



Fig. 1: James O. Chapin (1887-1975), *Young Ball Player*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 44 x 34 inches. Private collection.

Art of the Thirties

Rediscovered Masters of the American Scene

by Arthur D. Hittner

In the early 1930s, a new wave of painting took root in the United States. Dubbed the American Scene movement and characterized by a devotion to identifiably American subject matter, it arose in bitter reaction to the emergence of European modernism. In an era plagued by the economic and social devastation of the Great Depression, Americans turned inward, finding strength in themselves and their traditions. “The artist literally returned to the soil for his subject material and traveled as far away as possible from foreign isms. He stepped down from his ivory tower and out into the fields, the streets and the factories,” wrote Peyton Boswell Jr., editor of the influential *Art Digest* and an early champion of the cause.¹ A majority of the artists of the period rejected the more radical, non-objective artistic movements gaining prominence abroad, focusing instead on indigenous subjects rendered in a predominantly realistic fashion, creating a “democratic” art that was “accessible and understandable” to a wider public.²

The painters of the American Scene ranged from Regionalists such as Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Stuart Curry, who celebrated the virtues of rural America, to the Urban Realists (including Reginald Marsh and Isabel Bishop) and Social Realists (such as Ben Shahn, William Gropper, and the Soyer brothers), who either embraced the virtues of urban America or employed art as a means to convey their agendas for social and political reform. The American Scene movement received considerable sustenance from the federal government, which employed thousands of artists in its public art programs (both as muralists and easel painters) during the height of the Depression.

The luminaries of the thirties included Edward Hopper, Benton, Wood, and Marsh. But there were countless other artists active in those years who, according to one commen-



Fig. 2: Daniel R. Celentano (1902–1980), *The Houseboat*, ca. 1938.
Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 inches. Private collection.



Fig. 3: Mary Fife (1900–1990), *Place in the Sun*, 1934.
Tempera and oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Private collection.



Fig. 4: William J. L'Engle (1884–1957), *Nightclub Dancer*, ca. 1930. Oil on canvas, 60 x 30 inches. Private collection.

tator, “won wide acceptance among their peers as well as with the public as a whole but whose professional reputations after the war in many cases suffered the indignities of neglect.”³

The work of this “neglected generation” of realist American artists continues to receive little attention in art historical circles. Retrospective art scholarship has focused pri-

marily upon the emergence of abstract expressionism and the development of other avant-garde art movements that gained traction in America by the middle of the twentieth century. The tide, however, may be changing. As the work of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American painters becomes prohibitively expensive, the paintings of the American Scene are regaining exposure. Collectors are beginning to rediscover the less familiar names of this virtually lost generation of American art; men and women who studied at the leading American art schools and produced works of surprising virtuosity and appeal, only to find their achievements eclipsed over time by the advent of modernism and abstraction. The undeniable talent of just eight of these forgotten masters is evident in the exemplary works revealed here, all of which were produced during the turbulent decade of the thirties.

One of the most critically acclaimed of this group was James O. Chapin (1887–1975). Forced to work as a bank runner before finishing high school, Chapin attended evening art classes at Cooper Union and the Art Students League in New York. Later, with the gracious financial support of a cousin, he studied for two years at the Royal Academy in Antwerp and moved on to Paris. There, he became briefly enamored with Cezanne and the tenets of modernism before returning home to develop a more personal style. By 1924, he had relocated to rural New Jersey, renting a rustic cabin from the Marvins, a family of farmers whom he portrayed in a sensitive series of highly realistic paintings that won him national attention beginning in 1929. With no less than eighteen one-man exhibitions over the next five years, the artist was at the height of his popularity in the early 1930s when he painted *Young Ball Player* (Fig. 1). The young man portrayed heroically in this work is a local “bush leaguer” who played for the nearby Woodglenn, New Jersey, town team. A perfect American Scene subject, it is the earliest of four known works by the artist that feature ageless semi-professional ballplayers.

Daniel R. Celentano (1902–1980) was born in lower Manhattan’s Little Italy district,



Fig. 5: Leon Bibel (1913–1995), *Building a Nation (Construction)*, ca. 1937. Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches. Private collection. Copyright Park Slope Gallery/Leon Bibel Estate.

where he lived with fourteen siblings. Demonstrating an early aptitude for art, he began his formal training at the age of twelve, becoming the first pupil of Thomas Hart Benton. Celentano began exhibiting in New York City in 1930. Shortly thereafter, he participated in the mural program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Celentano took his artistic inspiration from the daily activities of his friends and neighbors in the upper Manhattan neighborhood of Italian Harlem, where he later resided. *The Houseboat* (Fig. 2) is one of a number of outdoor subjects set on or adjacent to the East River. Although the setting is untraditional, the family scene depicted is familiar: a mother, infant in arms,

appears ready to reprimand her roughhousing boys as two male figures attend to their boating chores despite the distraction.

In many ways, Mary Fife (1900–1990) was the quintessential female artist of the 1930s. Hugely talented in her own right, she subordinated her career to that of her husband, the artist Edward Laning (1906–1981). A lesser-known member of the so-called “Fourteenth Street School,” a loose affiliation of realist painters whose studios were situated in the Union Square-Fourteenth Street area of New York City, her subject matter focused on the people and places of that neighborhood. *Place in the Sun* (Fig. 3), which was exhibited by Fife at the Whitney Museum of American

Art in 1937, is a classic work of the Fourteenth Street genre, as well composed and as deftly executed as any of those by her more celebrated colleagues. The subject of the painting, four young working women enjoying their lunch hour on a sunny office rooftop on a hot summer day, relates closely to the sympathetic portrayals of working girls by the artist’s close friend and contemporary, Isabel Bishop. Fife’s women, however, are more sensual, approaching the more overt sexuality favored by Reginald Marsh. Her subjects are strong and confident, unfazed by the leering glances of men from nearby office windows.

The theme of urban nightlife inspired William J. L’Engle (1884–1957), a 1906 Yale



Fig. 6: Beatrice Cuming (1903–1974), *Industrial Landscape*, ca. 1935. Oil on canvas, 25½ x 31¼ inches. Private collection.



Fig. 7: Edward Firn (1909–1966), *County Fair*, 1935. Tempera and oil on masonite panel, 24 x 30 inches. Private collection.

graduate with French academic training. Executed around 1930, *Nightclub Dancer* (Fig. 4) captures the life and spirit of the Jazz Age, which emerged after the First World War and

found its zenith in the nightclubs of Harlem in New York City. *Harlem*, a watercolor by L'Engle in the collection of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and a study for the

same work (*Girls Dancing, Harlem*, 1930, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.), are extremely similar to *Nightclub Dancer* in both subject matter and composition. A description of the Corcoran work applies equally to *Nightclub Dancer*: "In tight clothes, very sexy, and moving to a rhythmic beat, [L'Engle's] dancers epitomize the then current view of blacks as primitive, exotic, and highly sensual."⁴

The hardships endured by artists during the Depression (and later, during the politically repressive McCarthy years) were all too familiar to the Social Realist artist Leon Bibel (1913–1995). Born in San Francisco, Bibel arrived in New York City at the height of the Depression in 1936. He was an active participant in the federal arts projects of the WPA. Profoundly influenced by the Mexican muralists and Thomas Hart Benton, Bibel's paintings and screenprints confronted social injustices or, like *Building A Nation (Construction)* (Fig. 5), celebrated the values and achievements of the common man. His bold (and often highly politicized) subject matter and dry, austere style caught "perfectly the fervent, almost religious idealism of the thirties," observed the sculptor George Segal (1924–2000), a neighbor, admirer, and long-time friend of the artist.⁵ Unable, like many of his fellow artists, to adequately support himself following the dissolution of the WPA, Bibel moved with his wife to South Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1941. There, he abandoned his art for over two decades to work as a poultry farmer and raise the couple's two children. His paintings from the thirties, many of which revealed his sympathies with the Communist movement (and some of which were rolled up and hidden in the rafters of his chicken coop during the height of the McCarthy era), were not exhibited publicly until about four decades later.

The industrial landscape was a popular theme for a number of American Scene artists. In 1934, Beatrice Cuming (1903–1974) relocated from New York City to New London, Connecticut, where she participated in a number of federal art projects and produced a series of powerful canvasses celebrating industrial America. *Industrial*

Landscape (Fig. 6) invokes the stark industrial forms favored by Charles Sheeler and the sense of urban isolation inherent in the paintings of Edward Hopper. *New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewett was favorably impressed. “Her typical subjects are buoys, drydock cradles, industrial plants, bridges, storage sheds,” he wrote. “Miss Cuming paints a man’s world, and she does so with uncompromising vigor.”⁶

Ohio native Edward B. Firm (1909–1966) was a fixture in the Cincinnati arts community from the Depression until his death in 1966. He exhibited frequently at the Cincinnati Art Museum as a member of the New Group during the thirties. Firm was employed by the WPA in Cincinnati, at a stipend of \$103.40 per month, and by the Treasury Relief Art Project in neighboring Kentucky. The subjects of his American Scene canvasses were the landscapes and people of the nearby Kentucky hills. These were the people who inspired *County Fair* (Fig. 7), whose subjects are strongly reminiscent of the farmers’ wives portrayed by Grant Wood in popular paintings and prints produced during the same period.

Nowhere is the tragic element of the American Scene era more evident than in the brief but stellar career of Harold J. Rabinovitz (1915–1944). Another graduate of the Yale Fine Arts program (in 1935), Rabinovitz painted the monumental *Eventide* (Fig. 8) in 1936 before his twenty-first birthday. A precocious artist of considerable talent, he participated in prestigious invitational exhibitions between 1939 and 1941 at the Corcoran Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy, Carnegie Institute, Whitney Museum, National Academy of Art, and the 1939 World’s Fair. Rabinovitz enlisted as a combat engineer with the Army at the onset of the Second World War in 1941. He was taken prisoner by the Japanese during the fall of Bataan and died in captivity, at only twenty-nine years of age.

The works featured here represent just a small sampling of the production of only eight of the largely unheralded but enormously talented artists of the American Scene. Steadily increasing interest from museums and art



Fig. 8: Harold J. Rabinovitz (1915–1944), *Eventide*, 1936. Oil on canvas laid down on masonite, 61 x 43 inches. Private collection.

galleries throughout the country will likely engender new scholarship and, in turn, a renewed appreciation for a long forgotten era in the evolution of American art. **AFA**

Arthur D. Hittner is a practicing attorney in Boston, Mass., with a passion for both art and baseball.

All photography by Forrest David Milder.

1. Peyton Boswell Jr., *Modern American Painting* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 58.
2. Francine Carraro, *Jerry Bywaters: A Life in Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 76.
3. Howard E. Wooden, *The Neglected Generation of American Realist Painters: 1930–1948* (Wichita Art Museum, 1981), 5.
4. *Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery* (exhibition catalogue, 1981), 115.
5. Letter from George Segal to Barbara Glaberson, September 29, 1990.
6. *New York Times*, February 3, 1942.