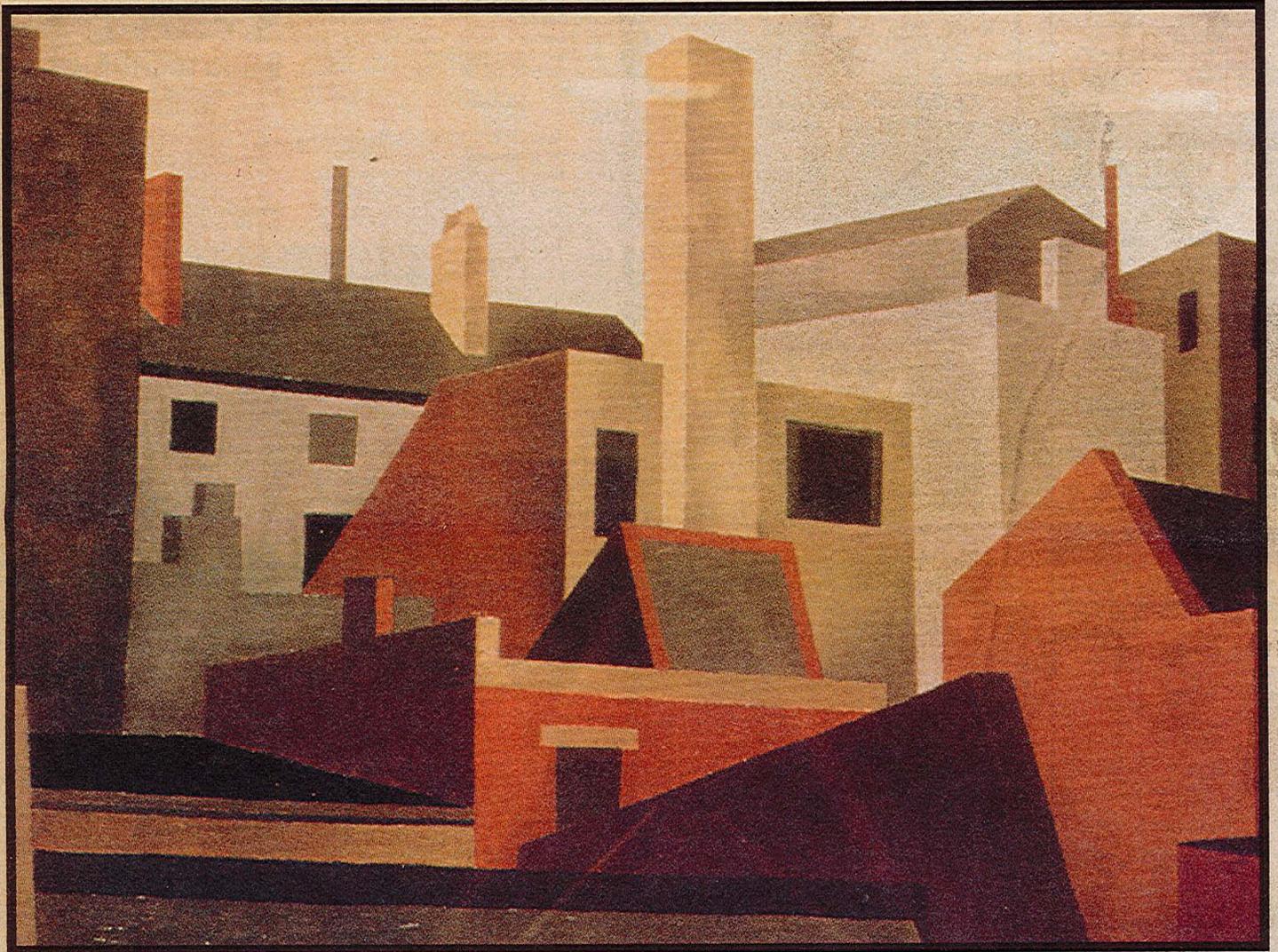


The Columbus Dispatch

Thursday

MAY 4, 1995

The Art



The abstract beauty of urban scenes: *Buildings* by Niles Spencer (1893-1952)

Precisely American

Theory reflected nation's search for identity in machine age

By Tim Feran

Dispatch Entertainment Reporter

IN 1915, ARTIST MARCEL DUCHAMP proclaimed the United States “the country of the art of the future.”

“Look at the skyscrapers!” he said. “Has Europe anything to show more beautiful than these?”

The Frenchman’s words focused attention on what was seen as a uniquely American artistic movement.

“Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality” is “the first major study of precisionism in a long time,” said Nannette Maciejunes, senior curator at the Columbus Museum of Art.

“Precisionism is very tied up with the search for a unique American identity,” she said. “It was about the tying of a rural past to the mechanical future. A lot of people in the ‘20s called it ‘the true American art.’”

By the time precisionism arrived, the United States was well on its way from a rural society to a nation of big cities with skyscrapers and homes with modern marvels such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines.

Painters and photographers associated with precisionism included Charles Demuth, Morton Schamberg, Charles Sheeler and Joseph Stella.

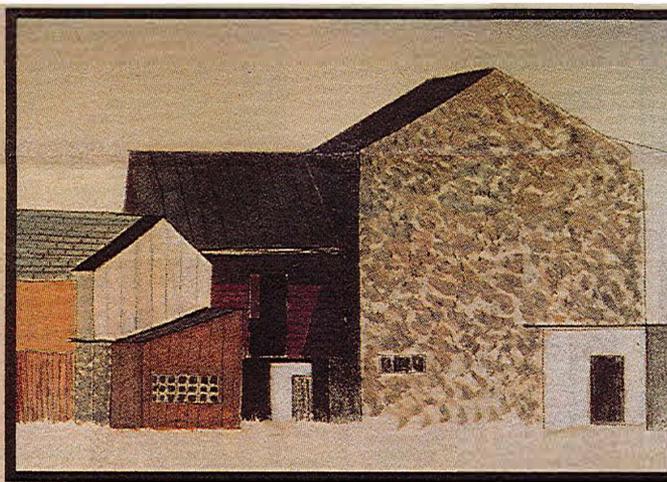
They were interested in the forms of the machine age: factories, grain elevators, steamships, steel bridges, crankshafts, light bulbs. They also were reacting to American impressionism, which was still going strong after World War I.

“American impressionism was concerned with the surface — the way water looked on streets, the way dew looked on trees,” Maciejunes said. “Precisionists were trying to get behind the surface. They saw themselves as part of the classical tradition.”

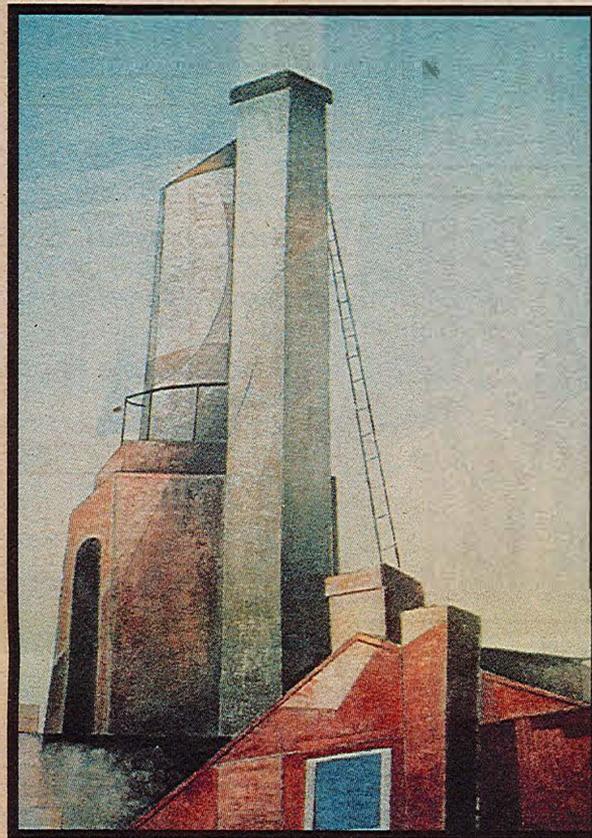
The movement’s emphasis on the abstract beauty of the machine and on exterior forms, however, extended beyond strictly industrial or urban scenes.

“Even though much of precisionism is urban scenes, it is very much tied to folk and vernacular art,” said Maciejunes, pointing out several still-life paintings. “It’s an *approach* to art, even to painting pats of butter.”

“This show is not as much new information as a rethinking of old information,” she said. “A lot of people still dismiss precisionism as American cubism. It’s a more fascinating, complex story than many people have



ABOVE: The clean lines of rural scenes: *Bucks County Barn* (1918) by Charles Sheeler (1883-1965)



LEFT: The forms of the machine age with classical clarity: *Augustin and Nicolette* (1923) by Charles Demuth (1883-1935)

show, which began at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey and features works by 26 artists from almost 30 institutions and private collections.

“This show is so critical to us,” Maciejunes said. “(Ferdinand) Howald was a major collector in this area. He saw the parallel between cubism and precisionism, and he collected both.”

Although many works in the New Jersey exhibition are not available for the Columbus show, precisionism’s links with developments in another art form — regionalism — are coincidentally on view at another venue: The Riffe Gallery, 77 S. High St., is presenting “Midwest Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950.”

“A lot more artists come into play in this (precisionism) show — a lot we haven’t looked at in a long time,” Maciejunes said. “It’s interesting to see how less well-known artists fit into the movement.”

The movement was all but over by 1941.

Some people have linked the mechanized horrors of World War II with precisionism’s fall from favor.

“There was a lot of mechanical death in World War I, too,” Maciejunes said. “American art in this century was totally reinvigorated at least twice after infusions from people fleeing Europe.”

The result after World War I was precisionism; after World War II, abstract impressionism.

“At first, the critics were excited (by precisionism),” Maciejunes said, “but it was really on the downturn by the time of the war (World War II). Critics had begun to think of it as sterile; suddenly it was too, *too* ordered. That’s how art history goes — swinging back and forth.

“As the world became madder and madder, precisionism seemed like not a call to sanity but irrelevant.”

been taught in art-history courses.”

With precisionism, the image is romanticized and cleaned up.

“For instance, Elsie Driggs compared the smokestacks in her *Pittsburgh* (1927) to Greek columns.”

Text panels in the Columbus exhibit explain that precisionism often crossed over into poetry and other mediums, including film (Fritz Lang’s 1926 movie *Metropolis*).

Poet William Carlos Williams, in particular, was closely allied with the movement.

“It was a sensibility, not just a style,” Maciejunes said. “It had ties to the literary community.”

The interconnection “reminds us how much more complex the period between the wars was than we’d like to think.”

The Columbus Museum of Art has been an important contributor to the

■ “Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality” will open Sunday and continue through July 4 at the Columbus Museum of Art, 480 E. Broad St. Tours will be given at noon May 26 and June 16, and 2 p.m. May 28 and June 18. Call 221-6801.

Painting the towns

If you're from the Midwest, the Riffe Gallery's current exhibition *Midwest Realities: Regional Paintings 1920-1950* may make you swell with pride.

Find your city; paintings of Columbus, Cincinnati, Chicago, Detroit, Ann Arbor, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Milwaukee and other Midwestern cities are included.

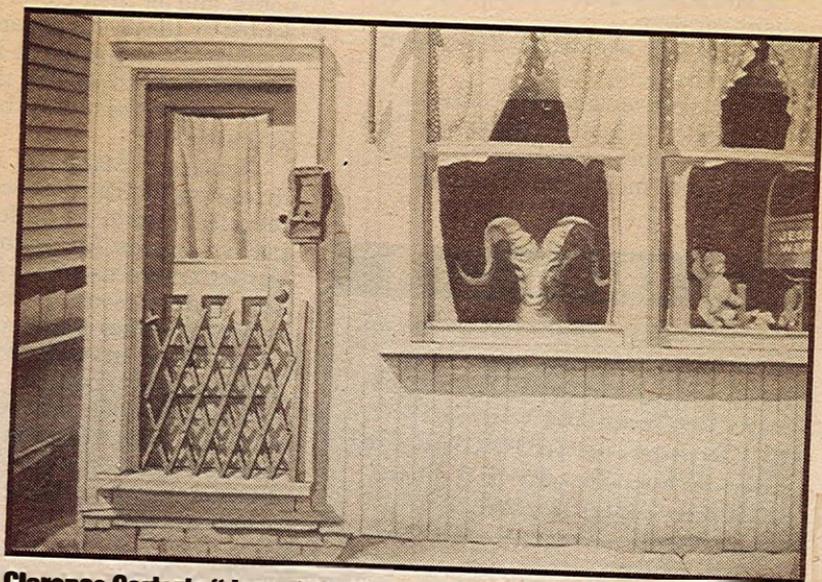
The paintings depicting Columbus scenes are Emerson Burkhart's *Larry's Grill* (Larry's used to be near Columbus State) and Robert Chedayne's *Cliffside Drive*.

This watercolor, by Clarence Carter, is called *Jesus Wept* and was painted in Portsmouth. The work "has a funny edginess," said curator David Lusenhop of Portsmouth's Southern Ohio Museum. "It has a surreal quality."

Like much German art, the paintings in this exhibition have "dark, rich, brushy, earthy colors," Lusenhop said. He calls the style "regional realism."

The 39 works depict urban, industrial and rural Midwestern life—and, in many cases, reflect the transition from agriculture to industry.

In its quiet way, this exhibition is stunning. It's on view through June 17 at the Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery, 77 S.



Clarence Carter's "Jesus Wept"

High St. Hours are Monday-Wednesday 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Thursday-Friday 11 a.m.-7:30 p.m., and Saturday-Sunday noon-4 p.m. During the Arts Fest (June 1-4), the gallery will have extended hours, open 'til 8 p.m. June 1-3 and 'til 6 p.m. June 4. Admission is free.

—Karen Simonian

Regional realists present life on home front before, after war

By Nancy Gilson

Dispatch Entertainment Reporter

The title is succinct: "Midwest Realities."

The paintings are of the realistic school, but, more important, they investigate the landscapes and daily duties — agrarian and industrial — of people in Ohio, Wisconsin, Indi-

ana, Michigan and Illinois. The time is 1920 to 1950, during which, even in the buffered Midwest, Americans were reeling from the effects of war.

The 42 works in "Midwest Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950," opening Thursday at the Riffe Gallery, take a broad look at Midwestern realists and their influential teachers. Together, the paintings



Near Irvington (1934), oil on canvas, by William F. Kaeser

form a definition of "home" in pre-war and postwar America.

"There's more to this show than meets the eye, but what meets the eye is very pleasing and accessible," said Sara Johnson, director of planning at the Southern Ohio Museum and Cultural Center in Portsmouth.

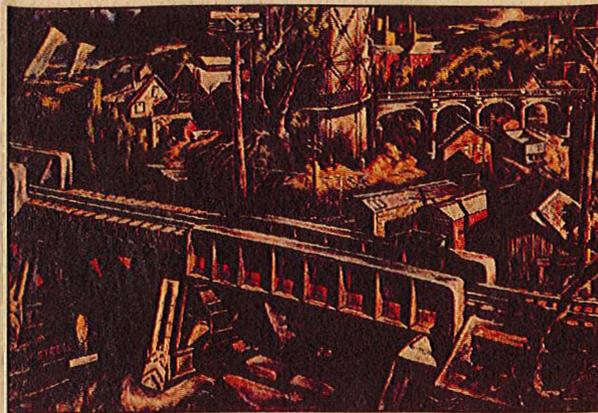
The museum organized the exhibit, primarily to put into context the work of Portsmouth native Clarence Holbrook Carter.

"We have about three dozen paintings by Carter, and we wanted to show them along with works by other artists painting at the same time in the region," Johnson said. "We think his works stand up very well."

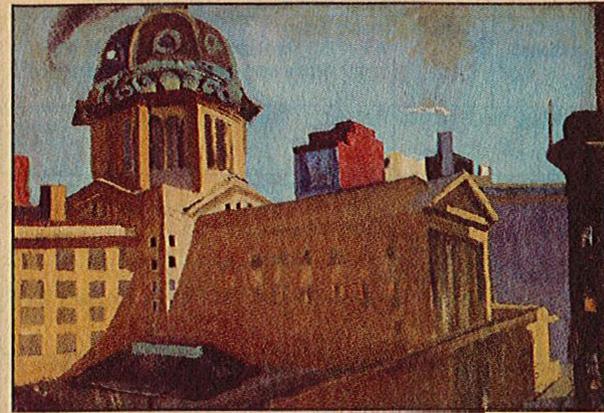
Carter, a resident of New Jersey, lived in Portsmouth during the 1930s and '40s. On his 90th birthday, he attended the Portsmouth opening of "Midwest Realities."

The Springfield (Ohio) Museum of Art has shown the exhibit. The Riffe Gallery is its final venue.

"There's clearly more of an effort by institutions around the country to recognize regional painters," Johnson said. "The artists represented in this show are in the same category but not as



View of Ann Arbor (1945), oil on board, by Jack Steele



Federal Building (1930), oil on canvas, by Jean Crawford Adams

famous as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. . . . We thought it was important enough to put this show together to take another look at them."

Represented are Charles Burchfield, Emerson Burkhardt, William Sommer, Frank Wilcox, William Forsyth, Jean Crawford Adams, William F. Kaeser, Jack Steele, Frances Chapin, Reginald Grooms and Sarkis Sarkisian.

In addition to the two Carter paintings from the Portsmouth

museum, the exhibit includes works from about 20 institutions or private collections in five states.

"There is a definite sense of place in these works," Johnson said. "Some people view this show with nostalgia, representing a time when they think they liked art more. But I think you can make a nice case for connections to modernism in this show. A lot of people think that the Midwestern regionalists ignored modernism, but I don't think that's true."

■ "Midwest Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950" will open with a reception from 5 to 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Riffe Gallery, 77 S. High St. The free exhibit will continue through June 17 (except Sunday and May 29). Hours: 11 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, noon-4 p.m. weekends and 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Wednesday. Call 644-9624.

The Columbus Dispatch

Tuesday

APRIL 11, 1995

VISUAL ARTS



Red Farm by Floyd Hopper

Realists capture industrial Midwest

Dark introspection marks period between world wars

By **Jacqueline Hall**
Dispatch Art Critic

"Midwest Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950" is thought-provoking, revealing an ambiguous, often uneasy relationship between a shrinking agricultural landscape and an expanding industrial one.

The show's 39 paintings deal with images of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin — the industrial Midwest. They were mainly done between the two world wars, when the United States was withdrawing upon itself to face its social and economic problems. Artistically, that withdrawal from the world also meant a shift away from modernism and innovation and a return to realism.

The realism varies from nostalgic and romantic in the 1920s to aggressive and expressionistic through the 1930s and '40s. It

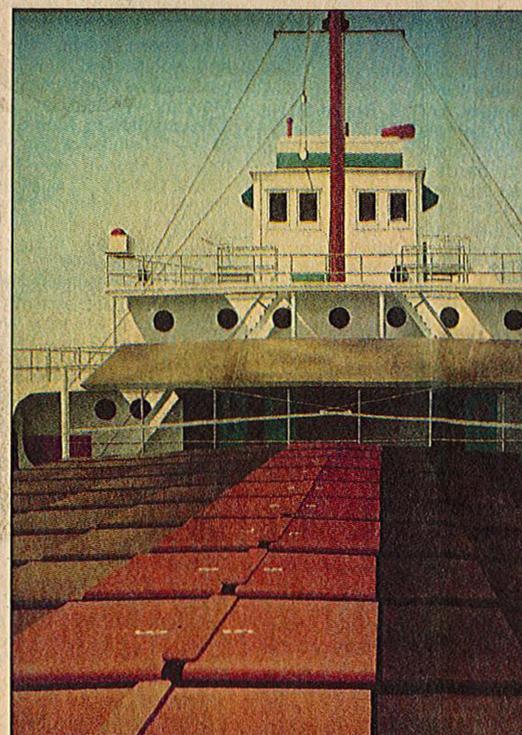
■ "Midwest Realities: Regional Painting 1920-1950" is showing through June 17 at the Riffe Gallery, 77 S. High St. Hours: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Wednesday; 11 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday; and noon-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

captured the uneasiness of a small rural town on the verge of industrialization. The image has a moody, mysterious quality that brings Burchfield to mind.

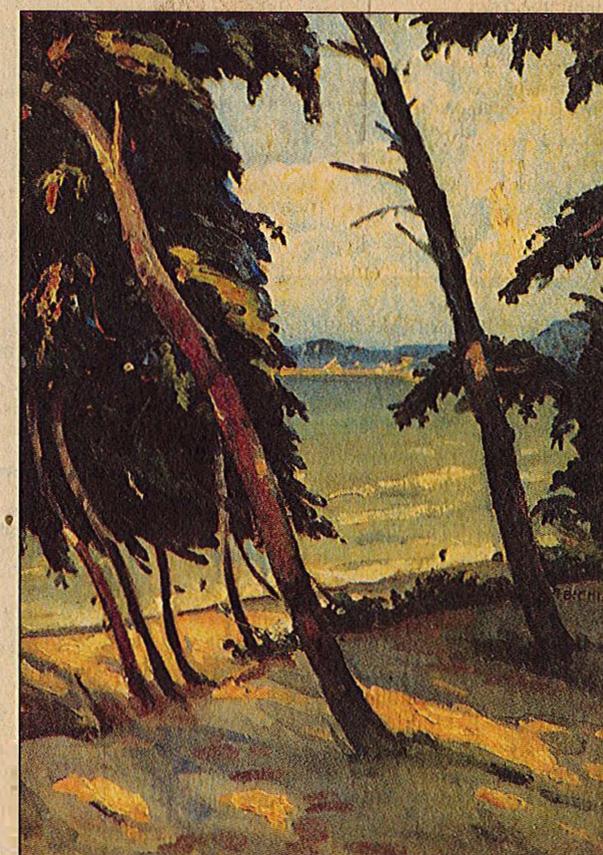
The exhibition presents artists of the Great Lakes region by area groups: Cleveland, Columbus, Indiana, Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit and Milwaukee. All visibly belong to the same period of strong realism that seems to have turned its back on the modernist innovations that Americans studying abroad brought back from Europe in the first two decades of this century. Yet, a close look at the paintings suggests that although they emphasized that strong hold on concrete visu-



White Tower by Frances Chapin



Above, *Ore Freighter (Wisconsin Ore Freighter)* by Edmund Lewandowski



Right, *Shore at Lake Erie* by August Bickel

period between world wars

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The realism varies from nostalgic and romantic in the 1920s to aggressive and expressionistic through the 1930s and '40s. It eventually talks of the spiritual vacancy accompanying industrialization.

The Great Lakes regional painters tended to favor dark palettes and heavy forms, which suggest disenchantment and apprehension. An occasional sunniness touches their landscape or city scenes but rarely achieves a carefree feeling.

The most cheerful and care-free images are those by four artists who inspired Midwestern painters in various ways.

William Forsyth and Henry Keller were impressionists who taught in Indianapolis and Cleveland, encouraging their students to paint the Midwest landscape.

John Sloan, an important member of the Ashcan school, had helped make urban landscapes worthy of artists' attention. His work was well-known in the Midwest. The national recognition of Charles Burchfield's rural scenes encouraged Midwestern artists to follow his lead. Their paintings are among the sunniest in the exhibition.

Among the regionalists who seem most readily inspired by those artists are Cleveland painter August Biehle, in his impressionistic view of *Shore at Lake Erie*; Emerson Burkhardt of Columbus, with his sunny view of the street in *Larry's Grill*; and Chicago regionalist Frances Chapin, with his urban scene *White Tower*.

With *Red Farm*, Indiana painter Floyd Hopper

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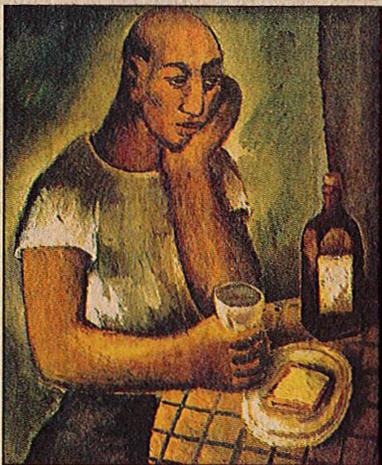
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In *Brandywine Landscape*, William Sommer accepts the two-dimensionality of the picture's surface and does not create any feeling of depth. In *Cuernavaca, Mexico*, Clara Dieke creates a cubist vision of the Mexican town. Sarkis Sarkisian handles *Factory Worker* in a volumetric manner that would have pleased Cezanne, as would have Joseph Frieber's abstracted rendering of a *Tenement at Night*, with its strong horizontal manipulation of brush and pigments.

David Fredenthal in *The Beach* offers an abstract vision of breakers and faintly visible running figures, which makes the spectator think of works by American modernist John Marin. Finally, in *Ore Freighter (Wisconsin Ore Freighter)*, Edmund Lewandowski approaches his subject with the hard-edged dramatic style peculiar to that most American modernist style, precisionism.

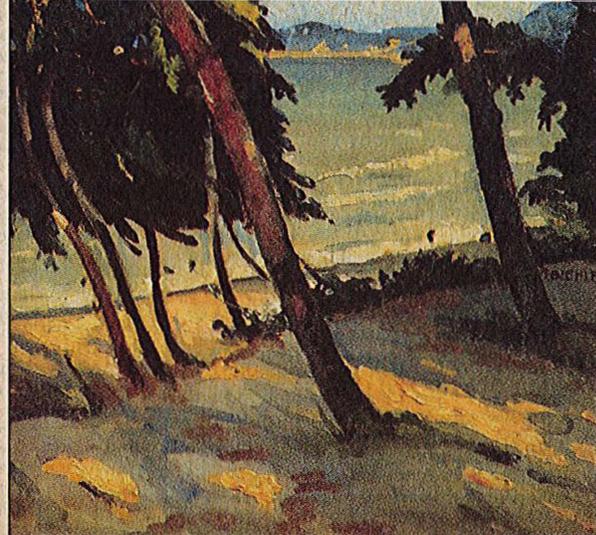
Similar modernist tendencies can be found to a lesser degree in many of the exhibited artists. But the painters who approached their subject with their emotions rather than their minds best captured the mood of the Great Lakes region between 1920 and 1950. Their paintings leave visitors in a thoughtful frame of mind.



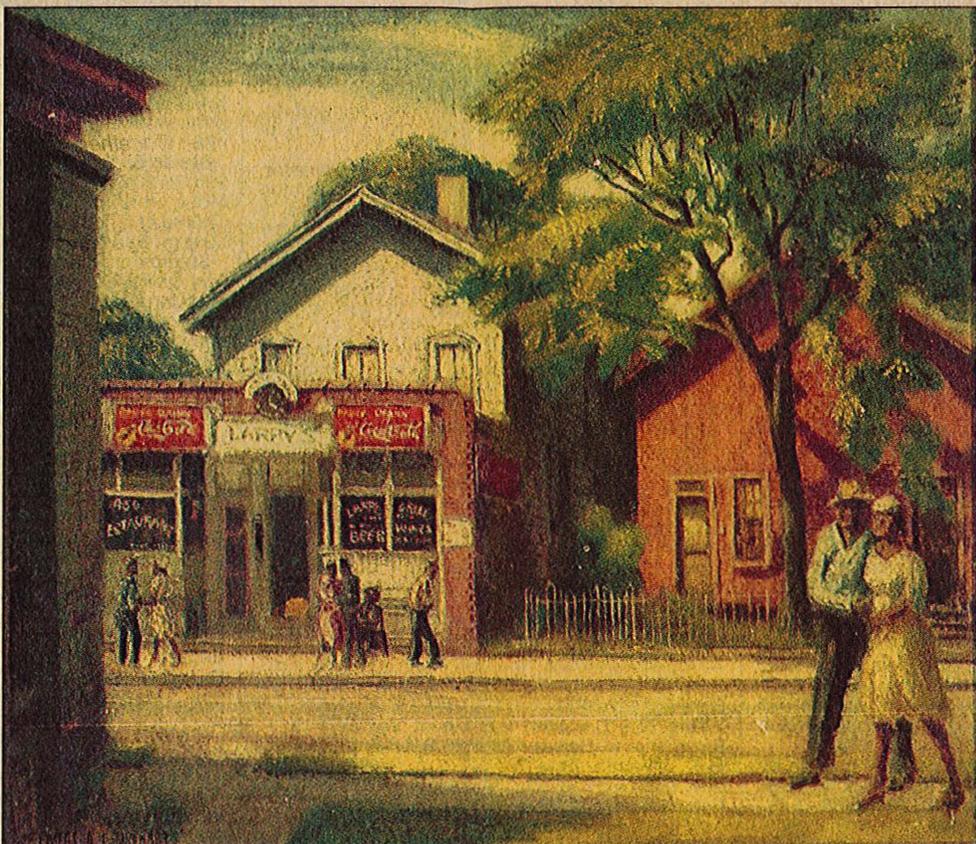
Factory Worker by Sarkis Sarkisian



Above, Ore Freighter (Wisconsin Ore Freighter) by Edmund Lewandowski



Right, Shore at Lake Erie by August Biehle



Larry's Grill by Emerson Burkhardt