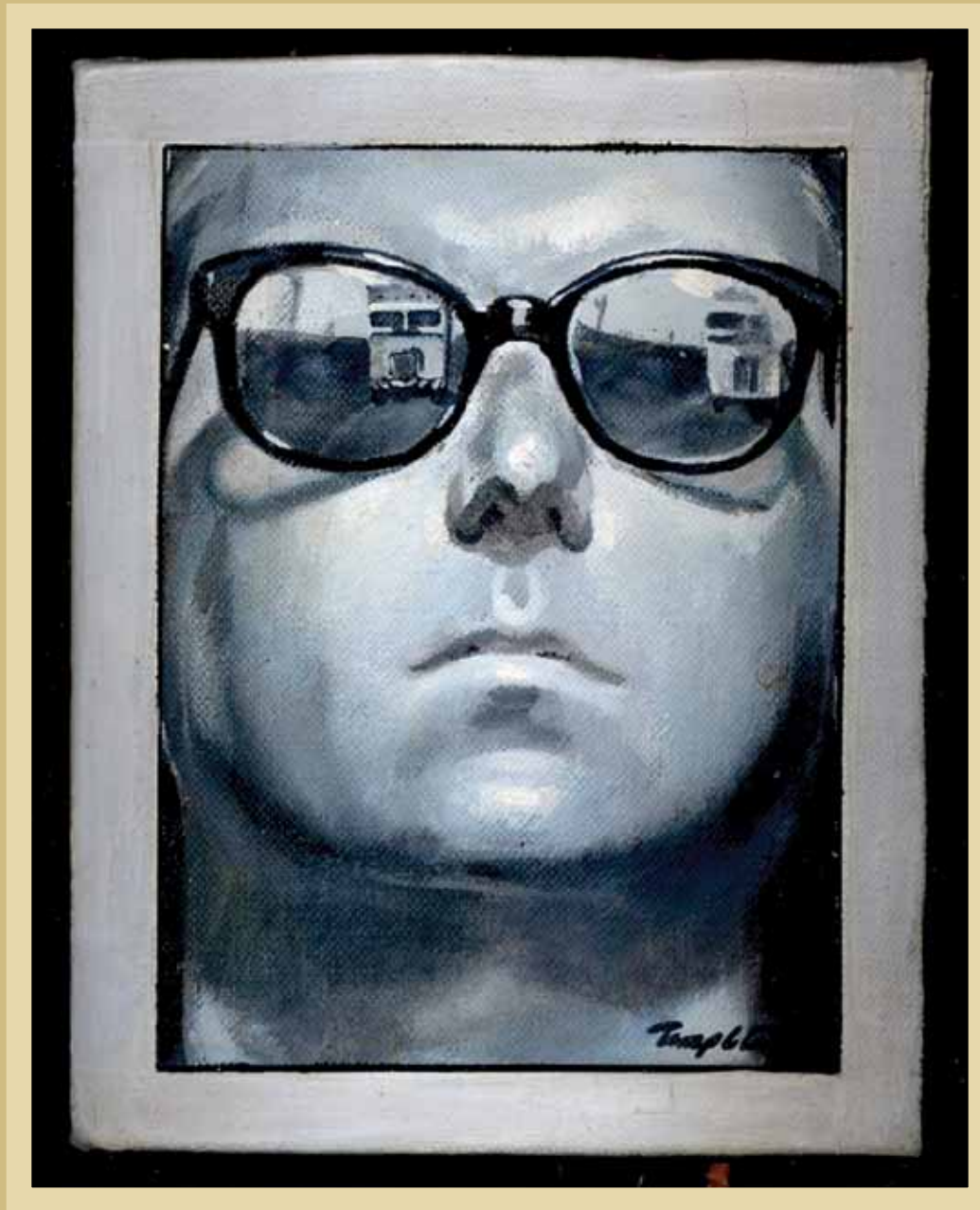
## Long Distance Driver

Repeat image of trucker in shadowbox covered in glass used as metaphor for being locked in the confined space of a truck cab for long hours.



Multimedia, 37"x33", 1965

Self Portrait with Truck  
Reflected in Sunglasses



Oil, 8"x10", 1964





Templeton exhibition in the Founders Gallery at the Golden Age of Trucking Museum in Middlebury, CT 2004

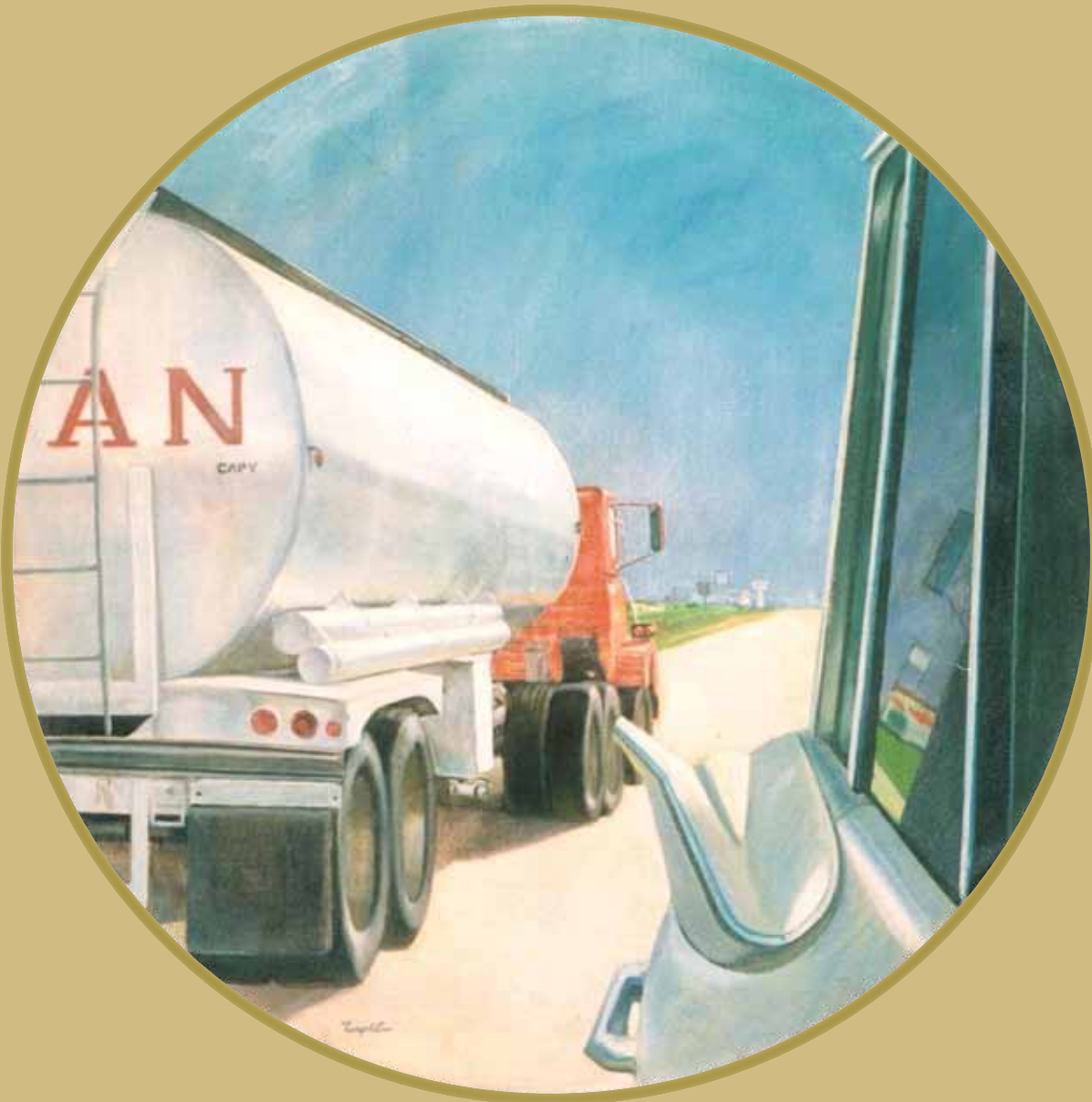
'GO STOP' Acrylic on wood panels 9'x7'

'TEMPLETON WAS HERE' Five reflections in oversized replicas of 1960s car side mirrors superimposed on the United States map 17'x12'

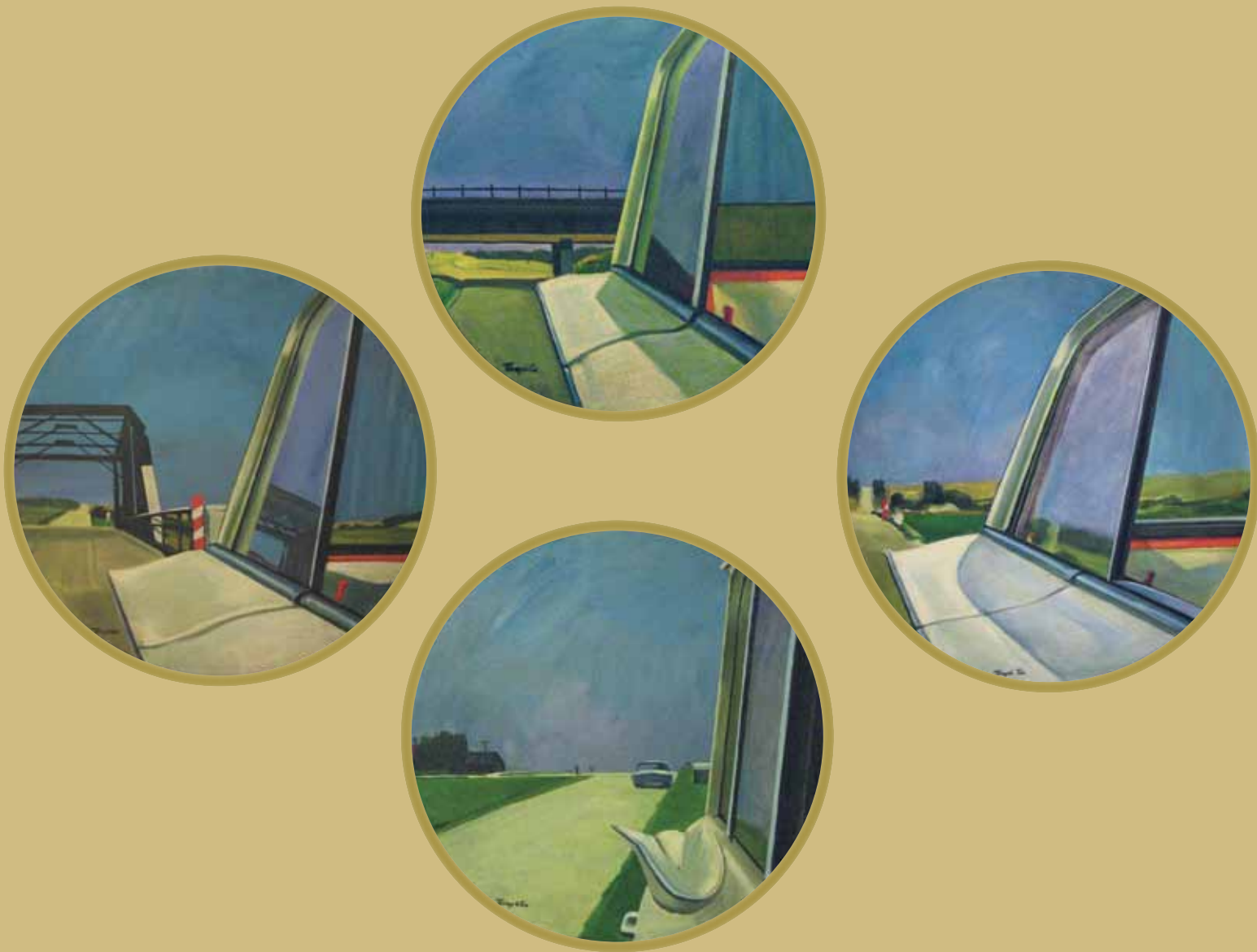


# Detail of 'TEMPLETON WAS HERE'

Reflection in an oversized replica of a 1960s car side mirror



Oil, 48" diameter, 1964



Detail of 'TEMPLETON WAS HERE' Reflections in oversized replicas of 1960s car side mirrors  
Oil, various diameters, 1964



Templeton one man show in the Founders Gallery at the Golden Age of Trucking Museum, 2004  
 'GO STOP GO', Silkscreen, 48"x38", 1965  
 OPEN SHADOWBOX I, 'DRIVER'S REFLECTION IN TRUCK MIRROR', 35"x48", 1964

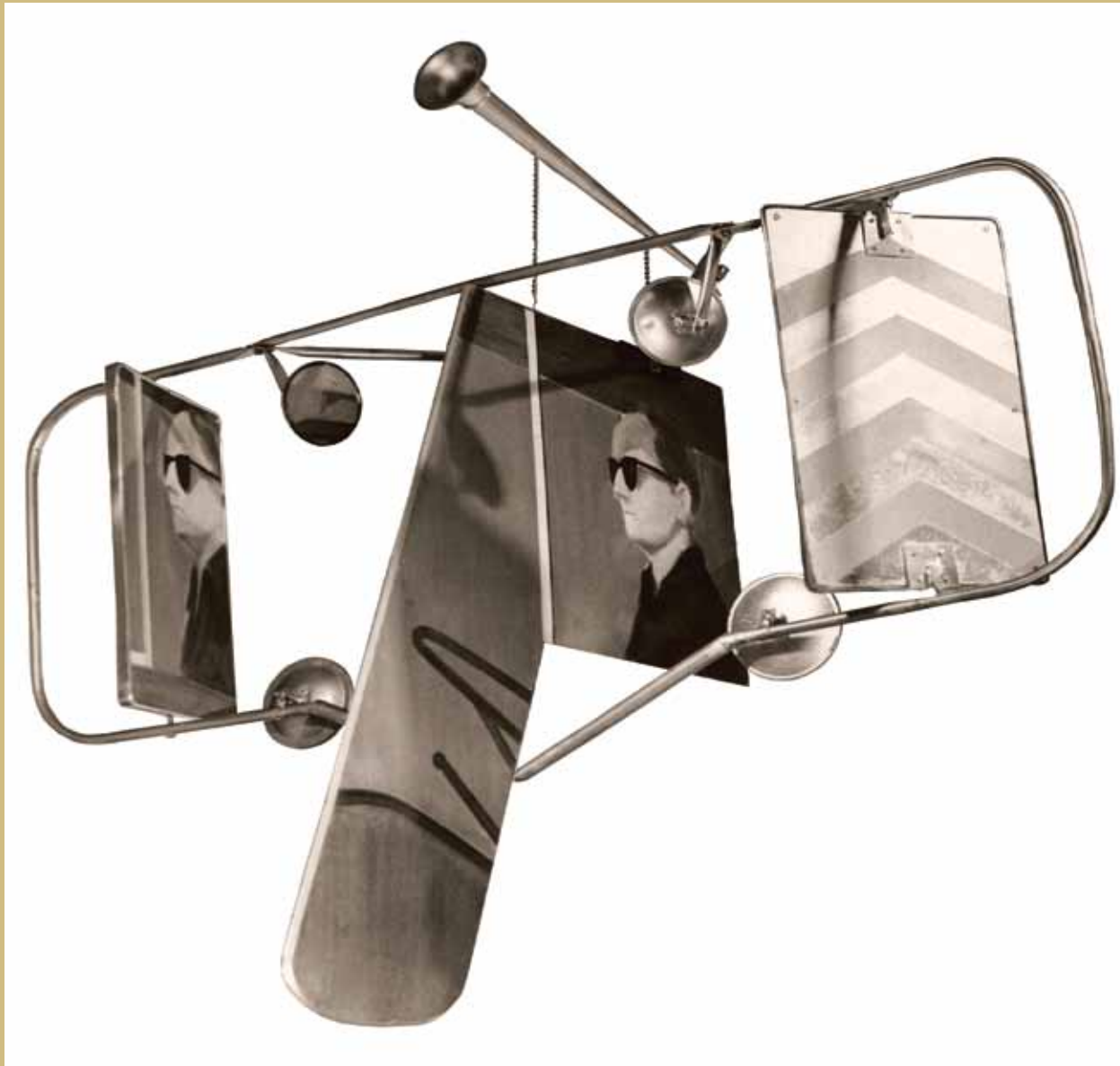
Truck windshield with driver and side mirrors



Multimedia Construction, 79"x20", 1964

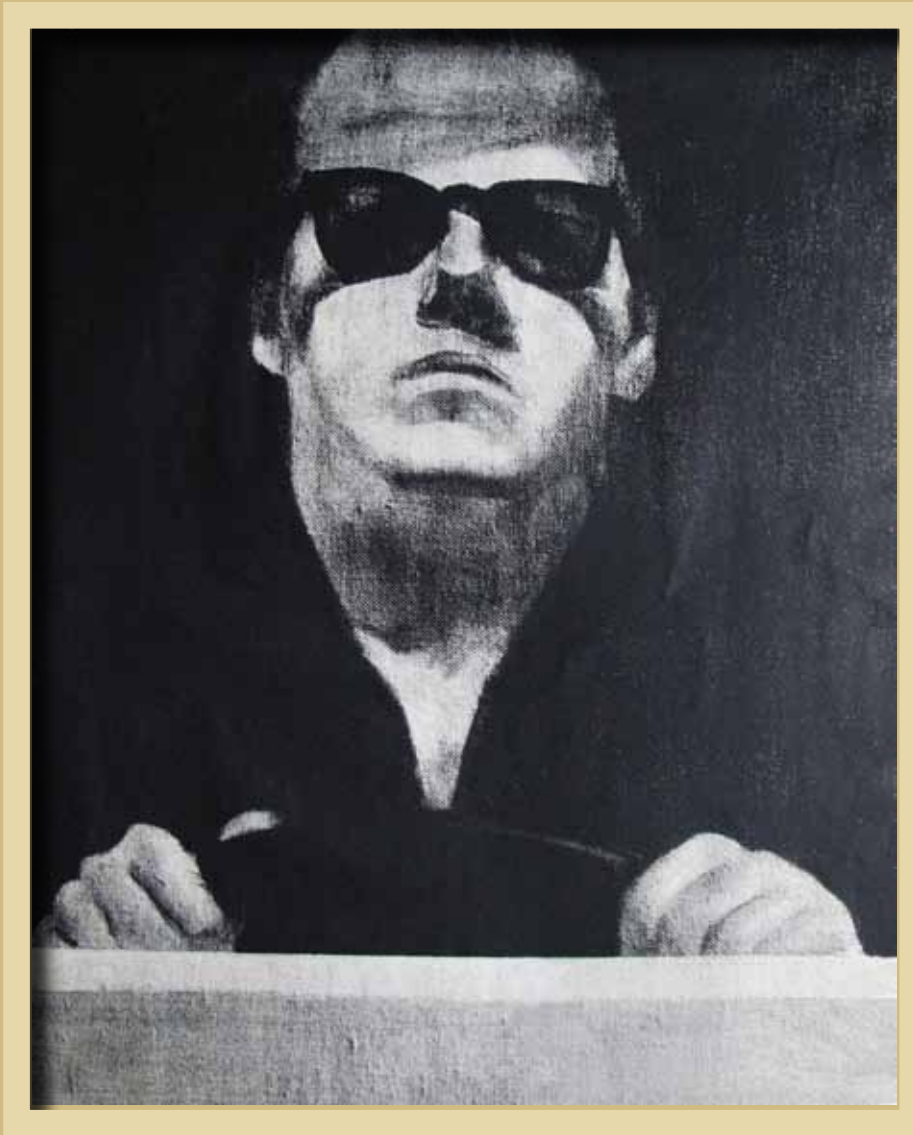


Multimedia construction of truck mirrors,  
driver, and truck horn



Oil on wood panels, aluminum tubing, 36"x58"x72", 1964

"Driving"



Silkscreen, 18"x24", 1965

## Open Shadowbox II



Multimedia construction with driver's reflection  
in the truck mirror, 35"x40", 1964

## ROBERT TEMPLETON

1929-1991

**B**orn into a farming family in Iowa the year of the stock market crash, life was hard for Robert Templeton. For long periods the family subsisted on whatever vegetables his mother was able to grow on their small rented acreage, supplemented by his father's wages as a WPA worker, and the sacks of rice the government distributed. After years of struggle, life finally became easier when his father was entrusted with the management of a farm in Montgomery County as a tenant farmer. Templeton later said that all the deprivations of his childhood toughened him rather than defeated him. His love of books and paintings carried him through the roughest spots. He recalled how he looked forward to the arrival of the Saturday Evening Post with the cover painting by Norman Rockwell. Every spare moment between school and farming chores was used to fill his sketchbooks with scenes from the Iowa countryside. His sketches caught the attention of his high school principal Mary Buffington, who encouraged him to pursue a career in art. When he won the National Merit Scholarship, she helped him to apply to the Kansas City Art Institute.

Templeton arrived in Kansas City in 1946, barely seventeen years old, penniless, but excited to be in a big city. He could not have imagined then that some day he would be in the White House painting the president's portrait. A year later his younger brother Kenneth followed him to work at Hallmark, and they were able to share lodgings. During that year Templeton was awarded the Vanderslice scholarship. Early on Templeton was able to cover his share of the living expenses with portrait commissions. He spent his summers in Colorado, honing his skill in portraiture on the sidewalks of Estes Park. He laughingly admitted that the Nebraska farmers were harder on him when he did their five-dollar portraits than the president of the United States.

In Kansas City he came under the influence of Thomas Hart Benton, who actually sat for him for his portrait. Templeton had gone to the Benton home for the portrait sitting, and when the sketch was finished, Benton called in his daughter to get her reaction to the portrait. When she approved, Benton was delighted, and autographed it.

In the summer of 1949 Templeton travelled to Santa Fe, with the express purpose of visiting the artist John Sloan, and his wife

Helen. A lifelong friendship developed from that visit, and when he moved to New York to continue his studies at the Art Students League, Sunday afternoon teas and discussions about art at the Sloan home became a regular event in Templeton's life. With a letter of recommendation from John Sloan, Templeton was able to get a Ball Grant from the Art Students League two years in a row. When classes were in session, he supplemented his income by ushering at Carnegie Hall. During summer recess he continued to hone his skill in portraiture in Estes Park, which generated enough income to last him through the school year.

In the Fifties New York was a hotbed of abstract expressionism, but Templeton never wavered in his belief in the validity of realism. In a letter to a friend he wrote that the world would be poorer without it, that it is a great communicator, because realist works do not need erudite essays to explain their meaning, they speak directly to the viewer. He continued to say that the works of Benton, Curry, Wood, Sloan, Henri, Bellows and Hopper sensitize us to the beauty of the Midwest and the city. Always capturing that special light, Templeton filled his sketchbooks with city and country scenes.

In 1952 Templeton was drafted into the Army for a two-year tour of duty. During basic training at Fort Leonard Wood he painted a forty foot mural 'Portrait of America', which showed the influence of Thomas Hart Benton. After basic training he was sent to Europe. During leave, instead of returning to the States, he visited the great museums of Europe, which reinforced his love of portraiture.

While still in the Army, Templeton married, and upon discharge in 1954 he and his wife settled down in New York, where he shared a studio on the Lower East Side with his friend from Art Student League days, the painter Roger Barnes, and Philip Levine, who later made a name for himself as a sculptor.

In 1963 Templeton moved back to Iowa. There he devoted his energy entirely to creating works with a transportation age theme. He participated both in the Mid America Annual at the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City, and the Annual Iowa Artists Exhibition at the Des Moines Art Center. He was a pioneer in dealing in art with the effect the automobile had on the landscape, and the way we live. One of the recurring images in his work is the long distance trucker, whom he uses as the protagonist of high stress modern man, both master and slave to the technology we created. He experienced the life of a trucker first hand when he accompanied his brother Darwin, who owned a trucking company, on cross country hauls. The paintings and constructions of trucks and highways were shown in 1964 at the Banfer Gallery in New York under the title 'L'Homme Machine (Machine Man)', and posthumously in 2004 as 'Life on the Road' in the Founders Gallery at the Golden Age of Trucking Museum in Connecticut.

In 1965 he and his wife bought a farm in Connecticut, where he lived until his death in 1991. The Connecticut period was filled with TIME cover commissions, including the cover of the Detroit riots, commissions of leaders in politics and industry, among them portraits of President Carter, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Connecticut Governor John Dempsey, A.W. (Chuck) Clausen, President of the World Bank, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee Melvin Price, and General Bernard Rogers, NATO Commander-in-Chief.

With all this activity he still continued to add paintings to his Machine-Man series, but from 1967 on, after his involvement in the Detroit riots, Templeton devoted more and more of his time to paint a record of the leading figures in the black civil rights movement. He felt, as we were witnessing a profound change in race relations, the nation owed these courageous people recognition for their untiring devotion to a just cause. For nearly twenty years he arranged portrait sittings with leaders in the movement with the help and advice of Dr. Benjamin Mays, mentor and friend of Martin Luther King. The resulting collection of thirty plus paintings were first shown at Emory with a grant from the Georgia Council of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. The title "Lest we forget...Images of the Black Civil Rights Movement" came out of a conversation Templeton had with Dr. Mays, who expressed regret that already so many people, their work and sacrifice, were forgotten. Since its first showing in 1986 the collection has toured the country. The national tour of historically black colleges under the auspices of the United Negro College Fund with funding from Heublein culminated in an exhibition on Capitol Hill in Washington. Templeton's Black Panther trial sketches were exhibited at the Beinecke Library at Yale in 2007.

Robert Templeton's work is part of public and private collections, including the Smithsonian, the Pentagon Museum, universities and libraries. His paintings were reproduced in publications, such as the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, the National Portrait Gallery news, the Smithsonian magazine, Art News, Black Enterprise, TIME and People Magazine. More about the artist can be found at [www.roberttempleton.com](http://www.roberttempleton.com).



Templeton in his studio in Corning,  
Iowa 1964 with 'Couple driving'



Oil, 7'x4', 1964

# ROBERT TEMPLETON

www.roberttempleton.com

Born in Red Oak, Iowa, 1929; died in Woodbury, Connecticut, 1991

EDUCATION:	Kansas City Art Institute, 1946-1949. National High Merit Scholar; Vanderslice Scholarship Art Students League, New York City 1950-1952. Ball Grant Mannheim Akademie, Germany 1956
SERVICE:	US Army 1952-1954, Fifth Army Signal Corps Designed and executed murals for the Army in the United States and in Germany; served as staff photographer for Stars and Stripes, Heidelberg
TRAVEL:	Traveled and painted in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Holland, Greece, Egypt, the Caribbean 1955-1991
ONE-MAN SHOWS:	Banfer Gallery, New York 1964 'L'Homme Machine' (Machine Man) Emory University, Atlanta 1986 "Lest we forget-Images of the Black Civil Rights Movement" Bergen County Museum 1988 "Lest we forget" Anna Howard Gallery, Washington, CT 1990
POSTHUMOUS ONE-MAN SHOWS:	Museum of American Political Life, Hartford 1992 Hartford Civic Center and Heublein Headquarters 1993, start of two-year national tour of Historically Black Colleges of "Lest we forget" Capitol Hill, Rotunda Building, Washington DC 1994, end of national tour Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL 1994 Retrospective, Corning, Iowa 1997 Housatonic Museum Bridgeport 2002 Guerrera Gallery, Golden Age of Trucking Museum 2004, Middlebury, CT The Beinecke at Yale 2007 The Art Students League of New York 2008 Mattatuck Museum of Fine Arts and History, Waterbury, CT 2009
GROUP SHOWS:	New York City Center Gallery 1959 National Academy Audubon Artists Exhibition 1959 Fourteenth Mid-America Annual, Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City 1964 Annual Iowa Artists Exhibition, Des Moines Art Center 1964 Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery 1973 "If elected"
PUBLICATIONS:	"If elected..." Smithsonian Institution Press 1976 "The Smithsonian Treasury - The Presidents" Frederick S. Voss 1991 "In Grateful Remembrance" Sara B. Hanan (Published by the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property) The New York Times Saturday Evening Post

TIME Magazine  
PEOPLE Magazine  
Art News  
Atlanta Constitution, Hartford Courant, New Haven Register, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Des Moines Register, Connecticut Magazine,  
among others  
Who's Who in American Art

**COMMISSIONS:**

TIME Magazine cover: Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty 1966  
TIME Magazine cover: Detroit Riots 1967  
Ralph McGill, Editor and Columnist, Atlanta Constitution 1968  
Jack Tarver, Publisher, Atlanta Constitution  
Vice President Hubert Humphrey for the National Portrait Gallery 1970  
Connecticut Governor John Dempsey, official portrait 1971  
Governor John Meskill, campaign portrait for the Hartford Courant  
Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen 1974  
Congressman Melvin Price, Chairman, Armed Services Committee 1976  
Double portrait of President and Mrs. Carter for Good Housekeeping 1977  
General Bernard Rogers, NATO Commander-in-Chief  
Harold Smith, Founder and CEO, First Federal Savings, now Webster Financial Corp  
Treasury Secretary Donald Regan 1982  
Luciano Pavarotti and Joan Sutherland for London Records  
President Jimmy Carter for the Georgia State Senate, unveiled 1979  
President Jimmy Carter for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Hall of Presidents, unveiled in 1981  
Roger Birk, Chairman, Merrill Lynch  
A.W. (Chuck) Clausen, President of the World Bank 1982 and 1986  
Hicks Waldron, CEO of Heublein 1989  
Harry Gray, CEO of United Technologies 1989  
Mr. and Mrs. Harry Gray for Hartford Hospital 1991  
William Pape II, Publisher, Republican American  
Robert Miller, President, Mississippi State University  
Dr. Harry Prystowski, Dean, Medical School, Pennsylvania State University at Hershey

Robert Templeton's paintings are part of public and private collections throughout the US, among them Pennsylvania State University, Lafayette University, Emory University, Mississippi State University, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, the House of Representatives Collection, the Pentagon Museum, the Connecticut State Library, the Carter and Johnson presidential libraries, the Lyman Allyn Museum, and the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** [www.roberttempleton.com](http://www.roberttempleton.com)

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