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Ohio Regionalists (1915 - 1950)

by Timothy Keny
& Michael D. Hall

Regionalism is often associated with Midwestern America west of Ohio.

That form of Regionalism is closely linked with the paintings and lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, which are firmly rooted in the rural, largely agrarian, culture of that region. These narrative works are some-

Authentic Narratives: Ohio's Regionalists (1915-1950) is on view through January 17, 2016, at the Springfield Museum of Art, 107 Cliff Park Road, Springfield, Ohio, 45504, 937-325-4673, www.springfieldart.net. A 48-page catalogue, with essays by guest curator Timothy Keny and art historian Michael D. Hall, accompanies the exhibition.

times tinged with wry humor (e.g. Grant Wood). Ohio's Regionalism, because of the rich diversity of its economy—from traditional agriculture to heavy industry to mining—and its extraordinary blend of different cultures, became a fertile “cross-

roads” of aesthetic styles, subject matter, social mores, and religious beliefs that belies Regionalism's more simplified, grass-roots overtly narrative perception.

Authentic Narratives: Ohio's Regionalists (1915-1950) includes ninety works by six-





ABOVE: Clarence Holbrook Carter, *Merry Go Round*, 1949, o/c, 21 1/2 x 32 1/4, Southern Ohio Museum, Portsmouth, Ohio.

RIGHT: George Bellows, *Rock Ridge Farm, October*, 1918, o/panel, 20 x 24, Schumacher, Gallery, Capital University, Columbus, Ohio.

LEFT: Robert Chadeayne, *Service Station*, 1935, o/c, 30 x 36, private collection, courtesy of Keny Galleries.

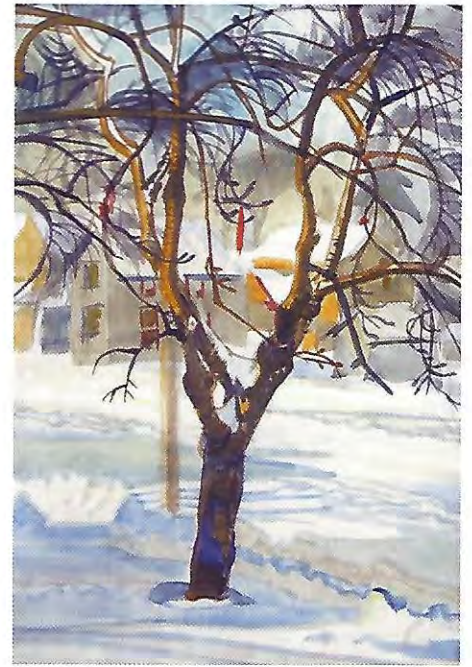
teen artists in divergent media which have been selected from museum and private collections largely from this region. In some instances, the works of artists not previously included in major Regionalist exhibitions, such as George Bellows, Carl Gaertner, James Hopkins, and Margaret Bourke-White, have been selected because of their significant contributions to Regionalism.

The first half of the twentieth century was one of great transformation nationally, throughout Ohio, and in flourishing Springfield. The emergence of the automobile, telephone, radio, and electric household appliances ushered in a new era of



speed, communication, and convenience. The Ohio Regionalists were among the first artists nationally to respond to these

phenomena with relevant, resonant works of art that capture, yet transcend the moment because of their enduring aesthetic



ABOVE: Charles Burchfield, *Evening Sunlight, Winter*, 1917, w/c, 19 1/2 x 13 1/2, private collection.

LEFT: Clarence Holbrook Carter, *Jesse Stuart*, 1941, o/c, 52 x 38, Schumacher Gallery, Capital University, Columbus, Ohio.

BELOW LEFT: William Sommer, *Horses Plowing*, 1922-1924, oil, 22 1/2 x 29, Dod and Ann Wainwright.

RIGHT: Robert Chadeayne, *Untitled (Hancock, New York Street Scene)*, 1931, o/c, 26 1/2 x 34 1/4, private collection.

BELOW RIGHT: Carl Gaertner, *The Ore Boat*, 1929, o/c, 35 x 40, Carol and Mike Sherwin.



excellence and extraordinary sensitivity to the human condition, with its strengths and foibles.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, two years after the end of the Civil War, William Sommer (1867-1949) was the senior painter in the group of Ohio Regionalists. In 1907, Sommer moved to Cleveland, Ohio where he spent most of his adult life working as a commercial lithographer with the Otis Lithography Company. The Otis Company was famous for its stylish advertising posters-especially those promoting touring circuses and carnivals.

As an artist, however, Sommer was something of an anomaly and a misfit. His workplace colleagues all acknowledged him as the best draftsman in the Otis shop. He, however, saw himself as an avant-garde

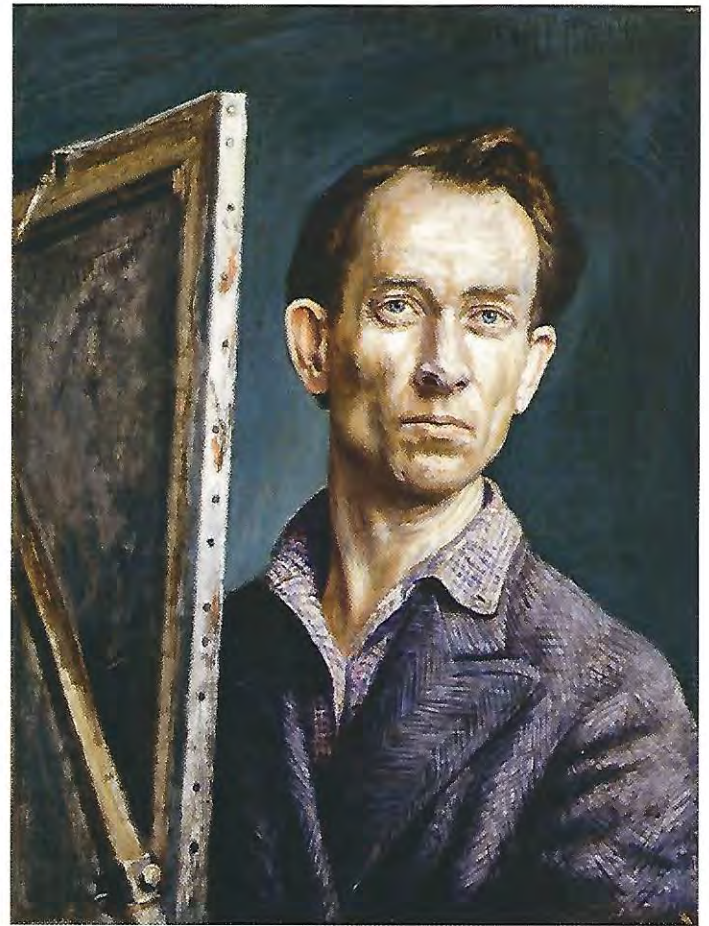


painter and traveled to Europe on several occasions to study the new styles of painting emerging in both Germany and France. Sommer read voraciously and his personal library was filled with rare and esoteric volumes (in both English and in German) on the subjects of art, philosophy and history.

In 1913 he traveled to Chicago to view the historic Armory show in order to study the works of the most controversial European masters of the moment. Returning to Cleveland, he experimented with all the styles he had viewed in Chicago. In the process, he mastered cubism, fauvism, and several modes of expressionism all of which he ultimately distilled into an elegant/formalist style all his own—a style that made him the leading postimpressionist in the Cleveland scene.

Sommer left his job in Cleveland in 1914 and moved to the small farming town of Brandywine where he dedicated his time





and talent to the creation of scores of vital and lively watercolors depicting the rural life and landscape around his home and

studio. Original and fully modern in style, Sommer's late landscape pictures are, however, spiritually and intellectually regional-

ist to the core.

ABOVE: Emerson Burkhart, *American Provincial*, 1942, o/c, 24 1/8 x 18 1/8, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, gift of Emery E. Galloway.

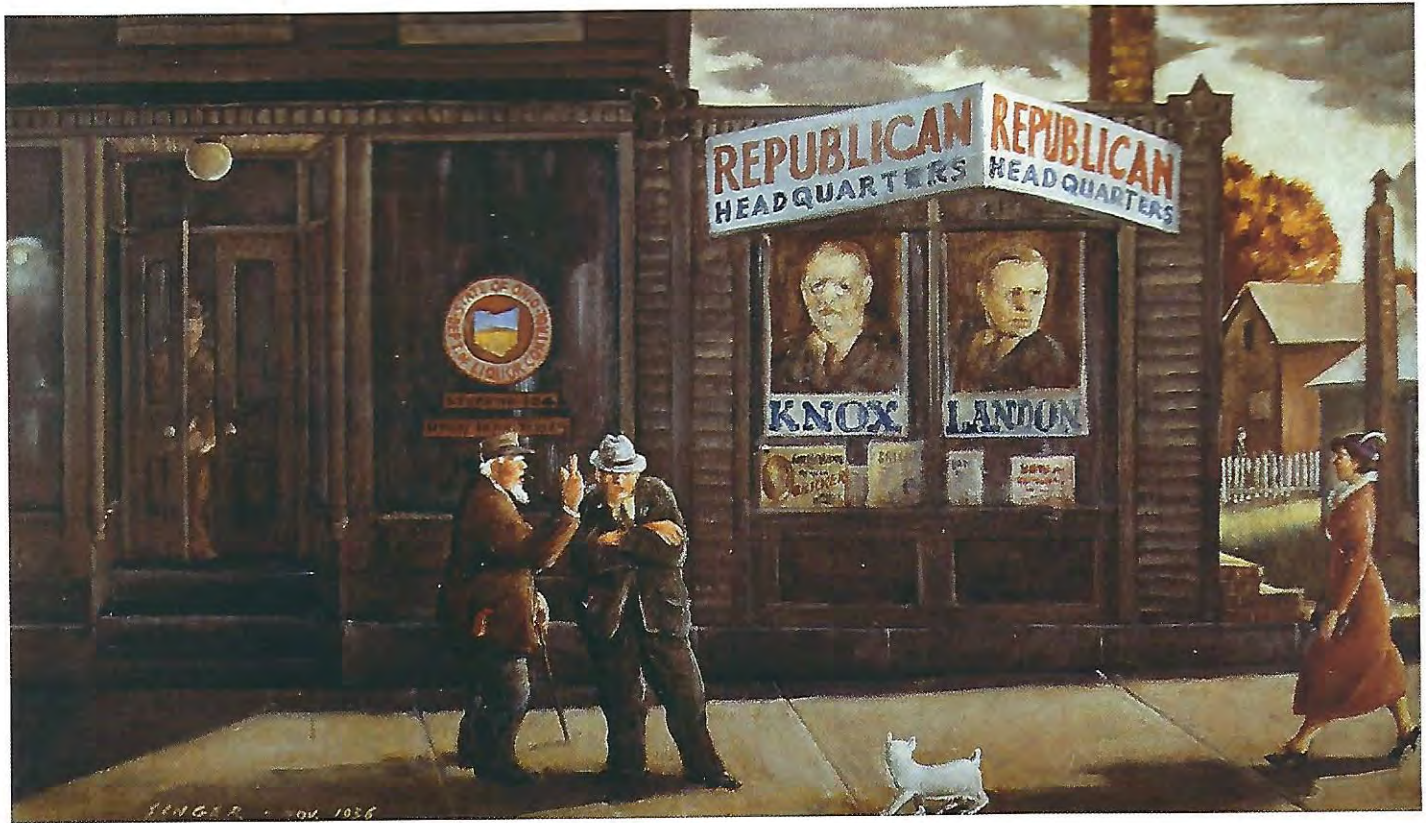
ABOVE LEFT: Clarence Holbrook Carter, *Night Carnival*, 1941, w/c on paper, 22 x 15, Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan and the Isabel Foundation, Inlander collection.

LEFT: William Sommer, *The Spinach Tree*, 1934, w/c, 17 1/4 x 20 7/8, Dod and Ann Wainwright.

ABOVE RIGHT: Clyde Singer, *Republican Headquarters*, o/c, 20 x 36, Bob and Diane Sakuta.

RIGHT: Clara Deike, *Still Life with Regal Lilies in Dark Vase*, 1935, o/c, 26 x 20, Dod and Ann Wainwright.

Clara Deike (1881-1964), a contemporary of Sommer, was also born in Detroit, Michigan, but moved with her family to Ohio at a young age. She attended high school in Cleveland and ultimately earned a degree in education from the Cleveland Normal School. After a brief career teach-



ing grade school, Clara decided to become a painter and left home to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. She ultimately completed her art studies at the Cleveland School of Art and quickly became a key figure in the prominent regional community of modernists working in Northeast Ohio. Like her fellow Cleveland artists, Sommer and Henry Keller, Deike's early work was rendered in a German-influenced decorative style. Pushing her artistic creativity to new levels, she then left Cleveland again—this time to study variously with both Hans Hofmann and Diego Rivera before returning to establish herself permanently as an Ohio painter. Her vital, dynamic Synthetic Cubist still lifes, such as *Still Life with Regal Lilies in a Dark Vase*, evoke the sophisticated milieu of Cleveland's artistic culture at that time.

Another gifted Cleveland School of Art graduate, Carl Gaertner (1898-1952) mastered the painterly depiction of the dynamic industrial core of Cleveland's economy and its identity in the 1920s, with strong examples of the era and place as in *Ore Boat*. His later 1930s and 1940s landscapes have a unique haunting, melancholy blend of stark light punctuated by pure primary colors, as displayed in *Seaside*, which evoke





LEFT: Harriet Kirkpatrick, *View of Provincetown*, 1935, o/c, 25 x 22, private collection, courtesy of Keny Galleries.

BELOW LEFT: Harriet Kirkpatrick, *Yankee Harbor (Gloucester)*, 1938-1940s, mixed media on panel, 30 x 48, private collection, courtesy of Keny Galleries.

RIGHT: Yeteve Smith, *Wings of Faith*, 1928-1930, oil, 46 x 36, Schumacher Gallery, Capital University, Columbus, Ohio.

FAR RIGHT: Yeteve Smith, *Clown*, 1935, o/c, 32 x 26, private collection, courtesy of Keny Galleries.

BELOW RIGHT: Emerson Burkhart, *Street Scene with African-American Mother and Children*, 1956, o/c, 24 x 30, private collection, courtesy of Keny Galleries.

Sunlight, Winter, to evoke a personalized sense of place in his watercolors of the 1916-1917 period. His most overtly Regionalist watercolors and paintings of the 1930s and 1940s demonstrate his uniquely expressive use of black and white lines and forms to emphasize the haunting, desolate windows and dilapidated doorways which symbolize the poverty and despair that so many people from the Buffalo region endured at that time. In his later highly expressive watercolors and lithographs of the late 1940s and 1950s, he increased his scale and re-energized his work with vibrant color and expressive use of line to capture the timeless beauty of the cycle of nature.

Another artist associated with the Cleveland region's artistic milieu was Clyde Singer (1908-1999), who lived in the Canton and Youngstown area for much of his life after his rural upbringing in Malvern. He was educated at The Art Students League in New York after study at the Columbus School of Art. He was inspired by the vital social narratives and commentary of George Bellows and John Sloan. Sloan had a profound influence on Singer with his focus on the daily routines and diversions of the spirited "working class" people, whether in New York or in Singer's home in Youngstown from 1934 until 1999. Singer delighted in depicting the personalities of individuals often within the pageantry of urban street activity, holiday celebrations, and sporting events. These vignettes are infused with a stalwart pride in one's community and individual dignity, despite one's foibles.

Born and raised in Portsmouth, Ohio, a small southern river town, Clarence Carter



the despair of the Depression, but rise above it to make a vital statement, which I interpret as perseverance.

Charles Burchfield (1893-1967), was another student of the Cleveland School of

Art. He combined his deep reverence for nature, nurtured in his rural hometown of Salem, Ohio, with highly inventive graphic calligraphy, asymmetrical Japoniste design, and expressive use of color, as in *Evening*



(1904-2000) was educated at the Cleveland School of Art and further informed by his brief study with Hans Hofmann in Capri and his travels in Europe in 1927-1928. His Regionalist paintings and watercolors from the 1920s through the 1940s are a powerful, peculiar mix of deeply felt, nostalgic depictions of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and especially Portsmouth. They have a quasi-surreal, dreamlike quality which visually distills the underlying religious roots, yearning hopes, and tragic disappointments of life, particularly during those trying times. The death of his father when he was sixteen invades Carter's uneasy, introspective images as in *Night Carnival* and *Merry-Go-Round*, which have some of the eerie qualities of Italian Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico's art.

George Bellows' (1882-1925) art, although he lived most of his life in New York, Maine, and Woodstock, New York, is imbued with his vital experiences growing up in central Ohio, in a successful, industrious, unpretentious environment with largely supportive parents. Bellows loved interacting with people, playing sports, and spending time with his family. His more liberal egalitarian political beliefs were different from his parents, but he shared their respect for hard work and care for less fortunate people.

Bellows left the Ohio State University for the artistic challenges and opportunities in the aesthetic arena of New York at age twenty-one. His mentor and friend, Professor Joseph Taylor, suggested that he seek the guidance of the inspiring, influential,





LEFT: Clara Deike, *New England Landscape*, 1931, o/c, 23 x 17 1/2, Daniel Bush.

BELOW LEFT: Carl Gaertner, *Seaside*, 1940, o/c, 36 x 50, Carol and Mike Sherwin.

RIGHT: Clyde Singer, *Ohio State Fair*, oil painting, 17 1/2 x 19 1/2, Daniel Shogren and Susan Meyer.

and painterly Realist artist, Robert Henri. Bellows' outstanding natural draftsmanship, infectious energy, probing intellect, and sensitivity to the underprivileged impressed Henri immediately. The artist's keen ability to capture the essence of the local light, atmosphere, terrain, and way of life is demonstrated in his paintings of Maine and Woodstock, New York. His vigorous Regionalist paintings have modern pictorial elements, including the expressive Fauvist use of color and Cezannesque physicality of form.

Robert Chadeayne (1897-1981) also studied in New York at the Art Students League. Chadeayne's first mature paintings of the early 1920s have affinities with Bellows' and John Sloan's New York subjects. His paintings of the late 1920s through the 1940s often have a stark light which at times emulates Edward Hopper. However, he often combines that strong warm light with animated, decoratively patterned and richly hued cityscapes, in works such as *Service Station*, which have more activity than Hopper's paintings. His rural paintings of the 1930s, like *Untitled (Houses in the Landscape)*, have an undulating organic rhythm that relates to Thomas Hart Benton's landscapes, but are less stylized. Chadeayne exhibited his paintings for decades at the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of Art and Art Institute of Chicago's annual juried exhibitions. He had a one-person exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art in 1972.

Yeteve Smith's (1888-1957) reductive, painterly bucolic landscapes relate stylistically to the 1930s rural landscapes of Chadeayne. She studied at The Ohio State University and exhibited often in the Columbus Art League. Her figurative paintings, including *Wings of Faith*, have a physicality of forms and authenticity of expression which relates to Bellows' paintings of the figure.

Harriet Kirkpatrick (1877-1962) was interested in a personal blend of a narrative Regionalist sense of place and history with modern aesthetic vocabulary. She was also





educated at the Columbus Art School with Alice Schille, who was very aware of the Post-Impressionist stylistic concepts, including flattened decorative pictorial design animated with vibrant color. She also studied modern “push-pull” cool and warm color theory with the great abstract painter, Hans Hofmann. She spent many of her summers in Provincetown, New Mexico, and Ohio. Her powerful *Yankee Harbor* captures the cool ocean breezes and stark plain fishermen’s role in the Massachusetts coastal region with its juxtaposition of sparse black and white linear buildings enlivened by a deep blue and light blue “puzzle” of oceanic rectangles of light. The triangular sails animate the composition

further and simultaneously tell the story of daily activity there.

Kirkpatrick was also a dedicated art teacher at Columbus School for Girls, the director of the Ohio State Fair Art exposition for many years, an active participant in the Columbus Art League, and director of an art gallery.

Emerson Burkhart (1905-1969), on the other end of the aesthetic and personal spectrum from Harriet Kirkpatrick, had Columbus Art School training. He had deep interest in narrative Regionalism, with an idiosyncratic expressionist edge that, ironically, flirted with Modernism, despite his well-known dislike of abstraction. Some of his most compelling, sensitive Re-

gionalist works depict African Americans as individuals or families, as in *Street Scene with African American Mother and Children*. Burkhart’s empathy for the misunderstood and downtrodden is tangible in these personal tributes to his friends and acquaintances in his neighborhood in Columbus.

The selection of paintings presented in *Authentic Narratives: Ohio’s Regionalists (1915-1950)* offers a fresh way to visually and intellectually navigate the landscape of early twentieth-century American painting. It is hoped that these personal vignettes about the artists will help viewers to enjoy and better engage with the exhibition.

—Adapted from the essays in the accompanying exhibition catalogue.