

Depression Era Paintings & Photographs from the Shogren-Meyer Collection

by Donald Myers

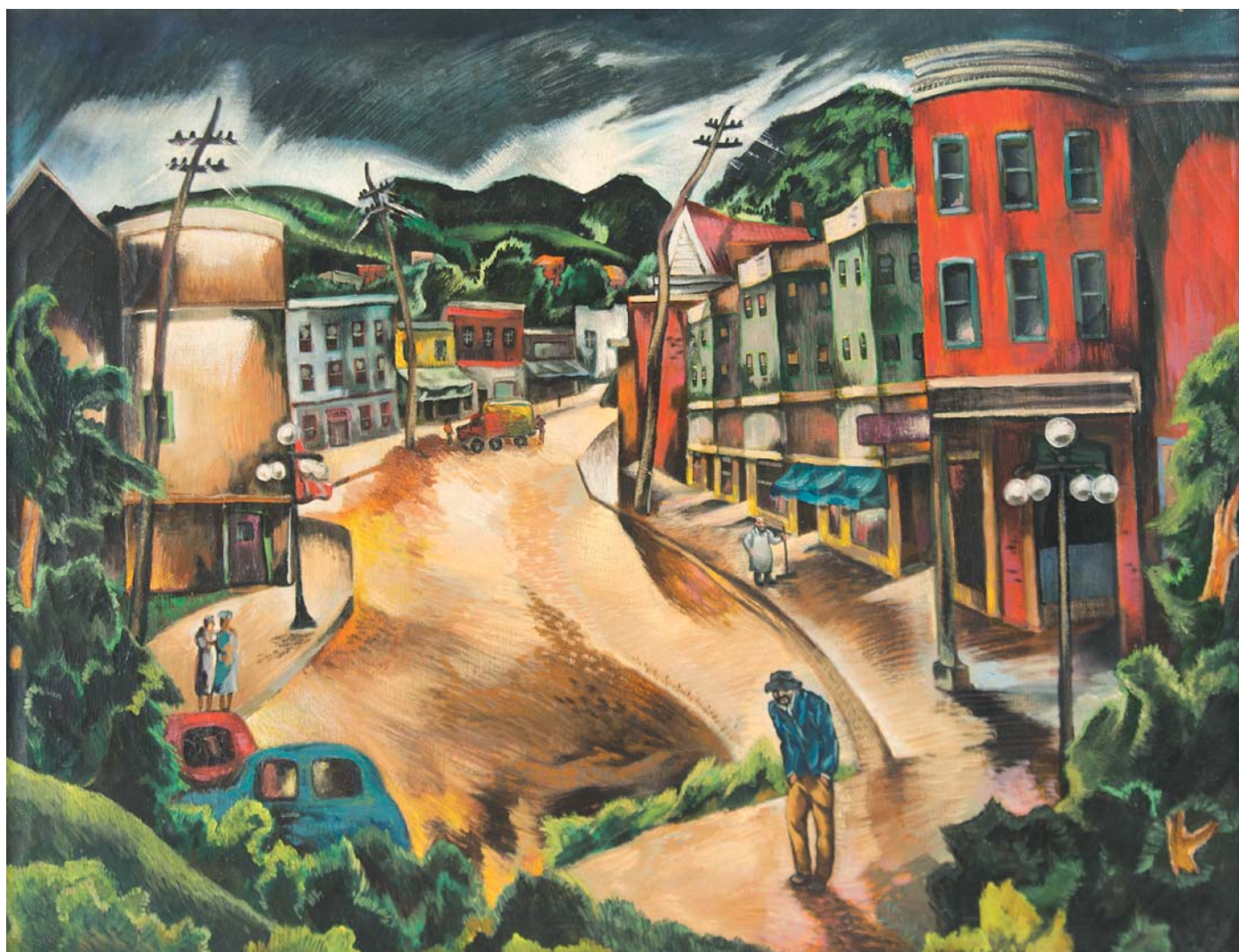
Daniel Shogren and Susan Meyer have been collecting for nearly three decades. They have long been fascinated by the 1930s and its art, and particularly appreciate American Scene and Regionalist artworks. Shogren and Meyer relate their interest in Regionalism and the American Scene to the fact that both of them were history majors in college; Shogren also has a degree in political science, which provides additional context in appreciating the many efforts of the federal

Industry, Work, Society, and Travails in the Depression Era: American Paintings and Photographs from the Shogren-Meyer Collection is on view through November 10, 2019, at the Hillstrom Museum of Art, Gustavus Adolphus College, 800 West College Avenue, Saint Peter, Minnesota, 56082, 507-933-7200, www.gustavus.edu/finearts/hillstrom. Organized by the Hillstrom Museum of Art and curated by director and chief curator Donald Myers, a 104-page catalogue accompanies the exhibition. It will travel to the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, Duluth, in January, 2021.

government to help its citizens through the intense trials of the turbulent Depression Era. Changes to the nation in this period, as it moved from being an agrarian society to one that is urban and industrial, is reflected in much artwork of the period and

is continually appealing to the collectors, who also have an extensive holding of prints—the first medium they collected.

Although they have been very active in building their holdings of photography, they have always liked paintings as well,





ABOVE: Robert Gilbert, *Industrial Composition*, 1932, o/c, 47 x 34.

ABOVE RIGHT: John Steuart Curry, *Russian Giant*, 1929, o/c, 26 x 20.

RIGHT: Louis Faurer, *Silent Salesman*, Philadelphia, c.1938, gelatin silver print, 14 x 11.

LEFT: William S. Schwartz, *Main Street, Galena*, c. 1938, o/c, 30 x 40.

even if their scarcer availability meant they were collected more slowly. Their first acquisition of a major Regionalist painting was in 1998, a work by Cameron Booth (1892-1980). Born in Pennsylvania, Booth became known as the “Dean of Minnesota Painting” and worked in that state much of his career. His large 1930 oil *Viaduct (Washington Avenue Bridge)* was seen by the collectors through the dealer’s window from the street, and they were immediately attracted to its composition and its subject of a train passing over a major Minneapolis street while people and vehicles pass under the railroad bridge.

One of their most recent acquisitions is *Russian Giant* by another American Re-





gionalist artist, John Steuart Curry (1897-1946). The enormous type of sunflower—*Helianthus annuus* “Russian Giant”—grows up to ten feet high with seed heads up to twenty inches in diameter. The plant towers over cabbages in a fertile garden, dominating Curry’s image and allowing the iconic picture to be seen as a harbinger of the coming decade of troubles.

The Shogren-Meyer exhibition has several major themes, including industry, work, society, and travails. A key painting is the monumental *Industrial Composition* by Robert Gilbert (1907-1988). Gilbert was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, but after attending New York’s Art Students League lived in Santa Ana, California. He worked various jobs while painting on the side, including at the Santa Ana Gas Company and the Fluor Corporation, so was familiar with industry.

Industrial Composition has a wonderful



ABOVE: Abraham Harrington, *Market Scene*, 1938, o/board, 23 x 29.

RIGHT: Paul Meltsner, *Earth and Sky*, c.1935-1940, o/c, 24 x 30.

ABOVE LEFT: Walker Evans, *Roadside Stand, Near Birmingham, Alabama*, 1936, gelatin silver print, 16 3/4 x 21.

LEFT: Earl Rowland, *Smelters*, 1934, o/c, 25 x 30.

deco quality that seems to glorify industry, with the three kneeling foreground workers seemingly subservient to it. The painting appears to have been shown at the forerunner to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1932, and the following year it was in a Laguna Beach Art Association exhibit, with *Los Angeles Times* art critic Arthur Millier deeming it the best work in the show, a “poetic statement” related to the artist’s experience in industry.





Another powerful industrial statement in which workers are dwarfed by the mechanics of industry is Earl Rowland's 1934

painting *Smelters*. It features a huge, fiery crucible from which molten steel is about to be poured, guided by tiny workers who

ABOVE: Margaret Bourke-White, *Louisville Flood*, 1937, gelatin silver print (printed no later than 1971), 7 x 9 3/8.

LEFT: Walker Evans, *Joe's Auto Graveyard, Pennsylvania*, 1935, gelatin silver print (printed before 1970), 7 3/8 x 9 1/4.

ABOVE RIGHT: Daniel Celentano, *Home Workers*, c.1930, o/c, 16 x 18.

RIGHT: Joseph Paul Vorst, *Sharecroppers' Revolt*, 1939, o/panel, 24 x 30.

seem like they could be shades flitting around in Dante's *Inferno*. The drama found in manufacturing is of great interest to the collectors, both of whom have experience with factories.

Artist Rowland, born in Trinidad, Colorado, studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, then at the School of Industrial Arts in Los Angeles. He painted *Smelters* in a year in which the crucial steel industry—backbone of the U.S. economy—had partially recovered from the initial effects of the Great Depression. At its



worst moment, in 1932, it was operating at only ten percent of its capacity, then rose to fifty percent when this striking work was made.

A more negative industrial image is Walker Evans' (1903-1975) iconic photograph *Joe's Auto Graveyard, Pennsylvania*. In the exhibition catalogue, Christian A. Peterson, independent scholar and former long-time photography curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, describes the famed Evans as a "kingpin among straightforward photographers of the 1930s." As Peterson indicates, less than 20 years after Henry Ford's Model T began rolling off Detroit assembly lines, they started appearing in junkyards, an early example of industrial waste. Evans likely came upon *Joe's Auto Graveyard* while exploring in his car





the vicinity of Easton, Pennsylvania, near where “Joe’s” was located.

Bridge Painter by Louis Wolchonok

(1898-1973), a Social Realist artist, highlights another theme in the exhibition—work. The painter, who straddles the

bridge’s suspension cable, has a brush in his left hand, while using his right one to grasp another part of the bridge to avoid plummeting downward. The man wears no hard hat and has no safety harness, but in an era when unemployment was common probably felt grateful to have work, even if it was difficult and dangerous. Wolchonok studied at New York’s National Academy of Design and later he taught drafting and design at New York’s City College.

Both Paul Meltsner (1905-1966) and Guy MacCoy (1904-1981) feature the work of farmers in their paintings. In Meltsner’s *Earth and Sky* the emphasis on farm equipment can be related to mechanization occurring in the U.S. in this period, a process that allowed some farmers to keep ahead of foreclosure, common in the Depression Era and the aftermath of the Dust Bowl. Contrastingly, MacCoy’s *Resting* presents an alternative view of farmers. The threshing equipment here sits idle beyond two men in the foreground, who take a break from their labors. This painting is a favorite of collector Shogren, and he ties



ABOVE: Cameron Booth, *Viaduct (Washington Avenue Bridge)*, 1930, o/c, 33 x 47.

RIGHT: Guy MacCoy, *Resting*, 1935, o/c, 22 x 28.

ABOVE LEFT: Arthur Rothstein, *Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma*, 1936, gelatin silver print (printed early 1940s), 8 3/4 x 12 3/4.

LEFT: Ernest Fiene, *Milltown in Winter*, 1935-1937, o/c, 25 x 30.

the oversized hands of the farmers to the nobility of farm work.

Many works in the Shogren-Meyer exhibit provide insights into society in the Depression Era. Urban social life is considered in the 1938 *Market Scene*, by painter Abraham Harriton (1893-1986). It depicts a pushcart on a street in New York's Lower East Side. Hundreds of such carts were to be found there, and were the source of not only goods, like the fresh fruit sold by the cart's proprietor to a couple neighborhood ladies, but also of socializing and gossiping that accompanied such exchanges. Harriton



became known for socially-conscious works, and likely this painting was reacting to years of anti-immigrant bias.

Many of the photographs and paintings in *Industry, Work, Society, and Travails in the Depression Era* provide examples of



ABOVE: Hansel Mieth, *Boys on the Road*, 1936, gelatin silver print (printed later), 12 7/8 x 9 5/8.

LEFT: Berenice Abbott, *Murray Hill Hotel, Spiral*, 112 Park Avenue, New York, 1935, gelatin silver print, 9 3/8 x 7 1/2.

BELOW LEFT: Arthur Rothstein, "Oregon or Bust," Vernon Evans, Missoula, Montana, 1936, gelatin silver print (printed later), 11 x 14.

RIGHT: Louis Wolchonok, *Bridge Painter*, c.1939, o/c, 30 x 40.

BELOW RIGHT: B.J.O. Nordfeldt, *Skating, Anoka*, 1933-1934, o/c, 32 x 40.



human misery of the period. The plight of African-Americans in the 1930s is captured in the 1937 photograph *Louisville Flood* by Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971), one of the preeminent photojournalists of the twentieth century. She was on assignment for *Life Magazine* when she made *Louisville Flood*, which appeared in the February 15, 1937 issue. It ironically juxtaposes a billboard image of a smiling, well-off Caucasian family driving in their pristine car, with a long line of African-Americans waiting to receive aid after a devastating flood of the Ohio River left huge numbers of people homeless, including in Louisville, Kentucky. The Great Depression was still affecting the nation and this additional natural disaster only multiplied the woes of the people in the photograph. Their suffering is ironically underscored by the billboard's caption, "World's Highest Standard of Living, There's no way like the American Way."

In the "Collector's Statement" from the



show's catalogue, Daniel Shogren draws parallels between the Depression-Era images in the exhibit and life in the U.S. today, noting the cautionary message of the paintings and photographs: "In my working career, I have traveled the Midwest and worked in factories where I've witnessed today's working men and women. I can't help but compare today, where we have full employment and a booming stock market, to the America of the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s, this country was in a "boom time," but signs were beginning to appear of the coming disaster known as the Great Depression along with the Dust Bowl. By the 1930s, jobs were hard to come by, especially in the manufacturing sector. In 1933, the steel industry was running at ten percent capacity and roughly twenty-five percent of the population was unemployed. Are we seeing warning signals, such as climate change and income disparity, that portend a future Depression and new Dust Bowl? If so, are we pre-



pared, and have we learned anything from our history? As they say, 'history repeats itself.' Will we listen to history and avoid an-

other time like the 1930s?"

—Adapted from the accompanying exhibition catalogue.