



Oscar Bluemner: Jersey Silk Mills (Paterson), 1911, repainted 1917, oil on canvas, 20 by 30 inches. Private collection.

Oscar Bluemner, in Living Color

BY RICHARD KALINA

If you had to pick the best underknown American artist of the first half of the 20th century, Oscar Bluemner would have a good shot at the honor. Bluemner may be entrenched in the standard history of American modernism, and his work is represented in museums, large and small, around the country, but he has not been the subject of the sustained critical, curatorial and commercial interest that has lifted Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove or Marsden Hartley into the first rank of American artists.¹ "Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color," organized by Barbara Haskell for the Whitney Museum of American Art, makes a strong case for changing our perception of Bluemner, and setting him alongside his more famous contemporaries.

For an artist to be considered major, exposure is vital: the work must have been seen, and must still be out there to see. In that regard Bluemner suffered. Bad career luck is an occupational hazard for artists, but most don't screw things up for themselves as thoroughly as he managed to. Prickly, suspicious, hurtful to his friends and supporters, fickle and disloyal to his dealers, self-pitying but utterly convinced of his greatness, Bluemner managed to alienate those people—most importantly, Alfred Stieglitz, an early advocate—who could have ensured his rightful place in history. He passed his paranoid vision of the art world on to his two children, who steadfastly stood in the way of scholarship and exhibition opportunities, not permitting access to either his extensive archives or the work that they inherited. It wasn't

A key member of Stieglitz's group, Oscar Bluemner was a passionate colorist, an exacting draftsman, and, at times, his own worst enemy. An exhibition at the Whitney sets the record straight.

until after they had both died, and the materials were bequeathed to Stetson University in DeLand, Fla., that the real work on rehabilitating Bluemner's reputation could begin.

Oscar Bluemner was born in Prussia in 1867, trained and practiced as an architect in Germany, and emigrated to the United States in 1892. Blessed at first by good fortune, he soon found architectural work in America and appeared to escape the hard times that greeted so many immigrants then. However, just as things were looking hopeful, his life was upended by the widespread economic disaster of the Panic of 1893. Having few resources, Bluemner was soon thrust into utter destitution, selling thimbles and margarine on the street, living on handouts from soup kitchens, and sleeping wherever he could. While he had short periods of very modest prosperity, poverty stalked him his whole life, and there were many times when Bluemner and his family snuck away in the middle of the night just ahead of the eviction notice. When he committed suicide in 1938, he was penniless.

Bluemner had an early and abiding interest in painting, but changed his course of study to architecture. Had he fully committed himself to a career in architecture in either Germany or America, he might ultimately have made a go of it, at least commercially. The architectural drawings in the Whitney exhibition, particularly those of two rather grand limestone-clad townhouses for the Upper East Side of New York, show a reasonable talent expressing itself in the classicizing, turn-of-the-century mode. He did get a number of things built—the townhouses, some country homes, and most important, the Bronx Borough Court-house in New York (although with typical Bluemner luck, that commission was overshadowed by anger, bitterness and some eight years of nasty lawsuits, thanks to a combination of corrupt municipal politics and naivete on Bluemner's part). Frustrated by the political and economic realities of architectural practice, Bluemner retreated from the profession. Starting in 1907 he increasingly thought of himself as a painter, and though he returned to architectural work periodically, it was solely to pay his bills.

Bluemner might have been conventional as an architect, but he was scarcely so as a painter. The turning point came in 1908 when he met Stieglitz and his circle of artists. Being exposed to their work, and the work of the Europeans that Stieglitz showed in his gallery, set Bluemner on an adventurous path almost immediately. There was hardly a better time, in terms of general creative ferment, than the years before WWI to be an advanced artist, and Bluemner was thrown into the excitement that was bubbling up everywhere.

He differed from the other artists in Stieglitz's orbit by virtue of his background and temperament, as well as his architectural skills. For one, he was older than most of them. He was much closer in age to Stieglitz, and this allowed the two men to be friends on a nearly equal footing. (Stieglitz tended to assume a paternal role with his younger artists.) He was also, as was Stieglitz, German—in fact, the two men had attended the same academy in Berlin, although at different times. Bluemner's German heritage formed an important part of his esthetic and intellectual approach. He couched many of his pronouncements in the language of Hegelian dialectical opposition, and believed deeply in German Romantic ideals, convinced that art's primary mission was not to depict the exterior world, but to illuminate the inner being of the artist. He shared with the German Expressionists, particularly Franz Marc and the Blue Rider group, a mystical attachment to color as the vehicle for true expressiveness. Like Marc's, his color is bold, chromatically rich and saturated, and contained, for the most part, within closed contours.

Something else that set Bluemner apart from his fellows was his obsessive attitude regarding preparation and documentation. This might have sprung from a certain Prussian rigor and thoroughness, but it also was an approach very much in line with an architect's careful planning and disciplined marshalling of information. When Bluemner made a study of a subject—particularly an art subject—he delved into it deeply, making notes and sketches at every turn. His not always lucid journal entries number in the tens of thousands, and



Evening Tones (Bronx River at Mount Vernon), 1911, repainted 1913 and 1916-17, oil on canvas, 15 1/4 by 20 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

The human form did not figure directly in Bluemner's painting, but trees were a favorite surrogate; in some sketches human and tree forms were even merged.



Eye of Fate, 1927, watercolor on paper, 13 by 10 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital image © MOMA/SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

he documented every aspect of his paintings' making with copiously annotated sketches. Bluemner never began a painting directly. Drawings at different scales and different degrees of finish were carefully constructed. When he finally got to the painting, he knew exactly what it was going to look like—in fact, he often worked on his canvases upside down, so as not to allow the subject to get in the way of the proper distribution of tonal values. Bluemner also brought with him a technician's involvement with materials. He conducted numerous experiments with paints, binders, mediums and supports so that he might achieve the utmost permanence and stability in his work, and imbue his paint with a richness and inner glow. In that he succeeded—the paintings and works on paper in the Whitney show are in nearly perfect shape, and the color and surfaces are radiant. The downside was that using dangerous materials, in particular formaldehyde (now known to be a serious carcinogen), probably contributed to the terrible illnesses that bedeviled his last years.

Fittingly for an architect turned painter, Bluemner gravitated, almost invariably, to a subject matter of buildings set into a landscape. More frequently in his early work than his later, he was

attracted to industrial sites, particularly manufacturing or commercial zones in towns like Paterson, N.J., or Mount Vernon, just outside New York City. Those early works, like *Jersey Silk Mills (Paterson)*, 1911, repainted 1917, or *Evening Tones (Bronx River at Mount Vernon)*, 1911, repainted 1913 and 1916-17, feature the fractured and stacked planes of the Cubism so prevalent at the time. Bluemner's compositions are architectonically structured, primarily composed, even in the landscape passages, of horizontals, verticals and regularized diagonals. He was not interested, however, in early Cubism's practice of pushing toward monochrome in the service of pictorial unity. Forceful color animated Bluemner's painting from the beginning. *Evening Tones (Bronx River at Mount Vernon)*, for example, is a mélange of dark and light shades—lemon and golden yellow, citrus orange, apple and viridian green, ultramarine and cerulean, lilac and deep violet, various tones of alizarin crimson, and what was to become Bluemner's signature color, a glowing vermillion. (In fact he identified so strongly with the color that he referred to himself as the "Vermillionaire.") Bluemner's high-keyed color is close to that of the Futurists. While he admired the Italian artists' innovative chromatic approach and urged Stieglitz to show them in his gallery, he did not at all sympathize with their social program. Bluemner did think that his art should in some

Death, 1926, watercolor on paper, 9 1/2 by 12 1/2 inches. Collection Helen Hayes Smith.



Venus, 1924, watercolor on paper, 9 1/2 by 12 1/2 inches. Collection Susan and Herbert Adler.





A Situation in Yellow, 1933, oil on canvas, 36 by 50½ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

way depict the built and the natural world around him, as opposed to being purely abstract, but representation was scarcely his main focus. He had no desire to rev up his work with the speed and clangor of modernity or to comment programmatically, either in a positive or negative way, on industrialization.

Some of the paintings from the teens, such as *Form and Light*, *Motif in West New Jersey (Beattiestown)*, 1914, or *Emotional Reconstruction of a New Jersey Corner (Hoboken)*, 1914, employed more generalized house and building forms, but they, like the industrial site paintings, were planar, geometrically ordered and spatially complex. The latter painting pushes and pulls space in a particularly sophisticated way—a diagonal line of blocky trees, for example, both recedes in perspective and flattens itself up against the picture plane, while a steeply pitched bridge to the left simultaneously moves us into the composition and slides us back out. Bluemner's goal was to achieve the pictorial state that he referred to, in typically dialectical terms, as "deep flat."

By the '20s Bluemner had moved his focus away from factorylike buildings, populating his paintings and watercolors with the kind of anonymous houses and commercial structures found in the small towns and rural areas of New Jersey, where he lived or would visit on sketching expeditions. Landscape elements, particularly trees, took on a greater

prominence, with curving forms increasing in importance. With the exception of the frontal, iconlike and rather creepy *Self-Portrait* (1933), the human form did not figure directly in Bluemner's painting. It did, however, make its way in by other means. Trees were Bluemner's preferred surrogates, and he even made sketches in which human and tree forms were merged. *Death* (1926), with its single barren tree, hunched over in an empty, purplish winter landscape, was painted following the death of Bluemner's wife. The connection is clear.

Trees and hills naturally resist the rectilinear, but in the '20s Bluemner began to bend his architectural forms as well. In *Venus* (1924), for example, the entire right side of the picture shows a night landscape with dark, rounded hills, a rolling expanse of green field, and a group of gnarled trees blowing in the wind. The planet Venus glows eerily in the deep blue sky—the only white in the composition. Pushed over to the left, hugging the edge of the picture and stretching to the top, are several tall, red, windowless structures. They could be a barn and silos, or just shapes that suggest buildings. Their outlines are gently warped, and the stylized internal modeling describes the forms three dimensionally, while also setting up a linear counterpoint to the outer edges.

This use of interlocking curved forms placed into a flattened, layered space has much in common with Dove and O'Keeffe (or even

A tendency toward the theatrical was part of Bluemner's personal style and also of his art. Indeed he called his works stage sets for human dramas.



A Light-Yellow (First Snow or Sylvester Night), 1930, casein varnish on paper mounted on board, 15 by 20 inches. Phoenix Art Museum.

Thomas Hart Benton), but it also directly relates to Bluemner's preoccupation with Japanese prints and Chinese landscape painting. The strongly vertical *Walking along a New Jersey Canal* (1929), for example, with its compressed and tonally variegated red buildings set into a composition of tree and plant forms and an enfolding, geometrically articulated blue background, has the feel of a Sung Dynasty painting, but manages the feat without any obvious bowing to the East. The beautiful *Moonshine Fantasy*, a work that livens a night scene with brilliant, orange and crimson-tinged moonlight, and the more somber, blue and green *Moonlight on a Creek*, both 1928-29 and both having an Asian look, stylize their subjects in the service of even greater abstraction.

Stylization, combined with strong symbolist overtones, was pushed furthest in a group of works from 1927 that each features a landscape (with or without buildings) dominated by a huge, glowing moon. The moon is ringed, sometimes with multicolored bands, as in *Ascension*, or sometimes with a single, insistent tone—the pulsing crimson of *Eye of Fate*, for

example. These powerful works bring to mind similar motifs in paintings by O'Keeffe, whose "Evening Star" series preceded Bluemner's, and Dove, whose "Sunrise" series followed. Their emotional charge is increased by the compositional difficulty that Bluemner seems deliberately to court. Putting a very large circular form into a confining rectangular space is problematic: the composition risks stasis if it is too centered and symmetrical, or imbalance if it is offset. While the works in this series might lack some of Bluemner's compositional deftness, the best ones, like *Eye of Fate*, make up for a certain awkwardness by their formal drama.

A tendency toward the theatrical was part of Bluemner's personal style, and it showed itself in his art as well. Indeed, he referred to his works as stage sets for human dramas, and a large number of the paintings in the Whitney exhibition fall into the inherently dramatic "night scene" category. The titles tell the story: *Glowing Night*; *Red, Night Thoughts*; *Moonlight Fantasy*; *Last Evening of the Year*; *Night and Snow (Winter Night)*; or *Radiant Night*—the last one a direct reference to Arnold Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*, which he saw the composer conduct in Boston. As Bluemner aged and became increasingly isolated—his move to South Braintree, Mass., in 1926 effectively cut him off from social contact with the art world—his work became more insistent emotional. Fortunately Bluemner managed to up the psychological ante without diminishing his formal resourcefulness or visual sophistication. *Radiant Night* (1932-33), for example, while

subdued (it is painted in shades of brown, black, gray and white), seems to have as much chromatic richness as his more coloristically varied work. It is composed of slippery planes of lustrous paint, and its sharp tonal variations are held in a state of tenuous, almost expectant equilibrium. The subject matter might be simple—a frontal view of a white house lit by the moon or a streetlamp—but its psychological charge is palpable. *Violet Tones* (1934) would seem to be heading in a different direction. Violet-pink clouds, offset by a triangle of brilliant yellow, float behind a dark, indistinct, jumbled group of building forms—a telephone pole, a smokestack, a columned house and a single contorted, leafless tree trunk. Even though *Violet Tones* might operate in a different color key than *Radiant Night*, the two works share a sense of tension and



Moonlight on a Creek, 1928-29, oil on academy board mounted on wood panel, 14 by 10 inches. Private collection.



Violet Tones, 1934, casein varnish on board, 22½ by 38½ inches.
Collection Judy and Stanley Katz.

watchfulness, a feeling that something momentous is about to happen. Bluemner's skill, both in terms of paint handling and pictorial structuring, never faltered. That structuring was, in an understated way, highly inventive: I can think of few artists who were able so successfully to combine a rectilinear, layered cubist organization with subtly curved forms.

Bluemner sits in an interesting position. A key member of Stieglitz's group, he fused a northern European sensibility with the pictorial goals of American modernism and brought to bear on his work an architect's careful, even obsessive, approach to materials, sources and technique. Bluemner, in his self-defeating, romantic way, saw himself as suffering the tragic fate of the misunderstood genius. While his life was indeed an unhappy one, there's a good chance that his work, with the help of this well-researched exhibition and its lively catalogue, will enjoy the acclaim to which it is entitled. It is, after all, the proper romantic ending to the story.



1. It is, of course, one thing for a work to be in a museum collection and quite another for it actually to hang on the wall. Being consigned to the storage room has all too often been Bluemner's fate. In addition, considering Bluemner's dates and the quality of his work, a surprisingly large amount of it is still in private hands—fine for aficionados, but not so good for the general public and for the artist's reputation.

"Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color," organized by Barbara Haskell with the assistance of Marcelle Polednik and Stephanie Schumann, appears at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [Oct. 7, 2005-Feb. 12, 2006]. A concurrent exhibition is on view at Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York [Oct. 27, 2005-Jan. 28, 2006].

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