

FROM THE GROUND UP:
HOLGER CAHILL AND THE PROMOTION OF AMERICAN ART

by

Jillian Elliott Russo

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate
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Abstract

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A biography of Holger Cahill, director of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) from 1935-1942, my dissertation chronicles his influence on American art as an art critic, curator, and administrator. An Icelandic immigrant, who was born in 1887 in Skogarstrand, Iceland near the Arctic Circle, Cahill grew up in the Midwest. Alienated from his family as a young man, he spent his adolescence as an itinerant worker, an experience that shaped his Populist artistic philosophies and his curatorial approach. Cahill, influenced by the Progressive theories of John Dewey, conceptualized art as an inclusive component of daily life with which everyone should have an opportunity to participate.

Settling in Greenwich Village, Cahill formed relationships with artists John Sloan, Stuart Davis, Mark Tobey, Joseph Stella, and Arshile Gorky, as well as with gallery owner Edith Gregor Halpert, collector Abby Rockefeller, and Newark Museum director John Cotton Dana. From 1922-1929, Cahill worked as Dana's assistant at the Newark Museum, where he helped build the museum's collection of Modern American art and met future Museum of Modern Art curator Dorothy C. Miller, whom Cahill married in

1938. At the Newark Museum, he pioneered the first museum exhibitions on American folk art, “American Primitives” and “American Folk Sculpture.” In 1932-1933, Cahill served as temporary director of exhibitions at MoMA, where he collaborated with Alfred H. Barr, Jr. on the exhibition “American Painting and Sculpture 1862-1932” and organized the exhibitions, “American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America” and “American Sources of Modern Art.”

Cahill applied his democratic aesthetic theories most broadly through the structure and programs he implemented as director of the Federal Art Project. In particular, I argue, the New York City FAP and the WPA/FAP Exhibition Division contributed to the development of a pluralistic art scene during the 1930s and early 1940s. Through its program of local and national exhibitions, the Exhibition Division extended the art world into new communities and offered exposure to established and unknown artists. Throughout his leadership of the FAP, Cahill served as a link between artists and the New Deal administration and as a mentor to many members of the avant-garde.

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Introduction

I seem to talk an awful lot about Holger Cahill, but he was someone to talk about.
--Dorothy Miller, 1971¹

On September 5, 1938, Edgar Holger Cahill, the director of the Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), a component of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal art programs, which operated from 1935-1943, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine (fig.1). The image of Cahill, departing from a more traditional headshot format for spotlighting a political leader or intellectual, was, like the man himself, somewhat unconventional. A relatively small figure, Cahill stands in the foreground with a mural painting of three overall-clad laborers behind him. The workers are excavating the soil, digging and molding rock and dirt at the foot of a small mountain range, its blue peaks rising in the distance. Positioned in front of the mural, at the base of the worksite, Cahill, wearing a pinstriped suit, green tie, and fedora, appears to emerge from the brown earth. Although his snappy attire distinguishes him from the men in the painting behind him, he occupies their space, and his head even eclipses and merges with the torso of a worker who wears a white shirt. With this image, *Time* offered the public a democratic vision, in which the governmental leader and the workers are linked in a reciprocal interaction. The caption, "WPA Art Director Holger Cahill: His Project: To Build a Plateau," underscored the relationship between art, labor, the American landscape, and national identity pictured on the cover. The article reinforced this point,

¹ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," May 1970-September 28, 1971, 78, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

summarizing Cahill's theory of national art with his quote: "You don't often find mountains where there is no plateau."²

The search for an American artistic tradition, or in Cahill's earthy metaphor, "a plateau," that could form the basis for artistic growth, was both a driving ambition behind his career and a highly personal one. An Icelandic immigrant, Cahill's desire for an identity and a social place in America, propelled and defined his interest in American art and culture. Born Sveinn Kristjan Bjarnason in 1887 in Skogarstrand, Iceland near the Arctic Circle, he immigrated with his family to America when he was two years old and grew up on a farm in North Dakota during the 1890s, during the height of the Populist movement. Estranged from his family as a young man, he spent his early life as a wanderer. An unlikely candidate for a career in the art world, he was largely self-taught in art, literature, and social theory. As a young man, he wound his way from Winnipeg, Canada, St. Paul, Minnesota, to Cleveland, Ohio. All the while, he worked a variety of odd jobs, before making his way to New York, where after his arrival, he changed his name to Edgar Holger Cahill. (Among his friends he always went by the more Americanized "Eddie"). He pursued careers as a novelist, curator, and art critic before becoming director of the WPA/FAP in 1935.

Cahill's experiences as a rambling adolescent who struggled to maintain ties with community and family and whose creative endeavors began on the social margins, had parallels, not only with the experiences of American artists, but also with many nineteenth and early twentieth century cultural leaders who orbited Cahill's circles. Where possible, I have tried to illuminate these connections in order to paint a broader

² Holger Cahill, quoted in "Art in the Business District," *Time* (September 5, 1938): 36.

picture of the sense of dislocation that haunted Cahill's youth and drove his engagement with American art.

In addition to his immigrant identity and his experiences as a wanderer, Cahill's Icelandic heritage contributed to his conception of artistic development as stemming from democratic and community-based traditions. Throughout his life, Cahill read the *Sagas of Icelanders*, epic poems written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that developed out of the oral folk traditions of Skaldic song. Presenting accounts of the first Norwegian immigrants to Iceland during the age of the Vikings, the folk songs and literary sagas became a tool for community building among Iceland's agricultural and isolated populace and expressed Iceland's development of an independent national culture. In addition to the sagas, Cahill's mother also recounted more personal stories about her childhood in Iceland in an impoverished rural farming community, which provided few opportunities for advancement of education. These influences shaped Cahill's interest in community-produced art forms and in popular American folk art, and provided a model for fostering artistic development outside major metropolitan centers while valuing Populist and indigenous sources in the development of American art.

As WPA/FAP director, Cahill implemented programs to cultivate community involvement in order to help foster the growth of American art. These included the WPA/FAP Exhibition Division, which coordinated local and touring exhibitions, the Community Art Center program, which offered classes and organized local exhibitions, and the Index of American Design, which catalogued and preserved American folk art. Throughout his careers as a journalist, curator, and administrator, Cahill strove to educate

the public about American art, to make it accessible to everyone as well as to have a continuum with everyday experience.

The title of my dissertation, drawing upon organic metaphors used by Cahill and his contemporaries, refers to this “ground up,” democratizing approach to promoting American art, as pictured on the *Time* cover. For Cahill, the artistic tradition he hoped to construct was not:

the genteel tradition, which . . . is charged with Victorian provincialism, envisaging art as something removed from the clutter of everyday life, as an activity suited to cloistered airs, and moments of refined leisure, in which the best people may be reminded, continually, of their gentility.³

Rather, as in the paintings of the Ashcan School (a term Cahill coined in the 1934 book *Art in American in Modern Times*), artistic impulses emerged from quotidian experiences.⁴ They moved upward from the dusty streets and communal daily activities into the realm of fine art.

Cahill’s quest for roots made him sensitive to his adopted country’s desire to define a national culture. Wanda Corn and Patricia Hills have aptly defined Cahill’s role as a cultural nationalist, who shared Van Wyck Brooks’s engagement in the search for a “usable past.”⁵ According to Corn, for leaders such as “Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and Constance Rourke in cultural criticism; Holger Cahill, Juliana Force, and

³ Holger Cahill, “What is Tradition?” Speech to the American Artists Congress, 1940, 19. Reel 5290, frames 1382-1402, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. [Hereafter, “Holger Cahill Papers, AAA”], Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/container183917.htm.

⁴ See Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (University of California Press, 2006), 23 and 319 and Elizabeth Milroy, *Painters of a New Century: The Eight and American Art* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1991), 15-16.

⁵ Patricia Hills, *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 53-54.

Lloyd Goodrich in New York's museums of modern art," the "aesthetic past had to be functional: their aim was, not to honor forefathers, but to bolster those in the present trying to do fresh and authentic American work."⁶ As Corn's study of Modern art and nationalism between the wars illuminates, their drive to cultivate the development of a distinctly American art had parallels in the ambitions of Alfred Stieglitz and the artists he promoted through the 291 Gallery, including Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, and Joseph Stella. Ironically, several of these artists, including Stella and Marcel Duchamp were, like Cahill, non-natives. While Cahill developed a friendship with Stieglitz, and through his work as a curator strove to develop similar supportive relationships with contemporary artists, Cahill advanced a democratic conception of the relationship between art and society. Whereas the Stieglitz circle was somewhat insular and elitist, Cahill was determined to democratize art and to redefine the role of art for the common person.

As I discuss in chapter one, Cahill's artistic theories were shaped by his immigrant experience and a self-fashioning of his identity, which propelled his ambition for a career as a novelist. After working at a farm and traveling throughout the Midwest he settled, by his late twenties, in Greenwich Village, the bohemian center of artistic experimentation, radical politics, and cultural rebellion. Here he established a new persona as a writer and art critic. In an undated photograph, probably from the 1930s (fig. 2), Cahill presents himself as a stylish intellectual. With a carefully groomed mustache, he holds a beer as he wears a brimmed hat and silk tie. Throughout his career, Cahill turned to fiction writing, as a means to shape his slippery sense of self; his books became

⁶ Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 298.

a means for continually revisiting and reworking his childhood experiences and memories.⁷ Self-conscious about his immigrant roots, he frequently concealed his Icelandic birth as well as his true age. He claimed, as the *Time* article reported, that he was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1893. In his first and last published novels *Profane Earth* (1927) and *The Shadow of My Hand* (1956), he refashioned memories of his childhood on the Great Plains and re-established a personal connection to the fertile soil he associated with communal, agricultural life, and the rich opportunities for cultural growth available in America.

Cahill's fiction and art historical writings, like the work of his colleague, Communist journalist Michael Gold, employed the image of the land as a Populist symbol. The soil represented not only fertility and rebirth but also a democratic American culture, which grew out of community and related to mass experience. As Gold asserted in his essay *Towards Proletarian Art*:

It is not in the hot-house air that the lusty tree will grow. Its roots must be in the fields, factories and workshops of America—in the American life. Only a creative nation understands creation. Only an artist understands art. The method must be the revolutionary method—from the deepest depths upward.⁸

Cahill did not agree with Gold's Communist position, but in his 1939 speech, entitled "American Resources in the Arts," that promoted the Federal Art Project, he gave broad socio-political meaning to similar organic imagery. Drawing a comparison between the Midwestern soil and the state of the arts in the United States, he concluded,

⁷ My examination of Cahill's self-invention through his fiction writing is inspired by Wendy Jeffers, "Holger Cahill and American Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 31, no. 4 (1991): 2-11.

⁸ Michael Gold, "Towards Proletarian Art," in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 70.

during the past seventy-five years, the arts in America have had to follow a path remote from the common experience, our country has suffered a cultural erosion far more serious than the erosion of the Dust Bowl.⁹

Although Cahill is most often remembered for his directorship of the WPA/FAP, and this can be seen as the apex of his career, his contributions as an art critic and curator during the 1920s and 1930s primed him for this position and made an impact on the development of American art. In chapter two, I examine how Cahill's work with the popular press during the 1920s, and involvement with Greenwich Village bohemia, prepared him for his position as a cultural leader. Cahill's exposure to the Progressive ideologies that infused Village intellectual circles encouraged his already-present interest in social ideas. His studies in economy and philosophy with cultural reformers Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey had a profound impact on Cahill's understanding of the relationship between art and society. Through his freelance journalism, he met many members of the New York avant-garde, including Stuart Davis, Mark Tobey, John Sloan, Joseph Stella, and others. As an art critic for journals such as *Parnassus* and *Shadowland* and as public relations director for the Society of Independent Artists, Cahill learned to engage the press as a means to attract attention to American art. He became an influential promoter of John Sloan, Max Weber, Davis, and many other contemporary American artists, as well as an advocate of Native American and pre-Columbian art as both a form of ancient America and of cultural primitivism.¹⁰

While exposure to Dewey's philosophies and his involvement with the popular press provided Cahill with promotional skills and an ideological framework, it was

⁹ Holger Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts," in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 38.

¹⁰ For Cahill's role as a cultural primitivist, see Hills, *Modern Art in the USA*, 63-67.

through his work as a curator for the Newark Museum that Cahill began to explore the relationship between art and community. Chapter three considers Cahill's training under Newark's innovative director, John Cotton Dana. Trained as a librarian, Dana was a Progressive thinker who believed that the primary responsibility of the museums was not to preserve luxury objects but to promote educational programs and popular exhibitions through local public outreach. Challenging aesthetic conventions, he exhibited an eclectic assortment of painting, photography, and industrial products, finding artistic merit in both commercial and fine art.

Since Dana was not particularly interested in fine art, throughout the 1920s he gave Cahill the opportunity to shape an exhibition program of contemporary American art at the Newark Museum. Later, in the early 1930s, the museum hosted Cahill's groundbreaking exhibitions on American folk, the first large-scale exhibitions on the subject, which established him as an authority on American art and, particularly, indigenous American art forms. At the Newark Museum, Cahill also met his wife, Dorothy Canning Miller, who would become the Museum of Modern Art's first female curator, working alongside Alfred. H. Barr, Jr. Cahill and Miller's intellectual partnership in the 1930s made a lasting impact on them both. Miller would have a long career in the field, becoming most well-known for her *Americans* exhibitions series, which, from the 1940s through the 1960s, exposed the public to contemporary trends in American art, from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art.

Prior to Miller's involvement at MoMA, Cahill served as a temporary director of exhibitions there from 1932 to 1933, when he replaced Alfred Barr during a year-long sabbatical leave, which he took in Europe. Chapter four examines Cahill and Barr's

collaborative efforts to construct a tradition for American art in the 1932 canon-shaping exhibition, “American Painting and Sculpture 1862-1932” and in their co-edited book, *Art in America in Modern Times*.¹¹ The book became the basis for a series of NBC radio broadcasts that aired nationally from 1934 to 1935. Here, I analyze Cahill’s large survey exhibitions “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900,” and “American Sources of Modern Art,” in the context of his search for a “usable past.” “American Sources of Modern Art,” which paired pre-Columbian sculpture and contemporary art, inaugurated MoMA’s problematic exhibition series on “primitive” art as a source for Modernism that continued into the 1980s. Contrasting Cahill’s social-historical curatorial practice with Barr’s formalist methodology, I characterize their approaches as cooperative strategies that enabled MoMA’s success in promoting Modern art and served their shared goals of public education.

Expanding upon Cahill’s influential role as curator, chapter five considers the broader application of his Populist theories through the structure and programs he devised for the WPA/FAP. Examining Cahill’s integration of local and national activities in his administration, I consider how the New York City FAP, the Index of American Design, the Community Art Center program, and the Exhibition Division, implemented Cahill’s ambition to integrate art into public life. Adding to recent studies on the FAP’s democratization of art through the Index of American Design and the Community Art Center programs, I analyze the Exhibition Division’s contribution to the development of

¹¹ Holger Cahill and Alfred Barr, eds. *Art in America in Modern Times* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934).

a pluralistic art scene.¹² Through local and national exhibitions it extended the art world into new communities and offered exposure to established and unknown artists. In addition to his administrative position, I document Cahill's continued involvement in curatorial projects, such as the national survey of FAP work, "New Horizons of American Art," which Cahill organized in collaboration with Miller. Furthermore, Cahill retained a personal dimension to his leadership, visiting artists throughout the country and serving as a mentor to many of them throughout his directorship. In these respects, his role had parallels to museum directors and curators such as Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller.

Although Cahill came to his directorship of the FAP as a curator and art critic and had little prior involvement in politics, Cahill's ideals as a cultural nationalist with a Populist approach to art corresponded with the reformist political agenda of the New Deal government. Committed to democracy, Cahill shared the conviction, as Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz have described, of "an energetic and expanding government [that] could work for the individual and the local community to alleviate misery, restore political faith, and improve the very structure of society."¹³ Cahill, however, never considered himself a politician instead viewing himself as an outsider throughout his tenure in federal government. He recalled, "We were aware of the fact that we were strange fish, and that the Roosevelt Administration had pulled in people that had never

¹² Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009); and A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹³ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 3.

been in Washington before.”¹⁴ Support for American art and artists remained Cahill’s most important concern and motivation.

While Cahill had concrete ambitions for the WPA/FAP, which included cultivating the growth of American culture, providing artists with a social identity, shaping public understanding of American artistic traditions, and encouraging widespread participation in the arts, my analysis of the FAP, contrasts with Jonathan Harris’s portrait of the program as a hegemonic component of the New Deal state.¹⁵ Rather than examine the bureaucracy of the FAP, I trace the contributions of individuals, many of whom were artists, educators, or cultural leaders, who, as Cahill observed, had not before been involved in government.

This is not to suggest that Cahill’s program was not propagandistic. Cahill promoted his ground-up conception of American cultural development that had been shaped by his own experiences, by his studies with philosopher John Dewey, his apprenticeship with museum director John Cotton Dana, and in his integrated role in the New Deal agenda as it related to the arts. As Barbara Melosh has argued in her analysis of the Treasury Section Arts, New Deal rhetoric did not consistently correspond to productive reforms. This resulted in “cultural expressions as visual representations of a commitment to humane government that did not translate, for the most part, into effective

¹⁴ Holger Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 408; Interview by Joan Pring, 1957, transcript Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, microfilmed copy, reel 5285, frames 0027-0670, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Digitized version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/series1.htm.

¹⁵ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

or far-reaching policies.”¹⁶ In particular, Melosh argues, the Treasury Section mural program thwarted the feminist movement by promoting conventional gender roles and employing images of domestic life to create a sense of social unity and stability.¹⁷ According to Melosh, the FAP and Treasury Section were distinct initiatives. Cahill’s FAP “was more concerned with promoting artists than producing a particular kind of cultural vision.”¹⁸ Of the four government art programs that operated, Cahill’s broad definition of art, which encompassed fine art, commercial art, and folk art, made the WPA/FAP the most inclusive and least stylistically restrictive. In his leadership of the program, Cahill was strategic in shaping press response. In chapter five, I examine his application of the techniques he developed as publicity director for the Society of Independent Artists, to the construction of a positive press response to WPA/FAP exhibitions.

As a framework for her discussion, Melosh presents a historiography of the New Deal from a range of perspectives: on the one side are critiques of the New Deal that see it as having fallen short of its liberal ideals, reinforced corporate capitalist power, or expanded the range of the federal government; whereas, more positive accounts couch the reforms as representing a moment of optimism, activism, and reform in U.S. history.¹⁹ Although the New Deal failed in many respects, my portrait of Cahill and the WPA/FAP aligns with conceptions of the program as an experimental reform initiative, rooted in

¹⁶ Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Progressive drives of the early twentieth-century that can be traced back to Greenwich Village in the 1920s.

Through an examination of Cahill's career, I suggest a more integrated narrative of artistic development from the 1920s through 1940s. Bracketed by major historical events—the stock market crash in 1929 and the U.S. entry into World War II in 1941—the thirties were historically seen as a retrograde, isolated, and stylistically inferior period. Though he challenges it, Stephen Polcari articulates the traditional opinion of this decade in his statement, “American art of the 1930s has been most frequently characterized in the postwar period as reactionary and nationalistic, as almost populist academicism.”²⁰ This view distinguishes the 1930s both from the cultural vibrancy of the Jazz Age and from the post-war triumph of Abstract Expressionism, which is “usually seen as a repudiation of both its subject matter and stylistic modes.”²¹

There is precedent for viewing these decades in this sort of interconnected way. In her recent book *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, Victoria Grieve grounds her discussion of the Federal Art Project in the Progressive movement, as lead by John Dewey during the early years of the twentieth century and the 1920s.²² Polcari, in his examination of the roots of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1930s, has identified threads of artistic continuity between the 1930s and '40s. While he also explores major differences in the art of these periods, he emphasizes the representation of American culture in the arts through the uses of symbolic, historic, or mythic themes as a point of connection. He argues that in the 1930s “American artists

²⁰ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Grieve, 1-82.

analyzed the distinctive components and activities and the very definition of culture in general and American mythic or symbolic culture specifically.”²³ This “historical tendency” continued in the Abstract Expressionist art of the 1940s, but the “search for the American Genesis,” now “sought the spiritual or inner . . . and not the outer or social genesis of humanity.”²⁴

Building upon the connective approaches of Grieve and Polcari, with closer attention to Cahill’s contribution, I examine how his artistic philosophies, shaped by his involvement with bohemian artistic circles and the leftist popular press in the 1920s Greenwich Village, were applied through the WPA/FAP with the intention of integrating art into American society and broadening the American art world. Whereas Polcari considers Cahill’s directorship as promoting artists to “seek out the American ‘native epic’ or ‘myth,’” I believe Cahill’s cultural vision was more inclusive than previously described, encouraging a pluralism that represents another continuity between the art scene of the 1930s and ‘40s. These decades are, in fact, linked by artistic experimentation, a pluralistic art scene, and the questioning of the role of American art in society.

The pluralistic, and, at times, experimental art scene of the 1930s and early 1940s included Regionalism, Social Realism, and various types of abstraction—from neoplastic to biomorphic to Cubist—supported by the American Abstract Artists group, David Alfaro Siqueiros’s experimental workshop of the 1930s, the early 1940s drip paintings of Hans Hofmann, a growing interest in non-Western art, as well as Cahill’s large-scale, government-sponsored art projects. Cahill, like Dewey, perceived art and environment as

²³ Polcari, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

actively intertwined and promoted American Scene painting, which he favored because its style and social themes were accessible and represented “an American art which had a definite relationship to the public.”²⁵ Cahill, however, did not advance strict stylistic guidelines as director of the WPA/FAP and viewed the American Scene as multifaceted. In 1940, he remarked, “I think we do well to encourage the artist to look deeply into American life and to recreate it for us in terms of art . . . whether his point of view is that of regionalism, social comment, abstraction, romanticism.”²⁶

According to Cahill’s ground-up vision, solidified in his directorship of the FAP, artists were not bohemians working in isolation or merely laborers employed on work relief, but were cultural leaders “who were searching for methods which guide the American people in bringing order, design, and harmony into the environment created by our society” and who shape our understanding of American culture.²⁷ Cahill envisioned his role as securing a context for their success through cultivating a strong relationship between the artist and the public to “provide a better environment for the American artist” and “wider opportunities for the American people to participate in the experience of art.”²⁸ The examination of the artist’s role in public life was not unique to Cahill’s theories; many others, including Stuart Davis, Thomas Hart Benton, and Clement Greenberg debated the relationship between art and society during these decades.

In particular, Clement Greenberg’s highly influential essay, “The Avant-garde and Kitsch,” written for the leftist journal, *The Partisan Review*, shaped understanding of

²⁵ Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936; Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 15.

²⁶ Cahill, “What is Tradition?” 20-21.

²⁷ Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” 43-44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

the New Deal art a few years before the FAP officially came to a close in 1943. Penned the year World War II began, *The Partisan Review* was in the process of refashioning itself “from radicalism in the thirties to Cold War liberalism by the late 1940s.”²⁹

Greenberg was responding to contemporary fears about Communism and Totalitarianism as well as unresolved questions about the identity of American art and culture. Describing American commercial culture and the propagandistic Socialist Realist art of Russia as kitsch that threatened artistic freedom and true cultural progress, Greenberg was critical of art with identifiable subject matter. He would later prescribe a narrow definition of American painting, which had to be flat and free from representational or literary associations, which could open a work to political messages and the influences of mass culture. He advocated for a “pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes colors,” encouraging the artist to shift “his attention away from subject matter of common experience” and focus it “upon the medium of his own craft,” making “subject matter or content . . . something to be avoided like a plague.”³⁰ Favoring abstraction over the New Deal Realist styles, Greenberg’s essay called for a severing with the artistic program of the 1930s, giving voice to many artists’ desires for a new direction in response to World War II.

While Greenberg’s formalist theories became a dominant model in the post-war period, Cahill’s Populist ideologies, defined in the first half of the twentieth century, were equally important for artistic developments of the forties and fifties. Although the

²⁹ Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1934-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 7.

³⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” excerpted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 532, 531. Originally published in *Partisan Review* VI, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-39.

WPA/FAP had a reputation for restricting artists' creative activities, Greenberg's aesthetic program presented artistic ideals that were just as, if not more, constraining than statements Cahill made in his speeches, writings, and exhibition catalogues. Ultimately, both Populist and formalist ideologies were constructions by art critics, with neither outlining an art that was more authentically "American" than the other. A son of Polish Lithuanian immigrants who grew up in the Bronx, New York, Greenberg was also searching for a position within American culture. After graduating from Syracuse University, he worked for his father in the necktie business as a traveling salesman and then in a civil service job before becoming a respected critic. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," was a breakout, career-making essay for Greenberg, and, as with Cahill's fiction writing and art criticism, was tied to his own identity making.

As a critic, Cahill recognized that artistic values were constructed, transitory, and subjective. Throughout his WPA/FAP directorship, he supported predominantly Realist styles because he felt they were most accessible to the public, and most relevant to the social themes of Depression life. He believed cultural beliefs are constantly shifting, and historically relevant, as reflected in the following statement:

We might . . . say that "tradition" is a weathervane word. It shows us which way the wind is blowing. In a period of active and progressive change we are apt to say of our friends that they use tradition as a living instrument, that they transcend tradition, or that they have freed themselves from the shackles of tradition; and of our enemies that they are tradition-bound, tradition-ridden, or imprisoned in a hidebound traditionalism. In conservative periods artists of whom we approve are, of course, the true heirs of the tradition. Those of whom we disapprove misunderstand tradition, fly in the face of it, or are absolutely without it. These uses of the word tell us very little about tradition, but they tell us a good deal about the way we use language. They are uses of the word for

purposes of persuasion, to affect the emotions, or to get the adherence of others. They have no particular reference to facts or truth.³¹

Acknowledging that a critic does not speak the unwavering truth, Cahill considered aesthetic debates essential to creative development and because “they can take place only in a society like ours,” fundamentally democratic.³²

Perceiving American artistic tradition as continually debated, growing, and changing, Cahill was not interested in using this tradition “for the purpose of setting arbitrary limits to [an artist’s] activity.”³³ Cahill’s conviction, throughout his career, and especially as director of the FAP, was to create an environment in which American cultural traditions would continue to flourish. As a student of Dewey, he did not believe this could occur through a top-down, passive model of education. Rather, it was the continued engagement of artists with the public that should determine the trajectory of American art.

³¹ Holger Cahill, “What is Tradition?” 1-2.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid., 19.

Chapter 1:
Identity, Fiction Writing, and Self-Invention

I had started to assemble the facts I knew, or thought I knew about Holger Cahill. . . . And I began to question [Cahill's sister] Anna about the gaps and discrepancies which I found in my own knowledge of that mysterious and secretive man with whom I spent twenty-nine years. Anna hesitated, did not want to be disloyal to Holger by telling me facts he had chosen to conceal for so many years, even from his wife, but she finally told me certain things. For me much mystery remains, but even if it were possible to probe further I would not do so, since he chose so definitely to be silent about much of his past life. Chief among the facts that Anna told me was this—that Holger was not born in Minnesota in 1893 but in Iceland in 1887. For years after learning this I was tormented by doubt that I had a right to disregard his wish to suppress this fact, especially since I could not guess the reason. My doubt concerned what I should . . . put on his gravestone. Finally . . . I decided that a graveyard is a place for truth . . .

--Dorothy Miller, 1971³⁴

Writing more than ten years after Holger Cahill's death in 1960, Cahill's wife and longtime colleague, Dorothy Miller, expressed her disbelief and continued fascination about still not fully understanding her husband's character or firmly knowing the details of his past. When speaking about his background, which was eccentric for an art professional, Cahill obscured certain information and provocatively constructed other narratives in his personal accounts, interviews, and novels. Following his death, Miller searched for answers about the facts of his childhood. In her correspondence, quoted above, with Cahill's sister, Anna Johnson, Miller discovered that her husband had been born in Iceland in 1887 rather than in Minnesota in 1893 as he had claimed on numerous

³⁴ Dorothy Miller, letter to Halldór Laxness, August 23, 1971, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations [Hereafter, "Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL"].

occasions.³⁵ Although she never completely comprehended his motives for hiding the information, she chose to accept the “mystery” of her husband’s persona, one that was largely a product of his own invention. In the worst light, Cahill’s manipulations of his identity made him appear to be a poser. At his best, his open-ended sense of self enabled him to excel in different environments, from journalistic circles, to museum administration, to the political culture of the New Deal government.

Ironically, a precedent for Cahill’s willingness to construct a new history for himself can be found in the Icelandic heritage he sought to conceal. Through his interest in fiction writing and poetry, Cahill retained a connection to his mother during decades of separation. Cahill’s alienation from his family began with his parents’ divorce, when his father’s abandonment of Cahill, his mother, and sister, forced Cahill’s mother to send her son to be a hired laborer on a nearby farm. The decision, made out of financial desperation, damaged the relationship between Cahill and his mother for much of his life. He remembered his mother as a formidable presence, and a poet and storyteller in the Icelandic tradition who “used to recite poetry to me, and poetry which she had written herself. She wrote poetry on all occasions of emotion.”³⁶ She also read poems written by Cahill’s grandfather, Bjarni, who was a Scald in Iceland—“a poet of local reputation

³⁵ See Holger Cahill’s undated autobiographical notes for the WPA Federal Art Project written just prior to his joining the art project in 1935, with Dorothy Miller’s corrections and his biographical statement, 1957, both contained in box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL. In 1942, Cahill also reported his birthday as June 13, 1893, on government paperwork that named his daughter as his beneficiary. See box 2, folder 5, Dorothy C. Miller Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC [Hereafter, “Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA”].

³⁶ Holger Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 16. Interview by Joan Pring, 1957, transcript Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, Microfilmed copy, reel 5285, frames 0027-0670, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Digitized version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/series1.htm.

probably as good as Charlie Norman or any of the minor American poets.”³⁷ This impressed upon Cahill “the prestige of the medium itself—that is, of poetry—it was a medium of enormous popular esteem, which you became conscious of, and which was practiced very much.”³⁸ Throughout his career, Cahill looked to fiction writing as a means of fashioning a new identity and as a connection to his past.

Iceland had a rich literary tradition, with roots in oral histories that were transcribed into the Icelandic sagas in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The sagas had parallels with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the renowned Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, which is set in Scandinavia. An intention to formulate a national history by tracing genealogical stories between leading families distinguished Icelandic literature from these other epics. As Robert Kellogg has noted:

one convention by which the sagas develop a dense and plausible historical context is to introduce their major characters into an explicitly defined historical setting. Often this is accomplished with a rich background of genealogical information. The memory and transmission of these genealogies was apparently one of the cultural functions of the [Icelandic saga].³⁹

Blending historical information and storytelling, the sagas intermingled fact and fiction, a technique Cahill embraced as a means of fashioning the narrative of his own life.

Furthermore, the stories suggested that history was malleable, and that a national artistic expression needed, first and foremost, to be relatable to the people, a belief that defined Cahill’s views on American art and commitment to public education.

³⁷ Holger Cahill, biographical statement about his mother, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

³⁸ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 16.

³⁹ Robert Kellogg and Jane Smiley, *The Sagas of Icelanders*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2001), xxxv.

When the sagas developed first in oral, and then written, form during the age of the Vikings, there was a desire in Iceland for the development of a national culture. As Icelandic immigrants arrived from Norway, colonists adopted Norwegian traditions of skaldic song to preserve their heritage. The songs expressed their experiences in a new land, transmitted news from Norway, and provided a means of entertainment. Originally more formal poetic expressions in Iceland's rural, agricultural setting, the songs and written sagas eventually became more colloquial, functioning as tools for community and history building and eventually developing into an oral folk literature. The need for the storytelling to relate to the daily life of the people, and to appeal and adapt to the changes of generations, affected the development of the sagas. As Kellogg explains:

For stories and poems to be transmitted through centuries of oral tradition, they have to make sense to their audiences from generation to generation, and to do this they must conform to the values, tastes and perceptions of successive new audiences.⁴⁰

In the Icelandic sagas, the heroes were often relatable characters. Stories featured wealthy farmers rather than aristocratic subjects. They used plain prose, focused on historical events and family relations, and employed irony and dark humor.⁴¹

Njal's Saga, perhaps the most well-known Icelandic saga, depicts blood feuds between families. According to historian Knut Gjerset, these "often involved so many families that they developed into a petty warfare of the bitterest and most vindictive sort."⁴² Like Homer's epics, the sagas elevate warriors into heroic protagonists. They also introduce other types of heroes, such as intellectuals and poets. In some instances,

⁴⁰ Ibid., xxxiv.

⁴¹ Ibid., xxvi-xlii.

⁴² Knut Gjerset, *History of Iceland* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 145.

warriors were also poets whose poems were included in the sagas.⁴³ Njal's Saga describes the heroes, Gunnar and Njal, as exemplifying two ideals of physical and mental prowess.

Gunnar was said to be:

a man of great stature and very able in all sports. He could wield the sword or use the bow with either hand he liked. . . . He could swim like a seal, and there was no play in which anyone could compare with him, so that it was said that he never had an equal.⁴⁴

Njal, in contrast, was a successful lawyer who gave sound advice. Saga heroes such as Gunnar often became outlaws, acting almost as pre-modern rebels, or challengers of the law on the margins of society.⁴⁵ Cahill regarded Gunnar's choice to stay in Iceland and become an outlaw as an ultimate expression of the bonds to place and landscape. As Cahill described this episode of the saga in 1957:

There is a famous episode in Njal's saga where Gunnar, who has been exiled for killing a man and is about to go abroad, falls off his horse. When he stands up he looks back and says that he has never seen the hlith as beautiful as it is now and so he will not leave it. The consequences of that were that he was made an outlaw for refusing to obey the judgment and for the manslaughter, and so he could be killed by anyone, legally, and of course he was. These people loved their barren land.⁴⁶

Like Gunnar, Cahill had strong ties to the agrarian landscape, which evoked memories of childhood in North Dakota and his mother's stories of her youth in Iceland. Within Cahill's desire for reinvention was also a need to maintain a connection to his family and his Icelandic heritage.

Complementing these specific ties to Icelandic society, the constriction of identity through literature and art also had broader roots within European and American culture.

⁴³ Kellogg and Smiley, xxviii.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Gjerset, 145.

⁴⁵ Kellogg and Smiley, xviii.

⁴⁶ See Cahill's undated autobiographical notes for the WPA Federal Art Project with Dorothy Miller's corrections, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

The influential literary scholar, Stephen Greenblatt, has discussed the importance of self-formation in the works of sixteenth-century English authors such as Thomas More, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare. Like Cahill, these authors transformed themselves through their writing into cultural leaders, recasting their economic and social positions within society. Greenblatt's notion that self-fashioning, "crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves" provides a conceptual framework for understanding Cahill's slippery persona and his relentless commitment to pursuing a career as a novelist.⁴⁷

In early twentieth-century America, writers, artists, intellectuals and drifters who wanted to break with the past, construct new identities, and challenge the status quo gravitated to Greenwich Village. Here they not only reinvented themselves, but nurtured the reconstruction of an entire community. In her book *American Moderns*, Christine Stansell has documented how "a group of writers who collected in Greenwich Village between 1890 and 1920 transformed an unexceptional shabby neighborhood into a place glowing with a sense of the contemporary."⁴⁸ The village was not only the place where Cahill transformed himself from a poor, aspiring journalist into an art critic and curator, but was also the first place he had ever felt at home as an adult. The friendships and the supportive environment that he found there energized and shaped his interests and his career. Cahill's experience in Greenwich Village almost certainly was a foundation for

⁴⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

⁴⁸ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000; Reprint, Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

his conviction that artistic development could not truly flourish without community involvement. With its mixture of characters and opportunities for the exchange of ideas, this bohemian enclave provided the necessary ingredients for rethinking the world as one had previously experienced it. The community provided a basis for personal development that fueled self-refashioning.

Throughout his career, Cahill produced three lengthy novels, *Profane Earth* (1927), *Look South to the Polar Star* (1947), and *The Shadow of My Hand* (1956). He also wrote a biography of the American sailor and military leader in China, Frederick Townsend Ward, entitled *A Yankee Adventurer: The Story of Ward and the Taiping Rebellion* (1930). In addition, he published short stories, numerous book reviews, and dabbled in poetry. Although his talents as a writer did not equal his abilities as an art professional, Cahill had a well reviewed but little-remembered literary career. Loaded with description, and often lacking a compelling plot, his novels are not easy to read but provide a window into the views and experiences of their author. Cahill's fiction writing mirrored accounts of his sojourns in the Midwest and a trip he claimed to have made to Shanghai as a worker on the steamship *The Empress of China*. *Profane Earth* and *The Shadow of My Hand* depict life on the Great Plains, while *Look South to the Polar Star*, a mystery-adventure story set in Shanghai, features a search for a missing person across China.

Driven by what Miller described as “his imagination, flair, wit, [and] elegance of mind,” Cahill's fiction writing was a vehicle for personal analysis as well as cultural study.⁴⁹ His novels reveal a determination to understand and capture different social and

⁴⁹ See Miller's notes on Cahill's personality, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

historical environments, but can also be interpreted as attempts to come to terms with a difficult childhood that had been characterized by financial hardship, nomadism, and alienation from his family. As scholar Wendy Jeffers explains:

Parentage was a recurring issue for Cahill as a youth, and his recollections include several tales of offers of adoption . . . followed by flight. Themes of the prodigal and surrogate son, wandering and belonging, etch the first quarter of Cahill's life and they appear as thinly disguised fiction in his novels.⁵⁰

Cahill often based his fiction writing on autobiographical events and his writing was both praised for its realism and criticized for being the shallow reworking of the author's life story.⁵¹

An excellent storyteller, Cahill presented his autobiography like a novel in his interviews, and did not hesitate to stretch the truth and indulge in recounting events as he chose to construct them. In his letters and personal papers, Cahill's account of his youth in the Midwest between 1890 and 1913, is an amalgamation of fact and fiction. In his 1957 Oral History interview for Columbia University, he presented a somewhat misleading version of his childhood in North Dakota. Striking for its polished rather than spontaneous quality, the opening passages of the interview read almost like the beginning of a book. He began with his earliest memory, emphasizing the richness of the Midwestern soil known as "black gold" for its lucrative fertile properties, and referencing the imagery of Mark Twain and one of his favorite authors, Leo Tolstoy:

I first saw the world on the banks of the Mississippi, but I don't remember it at all. That is the Mississippi River. . . . The world that I first got acquainted with was the flatlands of eastern Dakota, and I suppose there's

⁵⁰ Wendy Jeffers, "Holger Cahill and American Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 31, no. 4 (1991): 4.

⁵¹ "Ivor from Boyhood," *New York Sun* (24 September 1927). Reviews clipping folder, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

only one other country on earth that's like it is, the Ukraine. You get an inkling of that in Tolstoi's (sic.) *Anna Karenina*, where Levin comes in all the time. He is concerned so much with the soil, and that of course was Tolstoi's concern. The land that I was brought up on was called by its Russian name of "chernozium" which means, "black earth." The reason for that is that the only soil which is like that, as fertile as that, is the black earth of the Ukraine, the great Russian wheat country."⁵²

Eliding his birth in Iceland in 1887, and downplaying his immigrant status, Cahill highlighted his first memories of his North Dakota "homeland" and American roots.

In fact, for the early part of his life, Cahill was probably not a naturalized citizen of the United States. Despite his claims about being born in St. Paul, Minnesota, he had no birth certificate. Although Cahill was issued a social security card in 1939, the true location of his birth would not be confirmed until Cahill's sister went to Iceland and found his birth certificate after his death.⁵³ At the time that Cahill was nominated for directorship of the New Deal Federal Art Project, he drafted a statement to the administration explaining that he could not prove his citizenship and did not have a U.S. passport. Like many immigrants, Cahill resented having to go through the process of obtaining citizenship. He erroneously stated: "I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. At any rate so I have always believed." Cahill feared the situation would make him ineligible to work for the government, or worse "would cause...embarrassment to the WPA." He was in the difficult position of choosing to keep up a false identity in order to prove himself qualified for a position that he was initially reluctant to accept, but obviously cared about.

The statement continued:

I cannot deny that this status of mine is peculiar for one who has made an intensive study of American art and Americana. But I must say . . . I have

⁵² Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 1.

⁵³ Cahill was issued a social security card in November 1939, which was saved with Dorothy Miller's papers, box 2, folder 5, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

always been vastly more interested in American culture than in American politics, and since I considered myself a naturally born citizen I resented the idea of going through the naturalization process.⁵⁴

The boldness and vulnerability of this letter speaks volumes about his character. It blended an apology for his past and subtle deception regarding his citizenship with frank words about his lack of interest in American politics, a brash statement to make when trying to secure a job with the federal government.

In misrepresenting himself, Cahill was willing to take a significant risk to further his career and contribute to the development of American art. On the off-chance that his lie were discovered, he could have damaged his own reputation in the fields of both art and literature, as well as the reputation of the WPA Federal Art Project. This substantial pressure, probably exacerbated his chronic insomnia and a general tendency toward illness of which he suffered throughout his career, at times interrupted his work.

Decades later, Cahill continued to conceal his true birthplace, but did not divorce himself entirely from his Icelandic heritage. He discussed his memories of his mother, Vigidis Bjarnsdottir (fig. 3), who in spite of her petite frame and the sensitivity of her poems, he remembered “as quite a severe woman.”⁵⁵ In many respects, his mother’s childhood, during which she was separated from her family, paralleled Cahill’s own. One of ten children, Vigidis grew up in a peasant farming community. Like many Icelandic farmers, the family was poor and struggled to support their children with the meager resources available to them.

An island with a remarkable landscape of volcanoes, hot springs, geysers, glaciers, lakes, and mountains, Iceland’s majestic countryside made agricultural and

⁵⁴ Cahill autobiographical notes for the WPA, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁵ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 20.

economic development difficult. The possibility of destructive earthquakes and volcanic eruptions combined with arctic winters created a pattern of unpredictability. Throughout the history of the country, these natural events often triggered a negative chain of environmental effects that frequently had disastrous consequences for the population. With the fourteenth century eruptions of the Helka volcano, the countryside was covered in ash. The destruction of hay and grazing land led to the death of livestock, widespread poverty, famine, and contributed to a small pox epidemic. Earthquakes and cold winters, which led to terrible snowstorms and massive spring flooding, created further problems. Similar chain reactions occurred throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁶

Even in the nineteenth century, tenacious peasant farmers struggled against a severe environment, and the majority of the population was poor. The coast of Iceland was most favorable for farming because the gulf stream made this area warmer. Even near the coast, as a result of cold temperatures, farmers could not substantially grow grain but farmed turnips, cabbage, potatoes, and berries. They grazed sheep, cattle, and horses, and raised chickens, ducks, and geese, while living in modest houses made of mud, wood, and rock, with turf roofs and a central stone fireplace.⁵⁷ Cahill despised that Iceland offered few opportunities for social advancement or higher education. His mother's family struggled to provide themselves with even the basic necessities and Cahill lamented, "minds were shoveled away like garbage or dead leaves."⁵⁸

Vigdis's family, unable to support another child, sent her to live with her aunt when she was a year and a half old. The aunt had several other children and Cahill's

⁵⁶ Gjerset, 240-242 and 320-321.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 72-77.

⁵⁸ Cahill, biographical statement about his mother, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

mother was not accepted as a member of their family. They made her life miserable. An elder daughter forced her to carry water from the well at age four by claiming that if she refused “the huldafolk (the dwarfs and leprechauns who lived in nearby mountains) would carry her away.”⁵⁹ Vigidis, as she got older, was responsible for chores. She was asked to drive the sheep home from the fields and was beaten for any misbehavior. She was, however, taught to read and learned Icelandic sagas and poems that she recited while spinning wool and knitting. When she was thirteen she taught herself to write using a crow’s feather, discarded wrapping paper, and indigo ink used for clothing. For several years, from age eight to thirteen, she returned to live with her family, who also treated her as an outsider. Vigidis then went to live with another aunt and stayed there until she was twenty when she began working as a housekeeper for the county commissioner.

After falling seriously ill and recuperating in the capital city, Reykjavik, Vigidis began to consider a marriage proposal from Cahill’s father, Bjorn Bjarnason. Bjorn, who played the organ and owned a small amount of land, was of a higher social status and Vigidis hoped he would provide a degree of economic stability. Instead, it was a poor match from the outset. As Cahill described their marriage, it was not a love match but one based on necessity and prone to upheaval. He claimed his mother:

did not really care for [his father and] . . . could not make up her mind to accept him. He threatened to kill himself and she took that very seriously . . . she decided to marry him, because she needed some rest and security and he had a little property. She says he was a peculiar man, because when she married him he seemed not to care anymore about her.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

In any case, Bjorn, who Cahill claimed, “was a failure at everything he did [in America],” was never able to provide the better life for which Vigidis had hoped.⁶¹

Even by the 1880s, opportunities for economic improvement in Iceland were still limited. While Cahill did not discuss his parents’ motives for leaving, they were part of a national and international trend. In Iceland, emigration to America, South America, and Canada began substantially in the 1870s. Canada became a popular destination for Icelandic immigrants because of a publicity campaign the country launched by sending paid representatives to Iceland. Many immigrants arrived in Quebec and then established settlements along the western shore of Lake Winnipeg, which was named New Iceland. From there, some immigrants went on to found Icelandic communities in America in Marshall, Minnesota, and Pembina, North Dakota.⁶²

Cultural shifts from Romanticism to Realism in literature and journalism in the 1880s also propelled emigration. In the first half of the century, Icelandic literature, under the influence of German Romanticism, stressed nationalistic themes and spearheaded a cultural renaissance.⁶³ In response to political and intellectual events in Europe, including the destruction of the Napoleonic Empire in the Franco-Prussian war and Darwin’s introduction of the theory of evolution, Icelandic literature began to emphasize critical examinations of social conditions. The Realist literary movement was problematic for a country beset with environmentally propelled and, therefore, largely inescapable problems. In contrast to the Romantic writers,

⁶¹ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 19.

⁶² For the history of immigration from Iceland to Canada and America, see Gjerset, 460-471.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 367-372.

[the] critical and often negative realists could bring no . . . encouraging message. In their effort to picture conditions in their naked reality they could only point to the shady side of life, the poverty and discouraging economic conditions.⁶⁴

Unlike Upton Sinclair and the American muckrakers of the subsequent Progressive Era, the Icelandic writers did not spark reform. They provided further motivation for emigration and several left for America themselves.⁶⁵

When Cahill's parents left Iceland for Canada around 1889, they followed a well-established route. Vigidis, who was responsible for buying her own ticket, had little support from her husband. On an already arduous journey, in a ship that spent three weeks traveling around Iceland in windy conditions and shallow waters that made everyone "dreadfully seasick before the voyage was even half begun," she paid her way by caring for three additional children who were meeting their family in America.⁶⁶ Although he could not remember it, Cahill was also on the boat. For Cahill, who was walking at the time and just beginning to explore the world, the journey must have been fantastic and frightening. He experienced a separation from everything familiar to him and entered a new environment that was entirely unknown, at a time when he was first developing a sense of himself. Regardless of all attempts to rewrite his own history, Cahill was an immigrant and the trip naturally had an impact on his view of himself and of the world.

In one instance, Cahill recalled an act of discrimination toward his mother who, after arrival her in Canada, had sought help from Icelandic relatives who invited her to dinner. The son of the Icelandic couple, sizing up Vigidis as newly arrived, insulted the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 418.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Cahill, biographical statement about his mother, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

family by announcing, “I would rather eat with dogs than with emigrants.”⁶⁷ Whether Cahill, who wrote himself out of this memory, was present for this confrontation is unknown. Along with this outright prejudice from those who should have welcomed Vigidis and her family, Cahill’s life was affected by the secondary difficulties that often accompanied immigration, including poverty, domestic instability, and eventually the breaking up of his family.

Like many emigrants of the 1880s, the Bjarnasons, came to Canada with the intention of creating a better life. After their arrival in Quebec they went to Winnipeg, where Cahill recalled:

my father was terribly disappointed that he could get nothing to do except as a day laborer and he began to drink heavily which he had not done before. Then they came to the states and traveled about, but had a very poor time of it, especially after I was born and my mother had to carry me around and often with very little to offer me except the breasts, for her husband was a poor provider. Then they returned to relatives in Winnipeg until my father’s relatives got tired of him and he went to North Dakota.⁶⁸

Hoping to be able to secure a free piece of land after about a year in Canada, the family moved to the plains on the outskirts of Pembina, North Dakota.⁶⁹ Upon arriving, they found the conditions much less favorable than they had anticipated. Bjorn was unable to acquire land and had difficulty finding a job. As Cahill remembered:

I think that my poor father was a man who just didn’t fit into the civilization that he was connected with, the American civilization. And

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ The chronology of Cahill’s childhood and adolescence is difficult to pin down due to Cahill’s misstatements and the sometimes conflicting memories of Cahill’s sister. Miller created a chronology of her husband’s life. In consultation with Miller, Wendy Jeffers revised the chronology for her article, “Holger Cahill and American Art.” Throughout this chapter, I retain Jeffers’s dates and sequence of events.

I'm not fitted to it either, as a matter of fact, but there are opportunities here and there in odd corners.⁷⁰

Despite his father's inability to adapt to his new culture, the family managed to survive. They lived in a one-story, three-room house a few miles from the Red River, on the boarder between Minnesota and North Dakota.

Cahill described the landscape of Pembina as "the first home that I remember. . . . the first place that I saw the world to know and understand seeing it. It was flat as a billiard table."⁷¹ As he emphasized in his Oral History interview, the town had historic roots going "back to buffalo hunting days—that is to the 18th century" when it was an important fur-trading post.⁷² By the 1890s, the community, as Cahill remembered it, was a diverse mix of Sioux and Chippewa, Norwegians, Swedes, transplants from New York, Canadians, and Icelanders.

Cahill's family entered an established Icelandic immigrant farming community and, initially, Cahill's parents were able to eek out an existence. In 1893, Cahill's sister Anna, his only sibling, was born. He had also had a younger brother who died as a baby soon after the family had arrived in Canada. Cahill recalled that his mother, despite their difficult financial situation, was ingenious in making ends meet by buying liver and other cheap, undesirable cuts of meat. Accompanying his mother to the butcher as a child, Cahill "felt very inferior about this—the idea we took this food that other people wouldn't eat."⁷³ There are indications, beyond this statement, that throughout his life

⁷⁰ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14.

Cahill felt insecure about his upbringing and his education. Miller wrote in her personal notes about Cahill:

[he] claimed to be younger than he was because he got a late start owing to his struggles to keep alive and educate himself. He once said to me that it took him so long to get an education that he felt left behind by his contemporaries.⁷⁴

Whatever childhood community, or domestic security Cahill experienced, it was undermined by the breakup of his parents' marriage, whose tenuous relationship unraveled under the stress of emigration. Although Cahill presented a dramatic narrative, it is difficult to judge its accuracy, as he often blamed the breakdown of his family upon his father, who was unable to support them. As a result, the burden fell to his mother who faced extreme overwork and emotional stress. As Miller recalled:

Jobs for the mother were scarce in the small town and they suffered extreme poverty, often not getting enough to eat. The mother was a small, delicately built woman with a fine intellect and was not intended for such a life but through the years she worked with indomitable courage at cruel physical labor with practically no remuneration (eight dollars a month was usual).⁷⁵

The situation provoked heated arguments and Cahill's "memories of his father were of terrible quarrels in which the boy took the side of his mother. He hated his father."⁷⁶ The arguments eventually lead to divorce around 1897, when Cahill was about ten years old. After his father's departure, Cahill's mother, exhausted, was unable to support the family and sent Cahill to work on a farm about fifty miles away in exchange for room and board. Miller noted that "the mother suffered horribly from this separation from her son and he

⁷⁴ Dorothy Miller, notes on Holger Cahill, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁷⁵ Dorothy Miller's biographical statement on Holger Cahill, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

also suffered deeply.”⁷⁷ About five years after the separation, Cahill’s father died of a brain tumor before Cahill could reunite with him and make amends.

Estranged from his family, Cahill was treated as a laborer in his new home and was eventually taken out of school to work on the farm. Cahill despised being cut off from his education and confined to farm life. “They wanted me to be confirmed and to keep following the plow, and of course this didn’t make any great hit with me.”⁷⁸ Prior to his parents’ divorce, Cahill had attended Sunday school and the public local school, which he described as “the best school system in the state.”⁷⁹ He had excelled at mathematics, but dropped the subject after a prolonged absence from school due to illness. After leaving his mother’s house, he attended country school where one of his teachers, a law student at the State University, impressed him and encouraged him to continue his studies. Cahill’s memories of this period suggest he was an outsider but a strong and independent spirit in his new community. While attending country school, he got into fistfights with other boys in several instances in order to assert “a position in the pecking order,” or to protect himself.⁸⁰ It was common for fights to break out between the Icelandic and Native American boys. Cahill remembered,

There were both Chippewa and Sioux there, and they were traditional enemies. They used to fight each other . . . and they used to fight the white kids. . . . The ones that they’d fight most were the ones with that had the smallest gang. Well, of course, I was the one with the smallest gang.⁸¹

Another Icelandic boy, who lived down the road, would often save Cahill from a brawl.

He “was the best fighter in town, and he could lick anybody . . . and he would come to

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 33.

⁷⁹ Ibid.,” 7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁸¹ Ibid., 28.

protect me in case I was in trouble, that is, if he felt like it.”⁸² Despite the urgings of his teacher, Cahill was forced to leave school. Hereafter, his education was sporadic and he did not seriously resume it until after his arrival in New York.

Around 1902, at age 15, Cahill ran away, beginning a long period of nomadism. He returned to see his mother and sister, but the reunion was bitter. Cahill’s father was hospitalized and dying and his mother was now remarried to her third husband. He recalled:

I’m ashamed to say that I had very little affection for my mother because I felt she had let me down, by marrying again. . . . She married a third husband when I was just in the adolescent period, and there was an adolescent jealousy, which I never understood until I started knowing something about Mr. Freud.⁸³

After they fought, Cahill departed and, although he searched again to find her later in life, they did not reunite again until 1947. The event coincided with the completion of his book, *Look South to the Polar Star*.

Having fully severed ties with his family, Cahill had no firm sense of home. Although his Icelandic heritage, culture, and language, and in particular, his appreciation of the sagas, would remain a tie to his heritage, he found himself in a state of perpetual disconnection as he wandered the countryside working odd farms jobs. A kind Civil War veteran named Stark took him in for several years and supported his return to school. Stark made an offer of adoption but Cahill refused. He decided to go to Winnipeg in search of cousins or his mother and sister, whom he had heard were living together in Canada. Unable to find his mother, and turned away by his cousins, Cahill was sent to an orphanage. He quickly departed and was taken in by a family named McKinnon in a

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 111.

Celtic farm community in Saskatchewan. Cahill stayed in Canada for about two years and was able to briefly resume his education. During this time, he was an avid reader and dove into such books as *Ivanhoe* and Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*.⁸⁴

In pursuit of self-discovery and a place within American culture between 1902 and 1913, Cahill began traveling around the Midwest working a string of odd jobs and assuming a variety of personas. In Nebraska, he drove cattle for a buyer who formed a herd and shipped them to St. Paul. Cahill remembered,

I had a lot of riding to drive in the cattle. It's very hard to drive cattle that aren't used to being together in a herd, and I used to have to ride like a demon. It was a very hard job and in many ways a cruel job. . . . That's as close as I ever came to being a cowboy.⁸⁵

Ready to move on, he delivered a final herd of cattle to St. Paul, where he got a job working in the offices of Northern Pacific Railway.

Northern Pacific, along with Great Northern Railroad, were the major transcontinental lines that served the Northwest, connecting St. Paul with Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon. In contrast to the Union Pacific Railroad, which was based in Omaha, Nebraska, and charted a more central route across the country, both the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern Railroad had headquarters in St. Paul. Northern Pacific had been the pioneer of a northern route in the early 1870s. Construction commenced only a few years after the driving of the Golden Spike in 1869 in Promontory Summit, Utah. This historic event celebrated the connection of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads, forming the first transcontinental railway. In the early 1880s, the

⁸⁴ Jeffers, "Holger Cahill and American Art," 3; and, Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 38.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

president of Northern Pacific, Henry Villard, strove for the completion of a northern transcontinental railroad.⁸⁶

Villard, a Bavarian immigrant whose young adulthood, like Cahill's, had been defined by a rebellious flight from his family and the assumption of a false identity, was an exceptional character. A rebellious youth, during the 1848-1849 Bavarian revolution, Villard (whose given name was Ferdinand Heinrich Gustav Hilgard) refused to participate in a school prayer for the king. Believing in democracy and liberty, he insisted that he should be able to pray for his uncle, who was a member of the revolutionary government. When the revolution was suppressed, the headmaster of the school refused to advance him and Villard's conservative father sent him to a military school in France. During his university studies in Munich and Warzburg, Villard further disappointed his father by failing to follow in his footsteps and study law and by performing poorly in school. In 1853, after his father's warnings that he would enlist him in the army, he stealthily boarded a ship for New York, assuming the name of a classmate, Henri Villard.⁸⁷ After emigrating, Villard became involved in journalism and then in transportation development in Portland. Through a brash business deal, he managed to raise the money to purchase Northern Pacific. He brought the railway to completion in 1883, when the golden spike was driven in Gold Creek, Montana, but the project brought his companies to financial collapse. He had to resign from his presidency the following year, but went on to have an influential career in both technology and journalism.

⁸⁶ Robert S. MacFarlane, *Henry Villard and the Northern Pacific* (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1954), 9.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

By the time Cahill came to work in St. Paul, the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern had “enormous railroad offices.”⁸⁸ He worked from eight thirty in the morning until five in the evening and was paid forty dollars a week in gold. He remembered, “that was quite a lot of money in those days. \$40 would be two golden eagles, or double eagles. They’re quite big you see.”⁸⁹ The twenty dollar, “double eagle” coins were visually impressive. Some of the coins in circulation were designed by sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens and featured Liberty in a flowing toga on the front and a soaring eagle on the back. They must have been especially memorable to Cahill who was accustomed to getting by on so little. He used some of his salary to purchase his first books, a set of Tolstoy, from one of the many traveling salesmen who came to the railway offices. After work, he took law and journalism classes at night, and worked as a theater usher.

After about a month of working at Northern Pacific, Cahill suddenly stopped reporting for work. A supervisor came to his apartment and inquired about what had happened. Cahill explained: “I can’t do this kind of work. I have these terrible headaches. It’s just killing me.”⁹⁰ His colleague encouraged him to get his vision checked. Cahill, who had never had his eyes examined, discovered he was far-sighted and astigmatic. For most of his life, he had not been able to see properly, which must have enhanced his feelings of disconnection. He recalled:

that explained to me one of the tragedies of my boyhood, which was that I could never hit a baseball. I would always see it where it wasn’t . . . and I used to get this ungodly kidding from the other boys who said, ‘Aw, you couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn.’⁹¹

⁸⁸ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 43.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

With his glasses, Cahill resumed his job at Northern Pacific.

He stayed for about a year and a half, when he decided to leave his stable job and go to Milwaukee. In hindsight he reflected, “I don’t know why I did that. I ran out of money there.”⁹² He was able to find a job as a watchman and steersman on the Great Lake ore boars, which were gigantic vessels about seven hundred feet long. Cahill traveled between Milwaukee, Cleveland, and other towns in Ohio. During a stop in Cleveland, he quit and then tried a variety of jobs in that city, including insurance salesman, book salesman, and a worker in hotels.⁹³

Around this time, Cahill claimed he went to Vancouver and was hired as a coal passer on the ship *The Empress of China*, which enabled him to briefly visit Shanghai. It is questionable whether this trip actually occurred. When describing Shanghai, Cahill remarked: “it is hard to say how much I saw. I saw very little. It was just enough to create a terrific interest.”⁹⁴ On another occasion he admitted that he had never seen China but thought it made “an awfully good story.”⁹⁵ Real or fiction, accounts of the trip attested to Cahill’s ambitions and desires to experience the world beyond the Great Plains.

In 1913, Cahill’s attraction to adventure and urban life, represented in the alleged trip to Shanghai, drove him to leave for New York. As he remembered:

In those days I was so bored with the plains and I had been so racketeered in my childhood—at least I felt that I was, I felt a sense of injustice and anger about the whole thing—that I had no nostalgia for it whatever. What I really loved was the idea of getting into a city.⁹⁶

⁹² Ibid., 46.

⁹³ See Dorothy Miller’s account of Cahill’s life, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁵ Jeffers, “Holger Cahill and American Art,” 4.

⁹⁶ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 110.

Leaving from Cleveland on an ice cold night, he sewed his money into his underwear because “you have to be careful when you wander around. There are plenty of hold-up men around.”⁹⁷ Cahill heard a rumor that the Nickel Plate Road, a railway that linked Buffalo, Cleveland, and New York City was tolerant of hobos riding between boxcars. At about 26 years old, he hopped a freight train heading east, “holding on sometimes on both sides, sometimes on one, to two iron rails.”⁹⁸

Riding between freight cars was a dangerous, exhilarating, and isolating experience and Cahill recalled, “it took a hell of a lot of determination to do it the way I did.”⁹⁹ As the train took curves, riders who weren’t being careful could be thrown to their death. Smoke fumes in tunnels could be asphyxiating and discovery by the police could result in a night in jail.¹⁰⁰ Cahill described his experiences without a hint of fear, noting, “lots of brakemen saw me, and they didn’t bother me.”¹⁰¹ As a boxcar rider, Cahill was at the forefront of a cultural trend. Two decades later, during the 1930s, it became a cultural phenomenon as adolescents beat their way around the country in search of work or as an adventure that provided an escape from the strains of Depression life. At that time, the dark vastness of the American landscape, created overwhelming feelings of loneliness among many railroad riders.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁰ *American Experience: Riding the Rails*, dir. Michael Uys and Lexy Lovell, 72 min., WGBH, Boston, 1998. DVD.

¹⁰¹ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 50.

¹⁰² *American Experience: Riding the Rails*.

When Cahill made the trip, the country was even less developed. Watching the wilderness rush by in blackness, must have been similar to Willa Cather's description of traveling at night by train and wagon through Nebraska, where:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.¹⁰³

Cahill most vividly recalled the frigid temperature and physical exertion: "It must have been a very fast freight . . . and my hands kept getting colder and colder. When it stopped, finally, I made up my mind I wouldn't get on again."¹⁰⁴ He got off in a small town somewhere in Ohio or Pennsylvania and went inside for a cup of coffee. Years later he confessed, "When I think of that ride, I wouldn't do it now, I can tell you. What a job! I was just barely able to walk when I got off."¹⁰⁵

After warming up, he decided to get back on and rode to Port Jervis, New York, where he rested for a few hours and then took another train, which arrived in Jersey City that evening. As he walked to the ferry, a man "accosted" him, asking: "Do you know how to handle horses?" At that time, he "could handle horses like a dream," and the stranger paid him fifty cents to transport them to Brooklyn.¹⁰⁶ From there he walked across the Brooklyn Bridge. His memory of entering the city for the first time was magical. He "was fascinated by those lighted up buildings" and "enthralled" by the

¹⁰³ Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918; Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁰⁴ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 47-48.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

seafood. He immediately went to the fish market and ordered his first plate of steamed clams for ten cents.¹⁰⁷

In New York, Cahill began to refashion himself as a Greenwich Village bohemian. Although he was almost entirely self-taught up to this point, he began studying journalism and creative writing at New York University. He supported his education by working the night shift as a short-order cook in a restaurant downtown near City Hall called the Baltimore Lunch. Pressed for time to pursue his studies, Cahill struck a deal with his boss, who allowed him to study behind a screen for several hours between two thirty and five a.m. He recalled that establishing himself in New York was extremely difficult:

The challenge was too heavily set against me, in a way, because trying to get your footing in a town like New York, for a boy from a small town, is not an easy matter unless he has some backlog of money to help him...I didn't have a heck of a lot of time, there in the beginning, to think about careers or anything, except what I might try to build up.¹⁰⁸

Finally he was able to break into the literary world, when he found work as a journalist, under the radical writer, Mike Gold. In 1914, Gold was editor of two Westchester papers the *Bronxville Review* and the *Mount Vernon Argus* and Cahill published his first article on October 3, 1914. Using the byline Holger Cahill, he formalized his name change from Sveinn Kristjan Bjarnarson, marking his passage into his new professions of literature and art.

By 1921, he was working fulltime as freelance journalist and began studying economics with Thorstein Veblen, aesthetics with Horace Kallen at the New School for Social Research, and philosophy with John Dewey at Columbia. Through his connection

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 115.

to literary circles, Cahill met the Ashcan artist John Sloan, who provided him entry into the art world, and, in 1919, introduced him to his first wife, aspiring artist Katherine Dolittle Gridley (fig.4). In the early twenties, Cahill also started contributing art criticism to publications such as the film magazine *Shadowland*, *Creative Art*, and *Parnassus* and was invited by Sloan to be publicity director of the Society of Independent Artists. Cahill remembered that this represented a major change in direction:

My association with the independent artists and my study of painting sort of split my life in half. I had always been a writer, but now I found it easy to get good jobs in the art world.¹⁰⁹

His acceptance into the art world, not only represented a redirection of his career, but also, along with his assumption of the name Holger Cahill, “split” him from his past, distancing him from his many years spent as a wanderer.

Name changing, for much of the New York avant-garde, became a quintessential act of self-fashioning, signaling the beginning of a new career.¹¹⁰ Cahill’s reason for selecting the name Edgar Holger Cahill is unclear. Dorothy Miller believed that Cahill had been the name of one of the kind strangers that had helped him during his wanderings. Cahill’s daughter, Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, considered his selection of Holger “a nod to his Icelandic roots.”¹¹¹ Whatever the reason, the choice signaled a desire both to reinvent and preserve his identity. For contemporaries, such as Mike Gold (Irwin Granich) and Mark Rothko (Marcus Rothkowitz), their name changes downplayed their Jewish, immigrant heritage. In the case of Robert Henri (Robert Henry Cozad), it protected the artist from a scandal from his past—his father’s shooting of a man in

¹⁰⁹ Cahill biographical notes on his life, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹¹⁰ Ted Morgan, *On Becoming American* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1988), 83.

¹¹¹ Jeffers, “Holger Cahill and American Art,” 11, n. 14.

Nebraska over a monetary dispute.¹¹² Like Cahill, Arshile Gorky (Vostanik Manoog Adoyan) selected a name that both evoked and obscured his heritage. Choosing a Russian name, and even posing as the relative of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky, his name hinted at his Armenian roots while obscuring his tragic childhood experiences as refugee of the Armenian genocide in 1915.

Cahill's childhood and adolescence, peppered with traumatic events, including immigration, poverty, and feelings of abandonment by both his parents, was one of incredible hardship, but in the context of the 1890s, the experience was not entirely exceptional. The economic circumstances at the time of the Bjarnasons' arrival in the Midwest could hardly have been worse. They arrived in North Dakota just after the peak of a great land boom in the mid-1880s that had been driven by railroad expansion, investors, and a stream of settlers eager to acquire land.¹¹³ Arriving a bit too late, it is not surprising that Sveinn Bjarnarson failed to find a plot of land or a job. Even those fortunate enough to establish farms in the 1870s and '80s felt they faced unprecedented challenges. These included falling crop prices, expensive railroad shipping rates, and high mortgages, as well as the rise of industry and the burgeoning of cities that challenged their way of life. The situation for Midwestern farmers would worsen by the mid-1890s—the time during which Cahill's mother was attempting to support the family—as the United States entered a severe depression.

In response to these increasing economic hardships, in 1892, the newly formulated Populist party, having grown out of the Farmer's Alliance, vocalized its

¹¹² Bernard Pearlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 5-6.

¹¹³ Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 23-25.

demands to protect farmers in their Omaha platform. Denouncing the extreme division of wealth within the country, a situation in which “the fruits of the toil of millions are stolen to build up the colossal fortunes of the few,” the platform called for free silver, a graduated income tax, the direct election of senators, and the abolishment of national banks.¹¹⁴ The following year, many of the “colossal fortunes” unraveled when the stock market crashed, sending the country into financial panic as investors scrambled to buy gold and banks withdrew loans. Thousands of workers and farmers in the Midwest were pushed into poverty. In 1894, Chicago railroad workers responded with protests of wage reductions and layoffs in the Pullman Strike, spreading throughout the nation. The strike erupted into rioting and violence in Chicago before it was broken by federal troops. Two years later, in the election of 1896, Populist William Jennings Bryan famously defended farmers’ interests. Speaking passionately for free silver, he begged the country not to “press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”¹¹⁵ Bryan lost the democratic nomination but his speech became exemplary of the height of the Populist movement.

In the accounts Cahill provided of his childhood, he rarely referred to the impact of economic or political upheavals of the 1890s but focused on the personal struggles and adventures that resulted from the difficult breakup of his family. A noteworthy exception is an erroneous statement he made in his personal papers, claiming his father had voted for Bryan in the election of 1896. His father, who did not become a U.S. citizen until

¹¹⁴ “Populist Party Platform,” July 4, 1892, reprinted in *Great Issues in American History: From Reconstruction to the Present Day, 1864-1891*, vol 3, eds. Richard Hofstadter and Beatrice K. Hofstadter (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 139-145.

¹¹⁵ William Jennings Bryan, “Cross of Gold Speech,” July 8, 1896, reprinted in *Great Issues in American History*, 158-165.

1900, could not have participated in this election. The misstatement, however, made Cahill's desire to identify with the Populist cause clear.¹¹⁶ The political climate in which Cahill grew up shaped his perception of American culture, his interest in American folk art, his fiction writing, and his administration of the WPA Federal Art Project.

Cahill's commitment to community participation in the arts, a philosophy that helped make the WPA Federal Art Project more than just a work relief program, had roots in Populist ideals that upheld a pre-industrial, agricultural system, in which craft and labor were tied to the community and land. As historian Robert McMath defined Populist culture:

The term "culture" had first to do with the tilling of crops. And even while American farmers were busily expanding commercial production . . . they kept alive age-old cooperative labor practices that affirmed the principles of community and equality.¹¹⁷

Cahill felt that the loss of such community practices had negatively affected the relationship between art and the public. He argued,

I do not think that we have weighed sufficiently the meaning of the change from a handicraft to a machine method of production. . . . Its effect upon the arts has been catastrophic. It has divorced the artist from the usual vocations of the community and has practically shut off the average man from the arts.¹¹⁸

For this reason Cahill was attracted to the popular, craft quality of American folk art. A communal art form, with close ties to daily life, Cahill championed folk art as made by "the untrained average man who had no idea that he was making a work of

¹¹⁶ See Cahill's undated biographical statement to the federal government written just prior to his joining the art project in 1935, with Dorothy Miller corrections, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹¹⁷ McMath, 53.

¹¹⁸ Holger Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts" in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930's by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (New York Graphic Society, 1973), 36.

art.”¹¹⁹ Later, as director of the WPA Federal Art Project, Cahill attempted to reintegrate art into the community through art programs, including public mural commissions, direct financial support to artists, local art centers, and exhibitions. Influenced by the Populist environment of his youth, his views on art were shaped further by his studies with Dewey and Veblen, both of whom were born in the 1850s and formulated their theories on education and economics in the context of the Populist and Progressive movements.

Populist themes, in particular an ambivalent attitude toward the city, infused Cahill’s first novel *Profane Earth* while he was working at the Newark Museum. The book traced the experiences of a young drifter named Ivor from a Midwestern farm to his job as a journalist in Chicago, contrasting rural and urban life. Ivor’s transition from country to city life represented the cultural shifts from community farming to a commercial, independent, urban existence that concerned the Populists, who were “deeply rooted in the social and economic networks of rural communities.”¹²⁰

Although *Profane Earth* was heavily autobiographical, the plot had precedents in turn of the century literature, such as Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) or Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). Both coming of age stories, these books portray the journeys of young Midwestern women from the farm to the city, presenting the metropolis as a place of excitement, allure, and considerable hardship. As a reviewer noted, *Profane Earth* was “a new Pilgrim’s Progress,” a reinterpretation of a well-worn plot.¹²¹ The journey from the country to the city was familiar from great American novels

¹¹⁹ Holger Cahill, “American Folk Sculpture,” lecture at the Newark Museum, 1931, reel 5290, frames 1157, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

¹²⁰ McMath, 17.

¹²¹ *Newark Evening News* (24 September 1927), reviews clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

such as Dreiser's and from Baum's American fairytale. Reviewing the book for the socialist magazine *The New Masses*, writer Josephine Herbst, suggested it furthered this literary tradition and described it as an "American Earth saga." She liked its gritty realism in portraying distinctly American subjects:

The soil in which the young Ivor digs his toes is strictly American for all that, and Chicago and the roving life are indigenous to this country alone. If one book can be comprehensive of the American scene, this is such a book.¹²²

Cahill's writing was often praised for its vivid descriptions and in *Profane Earth* he encapsulates the transition between rural and urban life in the novel's opening and closing scenes. It begins at sunset with Ivor's admiration of a rural landscape:

Houses stood up naked from the treeless plain and leaned toward the place of sunset. Windows caught with insane intensity the dying light. Against a sky swollen with clouds masses ran the darkening horizon, straight as a knife.¹²³

The book concludes at sunrise with Ivor's description of dawn breaking through his city window as his friend tries to persuade him to accompany him to southern France.

Vocalizing a desire for community, he replies:

No...I've gone too far now looking for things. This is my soil and I must stay close to it. Try to sink my roots in. Deep. Windows looked with haggard intensity into the dawn. The city was moving again. . . . Outside a tangle of rubbish heaps, rusted iron, and decaying timbers stood up in the yard. The unity of night was gone. Dawn crept in like a tired animal returning to a detested familiar disorder.¹²⁴

¹²² Josephine Herbst, "American Earth Saga," *The New Masses* (March 28, 1927), reviews clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹²³ Holger Cahill, *Profane Earth* (New York: Macaulay Company, 1927), 11.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 383.

The conclusion, with its disgust for the dirty, crowded city, and mixed industrial and organic metaphors, suggested a Populist attitude toward urban life. Not satisfied with the provincial life on the plains, Cahill:

was disturbed about people in modern cities, leaving behind the cast-off rubbish of their activities—of lives that did not take root. Cahill had earlier experienced deserted farms and country homes, filled with empty memories. He viewed this as a phenomenon of dehumanized technology, which threatened community life and left empty land around empty houses.¹²⁵

For Cahill, the opportunities and excitement offered by urban life would always conflict with his respect for a rural existence sustained by the earth. Although Ivor completes his pilgrimage to the city, by beginning and ending the novel with sunset and sunrise, Cahill ties the story to the natural rhythms that structure farm life, driven by changes in weather, light, and soil.

The contrasts of urban and rural conditions that structured Cahill's novel appeared in the cover design for the book (fig. 5), a drawing by John Sloan that was reproduced in the *New Masses*. Sloan, like Cahill, had made the transition from country to city as a young man. Both men had fathers who were artistically inclined but who were poor providers and who were mentally unstable. As a result Cahill and Sloan had to take on a great deal of responsibility as adolescents. Born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, Sloan's family moved to Philadelphia when he was five. At sixteen, Sloan dropped out of high school in order to support his family after his father had had a mental breakdown. He worked first as a cashier in a bookstore, where, in his free time, he made drawings and etchings. He then worked as a greeting card designer for a stationery store before joining

¹²⁵ Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 146.

the art department of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1892. By the time he arrived in New York in 1904, Sloan was slightly older than Cahill was when Cahill made the trip nine years later, and Sloan had substantially more experience in visual art and journalism.

Created more than twenty years after Sloan arrived in New York, the *Profane Earth* cover is a nostalgic representation of the transition to the metropolis. In Sloan's drawing, farmers work in the shadow of a crowded and confused city, whose skyscrapers and urban masses threaten to engulf them. Cahill's protagonist stands in awe of the vice, agitation, and excitement of modernity and its allegorical personification, a gigantic, scantily dressed woman who evokes both muse and whore. The enormous, fleshy female, who rises from and tramples the rowdy urban crowd, recalls the female characters at the heart of many of Sloan's works of 1905-1915. Depicting prostitutes, independent, stylish working girls, and working mothers, Sloan presented women as symbols of modernity in witty compositions that celebrated and commented on their experience in the city.¹²⁶ On the *Profane Earth* cover, Sloan's woman is dwarfed only by the cityscape itself, and the huge billboard plastered in front of it, with large lettering promoting Holger Cahill and his book. While advertising posters and signs appear frequently in Sloan's work, this billboard obscures and almost overtakes the urban scene. Also visible, reaching upwards toward the top margin of the drawing is a new high-rise building that Sloan photographed in 1927 (fig. 6), while it was under construction near Washington Square Park. Following

¹²⁶ On Sloan's working class women, see Patricia Hills, "John Sloan's Images of Working-Class Women: A Case Study of the Roles and Interrelationships of Politics, Personality and Patrons in the Development of Sloan's Art, 1905-1916," *Prospects* 5 (1980): 157-196; On the sexually liberated, young working girl see Katherine E. Manthorne, "John Sloan, Moving Pictures, and Celtic Spirits," in *John Sloan's New York* eds., Joyce K. Shiller et al. (Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 2007), 151-177; On Sloan's prostitutes, see Suzanne L. Kinser, "Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan," *Prospects* 9 (1984): 231-254.

construction of the Radiator Building (1923-1924) and preceding the Chrysler Building (1928-1930), the structure embodied new architectural trends emphasizing height and ornamental Art Deco design. Like Cahill, in this work Sloan takes a retrospective view of the city, hinting at its transformation from a rapidly growing center of fashion, commerce, and entertainment in the early twentieth century, to an advertisement-saturated, streamlined metropolis by the early 1930s.

Sloan's book cover, depicting Cahill's name printed across the New York skyline, links Cahill to the city rather than to Midwestern fields. Despite his mixed feelings toward urban life expressed in *Profane Earth*, having settled in Greenwich Village prior to World War I, Cahill finally found a permanent home there. He lived in several different locations, including a room on Waverly Place, in Sloan's apartment from 1921-1922, on Eleventh Street, and much later on Eighth Street. Cahill would remain in the Village the rest of his life, with the exception of the years he spent in Washington, DC. During this time, Dorothy Miller stayed behind in New York to continue her work at the Museum of Modern Art. Cahill felt the Village was exceptional in its composition of people who "came searching for something they couldn't find in their hometowns" and, especially before 1920, individuals who shared a "real drive" and "were deeply interested in the arts."¹²⁷ As Cahill became part of this community, he gave up his persona as a wanderer, but continued his self-fashioning in his subsequent novels, *Look South to the Polar Star* and *The Shadow of My Hand*, in which he returned to China and the Midwest.

Written in 1945, after the end of the Federal Art Project, the adventure novel *Look South to the Polar Star* focuses on the search for an American missionary in Shanghai in

¹²⁷ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 59.

1941, just before America entered World War II. The missionary, Mr. Teigne, is suspected of being captured by, or in alliance with, the Japanese. An American consular officer, Captain Farjohn, and his assistant, an American painter named Eric Ryal, conduct the investigation into his disappearance. Not a first-hand observer of the political situation in Shanghai, Cahill spent many years reading extensively on Chinese society and learning the language. In preparation for the novel, a reviewer reported that Cahill read three hundred books on China.¹²⁸ His alleged trip to Shanghai also lent weight to his scholarly account of Chinese culture, politics, and society.

Cahill may never have seen China but his opening passages describing the Chinese landscape are convincing. As in the opening of *Profane Earth*, and in the beginning of his Oral History interview, Cahill is enamored with the fields and the soil:

[Farjohn] guided the boat slowly through a narrow canal between paddy fields veined with watercourses from sky to sky. Beside the water and the bare fields were shadowed by the moist breath of evening. . . . In the fields were tile roofs hidden in clumps of willow and dead mulberry but here along the canal there was only the sullen monotony of yellow water and yellow earth.¹²⁹

Describing small clusters of houses and flat terrain, he evokes his memories of the Midwest. His representations of urban life were equally capturing. As the *New York Herald Tribune* noted, he was able to “make the smell of a Shanghai market set your nose aquiver.”¹³⁰ The *New York Post* noted his sympathetic portrait of the Chinese people:

¹²⁸ The *New York World Telegram* (January 1947), reviews clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹²⁹ Holger Cahill, *Look South to the Polar Star* (New York; Harcourt Brace, 1947), 3.

¹³⁰ Adie Suehsdorf, “The Deep Life of China in an Adventure Novel,” *New York Herald Tribune* (26 January 1947), clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

politically, Mr. Cahill is with the little people, who always get it in the neck in any war. As a humanitarian, he believes that ignoring individual suffering because of mass ditto is an untenable excuse.¹³¹

When the book was released, Harcourt Brace publicity (fig. 7) helped attract national attention to it, which generated largely positive reviews. Critics faulted the novel for not having an especially compelling protagonist. Cahill's long-time friend, artist Stanton MacDonald Wright, commented on Farjohn, noting,

The thoughts of the book revolve about a character who is never glimpsed, a European, who stands as an empty space about which everything else equilibrates. He is absent, yet there is nothing but him in the book.¹³²

The analysis, which points to an author that fills the book with his undefined character, reinforces a reading of Cahill's novel as a self-exploration that is never completely realized. The book's title itself, which advocates looking south to find the North Star normally used for navigation, suggests misdirection and a circuitous journey. As the *New York Herald Tribune* noted, the book was frustrating in leaving questions unanswered:

After several confused months of wandering through Shanghai and the surrounding countryside, Farjohn admits that his suspicions are unfounded. While this is a generous acknowledgment it is of no use to Mr. Teigne, who is dead, or to Farjohn's companions who have been through considerable hell, or to the reader, who finds himself on page 503.¹³³

Farjohn's wanderings through China, in which he fails to connect with a missing person who is in fact deceased, parallel Cahill's aimless travels throughout the Midwest and Canada looking for his mother or other relatives.

¹³¹ Clip Boutell, "The East and West Have Met!" *New York Post* (27 January 1947), clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹³² Stanton MacDonald Wright, *Script* (March 1, 1947), reviews clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹³³ Adie Suehsdorf, "The Deep Life of China in an Adventure Novel," *New York Herald Tribune* (26 January 1947), clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

As Cahill finished *Look South to the Polar Star* his desire to contact his family resurfaced and he became “obsessed” with finding his sister.¹³⁴ He assumed that his mother was dead, but to his great surprise located her in Winnipeg by writing to a North Dakota postmaster who, by chance, remembered his family. She was ninety-three and living with his sister. As Miller remembered, Cahill, who had been in bed recovering from a heart problem, went to visit them immediately:

He stayed for many weeks with them in their tiny apartment. Old wounds were opened and healed over again. There was still need for forgiveness. Finally everyone was at peace. Vigdis was still very keen and would recite Icelandic verses by the hour, some of her own composing. Cahill’s Icelandic, his first language, came back to him and he began again to read the Sagas.¹³⁵

Photographs taken around 1949 reveal the fragile bonds reforming between Cahill and his family (fig.8). Looking dapper in a suit and tie, he stands somewhat tentatively next to his mother and sister, who link arms. He reaches towards them but gazes in another direction. The photographs capture the awkwardness of the occasion, recording a simultaneous sense of reunion and separation. After his visit in 1947, Cahill was able to come to terms with many events in his past. Throughout the late 1940s and ‘50s, he made several trips back to see his mother, who lived until 1957 when she was one hundred and two. In 1949, Miller accompanied him to meet his family, and in the following years Cahill visited during the summers, coordinating his stay with research trips to North and South Dakota for his last book, *The Shadow of My Hand*.

The beloved farmlands of North Dakota that he remembered from his childhood became the setting for his final novel. At the core, the book is a love triangle between

¹³⁴ Miller’s biographical statement on Holger Cahill, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Cameron Johnson, a returned veteran from the Korean War and Millie Shaw, who is still romantically involved with Cameron's landlord, John Durham. As in Cahill's other novels, the land plays a significant part and the promotional blurb from Harcourt Brace played up this angle: "The drama of this land is entwined with the lives of the men and women who have toiled with it, suffered from it, conquered it, and been conquered by it."¹³⁶ Steeped in his earlier memories, the novel was not an accurate historical portrait, even though Cahill made several return trips to North Dakota to conduct research on contemporary life. As one farmer from the area wrote to him in 1956, the book was "much more reminiscent of the period after World War I than after Korea."¹³⁷

A review from the *Los Angeles Times* highlights the book's connections to Cahill's experience as a young man and the plight of his parents in North Dakota in the 1890s:

The magic of the earth is known to Holger Cahill, who puts the reader under its spell. . . . Let a strong man plant his feet firmly on native soil and sing its virtues as he toils. Let him celebrate the circling seasons and greet the first green of spring with gladness and see the white blanket of winter snow as promise. . . . Cam had been born in Buffalo Coulee. His grandparents had been pioneers on the land his mother had loved to the end of her days. Cam had gone away then and had known eight years in the army in the Pacific and Korea. Then the land pulled him back—the land and his memories. And there he was again in Buffalo Coulee ready to work the land at hire but hopeful of renting and then buying a piece of his own.¹³⁸

Cam's objective to own a piece of land recalls that of Cahill's father. Although Cam is born in Buffalo Coulee, the desire to "plant his feet firm on native soil," suggests the

¹³⁶ Harcourt Brace promotional material for *The Shadow of My Hand*, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹³⁷ Letter from Vernice Aldrich, Aldrich Fair View Farms Company, to Holger Cahill, box 1, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹³⁸ Paul Jordan Smith, "Story of a Man and His Love for the Soil is a Rare Novel," *Los Angeles Times* (11 March 1956), clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

author's immigrant perspective. In his final book, Cahill refashioned his life story again. He reaffirmed his American heritage; he created a narrative in which "his grandparents had been pioneers on the land his mother had loved."¹³⁹ This experience of formulating an American identity, even an imagined one, was at the central aspect of the immigrant experience. As historian Ted Morgan describes it:

The true American, in the existential sense of the man who makes himself, is the immigrant, for he is American by choice. His nationality was not handed to him with his birth certificate. It came as a result of a deliberate effort. He *wanted to become* American.¹⁴⁰

In this respect, Cahill's concealment of his Icelandic birth and his construction of his persona through his fiction writing, were a powerful means for entering American culture.

Throughout his career, in his fiction writing, Cahill engaged with an aspect of his personality that he downplayed or denied in his career as an art critic, curator, and director of the WPA Federal Art programs. Despite his substantial contributions to American art, Cahill's ultimate ambition was to be a writer, and that was the profession Miller recorded on his death certificate. He devoted the last seventeen years of his life to his novels, while Miller, in an unconventional reversal of roles during the late 1940s and '50s, worked tirelessly at MoMA, creating groundbreaking exhibitions. At the time of his death, Cahill was working on a book, entitled *The Stone Dreamer*, supported by a Jon Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship. His focus on writing during the later part of his career reconnected him to his early interest in journalism, to his youth in

¹³⁹ Paul Jordan Smith, "Story of a Man and His Love for the Soil is a Rare Novel," *Los Angeles Times* (11 March 1956), clipping file, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹⁴⁰ Morgan, 7.

the Midwest, to his mother's interest in poetry, and to his admiration for the Icelandic sagas.

More broadly, Cahill's search for an American self-image, in his life and novels, mirrored the drive among writers and artists to create a defining American culture. Within the American literary vanguard, critic Van Wyck Brooks, journalist Paul Rosenfeld (fig. 9), editor Malcolm Cowley (fig. 10) and author Waldo Frank (fig. 11), wrote about the need for a more vital indigenous culture, independent from European traditions. Brooks expressed in his famous 1918 *The Dial* essay, "On Creating a Usable Past" the need for American writers to construct a history that has "living value," so that creative thinkers were no longer operating in a "void." In a statement that echoed Cahill's desire for self-reinvention, he urged: "If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?"¹⁴¹ Born only one year apart, Cahill and Brooks had ties with similar literary circles, but Brooks was a well-established figure, while Cahill was just breaking into the field. In the early twenties, Cahill contributed articles to the journal *Freeman*, where Brooks was an editor.

While Cahill had little training or professional experience, many his of colleagues had attended ivy league institutions and had formative experiences as travelers in Europe or as expatriates. Brooks, who had been born in Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1886, graduated from Harvard in 1907, where his classmates included T.S. Eliot, Maxwell Perkins, and John Reed. He traveled as a young man to such places throughout Europe as Germany, Italy, and England. Rosenfeld, Frank, and Cowley shared similar backgrounds.

¹⁴¹ Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," in *Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years: A Selection from His Works, 1908-1921*, ed. Claire Sprague (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 223. First published in *The Dial* 64 (April 11, 1918): 337-341.

Rosenfeld and Frank were from German Jewish New York families, attended Yale, had traveled in Europe, and possessed a refined knowledge of European literature and art.¹⁴²

Cowley, who would subsequently become assistant editor at the *New Republic* from 1929-1944, was born in Belsano, Pennsylvania. After graduating from Harvard in 1920, he lived in France from 1921-1923. He examined the return of American writers from Europe during the twenties in his 1934 book, *Exile's Return*.¹⁴³

Cahill's experience as a self-educated immigrant, distinguished his perception of American culture from his contemporaries. Cahill traveled to Sweden, Norway, Germany, Britain, and France, in the early twenties. He did not emphasize the expatriate experience, although the trip was influential in sparking his interest in American folk art. In contrast, as Wanda Corn describes the experience of Frank, Cowley, and Rosenfeld, as well as many contemporary artists, they:

constructed the three part drama... first, early indoctrination and enculturation in the superiority of European arts and letters and the provinciality of one's own culture; second, repeated visits to Europe; and finally the collapse of Euro-idolatry in the realization (sometimes an epiphany) that one's own culture had unrecognized value and needed its writers and artists at home.¹⁴⁴

With relatively fixed identities as upper middle-class Americans, these writers had the freedom, even the social expectation, to travel between Europe and America. It was this education abroad that provoked their interests in cultivating a definitive American culture. In contrast, Cahill's involvement with American art and literature evolved out of his itinerant youth and a self-designed education that helped open doors into political,

¹⁴² Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3-14.

¹⁴³ Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: The Viking Press, 1934).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

journalistic, and artistic circles. The desire for a national identity and for distinctive American traditions resonated with Cahill's personal search for a place within American society.

These differences set Cahill apart from other leaders of the New York art world, such as his friend, legendary gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz and influential museum director, Alfred Barr. Both were impeccably educated. Stieglitz had attended the Technische Hochschule in Berlin, where he studied photography with Hermann Vogel, and Barr had degrees in art history from Princeton and Harvard. Before assuming his position at MoMA, where he organized pioneering exhibitions such as "Cubism and Abstract Art" (1936) and "Picasso Forty Years of His Art" (1939), Barr had studied abroad in Europe, traveling to Germany, London, and Russia. Stieglitz, like Barr, served as a link between the New York and European art scenes, traveling frequently to Paris, Berlin, and London. As early as 1909-1910, he arranged exhibitions of the works of Rodin and Matisse at his Little Galleries at 291 Fifth Avenue. In this intimate setting, which evoked a bourgeois parlor (fig. 12), Stieglitz introduced European modernism to the New York avant-garde and showcased little-known American artists including Max Weber, Arthur Dove, Alfred Maurer, and John Marin. Their expertise and first-hand involvement with the currents of European art made Barr and Stieglitz instrumental in stimulating interest in Modernism and supporting its development in America. Cahill developed influential collaborative relationships with Stieglitz and Barr, but would never possess their intensive formal training in art or extensive exposure to international art

currents. Cahill's curatorial eye, which Miller considered equal to Barr's, was almost entirely self-trained.¹⁴⁵

The distinction between Cahill's perspective, as an immigrant who began his career with meager resources, and Stieglitz's position as a well-known photographer and gallery owner, is evident in Stieglitz's famous photograph *The Steerage* 1907 (fig. 13). On one of his trips between Europe and America, Stieglitz, standing on a first-class deck, focused his camera below on immigrant passengers who had been denied entrance to America and were forced to make a weary journey home. Renowned for its innovative interplay of abstract forms and "straight" photographic style, it is, in fact, a scene of incredible hardship, of disappointment and lost opportunity at the gateway to America. Several women cradle babies in their arms and hunched men in overcoats and hats crowd shoulder to shoulder on deck.

Viewing this scene from above, Stieglitz reduced it to a compelling geometric arrangement. He noted:

A round straw hat; the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white drawbridge with its railings made of circular chains—white suspenders crossing the back of a man in the steerage below...I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life.¹⁴⁶

Observing the masses below, recording them as interesting formal subjects, Stieglitz revealed his aristocratic perspective. His exhibitions at 291 were directed toward an elite, informed audience, and were not concerned with public outreach or popular taste.

According to Wanda Corn:

¹⁴⁵ See Miller's notes on Cahill's personality, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in William I. Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1979), 67.

For Stieglitz, and those he affected with his enthusiasms, the visual arts were capable of fostering a revolutionary new consciousness, but people would have to come and open themselves to art, not the other way around. His version of modernism retained features of nineteenth-century aristocratic traditions.¹⁴⁷

Cahill, who along with his family had, several years earlier, been part of the immigrant masses that Stieglitz photographed from above, did not approach art from the same position.

Opposing Stieglitz, Cahill believed it was the nineteenth century conception of art as “a minor luxury product” and “an activity sharply segregated from the everyday vocations of society” that was holding back the development of American art.¹⁴⁸ Rather than perceiving mass culture and popular participation as a threat to high Modernism, Cahill, drawing upon John Dewey’s theories, believed:

The resources for art in America depend upon the creative experience stored up in its art traditions, upon the knowledge and talent of its living artists and the opportunities provided for them, but most of all upon opportunities provided for the people as a whole to participate in the experience of art.¹⁴⁹

Cahill fully articulated this view as the framework for the WPA Federal Art Project program, but had begun developing his own convictions about American art earlier, in his writing on folk art, in his studies with Dana and Dewey, and in response to his adolescent ramblings.

Cahill’s multifaceted identity, including both his concealed history as an immigrant and his constructed persona as an authority on American art, made him an ideal candidate to direct the WPA Federal Art Project. As his fiction writing attests,

¹⁴⁷ Corn, 23.

¹⁴⁸ Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” 37.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 43.

Cahill remained strongly connected to memories of farm life on the Dakota Prairie, the Midwestern soil, and the small-town America he experienced throughout his youth. Even though it made him somewhat self-conscious, Cahill's position as an outsider within the art world allowed him to address the relationship between art and the populace as few other figures could. His self-cultivated interest in philosophy and theory encouraged him to apply the ideas of Progressive educators to a broad-reaching arts program, an experimental project aimed at integrating American art and community. Through his work as a journalist in the New York popular press between 1914 and 1921, he created close relationships with the New York avant-garde. He also developed his talents at public relations, which prepared him to navigate the pitfalls of the WPA bureaucracy and to formulate and present a cohesive vision of the FAP to the public.

Often an asset, Cahill's maverick persona and varied experience make him a difficult person to understand. The image that he fashioned, frequently by manipulating the truth, cannot be taken as a straightforward representation of the real person. While I have attempted to disentangle fact and fiction, Cahill often blurred these two. As Dorothy Miller concluded, rather than trying to completely deconstruct his character, it is better to embrace the mystery that remains a part of his shadowy, but fascinating, identity. It was Cahill's complexity that would make him an inventive, somewhat eccentric, leader in promoting American art.

Chapter 2:
Cahill's Intellectual Apprenticeship:
Greenwich Village, Progressivism, and the Popular Press in the 1920s

This was the part of New York City known the country over as Greenwich Village, thickly overlaid with the carefree glamour of Bohemia. . . . This was an area of bare attic studios where painters painted and writers wrote, chilly, hungry, warmed and fed entirely by their creative urges. Its population consisted strictly of men in berets and Byronic shirts and women with bobbed hair who smoked, all of whom spent their time talking endlessly across wine-spotted tablecloths in odorous little basement restaurants where the spaghetti was cheap. It was all gay, irresponsible, and faintly wicked.¹⁵⁰

--Caroline Pratt, *I Learn from Children*, 1948

When Cahill arrived in New York around 1913, he had no intention of pursuing a career in art, but was determined to become a journalist. As he remembered, "I had gotten the journalism bug in St. Paul, because somehow I thought a reporter's job was very honorable work, and really that was the thing I ought to do."¹⁵¹ He could hardly have hoped for a better time or place to prepare to enter into the field. The 1920s would be a decade of fervent nationalism and political conservatism, but in Greenwich Village it was also a period of Progressive thinking and social activism, which had its roots in the years leading up to World War I. New York would emerge as a cultural and commercial leader. Writers, artists, and educators focused fervently on the definition, development, and improvement of American culture. Their ideas were chronicled in the popular press and in liberal magazines based in the Village.

¹⁵⁰ Caroline Pratt, *I Learn from Children* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948. Reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 40.

¹⁵¹ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 53. Interview by Joan Pring, 1957, transcript Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, Microfilmed copy, reel 5285, frames 0027-0670, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Digitized version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/series1.htm.

The vibrancy of jazz age Manhattan, centered in Harlem and the Village, and immortalized in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), would make the twenties a fertile period for literature, print media, art, and theater. The design for the jacket of the first edition of Fitzgerald's novel epitomized this exchange between literature, fine art, and entertainment. An Art Deco portrait of a female face hovering over the city's explosive electric lights (fig. 14), the image evoked the novel's haunting commercial billboard with the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. Its cinematic style foreshadowed ties to the film and theatrical adaptation that followed the book's publication. With Eckleburg's omnipotent eyes, often interpreted as God's moral eyes, Fitzgerald critiqued the superficial, materialistic, hedonistic lifestyle that he initially presented as seductive and glamorous. He called attention to the need for a reevaluation of the course of America's development, expressing an undercurrent of social reform. It was this union of cultural vitality and Progressive drive in the Village that made Cahill's residence there influential in shaping his career as a curator and as WPA/FAP Director.

When Cahill came to Greenwich Village, after a childhood that lacked a cohesive sense of home or family with years of moving and not belonging anywhere, this community welcomed him.¹⁵² Bordered by Union Square in Lower Manhattan—the epicenter of business and government—and the immigrant community of the Lower East Side, the Village was a small enclave. It had its own counter-culture character within a bustling metropolis. The jostling of immigrants and bohemians in the Village since the 1890s had added to neighborhood's rebellious character. Bourgeois artists and intellectuals came to the Village in an attempt to break free from a prescribed experience

¹⁵² Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, personal communication with the author, June 16, 2010.

of proper, middle-class existence. It was one manifestation of what historian Jackson Lears describes as “popular longings for escape from the constraints of routine and normality but also from a feeling that one had somehow lost contact with ‘real life’”¹⁵³ These “self-styled sophisticates,” as Christine Stansell describes them, “fanned out across the poor neighborhoods to soak up ‘experience,’ construed as familiarity with plebian life.” Nearly everyone attracted to the Village hoped in some way for reinvention and “these small groups of self-conscious urbanites developed another narrative of urban life brimming with transformative encounters.”¹⁵⁴ Reinvention went the other direction as well. Cahill and other immigrants felt comfortable in the Village, where opportunities in art, literature, and politics allowed for the shaping of careers, and upward movement into professional fields.

Individual desires for new identities mirrored a national culture of reform during the Progressive era, when leaders were rethinking and restructuring American life with a renewed concern for the masses. This propensity for renewal in the decades after the Civil War had religious undertones and longstanding precedents in American culture. As Lears describes this impulse, “Longings for rebirth had a rich and complex history: rooted in Protestant patterns of conversion, they also resonated with the American mythology of starting over, of reinventing the self.”¹⁵⁵ Political and social reforms such as labor laws, anti-trust acts, and the founding of settlement houses such as Hull House, shaped modern life, with an eye towards broad-based improvements. In the fields of

¹⁵³ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009; Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 232.

¹⁵⁴ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16.

¹⁵⁵ Lears, 1.

literature and journalism, muckrakers such as Sinclair reinforced that writing could be a tool for social reform. Similarly, John Dewey (fig. 15) challenged the traditional conception that philosophy was an intellectual discipline separate from the flow of everyday life. Rather, he conceived intelligence as the product of a constant dialogue with the environment, as humans experienced it. He was committed to philosophy as a tool for social change. His theories stress the process of learning through experience in order to encourage development and growth.¹⁵⁶ That Dewey belief in the “idea of *growth* as the most basic human end” must have made his ideas appealing to Cahill, who was entering a period of intellectual development spurred by his new surroundings.¹⁵⁷

Impacted by New York’s cultural explosion and by social and political issues explored by Dewey and writers and philosophers such as Thorstein Veblen (fig. 16) and Gold, Cahill began a short career in journalism. He contributed articles to newspapers, literary magazines, and art journals. As his career trajectory moved away from journalism and towards art criticism, he became involved in the interrelation between art and the popular press, and employed the media as a promotional tool. As director of publicity for the Society of Independent Artists in the early 1920s, he coordinated media stunts designed to attract attention to their annual exhibitions. Through his involvement with the press and media, he learned strategies for fostering the growth of American art.

In 1914, Cahill began working for the *Bronxville Review*, the *Scarsdale Inquirer* and the *Mount Vernon Argus*, where Gold was an editor. A close friend with more experience in journalism and ties to the Westchester newspapers, Gold was a mentor to

¹⁵⁶ Michael Kelly, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

Cahill early in his career. Cahill recalled that, at that time, Gold was not yet involved with radical politics. “He wasn’t a socialist then and had no interest in social ideas, but after the Russian Revolution . . . sometime in 1918 he had become a communist.”¹⁵⁸

Gold’s new political outlook would create tension between them when Cahill turned his attention from journalism towards art and rejected Gold’s radical viewpoint. This disagreement eventually caused their friendship to dissolve.

Years later their different perspectives became the subject of an ironic conversation about art and politics that appeared in the proletarian magazine *The Liberator* in 1921. Gold warned Cahill “You are drifting in dangerous ways, Eddie. You are drifting away from the revolution.” He mocked Cahill for being lured by the Village art scene, “You have been poisoned-gassed by all the hot air that fills these Greenwich Village studios. . . . You have become infected with the Greenwich Village hallucination, that nothing exists in this world but art.” Defending the artists and his new involvement in art criticism, Cahill replied, “You do not understand the useful constructive value of criticism, my dear Michael. . . . Critics are the spade and shovel laborers, the axmen and the levelers who prepare the ground where the artists are to come in and build.”¹⁵⁹

Despite their friendship separation after 1918, it was Gold who launched Cahill’s professional career. After about six months of working as a reporter under him, he offered Cahill a position as a daily reporter for the *Mount Vernon Argos*. Shortly thereafter, Gold left to attend Harvard and Cahill assumed his editorial position.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 61.

¹⁵⁹ Mike Gold, “Two Critics in a Bar-room,” *Liberator* (September 1921): 28-29.

¹⁶⁰ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 96-97.

One of Cahill's first assignments on the *Argus* was to cover a story unfolding at the Thanhauser Company studios, one of the early motion picture companies based in New Rochelle, New York. Prior to the 1920s, New York was still a center of film production. Thanhauser had operations in Westchester and Thomas Edison's studio, the first movie studio in the country, which had opened in 1893 in New Jersey. Cahill remembered that in 1914 "there were a good many moving picture studios around this part of the world, before they went out to Hollywood" and,

on this day, there was some kind of a story that broke out on this Tennhasuer [sic] lot, in which a man was supposedly injured by a shotgun blast. He wasn't injured at all. I went out there, and saw the humorous side of it.¹⁶¹

At the time, Thanhauser was producing several films, as well as a film serial, entitled *The Million Dollar Mystery*, and was masterful in generating publicity around its movies. Directed by Howard Hansel and starring Florence La Badie, the twenty-two-part *Million Dollar Mystery* serial was written with no ending. The studio offered a ten thousand dollar prize to the viewer who, in 100 words, could supply the best conclusion to the story (fig.17). The publicity stunt was incredibly effective, making the film Thanhauser's greatest success. The studio received thousands of letters, with the prize finally going to a secretary from St. Louis.¹⁶²

The Thanhauser Company attracted the attention of the press in other ways as well. Blending fiction and reality, the studio made up a story for the press, claiming that an heiress with the same name as the heroine on *Million Dollar Mystery* was missing.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 96-97.

¹⁶² Raymond William Stedman, *The Serials: Suspense and Drama By Installment*, 2nd edition (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 14 and 22.

The fabrication was reported as fact for a week before the truth was exposed.¹⁶³ When Cahill was dispatched to the Thanhauser set, possibly as the result of another publicity stunt, he discovered there was no substantial story. He was, nevertheless, impressed with the humor of the events and the media attention it attracted. He would later emulate the film industry's techniques to draw attendance to the Society of Independent Artists exhibitions.

While working for the Westchester papers between 1914 and 1918, Cahill lived in Bronxville, New York, which he described as “a very charming small town.”¹⁶⁴ He also kept a room on Waverly Place at the corner of Washington Square Park. This allowed him to remain in touch with the downtown scene, where talent of every type converged and congealed in a small neighborhood. A community of intellectuals who were devoted to cultural rebellion and artistic freedom had already solidified by 1913. The development of the Village bohemia was driven by social forces, which had also influenced Cahill's identity formation, and his interest in journalism and reform. As historian Ross Wetzsteon described the cultural impetus behind the development of Greenwich Village between 1912 and 1917:

The populist movement and William Jennings Bryan in the nineties, and the progressive movement, Teddy Roosevelt, and the muckrakers in the early years of the century, had created a climate of insurgency. The energy and idealism of the American imagination, focused for half a century on rebuilding the nation after the Civil War, were suddenly released to confront modernity—the New Freedom, the new woman, the new theater, the new art, the new psychology, the new morality. Furthermore, the end of the frontier brought not only a geographic halt but a psychic vacuum. The momentum of “manifest destiny” having suddenly ceased, many of

¹⁶³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶⁴ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 96.

the adventurous and dissatisfied turned inward and became pioneers on the frontier of the self.¹⁶⁵

In Cahill's own travels from West to East, part of a reflective examination of his role in modern American society, he reversed the westward path associated with "Manifest Destiny." Having matured in a decade that stressed reform in every aspect of American life—economic, educational, and social—Cahill retained the ideals of the Populist and Progressive movements. He shared this belief in reform, dislocation from his home, and in his defiant spirit with members of the Village avant-garde.

The Village became a mecca for artists, writers, actors, political radicals, and educators, many of whom had come from other cities, immigrated from Europe, or like Cahill had arrived from the Midwest. Writer, political activist, and editor of the socialist magazine *The Masses*, Max Eastman, was from upstate New York, as was social reformer and feminist agitator, Margaret Sanger. Experimental educator and feminist, Caroline Pratt, had grown up in Fayetteville, New York. She taught there and in Philadelphia before establishing her experimental City and Country School on West Twelfth Street. Painter Marsden Hartley and poet Edna St. Vincent Millay both spent their early childhoods in Maine. Anarchist political leader, Emma Goldman, and Cubist painter, Max Weber, immigrated from Lithuania and Russia respectively. F. Scott Fitzgerald, who lived uptown but frequented the Village, like Cahill, had spent part of his youth in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Photographer Berenice Abbott was from Ohio and Louise Brooks, a Ziegfeld Follies dancer, had been raised in Kansas. Brooks popularized the Charleston and was a silent movie star for her provocative role as Lulu in the German

¹⁶⁵ Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village, the American Bohemia, 1910-1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 11.

film, *Pandora's Box*. Concealing her provincial Midwestern roots with her signature black bob, cosmopolitan confidence, and outright sex appeal, Brooks was able to “be cool and look hot.”¹⁶⁶ During the 1920s, she became an icon of New York flapper style, a persona that, like Cahill's, was partly a construction.

The diverse institutions that defined Village life included informal salons, art galleries, literary magazines, restaurants, and bars that became sites of cultural exchange. These included Stieglitz's 291 Gallery, the theaters of the Provincetown Players who performed the works of Eugene O'Neill, and the offices of the socialist art and literary journal, *The Masses*.¹⁶⁷ Literary, artistic, and political circles mingled at Mabel Dodge's Salon at 23 Fifth Avenue. Guests including Eastman, Goldman, Stieglitz, and anarchist Hippolyte Havel:

debated radical politics and free love, psychoanalysis and the single tax, birth control and the Wobblies, cubism and women's suffrage, all the enlightened ideas of the dawning century that they felt certain would cast off the darkness of the past.¹⁶⁸

Cahill did not gravitate towards Dodge's Salon, describing her as “a very pretentious rich woman from Buffalo,” but was aware that “all kinds of things were going on at her place.”¹⁶⁹

Instead, Cahill frequented the bars where many from these Village circles congregated. These included the Golden Swan, popularly known as the “Hell Hole,” and Columbia Gardens, nicknamed “Working Girls Home.” They were located on Sixth Avenue a few blocks from Cahill's apartment. He remembered that at the Hell Hole, a

¹⁶⁶ *Photoplay* (April 1926), as quoted in Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 16.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁶⁸ Wetzsteon, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill, 87.

favorite destination of Eugene O'Neill's, "a great deal of talk went on" and "there was a great deal of drinking involved in it."¹⁷⁰ The Hell Hole was a magnet for eccentrics, and Cahill postulated, "most of O'Neill's ideas were picked up around the Hell Hole from certain characters."¹⁷¹ It was also a meeting place for many artists, including Marcel Duchamp, Sloan, and Charles Demuth. Both Sloan and Demuth featured the bar in their works. Sloan, for example, captured the drinking, laughing, and flirtation that filled the Hell Hole's dimly lit interior in an etching (fig. 18), while Demuth, in a watercolor, presented a more debonair scene of conversation and cocktails. Demuth, smoking a cigar, sits with Duchamp at the lower left of the composition (fig. 19). At the Working Girls Home "a bar where, before Prohibition, women were more or less invited," Cahill met Berenice Abbott. She would later document New York City's ever-evolving cityscape in her well-known WPA photographic project *Changing New York*.¹⁷²

While bars were a major meeting place for the New York avant-garde, Cahill remembered, "in those days, the Village wasn't only the saloons. There were tea and coffee places where people would sit around and talk. Romany Marie's was one of the famous places. . . . I suppose every celebrity in the Village came there."¹⁷³ Struggling artists frequented it as well. Stuart Davis, working in his early Ashcan style, recorded a scene of a young stylish flapper and a dapper man sipping tea (fig. 20). Despite Marie's reputation as a conversationalist, Davis captured a quiet, introspective moment between the two patrons.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁷² Ibid., 57.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 59-60.

The political and literary scene in the Village was driven, not only by café life but by several journals addressing issues of culture, radicalism, and reform. Uniting these publications was a group of artists and writers committed to challenging the direction of American culture. Located at 91 Greenwich Avenue, *The Masses* (1911-1917) covered politics, literature, and art from a socialist perspective and provided artists such as Sloan, Glen O. Coleman, Davis, Henry Glintenkamp, and many others the opportunity to publish illustrations and cartoons that ranged from sardonic commentaries on Village culture to powerful political commentaries (fig. 21- 22). In 1917, the magazine, which was vehement in its anti-war stance, was forced to shut down under conservative pressure.

After *The Masses* published its last issue, a series of other magazines covering literature, art, and politics, established themselves in the Village. *The Liberator* (1918-1924), which was also founded by Eastman and retained most of the editorial staff of the *Masses*, continued the radical tradition of its predecessor. It became “the principal organ to print accurate news from Russia, including Lenin’s Message to American Workers.”¹⁷⁴ *The Dial* (1880-1929), edited by Scofield Thayer, published literature, poetry, and art. Its contributors included Dewey, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, e.e. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Charles Demuth, Gaston Lachaise, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, as well as many others. As Van Wyck Brooks recalled, *The Dial*:

stood for everything modern and new at a time when these words still had a mystical meaning. . . . For custom and tradition were in the process of being turned inside out, they were being pulled apart and torn to pieces,

¹⁷⁴ Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses (1911-1917): A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985), 46.

and only good taste unified the contents of *The Dial*, a miscellany of the new writers and graphic artists.¹⁷⁵

Brooks also became editor for another literary magazine, *The Freeman* (1920-1924), which had its offices a few doors down from *The Dial*'s on West Thirteenth Street.

Towards the end of the twenties, the Communist magazine, *The New Masses* (1926- 1948), which was edited by Gold, revived the leftist, artistic perspective of *The Masses* and *The Liberator*. Contributing writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Brooks, Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Lewis Mumford, O'Neill, Upton Sinclair, and Williams comprised a cross section of premier literary talent. The magazine also continued the political cartoons and provocative cover designs of *The Masses*. Artist and illustrator contributors included Coleman, Davis, Adolf Dehn, Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Louis Lozowick, Boardman Robinson, and Sloan. As a cultural magazine, articles were not confined to politics but addressed a wide range of topics including "the Machine Age, sex, Freud, cinema, jazz and all that was hottest in contemporary culture."¹⁷⁶ Combing politics and nightlife, the magazine also held carnivals and costume balls to raise money and foster community.

When Cahill moved to the Village full-time in 1918, the vibrant literary scene offered the potential to open new doors of opportunity for an aspiring writer. Having escaped the draft because he was recovering from an operation, he continued his newspaper work as a reporter on the *Bronx Home News*, a local paper that at the time had

¹⁷⁵ Van Wyck Brooks, *Days of the Phoenix: The 1920s I Remember* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1957), 67.

¹⁷⁶ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 12.

a large staff.¹⁷⁷ He left after a few months because he “got bored with that, because the stories seemed sort of piddling.”¹⁷⁸ Cahill was gradually gravitating towards artistic circles, and the following year he married Katherine Gridley, a painter and illustrator who had graduated from the Detroit Institute of Arts, and whom he had met through John Sloan. He was attracted to her vivacious personality and enamored by her interest in him. He recalled:

though this may sound like a cruel thing to say, I don’t think I ever would have married Katherine except out of pure vanity, because Katherine so obviously wanted to marry me that I felt flattered. She had a very charming character. . . . She laughed a great deal.¹⁷⁹

Although the marriage only lasted four years, they had a daughter Jane Anne, born in 1922. She would return to live with Cahill several years after the divorce. Together Cahill and Gridley became a lively part of the Village scene. Living for a time in the same house as Malcolm Cowley and his wife Peggy, the Cahill’s often played poker with the Cowley’s, who were “poker sharks.” They also developed a close friendship with Sloan and his wife, Dolly.¹⁸⁰

By 1921, Cahill was attempting to piece together a career as a freelance writer. He began contributing sporadic articles to the *The Freeman*, *The Nation*, and to the art journal, *International Studio*. He became a regular contributor to the art and film magazine, *Shadowland* (1919-1923). His involvement with the literary journals reinforced his liberal ideologies formed during his years as a nomad and he became more closely tied to leftist intellectual circles. In turn, his articles on art helped to define his

¹⁷⁷ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 103.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

artistic tastes, as he began to closely examine the paintings of the Ashcan school, Realism, folk art, and the works of contemporary Native American artists. In this respect, the publications for which he worked exerted a more important influence on him than he did on them.

In the early twenties, Cahill contributed two book reviews to *The Nation*. Although it was not published in the Village, the paper was known for its leftist perspective. Cahill's early book reviews, written before he began his novels, have not been discussed by scholars but served as a starting point from which he began to explore his identity. For *The Nation*, Cahill reviewed Norwegian author Knut Hamsun's novels *Hunger* and *Shallow Soil*. He admired *Shallow Soil's* journalistic style and "carefully-knit plot" and emphasized parallels between the early twentieth century Norwegian bohemia Hamsun described and Greenwich Village.

On a personal level, his interest in Hamsun's writing probably stemmed from similar experiences in their early biographies. Although later in his career Hamsun would become a vehement supporter of Nazi Germany, his childhood experiences echoed Cahill's. Born in a farming community in Lom, Norway, he grew up in poverty and was entirely self-educated. He left home as a young man and later supported himself with odd jobs, producing his first novel at eighteen. In 1880, he moved to Oslo where he lived in poverty. In the early 1880s, he wandered around the United States, working as a streetcar attendant, a farmhand in Wisconsin, and a lecturer in Minneapolis.¹⁸¹ Hamsun's themes of the wanderer in his novels, as well as his emphasis on the land, nature, and its relationship to characters, resurface in Cahill's fiction writing. The titles of Cahill's

¹⁸¹ Ingar Sletten Kollen, *Knut Hamsun: Dreamer and Dissenter*, trans. Deborah Dawkin and Erik Skuggevik (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3-24.

novels *Profane Earth* and *Look South to the Polar Star* pay homage to Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* and *Autumn Star*.

While Cahill received only a few assignments from *The Nation*, more significant were the intellectual currents of which he became a part through his involvement with the paper. At the time, *The Nation* was owned and edited by Oswald Garrison Villard, son of the aforementioned Henry Villard, who had been influential to the success of Northern Pacific Railway. Under Oswald's stewardship, *The Nation* became known for its leftist perspective. He was not only "one of the best known political journalists in the United States in the 1918-1932 period" but also "was one of the few outspoken, crusading liberals of his time," tackling "most of the great controversies of the first half of the twentieth century."¹⁸²

Villard continued the Progressive ideals his parents, Henry and Franny, worked to advance. His father had begun his career as a newspaper correspondent on the Lincoln-Douglas debates and was also involved in the transportation industry. He subsequently became a reporter for the *New York Tribune* and the owner of *The New York Post* and its weekly publication, *The Nation*. Oswald's mother was a suffragette and was involved with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹⁸³ Carrying on this legacy, Villard became a vocal supporter of liberal ideas during the 1920s, a time of Red scares, the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan, immigration restrictions, and the curtailment of labor unions.¹⁸⁴ Although somewhat out of step with the political climate of the decade, Villard's biographer, Joy Hume, described his liberal

¹⁸² D. Joy Humes, *Oswald Garrison Villard, Liberal of the 1920's* (New York: Syracuse University, 1960), 14.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁴ On 1920s politics, see Douglas, 18.

position as serving as “a connecting link or bridge between the more articulate liberal programs which preceded and followed it, namely progressivism and the New Freedom on the one hand and on the other the New Deal.”¹⁸⁵

Even though Cahill did not contribute to political issues for the paper, he must have taken notice of *The Nation*'s commitment to social activism, which provided evidence of a continuing drive for social change. Villard resembled Cahill's vision of the honorable newspaperman that had compelled him to pursue journalism in the first place. Throughout the 1920s, Cahill was not politically involved and his writing rarely addressed current debates or social problems. He confessed he did not like the political leaders of the period and that at the time, “all of my political ideas were on a completely theoretical basis and had no relationship to actuality that was going on. . . . I didn't respect the mentality of a man like Harding or Coolidge.”¹⁸⁶ Ultimately, however, Cahill shared Villard's belief in reform. Later in his career, he asserted, “American life and American character can never be expressed once and for all, but will be relearned and expressed again and again with fresh vitality and revelation.”¹⁸⁷

As with his writing for *The Nation*, Cahill's connection with *The Freeman* was significant in shaping him as an intellectual. The article he wrote for this journal was exceptional in being more political in tone, and his involvement linked him to many different writers in the fields of history, economics, and literature.¹⁸⁸ These included

¹⁸⁵ Humes, vii.

¹⁸⁶ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 94.

¹⁸⁷ Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930's by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (New York Graphic Society, 1973), 44.

¹⁸⁸ Holger Cahill, “In Brayg A Thought is Born,” *The Freeman* 4 no. 89 (November 1921): 253-254.

Charles Beard, Henry B. Fuller, Veblen, John Dos Passos, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, and Brooks. In addition, Jack Wheeler contributed articles on the history of American architecture as well as Brooks. Cahill remembered:

The Freeman was one of the leading periodicals on the intellectual side. The editor of *The Freeman* was Albert Nock, a very unusual fellow. The literary editor with whom I dealt was Van Wyck Brooks.¹⁸⁹

As Cahill observed, Nock was an exceptional character, an outsider with whom Cahill might have felt some affinity. In 1920, Nock was forty-seven and had pursued a variety of careers including as a baseball player, an Episcopal priest, and a reporter for *American Magazine*.¹⁹⁰ Brooks described him as “a professional exile, a homeless man . . . a scholar gypsy. . . . He had always felt in America like a displaced person.”¹⁹¹ His eccentricity aside, Nock, like Villard, was committed to furthering American culture and “it was his insistence on the question of improving our quality of life that made *The Freeman* so exciting.”¹⁹²

Surrounded by a group of socially conscious intellectuals, Cahill was compelled to continue his own, self-structured education and begin taking courses in economics, philosophy, and aesthetics. Seeking out the influential thinkers of the period he attended lectures by Veblen and Horace Kallen at the New School for Social Research and with Dewey at Columbia. These theorists were instrumental in the establishment of the New School, an institution that embodied their ideas regarding educational and social reform. Their teachings would become the basis for Cahill’s commitment to educating the

¹⁸⁹ Undated autobiographical statement by Holger Cahill, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

¹⁹⁰ James Hoopes, *Van Wyck Brooks: In Search of American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 146.

¹⁹¹ Brooks, *Days of the Phoenix*, 58.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 60.

populace about art. This intention was reflected both in his work as a curator and through the WPA/FAP programs, which included his establishment of community art centers and his support for scholarship on American crafts through the Index of American Design. The New School for Social Research and Pratt's City and Country School, both founded on Dewey's educational principles, provided models for the wide-reaching educational programs Cahill implemented as director of the WPA/FAP.

Decades later, Cahill still had vivid memories of hearing Veblen and Dewey speak. When he began attending Veblen's class, the economist was at the end of his career. Cahill recalled that he was not very well liked:

The classes were small. Veblen at that time wasn't very popular. He never was a very popular man, and he was then an elderly man. . . . He spoke in a very low voice. But you could always tell when he was joking. You'd see a twinkle in his eye.¹⁹³

In his description of the elderly professor, Cahill expressed an immediate respect for, and affinity with, him. Like Cahill, he was a Midwesterner, and even more, was a misfit within the academic community. Born to Norwegian immigrants in 1857, Veblen grew up in Wisconsin and Minnesota. After earning a PhD in philosophy from Yale and then a PhD in economics from Cornell, he taught at the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and the University of Missouri. He had a difficult time maintaining these appointments due to a tendency to get involved in scandalous affairs with women.

Veblen's most renowned book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, presented a satirical critique of the "conspicuous consumption" of the gilded-age American Society,

¹⁹³ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 65.

into which he could not fully assimilate himself.¹⁹⁴ Corresponding with his distaste for displays of wealth through expensive commercial goods, Veblen was critical of ornate objects, and encouraged an ability to see beauty in everyday things. He wrote:

It happens that the requirements of beauty, simply, are for most part best satisfied by inexpensive contrivances and structures which in a straightforward manner suggest both the office which they are to perform and the method serving their end.¹⁹⁵

This conviction that an art object need not be expensive or refined to be considered beautiful encouraged Cahill's appreciation of the handcrafted, utilitarian, and even crude qualities of American folk art. It also shaped his broad definition of what constituted American art, his belief that "in a genuine art movement a great reservoir of art is created in many forms, both major and minor."¹⁹⁶

In addition to his more famous *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen wrote about the connections between economics and education in *The Higher Learning in America*. Published in 1918, the book argued that in America universities functioned like corporations, with the ambition not to further scholarship but to make a profit. Veblen advocated for the separation of undergraduate and professional schools from universities, which would become self-governing graduate programs composed of professors and students.¹⁹⁷ These theories, in combination with Dewey's educational philosophies, became the basis for the alternative academic program offered at the New School for

¹⁹⁴ Martha Banta, "A Chronology of Thorstein Bunde Veblen," in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (New York: Macmillan, 1899; Reprint, ed. Martha Banta, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxx-xxxiii.

¹⁹⁵ Veblen, 100.

¹⁹⁶ Holger Cahill, "Art for the Few or the Many?" speech before the Washington branch of the American Association of University Women, November 15, 1936, frames 1255, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

¹⁹⁷ Louis Hacker, "Introduction," in Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1918; Reprint, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), vii-viii.

Social Research. Founded in 1919, initially the school was located on the outskirts of the Village, in Chelsea, and moved to West Twelfth Street in 1930 (fig. 23).

Although Veblen's lectures, especially those related to intellectual currents that infused Greenwich Village culture, made a significant impression on Cahill, Dewey's ideas had the most formative impact on Cahill's thinking about art, education, and society. When he first heard Dewey lecture around 1918, Cahill was immediately impressed with the teacher's pragmatic approach:

I was a few minutes late getting to the lecture and found the room crowded with students. Every seat was taken and there were a few standees near the door. The lecturer had just begun to speak. He was seated on a platform at the end of the room, gazing out the window speaking slowly and hesitantly, feeling out his words very carefully. I recall that he was speaking of the fact that philosophic ideas have a way of getting translated into programs of action . . . something of how the thought of the philosopher makes its way into the homely experience of every day and the common sense of the man in the street.¹⁹⁸

In his leadership of the WPA/FAP, Cahill would become a translator and disseminator of Dewey's theories, and, in particular, his ideas on art, which Dewey articulated in his 1934 book, *Art as Experience*.¹⁹⁹ In his own lectures and speeches, Cahill often summarized Dewey's complex ideas. He related them to discussions about the development of American art and the ambitions of the FAP in speeches that were directed towards a mass audience.²⁰⁰

In retelling his story of his initial encounter with Dewey, Cahill aligns himself with his listeners, positioning himself as the "man in the street" who stops in to hear the lecture. He is an uninitiated latecomer who stands in the doorway. Taking on a role he

¹⁹⁹ Dewey, John. *Art as Experience* (New York: Milton Balch and Company, 1934; Reprint, New York: Penguin Group, 2005).

²⁰⁰ Holger Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts," 33.

often played in Washington government as well as the New York art scene, he is both an outsider and insider. For Cahill, who had educated himself and was still attempting to find his niche professionally, Dewey's conception of intellectual growth as a self-driven, ongoing process and his belief that philosophy was rooted in the "common sense" may have seemed empowering.

Published one year before Cahill became director of the WPA Federal Art Project, *Art as Experience*, became a framework for its conception. Arguing for a democratization of culture, Dewey challenged the conception of artworks as rarefied objects confined to museums. Echoing Veblen, he asserted: "The growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper homes for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life."²⁰¹ As a philosopher writing about art, he aimed "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience."²⁰² This required a revision of traditional aesthetic values. As Michael Kelley explains:

Dewey's considered definition of 'art' is by no means orthodox, for it rejects two conceptual connections that had been regarded as axiomatic by most philosophical aestheticians since Hegel. One is the treatment of "art" as equivalent to "fine art"; the other is the assumption that the subject matter of aesthetics is, properly speaking, fine art, as contrasted with other kinds of cultural production.²⁰³

Dewey's challenge to conventional aesthetics within the field of philosophy was innovative, but his attempt to expand the definition of art beyond the category of fine art,

²⁰¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Milton Balch and Company, 1934; Reprint, New York: Perigee Trade, 2005), 7.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰³ Kelley, 23.

was not without precedents. Broadening this definition was at the heart of John Cotton Dana's exhibition program at the Newark Museum, which mingled industrial, commercial, and fine art. It was also the intellectual moxie behind Marcel Duchamp's exhibition of *Fountain* in 1917.

When Cahill first heard Dewey's lecture, Dewey had not yet ventured into aesthetic theory, but his revolutionary educational ideas were already popular with his contemporaries. In 1916, he published his highly influential book *Democracy and Education*, which he considered to be his most significant publication on education. In his words, it was expressive of his "entire philosophical position."²⁰⁴ As a philosopher, Dewey positioned himself in opposition to Idealists, who in the tradition of Hegel believed that ideas preceded the material world, shaping it as they were realized through human action and perception. Leaning more towards the materialist view advanced by Karl Marx, Dewey asserted that the environment, and human engagement with it, shaped ideas. In his words, "the first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it."²⁰⁵

Dewey was particularly interested in phenomenology, the study of this process of interaction between humans and their environment. This dialogue was a learning experience and an opportunity for growth and change. For Dewey, philosophy did not center on abstract ideology. Rather, ideas required practical application, testing, and active participants to enact reform. In a democratic society, philosophy was concerned

²⁰⁴ John Dewey to Horace M. Kallen, July 1, 1916, Horace M. Kallen Papers, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati; quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 168.

²⁰⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 12.

with “dealing with the problems of men” and was directed towards “the social good—the welfare of all those affected by an action.”²⁰⁶ In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey

wrote:

In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young. Since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter’s nature will largely turn upon the direction children’s activities were given at an earlier period. This cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth.²⁰⁷

For Dewey, a central aim of education was to cultivate moral, capable, informed, and engaged citizens who could participate constructively in a democracy.

His analysis of American education had origins in research he began conducting at the University of Chicago at the turn of the century. After beginning his career as a teacher in Oil City, Pennsylvania, and earning a doctorate in philosophy at John Hopkins University, Dewey joined the newly established University of Chicago as a professor of philosophy in 1894. At the University of Chicago, Dewey experimented with his theories on education more than a decade before publishing *Education and Democracy*.

Committed to putting ideas in practice, he founded an experimental Laboratory School that encouraged children to direct their learning, and emphasized interaction with the environment and materials.²⁰⁸ Dewey considered all living beings to be active “agents” in their “social environments” and developed a program of education in which children engaged in activities that were associated with daily life. These included cooking,

²⁰⁶ John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, eds. Jo Ann Boydston and Anne Sharpe, vol. 10, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 46; see also Westbrook, 157.

²⁰⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916; Reprint, Toronto: Collier Macmillan, 1966), 41.

²⁰⁸ Westbrook, 104-111.

sewing, carpentry, building a farm from blocks, and growing wheat. In older grades, history and geography were studied in a hands-on manner, such as learning about colonial history by reconstructing a room from a colonial house.

Although the Laboratory School was short-lived, his curriculum formed the basis for Progressive education. Within the Village, where his writing was frequently being printed in journals, his educational ideas were beginning to find tangible applications both at the New School and at the City and Country elementary school. Following in the footsteps of the Laboratory School, the New School, while not directed by Dewey, applied his philosophies and welcomed him as an instructor. Founded by American history professors James Harvey Robison and Charles A. Beard, who had resigned from Columbia after the university began to remove faculty members who expressed an anti-war stance, the New School was “committed to an expansive notion of academic freedom.” It “called for a new type of leadership in every field of American life,” which meant the faculty and students possessed the “right and even the obligation to subject every preference, institution, and presumption of knowledge to critical inquiry, unhampered by political, religious, or philosophical conventions.”²⁰⁹

The initial faculty included Beard, Robison, Veblen, Kallen, and Dewey, who taught for two years before returning to Columbia, along with other faculty in anthropology, sociology, and literature. Within the next five years, the teaching staff expanded to include leaders in all areas of American culture. Journalist and art critic Lewis Mumford taught a class in architecture and, in 1925, Waldo Frank offered one of the first classes on modern art. Other lecturers included Robert Frost, Leo Stein, Meyer

²⁰⁹ Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School: A History of the Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 3, 12, and 18.

Shapiro, Thomas Hart Benton, Aaron Copland, Sidney Hook, and Margaret Mead. Since classes could be attended for a small fee, the New School provided a forum for New York intellectuals and exposed a wider audience to their ideas.²¹⁰

During the 1930s and '40s, the school would continue to position itself as a leader in American education, and a promoter of artistic experimentation and liberal ideals. When the school opened its new building on Twelfth Street, muralists Thomas Hart Benton and José Clemente Orozco were given commissions for the interior. While Orozco's austere murals emphasized workers' organization and solidarity, Benton's brightly colored composition, *America Today*, focused on labor, industry, technology, and urban culture. The panel, *City Activities with Dance Hall* (fig. 24), celebrated metropolitan nightlife with interwoven vignettes of moviegoers, acrobatic theater performers, and Charleston dancers in cabarets. At the same time, Benton pictured the need for social action. Emily Braun has indentified the group of three figures in the foreground at the center of the mural panel as Benton's wife, Rita, holding their son T.P. in the company of Caroline Pratt.²¹¹ Behind them, connecting Progressive education and political involvement, is a blackboard and poster that read, "Vote." At the top of the mural, a greedy banker manipulates the tickertape, and the clock behind his head implies that the good times had already run out by 1930.

After the outbreak of World War II, the New School opened its doors to European intellectuals in exile from Hitler, reinforcing the Village's status as a premier center for

²¹⁰ Ibid., 48.

²¹¹ Emily Braun, "Thomas Hart Benton and Progressive Liberalism: An Interpretation of the New School Murals," in *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals*, Emily Braun and Thomas Branchick (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 1985), 21.

academics and artists, becoming an important conduit of cultural exchange between Europe and America. New faculty included, among others, anarchist philosopher Hannah Arendt, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, psychologist Max Wertheimer, and artists Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Jacques Lipchitz, Andre Masson, and Yves Tanguy.²¹² The presence of the Surrealists at the New School would not only be crucial for the development of the Abstract Expressionists, but underscored a connection between Dewey's anti-traditional ideas, which emphasized freedom, individualism, and exploration, and the artistic experimentations in the post-war period.

In addition to his contributions to the New School, Dewey's ideas were applied at the City and Country School, which offered an experimental curriculum that encouraged children to learn through play and exploration of the environment. Pratt's school is significant not only as evidence of the Progressive initiatives undertaken in the Village, but because she was closely aligned with the Village's artistic circles. As she recalled, it was the artists and writers who were willing to take risks and enroll their children in her new, unconventional neighborhood school and "we leaned on them quite heavily for the period of the school's development."²¹³ Artists were, therefore, aware of her innovative educational ideas. In addition to T.P. Benton, Pratt's students included William Zorach's children. Zorach himself was hired as the school's art instructor. Pratt recalled:

I liked his work with the children, especially, because he refused to teach. Encouragement and inspiration were what the children needed, as he was quick to see and these he supplied.²¹⁴

²¹² Stephanie Barron, et. al, *Exiles and Emigres: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997), 24.

²¹³ Pratt, 49.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

Initially teaching a small group of children in a three-room apartment converted into a schoolhouse, Pratt envisioned the city as an expansive classroom. She took the children on excursions to observe urban life, including a trip to the docks to watch the workings of the boats on the river.²¹⁵ Returning to the school, the students created their own rivers and boats using blocks on the floor, learning about the workings of waterways through their imaginative, playful reconstruction.

After Dewey endorsed these experimental methods, promoting the school in his book *The Schools of Tomorrow*, Pratt was able to move to a larger building and set up classrooms with flowing, flexible space using low tables that allowed for group work stations and individual desks as well as an outside play area (fig. 25).²¹⁶ Her emphasis on hands-on learning, integration of art into her curriculum, and the reconstruction of an environment in the classroom, would soon be reflected in education and installation practices at the Newark Museum. Director John Dana encouraged a careful examination of objects through the construction of period rooms in the museum galleries and established curatorial training and public outreach programs.

The WPA/FAP, like Dewey's Laboratory in Chicago or Pratt's City and Country School, strove to put Dewey's theories into action. Under Cahill's leadership, it provided artists with the same rights to employment as laborers, and through exhibitions and arts education initiatives, offered the opportunity for nationwide exposure to the arts that had not before existed. Cahill was explicit in paying homage to Dewey's educational ideas as a driving force behind the WPA/FAP. In his speech honoring the philosopher, he remarked,

²¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

²¹⁶ John Dewey, *The Schools of Tomorrow* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1915).

John Dewey and his pupils and followers have been of the greatest importance in developing American resources in the arts, especially through their influence on the school systems of this country. . . . They have insisted that the teaching of arts is . . . central in any system of education.²¹⁷

Beyond Dewey's contribution to the Federal Art Project, it is compelling to speculate on his more personal impact on Cahill's career, and his influence on the young journalist when Cahill first entered his class. While it is impossible to be certain about anything in regard to Cahill's careful manipulation of his biography, it is possible that Dewey's lectures allowed him to move further towards art criticism in his writing as these opportunities presented themselves, and assuring him that despite his piecemeal education he might have a place in the field. By 1921, Cahill could challenge Gold confidently in *The Liberator*, asserting his belief that art critics need not be elitist connoisseurs, but could be described more humbly as "spade and shovel laborers." In any case, at that point, as Cahill remembered, he "had met the art group and became very interested in art, and my interest in newspaper work began to wane. I didn't think it was so important anymore."²¹⁸

Cahill solidified his connection to artistic circles by becoming a regular contributor to the art and film magazine, *Shadowland*. Published in Brooklyn by a German color printer named Hofmuller, the magazine combined articles on art, film, and theater design, with Pictorialist photography and photo spreads of dancers and actresses (fig. 26). As Cahill recalled, the owner of the magazine had unusual motives for starting it. He was a "rich man who had fallen in love with some girl who had won a beauty contest and was trying to build a moving picture career for her. It didn't work."²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts," 33-34.

²¹⁸ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 104.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

Hofmuller, however, was committed to creating an artistic magazine. He “insisted that there be an art article every month, with color reproductions, written by good writers.”²²⁰ He created Art Deco cover designs often featuring organic motifs, such as gulls flying over the ocean, blossoming flowers springing from rolling hills, and massive tree trunks rising from the landscape. The illustrations gave the magazine a stylized, distinctive visual presence (fig. 27).

A unique publication, it is difficult to find a precise precedent for *Shadowland* among contemporary art journals or popular magazines. With its emphasis on Pictorialist photography and on artful design, one of the closest American precedents is perhaps Stieglitz’s *Camera Work* (1903-1917), although this publication was a high-end photographic and arts journal rather than a popular magazine. As such, it had a limited circulation, was disseminated by subscription, and did not include film. Robert Coady’s art and literary magazine, *The Soil* (1916-1918), a name that evoked the country’s agrarian past and themes of cultivation, covered more pedestrian subjects. Coady’s inclusion of movies, sports, art, and machine age design gave the periodical more breadth than *Shadowland*.

In certain respects, Hoffmuller’s visually appealing magazine echoed the format of European popular publications that specialized in striking photo essays and included articles on fashion, film, and theater. These included the French magazine *Vu* (1928-1940) and the German *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (1892-1945). The inclusion of political coverage in the magazines, however, gave them an entirely different perspective. Somewhat further afield, an earlier European precedent for *Shadowland*’s colorful Art

²²⁰ Ibid.

Deco covers and fashionable, theatrical image, was the Parisian *La Gazette du Bon Ton* (1912-1925). A high-end fashion magazine, *La Gazette du Bon Ton* elevated apparel to fine art through illustrations that often featured women posed in stage-like settings. Since this was an elite, expensive periodical devoted to couture it had closer parallels to *Vogue*, which also featured compelling photographic and illustrated covers that could have influenced Hoffmuller. *Shadowland* offered a unique combination of painting, photography, film, and theater coverage, with an attention to style, that bridged fine art and popular interests in a way that appealed to the cultural moment of the 1920s.

The magazine had a wide circulation and, years later, Clyfford Still told Cahill that his *Shadowland* articles were some of the first he read on art when he was growing up on the North Dakota prairie.²²¹ The essays on art frequently opened with a full-page color reproduction. Contributors included painter Stuart Davis, writing about fellow artist Glenn O Coleman, art critic Helen Appleton Read discussing images of New York, Walter Pach analyzing the work of Charles E. Prendergast, Guy Pène du Bois writing on Edward Hopper's etchings and Thomas Craven examining Charles Sheeler's painting. Cahill's articles offered portraits of artists George "Pop" Hart, Kenneth Hayes Miller (fig. 28) and Sloan.

Cahill's article on Sloan, rarely discussed in the Sloan literature, was particularly significant as it was aimed at promoting Sloan's career and generating sales for the artist. Despite his respected position among his contemporaries, Sloan had achieved little financial success. Cahill emphasized Sloan's talents as a Realist, whose perspective was firmly rooted in American soil. Hoping to secure Sloan's reputation as one of the premier

²²¹ Ibid., 107.

artists of his time, he extolled his painting, using a vocabulary that evidenced his absorption of Dewey's theories. Sloan's painting was according to Cahill:

an art that has plumbed life deeply, its crudeness and its vitality, its commonplace satisfactions and its vague exalted aspirations, its pettiness and its nobility. It is an art that realizes fundamental values *within* experience.²²²

Cahill would be an influential supporter of Sloan throughout his career. When Sloan died in 1951, Cahill was upset that the artist had not lived to see his own 1952 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He felt Sloan's exhibition should have been prioritized before the 1950 Edward Hopper retrospective.²²³

In his article on Sloan, Cahill was not only celebrating a painter he respected, but also returning a favor. While Eddie and Katherine were living with Sloan and Dolly in Sloan's apartment at 88 Washington Place, they had struggled financially as Cahill tried to make a living with his freelance writing. Sloan, despite his own impoverishment, provided them with monetary and moral support. In 1923, Katie wrote to thank him for his "faith in Eddie . . . because I have it too and I feel sure that you have done more than you can ever know towards keeping up his morale many times."²²⁴

Expressing his memories of this time, Cahill did not recount his personal difficulties but recalled the compelling individuals that frequented the apartment. In particular, he was impressed by painter, John Butler Yeats:

Sloan had a very interesting circle around him at that time. He lived on Washington Place . . . and an almost daily visitor was John Butler Yeats, the father of William Butler Yeats, and a painter. He was a very good

²²² Edgar Cahill, "John Sloan: Man and Artist," *Shadowland*, 4, no. 6 (August 1921), 73.

²²³ Holger Cahill, letter to Dorothy Miller, September 10, 1951, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

²²⁴ Katie Cahill to John Sloan, 1923, box 20, Helen Farr Sloan Papers, Delaware Art Museum.

painter and a very remarkable old man, a brilliant Irish conversationalist of the old school.²²⁵

Sloan had pictured his circle, including Yeats and Van Wyck Brooks, ten years before in his painting *Yeats at Petipas*, 1910 (fig. 29). Set on the dining patio of Petipas boarding house and restaurant on 29th street, the painting depicts a party organized to celebrate Dolly's birthday and to honor Yeats, a friend who exerted an influence on the development of Sloan's work.²²⁶ Like Cahill, he was as an influential promoter of Sloan's painting. Structured around a long, rectangular table, Sloan records an open circle of conversation as the guests exchange glances and ideas across the table. Sitting at the head of the table, smoking, listening, and drawing, Yeats is a focal point. A row of bottles and glasses on the table are arranged to guide the eye to his sketching hands. As Katherine Manthorne has argued, Sloan's compositional arrangement gives the work a filmic quality, suggesting another point of crossover between fine art and film. The focus on faces in conversational exchange:

gives full play to the flicker of light that hits the faces of Dolly and others in the half-circle at the right. Glances zigzag back and forth across the table, lending further dynamism to the scene, in the manner of early films such as Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat*.²²⁷

A similar scene of Sloan's circle would take place a decade later, with Cahill in the dynamic role of conversation leader.

A photograph, probably taken in the early twenties (fig. 30), records another dinner event with Cahill, Gridley, Sloan, and Dolly. Again it is structured around lively

²²⁵ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 73.

²²⁶ Katherine E. Manthorne, "John Sloan, Moving Pictures, and Celtic Spirits," in *John Sloan's New York*, eds., Joyce K. Shiller, et al. (Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 2007), 169.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

discussion across a table—in this case, possibly at the Hell Hole. The nature of the gathering, however, is quite different. The photograph in which the group eats bar food off paper plates, records an impromptu meal and, in this respect, captures the allure of the casual, free-spirited, downtown scene of the 1920s. The women, who have dispensed with the fans and hats they wore in *Yeats at Petipas* smoke and wear flapper-style dresses exposing their bare arms. These changes in style mirrored changes in the Village scene during the twenties, which was becoming popular for its radicalism and trendy in its non-conformism. Cahill's hand gestures capture his evident ability to be a charming character and to command attention with his lively, self-fashioned personality.

Employing his wit and adroit manipulation of the press, Cahill found other ways to further Sloan's career. As Sloan's biographer, John Loughery has recounted, by 1923 Sloan was in financial trouble. To alleviate his debts, he had agreed to sell a collection of twenty paintings to the wealthy collector George Otis Hamlin, for the low price of five thousand dollars. Always willing to twist the facts, especially in the interest of a promotional media spectacle, Cahill composed press releases hyping the sale. With Sloan's agreement, he inflated the purchase price to twenty thousand dollars. The promotion worked and shortly after art magazines and newspapers reported the sale, the Detroit Institute of the Arts approached Sloan about acquiring his painting *McSorley's Bar*. The Newark Museum also showed interest in purchasing additional works. The publicity reinforced Sloan's stature within the art world, but actually worsened his financial difficulties, as neither Cahill nor Sloan had really considered the effects of keeping up the lie. When the IRS noticed discrepancies between Sloan's reported income

and his impressive sale, he was audited and forced to straighten out Cahill's story.²²⁸

Despite Cahill's creation of a financial mess, Sloan, who at the time was president of the Society of Independent Artists, recognized Cahill's charisma and talents with the media by appointing him publicity director of the Society of Independent Artists. Cahill became responsible for publicizing their annual exhibitions.

Established in 1916, the Society of Independent Artists was founded when several different groups of American artists came together against the traditional, exclusive approach of juried exhibitions. Founding members, including Ashcan painters William Glackens, George Bellows, and Sloan, joined forces with John Marin, Walter Pach, and members of the Dada circle, including Walter Arensberg, Man Ray, Joseph Stella, Morton Schamberg, and Marcel Duchamp. The Society of Independent Artists offered exhibitions with "no jury, no prizes," providing an opportunity for any member to exhibit two works annually if they paid a small amount of annual dues. From the outset of the renowned 1917 Independents exhibition, which was almost double the size of the 1913 Armory Show, the Society was based around infighting and humorous pranks that drew the attention of the press. The Independents built on a rich tradition of using controversies and publicity to attract attention to avant-garde exhibitions.

The practice extended back to The Eight exhibition at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908, which promoted the break of eight Ashcan artists (Arthur B. Davies, Glackens, Robert Henri, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, Everett Shinn, and Sloan) from the National Academy of Design with their own non-juried exhibition.

²²⁸ For Cahill's promotion of Sloan's painting by misreporting the Hamlin sale, see Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 264-265.

Glackens, Luks, Shinn, and Sloan who had all been newspaper illustrators, were experienced in the workings of the popular press, and possessed ties with critics. They shaped public perception of the exhibition from the moment they presented the story to the papers. As art historian Bernard Perlman described the event,

[the] local press called attention to the uniqueness and democracy of the new organization . . . each man was to be represented equally by his own selections, without having to submit to the rigors of a jury.²²⁹

Some conservative critics, such as the *New York Tribune*'s Royal Cortissoz, denounced the painters, but the debate provided the notoriety and controversy associated with artistic innovation. The *New York Herald* reinforced the modernity of their vision, calling them "men of the rebellion."²³⁰ Building upon this momentum of the 1908 success, in 1910, Henri, Davies, Lawson, Sloan, Shinn, William Glackens, James E. Fraser, and Walt Kuhn organized another Independent Artists Exhibition, based on the non-jury system, which served as a precedent for the formation of the Society of Independent Artists.²³¹

As an organizer of the Armory Show in 1913, Kuhn launched an even more substantial publicity campaign to spark the interest among the critics and public by promoting controversial works of Modern art. He corresponded with newspapers, magazines, and critics, throughout the country, and even contemplated an electric billboard in Times Square.²³² Attempting to create a stir and generate interest, he wrote to the *Kansas City Post*: "We are doing this according to the American methods and have

²²⁹ Bernard B. Perlman, *Immortal Eight and Its Influence* (New York: Art Students League of New York, 1985), 152.

²³⁰ "Eight Independent Painters to Give an Exhibition of their Own Next Winter," *New York Sun* (15 May 1907), quoted in Perlman, 152.

²³¹ Milton W. Brown, *American Painting: From the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), 38.

²³² Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1963), 67.

already spent a good deal of money on advertising. . . . Give me an idea of what sort of photographs you can use. I suppose they will not stand for nudes.”²³³ Indeed, it was Duchamp’s radical Cubist abstraction, *Nude Descending A Staircase No. 2*, 1912, that the press latched onto in a series of humorous articles, spoofs, and condemnations that drew crowds to the exhibition and made Cubism a topic of conversation and the butt of jokes.

Duchamp’s decision to anonymously submit a urinal, turned upside down, signed R. Mutt, and titled *Fountain*, to the 1917 Society of Independent exhibition again had the flavor of a prank. He intended to create a fissure among the Independents, outing the former rebellious Ashcan artists as conservatives when compared to the Dadaists. Purchasing the urinal with Stella and Arensberg at J. Mott Ironworks on Sixth Avenue, Duchamp included some members of the Society of Independent Artists in the hoax, dividing the group against itself. When Duchamp challenged the established conceptions of what defined an art object, Glackens and Bellows were distraught that the non-juried show they had helped to pioneer implied that, in Bellows words, “If a man sent in horse manure glued to a canvas that we would have to accept it!”²³⁴

The submission of *Fountain* and the debate over its inclusion presented the opportunity for Duchamp, as Michael Leja has argued, “to orchestrate a media spectacle around the event.”²³⁵ Duchamp resigned from the Society, a move that attracted the attention of the press. He then secretly transported *Fountain* to Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery. Stieglitz, connoisseur *par excellence* of Modern art, was convinced the bathroom fixture

²³³ Quoted in Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, 68.

²³⁴ Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 182.

²³⁵ Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 231.

was a work created by a Philadelphia artist R. Mutt. Stieglitz famously photographed *Fountain*, artfully, in front of Marsden Hartley's painting *Warriors* (fig. 31). For a week he placed it on view in the gallery, while "Duchamp, Stieglitz, and Charles Demuth tried to persuade sympathetic critics to come to the gallery to see the scandalous object and to write about it."²³⁶

Duchamp further advertised the scandal through the publication *The Blind Man*, which he established along with Henri-Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood in order to publicize the Society of Independent Artists.²³⁷ Here, he presented his spin on the "The Richard Mutt Case" (fig. 32). He played up the controversial aspects of the work, its association "with a certain natural function of the secretive sort," and argued against its censorship. Underlining that *Fountain* was a work of art and questioning the vitality of American art, he proclaimed: "The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges."²³⁸ In effect, the whole series of events blended Dada performance with media blitz.

This complete fusion between a work of art and a publicity stunt, made Duchamp's shenanigans surrounding *Fountain* a difficult act to follow. The scandal, however, set the tone for the promotional tactics of the Society of Independent Artists. These often involved conflict between group members followed by a fight and resignation, all tracked in the press. The more structured approach was to concoct a hoax surrounding an exhibition that was staged to draw the attention of the media and increase attendance. As Cahill remembered, promoting the exhibitions was tricky because

²³⁶ Ibid., 233.

²³⁷ "The Richard R. Mutt Case," *The Blind Man* (May 1917).

²³⁸ Ibid.

“usually before an art show opens you don’t have any photographs of the work that is to be sent in, and you can’t therefore place stories in newspapers and magazines long enough ahead.”²³⁹ He was able to work around this limitation by utilizing his contacts with newspapers and journals, providing well-written pieces and devising stunts.

His methods initially provoked a dispute among the members of the Society, leading to the resignation of sculptor Gaston Lachaise and painter and art critic Hamilton Easter Field. According to Cahill, the disagreement began when he scheduled a meeting with Frank Crownshield, the editor of *Vanity Fair* magazine to show him some watercolors by Native American artists from New Mexico with the intention of generating some press coverage for an upcoming exhibition. Lachaise happened to come by to visit Crownshield during Cahill’s meeting. When Crownshield was not impressed with the Native American watercolors, Cahill showed him works by Sloan, Pach, and others that he was carrying in his briefcase.²⁴⁰ Several days later, Hamilton Easter Field, who perhaps had heard about the meeting from Lachaise, wrote a scathing article in *The Arts* denouncing Cahill’s publicity:

So it has been with the unfortunate row in the Society of Independent Artists; the principles have become obscured by the twisting of all discussion into a conflict of personalities. Let us see just where the issue lies. The other side believes that publicity is the great factor in modern life and that the society must officially feature the prominent members and the eccentricities of the show. Our side believes that such publicity is not consistent with the aims of the society, which are to give an equal chance to every member. We also believe that such publicity does not permanently increase the interest in art.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 125.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 125-128.

²⁴¹ Hamilton Easter Field, *The Arts* 2, no. 5 (February 1922): 310.

In response, with the support of Sloan, Bellows, and Henri, Lachaise and Field were removed from the Society. The arguments and their resignations were reported in *The New York Times*.²⁴²

In contrast to Field, Cahill and Sloan both relished the humor and vulgarity of the publicity stunt as a means to direct attention to American art. As Cahill remembered “Sloan was delighted. He just adored it and participated in every one of those things.”²⁴³ One successful hoax devised by Cahill and a publicity man trying to promote a female artist’s work featured a painting that mysteriously appeared on the walls after an exhibition was hung:

[T]his publicity man and I cooked up between us a story that this woman had written letters to the Society—we had the letters typed up to prove it—in which she accused them of being unjust to her, of not hanging her picture, and she threatened, “I will have my picture on the walls whether you want it or not.” Suddenly the following day, this picture appeared. How did it get there? Obviously it must have been a ghostly visitation or something like that. This ghost story made headlines in almost every newspaper in New York, and that day the Society of Independents tripled its attendance, from about 300 a day or 240 to 1,000.²⁴⁴

The article that reported the event in *The New York Times* emphasized the supernatural aspects of the artwork, suggesting that a “New York spirit nailed a rejected drawing to a wall” and that the work of the artist was in itself “fantastic” and “symbolic of ancient Egypt.”²⁴⁵ Manufactured for the press, the *Times* story played upon popular misconceptions about ancient art, as well as previous controversies surrounding Society

²⁴² “Artists Assail H.E. Field,” *New York Times* (6 March 1922); “Artists Squabble on Eve of Show; Gaston Lachaise Resigns From Independents--Editor Blames Walter Pach,” *New York Times* (24 February 1922).

²⁴³ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 136.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁴⁵ “Art Show Spook Hangs A Picture: Nails to Wall Rejected Drawing of Woman who Says Spirit Guides Her Hand,” *The New York Times* (18 March 1922).

of Independent Artists exhibition selections. It did little to advance public knowledge about art, but did get people in the door.

Another scam capitalized on the vogue for “primitive” art, within which Cahill included both Native American and pre-Columbian art. Like many of his early twentieth-century contemporaries, Cahill appropriated the art of these cultures as a basis for modernist experimentation and as a source for American cultural identity, often in an offensive and patronizing manner. Cahill shared Sloan’s view, as Jackson Rushing has described it, that “a deeper awareness of Indian art by modern artists and their patrons could only enrich the culture and make it more specifically American.”²⁴⁶ Although Cahill admired, and intended to promote, Native American art as deserving recognition, his ambitions were crippled by a racist and romantic conception of Native American art and culture, which he considered to be unspoiled, in harmony with nature, and in opposition to modern industrial life.²⁴⁷

In 1920, inspired by Dadaism and cultural primitivism, Cahill invented an artistic movement he called Inje-inje. It was based on an ethnographic study written by a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society who discussed, “A tribe in that region between the Amazon and the Andes which was so primitive that it only had two words, and the rest of their communication was eked out by gestures. The words were Inje-Inje.” Cahill responded, “Holy mackerel, this would be a wonderful basis for aesthetics. We’ve heard so much of the nuance and all kinds of things, how about a little simplicity for a

²⁴⁶ W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 102.

²⁴⁷ E. H. Cahill, “America Has Its ‘Primitives,’” 75, no. 299 *International Studio* (March, 1922): 80-83.

while?”²⁴⁸ The Inje-Inje group, whose participants included Sloan, Mark Tobey, Cowley, William Gropper, and Alfred Maurer mixed the playful, irreverence of Dada with cultural primitivism. In 1918, Cahill and Tobey conducted an Ouija board session and the combination of words that resulted mixed organic metaphors with expressions that evoked the primordial:

Take my load of dark red earth
 My bosom flowered darkly
 When did you live
 Before times
 What times
 Times you know²⁴⁹

In contrast to the allure of the primal, ancient red earth, the last line of the sequence, anchored the poem to the present and familiar. In Cahill’s explanation, Inje- Inje combined the absurd with the pedestrian:

The idea of Inje-Inje, which was in some ways like Dada and Surrealism that succeeded it. . . . making the fantastic become a part of reality, which of course, the fantastic really does in actual life. It emphasized the violence, the vulgarity and the bad taste that have a lot to do with the most vital elements in American life today.²⁵⁰

The vulgarity and absurdity that Cahill embraced as aspects of the American experience were expressed in his flair to fabricate stories that would entice the media. Although it was a short-lived movement, Cahill made Inje-Inje the basis for a spoof in which he and Sloan burned and scraped a board and then submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition as an example of South American art from the Inje- Inje tribe. The trick

²⁴⁸ Jeffers, “Holger Cahill and American Art,” 5.

²⁴⁹ Dorothy Miller saved the notes on the Ouija board session. See box 2, folder 5, Dorothy C. Miller Papers, AAA.

²⁵⁰ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 120-21.

demeaned the pre-Columbian artists it impersonated and, in this case, the event failed to attract attention.²⁵¹

Cahill's publicity stunts at times reflected the dark side of his humor and personality. His sardonic wit, a defensive mechanism, could be insulting, diminishing, or detrimental to those at whom Cahill directed it. As with the publicity for the Hamlin sale, Cahill's wit and ambitions revealed him to be, at times, self-absorbed, with an inability to see the larger view of a situation and its impact on others. When conflicts resulted, such as his disagreement with Field, Cahill, insecure about his position in the art world, had a tendency to hold a grudge.²⁵²

From the outset, nevertheless, Cahill's achievement in building attendance for the Society of Independent Artists was impressive. In 1921, the painter Max von Recklinghausen, a member of the Independents, recommended Cahill to John Cotton Dana. Dana needed assistance publicizing an exhibition on the Deutsche Werkbund at the Newark Museum. At their initial lunch meeting, Cahill and Dana discussed their mutual admiration for Veblen, and Dana hired Cahill to promote the project.²⁵³ This began Cahill's mentorship in museum work and a friendship between the two colleagues that lasted until Dana's death in 1929. Cahill's acceptance of the position represented the end of his dreams of becoming a journalist and a more substantial and professional commitment to the field of American art.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 118; Jeffers, "Holger Cahill and American Art," 5.

²⁵² Cahill's grudge towards Field is still evident in his 1957 Oral History interview. See Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 127-128. Regarding the grudge Cahill held towards New Deal Administrator Jacob Baker, see John Morse, "Interview with Holger Cahill," April 12 and April 15, 1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

²⁵³ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 154-155.

The Greenwich Village community, enlivened by cultural experimentation and a challenging of conventional social roles, seems to have been the ideal setting in which Cahill could break free of an established, prescribed professional path. In contrast, through his involvement with Village publications and institutions, Cahill's ambitions solidified. As he matured, his career took a new direction. His perspective shifted from that of a drifter with flighty aspirations to an intellectual, who was priming himself for a career in the New York art world. His involvement in artistic circles between the wars, made Cahill acutely aware of the importance of constructing media spin to promote art. It also shaped his awareness of what he later termed the "many streams" of tradition within American art.

Within the Village, these various artistic streams commingled, competed, and challenged each other. The Ashcan artists continued to paint the urban cityscape in the gritty, Realist style that had laid the foundation for further modernist breaks with aesthetic tradition. Duchamp effaced the line between the artistic and the vulgar, transforming bathroom fixtures and acts of self-promotion into artistic subjects that were expressive of the modern experience. Stieglitz circle artists celebrated their own new vision of the jazz age metropolis. O'Keeffe's homage to the skyscraper, *Radiator Building-Night* (fig. 33) captured the vogue for machine age architectural design and the vibrant nocturnal pulses of an electric city, while Arthur Dove's *George Gershwin—Rhapsody in Blue Part 1* (fig.34) visualized the rhythms that infused the cabarets. A kaleidoscope of media and styles, including Realist and abstract painting, amateur photography, and stage sets, also appeared in the popular press, jostling for attention on the pages of *Shadowland*.

Despite the lively innovation that was constantly challenging artistic conceptions, Cahill's fascination with the traditions of American art reflected his nostalgic view. By the time Cahill entered into the Village scene as a full-time resident, after the beginning of World War I, the community was already on the cusp of change. It was being transformed from a bohemia into "a good time place."²⁵⁴ Sloan, in his masterpiece, *The City from Greenwich Village* (Fig. 35) acknowledged the transformation of American culture, and of the Village landscape. In a painting that addressed themes that were similar to the cover he designed for *Profane Earth*, Sloan rendered the electrified urban cityscape. He chose a view from his Manhattan apartment window looking downtown with Wall Street in the distance. As John Loughery has suggested, as the center of business and money the downtown "city" is "magical, seductive, but also dangerously cut off from human lives and needs."²⁵⁵ It appears separate from the darkened Village streets, encircled in an otherworldly luminous glow, analogous to the green light that entrances Gatsby in Fitzgerald's novel. The luminosity has, however, begun to seep into the Village in the form of a Moonshine billboard pasted to an apartment house façade. Cahill shared Sloan's discomfort with the rapid economic, cultural, and social developments, which were propelling New York forward. As a result, he often looked to the nineteenth century, and especially to pre-industrial folk art, to define American tradition. Accompanying the excitement of the metropolis, the creative energy that was making New York into what Fitzgerald called a "capital of culture," was in his famous words, a tendency to be "borne back ceaselessly into the past."²⁵⁶ A metaphor for Gatsby's

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 59.

²⁵⁵ Loughery, *John Sloan*, 262.

²⁵⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, quoted in Douglas, 4.

inescapable past as poor janitor in North Dakota who built his fortune as a criminal and a bootlegger, Fitzgerald's final line hinted at tensions between rural and urban life.

While the twenties were in many regards as Fitzgerald described them—a glamorous, decadent, and politically conservative period, within New York, and particularly within the Village, turn of the century trends of Progressive reform continued to make an imprint. Fitzgerald's novel expressed a desire for more meaningful, thoughtful values. Liberal periodicals, Pratt's City and Country School, and the New School for Social Research, provided precedents for the cultural reform movements revived in the 1930s, of which the WPA/FAP would be a part. Cahill, working at the interface between artistic and journalistic communities, was urged, with further encouragement from Dewey's theories, to conceptualize contemporary art in relation to these broader cultural and social concerns unfolding around him. With Dana's guidance and support at the Newark Museum, Cahill's talents with publicity, knowledge of the downtown art scene, and interest in social theories began to congeal. Aligning himself with Dana's Progressive educational programs, Cahill began to conceptualize exhibitions on American art for an institution that was redefining the role of the museum in public life.

Chapter 3:
Creating Community at the Newark Museum:
Cahill and John Cotton Dana

If, as Cézanne has said, “Art speaks only to an extremely limited number of people,”—it is because only an extremely limited number of people have had the leisure opportunity to hear the voice of art. The ability to appreciate art is not the exclusive birthright of certain groups of people. It is largely the product of experience.

--Holger Cahill, *Art for the Few or the Many?* 1936²⁵⁷

In 1921, Cahill began working as an assistant to John Cotton Dana, a position that changed the course of his life professionally and personally. With Dana’s guidance his career shifted from public relations to curatorship. At the Newark Museum he conceived exhibitions of Modern and folk art and shaped the institution’s collection of American art. Through his involvement with the museum, he met Dorothy Miller, a talented apprentice in Dana’s newly established curatorial training program. She would become an influential colleague and friend many years before she and Cahill married in 1938. Most importantly, through his involvement with Dana’s experimental institution, Cahill began to approach American art and museum exhibitions as a means for building community. In the words of Cahill’s daughter, Jane Blumenfeld, “Dana gave him the opportunity to develop the museum into a community resource.”²⁵⁸

Cahill felt that the public should be informed about the art of their own country, both contemporary and historical. He reflected this belief in his exhibition program, which combined modern and folk art. He conceptualized a series of avant-garde shows,

²⁵⁷ Holger Cahill, “Art for the Few or the Many?” speech before the Washington branch of the American Association of University of Women, November 15, 1936, reel 5290, frames 1252-1271, 1-2. Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

²⁵⁸ Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, personal communication with the author, June 16, 2010.

including *Selections from the Society of Independent Artists*, the first museum presentation of Stuart Davis's work in 1925, and the first two museum survey exhibitions on American folk art, "American Primitives" in 1930 and "American Folk Sculpture" in 1931. Dana was pioneering a museum that promoted democratic aesthetic philosophies and public outreach and Cahill established it as an important venue for contemporary art.

A Progressive-era cultural reformer, Dana conceived the Newark Museum, like the library, as an institution of public service dedicated to educating the community and the "making of life more interesting, joyful, and wholesome."²⁵⁹ As a librarian, he had little expertise in Modern art but had been influenced by the Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Evident in his admiration for Japanese prints and his concern for the artful qualities of ordinary objects, these movements helped shape his conviction that beauty was an enriching component of daily experience for those educated to perceive it. As Carol Duncan has noted in her scholarship on Dana, he adapted these artistic theories to his own social vision:

Without the Aesthetic Movement, he would never have formed the conviction that aesthetic values are life enhancing, that practical objects like chairs, cups, and saucers can be beautiful, and that ornament and beauty are not synonymous. Dana's achievement was to infuse these values with Progressive-era purpose.²⁶⁰

Dana was, in fact, more interested in industrial and commercial objects than avant-garde painting and sculpture. His open-minded approach nevertheless enabled him to perceive the aesthetic significance in all objects, even when they did not suit his personal taste.

²⁵⁹ John Cotton Dana, "The Gloom of the Museum," in *The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana*, ed. William A. Peniston (Washington, D.C.: The Newark Museum and American Association of Museums, 1999), 56.

²⁶⁰ Carol G. Duncan, *A Matter of Class: John Cotton Dana, Progressive Reform, and the Newark Museum* (New York: Prestel, 2010), 56.

Dana encouraged Cahill, with his ties to the Greenwich Village art scene, to become the Newark Museum's expert on contemporary painting and sculpture.

Cahill recognized that the Newark community, an enormous, dirty, industrial manufacturing town, was in the shadow of New York City and not the ideal place for the application of Dana's vision of educating the public about art, craft, and industrial design. Cahill noted that "in some ways [his ideas] didn't fit the community."²⁶¹ Following the Civil War, Newark had been the site of ore and metal refineries, as well as leather tanning, paint, varnish, and electrical industries. With polluted water, dangerous enterprises, and a busy hub of railroad activity, it had the highest mortality rate of any American city in the 1890s.²⁶² By the early twentieth century, the city also had a booming commercial culture, embodied by Louis Bamberger's monolithic department store. The store, which had a restaurant and an auditorium, was located only a few blocks from the museum and was a center of entertainment with which Dana would have to compete. A large and eclectic community comprised of businessmen and immigrants who worked as laborers and craftsmen, Newark had a unique industrial history and strong economic drive. It was, nevertheless, in Cahill's words, "living under the wing of the mother hen, New York, and those people, whatever they want in a cultural way, they come to get in New York."²⁶³

²⁶¹ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 163. Interview by Joan Pring, 1957, transcript Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, microfilmed copy, reel 5285, frames 0027-0670, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Digitized version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/series1.htm.

²⁶² See Ezra Shales, "John Cotton Dana and the Business of Enlightening Newark: Applied Art at the Newark Public Library and Museum, 1902-19," PhD Diss. (New York: Bard College, 2006), 9.

²⁶³ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 163-164.

Dana's museum needed to appeal to the German, Irish, Italian, and East European immigrants who comprised two thirds of the city's populace. At the same time, Dana would have to attempt to fulfill the dreams of rich businessmen—the museum's trustees and donors—for an institution that could compete with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.²⁶⁴ Dana strove to make the museum serve his dual public. Catering his exhibitions on industrial, commercial, and craft products to the interests of businessmen and workers, he attempted to bridge the divide between labor and capital. As Duncan has discussed, like many Progressives, Dana ultimately viewed immigrants and laborers from an upper-middle class perspective and the museum ultimately sided with the commercial powers.²⁶⁵ Although his efforts had limitations, they were an act of community building that challenged traditional conceptions of a museum's role in society. Newark might never rival Manhattan as a cultural epicenter, but the city provided Dana a context within which to experiment with innovative ideas.

Cahill's attraction to the Newark job spoke to his proclivity for positioning himself on the margins, where he could be an insider and an outsider, and assume the role of cultural translator. Throughout his life, he was an Icelandic and American, a journalist and a curator, a bohemian and a bureaucrat. As director of the WPA/FAP, he became a conduit between New York, Washington, DC, and art projects throughout the country. Although he had hired Cahill for his publicity skills, and probably did not know that Cahill was an Icelandic immigrant, Dana may have sensed that he was a good match to interface with Newark's public. His identity combined an immigrant perspective with

²⁶⁴ Duncan, 69 and 74-75.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-139.

knowledge of art, literature, and culture acquired through the self-directed learning that the Newark Library and Museum encouraged.

A trailblazer in the field of museum curatorship, Dana's unconventional views on museums and aesthetics set him apart from his colleagues and made him an ideal mentor for Cahill. Like Cahill, although his path into his professional position had been circuitous, Dana's experiences had cultivated his commitment to education. At the same time, he produced the conviction that in the spirit of the age of reform he was not going to follow conventions. Born in Woodstock, Vermont, in 1856, Dana was the middle child of four brothers. As a boy he attended the local village school, assisted with the family's farm, and spent time at the local general store his father owned and operated. The store instilled in him the importance of building a relationship with a community of customers as the backbone to running a business, a respect for commercial goods, and an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of functional objects.²⁶⁶ After attending Dartmouth College, where he graduated at the top of his class, Dana returned to work as a lawyer in Woodstock. Discovering that his chosen profession did not allow him to indulge in his other wide-ranging interests including Latin, Greek, French, literature, and poetry, he was unsure of what kind of career he wanted to pursue. In 1880, he accepted an invitation from a Dartmouth classmate, who was a mine surveyor, to join him in Rico, Colorado.

Casting off his family's expectations for him at age twenty-three Dana began a nine-year period of wandering that echoed Cahill's adventures more than a decade later. As Sandra Alix Schnee describes Dana's self-education during these years, he:

²⁶⁶ Sandra Alix Schnee, "John Cotton Dana, Edgar Holger Cahill and Dorothy C. Miller: Three Art Educators," PhD Diss. (New York: Columbia Teachers College, 1987), 24-25.

traveled back and forth, from East to West, searching for a vocation, spiritual understanding, good health, and a life of purpose and fulfillment. Ever the passionate reader he read everything, discussing what he read with kindred spirits, both among the recognized literati and among the line men, cowboys, section hands, and ranchers.²⁶⁷

During this time he tried out a number of different professions, several of which Cahill also explored, including law, engineering, farming, insurance, real estate, surveying, preaching, and newspaper editing. At the same time, Dana continued to pursue academics, writing articles on religion, education, and ethics for small journals and newspapers, and lecturing on socialism and individualism.²⁶⁸ His years as a drifter came to an end in 1889 when, after writing an article critiquing public education, Dana was hired as director of the East Denver High School Library. After nine years in Denver, he became the director of libraries in Springfield, Massachusetts, from 1898 to 1902, and, in 1896, served as president of the American Library Association. By the time he was hired in 1902 as Director of the Newark Public Library, he had significant experience in reforming traditional library operations.

Informed by his early experiences at a high school library, Dana was opposed to the conception of libraries as rarified and restricted institutions and believed they should be an active part of the community. He maintained that libraries should be “interesting to the people of the community, the people who own it, the people who maintain it” and that materials should be easily accessible for loan because of the “necessity of getting your constituency in actual contact with the books themselves.”²⁶⁹ At Newark, as in Denver and Massachusetts, Dana established an open stack policy. Throughout his directorship,

²⁶⁷ Schnee, 27-28.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁶⁹ Quoted in Frank Kingdon, *John Cotton Dana* (Newark, NJ: Newark Public Library and Museum, 1940), 57.

Assistant Librarian Beatrice Winser (fig. 36) served as a powerful administrator who carried out his ideas. She had a dominating personality and was a strict manager. Cahill believed she “could run anything, including the United States Government, with great efficiency,” and “while she had a streak of ruthlessness, she also had a streak of kindness.”²⁷⁰

Dana, who believed art, like books, should not be sequestered from the public, sought to extend his reforms to museums. He believed American museums had become gloomy, stagnant temples filled with expensive objects that were not accessible or meaningful to their viewers.²⁷¹ In 1903, he began exhibiting art on the vacant upper floors of the Newark Public Library and in 1909, founded the Newark Museum Association. He also advocated for the placement of museums within the city center and the creation of branch museums. He established lending programs for art reproductions and art objects to local schools, and compiled a picture collection of photographs, prints, and illustrations available in the library (Fig. 37). Recognizing that it was not possible for all young people to visit the museum, he postulated:

Why not take the museum to the young people? Public braches can serve the adults; and collections, groups, single objects, and photographs and other pictures can easily be placed in school houses, and surely soon will be.²⁷²

This spirit of outreach infused Dana’s exhibitions, which attempted to cultivate the interests of the masses and reflected his eclectic artistic tastes. Early shows included Japanese prints (fig. 38), modern photography, and American paintings, pottery, rugs, and metals. Avant-garde exhibitions such as “The Eight” (1909), “Max Weber” (1913),

²⁷⁰ Cahill, *The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill*, 157.

²⁷¹ Dana, “The Gloom of the Museum,” 44-61.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 60.

and “Twenty Paintings by Twenty Living American Painters” (1913) made Newark, aside from Alfred Stieglitz’s Little Galleries (fig. 39), one of the few places to view modern American art in New York in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Whereas Stieglitz catered to connoisseurs and collectors, Dana strove to make his institution relevant to Newark’s immigrants and to the local businessmen who drove the economy of a rapidly growing industrial city. He promoted the museum’s activities through advertising campaigns, and organized exhibitions with ties to manufacturing and commercial displays.²⁷³ These included many shows of industrial art such as the “Exhibition of Modern German Applied Arts” in 1912 (fig. 40) and two years later “Exhibition of Clay Products Industry of New Jersey.” In the later show, in an act foreshadowing Duchamp, Dana put bathtubs, sinks, toilets, and urinals on display in the museum gallery. In Dana’s words, his exhibitions aimed to correct the fact that “our country is not getting the full value of the heritage in feeling for beauty and skill in crafts which many of her immigrants bring with them.”²⁷⁴ The Newark Museum became a leader in reaching out to immigrants and appealing to a multifarious group of viewers.

In another effort to bridge the divide between art and commercial goods, in 1928-1929 Dana organized a series of “Inexpensive Objects” exhibitions comprised of teacups, plates, pitchers, dishes, and bowls from local ten cents stores (fig. 41). One exhibition featured selections not costing more than fifty cents and another of objects not more expensive than ten cents. In his now well-known statement that accompanied the show, entitled “Beauty Has No Relation to Price, Rarity, or Age,” he asserted: “Beauty does not

²⁷³ Duncan, 147

²⁷⁴ Dana, “A Small American Museum: Its Efforts Toward Public Utility,” in *The New Museum*, ed. Peniston, 161.

wait on time, cost, or prestige. To see it, we need only open our eyes and our minds.”²⁷⁵

Challenging traditional boundaries between “high” and “low” artistic production, Dana’s curatorial practice encouraged all viewers to approach both contemporary American paintings and utilitarian objects with a careful eye and an open mind.

Cahill absorbed Dana’s conviction that support for local creativity and community outreach through exhibitions and education programs could foster a cultural Renaissance.

Dana maintained:

Art has always flourished where it was asked to flourish, and never elsewhere. If we wish for a renaissance of art in America, we must be students and patrons of endeavors, which seem humble but in truth are of the utmost importance, here at home.²⁷⁶

Cahill respected this support for contemporary American objects, rather than antique, expensive, and fashionable European products, which Dana associated with Veblen’s culture of conspicuous consumption.

According to Cahill, in 1926, Mrs. Felix Fuld, the sister of the owner of Bamberger’s department store, offered Dana 10,000 dollars to purchase European artworks. Dana refused, stating that he would prefer to buy American art. He left the selection to Cahill and Arthur Eger, a lawyer and founding member of the Newark Museum. Cahill bought John Sloan’s *Picture Shop Window* (fig. 42) and George C. Ault’s, *Brooklyn Ice House* (fig. 43) as well as works by Max Weber, Samuel Halpert, Robert Henri, and Bernard Karfiol. He played a key role in the formation of Newark’s

²⁷⁵ Dana, “Beauty Has No Relation to Age, Rarity, or Price,” 10-15 Cent Exhibition Folder, 1929, Exhibit Files, box 15, Newark Museum Archives.

²⁷⁶ Dana, “American Art: How it Can Be Made to Flourish,” in “Beauty Has No Relation to Age, Rarity, or Price,” Peniston, 218-219.

substantial collection of American art.²⁷⁷ The new collection was for display in the museum's new building. Designed by Chicago architect Jarvis Hunt (fig. 44), the building was sponsored by Bamberger and dedicated in 1925.

Cahill considered Dana's ability to foster connections between the cheap goods of department stores and industrial art one of his greatest talents, but found Dana's modernist aesthetic sensibilities lacking. When it came to fine art, Cahill vocalized his criticisms, and although Dana often did not agree, Cahill became the Progressive voice on artistic matters. In 1924, he and Dana debated the sculptural decoration for the exterior of the new building. Dana wanted to install traditional public sculpture by John Flannigan or J. Massey Rhind. To Cahill, who preferred the work of Lachaise, the statues seemed retrograde. He wrote to Dana:

You see I'm like the Camel's nose. I pry in everywhere. I've been thinking about sculpture. . . . In terms naïve Mr. Dana, don't do it! Two plots of grass would be better than anything any of these men can do, at a cost of some thousands of dollars. . . . Mr. Dana I advise you, don't let anybody's \$25,000 . . . smear a pair of weary, slab, flat [and] unprofitable sculptures [and] front of a new museum [and] so reduce to an architectural commonplace an institution which has the real old creative "picks" in its viscera even if the epidermis doesn't show it very well. . . . Rather let a museum show its good, unadorned flat face to the world.²⁷⁸

Dana's response made clear that his ambition was the promotion of the museum as an educational institution. As long as the public was content, he cared little about debates over artistic style:

Of course I don't agree. The fashions of sculpture change rapidly. The "forever good" kind is rarely produced [and] can't be distinguished as such when it is produced. I am trying to change a fashion (more than about 600 years old--) in museums—not in sculpture. To do that I'll gladly let

²⁷⁷ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 165-166.

²⁷⁸ Holger Cahill, letter to John Cotton Dana, November 24, 1924, Directors Records, box 7A, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

the outside of the museum's home be conventional—if so being it still pleases most [and] attracts customers.²⁷⁹

Ultimately Dana compromised, opting for small bronze relief busts of himself and Bamberger on the wall of the museum's entranceway. Nevertheless, Dana's approach towards the new building and Cahill's freshly assembled collection of Modern paintings infuriated Cahill at times. He recalled:

We put up [the new collection of paintings] in the gallery in the front of the museum, and they looked well there. To my horror about a month later, they had put in there a whole lot of cases of different examples of stone, which completely muddled up the display. They were glass exhibition cases, a great many of them, so you just had to wend your way between them. I wrote him a horrified note about it, and he just scrawled on the bottom, "For God's sake, let a plain man have his say once in a while!"²⁸⁰

Dana's tendency to challenge the "aura" of fine art, to "write 'Art' with a capital A, which had a little contempt behind it" frustrated Cahill, but had an incredible impact on his thinking.²⁸¹

Dana's emphasis on education, his conviction that fixed standards for good art were difficult to define, and his determination to intermingle objects of all sorts, shaped Cahill's theories as well as his curatorial approach. Dana instilled in him an open-ended appreciation for various artistic media and styles and a degree of irreverence for conventional display. Despite his displeasure with the cases of stoneware, Cahill integrated ancient stone sculpture and painting in his 1933 exhibition, "American Sources of Modern Art." In this exhibition, he artfully installed pre-Columbian sculpture as fine art rather than archaeological specimens. Probably hoping to avoid the congestion of

²⁷⁹ John Cotton Dana, letter to Holger Cahill, November 26, 1924, Directors Records, box 7A, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

²⁸⁰ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 167.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

Dana's display, he placed the ancient sculpture and contemporary painting in separate rooms. Although, at Newark, Cahill advocated for modern art in opposition to Dana's "plain man" perspective, Cahill would often play the role of the "plain man" in his own career. As director of the WPA/FAP he would assume Dana's role, prioritizing educational programs and public involvement over the advancement of avant-garde artistic developments, while still allowing these creativities to take place.

The opportunity Dana provided Cahill and other aspiring curators to shape the Newark Museum's exhibitions, installations, and programs became a career-molding influence on many aspiring museum professionals. Although the Fogg Museum at Harvard developed a reputation for having the premier curatorial training program directed by Paul Sachs, Dana was starting an apprenticeship program at virtually the same time. The first class of nine women graduated in 1926. The group included future Newark Museum curators Elinor Robison and Katherine Coffey as well as Dorothy Dudley, who became MoMA's head registrar, and Dorothy Miller (fig. 45). From the inception of the program Dana targeted women, sending letters to colleges and employment agencies looking for recent graduates of women's colleges who might be interested in museum work. Initially he planned to charge a fee for enrollment, but after graduates responded that they could not afford more schooling, he agreed to pay the apprentices a modest salary.

In addition to his outreach to women, Dana's decision to pay the students distinguished his curatorial training program from the Fogg's, making it not an academic program but a job with hands-on training. While connoisseurship was at the heart of Sach's museum course, Dana's apprenticeship stressed learning by doing. The Newark

Museum placed its emphasis on training educators not experts. As Dana explained in an overview of his apprenticeship program outlined in 1928:

We've ventured on an apprentice class in our museum because we were convinced that, being all of us learners, we could find no aid and stimulus to learning more which would be as good as the teaching of little that we knew. We do not question the generally accepted statement that genuine expertness in certain fields of learning is needed in a large museum, one which has many rare and curious things. But, for the beginning of a museum, and especially of a museum of teaching and utility such as ours is trying to be, expert-ness can be sought and found outside. . . . the expertness, most needed in a museum today is skill of management, or presentation to the public. What we have tried to do is make the institution in our hands attractive, entertaining and useful to our community.²⁸²

Apprentices worked in all aspects of the museum, spending several weeks in different departments including Registrar, Exhibits, Science, Office, Junior Museum, Lending, Museum Library, and Public Relations.²⁸³

The first class of apprentices were hired just as the museum was moving into its new building and were thoroughly involved in creating the Newark Museum as a distinct entity from the library. Miller remembered being asked to install the collections (fig. 46): “They just said to us, ‘Here’s the material set it up in these cases and write the labels.’ So it was great fun. Then when we got the museum open with all these various exhibits we had to become guards. . . . So we were guarding and docenting.” She described Newark’s collection as incredibly multifarious:

They had modern paintings, and they had a few very old paintings, mostly 19th century American. They had Tibetan art, African art, the art of Oceania. They had old English china and lace, early American furniture

²⁸² Pamphlet entitled, “Apprenticeship in the Museum,” compiled by E. T. Booth under the direction of J. C. Dana, director (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum, 1928), 3.

Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

and costumes. They had minerals. They had the birds of New Jersey. And they had a junior museum with live animals. They just had everything.²⁸⁴

Dorothy was responsible, in particular, for installing the collection of African and Oceanic art.²⁸⁵

In another example of unconventional display, in the late 1920s, Dana installed a collection of American crafts to recreate a colonial kitchen. The apprentices served as actors in costume, with Miller operating a spinning wheel and a colleague rocking a baby in a cradle in front of a hearth (fig.47). This complete recreation of a period room anticipated the preservation and installation of Colonial Williamsburg, a project that began in 1926 and on which Cahill later served as an advisor. The historical and educational value of crafts objects, at the heart of Dana's displays, provided a foundation for Cahill and Miller's interests in American folk art. The costumes and role-playing also hinted at a Progressive, bohemian undercurrent that characterized Dana's museum, and may have been enhanced by Cahill's presence. In one instance, a performance spoofing Vaudeville monkey acts had the apprentices dressed as the monkey troupe and Cahill as a woman (fig. 48).

The involvement of the apprentices in all aspects of the museum made it inevitable that Miller and Cahill would cross paths. When they did, Cahill was interested in the skinny brunette from the East Coast. Seventeen years her senior, Cahill, who had a tendency to be a Casanova, was at the same time starting a romance with gallery owner

²⁸⁴ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," May 1970-September 28, 1971, 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

Edith Halpert.²⁸⁶ His dashing appearance (fig. 49) and involvement in the New York art scene must have had an allure for Miller, but she did not rush into anything. They had both a personal and professional relationship for over ten years before getting married. In contrast to her husband, Miller was not an immigrant, a drifter, nor a bohemian. She had a relatively supportive, stable upbringing and exerted a grounding force on Cahill's life. She respected his reluctance to talk about his past, encouraged him to save money, and later supported his reestablishment of a relationship with his family.

Born in 1904 in Hopedale, Massachusetts, Dorothy was originally a New Englander like Dana. She had two sisters and a brother; her father was an engineer for the Draper Corporation, a company that produced mechanical looms. Her mother briefly studied art and then worked in Boston for a landscape gardener. The family did not stay long in Hopedale, which Miller's father found too provincial. He accepted a job in New York and the family went to live with his parents in Montclair, New Jersey, where Dorothy spent the majority of her childhood. She remembered: "Montclair was an extremely lovely Victorian town with glorious trees and marvelous mansions made of purple stone with stained glass windows." The community provided a combination of art and nature for an adventurous girl to explore.²⁸⁷

Surrounded by her parents and grandparents, her family nurtured her intellectual curiosity and artistic sensibilities. Miller recalled, "We were voracious readers. We were reading all the time when we weren't climbing trees and jumping off roofs."²⁸⁸ Miller's grandmother and sisters both played the piano, but even after six years of lessons she

²⁸⁶ Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 176 and 410.

²⁸⁷ Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 1.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

remembered she “couldn’t do a thing with the piano.”²⁸⁹ Her grandfather was an art collector, who compiled a collection of interesting, but mostly unknown, paintings and her father encouraged Dorothy to be an artist. The latter selected Smith College for her because of its reputation as having the best art department. As Miller discovered, in fact, “It had a very good history of art department . . . but the painting teaching was totally academic.”²⁹⁰

Entering Smith in 1921, Miller’s education at one of the premiere women’s colleges further shaped her interest in art and her identity as a grounded, ambitious woman. She possessed both a dedication to scholarship and a zest for life that prepared her to be a leader in her field. The letters she sent home exude her concern for her studies, her warmth toward her family, and an excitement about being on her own. She wrote to her mother:

I’ve got so much work ahead that I don’t want you to worry about me if you don’t hear from me very often. Shakespeare paper is due next Saturday and honestly it’s a life work and I don’t see how I’ll ever do it. And that’s only one item. But I suppose this is what it means to get educated.²⁹¹

In her first year at Smith, Miller studied French, Astronomy, and Art in addition to English. In art class, she made charcoal drawings of casts, “no shadows, just simple outlines to get the proportions right.”²⁹² She repeatedly voiced her anxiety about her studies, an early expression of the tremendous work ethic that characterized her entire career.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Dorothy Miller, letter to her mother, undated c. 1922, box 5, folder 15, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

²⁹² Dorothy Miller, letter to her family, September 30, 1921, box 5, folder 15, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

When she was not in class, she revealed that she “could do anything I please—study, go the movies, go calling, go walking, go shopping—anything.”²⁹³ Her letters frequently touched upon her love for fashion, expressing delight at clothing her family sent to her, and admiring the wardrobes of the women around her, whom she recognized as being wealthier than herself. Nevertheless, she remained frugal, and was ecstatic when during a snowy winter she discovered a deal to buy “some almost new arctics from a girl here for \$3.00. At the stores they cost \$5.50 so I think I was awfully lucky to get them so cheap.”²⁹⁴ Throughout her career, Miller, who bought her designer dresses from the second-hand Two Time Shop on East Seventy-eighth Street, would consistently appear impeccably dressed (fig. 50). Her elegant, understated manner evidenced a respect for craftsmanship and commercial goods that Dana advocated at the museum.

It was not until her senior year that a seminar art course with Clarence Kennedy on the Italian Renaissance inspired Dorothy to consider a career as a curator. She remembered:

He had five of us in a seminar in our last year studying Italian Renaissance sculpture. At the end of the year he said to me, “I want to take you five girls to Europe and you all should become museum curators. You have to get an M.A. first and at the end of our year in Europe you’ll have an M.A.” I was a very silly little girl and I said, “Oh, I’d love to go but I can’t because I haven’t any money.” (I could have borrowed the money.) The other four went. But I was the only one of the five that became a museum curator.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Dorothy Miller, letter to her father, Arthur B. Miller, February 3, 1922, box 5, folder 15, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

²⁹⁵ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Dorothy C. Miller,” 3.

Instead of going to Europe, after her graduation from Smith, she went out West with some cousins. While she was there, she received a letter from the Newark Museum inviting her to become part of the first class of apprentices.

From the outset, Cahill brought some excitement and spontaneity into Miller's hardworking approach to life. Cahill's adventurous nature appealed to the part of Miller's personality that liked to climb trees and jump off roofs. She remembered with pleasure the first time they went out together. On a Sunday, he invited her and Dorothy Dudley to see the Society of Independent Artists exhibition at the Waldorf Hotel. Even though both women had to work as docents at the museum in the afternoon, Miller agreed:

He took us to that show and of course it was terribly exciting. . . . Then Cahill asked us to lunch and took us to a speakeasy down in the Village. We had some ghastly muscatel or something—it was practically my first drink. We felt marvelous and so we said, “We're due at the Newark Museum at 2:00. Let's just telephone and say we'll be late.” So we told them. This was a place that was very strict, we punched a time clock at the Newark Museum. . . . When we got there Miss Winser was there at the door waiting to take our heads off and throw them into the street.²⁹⁶

At the Newark Museum, Cahill also acted as a liaison with the New York avant-garde, bringing the apprentices to see the Society of Independent Artists shows and attracting the New York audience to the Newark Museum. His attempt to reverse the cultural flow by bringing Modern art out to Newark anticipated his later efforts to extend creativity beyond major metropolitan centers. In 1924, utilizing his ties with the Society of Independent Artists, Cahill arranged for works from the Society's annual exhibition to be shown at the museum. He selected Sloan's *Dance Cochiti Pueblo* and Paul Barlett's *Pond Above the Sea* (figs 51-52), as well as works by Louis Lozowick, Marguerite Zorach, Henri Kantor, Halpert, and Walter Pach among others. It was an eclectic

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 7.

arrangement presenting several different approaches to the American landscape, with Lozowick's geometric cityscapes, Bartlett's pastoral boating scene, and Sloan's Santa Fe-inspired composition of a Native American celebration.

In correspondence with the exhibition, Walter Pach presented a lecture at the Newark Museum, in which he addressed the need for a tradition within American art, a popular topic often discussed by Cahill, writer Van Wyck Brooks, and contemporary artists. In the search for American artistic tradition, Pach argued for the engagement of museums, artists, and the public:

Today we have the struggle of the artist who is trying to express America as it is. . . . The meaning and destiny of America, unique in the history of nations, arouses in many imaginative minds a powerful artistic response. They want to express it, to put it into an artistic form that shall endure for all time. It is these artists who must be educated and encouraged by our museums and by our public.²⁹⁷

The talk, solidifying the mutual goals of artists and the museum staff, was perfectly orchestrated for the occasion. Cahill and Dana shared Pach's ideals. Through their curatorial projects, they were committed to supporting contemporary artists and to serving the public through programming and outreach.

In February 1925, in an attempt to connect modern art with the community, Cahill highlighted an artist who had lived and painted in Newark, mounting a mini-retrospective of Stuart Davis's paintings. The show of ten paintings was a small, but significant, undertaking. Cahill was aware of Davis's talent as both as an urban realist and abstract painter and chose to spotlight the young artist with his first solo museum exhibition. It seems likely that Cahill and Davis may have met prior to the exhibition. They might have

²⁹⁷ Walter Pach, "Problems of the American Artists. Discussed at Newark Museum," April 30, 1924, Exhibit Files, box 14, Society of Independent Artists Exhibit, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

been introduced through John Sloan, with whom Davis was close, or through the Society of Independent Artists, of which Davis was elected one of the directors in 1922.

Davis, who was born in 1892 in Philadelphia, lived in New Jersey for most of his childhood. He moved with his family to East Orange, New Jersey, in 1901, when his father, Edward Wyatt Davis, an illustrator at the *Philadelphia Press* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, accepted a job as art editor and cartoonist with the *Newark Evening News*. Through his work with the Philadelphia newspapers, Edward had become friendly with the Ashcan painters, who were employed as newspaper illustrators. Previously, he had met Robert Henri, the leader of the Ashcan school, when they were both students in an antique class at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1891. Throughout his childhood, Davis's family remained close with Sloan and the Henri circle. When Stuart decided, in 1909, to drop out of high school to study art, he enrolled in the Robert Henri School of Art located at Broadway and Sixty-sixth Street, marking the beginning of his long career. Davis moved the following year into a boarding house on James Street in Newark. Immediately, he turned his attention to painting Newark's saloons, street life, row houses, railroad tracks, and industrial canals. He created gritty, urban scenes that revealed an early attention to interplays of geometric form.

Davis's paintings portrayed Newark as a dirty, vibrant center of modern life around the same time the Ashcan artists were avidly painting the Manhattan cityscape, in particular the immigrant communities of the Lower East Side. Newark, however, had a unique landscape that was both heavily industrial and more rural than its neighboring metropolis. In *Newark*, painted in 1910 (fig. 53), Davis depicted the city's grungy canals that wound through flat fields lined with row houses and factory smokestacks. Using a

sooty brown and red palette, he rendered the houses with nearly abstract rectangles, and created dynamic tension between the vertical smokestacks and the horizontal lines of telephone poll wires. He also captured Newark's working class nightlife in his watercolor *Negro Saloon* of 1912 (fig. 54), a mysterious scene of a hushed conversation between two barflies.

The works Cahill selected, including *Newark* and *Negro Saloon*, traced Davis's artistic trajectory from early twentieth-century Realism toward more abstracted compositions, but did not present a straightforward progression. Featuring Davis's Ashcan style scenes, his Cuban watercolors, and geometric abstractions derived from the Gloucester ships and docks, the exhibition illustrated the breadth of Davis's early work. As a review in the *Newark Evening News* noted, "the exhibition is a cross section of the history of a phase of American art in the last twelve years."²⁹⁸ Another work in the show, *Rigging* of 1924 (fig. 55), exhibited as *Cross Word Harbor*, pushed viewers to the limits of discernable representation. The reviewer described the abstract arrangement of blue and white squares as "a deep blue and white harbor of crossword squares like a geometrical cloud on the horizon—the mirage of a sailor gone mad over crossword puzzles, painted by an artist who thinks geometrically and asserts the rest of us do, too."²⁹⁹ Although the show was not covered extensively in the press, it laid the foundation for a retrospective of Davis's work the following year at the Whitney Studio

²⁹⁸ "Crossword Puzzle Motif in Art Expressed on Canvas at Museum," *Newark Evening News* (8 February 1925).

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Club. The exhibition also cemented Cahill and Davis's friendship, which continued until Cahill's death.³⁰⁰

Over the years, Cahill and Davis met frequently to discuss the WPA/Federal Art Project, to visit museums, and to listen to jazz records, of which they were both passionate collectors.³⁰¹ Davis recounted in a speech honoring Cahill in 1939:

On an evening a few months ago I called on Mr. Cahill in his home armed with a collection of records which I felt would sure would knock him for a row of fur-lined saxophones. I would admit that I was a bit put out when he smiling matched me record for record from his own collection. Future meetings were arranged and every week the same result followed. All efforts to find some forgotten masterpiece of Swing music which he didn't have went for naught.³⁰²

Cahill especially impressed Davis by playing him a rare first recording by Pinetop Smith, the inventor of the Boogie Woogie jazz piano style.

The deep appreciation for jazz riffs and rhythms, which he and Cahill shared, infused Davis's works of the 1930s, including his WPA 1938 mural *Swing Landscape* (fig. 56) for the Williamsburg housing project in Brooklyn. Inventing titles that intertwined references to the American urban landscape with the musical terms "hot," "swing," and "style," the paintings pulsate with dynamic colors and abstract patterns, that appear as if they were blasted directly from the phonograph onto the canvas. Jazz

³⁰⁰ Ani Boyajian and Mark Rutkoski, *Stuart Davis: A Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 131, 132, and 156.

³⁰¹ Stuart Davis noted in his daily agenda, which was shared with me by the artist's son, Earl Davis, that the former met with Cahill and Dorothy Miller to discuss the Federal Art Project on November 21, 1935. On January 6, 1940, Cahill visited Davis and they listened to Earl Hines and Art Tatum. On March 26, 1952, Cahill and Davis went to the Whitney Museum together.

³⁰² Stuart Davis, "Speech at a dinner for Holger Cahill at Hotel Breevoort," May 26, 1939. Stuart Davis Papers, unmicrofilmed materials regarding American Artists Congress, Artists Committee of Action, American Society of Painters, Sculptors, Gravers, Artists Coordination Committee, League of American writers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

continued to influence Davis's work throughout his career and, in 1945, Cahill accompanied him to see the New Orleans trumpet player, Bunk Johnson.³⁰³ Their relationship, beginning with Cahill's support for Davis's work early in his career, spanned five decades. It survived the political debates of the 1930s, when Davis, as President of the American Artists Congress, campaigned for artists' rights, frequently writing letters demanding continued government support for artists to Cahill in Washington DC.

Cahill's exhibitions of contemporary painting at Newark were important for his relationships with artists and his development as a curator, but were minor shows that did not receive a tremendous amount of publicity. It was his surveys of American folk art, however, which he proposed after he had left the Newark Museum as a full-time staff member, that would attract attention and solidify his career. After Dana's illness and death in 1929, during which Cahill sat at his bedside, Cahill felt that the museum would not be the same without his mentor's leadership and decided to discontinue working there.³⁰⁴

Following his departure, Beatrice Winser invited him to organize a sculpture show. Cahill, who had had been intrigued by folk art since he had first begun his position at Newark, felt this was the opportunity to pitch a show about it. Following his promotion of the Deutsche Werkbund exhibition, the Swedish American News Exchange had invited Cahill to Sweden to help organize its publicity. He traveled through Sweden, Norway, and Germany, where he admired the collections of museums devoted to Swedish and German folk art. He recalled that in Gothenburg, "they have extraordinary

³⁰³ Stuart Davis, daily agenda, November 10, 1945.

³⁰⁴ Cahill, *Reminiscences of Holger Cahill*, 159.

examples, especially of Swedish costumes. The Swedish peasant costume, I think, is one of the most luxuriant. They have so many examples of it. They have hundreds.”³⁰⁵

Impressed with Sweden and Germany’s support for their local cultural traditions, Cahill returned to America with an interest in folk art. As a result of Dana’s proclivity for unconventional displays of industrial art and receptivity to new ideas, the Newark Museum would be receptive towards Cahill’s proposals for exhibitions of folk art in the early 1930s.

Although Dana had not had an interest in folk art, Cahill’s exhibitions “American Primitive Painting” in 1930 and “American Folk Sculpture” in 1931 can be seen as his expansion upon Dana’s exhibition programs. Cahill recalled that he presented the show as a continuation of Dana’s interests in order to get Winser’s support, because she was devoted to Dana. This was not just spin, as Cahill’s intention to bring craft objects, including folk portraits, weather vanes, duck decoys, ship figure heads, and paintings on velvet into museum galleries was in line with Dana’s interest in displaying an eclectic assortment of American-made objects. His understanding of Dana’s philosophies on American art, education, and community building, contributed to Cahill’s success at generating broad interest in folk art.

Although Cahill was not the only scholar to emphasize the relationship of American folk art to the formation of an American tradition or to discuss its impact as a

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 190.

populist art form with strong ties to local communities, he was adamant about creating an understanding about these largely uncelebrated objects.³⁰⁶ He observed:

Few people know much about American folk art. Many think there is no such thing. They would be willing to admit that other countries have it. But few Americans know about the folk expression of their own country.³⁰⁷

Although Cahill has rightly been credited as a pioneering scholar on American folk art, he was not its first connoisseur. Collectors such as Whitney Studio Club Director, Juliana Force, and Massachusetts's collector, Isabel Carleton Wilde had begun amassing collections of American folk art in the 1920s (fig. 57). The spreading vogue had been recognized in small exhibitions. Ahead of the collectors were the artists. As Cahill noted:

The discoverers of [folk art's] esthetic quality were the pioneers of modern art who began coming back from France about 1910. They were in revolt against the naturalistic and impressionistic tendencies of the nineteenth century and their emphasis upon a return to the sources of tradition had given them an interest in primitive and naïve art.³⁰⁸

Many artists had become interested in folk art by viewing Hamilton Easter Field's collection of objects and antique furnishings at his home and art colony in Ogunquit, Maine. Sculptor Elie Nadelman, and painters Robert Laurent and William Zorach all assembled significant collections (fig. 58) and were lenders to Cahill's exhibitions. Cahill, who met Field through his work with the Society of Independent Artists, probably first traveled to in the Ogunquit colony sometime in the early 1920s, and was certainly

³⁰⁶ [Lincoln Kirstein], *Exhibition of American Folk Painting in connection with The Massachusetts Tercentenary Celebration* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, 1930).

³⁰⁷ Holger Cahill, "American Folk Art, Radio Talk," November 1930, reel 5290, frame 1148, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA. Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/container183899.htm.

³⁰⁸ Holger Cahill, "Early Folk Art in America," *Creative Art* 4 (December 1932): 268.

aware of Field's folk art collection prior to 1924.³⁰⁹ Wilde's collection was shown at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art in Cambridge in 1930, with a small catalogue written by Lincoln Kirstein.³¹⁰ Prior to that, in 1924, Duidensing Gallery in New York showed American primitive landscapes and portraits and the Whitney Studio Club exhibited early American art lent by Ogunquit artists.

Building upon these smaller exhibitions, The "American Primitives" was a more comprehensive survey that incorporated new finds with loans. To assemble materials, Cahill and Newark Museum curators, Katherine Coffey and Elinor Robinson, went on a road trip along the northeast coast of the United States in the fall of 1930. Coffey recalled that on a visit to Baltimore and Pennsylvania, Cahill tracked down two paintings by Joseph Pickett, *Washington Under the Council Tree* (fig. 59) and *Coryell's Ferry New Hope Pennsylvania* by calling every last name beginning with "R" in the phone book, until he located someone who knew the particular collector for whom he was looking—Mr. R. Moore Price.³¹¹ *Washington Under the Council Tree* is an historic scene of Washington riding his horse through rolling hillsides dotted with farmsteads, trees, and flying birds. After the show, it was acquired by the Newark Museum and became a well-known folk painting.

As Coffey noted later in her report, most of the paintings in the show were not acquired this way but borrowed from artists, collectors, and dealers. In this regard

³⁰⁹ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 193.

³¹⁰ Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), 209.

³¹¹ Katherine Coffey, "Notes on Collecting the Painting for the Exhibition of American Primitive Paintings Held at the Newark Museum, November 4, 1930 to February 1, 1931." Exhibit Files, box 21, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

William Zorach offered some important leads and several of his own loans. In a letter to Winser he explained that Cahill:

wrote me about the exhibition of American Primitives and I gave him a number of suggestions. . . . I think the idea is a fine one—and you should be able to get together a very interesting showing. Mrs. Force of the Whitney Museum could help you a bit I think. . . . Eli Nadleman has a fine collection also of American Primitives. . . . He has a marvelous collection of all kinds of early American things of every sort.³¹²

Nadelman lent several works along with sculptor Robert Laurent and painter Stefan Hirsch. In total, the exhibition comprised eighty-three paintings of various genres, including portraits, landscapes, mourning pictures, and paintings on velvet as well as three pieces of wooden sculpture, including the carved portrait, *Preacher, Called Henry Ward Beecher* (Fig. 60).

Such works as the sculpture, *The Preacher* and the portrait, *Child in a Blue Dress* (Fig. 61) epitomized the slightly awkward, naïve style that charmed admirers of American folk art. Arms folded and Bible clasped in his hand, the figure in *The Preacher* lifts his chin towards the heavens, assuming a static and rigid pose. Similarly, untrained portrait painters portrayed their subjects in standard poses (in this case, seated and holding a book) but were uncertain of their ability to show the human body or three-dimensionality. The young girl wears a dress with a fancy lace collar and sits uncomfortably, with legs dangling in opposite directions, on a plain wooden bench. Her ornate costume, in combination with the simple furniture, expresses her bourgeois position. In colonial America, commissioned portraits appealed to the middle class as luxury goods—often intended for decoration or in commemoration of a child that had

³¹² William Zorach, letter to Beatrice Winser, Sept 29, 1930, Newark Museum, Exhibit Files, box 20, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

died—and helped reinforce a family’s social status. The ownership of a portrait was more important than the artistic merit of the artwork, enabling inexperienced traveling portraitists to learn the craft of painting, devising their own improvised styles.³¹³ In *Child in a Blue Dress*, the painter distorts perspective, tilting the seat of the bench forward, and rendering the child’s legs into ungainly log-like limbs. Her face appears flattened and delicate, with almond-shaped eyes that are captivating, but inexpressive. The artistic uncertainty and experimentation, as well as the flattening of forms, appealed to the modern painters and collectors of Modern art, who found an eccentric, whimsical beauty in folk compositions.

In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Cahill situated folk production within the tradition of American art. He wrote: “The pictures in this exhibition represent the unconventional side of the American tradition. Their creators were artisans and amateurs.”³¹⁴ He emphasized that folk art was produced by common people such as “inn keeper and sign-painter, Chester Harding. . . . Quaker minister Edward Hicks, or the storekeeper, Joseph Pickett,” and articulated a new Populist tradition that was based on local craft techniques rather than “an academic tradition passed on by schools.”³¹⁵ Cahill argued that all folk sources need not be native, however, noting both Dutch and English influences and parallels to Chinese art in some of the works.

While the catalogue offered only a brief introduction, Cahill skillfully promoted his show, using his ties with New York critics to spark the interest of artists and dealers. The review in *The New York Times* by Edward Alden Jewell tried to draw Manhattanites

³¹³ John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 1988), 69-71.

³¹⁴ Holger Cahill, *American Primitives* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum: 1930), 7-8.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

out to Newark, announcing “A Venture in Homespun: Fascinating Display at Newark, Within Tubing Distance of 57th Street.” Jewell noted that the exhibition forced the viewer to reconsider the “myth that argues our being able to advance no indigenous ‘folk’ art in this country.”³¹⁶

The exhibition was closely tied to collectors, dealers, and the art market and sparked Abby Rockefeller to become a serious collector of folk art.³¹⁷ During the “American Primitives” exhibition, works were virtually sold off the museum walls. Although the museum could not officially conduct a sale, it was common practice for gallery attendants to quote prices, and for the Newark staff to put interested viewers and collectors in contact.³¹⁸ As her interest developed, Cahill would serve as Rockefeller’s adviser, helping her to form her collection, now preserved at Colonial Williamsburg.

Edith Halpert (fig. 62) facilitated Cahill’s opportunity to advise Rockefeller, making her arguably the most influential person in launching Cahill’s career. While he had been assembling materials for “American Primitives,” Cahill was also scouting interesting folk art pieces that would appeal to Edith, who would sell them to Rockefeller and pay Cahill a commission. A young businesswoman who had been married to the artist Samuel Halpert, in 1926, she had opened the Downtown Gallery in Greenwich Village on West Thirteenth Street (Fig. 63), across the street from Romany Marie’s teahouse. Halpert catered to Village artists and to collectors of American modernism. On

³¹⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “A Venture in the Homespun: Fascinating Display at Newark, Within Tubing Distance of Fifty-Seventh Street,” *The New York Times* (9 November 1930).

³¹⁷ Wendy Jeffers, “Holger Cahill and American Folk Art,” *Antiques* 148 (September, 1995): 332.

³¹⁸ See Exhibit Files, box 20, American Primitives, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

the gallery's upper floors (fig. 64), she created the American Folk Art Gallery, which put folk art in a dialogue with the contemporary work downstairs (fig. 65).

Cahill and Halpert viewed American folk art as a source for modern artists, and the Downtown Gallery's pairing of objects asserted this relationship. The two had first met in Ogunquit in 1926, where Halpert purchased her first pieces of folk art, and where Cahill's "easy wit and smile caught her eye."³¹⁹ In a press release for her first exhibition of folk art, "American Ancestors," Halpert articulated an American lineage for modernist abstraction. Emphasizing the visual ties between folk art and contemporary painting she stated:

The Collections of the American Folk Art Gallery show very definitely the relation of American folk painting to modern painting. There is a disregard for imitative realism and a concentration on design problems in this folk expression, with which the modern artist finds himself very much in sympathy³²⁰

Edith would sometimes accompany Cahill on road trips throughout the northeast to search for new material. She became an instrumental collaborator in creating a market for folk art and an influential colleague, further solidifying Cahill's position as a critic and curator.

Halpert approached American art, as Cahill did, as an immigrant who was trying to forge a successful career. Edith, who had been born in Odessa in 1900 to a Russian Jewish family, came to New York City in 1906. Her father had died in Russia when she was a small child and, after bringing Edith and her sister to America, her mother supported the family by running a small stationery store on Madison Avenue and 105th

³¹⁹ Pollock, 54.

³²⁰ Quoted in Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 323-324.

Street. Halpert attended the local public elementary school, where she struggled her first year because she did not understand English, and was humiliated by her teacher who made her wear a dunce cap. This early embarrassment triggered a drive to work hard, Americanize her identity, and succeed. She soon moved to the top of her class. Although her family was poor, and she was teased for her homemade clothes, Edith developed a thick skin. As she put it, “I really developed for myself esteem, a sense of superiority to compensate for the hurt.”³²¹ In an effort to refine her intellectual and creative abilities, she also cultivated an interest in art, attending evening classes at the National Academy of Design.

When her sister married and brought her mother and Edith with her to her new home in Kentucky, Edith, who had decided she wanted to be artist, was eager to get back to New York. Like Cahill, she ventured out on her own, renting an apartment on Fifty-eighth Street and applying for a job at Bloomingdales to operate a comptometer, a mechanical adding machine. As Lindsay Pollock has noted, she had the ability to promote herself and a willingness to lie, skills that Cahill had similarly perfected. Edith recalled: “Standing in line waiting to be interviewed, I figured out immediately that Bloomingdales wanted experience. By the time I got to the head of the line, I’d had two previous jobs operating comptometers, did it well and liked the work. I was hired.”³²² Developing her business skills and relying on her self-confidence, she quickly advanced her career. She moved up into Bloomingdales art department, where she designed

³²¹ Harlan Phillips, “Oral History Interview with Edith Gregor Halpert, 1962-1963,” 60. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, quoted in Pollock, 18.

³²² Edith Halpert, *Art Dealer in America*, notes for Edith’s unfinished, unpublished autobiography, reel 5637, frame 424, quoted in Pollock, 24-25.

advertisements. She then became a fashion illustrator for R.H. Macy and Company and worked in advertising at Stern Brothers Department Store, while continuing her evening studies at the National Academy.

Still hoping for a career in art, she frequented galleries and made connections in artistic circles, through which she met Samuel Halpert in 1917. Shortly thereafter, her teacher at the academy, Leon Kroll, crushed her dreams of being a professional artist, advising her she that didn't have the talent. Devastated, she immediately threw all her art materials into the incinerator in the basement of her apartment building.³²³ Her connections with artists, and appreciation for their struggles would, however, be a great asset when she combined her artistic interests and business talents, when she launched her art gallery in Greenwich Village nine years later.

Initially called Our Gallery at the suggestion of William Zorach, Halpert decided to rename it the Downtown Gallery in order to market its Village locale. Recognizing an emerging fad for antique American arts and furniture, which Van Wyck Brooks described as “emblems of a country that could no longer be called new or young,” Halpert showcased American folk art in the context of her bohemian-chic, surroundings.³²⁴ By the 1920s, the Village was becoming a commercial destination as well as a tourist attraction and, as Cahill noted, “the virtue went out of the Village.”³²⁵ The commercialism however, brought with it new institutions and additional support for the artists. Edith attracted clients by introducing them to the artsy neighborhood. Halpert “loved escorting uptown types to Julius’s, a nearby speakeasy, or bringing a flask of

³²³ Ibid., 41.

³²⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, *Days of the Phoenix*, 1.

³²⁵ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 59.

martini mix to meet an out-of-town customer at the Drake Hotel. It was all for the shock value.”³²⁶ Capitalizing on the Village’s image, she created one of the few venues for viewing contemporary American art, aside from Stieglitz’s gallery.

While Cahill and Halpert’s professional and romantic relationship was spurred by American folk art, they were poorly suited for an intimate relationship in certain regards. Their shared immigrant experience was perhaps too similar, and they had responded to their difficulties differently. Both had to reinvent themselves in response to their new life in America, and had experienced poverty. However, Halpert’s family had been fairly prosperous in Russia living on “the Odessa equivalent of Park Avenue.”³²⁷ This potentially aided her in a secure perception of her social status and self-worth. It enabled her to cloak her vulnerabilities in self-confidence and even instances of bravura, such as boasting that she served her mother’s borscht recipe to Abby Rockefeller.³²⁸

Having hardened herself in her effort to excel, Halpert had little patience for Cahill’s sensitivities. His insecurities were always lurking beneath the surface of his lively personality, and perhaps reminded her of her own fragilities. When Cahill, who over the course of his career suffered from stomach problems, gallstones, appendicitis, and other illnesses, complained to Halpert about his physical problems, she was not sympathetic. A strong woman who had charted her own success, she replied: “I am terribly unhappy about you, and your lack of personal strength,” noting that she had “some pretty severe sorrows in my life,” but “I rarely luxuriate in self pity.”³²⁹ She

³²⁶ Pollock, 70.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

³²⁹ Edith Halpert, letter to Holger Cahill, *circa* summer 1930, reel 5285, frame 782, Hogler Cahill Papers, AAA.

seemed to wish that he would let go of his past traumas and his tendency to wallow, especially when he was ill, and simply get on with his career.

Although their romance was short-lived, Edith provided Cahill opportunities to build up his reputation. She invited him to write monographs on Downtown Gallery artists, which she published, and supported his curatorial projects through loans of gallery inventory. In 1928, Cahill authored a book on George Overbury [“Pop”] Hart and wrote a second on Max Weber two years later. Halpert also supported Cahill’s attempt at editing a magazine called *Space*, which he tried to launch in 1930. In cooperation with artists Stefan Hirsh, Weber, and Robert Laurent, who were also on the board of directors, Edith served as treasurer and secretary. Due probably to a combination of Cahill’s poor health and his involvement with Newark folk exhibitions, the venture was short-lived. Halpert would, however, be a key lender to Cahill’s second folk exhibition at Newark, “American Folk Sculpture.” She contributed gallery inventory, as well as pieces from Mrs. Rockefeller’s collection, which were lent anonymously through the gallery.³³⁰

In this in-depth survey of folk sculpture, Cahill kept the definition of sculpture broad, including toys (fig. 66) weathervanes (fig. 67), ship figureheads, and duck decoys, as well as a group of nine pins contributed from his own collection. The highlight of the show was a twelve-foot ship figurehead of Andrew Jackson, which he placed near the entranceway (fig. 68). The variety of the works could have resulted in a confusing *mélange* in the gallery. The installation photographs, however, document a modern, streamlined presentation (fig. 69). The galleries were not overcrowded. Each object was

³³⁰ See Edith Halpert’s lending agreement with the Newark Museum, Exhibit Files, box 21, American Folk Art Exhibition, Newark Museum Archives, Newark, New Jersey.

presented with sufficient space for contemplation, and consideration as an individual work of art and not installed as a period room, or an historic display of American crafts.

The arrangement distinguished Cahill's interest in folk art as a means to articulate a usable past from Henry Ford's obsessive collecting of American materials, which he installed at his museum in Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. In Ford's installation, a great variety of materials are presented without labels and arranged as if in a storage room (fig. 70), creating a cemetery of dead objects that commemorate an outmoded past.³³¹ In contrast, Cahill looked to artistic tradition, so that it might inform the present. In his words, "It must have relevance for us to today, or a potential relevance, otherwise it is not tradition but a cadaver."³³²

In his catalogue essay, Cahill emphasized the works as aesthetic objects, despite their sometimes crude construction, and continued to develop his Populist argument that folk art was an accessible art form that resulted from the intuitive creativity of the average craftsman rather than from formal, aristocratic artistic training:

folk art in its truest sense . . . is an expression of the common people and not an expression of a small cultured class. Folk art usually has not much to do with the fashionable art of its period. It is never the product of art movements, but comes out of craft traditions. . . . This art is based not on measurements or calculations but on feeling, and it rarely fits in with the standards of realism. It goes straight to the fundamentals of art—rhythm, design, balance, proportion, which folk art feels instinctively.³³³

³³¹ For a discussion of Greenfield Village and its construction of the past in relation to modernity, see Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1993), 144-151.

³³² Holger Cahill, "What is Tradition?" Speech to the American Artists Congress, 1940, 4. Reel 5290, frames 1382-1402, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA. Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/container183917.htm.

³³³ Holger Cahill, *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Craftsman* (Newark, New Jersey: The Newark Museum, 1931), 13.

Emphasizing formal elements, Cahill also hinted at the connection between folk art and modernism, recognized by artists like Kuniyoshi, whose painting *Boy Stealing Fruit*, enlivens the conventional folk baby portrait, putting the subject into action as an endearing, mischievous thief (fig. 71). Cahill hoped to reclaim folk sculpture as a popular source for contemporary artists, who “found in this folk expression a kinship with their own work, and a proof that there is an American tradition in the arts which is as old as the European colonization of this country and which is vital today.”³³⁴

The success of the Newark folk art exhibitions established Cahill as the leading authority on the subject. As Miller recalled, “Because Cahill knew people in New York, he got Henry McBride and all the other critics from other papers—and we had a lot of newspapers then—and art magazines *Creative Art* and so on—they all came over.”³³⁵ McBride’s article in *The New York Sun* astutely praised Cahill’s ability to stage an innovative visual production with the headlines “Newark Museum’s Display of Folk Sculpture Proves Both Popular and Important: Work of Unschooled Persons At Least Has Individual Touch: Weather Vanes, Ship’s Figureheads and the Cigar Store Indian Now Related to Country’s Art History.”³³⁶

The lead-in for the article hinted at the marriage between Cahill and his material. Putting the curator center stage, McBride wrote:

Holger Cahill achieves a first rate feat of showmanship in the exhibition of American folk sculpture at the Newark Museum. He has scoured the country to find specimens of an art that has heretofore been but dimly

³³⁴ Cahill, *American Folk Sculpture*, 18.

³³⁵ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Dorothy C. Miller,” 10.

³³⁶ Henry McBride, “Newark Museum’s Display of Folk Sculpture Proves Both Popular and Important,” *The New York Sun* (24 October 1931).

known even by experts and definitely establishes it as a class that hereafter can not be ignored by anyone.³³⁷

In an effort to construct an identity for American art, Cahill simultaneously fashioned one for himself. Following *American Folk Sculpture*, in 1932, he wrote art articles on folk art for *Parnassus* and *Creative Art*. That same year, at the recommendation of Abby Rockefeller, Cahill became the temporary director of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art while Alfred Barr was on a one-year leave from his position as director.

Cahill's position at MoMA would enable him to engage with a wider audience. Whereas Dana's community-building strategies at Newark were targeted largely towards a local public, Cahill would have the opportunity to think nationally at MoMA, participating in the conception of large, touring exhibits and projects such as the *Art in America* nationally broadcast radio programs. Dana's belief that an American artistic tradition could be built, at a community level, through public education, became the backbone of Cahill's ideology, as expressed in his scholarship on American folk art and expanded through his leadership of the WPA/FAP.

³³⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 4:
Fashioning an Identity for American Art at MoMA:
Cahill and Alfred Barr

The modernists took American art back to the sources of tradition.
--Holger Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture*, 1932³³⁸

When Cahill temporarily replaced the young, brilliant, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. as acting director of exhibitions, he faced the challenge of taking over for MoMA's respected leader at a time of social and economic crisis within American society. Since MoMA's founding in 1929, Barr had done a remarkable job of starting up a new institution devoted to modern art. Overworked, and plagued with chronic insomnia, he requested a leave from 1932 to 1933 to recuperate in Europe. He proposed that an interim curator take his place. In his short tenure, Cahill oversaw an ambitious exhibition program, orchestrating three major shows and accompanying catalogues. These included *American Painting and Sculpture 1862-1932*, a retrospective that solidified the canon of American art and brought James McNeil Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No.1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (fig. 72) to the United States for the first time, *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America*, from Abby Rockefeller's collection, and *American Sources of Modern Art*, a survey of pre-Columbian art.³³⁹

Barr's exhaustion, Cahill's immersion in American folk art, and the development of MoMA during its first years, were events informed by the cultural backdrop of the

³³⁸ Holger Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture 1862-1932* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 22.

³³⁹ Holger Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture 1862-1932* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932) and Holger Cahill *American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1933).

Depression. Although the economic crisis was an international event, it was a demoralizing time to be in America and in New York City. By 1932, the full ramifications of the stock market calamity were beginning to be realized. Nearly one quarter of the workforce was unemployed, and the precarious position of the banking system throughout 1930 and 1931 had worsened into a system-wide failure. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was about to take office, and his first priority would be to institute a bank holiday.

Even for working professionals like Cahill and Barr, who were not substantially impacted by the economic events, the social realities were devastating and hard to see. Witnessing the development of a new and very visible population of poor triggered doubts about the identity of the country. According to literary critic and cultural historian Morris Dickstein:

To many [the poor] showed that capitalism was doomed, that the American system had failed, including many of its cherished ideas: unbridled individualism, self-reliance, the entrepreneurial spirit, the promise of prosperity and social mobility, the open horizons once represented by the frontier, by virgin lands, and by the sheer size of the continent.³⁴⁰

In Manhattan, Hoovervilles lined the East and Hudson Rivers, and the biggest one formed in Central Park. In Brooklyn Heights, the breadlines of the early 1930s wrapped around Water Street unfurling against the backdrop of the Manhattan Bridge (fig. 73). In Manhattan, lines formed at Sixth Avenue and Forty-second Street (fig.74) near the entrance to the elevated train. Cahill recalled that when he was living on Eleventh Street in the early 1930s, as an insomniac, he often woke up in the middle of the night or early

³⁴⁰ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), xxi.

morning. He would “look out [the window] and . . . see men coming along the streets searching through the garbage cans.” He was surprised that they were not hobos or bums but “from the look of their sleeves, the way they were worn, you could tell they were working men.” He could not understand how a country with such “tremendously fertile” plains could not provide food for its people.³⁴¹ Although the economic situation did not affect the museum, whose chief patrons, Abby Rockefeller and Lille P. Bliss, were so wealthy they were immune to even the most severe financial collapse, it must have added to Barr’s personal stress during the institution’s formative years.

The son of a Presbyterian minister, Barr possessed strongly engrained moral values and “was a man of rectitude disciplined to whet the passions of others while restraining his own to the point of invisibility.”³⁴² With economic and social conditions in a downward spiral, the desire for the formulation of a national culture, a preoccupation of the 1920s, took on added urgency as a potentially stabilizing force. The 1930s were a golden age of Hollywood film and a fertile decade for American jazz, Art Deco design, Realist literature, dance (from Fred Astaire’s polished choreography to Aaron Copland’s folk-inspired *Appalachian Spring*), and visual art. These entertainments provided more than escapism. An unmoored populace was eager for collective experience, and a renewed sense of self through popular culture. As Dickstein argues, these enjoyments “offered wit, energy, class, style, and movement (above all movement) to people whose lives were stagnant, fearful, deprived of hope, people who often took to the road but

³⁴¹ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 443-444. Interview by Joan Pring, 1957, transcript Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, microfilmed copy, reel 5285, frames 0027-0670, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Digitized version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/series1.htm.

³⁴² Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), 7.

really had nowhere to go.”³⁴³ MoMA’s development was part of these broader cultural ambitions, although it charted an avant-garde course and took aesthetic risks. The museum relied on a small staff that, according to Russell Lynes, “worked until all hours of the night week after week.”³⁴⁴ That Barr’s doctors prescribed some time away, and that he chose to spend it surrounded by ancient, culturally rooted European art and architecture (fig. 75), revealed his preoccupation with fostering the growth of American art and culture.

Abby Rockefeller shared these goals. Her interest in American folk art and support for MoMA reflected Depression values of community, culture building, and public service that would soon be espoused by the New Deal government. Cahill had picked the perfect moment to market American folk art as a Populist, anti-industrialist, and community-oriented art form. His ability to sustain Rockefeller’s interest in folk art, assured his financial security. She was always eager to employ his services and support his trips to uncover new examples. Cahill’s daughter remembered that she was protected from the effects of the Depression because her father worked for the Rockefellers.³⁴⁵

At MoMA, Cahill’s exhibitions intended to shape an identity for American art and to provide a basis for contemporary development, which he believed could be fostered by looking to the past. In his catalogues, he adopted a social-historical perspective that interwove stylistic developments and historical conditions, an approach Barr described as an interest “in the problem of American art, to some extent from a sociological point of

³⁴³ Dickstein, xix.

³⁴⁴ Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: Atheneum, 1973), 3.

³⁴⁵ Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, personal communication with the author, June 16, 2010.

view.”³⁴⁶ Even with a remove from events in Europe, Barr welcomed Cahill’s viewpoint and expertise, writing periodically to share ideas, make suggestions, and praise Cahill’s work. In devising the exhibition program on American art, the curators enjoyed a genuine intellectual exchange that contributed to making MoMA a multifaceted institution.

Rarely discussed, Cahill and Barr collaborated on several projects during the early 1930s. When Cahill took over for Barr, the “American Painting and Sculpture 1862-1932” exhibition was already in the planning stages, and it was up to Cahill to conceive and install the show and produce the catalogue. In contrast, Cahill proposed both “American Folk Art” and “American Sources of Modern Art,” exhibitions Barr would probably not have taken on himself. In a preliminary meeting with Barr, Cahill “spoke up for American folk art immediately,” suggesting it as the follow-up exhibition to “American Painting and Sculpture.” His proposal for “American Sources of Modern Art” required, as Dorothy Miller remembered, a persuasive argument to convince MoMA to exhibit ancient works.

Impressed with Cahill’s work as temporary director, Barr partnered with him again after he had left the museum, to produce a nationally broadcast radio program in 1934, *Art in America in Modern Times*. Expanding upon the “American Painting and Sculpture” exhibition, and adopting the material for radio listeners, the series harnessed the mass media to educate the public about modern art. As their collaborative involvement in “Art in America in Modern Times” attests, both curators shared a commitment to education and formed an effective partnership at MoMA. When Barr chose Cahill for the job, he selected an opposite, both in terms of methodology and

³⁴⁶ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., letter to John Hay Whitney, June 26, 1933, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, AAA, 2164; 1251, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

personality. While Cahill's writing addressed art within its social-historical framework, Barr focused on stylistic developments and emphasized an artwork's formal qualities. Although Barr was concerned with social issues, he did not discuss them as integral to the development of artistic movements. Applying the rigorous analytical techniques and the principles of connoisseurship he learned at Princeton and Harvard, Barr fashioned a comprehensible narrative of modern art, in which social influences were reflected in formal evolutions.

At thirty, Barr presented himself as an introverted intellectual, with wire-framed glasses and a serious manner that made him seem highly focused (fig. 76). Gregarious, and almost fifteen years Barr's senior, Cahill's youthful ramblings had left him with an unrefined streak that contrasted with Barr's academic gentility. Whereas Barr was reserved, and, at times, even seemingly cold, Cahill could be boisterous, and had a tendency to yell out such phrases as, "Oh, the hell with it!" or "what the devil" when he was excited or annoyed.³⁴⁷ If Barr tended to hold himself away from others, Cahill was congenial, but presented a persona that had been carefully constructed. Cahill made up for his lack of formal education with sharp intelligence, a natural eye for art, and strong connections within the art world.

Cahill's self-reinvention had left him with some lingering insecurity. This resulted in a pattern of almost running away from opportunities. When MoMA approached him about the job, Alfred Barr's secretary called Cahill multiple times to set up a meeting, but he did not respond immediately. Cahill, who longed to return to his fiction writing, "forgot to reply" to several calls from the museum. The secretary finally reached him and

³⁴⁷ *From Turf Cottage to the Cover of Time: The Dramatic Life of Holger Cahill*, prod. and dir. Hans Kristján Árnason, 55 min., HKA Productions, 2009. DVD.

explained the predicament, telling him, “If you knew how sick Alfred Barr is, you’d reply right away.”³⁴⁸ In Cahill’s account of events, this approach of ignoring the knock of opportunity and needing to be thoroughly persuaded did not impede his professional success. In fact, Cahill usually received the confirmation in his abilities that he was seeking.

Cahill probably did not know, however, that there was another candidate for the position. Barr was also seriously considering art historian Lloyd Goodrich, whom had just completed a book on Thomas Eakins and contributed an essay on the same subject to Barr’s 1930 catalogue, *Sixth Loan Exhibition: Winslow Homer, Albert P. Ryder and Thomas Eakins*.³⁴⁹ In a letter to MoMA’s president Conger Goodyear, Barr described Goodrich as “the better choice since he is completely independent with dealers while Cahill has at one time worked in cooperation with Mrs. Halpert (though not as a dealer).”³⁵⁰ Despite this drawback, Barr may have considered Cahill’s age, which Cahill tried so hard to conceal, an asset. He noted that Cahill “was somewhat older,” cited his work at the Newark Museum, his monographs on American painting, and, most importantly, his position as an advisor to Abby Rockefeller.

At his initial interview with Barr, Cahill’s savvy proposal to also undertake a folk art exhibition was exactly the right suggestion. Ultimately, the hiring choice may have hinged on economics. As Barr noted, Cahill had already begun the research for Mrs. Rockefeller’s folk art catalogue, and “would be willing to select and arrange the

³⁴⁸ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 214.

³⁴⁹ *Sixth Loan Exhibition: Winslow Homer, Albert P. Ryder, Thomas Eakins* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1930).

³⁵⁰ Alfred Barr, letter to Conger Goodyear, June 22, 1932. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, AAA: 2164; 702, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

exhibition for very little more money.”³⁵¹ By hiring Cahill, whom he considered capable of getting the job done, the museum would get two shows for the price of one.

Furthermore, Barr chose a replacement who could complement his own work, and who excelled in the social aspects of the position.

The contrasting approaches of the two curators reflected their very different backgrounds and training. Cahill’s nomadism, and spontaneous adventures in the Midwest were a complete opposite to Barr’s relatively stable childhood and carefully planned career. Barr grew up in an academic household. Both his father and two of his uncles had graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, where his father had also taught. Whereas Cahill’s father was unable to successfully find his place in American society, Barr’s was a respected leader in his community, providing a model that Barr could both admire and challenge through his decision to pursue a career in art.³⁵²

Following family tradition, Barr enrolled at Princeton, where he eventually earned a B.A. and M.A in art history. He initially studied with Charles Rufus Morey, a specialist in medieval art. Morey inspired Barr’s interest in art history, and his scientific, analytical methodology impacted the development of Barr’s formalist theories. As Sybil Gordon Kantor has discussed, Morey had been influenced by art historian Alois Riegl’s concept of *Kunstwollen*, the belief that the views of a nation or an historical period found direct expression in artistic forms. Applying Riegl’s ideas to his research, Morey employed an almost scientific model. He examined and catalogued all types of medieval cultural production, from sculpture and painting to tapestry and metal work. He assembled a massive index, which could be used to observe stylistic developments over a period of

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Kantor, 2-11.

time. To map the different tendencies, he created flow charts that traced the various artistic permutations and their interactions.³⁵³

In Barr's own scholarship, the methodology he had learned from Morey enabled him to take a broad view of Modernism. Using this model, he was able to articulate its history, interpret stylistic changes, and trace the evolution of art movements. Ultimately, Barr transformed Morey's flow charts from scholarly notes into a public educational tool. The cover for his seminal 1936 show at MoMA, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (fig. 77) employed the flow chart to break down the complexities of Modernism into a readable genealogy of art historical movements.

Although Morey had provided Barr with an essential foundation for approaching art history, it was Frank Jewett Mather and his classes on Modern art during his junior year that intrigued Barr. After graduating from Princeton in 1923, Barr continued his studies on the doctoral level in modern art and museum studies at Harvard under the Fogg Art Museum Associate Director, Paul J. Sachs. At Princeton, Barr had learned strategies for art historical research and analysis, while at Harvard, he reinforced this expertise with training in connoisseurship and curatorial practice. Under the guidance of Fogg director Edward Forbes and Sachs, the museum was establishing itself as one of the first programs in curatorial study. That same year, Sachs launched a new course entitled "Museum Problems," which integrated the knowledge needed to be a successful curator or collector. It provided training in museum history, visual analysis, and professional conduct (fig. 78).

³⁵³ Ibid., 18-26.

The “Fogg method” stressed practical experience and the cultivation of a keen eye.³⁵⁴ In one lesson, Sachs presented students with a table filled with a range of objects, some worthless and others prized, to instruct his class in distinguishing a superb work from pedestrian examples.³⁵⁵ This exercise epitomized the differences in training offered between the Newark Museum and the Fogg. While the institutions shared a commitment to practical experience and learning by doing, Dana would never have distinguished “valuable” objects from “worthless” ones. In contrast to Dana, who saw aesthetic value in a broad spectrum of objects, Sachs taught in the tradition of connoisseurs, in which one’s reputation rested on a sharply trained eye for refined taste.

Sachs’s course, while innovative in combining connoisseurship with practical skills, built on the “Genteel Tradition” of the Harvard art history program. The roots of the program extended back to the late nineteenth century, when the university began developing one of the premier centers for art historical study in America. From its inception, the methodology reflected the expertise of a group of gentleman collectors and stressed the naturalist tradition of art critic, John Ruskin. In 1873, Harvard appointed Charles Eliot Norton, a close friend and disciple of Ruskin’s, the first lecturer on the History of the Fine Arts as Connected with Literature. A Boston merchant, Norton was an expert on European art and literature, and a passionate collector of prints, books, and paintings. When not residing at his pastoral Shady Hill house in Cambridge, he traveled frequently to Europe. Under the directorship of the wealthy collector Edward Forbes, the Fogg was designed as an “art laboratory.” It housed an art collection and research

³⁵⁴ Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., Virginia Anderson, and Melissa Renn, *The Last Ruskinians: Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Herbert Moore, and Their Circle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2007).

³⁵⁵ Kantor, 62.

materials, including a library, slides, and reference photographs all in one building.

Fashioned by connoisseurs, prior to the 1920s the Fogg galleries and study rooms evoked a modernized cabinet of curiosities, filled to the brim with art objects, books, and card catalogues.³⁵⁶

Sachs, who strove to modernize both the Fogg's buildings and methodology, had also entered the field as a collector. Beginning his career as a partner in his family-owned banking firm, Goldman Sachs, he became renowned as an expert on prints. Possessing the necessary connections with wealthy businessmen, collectors, and dealers, his networking, financing, and personal bequests of artwork were crucial to the Fogg's development.³⁵⁷ Sachs's museum course was hand-on and he emphasized close visual analysis. From Sachs, Barr learned to evaluate art according to aesthetic principles and through a process of systematic study and categorization that complemented Morey's techniques.

Barr and Cahill possessed contrasting personalities and distinct methodologies, but also shared much common ground. They both had an insatiable love of learning, openness to artistic innovations, and a dedication to studying contemporary art. Writing to promote the new museum in 1929, Barr placed educational initiatives at the heart of MoMA. He noted that the educational value of the institution:

will be inestimable—to painters looking for encouragement and inspiration, to students of the history of art, to students of contemporary culture, to

³⁵⁶ Kathryn Brush, *Vastly More Than Brick and Mortar: Reinventing the Fogg Art Museum in the 1920s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003); See also, Caroline A. Jones, *Modern Art at Harvard* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museum, 1985).

³⁵⁷ Brush, 15-37; and, Jones, 31-57.

critics searching for some canon of comparison, to the general public which likes to look at pictures.³⁵⁸

Barr's ambition to educate the public structured his essays, exhibition catalogues, and articles, which he wrote in clear, expressive language.

Cahill admired the accessibility of Barr's scholarship, which was also a hallmark of his own essays and articles. In a letter to James Thrall Soby, Cahill praised Barr's writing for "its use of the terms of ordinary discourse about art instead of the special jargon of critics." He found his well-articulated, modest prose,

so fine an achievement it is apt to escape the average art magazine reader, particularly since it is done without trumpets and drums. But if we are ever to reach a wider group of readers with good art writing that seems to be the road.

Exceptional in its ability to reduce complexities to their essence, Cahill believed his "writing becomes very useful indeed in leading away from the categorical confusions which are the stock-in-trade of the art reviewer and all but the most brilliant critics."³⁵⁹

Cahill's writing, by linking American art to historical conditions and social changes, was designed to interest a broader public by presenting a clear, compelling picture of artistic developments.

Cahill and Barr shared a commitment to presenting art in a way that was comprehensible and relatable. MoMA's promotion of American art in the early 1930s was really a collaborative effort between Cahill, Barr, and Dorothy Miller. Miller, prior to joining MoMA as Barr's collaborator in 1934, assisted Cahill with his curatorial

³⁵⁸ Alfred Barr, "A New Museum," in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, eds. Irving Sandler and Amy Newman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 73.

³⁵⁹ Holger Cahill, letter to James Thrall Soby, July 29, 1951, DCM, IV.4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

projects. Although critics accused Barr of focusing predominantly on European Modernism at the expense of American artists, he launched, in fact, a number of shows on American art during the museum's first years.³⁶⁰ In 1929, MoMA's second exhibition, "Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans" presented a diverse group, including John Sloan, Eugene Speicher, Max Weber, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The show inaugurated a tradition of exhibiting contemporary American artists that Miller expanded upon in 1942, with her *Americans* series. More successful than Barr's earlier endeavors, Miller's exhibitions became instrumental in bringing Abstract Expressionism before the public eye.

In addition to showcasing contemporary American art, Barr also looked to the nineteenth century to define American masters. In his *Winslow Homer, Albert P. Ryder, Thomas Eakins* catalogue, he chose three artists he felt embodied the contemporary trends of Realism and Surrealism.³⁶¹ Barr, however, confined his comments to a short introduction. He left the catalogue contributions to Frank Jewett Mather of the Princeton Museum of Art, Bryson Burroughs of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Lloyd Goodrich, editor of *The Arts*—three experts on American art. While Barr recognized that his passion and scholarly expertise centered on European Modernism, this did not stop him from planning projects that mined the nineteenth century, with the assistance of scholars such as Goodrich and Cahill, in an effort to construct a usable past for American art. Above all, Barr's conception of the "American Painting and Sculpture" exhibition as a major critical survey evidenced his commitment to American art.

³⁶⁰ Milton W. Brown, "From An Evangelical Tent Show into a Modern Museum," *Art News* 78, no. 8 (October 1979): 76.

³⁶¹ *Sixth Loan Exhibition: Winslow Homer, Albert P. Ryder, Thomas Eakins* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1930), 6-7.

When Cahill took over the exhibition, it was his responsibility to coordinate loans, install the works, and produce the catalogue. Originally, Barr had conceived the show as including only painting; it is possible that Cahill proposed the section on sculpture or an additional show on sculpture that was combined with Barr's proposal for an exhibition of American painting.³⁶² The result was a shared vision that shaped the canon of nineteenth and twentieth century American art as we have come to understand it. Of the 150 works exhibited, at least nineteen are now considered iconic examples of American art. These include Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No.1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother and Woman in White*, Mary Cassatt's *La Loge*, George Inness's *Early Autumn Montclair*, Albert Pinkham Ryder's *Toilers of the Sea*, Thomas Dewing's *Recitation*, Thomas Eakins's *The Pathetic Song* and *Salutat*, Winslow Homer's *Eight Bells*, Frederick Remington's *Broncho Buster*, William Glacken's *Chez Mouquin*, John Sloan's *McSorley's Bar*, George Bellow's *Stag at Sharkey's*, George Luks's, *The Spielers*, Charles Demuth's *My Egypt*, Georgia O'Keeffe's *Cow Skull and Calico Roses*, Charles Sheeler's *Classic Landscape*, Gaston Lachaise's *Figure of a Woman* and Joseph Stella's *Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The Port*.

Following the galleries of American art in the Armory Show, this was a blockbuster exhibition of nineteenth and twentieth century American painting and sculpture. While some of the works were already well known, the exhibition brought them together in an historic survey, which toured the country. With numerous loans from both public and private collections, Barr considered the project "the most difficult and

³⁶² Alfred Barr, letter to Conger Goodyear, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, June 22, 1932, AAA: 2164; 701-705, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY; Holger Cahill, letter to Alfred Barr, October 19, 1932, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, AAA: 2164; 642, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

most conspicuous exhibition of the year.”³⁶³ Especially with the display of Whistler’s *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. I: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* which had not been on view in the United States since 1882, he recognized that the exhibition would attract considerable attention.³⁶⁴

Barr had smoothed the way for the Whistler loan, having already established a lending agreement with the Louvre for his “Eighth Loan Exhibition: Corot, Daumier” in 1930 to which the museum contributed four works.³⁶⁵ MoMA’s relationships with other art museums, an advantage that Cahill did not have at the Newark Museum, facilitated loans from important U.S. collections, including the Corcoran Gallery, Addison Gallery of American Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Phillips Memorial Art Gallery, Detroit Institute of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of Art.

Cahill, however, was instrumental in selecting contemporary painting and sculpture. He went to Alfred Stieglitz’s American Place gallery to inquire about what he might be able to borrow. The men already knew each other well. Cahill’s memory of Stieglitz, whom he recalled as having “a very high nose, with fur coming out of his nose and his ears, and [who] always wore a cape,” suggests he was drawn to his unconventional character. Cahill “used to go and sit and talk with him by the hour,” and considered Stieglitz both “one of the greatest photographers of our time” and skillful in convincing collectors to purchase art, often at exorbitant prices. As Cahill viewed it, he

³⁶³ Alfred Barr, letter to Conger Goodyear, June 22, 1932, AAA: 2164; 701-705, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁶⁴ “Whistler’s ‘Mother’ to be Lent by Louvre To be Shown Here,” *New York Herald Tribune* (13 October 1932), A. Conger Goodyear Scrapbooks, 19, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

“had a way of reaching out to those people—not only reaching out to them to make them buy, but to insult them into paying much more than they wanted to pay, by making them feel cheap.”³⁶⁶

Probably aware of Cahill’s predilection for Native American watercolors, Stieglitz showed him a John Marin watercolor of an Indian ceremonial dance. Very pleased with the work, Cahill asked what the insurance value was and then immediately knew that its inclusion in the show would be out of the question. “He put a value of \$20,000 on it, and it was a watercolor! I knew that you couldn’t budge him.”³⁶⁷ Rather than quibble over price, Cahill selected a comparable painting, *New Mexican Landscape, Blue Mountains*, that could be insured for a price that fit within the budget. Stieglitz also agreed to lend O’Keeffe’s *Cow Skull with Calico Roses* (Fig. 79) and a pastel still-life by her, *Pink Dish and Green Leaves* (fig. 80).

At another point in the organization of the exhibition, when a hook came loose and one of O’Keeffe’s works crashed to the floor, Cahill was pleasantly surprised by Stieglitz’s levelheaded response. Upon arrival to the museum one morning, he discovered that the fallen painting was intact, but the frame had been damaged. A business manager suggested to Cahill that they simply repair the frame. Despite Stieglitz’s unpredictability, Cahill decided to call him immediately. In this instance, he did not feel comfortable employing any degree of spin, not wanting to deceive Stieglitz and certain he would get wind of the mishap one way or another anyway. According to Cahill, Stieglitz replied, “I’ll be right over,” and sure enough, there he was, with his cape. I was wondering what

³⁶⁶ Cahill, “Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 145 and 150.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

the devil he'd do, because he might claim total loss."³⁶⁸ He "was astounded" when Stieglitz agreed to fix the frame at no cost.³⁶⁹ Cahill's skillful judge of character and ability to appease distinct personalities made him successful at negotiating the intricacies and alliances of the New Deal government.

Beyond his collaborations with Stieglitz, Cahill struggled to compile a compelling overview of American sculpture. He explained to Barr, "our representation for the nineteenth-century is slight but as you know it is very difficult to represent men like Ward and Saint-Gaudens."³⁷⁰ Cahill had hoped to exhibit a cast of Gauden's *Adams Memorial*, but the estate of the artist refused the loan because the cast was in a dangerously fragile condition.³⁷¹ Instead, he had to settle for a bronze relief of Robert Louis Stevenson (fig. 81). He assured Barr that he would be able to include Lachaise's large sculpture as well as the bust by Robert Laurent. He also selected a portrait head by Isamu Noguchi and a two-figure sculpture by William Zorach (fig. 82) lent by the Downtown Gallery. On the whole, he told Barr that the exhibition "is coming on nicely. I do nothing but work, eat, dream and sleep it."³⁷²

At the time, MoMA's staff was small and Cahill was under considerable pressure to produce the exhibition and catalogue in a short time. It might have been an impossible task without Miller's assistance. Cahill asked her to come to work with him in the fall of 1932, and the museum offered her one dollar an hour to assist with the preparation of the

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 152.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 152.

³⁷⁰ Holger Cahill, letter to Alfred Barr, October 19, 1932, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, AAA: 2164; 642, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁷¹ Homer Saint-Gaudens, letter to Holger Cahill, September 28, 1932, Registrar Exhibition Files, Exhibition, #20, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁷² Holger Cahill, letter to Alfred Barr, October 19, 1932, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, AAA: 2164; 642, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

catalogue and installation. Miller had not yet met Alfred Barr, and had just left her job at the Montclair Museum in her hometown because, in her words, “I want[ed] to go out into the big world,” and “[n]o matter what I had done there I would always be little Dorothy Miller, ‘you remember the funny little girl who used to run around climbing trees.’”³⁷³ Ambitious and determined to be a successful curator, despite the fact that there were few women in the field, her enthusiasm and professionalism mark the research and organization of Cahill’s projects for MoMA, providing the backbone to his visionary endeavors.

In exchange, Dorothy absorbed Cahill’s expertise at presenting exhibitions that were both visually interesting and thorough. His exhibitions, while not without omissions, often endeavored to chart complete overviews in relatively unknown fields, such as folk art and pre-Columbian art. In particular, Cahill’s installation of “American Painting and Sculpture,” broadly tracing the trends of American art over a seventy-year period, provided a point of reference and a counterpoint to Miller’s later *Americans* series. These exhibitions more narrowly aimed to define the multifaceted developments of the contemporary scene by showcasing a limited number of artists.

Cahill’s installation of the exhibition, over which he had sole direction, reflected his refined eye. He arranged the works, not by theme or subject matter, but to highlight formal relationships and create a pleasing rhythm. On either side of Whistler’s *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. I: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* the diamond piece of the show, he hung Ryder’s *Macbeth and the Witches* and Blakelock’s *Moonlight* (fig. 83). The three works were guarded by a railing, in anticipation of the crowds that would

³⁷³ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Dorothy C. Miller,” May 1970-September 28, 1971, 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

be eager to get a close view of Whistler's famous portrait. Given their proximity, Cahill felt the two landscapes held their own next to the Whistler, but also possessed a subtle stylistic relationship. He described both Ryder and Blakelock as having "concern with the abstract qualities of art in the age of realism," and admired *Moonlight* for its "decorative" quality and "muted splendor of tone."³⁷⁴ Although he did not bring the point out specifically in his essay, a shared concern with abstraction, mood, and decorative elements connected the paintings. Cahill complemented his historically grounded history of American art in his catalogue essay with an installation that stressed visual analysis. Alternating portraits and landscapes, he created an arrangement that avoided monotony but appeared cohesive, making it accessible to the viewer.

In the modern gallery, Cahill installed works on paper next to paintings, disregarding a conventional hierarchy of media that often separated watercolors and drawings in their own display. He installed John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Winslow Homer watercolors in the Salon Carré of MoMA's townhouse building on Fifty-third Street. Stieglitz, thrilled after viewing the exhibition, sent a letter to Cahill saying that it had been a standout event for him. He wrote with surprise at the scope of the presentation, "I can see what you were up against. Ye gods." He went on to congratulate Cahill on his arrangements of the watercolors, noting, "Your hanging of the O'Keefes and Marins is masterly."³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Holger Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture*, 15.

³⁷⁵ Alfred Stieglitz, letter to Holger Cahill, December 5, 1932, reel 5285, frame 757, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; See also, Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 152-153.

Barr and Goodyear were pleased overall, but expressed concern that the contemporary section appeared weak in comparison to the American masters. Goodyear wrote to Barr:

The American Show, which opened yesterday, I am sure is going to be a great success. Cahill has done an excellent job on it in every way, besides that, he is a nice fellow and I like to work with him. . . . [T]he pictures are splendidly arranged on the walls, and even the sculpture looks well. I really think that the show will be a revelation to the people who have been sneering at American art. . . . As a whole, the men of the past from Whistler through Bellows carry off the honors and the show is far from a boost to the painters of today as compared with those of yesterday in this country.³⁷⁶

In response to Goodyear's letter, Barr began strategizing for improvements for the exhibition in preparation for a possible tour in France. Barr believed a strong presentation in the renowned capital of creativity would "increase the prestige of American painting in France (and thus in America)." He considered the best way to do this was to be "frankly nationalistic" by focusing "on what will seem authentically American to the French." To amend the current weaknesses, he also made a pragmatic, mathematical analysis of the scope of the show. Barr calculated "that while the number of artists are about equal there are just about twice as many paintings of the past as there are of the present" and lamented that "people are saying that we have done badly again by 'living Americans.'" He resolved that going forward he should "pit eleven Homers against eleven Hoppers," in order to drive home the accomplishments of contemporary artists.³⁷⁷

Barr's concern with introducing American art to French audiences in order to garner respect for it expands his more accepted role as promoter of European art to the

³⁷⁶ Conger Goodyear, letter to Alfred Barr, November 1, 1932, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, AAA: 2164; 695, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁷⁷ Alfred Barr, letter to Conger Goodyear, November 21, 1932, Alfred Barr, Jr. Papers, AAA: 2164; 685-689, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

American public. Barr and Goodyear's careful consideration of the presentation of American art, and Barr's advocacy for potent nationalistic themes, records MoMA's participation in the interwar search for artistic heritage. If Cahill's drive to understand American art expressed his desire to become American, then MoMA, a small institution still defining itself, provided the fuel and context for his engagement in the much broader search for roots that was propelling cultural endeavors.

Cahill's essay for the exhibition catalogue announced its intention with its first sentence: "This exhibition covers a period of change and development in American art." Capturing the flux, excitement, and complexity of the period, Cahill conceded that the text could "do little more than make a note of main tendencies" and "touch the surface of individual contributions." Keeping the discussion of artworks brief, Cahill's essay presented them in a social and economic context. He viewed the post-Civil War period as a time when American art, led by Whistler, Inness, Eakins, and Homer, was "lifted out of the provincial stage" and "enter[ed] a national and cosmopolitan phase."³⁷⁸ This provincialism, a result of "classes with little tradition of art patronage" whose tastes were "conditioned by great social and economic sources," was not, however, ameliorated by cosmopolitan trends. Without continuing patronage and public understanding, Cahill believed that nineteenth- and twentieth century artists became dislocated. "Whistler escaped to Europe," and Homer, Eakins, and Ryder, "found little more than indifference until late in life, save for the devotion of a few friends and pupils."³⁷⁹

For Cahill, the success of American art depended on the creation of community and the building of ties between the artist and society. In his opinion, despite certain

³⁷⁸ Holger Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture* 9, 22 and 9.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

advancements including “the founding of museums and art schools, the inclusion of art in the curriculum of the public schools, and the gift of rich men’s collections to the public,”³⁸⁰ such a relationship did not exist in late nineteenth century America. He wrote:

It was an era of expatriates and solitaries. The artist was outside society. . . . Without work to do for the community he is thrown back into the exploration of personal peculiarities, into bohemianism, and defiance. He is a member of the social body cut off from the general circulation. No profession can maintain health under such conditions. The realization that this is so has lead to many attempts in our time to bridge the gap between the artist and the community.³⁸¹

He considered twentieth century artists also somewhat adrift “in the bewildering pace and chaos of the contemporary age.” Cahill perceived Modernist abstraction itself to be a “search for structure.” Artists found this source of structure, he argued, by returning to pre-Renaissance traditions, in particular, Byzantine, Persian, Hindu, Chinese, as well as “primitive and aboriginal” art.³⁸²

In the *American Painting and Sculpture* catalogue, Cahill presented an original analysis that, in effect, mirrored his own experience. His wanderings as a young man impressed upon him sensitivity to artists’ marginalized social positions. A deep desire for connection inspired his research into American and non-Western culture and a veritable obsession with creating the sense of belonging that eluded him as a young man. In his writing, he argued that national identity could be found through community and through a return to pre-industrial artistic trends.

This view, of course, had its limitations and oversights. The most major was Cahill’s decision not to include Dada artists, whose works challenged artistic traditions

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 12.

³⁸¹ Ibid

³⁸² Ibid., 12 and 18.

and embraced modern consumer culture, in his overview of twentieth century art. Cahill rarely discussed the American Dadaists in his writings, and his retrospective view did not lend itself to an analysis of the Dadaists' celebration of the machine aesthetic as a complete break from the past. Cahill also may have omitted them because he felt that the complexity and radicalism of the work would not be accessible to viewers.

Many critics, echoing the concerns of Barr and Goodyear, were impressed with the exhibition's presentation of American masters but were underwhelmed by the contemporary art galleries. A case in point was Lewis Mumford's review. He asserted that the "exhibition demonstrates a good, solid, painter-like tradition which, beginning long before the Civil War, came to maturity in the seventy years that followed its outbreak," and that the contemporary art galleries did not take enough risks. "The Museum erred, if it erred, on the side of mediocrity; but, needless to say, there are some excellent paintings here."³⁸³

Despite its flaws and oversights, Cahill and Barr's showcasing of the Whistler painting ensured that the exhibition received tremendous press and made it a popular success. *Art Digest* announced that the show, the seventh in a series of American exhibitions since the museum opened, was "undoubtedly the most important and will unquestionably break all attendance records."³⁸⁴ Adept at judging public interest, Cahill's emphasis on America's artistic past and his presentation of Whistler's iconic motherly

³⁸³ Lewis Mumford, "Seventy Years—The Work of Mary Cassatt," *The New Yorker* (November 12, 1932), Department of Public Information Records, mf, 3; 731, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁸⁴ "Review of Seventy Years of American Art Opens at Modern Museum," *Art Digest*, (November 1932.), PI mf 3; 690, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

image, was well timed as the nation, at a time of fear and uncertainty, turned inward and looked backward.

Critics nationwide celebrated Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No.1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. As the exhibition toured the country, the painting became accessible to viewers in Western cities. It was shown at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, The City Art Museum in St. Louis, the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts in Ohio, and at the Century of Progress Exposition at the Art Institute of Chicago. This cultural event came as a welcome diversion from the economic and social turmoil that consumed public attention. As *New York Sun* art critic Henry McBride noted, "At least the art world has genuine solace to offer a distracted public. Whistler's portrait of his mother has come to town. The Louvre has lent it to us!" He considered seeing the painting as an opportunity not to be missed. "Every one, of any degree of intelligence whatsoever, will wish to see it. Those who travel have already seen it, but they will wish to see it again—to see how it looks in this different atmosphere."³⁸⁵

The painting's display during the depths of the Depression did create a new context for the image, which became an icon of 1930s moral values and a symbol of cultural identity. During the tour of the exhibition in 1934, in honor of Mother's Day, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp featuring Whistler's portrait (fig. 84). The artist's mother appeared sitting opposite a small vase of flowers with the words, "IN MEMORY AND IN HONOR OF THE MOTHERS OF AMERICA" in the center. Artists were furious about the manipulation of Whistler's masterpiece. They considered the omission

³⁸⁵ Henry McBride, "Retrospect of American Art Arouses Wide Public Interest, And the Display Justifies it in the Main, Revealing Much That Has to Be Taken Into Serious Account," *New York Sun* (5 November 1932), PI mf, 3; 695, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

of the painting's original background, the cropping out of the footstool and feet at the bottom, and the addition of "a cheap looking vase of flowers" to be an act of "mutilation."³⁸⁶

If the stamp bastardized the painting, then it did so in order to further transform it into a familiar, reassuring national image. Honoring America's mothers, it advanced a Depression-era emphasis on family, which served as a stabilizing antidote at a time of economic and social upheaval. Potent depictions of mothers and domestic life would become a frequent theme of New Deal painting and photography. Harry Sternberg's mural for a Pennsylvania post office, *The Family—Industry and Agriculture* (fig. 85) presented family as a unifying force that could restore social order, mending the opposing interests of industry and agriculture. In contrast, Dorothea Lange's photograph, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (fig. 84), whose later renown would rival Whistler's image, depicted a hardened, destitute mother as a symbol of the Depression's devastation.

The transformation of Whistler's painting into a national emblem documented MoMA's role in defining American art. Reviewing "American Painting and Sculpture" for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Helen Appleton Read noted the Whistler "looks vastly better in its present setting surrounded by Eakins, Sargent, Homer and Weir, than it does in the Louvre. It needed an American environment." According to Read, Cahill's curatorial selections also made the public aware of new examples of American art. She emphasized, "Care has been taken to select pictures which the average gallery frequenter is not familiar." These included Eakins's *The Pathetic Song* and Glackens's *Chez Mouquin*, paintings that have since been canonized. Describing "American Painting and

³⁸⁶ "Artists Protest Whistler Stamp," *New York Sun* (5 May 1934), PI mf, 3; 797, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

Sculpture” as “the first attempt to arrange a representative retrospective exhibition of American art, which shall present only the significant figures,” Read noted that the museum was a leader in “appraising our cultural past” by applying Van Wyck Brook’s literary ideals to the visual arts.³⁸⁷

MoMA’s decision to schedule “American Painting and Sculpture” and “American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America” simultaneously, and to publicize them jointly, reinforced these claims. The pairing of the exhibitions underscored Cahill’s intent to trace a complete cultural history in the fields of both fine art and craft. The press release for “American Folk Art” stressed the complementary nature of the exhibits: “Taken together these two exhibitions form a comprehensive presentation of America’s contribution to art, in both its conventional and unconventional aspects.” Describing folk art as “a varied art which is an honest and straightforward expression of the spirit of a people,” Cahill’s publicity statement positioned folk art as an uncharted, Populist tradition. The exhibition contrasted and complemented the overview offered by “American Painting and Sculpture.”³⁸⁸

Building upon his curatorial projects at the Newark Museum, Cahill traced a history of American folk art in a display of 175 objects. Composed almost exclusively of works from Abby Rockefeller’s collection, the show integrated material that had been exhibited in “American Folk Sculpture” with new portraits, landscapes, and paintings that Cahill had uncovered during road trips to Pennsylvania for Rockefeller and for Edith

³⁸⁷ Helen Appleton Read, “Native Art in Focus: Racial Qualities Unite Best Work in Modern Museum Show—Whistlers “Mother” Loaned by Louvre,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (6 November 1932), PI mf, 3; 701, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁸⁸ Museum of Modern Art press release, November 30, 1932, Department of Circulating Exhibition Records, III, reel 1, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

Halpert. Paintings such as Edward Hick's *The Peaceable Kingdom* (fig. 87), Joseph Pickett's *Manchester Valley* (fig. 88), the portrait attributed to Eratus Salisbury Field, *Girl Holding A Rattle* (fig. 89), and the watercolor by an unknown artist, *Glass Bowl with Fruit* (fig. 90), have become familiar examples now in the Colonial Williamsburg collection. Accompanying portraits, landscapes, watercolors, and still-lives were paintings on velvet (fig 91), mourning pictures, duck decoys, wood sculptures, cigar store Indians, and weathervanes. Cahill also included several paintings with historical or religious themes, including *Washington and Lafayette at the Battle of the Bradywine*, *Pocahontas Saving Captain John Smith*, and *The True Cross* (fig. 92), a favorite work of Mrs. Rockefeller's that hung above her fireplace.

When Cahill scouted for folk art, Miller often accompanied him. She recalled that after she had met Cahill at the Newark Museum: "Right away folk art was something I loved very much. We combed through the antique shops of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and New England." At the time, the shops abounded with high quality inexpensive pieces just waiting for an experienced eye to pluck out the best examples. As Miller remembered: "Pennsylvania was so rich. All you had to do was drive around the road and around this road, and there they were. Marvelous materials. It was really very marvelous."³⁸⁹ Miller and Cahill found excitement not just in making the find, but also in researching and documenting previously unknown artists. Cahill remembered that in Pennsylvania, Dorothy helped him "dig up the history of Pickett and Hicks and others in the exhibition. One of things I had to do was discover the biographies of these people,

³⁸⁹ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 7 and 11.

and find out what years of their lives had been devoted to painting.”³⁹⁰ Miller’s research provided the foundation for the artists’ biographies in the exhibition catalogue. It also has been preserved in a massive card catalogue she assembled to document and organize Rockefeller’s collection.

The great fun of folk art trips was the thrill of the hunt. On a particularly successful trip to New Haven, Connecticut, Cahill found the stencil watercolor *Glass Bowl with Fruit* (fig. 90), which he purchased for a mere \$3.50 at a Yale bookstore. Over twenty years later, he remembered it in detail:

I was looking to buy objects, and I came upon a painting of the Yale Commons that was priced at \$600. So I said to myself, ‘They have a pretty good idea of what prices they want here.’ But I went through the place, and I came into a little room where the walls hadn’t been cleaned or painted in probably fifty years. There, on the wall, was that, “Glass Bowl with Fruit,” in a gilt frame. . . . I finally said to the girl who was in charge of the floor, ‘How much did you say that picture was?’ She said, ‘Three fifty.’ Well three fifty—whether it’s \$3.50 or \$350, that still baffled me. I still wandered around, and I said, ‘I’m not sure I heard what you said about the price of that?’ She said, “Three dollars and a half.” So I had to look away for a while to still my agitation, because this was so exciting a find. . . . I said to her, ‘Well . . . I think I’ll take that.’ She took it off the wall, and behind it was almost white. All the brownness had gathered since that picture had been there.³⁹¹

Cahill was so overjoyed that he surprised Charles Sheeler by stopping at his house in Ridgefield, Connecticut, on his return to New York. Cahill presented the work to him and exclaimed, “Charles, how would you like to have done this?” Sheeler held the watercolor and, examining it, declared, “My God I wish I could!”³⁹² The thrill of discovery that Cahill shared with Sheeler, and Miller, extended to an engagement with contemporary

³⁹⁰ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 217.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 212-123.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 213.

art. Together Cahill and Miller would do a great deal to foster the careers of young artists, which they furthered through the WPA/FAP and through MoMA exhibitions.

For Cahill, who had encouraged Halpert's juxtaposition of folk and modern pieces at the Downtown Gallery, the two fields were interrelated. He prized American folk art because it expressed a popular engagement in the artistic process that he believed could vitalize the contemporary artistic scene. In his catalogue essay he considered works produced by craftsmen, amateurs, female artists, ship carvers, and school children. He concluded, "Their art mirrors the sense and the sentiment of a community."³⁹³

Articulating his conviction that anyone could produce art, he described the velvet paintings created by female students in academies and seminaries as possessing "a good deal of originality in the treatment of the oft-repeated theme," and considered them "a distinct contribution to the tradition of still-life painting in this country."³⁹⁴ Expressing his Populist convictions, he not only championed art produced in a quotidian context, but also took a critical view towards industrialism and urbanization after the Civil War. At this time:

Everywhere in the United States the machine was driving out the local craftsman. By 1865 the United States had turned the corner from a rural to an urban civilization. Machine industry was enthroned. Business enterprise made use of the limitless reproductive power of the machine to fill the land with machine-made copies of objects designed by the craftsmen whom the machine was destroying.³⁹⁵

Through his study of American folk art, and through the community oriented projects he oversaw as director of the WPA/Federal Art Project, Cahill would strive to reintegrate

³⁹³ Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America*, 28.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

artistic practices into daily life and spread it beyond urban metropolises and throughout the entire nation.

While Cahill's perspective differed from any of MoMA's previous endeavors, Barr and Goodyear were both incredibly impressed with the exhibition and the scholarly catalogue. Goodyear felt "lucky to have [Cahill's] years of research condensed into that essay—a really first rate job."³⁹⁶ After receiving the publication, Barr wrote to Cahill to commend him for "an exceedingly fine job and a great addition to our series." He considered Cahill an intellectual partner, noting, "[m]ore than most people I can appreciate the work and scholarly care which has gone into it—the masterly introduction, the bibliography and the amazingly informative notes to the pictures." Eager to acquire a few pieces of folk art for the museum, Barr hoped that "all the things aren't going to Virginia" and confided that he was "writing Mrs. R. asking her to keep at least a few in New York."³⁹⁷

Immediately following the heels of the "American Folk Art" and "American Painting and Sculpture" shows, Cahill embarked on the even more complex "American Sources of Modern Art," which presented pre-Columbian pottery, textiles, and sculpture from Mexico, Peru, Honduras, and Nicaragua. As Miller recalled, Cahill said it was a worthy subject for MoMA arguing:

[pre-Columbian art] has influenced contemporary artists not only in America but in Europe. They've all looked at this art as they've looked at African Art. . . . They've been to the natural history museums and they love it and it has influenced their work.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ Alfred Barr, letter to Holger Cahill, May 29, 1933, DCM, IV.4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁹⁷ Alfred Barr, letter to Holger Cahill, undated, late 1932 or early 1933, DCM, IV.4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

³⁹⁸ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 12.

As Barbara Braun has suggested, Nelson Rockefeller's interest in collecting pre-Columbian art provided additional motivation for MoMA to organize the exhibition.³⁹⁹ Managing to gain the museum's support, the show became another variation of Cahill's examination of American traditions. Adopting a pan-American viewpoint, the exhibition extended the search for cultural roots to South America. Arguing once again for the relevance of pre-industrial tradition to contemporary artists, Cahill juxtaposed ancient art with paintings and sculptures by modernists such as Max Weber, William Zorach, Diego Rivera, Jean Charlot, and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Cahill's ambition to illustrate the artistic quality of "American Sources," by displaying pre-Columbian works in an art museum and positing it as a source for modern artists, inaugurated the problematic tradition of MoMA exhibitions on primitivism, which extended through William Rubin's 1984 exhibition, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern." Following "American Sources," two years later, in 1935 Barr organized "African Negro Art," and in 1941 Rene d'Harancourt and Frederic H. Douglas organized the highly influential "Indian Art of United States," for which "American Sources" provided a context. D'Harancourt's exhibition of Native American art and Cahill's exhibition of pre-Columbian art illustrated artists' appropriations of these art forms as sources for America's useable past, co-opting them as symbols of national identity. As Jackson Rushing describes the "Indian Art of the United

³⁹⁹ Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 43.

States” show, “the design and discourse of the exhibition transformed Indian art, and the cultural traditions thus represented, into a signifier of national spirit.”⁴⁰⁰

The scope of Cahill’s exhibition, with a total of 266 works, was impressive, providing an ambitious model that D’Harancourt would follow in his large-scale installation that filled the entire museum. The pre-Columbian section of “American Sources” consisted of ninety-four stone sculptures, eighty pieces of pottery, forty examples of metal work, and sixteen textiles. Cahill brought together several remarkable pieces from different collections. These included the Maya sculptures Head of Maize God (fig. 93) from the collection of the Peabody Museum at Harvard and Stela no. 13 from Piedras Negras, Guatemala (fig. 94), lent by The University Museum of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. One of Cahill’s favorite works was a rare Peruvian feather mosaic from a private collection (fig. 95). The inclusion of Stela no. 13 in New York was an exciting event that demonstrated the most recent archaeological research at Piedras Negras by the University of Pennsylvania and provided a rare opportunity to view the stone sculpture. UPenn had just begun excavation there in 1931, and several of the discovered stele were placed on loan to the University for an extended period but were returned to Guatemala in 1947.⁴⁰¹ Cahill admired Maya sculptural works for “their extraordinary mastery of the carver’s art, their sensitive modeling, and their fine sense of

⁴⁰⁰ Jackson W. Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 120.

⁴⁰¹ Linton Satterthwaite, Jr., Mary Butler, and J. Alden Mason, “Piedras Negras Archaeology, 1931-1939 University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,” *Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies*, eds. John M. Weeks, Jane Hill, and Charles Golden; see http://www.famsi.org/research/piedras_negras/u_penn.

proportion.”⁴⁰² He considered Head of Maize God “one of the greatest sculptures ever made in America” and the feather mosaic the finest example of Peruvian textile.⁴⁰³ When Cahill found out he might be able to acquire the featherwork by loan, he wrote to Phillip Ainsworth Means, a specialist on Peru, that “the possibility of getting the tunic . . . has raised my blood pressure several points.”⁴⁰⁴

In addition to the works from the University Museum and the Peabody Museum, Cahill selected works from the American Museum of Natural History. Miller accompanied him to view the collections. She recalled, “I didn’t get paid but it was a marvelous experience going around to all the big centers of this pre-Columbian material here in the East. . . . Cahill selected the show with a perfect eye and it was a knockout.”⁴⁰⁵ At Harvard, the Peabody collection of pre-Columbian art had been installed in a gallery of the Fogg Art Museum, which served as an important precedent for Cahill’s exhibition. He considered the Fogg “among the first to show a very strong interest in the aesthetic side of pre-Columbian art” and was so impressed with the collection that “he broke up their whole room there” with loans for “American Sources.”⁴⁰⁶

Following in the Fogg’s footsteps, Cahill emphasized the artistic value of pre-Columbian art in the installation of “American Sources,” arranging the works to highlight their aesthetic quality. Despite the large number of objects, the galleries were not cramped, providing space around each object for contemplation, with labels and wall text kept to a bare minimum (fig. 96). Architect Philip Johnson, who joined MoMA in 1932

⁴⁰² Holger Cahill, *American Sources of Modern Art*, 10.

⁴⁰³ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 188.

⁴⁰⁴ Holger Cahill, letter to Phillip Ainsworth Means, April 20, 1933, Registrar Exhibition Files, Exh #29, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁴⁰⁵ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Dorothy C. Miller,” 12.

⁴⁰⁶ Cahill, *Reminiscences of Holger Cahill*, 188.

as head of the department of architecture, assisted Cahill with the installation.⁴⁰⁷ Where built-in wall cases were used for display (fig. 97), Cahill and Johnson devised a streamlined design that echoed the appearance of the façade of Meis van der Rohe's *Tugendhat House*, 1928-1930 (fig. 98). While the installation design presented pre-Columbian art in the context of modernist works, Cahill did not mix the ancient and modern. Instead of integrating them, as was his approach with watercolors and paintings in the "American Paintings and Sculpture" exhibition, he placed them in separate galleries.

The catalogue, with a cover featuring a striking, graphic, pre-Columbian-like sculptural motif (fig. 99) was fundamental to the construction of the history of the artists' interest in primitivism and, in particular, pre-Columbian art. Cahill's essay was one of the first texts written on the subject. The *American Sources* catalogue preceded Robert Goldwater's 1938 book *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, which provided the first thorough consideration of the influence of the art of Africa and Oceania on French painters. Goldwater's book also touched on Native American Indian art, but did not include pre-Columbian art.⁴⁰⁸

In his catalogue essay, Cahill argued for the influence of pre-Columbian art on Modernism, which, he noted, "like everything else in modern culture, has a complex heritage."⁴⁰⁹ He sought to elevate pre-Columbian art, which had previously been

⁴⁰⁷ "Ancient Art from Mayan and Mexican Sources Shown at Modern Museum," *New York Sun* (13 May 1933), Department of Public Information Records I, 9,4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid

⁴⁰⁸ Robert J. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938).

⁴⁰⁹ Holger Cahill, *American Sources of Modern Art*, 5.

considered a field of archaeological study, to an influential fine art form. He did so by incorporating it into the history of European and American infatuation with primitivism. Like many of his contemporaries, he defined primitivism as a blanket term, reducing the widely different artistic productions of Chinese, African, pre-Columbian, and Native American cultures into an ill-defined and implicitly marginalizing category.

As Cahill helped mold this faulty concept of primitivism, he was also one of the first to chart its artistic impact on American art. He began his short overview with the French Romantics' interest in Eastern art, and with nineteenth century painters such as Whistler, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec. He then considered the Fauves and the Cubists, the "standard bearers of this movement," who frequently visited the archaeological and ethnographic collections on display at the Trocadéro in Paris. He remarked that while "African sculpture had the most immediate effect upon the Cubist painters . . . the Trocadero's collections of Peruvian, Mexican, and Central American art were known to *Fauves* and Cubists alike."⁴¹⁰

Around 1909, American artists who returned from Paris, such as Max Weber, began to visit the pre-Columbian collection at the American Museum of Natural History. As a result, Cahill concluded:

During the past thirty years ancient American art had come to be valued more justly by artists and art lovers. From an object of scientific investigation, exotic to the main stream of European civilization, it has come to be looked upon as one of the great arts of the world.⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ Holger Cahill, *American Sources*, 8-9.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

He believed that it deserved a scholarly attention “with the same respect and care” given to Asian and European art.⁴¹² While Cahill’s ideas furthered the prejudiced views of the period in regard to non-Western art, his argument that pre-Columbian art should be viewed as an art object was radical. It questioned, but did not overturn, the conventional division between art and archaeology. Today, Harvard’s collection of pre-Columbian art remains a component of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

Incorporating pre-Columbian art into the history of primitivism, Cahill had to finesse his argument, so as not to undermine the artistic significance of his subject matter. In a statement revealing the pejorative aspects of the term “primitive,” he noted that “[w]hile the growth of popular appreciation has come about through the general interest in primitive peoples, ancient American art cannot, in its best periods, be called primitive.”⁴¹³ Cahill upheld the nineteenth century hierarchy imposed on the pre-Columbian world by placing the Maya as superior to the other implicitly “primitive” cultures of ancient Mexico, including the Huastecs, Totonacs, and Tarascans, whose art he claimed “has much that makes a direct appeal to contemporary European and American taste.”⁴¹⁴

The history that Cahill traced in his essay, he had participated in creating first hand. In 1922, he authored an article in *International Studio* on contemporary Native American watercolorists from New Mexico, Fred Kabotie (fig. 100) and Awa Tsireh, entitled “America Has Its ‘Primitives.’” Cahill intended to change public perception about Native American art, but was limited by his own stereotypical, romantic, and

⁴¹² Ibid., 9.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

pejorative conceptions. Cahill argued that despite “indisputable proof of the Indian’s wonderful creative life before us, a large part of our public sticks its collective head into the broad sands of prejudice, and exclaims, ‘Indian art! There ain’t no s[u]ch animal.’”⁴¹⁵ His choice of the word “animal” echoed the negative stereotypes he was trying to counteract but could not shake. Cahill addressed his subject from a paternalistic, romanticized viewpoint, describing the Native American as “a child of nature, close to the soil from which he wins his living, cultivating the earth with a rough hoe, hunting wild creatures, and living with his tribe in a free democratic association.”⁴¹⁶

Cahill’s articles contributed to the vogue for the American Southwest that drew Georgia O’Keeffe, John Sloan, and other artists to escape the city for a more serene, earthy experience in the rolling red hills of Taos and Santa Fe. Cahill had a long-term affection for New Mexico, frequently staying with Sloan in Santa Fe throughout the 1930s.⁴¹⁷ A photograph from 1942 (fig.101) captures another visit with Georgia O’Keeffe and her friend, Maria Chabot, the latter of whom was the initiator of the Santa Fe markets selling Native American arts and crafts. In the 1930s, she worked for the WPA photographing and documenting Native American and Colonial Spanish art in New Mexico.⁴¹⁸

In addition to his art criticism and his personal admiration for Santa Fe, Cahill frequently accompanied Max Weber on trips to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In New York in the 1920s, Cahill and Weber shared an appreciation for

⁴¹⁵ E. Holger Cahill, “America Has Its ‘Primitives’,” 75, no. 299, *International Studio* (March 1922): 80.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, personal communication with the author, June 16, 2010.

⁴¹⁸ Douglas Martin, “Maria Chabot, 87, Dies; Began Indian Market and Was an O’Keeffe Associate,” *The New York Times* (15 July 2001).

pre-Columbian art. Around 1922, Weber wrote to Cahill apologizing for having to miss one of their visits to the museum:

I cannot tell you how I longed and looked forward to our visit to the Museum of Natural History (rather the museum of great art as far as we are concerned). . . . I am so glad over your interest in the great art as typified in my old and beloved Chac Mool and all other great examples of the significant Yucatan Culture and the art of the Aztec. It is a great blessing to be able to “listen-in” on these great spiritual works of art, either intellectually or cultivatedly. I hope to be able to be free one day next week to meet you . . . and what a wonderful time we will have contemplating these wonders of art.⁴¹⁹

Weber was so moved by the timeless quality of the Chacmool that he composed a lengthy poem to the sculpture, which, according to Cahill, was written against the knee of the statue. Weber found the work simultaneously modern and ancient with shoulders that could “bear the weight of time,” and eyes that appeared to “stare into the future with unequalled velocity.”⁴²⁰ He adapted the Chacmool’s reclining pose, square head, broad shoulders, and bulky legs as his basis for the females in *Tranquility* (fig. 102), a painting Cahill selected for “American Sources.”

Although “American Sources” generated a largely positive response, it stimulated lively debate among critics. As with the “American Painting and Sculpture” exhibition, a number of reviewers critiqued the Modern portion of the show. Several critics accepted the influence of the pre-Columbian on the Mexican artists, but felt that relevance to the American artists was strained. Most objected because they believed American artists should pursue native subjects and not because they were concerned about an appropriation of pre-Columbian art. A critic for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*,

⁴¹⁹ Max Weber, undated letter to Holger Cahill, *circa* 1922, Holger Cahill Papers, reel 5285, frames 706-707, AAA.

⁴²⁰ Cahill discusses and reproduces Weber’s poem to the Chacmool in Holger Cahill, *Max Weber* (New York: Downtown Gallery, 1930), 27-28.

however, criticized Cahill's presentation of pre-Columbian culture, describing the tie-in with the American painters as "somehow artificial and negligibly ethnological." Others simply found the Modern galleries labored and unconvincing. Helen Appleton Read writing for the *Herald Tribune* remarked:

probably in order to bring the exhibition within the scope of a museum dedicated to modern art it was necessary to create this *raison d'être*. The modern showing it must be admitted is pretty poor and does not speak any too well for that curiously exciting and inspiring quality, which these ancient arts are supposed to exert upon the creative faculties of 20th century artists.⁴²¹

The most critical review was from journalist and art critic Anita Brenner in *The Nation*. Brenner, an expert on Mexican art, politics, and religion and author of *Idols behind Altars* (1928), criticized the exhibition for forcing a connection between pre-Columbian works and the Modernists in the service of nationalism. She argued that Cahill's display of pre-Columbian cultures were "too narrowly bound by its name to exhibit the great of the past frankly as such." By making the pre-Columbian art an expression of American nationalism, the "exhibition must therefore make American ancients plausible by having them wave on the star-spangled banner or calling them the

⁴²¹ See, for example, "A Lost Race But Foreign, Not American Artists Make Most Use of our Background" *Brooklyn Eagle Magazine* (August 13, 1933); "Old Indian Art Fathers Work of Modern Sculptors" *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (23 May 1933); and, Helen Appleton Read, "Modern Art's Ancestors," *New York Herald Tribune* (14 May 1933); In opposition to Read, many reviewers, including Henry McBride, found the exhibition convincing in its juxtaposition of the ancient American and the Modern. Henry McBride, "Ancient Mayan Culture Proved by Works of Art," *The New York Sun* (22 May 1933). Other positive reviews include Malcolm Vaughan, "Ancient American Art Shown by Modern Museum," *New York American* (May 14, 1933); and, Carlyle Burrows "American Sources of Modern Art Revealed in Museum Show," *New York Herald Tribune* (14 May 1933). The reviews cited are compiled in the Public Information Records, PI, I, 9;4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

tail that wags the Mexican dog.”⁴²² To fully appreciate pre-Columbian art it needed to stand on its own, without any justifying framework. Regardless of a Modernist display, Brenner implied that Cahill did not consider the pre-Columbian work suitable for exhibition at MoMA without demonstrating its connection to Modernism. Indeed, she believed Cahill employed pre-Columbian art as a means to serve his larger ambition to construct art historical traditions that could bolster American contemporary art.

Cahill recognized the Modern galleries were the low point of the show, but in a letter to Goodyear he explained their necessity:

The modern section is the weak part of the show . . . but was necessary . . . because the reevaluation of pre-Columbian art was made by modern artists and it was not until we could see ancient American art through the eyes of modern artists that its high quality became evident.⁴²³

Goodyear acknowledged the weakness, but offered his full support replying,

the choice of objects that you made is beyond criticism and the arrangement of the whole exhibition is a real delight. . . . This is certainly the culmination of several shows that you have supervised for us this season.⁴²⁴

Equally pleased, Barr wrote to Cahill expressing his regret that the exhibition did not have a more prominent place in the schedule. He commended Cahill for undertaking a project that he would “never [have] had the courage to tackle it within so short a preparatory time.” Eager to catch up on events of the past year in person upon his return from Europe, Barr concluded, “I look forward to seeing you—there’s a lot I want to hear about if you’re not tired of talking shop. I think you’ll have a lot to say—and some good

⁴²² Anita Brenner, “The Tail that Wags the Dog,” *The Nation* (June 28, 1933), PI, I, 9;4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁴²³ Holger Cahill, undated letter to Conger Goodyear, *circa* 1933, A. Conger Goodyear Scrapbooks, 22, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁴²⁴ Conger Goodyear, letter to Holger Cahill, May 17, 1933, DCM, IV.4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

advice after this year's experience."⁴²⁵ Regardless of the conceptual problems that underpinned "American Sources," Cahill's organization of three large, successful shows in one year, especially given the museum's small staff, was remarkable. Such vigorous scholarship paralleled Barr's ambitious efforts during MoMA's first years.

When his directorship at MoMA ended, Cahill began organizing the Municipal Art Exhibition, which was sponsored by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and the Rockefellers. It was scheduled to run from February 28 to March 31, 1934 at the RCA building at Rockefeller Center, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fiftieth Street. He recruited Dorothy to help him organize what was conceived as an enormous undertaking. A seven-person jury comprised of Barr, Cahill, the directors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, as well as the heads of various artist societies, would select five hundred contemporary American artists who would be invited to participate. Miller remembered the exhibition gallery was "a magnificent space on three levels," that "was beautifully designed," but not yet finished. Miller noted:

The paint wasn't yet dry . . . and there was no elevator in the proper place so that you could bring a truck in and take it up. They had to go in another entrance where building materials were being brought in and weave through that with the art trucks to another elevator. It was ghastly.⁴²⁶

Soon after it had begun, the organization of the exhibition took a disastrous course that ultimately demonstrated Miller's excellent curatorial skills. From the outset, she and Cahill were overwhelmed by the project, and Cahill had been suffering from attacks of gallstones. They decided to hire Mildred Holzauer as an assistant. When Cahill slipped

⁴²⁵ Alfred Barr, letter to Holger Cahill, May 29, 1933, DCM, IV.4, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁴²⁶ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 15- 16.

on ice because of an attack and had to be rushed to the hospital to have his gallbladder removed, she and Miller took over the project and were working until midnight every night. Miller called Beatrice Winsor to elicit the help for a few weeks of Dorothy Dudley, her colleague from Dana's apprentice program who was still at the Newark Museum, in order to make the deadline. At the same time, Miller was worried about Cahill, and recalled: "I was going up to [Columbia University Medical Center in] Washington Heights at dinnertime when I should have been having something to eat to see if he was going to survive and then coming back and working."⁴²⁷

Additional, if unneeded, excitement was provided by the construction of Diego Rivera's mural, *Man at the Cross Roads* in the lobby of the RCA building. When Miller had a free moment, she frequently went to watch Rivera and his assistants, Ben Shahn and Lucienne Bloch, working. She witnessed the Rockefeller's displeasure with the mural and its infamous portrait of Lenin, when it was covered with canvas curtains. From her account, however, she had had no idea they were planning to destroy the mural. Presumably as a result of all this commotion, she also noticed for her own show that "these two watchdogs came down every day to check on everything we were doing" as Rockefeller was also funding their exhibition.

She read the news about the destruction of Rivera's mural in the headlines of the morning paper on the day the first trucks were scheduled to begin picking up the artwork for her exhibition. Suddenly, more than half the artists were threatening to withdraw their works in protest. The museum professionals, who were jurors for the exhibition, were

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

also upset. In order to ensure that the project would go forward, Miller had to call everyone to convince them to still participate. She remembered:

I found myself in the very curious position of trying to persuade them to go ahead with the show because it meant so much to the City of New York to have this municipal art gallery;... I even talked to all the jurors, the museum people. Alfred Barr was just at the end...I had just barely met him...I heard myself talking to this great man on the telephone and saying, "Please, don't you think we ought to have this municipal art gallery and we can't have it if the whole thing stops right now?" I don't know how I persuaded him.⁴²⁸

Along with Barr, Miller managed to convince many of the artists to reconsider. A hanging committee, which had been assembled by Cahill and included Kuniyoshi and Thomas Hart Benton, came to assist Mildred and Dorothy hang fifteen hundred paintings.

Miller remembered them as "two poor little young girlies [who] were trying to get things done," but she and Holzauer impressively completed the show on schedule. Cahill was still in the hospital and could not attend the grand opening. When he was released a week later, Miller remembered he "weighed 123 pounds at that point. He came with a cane." In a display of his hard-headed and hearty character, "he would not go to his home; he said, 'I must go to the exhibition.' He went to the exhibition and went all through it, up and down the stairs before he would go home."⁴²⁹ During Cahill's absence Miller had distinguished herself as a capable leader, who could deliver an exhibition under even the most difficult circumstances. Had Cahill not slipped when he did, her career course might have been different, since her difficult telephone call to Alfred Barr had impressed him.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

A few months later Barr called Miller to invite her to work on a project at MoMA. She could not accept, as she was working with Cahill on an immediate follow-up to the Municipal Art Exhibition, entitled *Salons of America*. Another survey of contemporary art for the Forum Galleries at the RCA building, it included five thousand works and opened in April 1934. Cahill had recuperated sufficiently to participate in the project, but was still a bit frail. In the staff photo taken after the hanging of the show (fig. 103), he looks debonair, but still a little skinny. That summer, with the second survey exhibition completed, Miller put on her best hat and went to see Alfred Barr, to ask if he might have a job for her at the museum.⁴³⁰ He hired her as his assistant, launching her influential career at MoMA.

Barr was also impressed with Cahill's curatorial projects, and hired him again in 1934 to collaborate on the preparation for the NBC *Art in America* radio series, the first nationally broadcast radio program on American art.⁴³¹ The 1930s were a golden age for radio, which brought a fragmented country together in regular installments of news reports, serialized dramas, and Roosevelt's fireside chats. Dissolving the barriers of entertainment and education, radio programs provided both crucial information and escape into fictional storylines and vibrant jazz tunes.

The most infamous blending of radio's informational and sensational aspects was Orson Welles's 1938 *War of the Worlds* broadcast, aired as part of *The Mercury Theater on Air*. *Art in America*, the first attempt to translate American art history into a radio show for a broad audience, followed a serialized format and utilized a conversational

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁴³¹ See Clayton Funk, "The 'Art in America' Radio Programs, 1934-1935," *Studies in Art Education*, 40, no. 1 (Autumn 1998), 31.

script. Funded by the American Federation of the Arts, which was supported by the Carnegie Corporation, the series was a major educational endeavor that made art accessible to a wide audience through the use of entertainment media. It was presented in two parts. The first, organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, covered American art from 1600-1865. The second was coordinated by MoMA, and considered art from 1865 to the present, providing a history of painting, sculpture, and architecture, as well as overviews of contemporary photography, film, and stage design, in seventeen installments. It aired Saturday nights at 7 p.m. Eastern time from October 1934 through January 1935.⁴³²

To accompany the second part of the broadcasts, Cahill and Barr co-edited the book, *Art in America in Modern Times* for which Cahill wrote the essays on American painting and sculpture. Henry Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, and Catherine Baurer contributed sections on architecture. Lincoln Kirstein wrote about photography, Iris Barry discussed the motion picture, and John Mason Brown contributed an essay on stage design. In 1935, Barr and Cahill edited a second revised book, *Art in America: A Complete Survey* that covered both the first and second radio series, and added an additional section on folk art. The catalogues represented Cahill and Barr's shared commitment to public outreach and art education, and remain formative surveys conceived for a national audience.

The production of the series was a collaborative effort between Barr, MoMA founder Eddie Warburg, Cahill, and Sarah Newmeyer, the director of MoMA's publicity department. Barr and Warburg were responsible for outlining the content of the book and

⁴³² Cahill and Barr, *Art in America in Modern Times* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934).

radio program, which Cahill flushed out in his writing for *Art in America in Modern Times*.⁴³³ Newmeyer, who had worked as a fiction writer and playwright in California before joining MoMA, wrote the radio scripts as well as *Art in America News*, a promotional newsletter. *Art in America News* (fig. 104) summarized the content of each radio installment, reproduced one representative image, advertised the mail order form for the book, and allowed the listener who did not purchase a book to follow along.

In his preliminary outline for the series, Barr and Warburg conceived the discussion of America after the Civil War as a comparison of expatriates Whistler, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, and artists who stayed at home including Homer, Eakins and Ryder, “the solitary.”⁴³⁴ In their final form, the radio programs, with some changes and rearrangements, generally maintained Barr and Warburg’s initial conceptions. The first installment, entitled “Expatriate and Stay at Home—Whistler and Homer,” was followed by “Three Landscape Painters and a Solitary—Inness, Martin, Wyant, Ryder,” and “Waves of European Influence—Hunt, La Farge, Duveneck, Chase. Portrait Painters, Fashionable and Unfashionable—Eakins, Sargent.” The programs then moved on to sculpture after the Civil War, architecture, stage design, Impressionism, American scene painting, modern art, contemporary art, the modern room, the modern house, city planning, photography, and film. The final installment presented a review. Expanding Barr’s conviction that MoMA’s curatorial department should include architecture and design, the *Art in America* programs defined contemporary art, broadly incorporating elements of popular culture and social history.

⁴³³ See correspondence between Alfred Barr and Eddie Warburg, July 1933, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, AAA: 2164; 1187-1235, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2164; 1234-1235.

Cahill's writing for *Art in America in Modern Times*, which presented a complete overview of American artistic development in an historic context, was one of his best essays of his career. Although he followed a prescribed narrative, Cahill's voice and convictions infuse the text. He expressed the history of American art in personal, accessible terms. He opened the book with the observation that the years 1865 to 1934, with all their complex developments, "may be spanned by the life of one man." Although that person would have been more than two decades older than Cahill, he almost certainly perceived American art as a reflection of himself and his life experiences. In a letter to Goodyear, he described American art as "a hometown boy, inclined to put on cocky airs but rather unsure of himself and timid, on the whole, to go out and face the big world and find out what it thinks of him."⁴³⁵ The remark was an insightful, if unconscious, self-assessment.

The first page of the book continues with a social history that expressed Cahill's anti-industrial, anti-materialistic, democratic ideology and a conflicting excitement about the developments of modern life. Once again employing organic metaphors, he noted that in the post-Civil War period:

A whole nation was "on the make," restless, uprooted, eagerly developing, wasting and destroying the resources of a continent. . . . New industries were born almost over night. And from these flowed immense streams of wealth to people who had never had wealth before. It was a time when great fortune attended the ruthless and the pushing—when the rawness of the frontier was matched by the crudeness of the new industrial plutocracy, who cared as little for the more dignified esthetic ideals of the older America as they cared for its more democratic social theory. . . . At the feet of the great slag mountains of the Gilded Age there were many

⁴³⁵ Holger Cahill, letter to Conger Goodyear, August 2, 1938, DCM III.7.b, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

small plots of green where a rich intellectual and spiritual life was germinating.⁴³⁶

Cahill, like contemporary art historian Lewis Mumford, suggested Gilded Age history had a relevance to the country's current situation. The runaway speculation, rapid commercialization, and immense wealth of the 1920s had changed American life.⁴³⁷ Cahill believed these powerful economic forces in the Gilded Age and in the present could inhibit artistic growth. After the Civil War, Cahill perceived that "the original artist had little place. He was driven into isolation."⁴³⁸ In particular, his discussion of Whistler expressed an empathy with the artist's experience that seemed to mirror Cahill's own desire to define himself. He noted: "[Whistler] searched the world for something he did not find in his own country, for the look of the past, for the elusive romantic beauty which is always to be found somewhere else, in another country, in an another age."⁴³⁹

In his overview of contemporary art, Cahill noted a similar situation in which artists were striving to make their art relevant to the present conditions. After twenty years of experimentation with "every conceivable device for handling form and color," the current question was, "What is the artist to do with it all? What has he to say with it?" Cahill felt that artists were in an even worse position in the early 1930s than during the late nineteenth century. During the Depression, he noted:

We are living in a time of conscious and critical reevaluation, of profound readjustments. . . . art seems more a luxury than ever, the artist more divorced from life. Art for arts sake is a tattered banner which has blown

⁴³⁶ Cahill and Barr, 7.

⁴³⁷ Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of Art in America 1865-1895* (New York: Dover Publications, 1931; Reprint, 1971).

⁴³⁸ Cahill and Barr, 7.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

down the wind.⁴⁴⁰

This statement did not reflect a personal bias against abstraction and was not an endorsement of American Scene painting as the single style that could be relevant, but spoke to the current historical moment.

Cahill, who appreciated both abstraction and realism, emphasized the contemporary vogue for realist style, but was aware that stylistic trends shift over time and, even within a defined period, are not monolithic. As he described it, for a critic or art historian, “all styles are equally valid in themselves, but a particular style may be the best vehicle for creative activity at a certain time. . . . Eclecticism in public taste was a normal phenomenon in the nineteenth century and it is a normal phenomenon in our time.”⁴⁴¹

Cahill’s remarks in *Art in America in Modern Times* addressed contemporary conditions, in which economic devastation had left artists with few patrons and threatened to erode their audience, as much of the public turned its attention to more fundamental issues of subsistence. Above all questions of style, his central concern was securing a place for the artist in society and providing every person with the opportunity to understand and take part in the creative process.

Bringing art to anyone who had access to a radio, the *Art in America* programs were a step towards realizing these goals. The series successfully engaged many people who might otherwise not have been exposed to art. In the first five weeks of the program, the museum received more than 4,000 letters from listeners. Some were individual responses to the content of the broadcasts and others came from high school and college

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁴¹ Holger Cahill, “A Symposium: The State of American Art,” *Magazine of Art* 42, no. 3 (1949): 88.

educators who were integrating the radio programs into their curriculum. In some instances the programs were a community-building experience. People gathered at museums, libraries, churches, schools, and local stores where a broadcast would be aired, or organized a block party for their neighbors or even an entire town.⁴⁴² This must have been exactly the sort of response Cahill had been hoping for, and provided a context for the future education programs of the WPA/FAP. It also paved the way for further radio programs on American art, such the 1939-1940 *Art for Your Sake*, a National Broadcasting Company production that portrayed the life of contemporary artists, such as Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and Rockwell Kent.⁴⁴³

Cahill and Barr's collaboration on the *Art in America* radio series, and on large touring exhibitions, record Barr's commitment to promoting American art and Cahill's intellectual contribution to MoMA's curatorial program. Their partnership during the early 1930s was built on a mutual dedication to public involvement and a common aspiration toward curatorial excellence. Although brief, it was important to the success of MoMA during its early years. It shaped Cahill's and Miller's careers as well as public understanding of American art history. The following summer, Cahill was offered the chance to expand upon the programs he helped form at MoMA, with an offer to direct the FAP. When Cahill received the most important opportunity of his life, he did everything possible to dodge accepting it, just as he had done with the job offer from MoMA.

⁴⁴² Clayton Funk, "The 'Art in America' Radio Programs, 1934-1935," *Studies in Art Education* 40, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 39, 36, and 106.

⁴⁴³ See Leo G. Mazow, "Regionalist Radio: Thomas Hart Benton on *Art for Your Sake*," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 1 (March 2008): 101-122.

Chapter 5:
The WPA Federal Art Project and American Art from the Ground Up

In organizing the Federal Art Program the many forces which tend to build up a sound art movement have been considered. . . . While the fate of the workers in the fine arts has seemed of paramount importance, it is clear that under the most favorable conditions these artists cannot prosper alone. Nor can they by their solitary efforts create a fully developed art movement in America.

--Holger Cahill, *Art for the Few or the Many?* 1936⁴⁴⁴

In his Oral History memoir, Cahill recounted his nomination to the directorship of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) as a momentous and humorous event. One day in late June 1935, he was returning home from working on one of his novels at the New York Public Library. He had finished his curatorial projects at MoMA and six weeks' prior had given up his position as advisor to Rockefeller in order to concentrate on his writing. At the time, he was living in the historic Rhinelander buildings at 116 West Eleventh Street. It was, as Cahill noted, the "same house that Theodore Dreiser wrote *The American Tragedy* in."⁴⁴⁵ The French woman who ran the house greeted him with: "Oh my God, Mr. Cahill, Washington has called you fifteen times since 9:00 o'clock this morning!" Perhaps thinking that the government had finally discovered that he had never officially obtained citizenship, he replied in half jest, "Well, the F.B.I has caught up with me at last, I guess."⁴⁴⁶

When he returned the telephone calls, he was invited down to Washington, DC for a meeting about the WPA/FAP with assistants to the WPA director, Harry Hopkins. Instantly, Cahill tried to turn the offer down, replying, "I know nothing about the

⁴⁴⁴ Holger Cahill, "Art for the Few or the Many?" 5, reel 5290, frames 1252-1271.

⁴⁴⁵ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 235.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

Government Art Project.”⁴⁴⁷ The promise of an all-expense paid trip eventually convinced him to take the meeting. He remembered: “I boned up the night before on all the sharp things that I could say about the Government Art Project, and I said them.”⁴⁴⁸ Cahill went to his initial lunch meeting in DC with the intention that he would be an advisor who would not stay long.

At the meeting, he remembered that he was highly critical of the previous Public Works of Art Project, “talking over the bugs that I found in the program as I read it over.” A woman in the group counseled him not to “denigrate things,” because “that isn’t what they want out of you.” He responded, “Then what in the devil did they bring me down here for?” To her it was obvious, and she shattered any delusions by saying, “You know why they brought you down. . . . They want you to take to take this art job. That’s the reason.”⁴⁴⁹ Confronted by the fact that he was being primed for a very influential position, he got away from the woman as quickly as possible.

In an effort to flee the scene, an hour later he boarded the next train to New York. By coincidence, the woman he had hoped to dodge was also heading to New York on the train. She questioned Cahill, “For God’s sake what are you doing here? Don’t you know that you have a date with Harry Hopkins this evening?” Cahill pointed out that no one had informed him about such a meeting and that “there’s no use in my repeating to Mr. Hopkins what I’ve already said to his assistants.”

As soon as he got back to New York that evening, Cahill met Stuart Davis for dinner. He remembered that “it was a very windy black night and the leaves were

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 235-36.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 236-237.

blowing all over the place.”⁴⁵⁰ They went to an Italian restaurant near Fourteenth Street and Cahill told him about the meeting. By that point, the response of one of his most trusted friends, “For God’s sake, what’s the matter with you, why don’t you take it?” must have been starting to sound familiar. Reluctant to put his writing on hold again, he said, “I don’t want to. I don’t want to go in for that sort of business. Would you want to stop being a painter?” Davis surprised him by confessing, “Well, nobody’s offered me anything particularly.”⁴⁵¹ Cahill began to contemplate the job. He talked out some initial plans for the organization of the Federal Art Project, including the establishment of a National Advisory Committee that would include professionals in the field, such as Barr, Davis, and Worcester Museum director, Francis Taylor.⁴⁵²

The next morning, Cahill received a call from administrator Jacob Baker who expressed his displeasure with Cahill’s behavior in Washington. Probably hoping to close the discussion for good, he said, “Mr. Baker, honestly, I’m not interested in the job.” Baker replied that if he turned the position down, he would most likely give it to Jonas Lie, president of the National Academy of Design. This concerned Cahill, who was critical of the Academy’s aesthetic conservatism. Both he and Davis felt that if appointed, Lie would not be supportive of modern artists.

In the next several days, Cahill, whom Miller described as “horrified” by his predicament, made several phone calls seeking advice about his decision. He phoned her while she was in Nantucket with friends. Dorothy was the only person who refused to offer an opinion, replying: “I know enough not to advise a man about something that

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 337.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Taylor would subsequently become the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1940 to 1955.

important. You'll just have to make up your own mind."⁴⁵³ Cahill then called Francis Taylor. He was on vacation, but Cahill managed to reach him on the beach in Maine. Cahill "could hear the water splashing off Taylor's bathing suit as he came into the booth to talk to me. I told him what was on my mind." He concurred, "You're quite right, it's the worst job in the world. It'll be terrible, with a dead cat coming your way every few minutes, and you'll be lucky if you dodge any of them . . . but of course you've got to take the job! . . . An invitation from the government to a job like that is tantamount to an order. It's like being drafted." Cahill relented, "Yes. I guess you're right."⁴⁵⁴ After several more calls from Baker, he consented, hesitantly, with the concession, "I do not see how I can say no."⁴⁵⁵

In Cahill's account of his acceptance, he suggests that agreeing to take on a government position, in which he had no experience and which put him before the public eye, was a personal hurdle. His recollection of the events may reflect his reluctance to take a job that could reveal that he wasn't a U.S. citizen and that would force him to pause his writing career. In Cahill's remembrance, Taylor's remarks, by aligning the position to military service and a sacrifice for one's country, helped to nudge him towards an acceptance. Given Cahill's tendency to mythologize his past, he may well have embellished the degree to which he needed to be persuaded into the position. Cahill was between jobs when he was offered the position and therefore in need of work, but

⁴⁵³ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," May 1970-September 28, 1971, 14, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

⁴⁵⁴ Holger Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 339. Interview by Joan Pring, 1957, transcript Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, Microfilmed copy, reel 5285, frames 0027-0670, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Digitized version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/series1.htm.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 340.

more importantly the WPA/FAP directorship offered him an unprecedented opportunity to shape a major cultural reform initiative. If he accepted the job, then he would finally be able put his Populist artistic theories, which had been a driving force behind his career, into action.

The WPA/FAP was the largest of four government art projects that operated throughout the Depression years. It followed the Public Works of Art Project (1933-4), and operated concurrently with the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (1934-1943) and the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935-1939), both administered by the Treasury Section. The FAP was a small division within the WPA, Roosevelt's enormous work-relief program, which was shaped and overseen by his trusted advisor, Harry Hopkins. The visual arts division, which produced murals, easel paintings, sculpture, graphics, posters, and plates for the Index of American Design, was one component of Federal Art Project Number One, which included the visual art, music, theater, and writing divisions. The structure of the WPA/FAP was, to a certain extent, decentralized, with state and local supervisors overseeing artistic projects and reporting to Cahill and his staff in Washington.

In its decentralized organization, the WPA/FAP echoed its predecessor the PWAP, the first of the New Deal art programs, which was funded by the Civil Works Administration, administered by the Treasury Department, and directed by Treasury Department official, Edward Bruce. Edward Bruce's leadership was influential to the success of the program, and the subsequent creation of the FAP, which he had encouraged Roosevelt and Hopkins to develop. He continued to play an important role in New Deal public art as director of The Treasury Section of Fine Arts.

Under Cahill's leadership, the FAP differed from the Treasury Department art programs both in its methods of employing artists and in its educational initiatives. Whereas the Treasury Section generally prioritized artistic quality over financial need in employing artists, or chose artists through competitions, the FAP offered broader access to government support.⁴⁵⁶ Although this approach was in line with Hopkins's objectives for the WPA, intended to ameliorate the miseries of unemployment, Cahill's conception of the WPA/FAP broadened the administration's primary function as a work-relief effort.

Through an exhibition program, which was paired with educational initiatives such as the Community Art Centers, and the Index of American Design, Cahill made the WPA/FAP into a cultural reform project that reflected his Populist vision of art as embedded in the experience of everyday life of the common person. Through FAP exhibitions, which included local and national shows, Cahill aimed to revitalize American culture by supporting artists, rebuilding the relationship between art and local communities, and extending the art world beyond major metropolitan centers. Applying his talents as a publicist, Cahill and the FAP administration utilized the media to promote the accomplishments of the WPA/FAP and their expression of Cahill's ideals of a national artistic culture that was interwoven with American public life.

Reflecting Cahill's ambitions for broad-based artistic activity, the scope of WPA/FAP production was wide reaching. At its height, the art project employed more than 5,000 artists throughout the United States and, over the course of the entire program,

⁴⁵⁶ For the distinctions between the programs, see Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 39.

created 2,500 murals, 18,000 sculptures, 108,000 paintings, 200,000 prints, 35,000 posters, and 22,000 plates for the Index of American Design.⁴⁵⁷

Throughout his directorship, Cahill became a link between local city and state art projects, and between individual artists and the federal administration in DC. Although he was responsible for administrating a large bureaucratic operation, Cahill continued his involvement in curatorial projects, and as a mentor to artists. There was a crucial personal dimension to Cahill's leadership, which he used as a means for community building among artists. His mentorship was similar to Stieglitz's, but was ultimately wider reaching since Stieglitz promoted a small, carefully selected circle of artists for an elite audience. Unlike Cahill, Stieglitz was not concerned with the relationship between art and society. His circle, according to Wanda Corn, "situated itself as a modernist aristocracy in New York."⁴⁵⁸ As director, Cahill spent the majority of his time traveling throughout the United States to remain connected to the artists and the various arts activities sponsored by the FAP. Miller often accompanied him on these trips (fig. 105) and, together, they cultivated relationships with such artists throughout the country as Philip Evergood, Arnold Freidman, Arshile Gorky, Stanton MacDonald-Wright, Loren MacIver, Morris Graves, Jackson Pollock, Joseph Stella, Mitchell Siporin, Mark Tobey, and William Zorach, to mention only a few. Although Cahill was officially instructed by Harry Hopkins's assistant Jacob Baker to refer artists seeking employment to their state and local administrators, Cahill, nevertheless intervened to get many artists on to the FAP

⁴⁵⁷ See Richard McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 96; and, Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (New York: Graphic Society, 1974), 28-29.

⁴⁵⁸ Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 23.

and advocated for the employment of others. Those he was able to include on the FAP included Oscar Bluemner, Jan Matulka, MacIver, and graphic artist Arthur Zaidenberg.⁴⁵⁹

Cahill came to the FAP directorship as an art critic and curator with a longstanding relationship to the New York art scene. Although he stepped into the position without political experience or a political agenda, his Populist artistic philosophies and interest in reforming what he perceived as a disconnected relationship between art and society dovetailed with the progressive ideals of the New Deal government. President Roosevelt envisioned the WPA/FAP and other New Deal art projects as one aspect of his massive work-relief program aimed at job creation and the improvement of almost every aspect of American society, including the economy, agriculture, infrastructure, and conservation. Some scholars, such as Jonathan Harris, question the success of the New Deal programs, arguing that they “brought very limited reforms to the system and, in the long term, functioned to preserve and entrench the power of monopoly capitalism in the United States,” whereas others observe progressive elements in the New Deal.⁴⁶⁰ As historian Robert McElvaine has noted, while the WPA was not successful in many of its endeavors and failed to alleviate widespread

⁴⁵⁹ Jacob Baker issued an instruction that prohibited the federal office to deal directly with artists. See Jacob Baker, memo to Holger Cahill, September 6, 1935, reel 5285, frame 889, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; Also, Holger Cahill, letter to Oscar Bluemner, December 7, 1936, reel 5285, frame 914, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA; On Matulka see Holger Cahill to Audrey McMahan, October 23, 1935; on Zaidenberg see Holger Cahill letter to Arthur Zaidenberg, May 6, 1936 contained in box 2 folder 49, Belisario Contreras Papers on New Deal Art, Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

⁴⁶⁰ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

unemployment, with only about 30 percent of the total jobless aided, he considers the FAP one of its most “innovative” and “daring” initiatives.⁴⁶¹

Not an expert on art, Roosevelt, nevertheless, shared Cahill’s artistic philosophies. He had an interest in both American artists and the role of art in public life and would sometimes respond directly to artists who wrote to him. In 1939, he wrote to Rockwell Kent:

I think we should all be encouraged because the function of art in society and particularly in a democracy is receiving such national recognition. . . . After all, there can be no freedom in the arts unless there is individual freedom and only in nations which guarantee both will culture derive from the masses and by the same corollary influence the lives and tastes of all people.⁴⁶²

Roosevelt, like Cahill, believed that in a democracy culture should be generated from the bottom up, arising from the “masses,” rather than being determined by art critics, artists working in isolation, or experts, and be accessible and broadly relevant. He believed art could play a role in rebuilding a broken hopeless society, and envisioned it as an uplifting component that could promote New Deal reform efforts.⁴⁶³

Hopkins, a man for whom Cahill developed a deep respect, also shared Cahill’s vision about the role of art in a democracy. Another Midwesterner, who was son of a harness maker from Sioux City, Iowa, Hopkins put himself through Grinnell College and then went into social work in a tenement on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. He worked from 1932-1933 as director of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA),

⁴⁶¹ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 268.

⁴⁶² Franklin D. Roosevelt, letter to Rockwell Kent, May 16, 1939, Federal Art Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry L. Hopkins, reel NDA/HP1, AAA.

⁴⁶³ For a discussion of Roosevelt’s views on art, see Roger G. Kennedy, *When Art Worked* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 67.

a New York State relief program, and in Roosevelt's federal administration as director of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) from 1933-1934. Under his tenure, both these programs included employment programs for artists. The driving force behind the concept of the WPA, Hopkins proposed the new program to Roosevelt in 1934. He suggested replacing the dole with work relief in order to rebuild confidence and remove the sense of humiliation associated with a handout.⁴⁶⁴

As suggested by his insight into the emotional ramifications of the dole, Hopkins had an incredibly sharp intellect. Cahill remembered him as having "an extraordinary way of putting his finger on something which would be the center of the thing."⁴⁶⁵ Cahill also considered him an idealist, an "American 'libertarian'" in the same tradition as John Cotton Dana. Like Dana, Hopkins believed in fine art's social importance, and envisioned it as part of the WPA. When Bruce and Roosevelt began to explore the idea of an arts program as part of the WPA, Hopkins replied to Roosevelt immediately with the assurance that "I have your file on art projects. . . . I feel that this whole matter should receive attention the moment our new bill goes through Congress. In the meantime I will keep in touch with Mr. Bruce and try to submit something to you."⁴⁶⁶ After the approval of the project, Hopkins looked to Cahill for his expertise on American art and, as Cahill remembered, "he really liked those projects. He enjoyed them. He had fun out of them."⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁴ McKinzie, 76.

⁴⁶⁵ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 326.

⁴⁶⁶ Harry L. Hopkins, letter to Franklin Roosevelt, January 4, 1935, Federal Art Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry L. Hopkins, reel NDA/HP1, AAA.

⁴⁶⁷ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill, 326.

In one of their early meetings, Hopkins asked Cahill what the significance of the FAP would be. Cahill defined the project as a preservation of American artistic traditions, which he perceived to be threatened, drawing parallels between what he saw in the United States to what was happening in China. He described the latter as being “practically without painters, without any of the old craftsmen, anything of the old craftsmen” and “They might recapture tradition, but it might be a matter of hundreds of years.” He feared, “this is the sort of thing that can happen to a culture. It can happen to us.”⁴⁶⁸ Cahill hoped that the FAP would minimize ill effects on U.S. culture, not only by supporting artists to work in spite of the absence of private patrons, but by restoring public participation in the art making process.

Cahill and Hopkins considered cultural preservation and growth the responsibility of a democratic society, and Cahill believed these ideals required application within everyday life in order to have any value. In Cahill words, democracy meant more “than the simple cherishing of a great heritage and a great ideal,” but an engagement with the process of keeping “the heritage and the ideal alive by making it function effectively in meeting contemporary problems.” The mark of a successful democracy was its ability to “release and guide the creative and constructive forces of our society to creative and constructive ends.”⁴⁶⁹ Cahill did not define creative success in terms of the production of a few outstanding works of art, maintaining that the “emphasis on masterpieces is primarily a collector’s idea.” Recognizing that it could take decades before it was possible to know “whether our day has produced masters or masterpieces,” he intended to

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 360.

⁴⁶⁹ Holger Cahill, “Art in Democracy,” undated, reel 5291, frames 466, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

create a favorable climate for creativity. Acknowledging that only a few artists would become highly significant, he believed “even those who will be forgotten were doing useful work in their own generation.”⁴⁷⁰

As a student of John Cotton Dana, Cahill did not approach the WPA/FAP with a connoisseur’s eye. Like Dana’s educational ambitions for the programs at the Newark Museum, the objective of the FAP was to democratize art, extending production beyond urban centers into communities that had little exposure to it. He did not attempt to predict which artistic trends and achievements were most significant. Although he promoted Realism and American Scene painting as the modes that would most fully connect the artists with their environment, Cahill had a pluralistic vision of cultural production and outlined no official restrictions in regard to artistic style and quality.⁴⁷¹

In this regard, Cahill’s approach differed from Edward Bruce’s leadership of the Public Works of Art Project and the Treasury Section, both of which had prescriptive guidelines on subject matter. In both these programs, Bruce stipulated American Scene painting as the official style, and prioritized issues of style and quality as a mission of the program. Writing about the procedures of the PWAP, he noted:

The central organization in Washington announced as the theme for the art work to be done the American Scene in all its phases. Subject to these limitations, complete freedom was granted to the regional committees in the selection and employment of the artists. The quality of the applicant as an artist was fixed as the first qualification and the need of the employment as the second.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” 35.

⁴⁷¹ For Cahill’s discussion of the American Scene as reconnecting the artist and society, see his essay, for the WPA/FAP exhibition catalogue *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art 1936; Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 14-15.

⁴⁷² Edward Bruce, “Implications of The Public Works of Art Project” *American Magazine of Art* 27 no.3 (March 1934): 113.

Similarly, the competitions for commissions sponsored by the section had guidelines that restricted artists to American Scene subjects and selected artists entirely on their artistic merit. The Treasury Section was, furthermore, not a work-relief initiative, but financed its commissions through the federal building fund and through allocations from other governmental agencies.

Despite their differences, Bruce, who was an experienced bureaucrat and a professional artist, provided a model for Cahill's promotion of American art through the New Deal administration. In particular, Bruce's administration of the PWAP provided precedents for the FAP that Cahill could reinforce and challenge. Both the PWAP and the FAP treated artists as laborers, paying them a weekly salary. Both organizations were also, of course, funded by government agencies that were established to provide economic relief throughout the Depression. Therefore both programs were, from their inception, fundamentally temporary initiatives. Ideologically, Bruce and Cahill shared the convictions that democratic patronage could foster a national culture and that, in Bruce's words, "Masterpieces and great geniuses are not produced from isolated efforts; if the history of art is any criterion they come only from large art movements."⁴⁷³ Cahill's apprenticeship with Dana had instilled in him a broad definition of what was considered a work of art. At Newark, Cahill had observed the impact of educational exhibitions of fine art and commercial design, rather than more traditional museum displays, as a means to engage the public with contemporary art. He had less rigid definitions in regard to what constituted American art and the WPA/FAP considered folk art, design, and art education as influential components in fostering public involvement.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 115.

Cahill's core missions of employing artists, cultivating public art education, and preserving American craft traditions, distinguished the FAP from the other arts organizations at the time. In October 1935, Cahill stressed these goals as central to his program in the Federal Art Project Manual:

Through employment of creative artists it is hoped to secure for the public outstanding examples of contemporary American art; through art teaching and recreational art activities to create a broader national art consciousness and work out constructive ways of using leisure time; through services in applied art to aid various campaigns of social value; and through research projects to clarify the native background in the arts. The aim of the project will be to work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community, and fine arts and practical arts.⁴⁷⁴

Beyond its first objective of employing artists as part of a work-relief initiative, the FAP would have public outreach, community building, social reform, and instructional components that set it apart from its forerunner, the PWAP, as well as its contemporary counterparts in the Treasury Department.

Emphasizing education and incorporating the study of American folk art through the Index of American Design, Cahill extended the scope of the PWAP in his conception of the FAP. In a letter to Harry Hopkins, Jacob Baker described the additions Cahill had made, noting that the “Federal Art Project is now carrying on all the types of projects which were carried on under the Public Works of Art Project, such as mural painting, easel painting, sculpture, graphic arts, poster work, and arts and crafts.” He was also quick to point out Cahill's “interesting departures” from the previous program, which included a proposal for a design laboratory which was “a master teaching project, headed by the best people in the field . . . to train teachers in effective methods of teaching art as

⁴⁷⁴ Holger Cahill, Federal Art Project Manual, quoted in O'Connor, ed., *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1969), 28.

worked out by the most advanced schools both here and abroad.” Baker also highlighted the “opening of demonstration galleries and art centers in states which heretofore had been underprivileged in the arts, and the Index of American Design.”⁴⁷⁵ Cahill’s emphasis on art teaching, shaped by Dewey’s and Dana’s theories, expanded the educational components of the WPA. Aside from the art programs, these offered women training in domestic work and, in North Carolina, sponsored a library project that enhanced the state’s library services.

The organizational framework Cahill devised for the FAP aimed to connect regional communities with the federal administration, and, through collaboration, to encourage local artistic developments. The FAP was comprised of two main administrative structures, one focused on employment, production, and education, and the other on preservation and public outreach. The first structure was decentralized, composed of state and city directors who supervised artist employment and artistic production and reported to Cahill and his assistant, Thomas Parker. It also included the Community Art Center Program, overseen by Parker, but administered by state and local directors. The second component of the administration, which included the Index of American Design and the departments of Exhibitions and Information, was more concentrated in Washington, DC. Although The Index of American Design consisted of a network of local projects that researched and preserved American crafts, these activities were overseen by Ruth Reeves and Adolph Glassgold and the Index was edited by Constance Rourke.

⁴⁷⁵ Jacob Baker, letter to Harry Hopkins, February 14, 1936, reel 5285, frames 953-954, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

The Index of American Design, the Department of Information and the Exhibition Department were all aimed at rebuilding the connection between artists and the public. As Victoria Grieve has argued, the incorporation of American folk art into the history of American art, The Index of American Design, made art accessible to new audiences, by tracing an “accessible and popular artistic tradition” that “had simply been hidden in the shadows of what was considered fine art,” creating what she terms “middlebrow culture.”⁴⁷⁶ The Department of Information, which handled publicity, likewise encouraged widespread discussion about American art and advertised the Populist mission of the FAP through print media and film. The Exhibition Department, headed by Mildred Holzhauser, popularized the work created by WPA/FAP artists through local exhibitions and larger museum shows that presented a national survey of artworks produced.

Perhaps as a result of Cahill’s curatorial background, the Exhibition Department played a key role within his administration, linking the regional and national aspects of Cahill’s programs. Even as director, Cahill maintained involvement with some curatorial projects. He was involved in assembling the large survey exhibition of FAP work at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, and in New York City at the Museum of Modern Art. He and Miller collaborated on the 1936 MoMA exhibition, “New Horizons in American Art,” which presented a diverse overview of the murals, paintings, graphic art, sculpture, and children’s art created through the FAP. In addition to the survey exhibitions, local FAP art galleries—from the Federal Art Project Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in New York City to the Butte Art Association in Butte, Montana—

⁴⁷⁶ Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Champaign-Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2009), 130.

provided artists a chance to exhibit within their own communities. They also displayed work lent from art projects in other cities and circulated by the Exhibition Department.

The staff Cahill selected to direct his programs shared his commitment to democratizing art through educational programs, support to artists, and by stimulating public involvement through exhibitions and articles in the press. When Cahill arrived in Washington in the summer of 1935, no administrative structure existed. President Roosevelt had not yet released the needed funds for the FAP, and Cahill was given a tiny office, a typewriter, and an overflowing basket of mail, which “came in stacks from people who had heard about this and were telling me what I could do.”⁴⁷⁷ When journalist and author Ernestine Evans asked Cahill, “What are you going to do with all these artists?” He had no answer to the question.⁴⁷⁸ The first assistants Cahill hired were Mildred Holzhauser, who had worked on the Municipal Art Exhibition, and Thomas Parker, who as a southerner would serve as Cahill’s liaison with the southern states, an area of the country upon which Cahill focused. Cahill’s subsequent appointment of Holzhauser as head of exhibitions, and Parker as director of the Community Art Center Program, suggests the importance of these divisions, which were entrusted to core staff members.

With no funds to work with, Cahill began paying Holzhauser and Parker out of his own pocket, while receiving no salary himself. This went on through the fall until, in a fury, Cahill apparently threatened to resign and took a train to New York. The next morning he got a call that Roosevelt had approved the Federal Art Project and that he

⁴⁷⁷ Cahill,” *The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill*,” 341.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; In 1929, Evans, who wrote the first English book on Diego Rivera entitled *The Frescos of Diego Rivera* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1929), was working for photographer and administrator Roy Stryker in the Resettlement Administration.

must return to Washington immediately.⁴⁷⁹ It was Cahill's first exposure to the workings of government bureaucracy.

As Cahill expanded his administration, he appointed directors in the divisions of Information, the Index of American Design, and Administration, as well as in state and regional offices. Cahill appointed many female administrators into prominent roles within his administration. While, as Barbara Melosh has argued, New Deal art often promoted traditional feminine roles, and Cahill's views towards women were not consistently progressive, his choices suggest he had no reservations about appointing women as cultural leaders.⁴⁸⁰ In addition to Holzhauser, he hired Mary Morsell as Assistant Director for Research in the Information Department, as well as Ruth Reeves and Constance Rourke, as supervisor and editor, respectively, of *The Index of American Design*.

Reeves, a textile designer, conceptualized the idea for a published picture collection on American crafts in collaboration with artist and librarian, Romana Javitz, and proposed the Index to Cahill. Cahill downsized Reeve's initial proposal, which he felt was too ambitious. He eliminated the study of architectural ornament and Native American artifacts, because they were catalogued by other government art projects, but approved the Index of American Design and appointed her to oversee it. This decision to exclude Native American works, as Grieve has argued, reinforced a "Eurocentric" definition of folk art.⁴⁸¹ Rourke, a colleague of Van Wyck Brooks had an established

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 342-45.

⁴⁸⁰ See Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

⁴⁸¹ See Virginia Tuttle Clayton, et al., *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press/National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2002), 5-6; For a critique of Cahill's decision to exclude Native American works from the Index, see Grieve, 123-126.

career as a writer and cultural critic prior to her appointment to the Index of American Design. In addition to her responsibilities regarding the conceptualization of the Index, Cahill utilized her writing talents and connections with the literary world in promoting the project. When Rourke told Cahill that she had been approached to write articles by the *New Republic*, *Harpers*, and *Atlantic* among others, he was delighted and replied that in choosing which offers to accept he would “have to leave all the decisions to you.”⁴⁸² Similarly, Cahill delegated a great deal of responsibility to Audrey McMahon (fig. 106), whom he appointed to administer the important local program for New York City as well as that for New York State. According to Cahill, her outgoing, strong personality earned her the nickname “the Iron Woman.”⁴⁸³

When Cahill assumed directorship of the FAP, both McMahon and her colleague, Frances Pollak, had been involved with supporting New York City artists with the financial backing of state and federal relief funds. Cahill decided that McMahon would be the preferred choice as a manager in New York. Pollak, Cahill feared, “would be on the phone to call me about every decision, every fifteen minutes.” Although he felt he did not completely trust McMahon because she “was very ruthless,” Cahill had confidence she could negotiate the demands of the New York City operations, because “she was quite a tough girl. She could take it on the chin.”⁴⁸⁴

Despite Cahill’s mission to extend the art world beyond New York City and other urban centers, many of the artists remained concentrated in New York, making it one of

⁴⁸² See Constance Rourke, letter to Holger Cahill, April 16, 1936; and, Holger Cahill, letter to Constance Rourke, April 20, 1936, box 2, folder 50, Belisario Contreras Papers on New Deal Art.

⁴⁸³ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 503.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

the FAP's most visible programs. At its peak, the FAP in New York City employed 2,323 artists and used the bulk of the budget allocated for New York State. Over the course of the FAP, New York City created 200 murals, 2,100 sculptures, more than 12,000 easel paintings, and 75,000 prints.⁴⁸⁵ In part as a result of the FAP, New York would emerge from the Depression as an artistic powerhouse, leading the country, and exerting an international influence.

McMahon, who had been dedicated to helping artists for years, brought a great deal of experience to the position. She had achieved some impressive accomplishments prior to joining the WPA/FAP that were truly remarkable for a woman working in the arts between the wars. In the late 1920s, she was the director of the College Art Association, and, in 1928, helped launch the art journal, *Parnassus*, which published one of Cahill's articles on folk art. The journal focused on contemporary trends and was directed at younger readers and art students. The following year, she recalled that she "in effect produced the little monthly publication practically single-handed" and was promoted to editor.⁴⁸⁶ After the 1929 stock market crash, *Parnassus* became an important mouthpiece for the College Art Association's supportive stance toward artists.⁴⁸⁷

At the College Art Association, McMahon was also involved with a program of traveling exhibitions that were circulated to small museums and college art departments. The circulating exhibition program McMahon instituted prior to her work with the

⁴⁸⁵ Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 6.

⁴⁸⁶ Audrey McMahon, undated and untitled manuscript outlining her work history and the operations of the Federal Art Project, 2, box 1, folder 5, Audrey McMahon Papers, AAA.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

WPA/FAP documents her own efforts to democratize art and demonstrates a genuine parallel with Cahill's philosophies. She recalled:

In the days before the Federal Project era, when one of the aims of the College Art Association was to reach a broad public, traveling exhibitions, sponsored by the Association, had been sent to museums, colleges, libraries, schools, and many other public and semi-public places. . . . The teaching of drawing and painting, outside of the urban area (and sometimes within it) was primarily in the hands of genteel, highly uniformed ladies, who had demonstrated "talent" but many of whom had never seen an original work of art! Museum collections, in smaller centers, were apt to be of very low caliber, if they existed at all.⁴⁸⁸

McMahon directed her other efforts, in collaboration with Pollak, towards appealing to committees for money to employ New York City artists. She oversaw mural projects in churches, schools, and neighborhood houses, while Pollak trained art teachers to offer classes in art and crafts.⁴⁸⁹

As a WPA/FAP supervisor, McMahon worked tirelessly and remembered the experience "as a high spot in my life, certainly my most exciting job."⁴⁹⁰ Her account as an administrator, while, of course, biased, challenges the conception that the WPA/FAP administrators had an agenda to dictate subject matter or to deliberately make things difficult for artists. Rather, the art projects operated within cultural and political constraints, and her memoirs suggest that staff, despite their flaws and limitations, in general displayed a great deal of dedication. McMahon recalled, "an eighteen hour day was the rule rather than the exception" and "that it was the excitement, as much as anything that sustained us."⁴⁹¹ There were controversies, conflicts, and disagreements

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁸⁹ McKinzie, 77.

⁴⁹⁰ Audrey McMahon to Carl K. Tranium, November 25, 1968, box 1, folder 2, Audrey McMahon Papers, AAA.

⁴⁹¹ Untitled manuscript outlining Audrey McMahon's work history and the operations of the Federal Art Project, undated, 2, box 1, folder 5, Audrey McMahon Papers, AAA, 27.

that caused her to approach her mountain of mail every morning with trepidation. The situation became especially tense after 1938, when Federal Project Number One was accused by factions of Congress as employing artists, musicians, writers, and actors who were members of the Communist party. Although the theater division of Project One bore the brunt of the attacks and investigations, artists were investigated, and Gorky had FBI agents come to his studio asking about the political involvements of his friends.⁴⁹² Despite these difficulties, McMahon believed that “except for the dreaded layoffs, every obstacle was overcomeable.”⁴⁹³

Working within the limitations of the WPA, McMahon believed a fundamental ambition of the FAP should include “furnish[ing] [artists] with *lebensraum* for artistic expression and development.”⁴⁹⁴ While her view of artists facing minimal stricture was overly positive, it suggests that within her administration there was a spirit of encouraging creativity that was part of the philosophy of the art project. Although easel painters, for the most part, had freedom to paint what they wished, all artists had to report to work so that their hours could be clocked. Cahill found this structured time-keeping ridiculous and fought against it. He approached this issue as curator, gallerist, and a supporter of artists, and not as a bureaucrat. He told Hopkins, “You have to have some kind of agreement with the artist, realize how quickly he works. A very meticulous craftsman takes a long time to paint a picture. Others turn them out much faster.”⁴⁹⁵ For a

⁴⁹² Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 238.

⁴⁹³ McMahon, 28. Here McMahon employs the secondary meaning of word “*lebensraum*,” which Webster’s Dictionary defines as “the space needed for life, growth, or activity.”

⁴⁹⁴ McMahon, 10.

⁴⁹⁵ Cahill, “Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 356.

short time, he succeeded in instituting an honor system in some states in which artists had to produce work in intervals of several weeks. This system was short-lived because, according to Cahill, “the state administrators kicked like a steer,” protesting “you’re going to have all of us in state prison before you’re through.”⁴⁹⁶

Muralists and sculptors designing works for public installation faced more constraints, and often had to make modifications.⁴⁹⁷ These often came from outside the WPA/FAP, requested by the sponsor of the commission and by the City Art Commission, which was headed by Jonas Lie. Many mural painters, including Burgoyne Diller (fig. 107), who served as director of the mural division, and Lee Krasner, remembered some restrictions on their commissions. Krasner recalled, for example, that it was difficult to get an abstract mural commission because very few places would sponsor them, but noted that as an abstract painter she “didn’t find any sense of discrimination.”⁴⁹⁸

While Cahill accepted abstract works, and selected them for display in exhibitions, he did not endorse them enthusiastically. Diller, in particular, remembered that it was difficult to be an abstract painter because Cahill and the administration felt:

there was no place for it at the time because they felt the project should be a popular problem and, while they didn’t attempt to invalidate or question the validity of the work, at the time abstract art had no place, because in a way you did have a great problem of building up public sympathy and understanding and a demand on the part of the public for the work.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 356-357; and, McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 85.

⁴⁹⁷ McMahan, 16.

⁴⁹⁸ Barbara Rose, Interview with Lee Krasner,” July 31, 1966, AAA. Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/lee-krasner-interview-10648.

⁴⁹⁹ Harlan Phillips, “Oral History Interview with Burgoyne Diller,” October 2, 1964, AAA. Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-burgoyne-diller-12944.

However, Diller noted that his disagreements with Cahill over the role of abstraction within the FAP occurred not in official meetings with him, which “were more or less non-directive directives.” He added, “I think they were things that had to do with the budget, number employed, and that sort of thing.” The debates occurred after the meetings over a drink when Cahill “was expressing a personal enthusiasm, a personal belief, and . . . we argued it, or denied it . . . but there was no pressure exerted on us under him.” Although they held different convictions, Diller admitted he “survived” as an administrator. Cahill “never hit me. He didn’t fire me.”⁵⁰⁰

Diller remembered that Cahill was involved with operations of the New York Federal Art Project making frequent visits, but generally did not attempt to control the decisions of local administrators, allowing them to maintain authority over their own projects. He wrote:

[Cahill] was aesthetically aware enough not to want to impose his will, which is the most important thing perhaps. As a politician he was aware of the fact that he couldn’t direct these things completely and that some way or other a happy medium had to be found between the desire of an artist to do a good thing, a fine thing, and the thing that people would ask for.⁵⁰¹

Diller operated successfully, although not as prolifically as he would have liked, in producing abstract murals within Cahill’s New York FAP administration. Their creation was a result of Diller’s agency in advocating for them. Cahill was, nevertheless, pleased enough with the work to select it for inclusion in his authoritative survey, *New Horizons in American Art*.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936; Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969).

An expert at locating space and sponsors for projects, Diller identified select venues that would accept abstract works, such as the Williamsburg housing project, WNYC Radio Studio, and Newark International Airport. At the Williamsburg housing project, he secured commissions for Illya Bolotowsky (fig. 108), Harry Bowden, Byron Browne, Francis Criss (fig. 109), Balcomb Greene (fig. 110), and Paul Kelpé (fig. 111).

⁵⁰³ Diller felt abstract murals were suited to the public spaces of the housing project because:

these areas were intended to provide a place of relaxation and entertainment for tenants. The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation.⁵⁰⁴

Criss tied his mural to the cityscape, abstracting an elevated train station into colorful arrangements of triangular and rectangular forms, and crisscrossing and checkerboard patterns. Greene created a hard-edged abstraction in a palette of gray and white, while Kelpé and Bolotowsky combined geometric and biomorphic forms, utilizing contrasting color schemes of earthy and primary hues.

Similarly, the radio studio provided a contemplative environment where “everything must contribute to the quiet and uninterrupted function of the broadcast” and the “proper use of form and color” would create a “soothing influence.”⁵⁰⁵ At WNYC, Stuart Davis’s *Mural for Studio B* (fig. 112) evoked the relationship between abstract

⁵⁰³ A number of the murals commissioned for the Williamsburg housing project were lost and presumed destroyed for decades. In the late 1980s, the canvases by Bolotowsky, Greene, Kelpé, and Swinden were rediscovered in the basement of the housing project. They were covered with multiple coats of paint and some had been painted with rubber cement to convert them into bulletin boards. The restored works are now in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum where they are on display. See William H. Honan, “Long-Lost Brooklyn Murals are Being Restored,” *The New York Times* (20 July 1988).

⁵⁰⁴ Burgoyne Diller, “Abstract Murals,” in *Art for the Millions*, ed. O’Connor, 69.

⁵⁰⁵ Harlan Phillips, “Oral History Interview with Burgoyne Diller,” AAA.

painting and music, with an arrangement of rectangular shapes, small circles, and interconnecting lines bursting from a sideways saxophone. To accompany Davis's painting, Diller succeeded in obtaining a mural commission for Lee Krasner (fig. 113) that was never executed.⁵⁰⁶ Krasner's design preserved in *Study for Mural for Studio B*, features an abstracted female figure as the centerpiece of the design. The composition likely derived from Krasner's numerous studies of seated female nudes (figs. 114-116), which she used as a vehicle to explore abstraction throughout the 1930s.⁵⁰⁷ In Krasner's mural, the head has been reduced to an oval, and the twisted position of the body articulated by a series of yellow, red, and blue planes combined with a rhythmic black line. Her composition possessed less representational ties than Davis's *Mural for Studio B* where musical imagery tied the work to identifiable themes.

Similarly, the "very contemporary activity" of Newark airport made it a fitting location for Arshile Gorky's painting of the 1930s, which combined cubist and biomorphic forms. In his murals for Newark airport, (fig. 117-118) Gorky evoked influences of Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis in a design that deconstructed images of airplanes in flight and rearranged them into a composition of biomorphic shapes. Despite Gorky following closely the prescribed aviation theme for the murals, his composition had a difficult time being accepted by the general public because of its radical abstraction. Initially Gorky had conceived the work for the Floyd Bennett Field Airport in Brooklyn, but it was reassigned to Newark because Fiorello LaGuardia, the New York

⁵⁰⁶ Barbara Rose, "Lee Krasner Interview," July 31, 1966, AAA; Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/lee-krasner-interview-10648.

⁵⁰⁷ Ellen G. Landau, *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Harry H. Abrams, 1995), 28-29 and 46-55.

City mayor, did not like the designs, first presented to the public at the Federal Art Project Gallery in December 1935.

As one aspect of the programming of the FAP exhibition division, Cahill created Federal Art Project Galleries throughout the country, providing an opportunity for artists to exhibit both within their communities and beyond through traveling exhibitions. Mildred Holzhauer, who oversaw all exhibition programming, was responsible for “assembling work executed on the Federal Art Project for exhibitions in museums, schools, universities, and the 52 community art centers established by the Federal Art Project.” She also directed the selection and installation of exhibitions in federal and non-federal art galleries and in department stores.⁵⁰⁸ Reflecting Cahill’s philosophy of building the American art world from the bottom up by fostering artistic growth throughout the nation, the exhibition program aimed to restore the connection between artists and the populace. According to Mary Morsell, head of the FAP Department of Information:

The exhibitions of the WPA/FAP have sought to bring a wider experience of art to the entire country and to give artists a healthy contact with large audiences. In the past, a few attempts were made by various museums to break this impasse. Inevitably these so-called “national exhibitions” were thin and pitiful in their gleanings, because there had been no true cultivation of our artistic soil. The idea that art could flourish only on the Atlantic Seaboard was a fallacy, but it was difficult to dispel.⁵⁰⁹

Morsell’s description of the exhibition program as correcting a failure to cultivate “our artistic soil,” reiterated Cahill’s frequently employed, Populist metaphor of the vast

⁵⁰⁸ Mildred Holzhauer, job analysis sheet, RG 69, entry 1021, box 3, National Archives at College Park, MD.

⁵⁰⁹ Mary Morsell, “The Exhibition Program of the WPA/FAP,” in *Art for the Millions*, ed. O’Connor, 229.

American landscape as a symbol of the broader potential for national cultural development.

Holzhauser put these objectives into action, coordinating and integrating local and national, as well as small and large-scale projects. The wide range of exhibitions included the “National Exhibition of the Index of American Design” at the Stix, Baer and Fuller Department Stores in St. Louis, Missouri (1938), “First Exhibition of Fine Arts” at the Butte Art Gallery in Butte, Montana (1938), and comprehensive surveys designed to attract the attention of the press, such as “National Exhibition of Mural Sketches, Oil Paintings, Watercolors, and Graphic Arts: Federal Arts Project” (1936) at the Corcoran Gallery and, even to a greater degree, “New Horizons in American Art” at MoMA (1936).

The exhibition programs Cahill instituted as part of the FAP, in many respects echoed Dana’s program at the Newark Museum. Cahill’s exhibitions, like Dana’s, aimed at integrating fine art and education and expanding the traditional methods of museum display and public outreach in order to reach a popular audience. In the case of the Index of American Design exhibitions, Cahill embraced Dana’s partnership with commercial department stores, using them as exhibition venues that presented American folk art to middle class audiences. Cahill’s catalogue text that accompanied the exhibition clearly referenced Dana’s exhibitions as a prototype, by stating:

[the] distinguished founder of the Newark Museum, used to say that everyday commercial enterprise had done more for the arts than all the museums in history and that the department store is, actually, the most effective of contemporary museums.⁵¹⁰

⁵¹⁰ *National Exhibition Index of American Design*, in Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues, January-April 1938, reel 5295, frame 1064, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

Through the FAP's circulated exhibitions, Cahill expanded upon Dana's program of loaning art works and reproductions to local schools by developing further his conception of extending the museum beyond its walls in order engage a broader public. The work produced by local FAP art projects, and circulated by the Exhibition Department, represented a decentralized, vast, and moveable collection. Local exhibitions in small towns, such as "First Exhibition of Fine Arts" in Butte, often featured work created in other parts of the country, and integrated exhibitions with art classes, as well as library and research services. The exhibition pamphlet for the Butte Art Center outlined its mission "to provide all our people with a wider opportunity to study, appreciate and enjoy the visual arts."⁵¹¹ The exhibition was comprised of works made throughout the United States, including twelve paintings from California, nine from New York State, three from Massachusetts and one example each from Colorado, Washington, DC, Louisiana, New Mexico, Montana, and Illinois. A few of the artists in this show, including Joseph DeMartini, Nicolai Cikovsky, and Helen Lundeberg, went on to have successful careers.

While bolstering art appreciation and art education in cities like Butte was an essential part of the FAP exhibitions programs, the FAP Gallery in New York remained one of the most important venues for exhibitions, providing a forum for artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Jack Tworkov to exhibit during and just after the Depression.⁵¹² The FAP Gallery hosted a wide variety of exhibitions on all types of art

⁵¹¹ *Catalogue First Exhibition of Fine Arts Presented Jointly by the Butte Art Association and the Federal Art Project*, in *Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues*, January-April 1938, reel 5295, frame 1097, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵¹² Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Woodward/White; reprint Harper Collins, 1991), 303; and, the catalogue,

produced by the WPA, including posters, prints, watercolors, murals, paintings, and sculpture, which Cahill frequently attended (fig. 119).

In 1938, the FAP Gallery presented a mural exhibition, featuring both American Scene and abstract work with Davis's *Swing Landscape*, originally created for the Williamsburg housing project in Brooklyn but never installed there (fig. 120). Morsell described this kind of pluralistic approach, which integrated different styles and juxtaposed renowned and un-established artists, as central to a WPA/FAP installation:

In the assembling of each exhibition, whether small or large, care is taken to choose pictures which will present this cross section. In addition to unfolding this fresh panorama of American art, displays are marked by a sound and democratic mingling of known and unknown talents.⁵¹³

As the installation photograph from the 1938 exhibition documents, works were hung close enough to suggest visual relationships, yet verge on overcrowding the gallery space in the service of an educational display. To provide context for the art work selected, photographs were placed beside them, showing the placement of the mural panel displayed within the larger commission. Nevertheless, the installation retained a clean, clear, and uncluttered presentation, in part because most of the larger "murals" on exhibit were actually not murals at all, but were canvases installed into the walls, recreating a mural experience in a streamlined, modernist approach.

The educational versus fine art aspects of the viewing experiences at a WPA/FAP installation at times created a tension. For all of Cahill's commitment to educational programming, he retained high curatorial standards. He did not want art installations to

Exhibition Paintings and Watercolors Federal Art Gallery, in *Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues*, January-March, 1939, reel 5295, frames 1160-1168, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵¹³ Morsell, 230.

appear merely as didactic, informative illustrations of the FAP's achievements, nor as pure propaganda. Cahill recalled that when McMahon approved a WPA/FAP installation for the 1939 World's Fair in New York featuring "blown up photographs of all the activities of the Project," in frames with "no spacing, so that there was just this solid line of photographs" it triggered a heated disagreement. Cahill, appalled, explained:

You can't breathe in here. And in the second place, it tells about activities which are illustrated in the actual work. What do you want photographs of them for? You can take some of them that are not illustrated, processes that are not illustrated by sculpture, paintings, prints . . . but to have this solid thing in here, illustrating every activity of the Project! This is just ridiculous!⁵¹⁴

When McMahon tried to defend her installation, Cahill replied: "If you don't get some of these things out of here, I will do it myself."⁵¹⁵ As his statement above suggests, Cahill wanted FAP exhibitions to present artwork in an accessible manner, and the FAP installations often employed photographs to place the artwork in context. Cahill, however, did not want these didactic elements to undermine the artistic quality of the installation and the artwork. He looked to the Museum of Modern Art as a model for installation design, and the 1938 mural show at the New York FAP Gallery evidences an attempt to strike a balance, as a museum would, between educational function and visually compelling presentation.⁵¹⁶

The New York FAP Gallery brought the work of established artists, such as Davis, to a broader audience and offered the possibility of exposure to many struggling artists who would otherwise not have been able to exhibit during the Depression. In McMahon's words, "The exhibitions in New York City afforded dealers and the public

⁵¹⁴ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 505.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 506.

an opportunity to see works by hitherto unknown or little known artists, with constructive results, which carried far beyond the life of the program.”⁵¹⁷ In 1938, following the mural show, the FAP Gallery hosted a sculpture exhibition with works by Joseph de Rivera and David Smith, among many lesser-known sculptors.⁵¹⁸ The following year it presented “Exhibition: Paintings and Watercolors,” which included *Street Scene* by Mark Rothko (possibly c. 1937, fig. 121) and works by Joseph Solmon, Jack Tworkov, and Loren MacIver. The accompanying catalogue had a painter’s statement by Max Weber and a foreword written by Philip Evergood, who at the time headed the Easel Division of the FAP. Weber’s statement addressed the public interest in art exhibitions and the impact of the WPA/FAP in exposing new audiences to art. He wrote:

Everywhere a veritable hunger for such art exhibitions as this is manifest. The work accomplished by the Federal Art Project has been an enriching and deeply germinative influence upon millions of people and has awakened in them a new sense of values and a greater art consciousness.⁵¹⁹

Complementing this, in his foreword, Evergood discusses the impact the FAP had on artists who, through government patronage, were aided by

the liberation of the restrictions usually imposed by the necessity of conforming to the tastes of the individual. In working to please hundred or thousands of people, the narrowness of individual prejudice is avoided or swept aside, and as the horizon for his output widens, his own outlook broadens.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁷ McMahan, 26-27.

⁵¹⁸ See Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues, January-April 1938, reel 5295, frames 1044-1099, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵¹⁹ Max Weber, “Painters Statement,” in *Exhibition: Paintings and Watercolors*, Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues, January-March, 1939, reel 5295, frame 1162, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵²⁰ Philip Evergood, Geroge Picken and Murray Hantman, “Foreword” in *Exhibition: Paintings and Watercolors*, Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues, January-March, 1939, reel 5295, frame 1162, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

The type of broadening that Evergood described, which connected the artist with the public, spoke directly to Cahill's Populist ideal.

To complement the FAP Gallery shows, Cahill in collaboration with Miller, helped organize the 1936 exhibition, "New Horizons in American Art" at MoMA and authored the accompanying catalogue. Cahill conceived the exhibition as an authoritative survey of FAP production that documented the FAP's pluralistic achievements, introduced new artists to a broad audience, and grabbed the attention of the press. He wrote to Ellen Woodward about the importance of the MoMA exhibition:

The leading place which this Museum of Modern Art holds in the art world will bring the great scope of the Project before a very large public. . . . Naturally we are all working to make this display a really exciting revelation of what it has been possible to accomplish under government art sponsorship during the past year.⁵²¹

"New Horizons" included painting, sculpture, graphic art, examples from the Index of American Design, art by children, and photomurals that showed the nationwide activities of the FAP. Additionally, the exhibit had a mural room that displayed both murals selected from throughout the country as well as models of mural designs that illustrated the process of their creation.⁵²²

Dorothy Miller selected from a group of works that had been pre-chosen by Cahill and his assistants from art projects throughout the nation. The exhibition was Miller's first MoMA curatorial project for which she had complete responsibility. She recalled:

This was the first show I was entirely in charge of. It was partly Alfred, it was also partly Conger Goodyear, who was President of the Museum then, who said, "Well, let's let Dorothy do it. She can do it." So I selected the stuff in Washington. They had a center where they brought in all the best

⁵²¹ Holger Cahill, memo to Ellen Woodward, August 1, 1936, box 9, folder 49, Belisario Contreras Papers.

⁵²² Ibid.

work from all over the country. There were several awfully good artists that had their very first appearance then. Jack Levine was one of them. And Morris Graves.⁵²³

Although the exhibition contained a plethora of American Scene paintings, Miller selected carefully to highlight the diversity of artistic production. She included a wide range of approaches to mural design, including historical murals such as Evergood's *The Story of Richmond Hill* (fig. 122) for the Richmond Hill Library in Queens, as well as abstract compositions including Arshile Gorky's *Aviation* mural for Newark airport, Karl Knaths's *Music* (fig. 123) for the music room of Falmouth High School in Massachusetts. In addition, Miller included all the studies for abstract murals for the Williamsburg housing project, including a proposal by Willem de Kooning, which was never executed, and designs by Jan Matulka and George McNeil.

As Victoria Grieve has observed, despite this diversity the WPA/FAP perspective was often exclusionary. Murals presenting historical subjects, such as James Michael Newell's, *New York: The Evolution of Western Civilization* (fig. 124), and depictions of scientific discovery and learning often emphasized, in Grieve's words, "a decidedly white version of the development of American culture and society."⁵²⁴ Many of the murals chosen for illustration in the catalogue can rightly be critiqued for extolling a particular "version of American progress" in which "racial and ethnic discrimination . . . are not questioned."⁵²⁵ It should be emphasized, however, that in the "New Horizons" exhibition, the African American voice, if under-represented, was not entirely excluded. The mural section included designs by Charles Alston for *Mystery and Magic Contrasted with*

⁵²³ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 22.

⁵²⁴ Grieve, 104.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

Modern Science and Medicine for the Women's Wing at Harlem Hospital and the easel painting installation included the painting *School's Out*, 1936 (fig. 125) by Boston African American artist Allan Rohan Crite.

The easel paintings selected also represented a variety of styles, including Loren MacIver's reductive and whimsical, *New York Dune Landscape* (fig. 126), Red Robin's *Hasjelti Das*, an example of Pueblo Indian sand painting (fig. 127), Joseph De Mer's comment on commercial culture, *California: Post No Bills* (fig. 128) as well as paintings by Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, and Joseph Stella, to name only a few of the eclectic group of both well established and unknown artists.

The press release for the exhibition emphasized artistic diversity, the presentation of works by unknown artists, and artistic quality, as opposed to a focus on regionalism, as popularized by Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood and John Stuart Curry. The release read:

Although selections have been made on the basis of quality alone, without regard to regional representation, all sections of the country will be represented. Most of the exhibits will be the work of artists unknown or little known to the New York art world.⁵²⁶

A quote from Alfred Barr stressed that the art would be of the highest quality, and that the WPA/FAP was successfully expanding the field of American art. He was "convinced that the work to be exhibited in 'New Horizons in American Art' shows a remarkable increase in the quality over the proceeding work done under government patronage" and believed that the FAP had enabled in an "improvement in official taste, which has

⁵²⁶ Museum of Modern Art Press Release for "New Horizons in American Art," Federal Art Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry L. Hopkins, reel NDA/HP1, AAA.

heretofore been dominated by a comparatively small group of academic artists and architects.”⁵²⁷

Barr’s statement reinforced the theme of a widening art world that Cahill articulated in “New Horizons.” Cahill’s title, like that of his novel, *Profane Earth*, again invoked a land metaphor. Returning to the image of a “darkening horizon, straight as a knife,” that Cahill had used to describe the Midwestern prairie at the opening of *Profane Earth*, the choice of “New Horizons” suggested expansion, cultural progress, and innovation. The broadening and advancing of American culture, for Cahill, was most aptly expressed as an horizon line, as it arose from the land, cultivated by a Populist, community-based participation that would fuel new artistic developments.

In his catalogue essay, Cahill addresses the disconnection that he observed between art and the public, and stressed the role of the FAP in mending this cultural rift. His first sentence asserts, “When the long view of American art is taken it becomes clear that the American artist has rarely had a full and free relationship with the public or with his own time.”⁵²⁸ This situation, made worse by the Great Depression, was not something that Cahill believed would simply resolve itself. He remarked:

There is a theory that art always somehow takes care of itself, as if it were a rootless plant feeding upon itself in sequestered places. Many people are willing to believe, in a time like this, when art patronage has dwindled to infinitesimal proportions, that it is not necessary for organized society to do anything in particular, because no matter what happens, a few artists starving in garrets will see to it that art does not die. It is quite obvious that this theory will not hold.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: MoMA, 1936), 9.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

Cahill outlined the history of the fragile relationship between American art and the common man from the Colonial period through the Ashcan school as the framework for the establishment of the WPA/FAP. He continued with an outline of the objectives of the FAP, including the preservation of artistic skills in both areas of fine art and commercial crafts, and the integration of both these “high” and “low” modes of production, which consisted of murals, paintings, and prints, along with posters, maps, and dioramas. Cahill also emphasized the support the FAP offered young artists, as well as its exhibition, teaching, and Index of American of Design programs. Discussing the FAP’s mural and easel divisions, Cahill asserted that a major benefit to artists was the sense of increasing community demand for their work. As a result, he wrote:

There has been at least the promise of a broader and socially sounder base for American art with the suggestion that the age-old cleavage between the artist and the public is not dictated by the very nature of our society. New horizons have come into view.⁵³⁰

In particular, Cahill saw the murals as an expression of community. In certain respects, he considered murals as akin to folk art as a means of popular expression.

Describing the history of American murals in the *New Horizons* catalogue, Cahill noted that in the eighteenth century:

most of this work, especially in the early period, was of the provincial-popular type. It was done probably by itinerant limners who were a feature of American village life up to the middle of the nineteenth century, and many of whom may still be found today especially in the South.⁵³¹

However, he also presented the history of the mural as a fine art form, mentioning John La Farge’s decorations for the interior of Trinity Church in Boston, the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton, the Mexican Muralists and the MoMA 1932 exhibition, “Murals by

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 30-31.

American Painters and Photographers.” Brining together folk and fine art traditions, mural painting “by its very nature is social” and “has always been associated with the expression of social meanings, the experience, history, ideas, and beliefs of a community.”⁵³² Furthermore, Cahill saw regionalist themes as arriving naturally from a painter’s direct observation of the environment and social conditions. In regionalist painting, Cahill perceived there to be “nothing here of a false localism or of a romanticising [sic] of the past.”⁵³³

Cahill acknowledged in the catalogue that presenting murals was difficult and that the installation of the exhibition relied on designs, sketches, models, and photographs in order to present mural paintings alongside easel paintings, prints, sculpture, children’s art, and the Index of American Design plates. Miller’s installation at MoMA, like an FAP Gallery installation, balanced educational clarity with artful presentation. An installation photograph (fig. 129) shows a detail of James Michael Newell’s mural, *Evolution of Western Civilization* hung in proximity to José de Rivera’s abstract sculpture, *Flight*, documenting Miller’s pairing of different styles and media. Despite this mingling, she was careful to position explanatory photographs in a way that allowed the viewer to freely follow along and make deeper connections with the artworks. A reproduction of Newell’s full mural, for example, appears on a separate wall to the left of the study displayed in order to explain its context without detracting from the painting itself.

A second installation photograph of Alfred Barr and a young African American girl examining an artwork together (fig. 130) stressed the educational function of the *New Horizons* exhibition. Capturing Barr in an unusually candid pose as he analyzes a

⁵³² Ibid., 32.

⁵³³ Ibid., 33.

painting that is likely one of the examples of children's art, the photograph presents him as a teacher. Whether the girl is the artist herself or a museum visitor, the photograph promoted Cahill and Miller's exhibition as cultivating an environment in which MoMA's director could explore his role as public educator.

"New Horizons" received substantial publicity in the New York papers and Cahill, as with many of his curatorial projects, had endeavored to shape and generate the press response. Prior to the exhibition opening, Cahill wrote Ellen Woodward in the Department of Information asking her to relay his suggestions for remarks President Roosevelt might make to MoMA President Conger Goodyear in congratulating him on the exhibition. Cahill encouraged the president to say:

I believe that this exhibition is important in the work exhibited, but I believe it has an even greater importance as an indication of a new and sounder relationship between the American artists and the American people and a demonstration of the great wealth of talent in the United States.⁵³⁴

Woodward relayed Cahill's statement to Roosevelt's Assistant Secretary, suggesting the president send it to Mr. Goodyear in a wire that "could be quoted in the press and which would give nation-wide publicity to this exhibition."⁵³⁵ In addition to Cahill's personal directives, MoMA's publicity department partnered with the WPA/FAP Department of Information in promoting the exhibition. Sarah Newmeyer, MoMA's publicity director informed Mary Morsell of the Department of Information that she had gotten:

Paramount to come over and take a news reel of a few of the children [artists] alone and with Mrs. Roosevelt. Paramount tells me that the reel is

⁵³⁴ Holger Cahill, memo to Ellen Woodward, September 10, 1936, Federal Art Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry L. Hopkins, reel NDA/HP1, AAA.

⁵³⁵ Ellen Woodward, letter to Stephen Early, September 11, 1936, Federal Art Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry L. Hopkins, reel NDA/HP1, AAA.

very good and they hope it won't be squeezed out by all the political and election stuff they are compelled to run.⁵³⁶

As a result of these efforts, the exhibition received a warm reception from the press. Reviewers, responding to Cahill's catalogue essay and MoMA's press release, viewed the first year of the Federal Art Project's creative production, and the artistic trend toward the American Scene, as opening up fresh directions in American art.⁵³⁷

Writing for the *New York Evening Post*, Jerome Klein noted a renewed connection between artists and the public:

Government support has helped the artist to realize that the world is much larger than his studio. A project job has enabled him to feel that he is a useful member of the community. He has come to regard his work in light of popular interests, and the public has observed that the artist is quite a normal fellow when taken out of his cage.⁵³⁸

The painter of this new generation, Malcolm Vaughn, concluded,

[We] have changed the whole horizon, for the landmarks set up by the modernists now drop into place alongside the monuments of tradition and the young generation steps ahead toward unhackneyed territory.⁵³⁹

Melvin Upton, of the *New York Sun*, remarked:

There is a certain freshness of outlook, a sturdy, unsentimental gripping with environment evident, particularly in the work of those in outlying sections of the country where contemporary art fashions have not penetrated that is most appealing.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁶ Sarah Newmeyer, letter to Mary Morsell, October 9, 1936, RG69, entry 1021, box 9, National Archives at College Park, MD.

⁵³⁷ Grieve, 106-107.

⁵³⁸ Jerome Klein, "Show Proves U.S. Spends Wisely in its Arts Project," *The New York Evening Post* (19 September 1936), box 9 folder 49, Belisario Contreras Papers.

⁵³⁹ Malcolm Vaughn, "W.P.A. Artists Lead Week's Parade as Season Opens," *New York American* (September 25, 1936), box 9 folder 49, Belisario Contreras Papers.

⁵⁴⁰ Melvin Upton, "New Horizons in Native Art," *The New York Sun* (19 September 1936), box 9 folder 49, Belisario Contreras Papers.

Although Cahill's efforts to construct a press response document his use of the media to shape public views of the FAP, the reviewers did not find the exhibition itself to be overtly nationalistic. In Lewis Mumford's words, there was "not a touch of officialism or academic timidity or nationalistic bumptiousness" in the show.⁵⁴¹

Cahill's collaboration with Miller in organizing "New Horizons of American Art", and his careful orchestration of the exhibition's press response, presented his from-the-ground-up approach as stimulating new artistic directions and developments as artists worked within their communities. The exhibition, therefore, reflected Cahill's vision that American cultural identity was defined and negotiated as a relationship between the individual artist, his or her community, and society. Cahill formulated his own career as cultural leader around this principle, encouraging cultural development through his personal relationships with a community of artists and as an administrator who, through the WPA/FAP, attempted to redefine the relationship between artists and the public.

While Cahill was skillful at harnessing the media to shape public understanding of the WPA/FAP's activities and increase awareness about art, his experience was rooted in his work as publicist and critic for the Society of Independent Artists. Cahill was not an ideologue and considered himself, "a non-political man, in the sense that that sort of thing doesn't interest me very much."⁵⁴² Cahill claimed he never felt particularly comfortable in Washington, DC and seemed to view himself as a cultural leader, more closely emulating the role of a museum director like Barr or Dana, than a Washington bureaucrat. He developed relationships with many WPA/FAP artists as a means of personal

⁵⁴¹ Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries East and West," *The New Yorker* (September 26, 1936), box 9 folder 49, Belisario Contreras Papers.

⁵⁴² Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 406.

mentorship and of bolstering their position as cultural contributors to their community and society.

Cahill's support for artists transcended any debates over style that he vocalized as director of the FAP. During Cahill's directorship, he developed a close relationship with Arshile Gorky whose abstract style he did not favor. Cahill and Miller went frequently to Gorky's studio for dinner and the artist would cook elaborate Armenian meals for them. Miller recalled that Gorky would spend several days preparing. "He'd do stuffed vine leaves, shish-kebab. He had a terrible, tiny, old stove, and he put the spits under the broiler." Dinner was followed by conversations about art with Cahill and Miller in which Gorky spoke energetically as he discussed the pictures in his collection of books.⁵⁴³

Cahill had for many years been a supporter of Gorky's painting, as the artist moved between figurative and abstract styles. Cahill had introduced Miller and Gorky in the fall of 1931 at Romany Marie's cafe and they both were "crazy" about Gorky, "very devoted" to him.⁵⁴⁴ Although this was during the height of the Depression, and was at a time when he and Dorothy were both between jobs, they wanted to help Gorky, who was in a desperate situation. They agreed to pay him for informal art lessons at his studio. Miller remembered, "We used to go over in the afternoon. He took us to an art store on 8th street and told us what to buy. . . . And we started trying to splash paint around a bit." She considered herself untalented with a paintbrush, "I really didn't do anything. I was so tight. I was uptight. I just couldn't get going but Cahill would just start right out."⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁴⁴ See Dorothy Miller's interview in Karlen Mooradian, *The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky* (Chicago: Gilgamesh Press, 1980), 170.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.; and, Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 70.

Cahill considered Gorky “a wonderful teacher. He used to pull things out of you. Very eloquent.”⁵⁴⁶ Following the lessons, they would sit and talk and Gorky would serve them Martinsons coffee, one of the very best available, which he always bought despite his poverty.⁵⁴⁷ A believer in learning by doing, Cahill presumably saw the art lessons not only as a way to support Gorky, but as a means of deepening his understanding and involvement in the artistic process.

Artists involved in the FAP administration, such as Stanton MacDonald-Wright and Philip Evergood, in particular, looked to Cahill for advice. In 1936, Wright, Regional Director of the FAP for Southern California wrote Cahill a sardonic letter expressing his frustration about the criticism and obstacles he and his assistant, Lorser Feitelson, were facing. “The project is dragging its arse along the rough and short via dolorosa like a wounded cockroach and the morale is hitting a new low. My own thoughts are undercutting the morale and Lorser’s have dug in under mine.” He explained:

I’m sending a report of what is doing here, because although we have been repeatedly admonished that the national director is but an ornamental and rococo bit of slip-shod décor and I still feel that we are working under or in your beneficent aegis until the joint folds or you inform us that you no longer have any interest.⁵⁴⁸

He concluded, “I’m drinking to your luck . . . and sending you north an affectionate salute.”⁵⁴⁹ Cahill, who also possessed a dark sense of humor, must have appreciated Wright’s letter. Their long-lasting friendship extended into the 1950s. Under Wright’s leadership, the Southern California FAP became one of the most successful programs. In

⁵⁴⁶ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 583

⁵⁴⁷ See Mooradian, *The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky*, 170.

⁵⁴⁸ Stanton MacDonald-Wright, letter to Holger Cahill, Holger Cahill Papers, reel 5285 frames 916-919, AAA.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

addition to producing numerous murals, it supported the careers of Feitelson and his wife Helen Lundeberg. Dorothy Miller would later select Lundeberg to participate in her exhibition, “Americans 1942,” and subsequently both Lundeberg and Feitelson became leaders of the development of hard-edge abstract painting in the 1960s.

In 1942, toward the end of the FAP, Cahill received a letter from Philip Evergood asking for career advice. With the outbreak of World War II, the exciting and difficult period of FAP creativity and experimentation was coming to end. This was not an abrupt dissolution, but a slow dismantling and erosion of the art projects that had begun in 1938. By the early 1940s, the FAP had become part of the War Services Division, with artistic production being channeled to support the war effort. Evergood, who was just finishing a mural as part of a resident art position at Kalamazoo College in Michigan explained,

I don't know what headway has been made by the artists' groups in opening up the field, where artists' talents might be utilized to aid the war effort. . . . You have a fair idea of my general background as an artist and the work I did as Managing Supervisor of the Easel Division in the N.Y. Project, so I thought you might have some ideas about where I might fit into the present scheme of things.⁵⁵⁰

He also looked to Cahill as a means to stay in contact with other members of the New York avant-garde, inquiring “Have you seen Niles [Spencer] or Stuart [Davis] lately? The very best to them when you do.”⁵⁵¹

The following month Chicago painter Mitchell Siporin wrote to Cahill asking for similar advice about how to continue his painting career since he had been drafted.

Siporin was completing a mural in Saint Louis, which he reported to have:

⁵⁵⁰ Philip Evergood, letter to Holger Cahill April 6, 1942, box 4 folder 21, Belisario Contreras Papers.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

attracted the favorable attention of the whole town. The stuff glows and there's so much of it. Things went just right and we are at the end of a long job—and in a way we are culminating a creative period, that has absorbed us totally for a long time.⁵⁵²

Cahill replied, “I am glad to hear the St. Louis mural has gone well.” He expressed his pleasure that Chicago artists “have given Chicago a period such as she had not had before in her art history, and that the Windy City’s cultural development has been extraordinary in the past years because of that fact.” In regard to his career, Cahill advised Siporin to go through his basic training with the offer to help him get a job in the Special Services Division, possible working at a mural studio at Fort Belvoir outside of Washington, DC. Cahill regretted that “there are a lot of young artists in your position, and the sad part of it is that no organization so far as I know is doing anything about it.”⁵⁵³

Through his directorship of the WPA/FAP, Cahill strove to be both a personal mentor to individual artists and an administrator of broad-based, cultural reforms. In applying his Populist ideals on a national scale, Cahill brought together many of the projects that had defined the early part of his career in his programs that comprised the WPA/FAP. His commitment to the study of American folk art as a means for constructing a usable past rooted in pre-industrial, community-oriented art practices was carried forward through the Index of American Design. The Community Art Center Program and Exhibition Division expanded upon techniques of educational outreach, the integration of fine art and commercial craft, and broadened the function of the museum through educational outreach that Cahill had absorbed from John Cotton Dana. Informed

⁵⁵² Mitchell Siporin, letter to Holger Cahill, April 22, 1942, Artist Files Correspondence, 1935-43, reel 1107, frames 43, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵⁵³ Holger Cahill, letter to Mitchell Siporin, May 11, 1942, Artist Files Correspondence, 1935-43, reel 1107, frames 46, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

by Dana's conception of art as inclusive of commercial and industrial design, Cahill had a pluralistic view of American art, and the Exhibition Division exhibited a range of media and styles and juxtaposed known and unknown artists in local and regional exhibitions. In her later *Americans* exhibitions series, Dorothy Miller, building on and challenging the "New Horizons" exhibition, offered her own pluralistic survey of contemporary trends, which reflected and shaped developments in post-war American art.

Conclusion:
Cahill, Dorothy Miller, and a Home on Eighth Street

[Cahill] was so interested in everything, so wide-ranging in his thinking and his sympathies, so genuinely kind and generous, and always such good company. The great and unique contribution that he made to art in this country—to its creation, its appreciation, and to the social position of the artist in America—will always be remembered.
--Lloyd Goodrich, 1960⁵⁵⁴

Following the dissolution of the Federal Art Project, Cahill was eager to devote himself full-time to his writing. He had already begun his novel, *Look South to the Polar Star* while still working for the WPA. When he returned to his and Miller's apartment on East Eighth Street in New York, he pursued the writing career he had wanted since he was a young man in St. Paul. Miller encouraged him, dedicating herself to her career at the Museum of Modern Art while supporting his more domestic lifestyle, which often centered on their apartment, his typewriter, and their cat, Moon (fig. 131).

Although Cahill continued to travel frequently throughout the last decades of his life, many of his letters to Miller during these years reflect a sense of roots. This more grounded lifestyle was not only geographical but also psychological. After 1947, Cahill had finally re-established a relationship with his mother and sister and went to visit them almost every year in Winnipeg, putting an end to a lifetime of emotional dislocation.

This reconnection was prompted after Cahill suffered a heart attack earlier in 1947. Miller encouraged his desire to get in touch with his family, fearing that the impact of the separation was exerting a dangerous effect on his health. When he finally was able to reconnect, Cahill was able to re-experience aspects of his Icelandic identity that he had

⁵⁵⁴ Lloyd Goodrich, condolence letter to Dorothy Miller, July 15, 1960, reel 5287, frame 732, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

tried to obliterate. Cahill's daughter, who was living with him at the time, recalled, "When I came home, I just happened to walk into the apartment. And here he was talking in Icelandic . . . it gave me the feeling of a mother tongue. That the language you learn at your mother's side never leaves you."⁵⁵⁵ After years of bitterness, the relationship with his mother had been salvaged. Cahill wrote to Miller describing the reunion:

Mother is the sweetest darling and amazingly active . . . today she even made Icelandic pancakes (somewhat on the crêpe suzette or German pancake style), their [sic] rolled and sprinkled with sugar. . . . she has the most amazingly lovely and happy disposition in spite of the weight of her years and all the hardship and suffering she's been through. She can recite Icelandic poetry by the hour. We sit holding hands and embracing like a pair of newlyweds.⁵⁵⁶

Dorothy had helped broker this reconciliation, calling ahead to let Cahill's sister know when her brother would arrive, and again to check on her husband.

The warmth Miller extended to Cahill's family in order to help rebuild a connection, in spite of Cahill's tendency to dwell on the pain of the past, was an expression of her love for him. According to Cahill, his mother considered Dorothy to be a saint. He said she "knew right away . . . what kind of woman you were when you called up to see if I was all right."⁵⁵⁷ She and Cahill visited his family together in 1949, and thereafter she corresponded with his mother and sister, occasionally sending candies to his mother.

Cahill and Miller traveled frequently, but not usually together. He would often get out of New York for months at a time during the summer, while she stayed behind to

⁵⁵⁵ Jane Cahill Blumenfeld in *From Turf Cottage to the cover of Time: The Dramatic Life of Holger Cahill*, prod. and dir. Hans Kristján Arnason, 55 min., HKA Productions, 2009. DVD.

⁵⁵⁶ Holger Cahill, letter to Dorothy Miller, 1947, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁵⁷ Holger Cahill, letter to Dorothy Miller, 1949, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

work at MoMA. In 1947, Cahill traveled to Florida, Havana, Cuba, South Carolina, Virginia, New Orleans, North Dakota, and Winnipeg. He would often go to Florida and the south to improve his health and to Winnipeg to visit his family. Throughout the early fifties, as part of his research for his last novel, *The Shadow of My Hand*, he re-explored the West, sometimes staying with farmers or ranchers, and renewing his connection with the soil and landscape that had been part of his experience of America as a young man. In contrast, Miller spent time in her house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and in Europe. During these separations, they wrote letters to each other frequently, many of which are persevered in the archives of the New York Public Library.⁵⁵⁸

While Cahill had essentially retired from his professional career in the art world, Miller was becoming a driving force at MoMA. In many ways, she extended into the post-war period his commitment to promoting American art. Between 1942 and 1963, her influential *American* series, including “Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States,” “Fourteen Americans,” “Fifteen Americans,” “Twelve Americans,” “Sixteen Americans,” and “Americans 1963” presented contemporary trends by showcasing a limited number of artists, giving each their own gallery, offering participators mini one-person exhibitions. Her inclusion of a range of styles, from abstraction to Realism, furthered the pluralistic approach she adopted in her WPA/FAP exhibition, “New Horizons in American Art.” Cahill and Miller’s shared belief in multiplicity can ultimately be traced back to Dana.⁵⁵⁹ Spanning two decades, the Miller’s *Americans* exhibitions would help launch the careers of many well-known artists, including William

⁵⁵⁸ See Cahill and Miller correspondence, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁵⁹ Holger Cahill, “What is Tradition?” Speech to the American Artists Congress, 1940, 21. Reel 5290, frames 1382-1402, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA. Digital version: www.aaa.si.edu/collectiononline/cahiholg/container183917.htm.

Baziotes, James Brooks, Ashile Gorky, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelley, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson, Isamu Noguchi, Irene Rice Periera, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, José de Rivera, Theodore Roszack, Mark Rothko, Saul Steinberg, Frank Stella, Clyfford Still, and George Tooker.

The *Americans* series had precedents in shows conceived by Barr and Cahill, yet Miller's knowledge of contemporary art and her thoughtfully nurtured relationships with artists, during and following the WPA/FAP, put her mark on the exhibitions. As Miller observed, the concept for the exhibitions was "invented by Alfred Barr way back in 1929-30—the first American survey the Museum did, [Paintings by] Nineteen Living Americans."⁵⁶⁰ Although Barr's collaborations with Miller and Cahill suggest he was more involved in American art than he has received credit for, it was not his predominant area of expertise. It was, in fact, Miller's commitment to contemporary trends and appreciation for diverse styles that made the *Americans* series an influential venue for aspiring members of the New York avant-garde.

Similarly, Cahill's early exhibitions of Modern art at the Newark Museum, as well as the exhibitions driven by the WPA/FAP Exhibition Division under his lead, provided a context for Miller's endeavors. Like Cahill, Miller was sensitive to artists. She saw hands-on experience and personal relationships as an essential complement to book learning. She commented, "If I hadn't known any artists I wouldn't know a damn thing about art. What good are the books? You simply have to know the people and see them working and let them tell you about their pictures."⁵⁶¹ Cahill's curatorial projects of the 1930s, however, had been concerned with defining a tradition and charting a history for

⁵⁶⁰ Cahill, *The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill*, 604.

⁵⁶¹ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 74.

American art. In his shows of pre-Columbian and folk art at MoMA, he advanced a retrospective view, some may say to the detriment of the contemporary galleries. In contrast, Miller wanted her exhibitions to define the present moment with an eye towards the future. As Frank Stella recalled:

The *Americans* shows set the tone for my time. You were either in or you were not. They were exhibitions of what was going on, pointing to the future, and they were definitive. Or if they weren't definitive, they were certainly exciting.⁵⁶²

The *Americans* exhibitions trace the developments in post-war painting, as well as reflect Miller's own evolution as a curator. "Americans 1942" was, as Lynn Zelevansky has noted, "almost certainly Miller's tribute to the Works Progress Administration."⁵⁶³ Miller respected the WPA/FAP's major cultural contribution. She commented in 1971, "I personally don't think any of that great development would have happened here in the 1940s and 1950s without the WPA."⁵⁶⁴ When formulating her first exhibition in the series, ten of the eighteen artists were FAP veterans, some of whom Miller and Cahill had cultivated relationships. These included Jack Levine and Morris Graves, who impressed Miller when she was selecting the 1936 "New Horizons," as well as Darrel Austin, Raymond Breinin, Samuel Cashwan, Emma Lu Davis, Charles Howard, Helen Lundeberg, Mitchell Siporin, and Fletcher Martin. Of the artists in "Fourteen Americans" and "Fifteen Americans"—Gorky, Loren MacIver, Isamu Noguchi, Irene Rice Pereira, and Mark Tobey—all had FAP ties. In "Americans 1942," Miller reinforced these FAP connections by including artists from all over the country. This decision, a continuation

⁵⁶² Michael Kimmelman, "Dorothy Miller is Dead at 99; Discovered American Artists," *The New York Times* (12 July 2003).

⁵⁶³ Lynn Zelevansky, "Dorothy Miller's 'Americans,' 1942-63," *Studies in Modern Art* 4 (1994): 60.

⁵⁶⁴ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 13.

of Cahill's ambition to provide opportunities for artists outside New York, was not well received by some New York artists who felt they had been unfairly excluded.⁵⁶⁵

As an installation photograph records, figurative, regionalist, and social themes formed the central focus of "Americans 1942" (fig. 132). Miller echoed her accessible WPA-style arrangement, with paintings hung in proximity to each other to suggest visual relationships, but without crowding the gallery. Zelevansky, who has interpreted the exhibition as Miller's tribute to the WPA/FAP, has observed that mismatched frames and close hanging of the paintings suggests a low-budget installation.⁵⁶⁶ A review in the *Daily Worker* praised the exhibition's social content, noting:

In vivid contrast to most of the other museum group shows now current, the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art is fresh, exciting, and contemporary in the best sense of the word and socially conscious to a degree that one rarely finds in Museum exhibitions.⁵⁶⁷

In her subsequent *Americans* shows, Miller shifted her focus more towards abstraction but continued to present a variety of different styles, evidencing an inclusive attitude to a spectrum of artistic production. Miller expressed her desire to mix abstraction and Realism in a 1946 letter to Gorky. She planned the next *Americans* show, which she initially hoped to arrange for 1943, to "have as its theme a contrast between abstract and realistic art."⁵⁶⁸ When Miller realized the exhibition in 1946, she included both Motherwell's abstract painting and Steinberg's Realist drawings. Similarly "Fifteen

⁵⁶⁵ Norman Barr of United American Artists, letter to Dorothy Miller, October 21, 1941, Dorothy C. Miller Papers, I3.d, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁵⁶⁶ Zelevansky, 60.

⁵⁶⁷ George Baer, "Young American Artists--1942," *Daily Worker* (4 February 1942), DCM I.3.D, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁵⁶⁸ Dorothy Miller, letter to Arshile Gorky, November 23, 1942, box 3, folder 25, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

Americans” of 1952 paired the expressionist and figurative paintings of Herbert Katzman and Edwin Dickinson with the Abstract Expressionists.⁵⁶⁹

The critics did not always look favorably on Miller’s selections, but in contrast to the WPA/FAP, during which critical voices could create problems, at MoMA, Miller had the liberty to challenge viewers. Additionally, Cahill reassured her in a 1947 letter that all press was good press, “I don’t think praise or blames by the newspaper critics has any importance, except that enthusiastic attacks or praise with a lot of space brings people. Attack is probably better than praise for stirring up people.”⁵⁷⁰ In 1952, after the opening of “Fifteen Americans,” Barr and others commended Miller with such phrases as: “Congratulations, Dorothy! You’ve done it again: They hate it. Isn’t that wonderful!”⁵⁷¹

Miller’s *Americans* series can be considered the next segment in the process of advancing American art through educational exhibitions. If Cahill had kept artists producing through the Depression, and placed art and artistic debates before the public eye, then Miller could, in “Fifteen Americans,” encourage audiences to open their minds to Rothko’s hovering shapes (fig. 133) and Pollock’s drips. By 1952, she had devised a new installation strategy, dispensing with frames and emphasizing the oversized canvases as continuous with the wall.

⁵⁶⁹ See Julia Blaut, “Herbert Katzman and the Museum of Modern Art’s Fifteen Americans: Figuration and Abstraction. New York in the 1950s,” in *Glorious Sky: Herbert Katzman’s New York*, Julia Blaut, Alison Lurie, Katherine Manthorne, and Jillian Russo (London: Giles, 2010), 13-27.

⁵⁷⁰ Holger Cahill, letter to Dorothy Miller, undated, 1946, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁷¹ See Paul Cummings, “Oral History Interview with Dorothy C. Miller,” 74; and, Wendy Jeffers, “Dorothy C. Miller: A Beguiling Beauty A Discerning Eye, in *The Dorothy C. Miller Collection - Tuesday 11 & Wednesday 12 November 2003* (New York: Christie’s, 2003), 13.

Cahill and Miller continued to collaborate informally at times. It was Cahill who first viewed the work of Clyfford Still around 1948 or 1949 at an exhibition at Betty Parsons. Miller recalled:

[He] called me at the museum and said. "Come on over here quickly to Betty Parsons." . . . We looked at the show. I was always slower than he to get something. He just had marvelous, instantaneous responses. I would look and agonize about it for a little while and then it would come through. I had a feeling of being disturbed by those paintings and not knowing why. . . . Cahill said, "I want to go and see this man." He got Betty Parsons to give him the address, which was 48 Copper Square. Eddie just went there and climbed up four or five flights of stairs and knocked on the door without any warning. They sort of became very good instantaneous friends. They both had been brought up in the Dakotas, in the Great Plains. This was a real bond you see.⁵⁷²

Still respected Cahill as an intellectual and, in 1951, wrote to Cahill about his working process. He confessed:

It is because you are one of those who have insight into more exciting levels of thought and feeling that I take the liberty sending you this. . . . In [the painting] you have found factors which I know bring you exceptionally close to the experience I would have you share.⁵⁷³

When Miller began contemplating her group for *Fifteen Americans*, she decided to include Still, but the decision was not prompted by Cahill. As she recalled, "I couldn't listen to anybody's suggestions. I just had to feel it."⁵⁷⁴

As Cahill's friendship with Still suggests, he remained a presence in the art world while focusing on his writing career. He continued to author occasional articles on American art and to socialize with artists and colleagues, including Alfred and Marga Barr, Roselle and Stuart Davis, and James Thrall Soby.⁵⁷⁵ Cahill, perhaps as a result of

⁵⁷² Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 79.

⁵⁷³ Clyfford Still, letter to Holger Cahill, box 7, folder 5, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

⁵⁷⁴ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Dorothy C. Miller," 79.

⁵⁷⁵ See Holger Cahill, letters to Dorothy Miller, June 1951, box 2, Cahill Papers, NYPL.

his job as a line cook during his early days in New York, was an excellent chef. When hosting the Barr's, Davis's, and other friends, he often prepared meals in his small galley kitchen.⁵⁷⁶ According to Wendy Jeffers, "It was considered quite a good invitation if the Cahill's invited you over for dinner."⁵⁷⁷

The apartment was filled with Miller and Cahill's collection of modern and folk art, which recorded their interest in both representational and abstract painting (fig. 134), as well as their professional engagements and their longstanding relationships with artists. Works by Oscar Bluemner, Ilya Bolotowsky, Arthur Dove, Lyonel Feininger, Morris Graves, Jasper Johns, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Joan Miro, Henry Moore, Kurt Schwitters, Charles Sheeler, Max Weber, and others modernists hung salon-style on the walls, along with American folk paintings. Small Native American and folk objects, arranged on the mantle and low bookshelves, mingled with a sculpture by Louise Nevelson and a Calder mobile. The furniture was predominantly simple, well-crafted, nineteenth century New England pieces. Bookshelves contained Cahill's extensive library, documenting his tendency towards voracious research.

While Cahill's retirement had a domestic focus that formed a counterpoint to his early years of rambling, he was not secluded in his later career. He maintained a connection to the downtown art scene, an environment in which he had always felt accepted, and continued to express an interest in contemporary trends. He attended exhibition openings and frequented the weekly lectures offered at The Subjects of the Artist School, a discussion meeting founded in 1948 by Rothko, Motherwell, Baziotes,

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.; and, Jeffers quoted in *From Turf Cottage to the Cover of Time*.

⁵⁷⁷ Jeffers quoted in *From Turf Cottage to the cover of Time*.

Still, and David Hare. The school only operated for about a year, but became a forerunner to The Club.⁵⁷⁸ In his 1957 interview, Cahill spoke supportively of the new developments in American art, commenting that “in fact this period of American art seems the most exciting. Certainly it has many more first-rate artists than any other period, and much more recognition internationally.”⁵⁷⁹

For some of the younger Abstract Expressionists, including Still, Pollock, and Grace Hartigan, Cahill became almost a father figure. Following Cahill’s death, Hartigan confided to Miller, “I have been spoiled knowing the most interesting people of my time, the most creative, most acting (capable of action), most feeling. . . . I’ve been spoiled by people like Alfred and you and Eddie.”⁵⁸⁰ Pollock, during his nocturnal drinking binges on the Bowery, would often knock on Cahill’s door. Cahill was frequently ill, and when Miller heard the doorbell late in the evening she recalled, in 1971, that she never wanted to answer “because the street was always full of—now its hippies but it used to be Bowery men and so on. I’d say, ‘We won’t answer the bell.’” Cahill would reply, “‘That’s Jackson. Open the door.’ And it would be.”⁵⁸¹ Pollock would invariably be intoxicated, but “he was very, very gentle because he knew Eddie wasn’t well. He’d sit down at the foot of Eddie’s bed and start massaging his feet and his legs. You know he was such a big powerful guy and Eddie would say, ‘Wait a minute, Jackson. Don’t break it off.’”⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁸ Cahill, “The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill,” 568-569.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 586.

⁵⁸⁰ Grace Hartigan, letter to Dorothy Miller, September 13, 1961, box 3, folder 34, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

⁵⁸¹ Paul Cummings, “Interview with Dorothy C. Miller,” 131.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*

In Cahill's memory of Pollock's visits, the story varies slightly from Miller's. In Cahill's version, it is Miller who cautions Jackson to be careful of his feet. Perhaps trying to preserve some of his own bravura, according to Cahill, "Jackson's hands were enormous, but he was very tender and sweet, and a very loving character." Drunk and considerably disturbed, he sat at Cahill's bedside and "curse[d] like a trooper." Cahill recalled,

[I] thought he was cursing at me, and I said, "Well, Jackson, can't you think of my first name?" and then I'd give him some other cuss word. . . . He got up, he threw his arms around me and kissed me several times and said, "Oh Eddie, you know I'm not talking about you. I'm talking to myself"—which was quite true.⁵⁸³

Whether this cathartic event happened as Cahill recounted it or not, Cahill had an affinity for Pollock, whose "sort of abrupt, violent character" he said reminded him of how "I used to be myself when I was younger."⁵⁸⁴ Cahill seemed to perceive the presence of Pollock's troubled personality in his paintings, his desire, yet inability, to break free from himself. As Cahill described Pollock's drip paintings:

You feel this racing, dancing, galloping line, with its tremendous power, and always hold in their rhythm of his. It never runs away. In other words, it is a disorder that is contained, a contained disorder that doesn't break over, doesn't break out of the picture.⁵⁸⁵

It seemed to subtly pain Cahill that, despite the assistance he had provided through the FAP, Pollock was beyond help. At Pollock's funeral, Cahill remarked to Clement Greenberg, "we haven't always agreed on everything, but you did a good thing for Jackson."⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸³ Cahill, "The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," 555.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁵⁸⁶ Jane Cahill Blumenfeld quoted in *From Turf Cottage to the cover of Time*.

Complementing his ties to artists, Cahill also nurtured his connections with friends and teachers in the literary world. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he corresponded regularly with his friend, novelist and journalist, Josephine Herbst.⁵⁸⁷ In the late 1950s, he studied poetry with Stanley Kunitz, and penned several poems.⁵⁸⁸ At a Guggenheim opening in 1959, Cahill met the Nobel prize-winning Icelandic novelist, Halldór Laxness. Miller recalled, “the two men immediately began chattering in Icelandic, exchanged inscribed books, and toasted each other in Icelandic aquavita. It was wonderful.”⁵⁸⁹ Following their introduction, Laxness invited Cahill to come to Iceland for two weeks and give a lecture on American art. Unfortunately, the invitation came too late. During the last year of his life, Cahill was too sick to embark on such a long trip.

Although Miller was disappointed that Cahill was not able to go, from the perspective of an outside chronicler, the last few months of his life provide perhaps an even more satisfying, if less dramatic, conclusion to a life story that began with a jarring experience of separation. Rather than revisiting his homeland and a past that was always with him, but could never be recaptured, he went to Miller’s country house in Stockbridge and was surrounded by friends and family. Since Dorothy could not work at the museum and care for Cahill full-time, his daughter came from Winnipeg as well as other old friends from Long Island. Grace Hartigan came to visit Eddie and Dorothy for

⁵⁸⁷ Their letters about writing, literature, and politics are contained in the Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁸⁸ Dorothy Miller, notes on Cahill’s life, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁸⁹ Dorothy Miller, letter to Jane Blumenfeld, January 22, 1978, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

the fourth of July and they drank champagne on the lawn.⁵⁹⁰ Miller recalled, “All of us will remember that summer with joy—a beautiful family reunion a few months before he left us.”⁵⁹¹ Hartigan was the last artist to visit Cahill before he died on July 8, 1960, of a cerebral hemorrhage.

In response to her husband’s death, Miller received over three hundred condolence letters from the art and literary world, which document the breadth of Cahill’s engagement in American culture and the scope of his impact. The kind, commemorative words of Cahill’s colleagues provide perhaps the best argument for his importance to the field. Marga and Alfred Barr wrote, “Eddie has been heroic and you magnificent.”⁵⁹² Jack Baur, of the Whitney Museum remarked that Cahill “was a person of such extraordinary integrity and standards. His importance, I always felt, was a mark of how poorly the world measured up to these.”⁵⁹³ Marguerite and William Zorach wrote, “Eddie was a good a loyal friend of all the artists and through his efforts has done more for American art and artists than I can say.”⁵⁹⁴ Max Weber commented, “The more I saw Eddy, the more I realized his literary and cultural gifts and spiritual vision to be of the quality given to few and seldom met with.”⁵⁹⁵ Helen Farr Sloan wrote, “You know how much affection

⁵⁹⁰ Grace Hartigan, letter to Dorothy Miller, June 16, 1961 box 3, folder 34, Dorothy Miller Papers, AAA.

⁵⁹¹ Miller’s notes on Cahill’s life, box 11, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁹² Marga and Alfred Barr, telegram to Dorothy Miller, July 8, 1960, reel 5287, frame 525, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵⁹³ Jack Baur, letter to Dorothy Miller, July 8, 1960 reel 5287, frame 528-9, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵⁹⁴ William and Marguerite Zorach, letter to Dorothy Miller, reel 5287, frame 614, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵⁹⁵ Max Weber, letter to Dorothy Miller, July 15, 1960, reel 5287, frame 744, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

and esteem Sloan had for him. I like to believe that these two good old friends are now in a better world, but still . . . interested in art and even more in people.”⁵⁹⁶

The following year, Miller encouraged Barr to accept the invitation to lecture on American art in Iceland that had been extended to Cahill, and proposed that she and the Barrs take the trip in his place. Miller explained that she “really long[ed] to see the place with its marvelous landscape, but mostly it would be a sentimental journey because of Eddie.”⁵⁹⁷ In the summer of 1961, they retraced Cahill’s steps to Iceland, where Barr gave lectures about the New York Museum of Modern Art at the Kynning Society, an organization that hosted intellectual leaders from abroad to discuss the cultural developments of their countries. Miller traveled to North Iceland to experience its exceptional terrain of mountains, volcanic craters, and glacial rivers. She remembered she “saw some of the most extraordinary sights in Iceland and . . . received an impression of the grandeur of the country.”⁵⁹⁸ She also visited the art galleries to observe the work of Icelandic contemporary artists. Her host, Ragnar Jónsson, the Executive Officer of the Kynning Society, showed Miller his personal collection of art works by the Icelandic landscape painter, Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, an artist Cahill admired. Both Miller and Barr had been interested in viewing this collection, with the possibility of making an acquisition for MoMA.

Miller’s eye was drawn to *Lava at Bessatadir*, 1947-54 (fig. 135), a colorful landscape of Iceland’s rocks, water, and mountains, in which forms are abstracted almost

⁵⁹⁶ Helen Farr Sloan, letter to Dorothy Miller, July 18, 1960, reel 5287, frame 766, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

⁵⁹⁷ Dorothy Miller, letter to Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, box 2, Holger Cahill Papers, NYPL.

⁵⁹⁸ Dorothy Miller, letter to Ragnar Jónsson, July 25, 1961, Dorothy C. Miller Papers, IV.15.a.i., Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

into an overall composition, but maintain a visible connection to the earthy terrain. Barr had not yet seen the painting, but Jónsson allowed Miller to carry it home with her on the plane without payment. Upon her return, she wrote him about arranging the purchase:

I have been thinking for a long time wondering if I can ever make some appropriate kind of memorial to my husband. It came to me that what I would really like best would be to buy a painting by Kjarval and give it to the Museum of Modern Art in his memory. I would be very happy if it could be your painting the one I brought back.⁵⁹⁹

With Barr's approval and Jónsson's agreement, Miller was thrilled to make the donation, noting, "It is truly appropriate, not only because my husband was Icelandic but because so much of his life was devoted to the arts."⁶⁰⁰ Visually, it was also a fitting choice, speaking to Cahill's innate love for the land—Icelandic and American—and its symbolic connections to community. The painting remains in MoMA's collection, buried somewhere in storage, at the core of the museum.

⁵⁹⁹ Dorothy Miller, letter to Ragnar Jónsson, July 28, 1961, DCM IV.15.a.i., Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

⁶⁰⁰ Dorothy Miller, letter to Ragnar Jónsson, September 11, 1961, Alfred Barr, Jr. Papers, AAA: 2185; 459, Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

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