

Artists of the Great Lakes: 1910-1960

In 1920, philosopher John Dewey wrote of America: "The country is a spread of localities." This declaration expresses the aesthetic of the American Scene, which prevailed in art, music, and literature notably between the two World Wars. The American Scene artists sought to align their production with democratic principles, calling for art to reflect the conditions from which it sprang and toward which it was directed. American Scene painting followed the principle of "local color." Similar to their counterparts in music and literature, its practitioners focused on specific aspects of a region: the geography, the

people, and the commonplace moments of everyday life.

True to this idea of "local knowledge" are artists who were part of what can be termed the "Great Lakes Scene." These artists worked within a 500-mile arc of the Straits of Mackinac, the narrow waterway between Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas where Lakes Michigan, Huron, and Superior converge. They were active from circa 1910 to 1960. The Great Lakes Scene included artists working in and around Buffalo, Cincinnati, Duluth, and points in between. They recorded and celebrated the water, the land, the culture, and the activities that comprised day-to-day existence in the Upper Midwest. Many of these artists

were well known and exhibited widely during their lifetimes. However, more than a few slipped into obscurity after the Second World War as the American Scene was eclipsed by the rise of abstract expressionism. Only recently have many of these artists gained the recognition they deserve.

The city of Flint lies almost at the geographic center of the Upper Midwest, making it a fitting location from which to consider artworks devoted to the region's local culture. Indeed, the Flint Institute of Arts is a leading repository of Great Lakes Scene painting, a position secured to a significant degree by the acquisition of the Inlander Collection of Great Lakes Regional Painting in 2003. Assembled by Detroit-





Artists of the Great Lakes: 1910-1960 is on view through from May 26 through August 19, 2007, at the Flint Institute of Arts, 1120 East Kearsley Street, Flint, Michigan, 48503, 810-234-1695, www.flintarts.org.

LEFT: Charles Burchfield, *Nighthawks at Twilight*, 1917-1949, w/c on paper, 34 3/8 x 48 1/2, Flint Institute of Arts, gift of the Viola E. Bray Charitable Trust.

ABOVE: Constance Richardson, *Ore Docks, Duluth*, 1953, oil on masonite, 16 x 31, Flint Institute of Arts, courtesy of The Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

RIGHT: Lawrence McConaha, *Coke Otto*, 1953, o/c, 25 x 30, courtesy of The Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.



area collectors Pat Glascock and Michael Hall, the Inlander Collection includes works (many in original or period frames) painted in oil, watercolor, and gouache. The majority of the 105 works comprising the collection were purchased by a private patron on the museum's behalf with the remainder donated by the collectors.

The collection takes its name from a journal entry of watercolorist Charles Burchfield (1893-1967): "I will always be an Inlander in spirit." (Burchfield lived and worked for most of his life near the eastern shore of Lake Erie, first in Ohio and then in New York state.) The collection is also surveyed in a book published by the Flint Institute of Arts, *Great Lakes Muse: Ameri-*

can Scene Painting in the Upper Midwest, 1910-1960 by Hall and Glascock. Of the nearly 100 works in the *Artists of the Great Lakes*, some eighty percent are from the Inlander Collection.

The production of the Great Lakes artists is a material record of a place in time in the nation's culture, a topology and ty-

pology of the animating spirit of America. It is an imagined community of Tocquevillean dimensions. To be sure, when Alexis de Tocqueville visited the continent in 1830 to research what was to become *Democracy in America* only the lower reaches of the Upper Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) had been officially incorporat-



LEFT: August F. Biehle, *Hollyhocks*, 1919, gouache on paper, 11 x 15, Flint Institute of Arts, gift of Pat Glascock and Michael D. Hall in memory of Peter Newman, Inlander Collection.

BELOW LEFT: John Steuart Curry, *A Wisconsin Landscape*, c. 1936-40, w/c on paper, 12 x 12, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

RIGHT: Edward Brucker, *Bill*, c. 1938, o/c, 32 1/2 x 26 1/2, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

BELOW RIGHT: Carl Gaertner, *Freighters*, 1931, o/c, 35 x 41, Flint Institute of Arts, gift of Pat Glascock and Michael D. Hall, Inlander Collection.



The region was a microcosm of modern America as Tocqueville envisioned it. The artistic production of the Great Lakes Scene during the first half of the century fused Heartland regionalism (exemplified by the "Triumvirate" of Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry) and the urban social realism more typically associated with cities of the East Coast. Taken together, the art of the Great Lakes Scene constitutes what interpretative ethnographers, such as Clifford Geertz, term a "thick description" of the Upper Midwest in the times leading up to the end of the Second World War.

The "lure of the local," as art historian Lucy Lippard expresses it, can be recognized in the work of John Steuart Curry (1897-1946), an artist whose importance has remained generally acknowledged through the decades since the heyday of the Great Lakes Scene. *A Wisconsin Landscape* is a watercolor study for the artist's regionalist masterpiece in oil of the same title purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1942. The picture portrays the rolling dairy land of southern Wisconsin, cows resting under a tree in the foreground, farm buildings in the middle, and undulating hills in the background receding toward the horizon under an azure Midwestern sky. Though born in Kansas, Curry spent his last decade as artist in residence at University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he captured the rhythms of Midwestern life in a body of work that is represented in many American museums.

Another Great Lakes regionalist whose significance continued to be recognized through the years is the Inlander himself, Charles Burchfield. *Nighthawks at Twilight*

ed into the Union. The rest was part of the Michigan Territory, which at one point included what are now Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota as well as parts of Iowa and the Dakotas. Yet it was in these still-developing lands north of the Ohio River and to the west that Tocqueville saw democracy

ideally fulfilled in the productive diligence of common people.

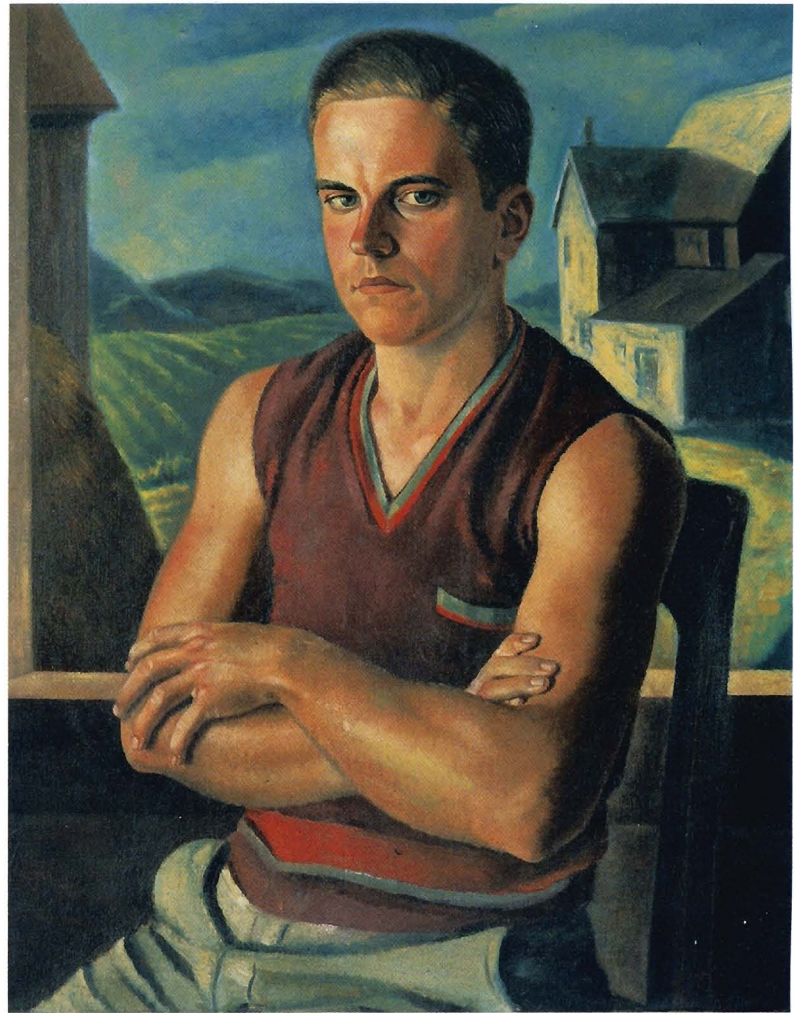
Moving into the twentieth century, the Upper Midwest developed a diversified economy and culture, mixing mining, lumbering, agriculture, manufacturing, and trade in both rural and urban environments.

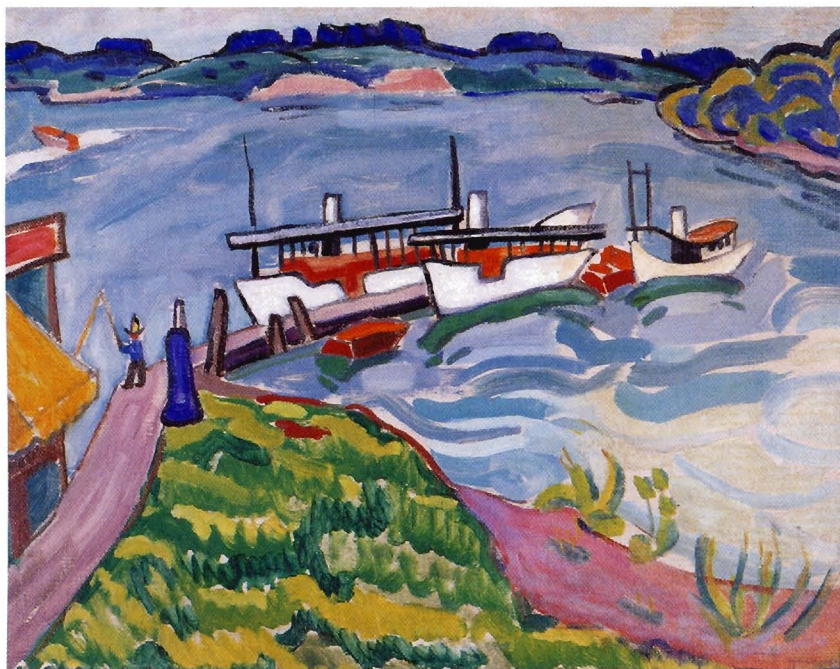
was begun in northeast Ohio, where the artist lived as a young man and as a student at the Cleveland School of Art, in the year he later termed his "Golden Year," when he felt he achieved mastery of the watercolor medium for which he justifiably came to be renowned. The painting is one of many Burchfield subsequently reworked, adding a mystical element to the depiction of the local environment. The connection between the local landscape and the transcendent cosmos increasingly occupied Burchfield in what is known as his late Expressionist period, lasting from 1943 to his death in 1967.

However at times metaphorical, each picture painted by the *Artists of the Great Lakes* presents a different, specific aspect of the local environment. The small-town setting of William Sommer's *The Rabbit Hutch*, a view of the artist's backyard in Lakewood, Ohio, just west of Cleveland, is rendered in cloisonné style with black outlines of form and non-representational color. Sommer (1867-1949) executed the painting immediately upon his return from the legendary 1913 Amory Show.

It was America's penchant for commerce and industry that Tocqueville identified as a hallmark of the burgeoning democratic society. "Almost all the tastes and habits that are born of equality naturally lead men toward commerce and industry," he writes in Volume Two of *Democracy in America*. For Tocqueville, the creative and productive power unleashed in American society by the modern market economy was inherently superior to the static wealth of the traditional European landed aristocracy. It was a force that could not nor should not be resisted.

Ore Docks, Duluth by Constance Richardson (1905-2002) is a more traditionally realist portrayal of the Minnesota town's harbor. Its panoramic view presents railroad lines and trestles receding into the middle ground to connect with hoppers and docks extending into the harbor. Other structures and equipment of a massive processing facility sprawl out deeper in the distance. Behind it all, the vast expanse of Lake Superior seems to stretch back into infinity. As the spouse of long-time Detroit Institute of Arts Director Edgar P. Richardson, Constance Richardson lived in Detroit for many years. She produced many highly detailed landscape paintings of the Great Lakes region of which *Ore Docks, Duluth* is a fine example.





Besides sketching the physical attributes of the Great Lakes region, many works in this collection capture the character of the local population. Edmund Brucker (1912-1999) is best known as a portraitist, and the painting of his brother *Bill* sitting before a composite landscape represents the stylized realism he perfected within the portrait genre. An instructor at the John Herron School of Art for more than forty years, Brucker was an influential figure in the small but progressive art scene in Indianapolis during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

The painters of the Great Lakes Scene also mapped elements of the region's economy and communal life. For example, the industrial production cycle is recorded from the point of origin of raw materials in northern mining towns depicted in works such as Clarence Holbrook Carter's *Coal Docks at Superior* (1939) to the inland sea transport system of

RIGHT: Kenneth A. Wood, *Warm Shadows*, 1953, gouache on paper, 15 x 22, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

BELOW RIGHT: William Sommer, *The Rabbit Hutch*, 1913, o/b, 26 x 20, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

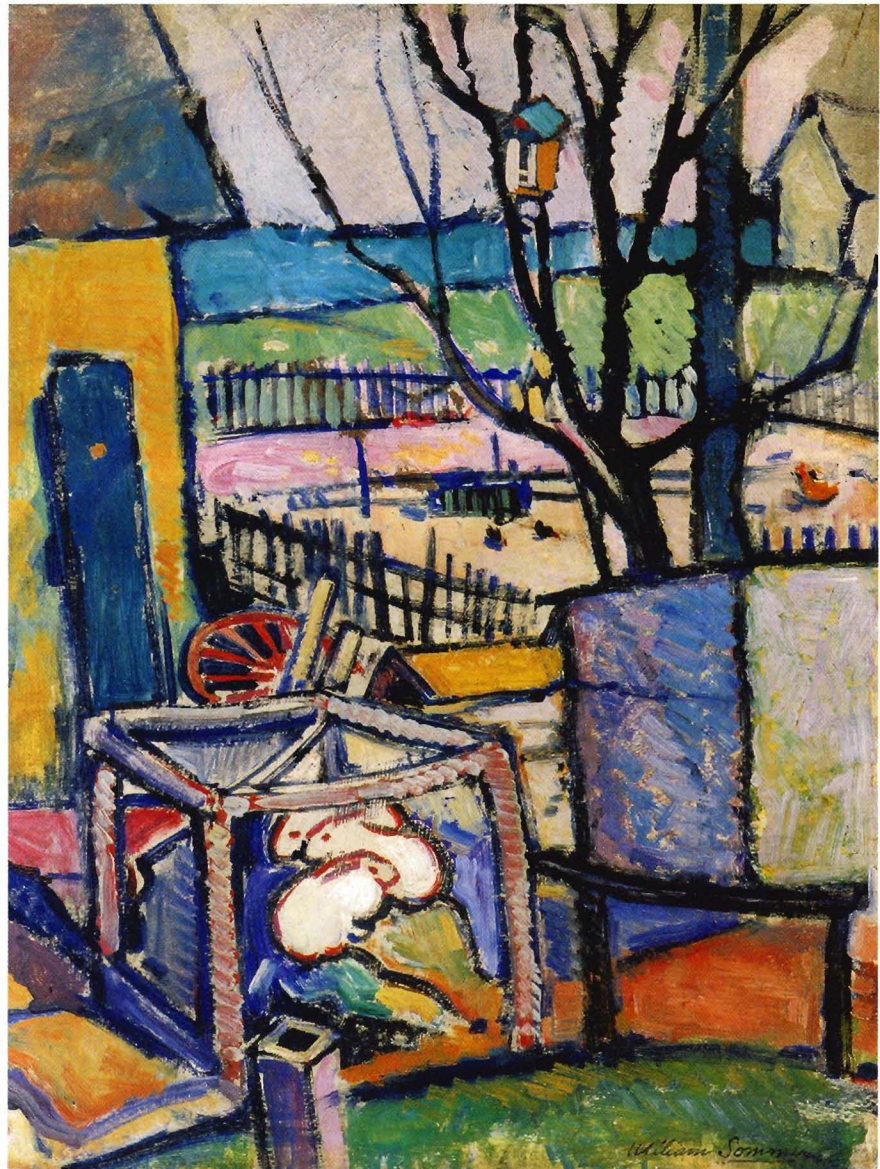
LEFT: Virginia Cuthbert, *Movie Palace*, 1936, o/c, 25 x 30, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

BELOW LEFT: Jean Crawford Adams, *Lake Geneva*, 1929, o/b, 16 x 20, Flint Institute of Arts, gift of Pat Glascock and Michael D. Hall in memory of Harry Butler, Inlander Collection.

the Great Lakes in Carl Gaertner's *Freighters*. The processing of these inputs in industrial facilities is shown in paintings like *Coke Otto* by Lawrence McConaha and their use in manufacturing at the end of the value chain in *Assembly Line* (1954) by Jack Keijo Steele. Born in Portsmouth, Ohio, Carter (1904-1999) taught at art schools around the Midwest, including the Carnegie Institute. His Great Lakes paintings can be found in many U.S. museum collections. Gaertner (1898-1952) taught for twenty-five years at the Cleveland School of Art and is represented in more than twenty-five public collections. McConaha (1894-1962) and Steele (1919-2003) painted on evenings and weekends. One worked until retirement as a telegraph operator for a brokerage house in Indiana, the other as a clay modeler in the Ford Motor Company automotive design studio. Both, however, were known and respected among their peers in the Great Lakes.

Daily recreations are documented in the collection with paintings such as *Movie Palace*, a street scene outside the Rialto Theater in Pittsburgh, by Virginia Cuthbert (1908-2001). Cuthbert was born in western Pennsylvania. She established herself as an artist in Pittsburgh in the mid 1930s and in 1941 moved to Buffalo where her husband was director of the Albright Art School. These are populist visions in keeping with the democratic tastes in American culture Tocqueville identified nearly 200 years ago, which persist into the present if sometimes in new forms.

The preponderance of work by artists of the Great Lakes in this collection expresses solidarity with the values of their local communities. Many of the artists' biographies suggest their affinity with Mid-





dle America. Most were from modest backgrounds. Only a fortunate few, such as Curry and Burchfield, sustained themselves primarily through their art. Many made their livings teaching at regional art academies and in public school systems. Others worked as commercial artists, designers, and illustrators. Some, like McConaha, were employed in occupations unrelated to the arts, fine or applied. Philosophically and politically, the art of the Great Lakes is communal and egalitarian, truly of, by, and for the people. It embodies what Tocqueville terms the “local freedoms” of civil society, propagated by the reciprocity of social relations that arise from grassroots associations, both institutionalized and spontaneously made by human interaction.

What this reciprocity might look like is made visible in the art of the Great Lakes in representations of the public and private spheres of the Upper Midwest. It is particular-



ABOVE: William S. Schwartz, *Mining in Illinois*, c. 1937, gouache on paper, 11 3/4 x 19 3/4, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

RIGHT: Roland Schweinsburg, *Youngstown Mural*, c. 1938, o/c, 51 x 40, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

LEFT: Clyde Singer, *The Medicine Man*, 1932, oil on burlap, 27 x 34, Flint Institute of Arts, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.

BELOW LEFT: Santos Zingale, *The White Station—Madison*, 1941, o/c, 26 x 30, courtesy of the Isabel Foundation, Inlander Collection.



ly evident in a work like *Youngstown Mural* by Roland Schweinsburg (1898-1963), son of a Pennsylvanian steelworker who taught art and illustration at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. Several of Schweinsburg's public commissions can still be found in municipal buildings in southern Ohio. The lunette-peaked *Youngstown Mural* depicts a steel mill on the left of the foreground and a church and civic groups on the right. The town unfolds in successive rising planes, a city on a hill, the very image of the Pilgrim vision of America. The painting celebrates a community living and working together. It is art that the author of *Democracy in America*—and his intellectual heir John Dewey—would no doubt appreciate.