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April N. Johnston  
*Washington University in St. Louis*

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

American Culture Studies

The Making of Cleveland's Artist: The Aesthetic and Cultural Politics of Boundary Crossing in  
the Industrial Landscape Paintings of Carl Gaertner, 1923 - 1952

By  
April Nehring Johnston

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts

May 2019  
St. Louis, Missouri

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I owe much to the art historical community in Cleveland for the success of this project. I thank Mark Cole, Curator of American Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the librarians of the CMA's library. Effusive thanks to Laura Ponikvar at the Cleveland Institute of Art Jessica R. Gund Memorial Library, for teaching me to use a microfilm machine and then letting me sit at it for days on end. Without Michael Wolf, dealer and Gaertner estate representative, this project would lack a certain zest. Thank you to Wolf, Cleveland art dealer Bill Tregoning, and Private Collectors Jim Woods and Fred Fotchman for assisting me in peeling back the layers of time and generously sharing oral histories, inquisitive spirits, and many incredible paintings. I am moved by the hospitality of Mr. Charles Bolton at the Cleveland Union Club; hours of private study with the Gaertner Industrial Landscapes in this private collection were formative for me professionally and personally. Special thanks to Carl Gaertner Jr., who added much joy to this

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Lastly, I thank my parents for their patience with my withdrawal from family life in pursuit of this dream over the last two years, and for their enduring support of my studies. To my Mom for being my fearless research road-tripper: thank you for the sacrifices and companionship. To my Dad, whose tenacious pursuit of his own Master's in the evenings after his full time job made an indelible impression on my childhood: you are the reason I have done this. And to Alex for lifting me up: I could not have done this without you.

*April Johnston*

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*May 2019*



Dedicated to my new friend Blinky, in honor of your dad. He liked shapes, and I like him.

## ABSTRACT

The Making of Cleveland's Artist: The Aesthetic and Cultural Politics of Boundary Crossing in  
the Industrial Landscape Paintings of Carl Gaertner, 1923 – 1952

by

April Johnston

Master of Arts in American Culture Studies

Washington University in St. Louis, 2019

Dr. Iver Bernstein, adviser

In 1923 Carl Gaertner captivated jurors at the Cleveland Museum of Art's annual competitive May Show with a painting of a local bolt factory titled *Up the River at Upson's*. What made the painting so arresting was its rendering of the elements of factory, nature, and the human spaces that mediated between them, as part of a larger whole, an effect that Gaertner achieves through rich surface textures but also through a wintry snow scape that frames the massive cylindrical structures of the plant and river into visual conversation. This rendering represented at once a borrowing from and a declaration of independence both from his Cleveland School of Art mentor, watercolorist Henry Keller, as well as from the minimalist Precisionists. This thesis explores the making of Carl Gaertner—the shaping of the worlds that contributed to his artistic production, and which he in turn shaped. What is so arresting about Gaertner's career is that his remarkable images of the borderlands of industrial life—the spaces at once between and connective of workplace and neighborhood—grew out of the synergistic relationships between the communities that produced Gaertner—Cleveland steel workers and their families, local manufacturers (as in the case with Upson's), as well as local and national art critics and middle

class patrons shaping the market for his affordable art. Also critical were the communities which he helped produce as a Cuyahoga valley resident and respected teacher at the Cleveland School of Art between 1923 - 1952. This thesis posits the world of Gaertner as an entry point to understanding what it was about his artistic representation of the milieu of Cleveland labor and city life that was distinctive, garnered him approval from these communities, and formed a potent rapprochement between Gaertner's fellow Cleveland artists and working people at a pivotal moment in local and American cultural and political history.

# Preface

## Cleveland and the Flats: The Lay of the Land

*“In the mammoth backyard of Cleveland, stretching from the foot of soaring office buildings to the swampy shore of Lake Eerie, lies a sprawling, cluttered area known as the Flats. Slashed across by countless railroad tracks and channeled through by the wandering Cuyahoga, the Flats are astir with nervous life. Locomotives slap and shove reluctant coal cars; tugboats coax their bulging ore barges around the river bends. Overhead, traffic roars into the city on high-flung bridges. At the far edge of this clanging confusion, smokestacks on the upper rim of the Flats raise their smoking arms over the blast furnaces, where ore meets coke and becomes steel.” Margaret Bourke-White, 1927*

*“And I drove home...wondering how I was going to get into that magic place.” Margaret Bourke-White, 1927*

The geography of downtown Cleveland is essential to the argumentative and analytical structure of this thesis. The river zigzags through the city, creating natural enclaves and a clear east/west divide. Historically the river valley, known as The Flats, housed the bustling center of Cleveland’s steel industry and other manufacturing hubs, such as the first factories in the Sherwin-Williams paint empire. Since the 1980s this area has had more bars and businesses than steel factories, but prior to the 1960s the Flats was the focal and economic center of Cleveland. The steel factories were visible from the surrounding neighborhoods; the area grows more hilly towards the east, allowing sweeping vantage points of the Flats below. According to Carl Gaertner Jr., his father first grew to love the Flats as a young man living in the neighborhoods overlooking the industrial landscape. Not only was Gaertner attracted to the winding river and statuesque factories, his family’s business was located nearby, in the vicinity of Terminal Tower. Within a simple bus ride further east was the art school and art museum in the city’s University Circle. Cleveland is a tight hub of commercial, economic, and cultural activity, frequently

traversed by Gaertner and his colleagues. In order to familiarize the reader with the areas discussed in this paper, below are a series of maps and photographs orienting modern readers to Gaertner's Cleveland.

These maps, while useful in gaining a geographical sense of Cleveland, by nature are unable to convey the distinctive visual aspects of the Flats region. Where Gaertner would have traversed ethnic neighborhoods and factory neighborhoods is now a partially abandoned bar district on the brink of revitalization. However, many historical structures still stand—such as the city's earliest brick restaurant, the original Sherwin Williams paint factory, and many rare types of swing bridges—tourists to the area will find the shore of the city's central river to be cluttered with the remains of the great industrial hub that was Gaertner's Cleveland. Local historians Joan M. Schattinger and Ann T. Lawrence have encapsulated one hundred years of vernacular civic pride into two small books intended to direct scholars and tourists alike through notable landmarks of Cleveland. For my research, I read and adapted Schattinger and Lawrence's *Cleveland's Flats on Tour* for my purposes.

Schatinger and Lawrence first divide the city into five areas, each assigned a letter A – E. Below is their map of these areas:

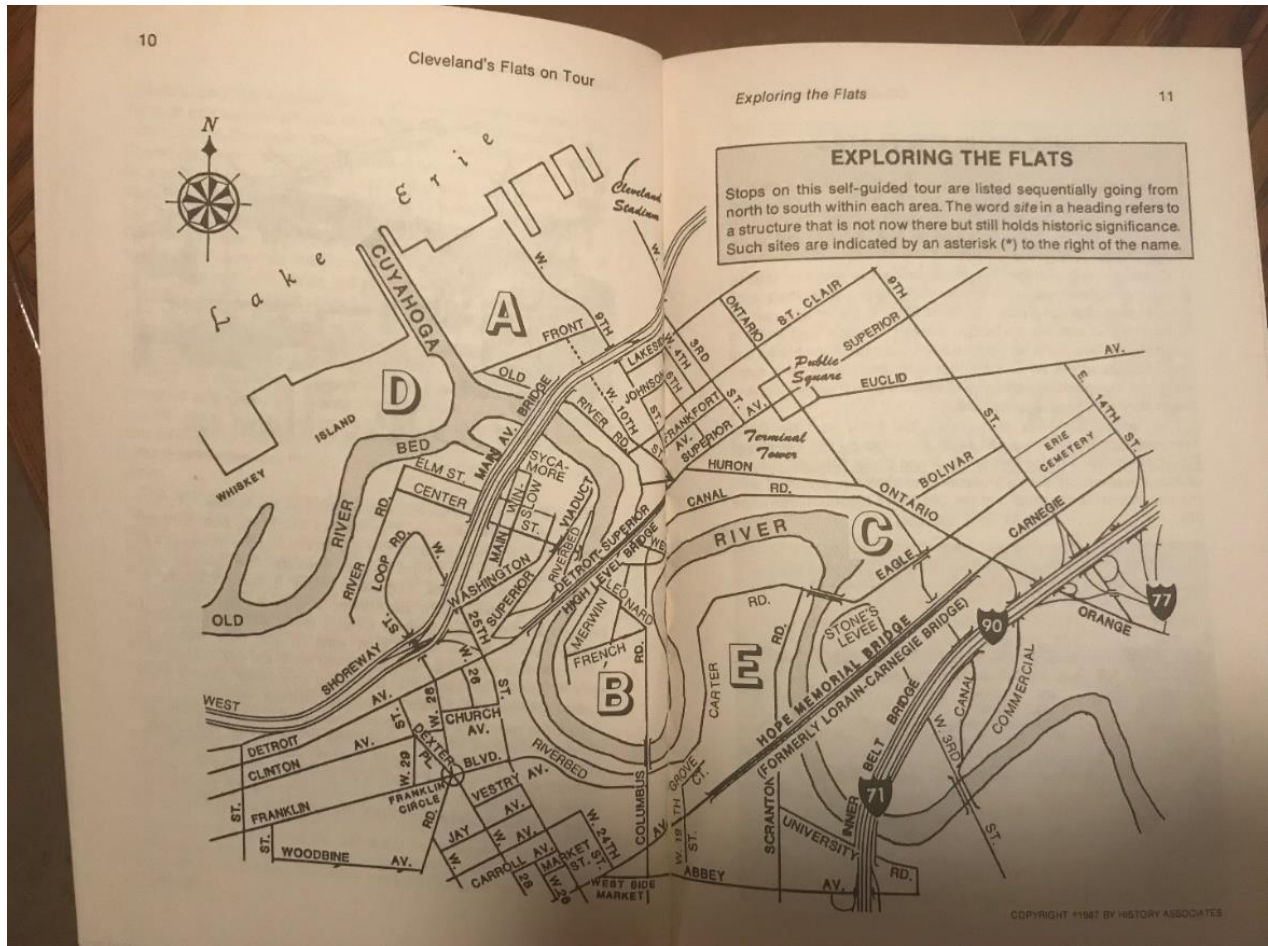


Figure 1 "Exploring the Flats," a map of downtown Cleveland's industrial hub in the guidebook by Schatinger and Lawrence.

For purposes of this thesis: Area A pertains mostly to the establishment of Cleveland as a city as well as the history of the Gaertner family business. Readers should note public square and Euclid boulevard extending east from it; at the other end of Euclid lies the art museum, the historic and then current location of the Cleveland School/Institute of Art, and other arts organizations relevant to Gaertner.

The river banks connecting Area A and B were home to the epicenter of Republic Steel, which Gaertner painted frequently. Of interest to the labor history portion of this paper: Area B was known colloquially as Irishtown Bend, and housed a major population of immigrant and second-generation laborers.

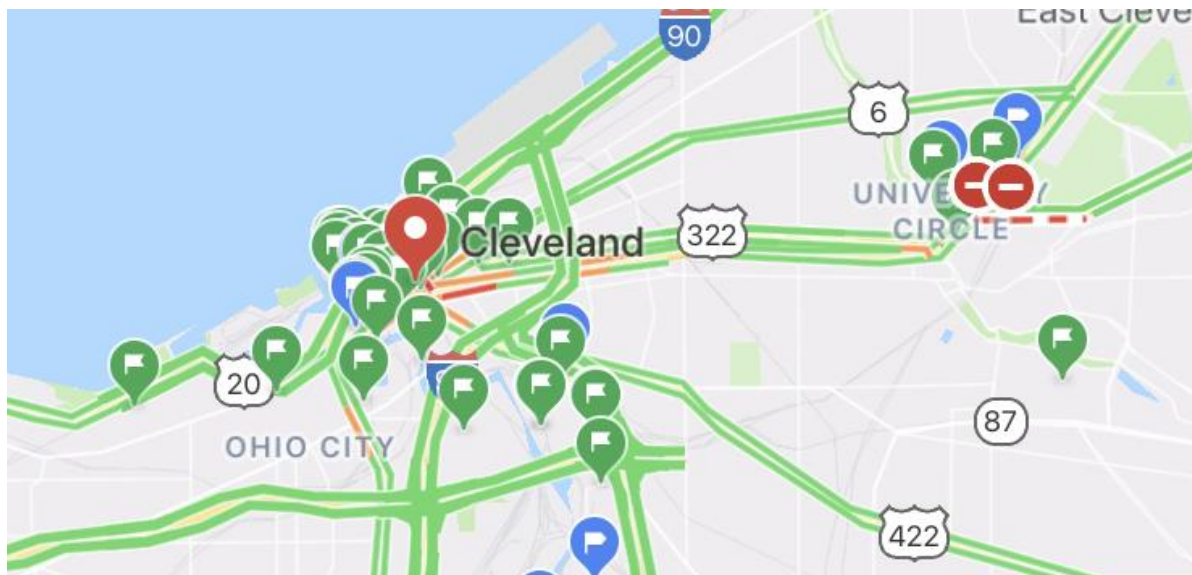


Figure ii Thesis research sites; Google map generated by author.

These were the sites I flagged for my research; Schattinger and Lawrence's five areas are the cluster of pins to the left; the pins on the right show the University Circle area and its relative distance from the Flats (5 miles). When I refer to "downtown Cleveland" in this paper, I am broadly referring to the 5 mile area encapsulating the Flats to University Circle. If I refer to "the Flats," I will just be referring to the river valley specifically, from Whiskey Island to the Arcelor Mittal site roughly 5-6 miles to the south following the river.

The reason I will use "downtown Cleveland" so generally at times is to distinguish this urban area from the relatively rural areas to the west and east which have significance to Gaertner.

Henry Keller's Berlin Heights summer school at his farm will be mentioned; seen in Figure iii, Berlin Heights is 50 miles west of downtown Cleveland. The map in Figure iv shows Gaertner sites to the East of downtown: Willoughby to the northeast 22 miles is the birthplace of Gaertner; Chagrin Falls, 30 miles southeast, is where the artist would live and take students later in his life. This neighborhood is 15 miles from the art school. I have not been able to identify the exact address of Gaertner's home; however, the oral history of his son, Carl Jr., and the family's estate place it within a long walk from the school.

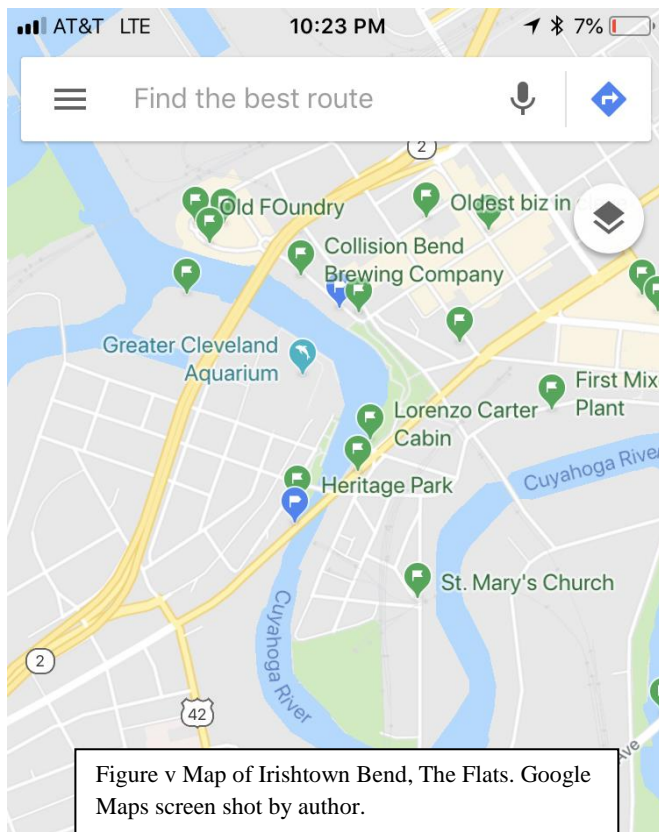


Figure iii Location of Berlin Heights in proximity to the Flats; Google Maps screen shot by author



Figure iv Location of Chagrin Falls in relation to the Flats; Google Maps screen shot by the author





The top left of this map shows the Cuyahoga dumping into Lake Erie; the green protrusion on the corner top left is Whiskey Island, the site of the first settlers to Cleveland. This is where the surveyors from the Western Reserve Land Company began exploring the river banks. In the middle of this map is Lorenzo Carter's Cabin, the first permanent structure in Cleveland. Lorenzo's Cabin faces Irishtown Bend, one of the

city's many ethnic labor-class settlements. To get there from the west, one must traverse the Detroit-Superior bridge. Gaertner painted this bridge and entered the image into the 1924 May Show. It was not photographed and as far as I know the painting itself has been lost to time. The Detroit-Superior Bridge and the Main Avenue Bridge to the north were both significant to Gaertner's viewing of the Flats. From Heritage Park he had the vantage point to paint West Side, Cleveland and Center Street Bridge, both in 1923. I tried to approximate Gaertner's winding through the flats for various vantage points. The site on this map labeled Collision Bend Brewing Company is the present-day site of Up The River at Upson's. I believe he painted it from the green flat above the Greater Cleveland Aquarium, though I'm sure access to the water's edge could be different now than it was when Gaertner was painting. The green flag between Lorenzo's cabin and Heritage Park marks both the Center Street Bridge and the earliest Rockefeller Steel site; a vantage point of this intersection is below. To the East on this map you

can see the flat for the first ever modern paint mixing plant (Sherwin Williams). This not only revolutionized the art world in Cleveland and beyond, the site represents Gaertner's oldest and longest patronage; the Sherwin family still has the largest private collection of Gaertner's works. Across the river at 1970 Carter Road was one of the original Otis Steel sites; this may or may not have been where Margaret Bourke-White photographed. The road here seen following the East river bank from the Old Foundry circle down to Heritage park is the Old River Road; most of the steel sites were along this road, and along its banks were the many infamous river pollution fires. Where the river bends out of the right frame of the map here past Sherwin Williams is called Collision Bend, one of the most infamous spots on the river. Many fires happened in Collision Bend as a result of boats getting stuck and then sparking onto the surface pollution from nearby factory dumping.



Though this furnace/elevator is almost certainly not the same one that Gaertner painted repeatedly (many of these were destroyed and sold as scrap metal during the steel crash/crisis of the 70s-80s), it is at the present day site of the Republic Steel furnaces that were his subjects. It gives present day readers a sense of the captivating nature and overwhelming heft of these structures. While we know for certain the Furnace (right) and the structures of The Pie Wagon

existed at the same work site, it is possible that Gaertner's other works portray other similar furnaces and elevators along the river road, as Republic Steel expanded downriver into the 40s.

The challenge, both for the scholar who seeks to explore the originality and aesthetic and cultural significance of Carl Gaertner's industrial landscape paintings, *and* for the reader of this thesis, is to begin not only to understand, but more fully, to imagine and feel the lay of the land: the physicality of the world of the Flats, as it was experienced by Gaertner, Margaret Bourke-White, and others in the 1920s and 30s. These maps and images are a fit starting point for the analysis of the aesthetic and cultural politics of Carl Gaertner that follows.

# **Chapter 1: The Inscrutable Master**

The sprawling office suite of St. Louis financier John Horseman is packed with paintings. Familiar masters of American twentieth-century painting such as Joe Jones and Thomas Hart Benton hint at Horseman's collecting ethos: to document regional expressions of national identity in art. Yet these richly painted landscapes and scenes of American daily life hang in visual tension with confrontational, bizarre images of the destitute under Hoover blankets; scabs confronting enraged workers; the bulging masses of oil drillers and dock workers; and apocalyptic hellscapes imagining worst-case scenarios of America's great wars as envisioned by the artists who fought in them. Viewed together, it becomes clear that Horseman's collection was intentionally assembled to subvert and expand the canons of twentieth-century American art. This encyclopedic survey of America's artists delves into a visual history beyond a more familiar cultural narrative framed by farmers and the occasional expatriate Impressionist. A vastly interconnected motley crew of farmers, soldiers, businessmen, laborers, and political sympathizers brings contemporary viewers into the many overlapping worlds of art, culture, and economy that comprise the framework for America's ever-changing aesthetic values and mass media.

Amidst the century of social and economic chaos palpable from a sweeping look at the paintings on Horseman's walls, two large-scale paintings exude a captivating gravitas impossible to ignore (Figures 1 and 2). One, a scene of two women hanging laundry on the back stoops of two rickety houses under the banner of power lines and ominous clouds, grasps the viewer with a composition just symmetrical enough to soothe the eye yet unexpected enough to evoke a

sensation of happening upon a private moment of importance and mystery. The other—at first glance a dreary neighborhood landscape—radiates with the peculiar glow of a lone popcorn vendor in the night under a cloudy sky of romantic proportions, in a neighborhood similar to that of the women hanging laundry. Both images bespeak the gritty, unsuspecting beauty of the penumbra of industrial life.



*Figure 1.1. Carl Gaertner, Second Floor Back, 1938. Figure 1.2: Carl Gaertner, Night in Pittsburgh, 1938. Both in the John and Susan Horseman Collection of American Art, St. Louis, Missouri.*

These paintings are the work of Cleveland painter Carl Gaertner (1898—1952), a veritable American master whose works have eluded scholarly attention in recent decades despite garnering national popularity during his lifetime. They represent a body of work that defies easy categorization within commonly accepted aesthetic idioms. Thematically, they are neither genre paintings nor modernist provocations. Their gothic lighting belies a mundane hum of human activity, playing out under the shrewd attentions of an artist synthesizing the roles of neutral participant and astute commentator. Gaertner’s Cleveland was in motion: transforming in epochal ways, catalyzed by upheaval economically and culturally.

Cleveland claims Gaertner as an art historical icon, yet little of his relationship to the city has been interpreted. This thesis argues that the world of Gaertner can serve as an entry point to

understanding what it was about his artistic representation of the milieu of Cleveland labor and city life that garnered him approval from communities of critics, patrons and manufacturers and formed rapprochement between Gaertner's fellow Cleveland artists and working people at a pivotal moment in American cultural and political history. Gaertner found early success in the Cleveland art market with his large-scale industrial landscapes such as these. Others, such as *Up the River at Upson's* (1923) and *The Furnace* (1924), inaugurated a three-decade career in which local manufacturers such as the Republic Steel Company and its subsidiaries—located along the river banks of downtown Cleveland—became his preferred subject matter. Gaertner's distinctive approach to industrial landscape was popular with Cleveland's elite and notably accessible for members of the industrial realm that they portrayed. During Gaertner's lifetime, Clevelanders found these works so relatable that they became icons of local pride and identity. Recent years have seen his work return to this status, finding their homes in the collections of Cleveland natives such as Horseman. These paintings are both documents of a historically significant era of capitalist activity, and capital themselves. From this distinctive vantage point, Gaertner's work asks perennially relevant questions about the limits and nature of genre and political affiliation.

This thesis will present a collection of Carl Gaertner's paintings—specifically those of the Republic Steel Company and its subsidiaries in the Flats—and discuss how they represent one artist's mindful transgressing of certain boundaries commonly used to categorize and canonize visual artists. Heavily utilizing archival sources and mementos, sales records and oral history, this thesis focuses on Gaertner's distinctive vision of this region: his paintings of industrial Cleveland that expose the tensions between the point of production—the factory—and the communities economically and culturally defined by manufacturing. By placing Gaertner at the intersections of aesthetics and consumerism during a pivotal era of manufacturing and

development in the area in Cleveland known as The Flats, I argue that Gaertner's industrial landscapes knit together antagonistic narratives about the relationship between humans, the landscape, and labor. Gaertner's paintings tell the story of Cleveland's early twentieth century steel boom, relay sublimely mundane aspects of a life lived among factories and industrial structures, and evoke the city's dawning consciousness that the economic pride which accompanied the growth of the Republic Steel Company and its local rivals bore serious environmental consequences. In weaving together the narrative elements of man, factory, and nature, Gaertner negotiated between the working class realities of his subjects and the tastes of his elite patronage to produce compelling visual documents which remain much beloved by Clevelanders yet forgotten to those in other art centers. To redress the relative omission of Gaertner's historical and cultural significance, I will investigate the dialogue and tensions between his industrial landscapes and those of his better remembered contemporaries. By adopting numerous American painting styles and joining many overlapping realms of culture in Cleveland in the early-to-mid twentieth century, Gaertner crossed between civic, economic, and aesthetic boundaries. In so doing, Gaertner acknowledged a wide range of local consumer taste, as affected by the labor movement's cultural aesthetics and also the appetite for various forms of high and folk art fostered in the community by the art museum's citywide annual juried May show. His propensity for boundary-crossing will guide the investigation of this thesis.

In this thesis I aim to evaluate the two most enduring understandings of Gaertner's industrial paintings: that they were simply studies of light from an adept pupil of the region's most celebrated impressionist teacher, Henry Keller; or, that the paintings flow from a cynical assessment of the city's grit and power, within which man is existentially alienated and dwarfed

by the power of his industrial creations.<sup>1</sup> My goal is to evaluate these popular interpretations within the context of Cleveland's labor movement and the aesthetic trends espoused by the Cleveland School's curriculum at the time. Few critics writing on Gaertner's industrial landscapes today have engaged with the primary sources. As Gaertner didn't write about his own work, these documents hold a place of utmost importance by providing a check against grandiose misinterpretations.

Gaertner's paintings and activities between 1927 and 1952 demonstrate a peculiar and progressive interweaving of one major American city's main industrial economy and popular visual culture. Analysis of Gaertner's industrial landscape paintings, alongside studies of the visual culture surrounding those sites that would have been consumed by all Clevelanders, will reveal how the city's art historical climate allowed for the contradictory union of artists and working-class consumers at a time of crisis for the labor movement. In turn, this study argues for the importance of Gaertner's distinctive vision of Cleveland's industrial flats to historians seeking to make sense of what has been, to date, its transient place within the history of twentieth-century American art and culture.

The "how" of this project is deeply enmeshed with the "who." Gaertner was a social yet private man. He is an inscrutable constant in art histories of Cleveland. Frequently included in exhibitions and regional surveys, the same few details are repeated ad nauseam: Carl Gaertner was born in 1898, attended the Cleveland School of Art from 1920—1923, returned to teach night classes in 1925, joined as full time staff in 1927, and proceeded to spend twenty-some

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<sup>1</sup> In the official history of Gaertner's long time employer, *Cleveland Institute of Art: The First Hundred Years*, Gaertner is pictured along with other notable staff. The school remembers him simply as "widely acclaimed for his landscapes, both in oil and watercolor" (34). Earlier sources tend to emphasize Gaertner's imagery of the natural world, despite a wealth of industrial scenes. On the other end of the spectrum, contemporary scholars such as Christine Fowler Shearrer and critics like Steven Litt almost exclusively praise his industrial scenes, with his landscapes receiving acknowledgement in passing.



additional years teaching and exhibiting widely until an untimely death in 1952.<sup>2</sup> During these years, Gaertner only traveled once, to Bermuda in 1924, where he would produce a series of small watercolor studies of tropical weather and light against geometric white houses—overlooked yet clearly integral works to the honing of his industrial landscapes. Variations on this handful of biographical facts give the effect of familiarity, though truly they omit much about this artist that ought to be better remembered. He was born in 1898, lived in the Flats until the 1920s, and initially planned to enter the field of mechanical design.<sup>3</sup> His father, H. Frederick Gaertner, managed the Burrows Brothers Company, a hardware store in eastern part of the Flats near to Terminal Tower; no history of his mother survives.<sup>4</sup> The artist's son, Carl Gaertner Jr., recalls that his father was somewhat of a flaneur, often strolling through the flats with a camera or sketchpad. He says his father was enamored by the shapes the industrial structures set against the skyline and almost always painted while wearing a tweed suit jacket (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Some examples include the Golden Gate International Exhibition, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Fowler Shearer, *Carl Gaertner: A Story of Earth and Steel* (Cleveland, OH: The Cleveland Artists Foundation, 2000), 37. Christine Fowler Shearer records that he studied at East Technical High School and graduated in 1918. Various internal memos with artists bios in the archives of The Art Museum of Northeast Ohio (ArtNEO) and the Cleveland Museum of Art show he briefly attended Case Western for mechanical design before pursuing the arts.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Gaertner general, in-house typewritten biography handout. Carl Gaertner Curatorial File. Exhibitions Archive. Art Museum of Northeast Ohio, Cleveland, OH. Accessed November 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Gaertner, Jr., interview by the author, WOLFS Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio, USA, March 14, 2018.



*Figure 3. Carl Gaertner, Plein Air Sketch of the Flats, date unknown. Private Collection of Carl Gaertner Jr., accessed September 2018.*

The historical record contains very few remembrances of Carl Gaertner, let alone the Carl Gaertner recovered in this thesis. When included in articles or more general regional art history books, his paintings, rather than archival documents, are parsed for clues about the artist. For example, only one book has ever been published focusing solely on this artist. In 2000 Christine Fowler Shearer curated an exhibition on Gaertner's industrial paintings for the Cleveland Society of Artists; the eponymously titled exhibition catalog, *Carl Gaertner: A Story of Earth and Steel*, provides a thorough discussion of Gaertner's influences and subject matter, but biographical information is restricted to relevant dates connected to the artist's education. Even the wealth of articles pertaining to the artist from the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper archives shy away from personal perspectives on the artist himself. However, Gaertner was a regular participant in art shows and community art demonstrations, so some information about his life beyond the

easel can be surmised by newspaper mentions of these events. Since Fowler’s exhibition there has been an uptick in interest about the artist. For scholars interested in the artist’s elusive biography, there remain figures in Cleveland with passed-down anecdotal memories from the artist’s wife, Adelle, his son Carl Jr., or figures from various ranks within the Museum and the Cleveland Institute of Art—formerly the Cleveland School of Art, where Gaertner taught. Mark Cole, Curator of American Art at the Cleveland Museum, shared the popular anecdote that “[Gaertner] was a gentleman” and took short train trips once a summer for two weeks or less on break from school; Bill Tregoning, a long-term Cleveland art dealer with ties to the family estate, added to this by explaining that the train trips were because “Gaertner was deathly afraid of flying.”<sup>6</sup> Details like these both highlight the sparse knowledge of the artist’s life, and add personal dimension to it.<sup>7</sup>

Art dealer and Gaertner estate representative Michael Wolf fleshed out the image of Gaertner, complimenting his encouragement as a teacher with the demeanor remembered by his son. According to Wolf, “Everybody respected him. Whenever he painted, he [required a particular environment]: he needed to be without disruption. If he was in the house painting, he needed to be completely alone in the house. The family would leave. He was extremely serious when working, and that’s the first thing Carl Jr. ever told me about his father.”<sup>8</sup> I asked Wolf why so little about Gaertner the man survives—who were his parents? What was the nature of

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author, November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Some anecdotal memories of Gaertner paint him as a somewhat austere man; family estate representative Michael Wolf teaches that Gaertner was deeply introspective. A few art figures I interviewed with less familiarity of the artist recalled that some historians describe Gaertner as stern man. While ultimately some of these details are lost to time in the absence of any journals or more detailed family documents, the archival record is crucial to gleaning insight into the artist’s life. For example, I found the trope of Gaertner being a stern recluse painter inaccurate after finding a very warm professorial letter from Gaertner encouraging student Hughie Lee Smith to continue applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship. Letter held in Horseman Collection of American Art Archive.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the author, November 2017.

his marriages? What did he enjoy doing? Did he have a sense of humor? Wolf credits the dearth of personal information to the effect his death had on his those around him: “It’s a shame he died at his age. People were sensitive to his passing—a lot of things people wanted to know were lost after his death.” Essentially, according to Wolf, historians at the time wanted to respect his widow’s grief and held off on immediately writing memorials to the artist—a pleasantry stemming from Gaertner’s many close relationships in the city, but one which contributed to a regretful dissipation of the artist’s memory. His peers and friends continued to share oral history until roughly ten to twenty years ago, but little was put to paper from 1952 and 2000. The need and desire for a Gaertner catalog raisonné or updated monograph is strong. Mark Cole told me that despite the proliferation of Gaertner collectors today—who are well networked with each other and familiar with the provenances of these beloved paintings—no compilation of Gaertner’s complete body of work has ever been done.

Ever loyal to its artists, Cleveland’s art establishment remains proud of the impact Carl Gaertner had on the history of Cleveland art and proud of his vision of their industrial landscapes. In the absence of scholarly research and reflection on this artist, the fastidiously archived ephemera pertaining to Gaertner’s life provides the strongest protection of his legacy. Though existing scholarship on Gaertner is limited, an abundance of primary source newspaper coverage survives, which has been rarely published. This wealth of archival information forms the research backbone of this project. To conduct my research, I sifted through archives in Cleveland and interviewing historians, dealers, and collectors of Gaertner’s paintings in addition to studying the limited secondary material published on the artist. Gaertner’s surviving son, Carl Jr., was kind enough to grant me both an interview and to loan me a box of the artist’s family papers, both of which contributed considerably to my interpretation of the archival material.

During the artist's lifetime his name and accomplishments could be frequently spotted in Cleveland's local newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, the *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* and assorted local ephemera published by the Cleveland School of Art. Arguably the most important text on Gaertner is a scrapbook held in the Cleveland Institute of Art Library that contains the closest thing to a complete record of Gaertner's publications. Known colloquially in the city's art world as "the scrapbook," it is an astounding volume in excess of one thousand pages assembled by a patron of the art school with a fervor for documenting the detailed history of the school via the activities of its noted students, alumni and teachers. The document is only available on microfilm at the library of the Cleveland Institute of Art, formerly known as the Cleveland School of Art; the original is housed in the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art and is too fragile to consult.<sup>9</sup> This compendium has been painstakingly catalogued and contains around one hundred entries for Carl Gaertner, pasted into the book in chronological order. They are sources such as clippings from *The Plain Dealer*, the *New York Times*, *Art Digest*, and other newspapers; gallery invitations and announcements; publications and newsletters from the Cleveland Museum of Art; and photographs. In it scholars can glean a sense of Gaertner's place in Cleveland's art-economic ecosystem like nowhere else.

The scrapbook is as valuable for what can be read between the lines as what can be read in the clippings. As there is almost no information on the artist's early life, Gaertner's name first appears in an announcement for his hiring in 1927. There is a three-year gap until consistent

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<sup>9</sup> The original of this scrapbook is held in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. The only full copy of it is held in the microfilm library of the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. I read all the entries on Gaertner on November 2 – 4, 2017 and March 13 – 16, 2018. Some volumes I consulted include: Macbeth Gallery Records 1838-1968. Box 39 folders 10-12. 1919 and 1946-1953. Letters written by artist [Carl Gaertner]. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. ----. Exhibition Scrapbooks from 18 July 1941-October 1945. (NMc4:771-772) Paintings by Carl Gaertner. Jan. 8-27, 1945. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

mentions resume again. Presumably these are the years during which Gaertner was settling into young adult life, employment, and his art practice, though one could postulate further into the meaning of this documentary lull. Some of the earliest mentions of the artist are small and pithy—his name listed among artists showing in an exhibition, or a simple announcement of a sale or show one sentence long. As the years advance, the documents lengthen and increase in number. The pattern of criticism published about Gaertner reveals even more when juxtaposed with his sales record. I have been able to access partial sales records from his lifetime at the Cleveland Museum of Art, in the papers of the Macbeth Gallery, and in a box of unpublished mementos the family’s personal archive. The scrapbook and sales records and the information they relay about the artist’s fluctuating yet steadily progressing popularity will be critically analyzed to find answers to the driving questions how Gaertner crossed boundaries in the city’s artistic and economic realms.<sup>10</sup> The Cleveland Institute of Art’s scrapbook guide my inquiry into the puzzle of Gaertner’s biography and boundary crossing, and launches the concluding analysis of the trajectory of Gaertner’s public memory after his death. By deeply considering the understudied archival sources on this artist, this thesis contributes the first close reading of Gaertner’s personal history and artistic oeuvre in two decades.

In the early stages of this research, it became clear that the shape of Carl Gaertner’s art market told one of the most compelling histories of the artist’s cultural impact. Earning gallery representation was (and remains) a significant litmus test for America’s evolving popular tastes during and the rise of abstraction in the 1920s forward. Over the course of his career, his institutional and market popularity diverged at times; at others, these responses synchronized and

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<sup>10</sup> Gaertner’s institutional relationships offer a key piece of the answer: his employment at the Cleveland School of Art and close rapport with the Cleveland Museum of Art kept him at the economic intersection of connoisseurship and popular consumption. This will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

garnered him national commissions and awards. Much like today, Gaertner's sales during his lifetime took place through commercial art exhibitions and private dealer—to—client relationships. Michael Denning's text *The Cultural Front* informs my study of the appeal of Gaertner's images of industrial Cleveland to audiences at multiple points on the economic and class spectrum. In assessing the nature of Gaertner's aesthetic and economic boundary crossing in Cleveland, and why he became a local hero, this thesis will engage Denning's history of the Cultural Front aesthetic branch of the labor movement. Gaertner's industrial landscapes hold significance beyond just their architectural and geographic meanings. Incorporating a wider cultural element of labor and economics reveals how political and economic commitments affected the consumption and connoisseurship of paintings in Cleveland.

In *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning presents an alternative framework for study of American cultural politics and art historical periodization. If the Popular Front is the web of leftist political groups taking shape in and around working class communities in the early twentieth century, the Cultural Front is the material cultural locus of these groups interacting with mainstream visual and political culture. Those within the Cultural Front were laborers in various industries, including ethnic and gender minorities; as a class, this group was expanding at a fast rate due to immigration and population expansion. Along with this expansion came unprecedented buying power. Denning's book deeply engages the ways that the values of these laboring leftist fellow-travelers exerted influence over American visual and material culture by how their neighborhoods, social groups and unions shaped their various distinctive visual preferences, and how their new consumer power effected more cultural products—in visual art, printmaking, music, theater, and the like. Those within the Cultural Front were continuously making sense of their identities as groups of laborers; as detailed in the labor histories of David

Montgomery and Elizabeth Faue, these labor class group identities hinged around type of industry—textile, steel, longshoring, and so on—and workplace structure—worker’s control, factory hierarchies, manual assembly or mass production.<sup>11</sup> The social dynamics of the neighborhoods surrounding these various factories likewise took on their own defining aspects, and when combined with the convictions surrounding class status, workers’ autonomy and politically sympathetic artwork being formed on the factory floor, produced the Cultural Front. The Cultural Front as a cultural bloc bridged the gap between the public front lines of political disputes unfolding via the age of union and factory strikes, and the private dissatisfactions of workers.

Denning correlates these emerging and increasingly powerful community identities with the serious of strikes, factory riots and labor struggles unfolding across the nation during the early twentieth century. The early chapters of his text outline the rise of the age of the CIO contained a second American renaissance in which fellow travelling thinkers, workers and consumers indelibly altered how working-and-middle class citizens consume and produce art. This approach offers a solution to the struggles art historians have with categorizing regional artists without being overly reductive. Denning asserts in the first chapter that historians should not simply focus on ascertaining which political commitments spurred thinkers, writers, and laborers in their work. He argues instead for the close relationship between aesthetics and politics, both in the production of culture during this time and in how working—class individuals consumed cultural products. Gaertner’s world is an excellent example of the web of exchange described by Denning, and Denning’s attitudes towards re-analyzing the social and political

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<sup>11</sup> Faue, Elizabeth. “Community and Workplace in the History of U.S. Labor,” *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 1-20.



implications of price, production, and aesthetics offers an exciting approach for American art historians.

Likewise, Gaertner's paintings ask us to question the efficacy of stringent chronological periodization and the limits of genre. Considering them in loose groups defined broadly by the social forces acting upon them proves a more interesting and effective approach. The worlds of Gaertner allowed him to traverse among realms in Cleveland defined by the Cultural Front. He himself can also be read through this lens: though his personal politics were kept private, his industrial landscape paintings share and portray tensions common within Cultural Front visual culture, such as the delicate balance of power between workers and their bosses seen by community incentives to manage discontent and prevent rioting, like the delivery of pies to the factory grounds or corner popcorn stands to assuage families under the burden of grueling hours. Gaertner's works also portray a more holistic life of the worker; by focusing on life beyond the factory floor, his paintings fill Denning's criteria of Cultural Front visual culture by referring broadly to labor, and actively participating in what he calls the laboring of American culture. The production of cultural goods is itself work enacted by the artist in the role of worker. Gaertner's industrial paintings pull back the curtain to reveal the underlying mechanics of American capitalist consumption—manufacturing and production of goods—while themselves being goods consumed by fans and buyers. Like the cultural producers contained in Denning's rich cultural history, Gaertner established in an interesting way a deeply rooted web of production and consumption between the factories and workers he portrayed, the middle—class consumers who purchased his work, cultural elites in his communities at the Cleveland School of Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, and various galleries, and more. This web and his easy transgressing of

boundaries between these groups reveal a compelling cultural history of an understudied American artist during the height of the nation's labor movement.

Many artists like Gaertner have been lost to time despite significant cultural influence during their own lives for a few reasons; chief among them are a flattening or erasure of the web of interdisciplinary influences in the creation stories of cultural objects, as described by Patricia Bradley in *Making American Culture: A Social History, 1900–1920*, and a loss of memory due to overgeneralizing and oversimplifying the influence of Communism on American mass culture, as argued by Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front*.<sup>12</sup> Carl Gaertner's boundary crossing and its resultant influence on his art and position within Cleveland's visual culture is the sort of transgressive culture—making that Bradley and Denning direct their readers to reexamine. By drawing upon these two argumentative historiological texts, I aim to further demonstrate the importance of resurrecting the memory of Gaertner's life and work from a paradigm of art historical periodization that often excludes an otherwise pertinent artist.

Similarly, Gaertner's exhibition history offers a main point of access for analysis in this thesis. Today, Gaertner's paintings are gaining traction anew, often displayed in group art exhibitions and collegially passed around the art market—especially in Cleveland. Despite commonly surfacing on the low—to—mid—level art market, his sales remain mostly regional today, and the works have only once comprised a solo show since his death. This exhibition is an important milestone in the historiography of this artist, as it was the first major effort to remind Cleveland of this key figure since his death. It also followed a devastating death knell in the city's steel industry. A strength of the exhibition was its discourse on Gaertner's eye for aesthetics, but it missed a critical opportunity to excavate the archival record to produce a deeper

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<sup>12</sup> Bradley's first chapter in particular, "Culture and Nationhood," relates strongly to Denning.

historical portrait of the artist himself. This thesis, instead, reconciles archival, exhibition, and sales records in order to explain why Gaertner's eye and technique resonated with Cleveland's Cultural Front organizers and sympathizers as well as the city's bourgeoisie. In this vein, though there are limited books specifically on Gaertner, the scholarly literature on Cleveland's art history has created space and importance for further Gaertner research. Henry Adams's *Painting in Pure Color: Modern Art in Cleveland Before the Armory Show 1908 – 1913* probes the question "Can we construct other schemes of modern art?" with regards to including American artists in the cannon of modernisms. Adams's book offers no concrete solutions but points scholars following in Denning's footsteps towards the layered world of Gaertner to find the answer.

At the time of Gaertner's birth in 1898, the city was one hundred years old. Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Cleveland's economic foundation lay in manufacturing; strong economic growth and a flourishing middle class would foster a taste for art and a market for the employ of artists. Artists became enmeshed in Cleveland's economy as early as the 1830s, when painters like Jarvis Hanks found financial prosperity through portrait commissions and decorative painting. This functional sort of art making dovetailed with early businesses in the city and arguable molded mainstream aesthetic consumption. Gaertner's art of industry, done in a narrative yet apparently objective way, harkens to a precedent of consumerism and connoisseurship established in the decades before him. The nineteenth-century city hosted a small handful of sign painters and furniture decorators. Until the late nineteenth century, little art for art's sake existed. In 1996 art historian William Robinson detailed Cleveland's business-oriented early art market in his Cleveland Museum of Art exhibition *Transformations in Cleveland Art*. He was frustrated that, "although Cleveland's evolving artistic tradition is

interwoven at every point with the city's history, almost nothing has been written about how economic, social, and political events affected the character of Cleveland art."<sup>13</sup> As Cleveland's art market developed and branched out from its practical roots, painters organized themselves along aesthetic lines, which frequently served as socio-economic indicators as well. Gaertner was a student as this coalescing became more prominent in the city and the art institutions; what he observed would come to bear on his own art upon his graduation in the middle of the decade.

These two markets appealed to consumers of various social classes and status. Earlier painters, such as Joseph Parker, had documented the developing city's infrastructure to much local acclaim (Figure 4). Over time Cleveland's artists would more frequently find sustained fame in the realm of practical subject matter done in vernacular styles that doubled as objects of beauty and functional commodities. Artists of early nineteenth-century Cleveland mostly busied

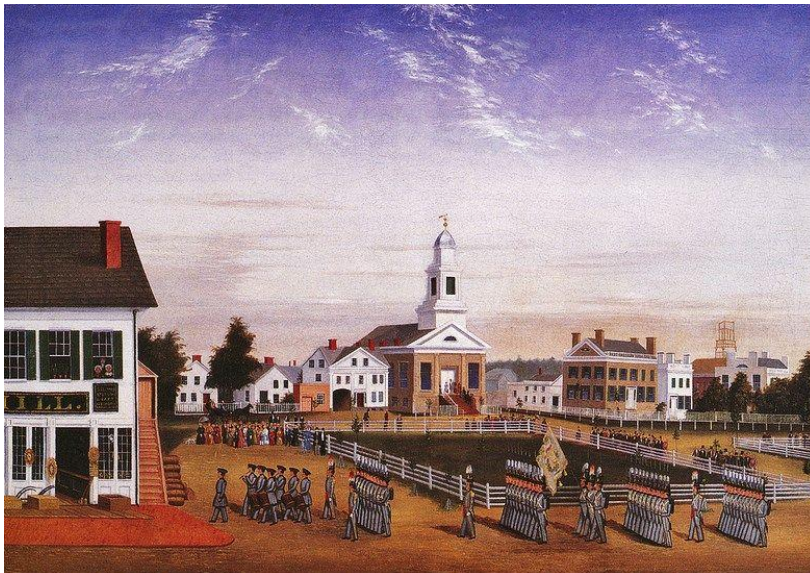


Figure 1.4 Joseph Parker, *The Cleveland Ohio Grays on Public Square, 1839* – example of objective renderings of local landmarks overlaid with a proud civic display

themselves portraying civic icons. The resultant paintings were popular means of self-identity and civic pride. As early modern art began spreading across the United States and prosperous cities such as Cleveland, artists began exploring the idea of a regional

<sup>13</sup> Robinson, William H., and David Steinberg. *Transformations in Cleveland Art, 1796-1946: community and diversity in early modern America*. (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996), 1.

aesthetic. As the economy and art market expanded, artists and their endeavors grew more familiar in the city. By the time Gaertner was born, a handful of artists had emerged whose artwork depicting the civic icons of Cleveland, and their individual panache in doing so, had elevated the station of artist to one of cultural icon.

The cultural history of Cleveland and its formation has been a continuous subject of exploration for area historians interested in mining the minutiae of the past for further insights into how this steel industry hub spun such a complex web of artistic exchange. In Gaertner's world, there were generations of Cleveland families who responded to his work from a position of public pride, interpreting his works within the framework of the city's cultural past. During the late nineteenth century, Cleveland's multi-generational Edmonson family would prepare the city for the full impact of Gaertner's work. Spanning three generations, various personal and public dispositions, and attitudes towards media and subject matter, George W., George M., William John, and Ivy Jane Edmonson functioned as a microcosm of Cleveland's evolving notions about art and fine society.<sup>14</sup> George W., an established society painter, connected well with elites and harkened aesthetically and professionally to practical painters such as Parker. W. Edmondson also had a reputation for photographing presidents Taft and McKinley and the likes of John D. Rockefeller. Gaertner's contemporary Margaret Bourke-White, the renowned photographer of the Flats, began her career with a residency at George Edmonson's. William John represented a younger generation whose interests socially and aesthetically were expanding

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<sup>14</sup> William and George were brothers; their father sent William to study under William Merritt Chase, presumably setting a precedent for art of traditional subject matter rendered in expressive yet realistic, proper ways; his skill set for popular high-class art was finessed enough to earn him a scholarship to the prestigious Academie Juilen in Paris. He was known in the 1920s for his impressionistic paintings, but also his portraiture. His older brother George was particularly famous for his portraits. Gaertner would likely have been familiar with the work of these brothers, especially as he was a young professional himself at the height of the brothers' local fame. Historians might consider them a high-society foil to Bellows.

to include the mechanical and industrial developments of the 1910s and 1920s. This artist was among a loose association of photographers who came early to fame in Cleveland. William's sister, Ivy, was even more interested in the realm of visual culture; as a student at the Cleveland School of Art during the time of Gaertner's tenure there, she approached painting with less rigor than her father but with equal or surpassing curiosity. Paul Travis, her instructor in watercolors, was a peer of Gaertner's; both had themselves been pupils of the renowned regional watercolorist Henry Keller, who brought an Impressionistic knack for spontaneity and light to the Cleveland art world shortly after the 1913 Armory Show. Each of these artists appealed to specific sections of the city's consumer classes, which later Gaertner would manage to appeal to simultaneously. Because this family's multigenerational art collection was kept in-tact, it stands as a metric for Cleveland's changing artistic mores.<sup>15</sup> Their work were closely related to industrial wealth in the city, and, as such, are interesting to note in the years prior and slightly concurrently with Gaertner's emergence on the scene.<sup>16</sup> Artists such as the Edmonsons struck a chord with viewers across class lines with their portrayals of downtown Cleveland and the natural economy.

As Cleveland's distinctive downtown river valley witnessed the expansion of the steel industry and other manufacturing sites, the consumption of fine and mass visual culture grew increasingly interwoven, despite striation in class and labor by the turn of the twentieth century and into its first decades. Gaertner's life was set against a complex web of art and industry. In 1918, at the culminating moment of Cleveland's developing wealth and expansion, the teen Carl

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<sup>15</sup> Lauren Hansgen, *Art in the Veins: The Legacy of the Edmonson Family in Cleveland* (Cleveland, OH: The Cleveland Artists Foundation, 2009), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Hansgen, *Art in the Veins*, 8-9.

Gaertner enrolled in the Western Reserve College with aspirations towards engineering.<sup>17</sup>

However, as a young man he was interested in design and began giving art lessons at a local high school.<sup>18</sup> Little, if anything, survives in the historical record to connect the dots between Gaertner's high school interest in engineering and his adulthood fascination with painting the Flats. Subsequent chapters of this thesis will consider the impact of Cleveland's landscape on the young adult artist during college-aged studies with Impressionist devotees, and investigate how the artist's keen sensibilities of taste and patronage at various levels of Cleveland's art world led to his incisive industrial landscapes. Gaertner's industrial paintings synthesize factory, nature, and the human spaces which mediate between them. They transgress the limits of genre in a way that allows continued art historical interest and insight.

If Gaertner's oeuvre is to be categorized by any terms, they should be factory, nature, and man. These three themes play out over a variety of sizes in Gaertner's work. Gaertner's preferred media was oil paint. His body of work can generally be broken into three groups by size. There are a few hundred small thumbnail sketches and watercolors. The thumbnails can sometimes be found on the art market in groups, whereas the watercolors are more complete works serving as finished studies for light and form. Gaertner predominantly made his watercolors whilst traversing the nation by train. Gouaches (or opaque watercolors) comprise most of his mid-sized works, typically measuring in the range of 18 x 14 inches. However, what he is best known for are his large oil paintings. Almost all of these pertain to Cleveland's industrial realm, focusing on factories and labor class neighborhoods. Gaertner rarely did interior

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<sup>17</sup> "Selections from the Collection of Cleveland Artists Foundation, January 6 -31, 1995" ticket stapled to typewritten notes about purchase of 1949 oil. Carl Gaertner Curatorial File. Exhibitions Archive. Art Museum of Northeast Ohio, Cleveland, OH. Accessed November 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Gaertner general, in-house typewritten biography handout. Carl Gaertner Curatorial File. Exhibitions Archive. Art Museum of Northeast Ohio, Cleveland, OH. Accessed November 2017.

scenes. His sole industrial interior oil painting was created in 1925 but has been lost to time; the only surviving record of it is a photograph in the archive of the Cleveland Museum of Art (Figure 5).<sup>19</sup> His sole interior domestic scene is a gouache of him and his wife Adele (Figure 6).<sup>20</sup>



Figure 1.5 Carl Gaertner, *The Forge Hammer*, 1925. Oil, size and location unknown. Photograph from the Cleveland Museum of Art.

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<sup>19</sup> During the preparation of the Carl Gaertner Memorial Exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art following his death in 1952, most of his known paintings at the time were borrowed from their current owners where accessible and catalogued loosely for purposes of the exhibition list. These photographs and in most cases the names of the works owners from the time survive in the Museum's curatorial exhibition file. This image was sourced from Shearer, *Carl Gaertner*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Shearer, *Carl Gaertner*, 16.





*Figure 1. 6 Carl Gaertner, Evening at Home, 1943. Gouache, 15 x 20 inches, Mike and Carol Sherwin Collection.*

Within these groupings are various landscapes—snowy river banks in the 1920s and 1930s, scrub brush and grassy railroad lines in the 1940s, with memories of Bermuda’s foliage and weather throughout—and striking industrial landscapes wherein the exterior of factories, steel furnaces, and workers quarters are the focus. As this thesis will demonstrate, the artist’s imagery underwent nuanced changes over time. However, at no point did Gaertner’s paintings fit snugly into the commonly—used genres of the time, namely the more traditional Aschan school style and urban realism, and the newer, more provocative avant-garde modes of Impressionism and Expressionism. When Gaertner reached art school in 1920 he fell into the tutelage of renowned watercolorist Henry Keller who, despite his abstract flourishes, ultimately fell on the conservative side into the tutelage of renowned watercolorist Henry Keller who, despite his abstract flourishes, ultimately fell on the conservative side of a city-wide aesthetic rift. Twenty years before he was teaching a young Carl Gaertner the basics of light and composition, Keller

himself was working in Paris and Dusseldorf and immersing himself in European Impressionism. While teaching in Cleveland he aimed to remain an aesthetically neutral teacher of basic art and design during the school year, saving his specific passion for instilling Impressionist aesthetic values in his students for his special summer classes.<sup>21</sup> In each teaching mode, however, his approach to landscape was “[instruction] in how to use natural forms decoratively.”<sup>22</sup>

Cleveland’s early exploration of modernism in art tends to precede interesting short histories of artists who have since been forgotten but clearly played an important part in the city’s cultural development. In 1895 Louis Rorimer returned to Cleveland following a period of studying abroad in Paris; his effect on the cultural development of Cleveland is compared by William Robinson to that of Steiglitz on New York.<sup>23</sup> Louis Rorimer, together with Henry Keller, established the school’s design program and brought their own visions of painting to its curriculum, through which would pass almost every great Cleveland artist of the early twentieth century. The Cleveland School, therefore, refers to a multi-generational web of artists working in the city and surrounding Great Lakes region prior to and after the Armory Show. With a concentrated solidification of goals and methods between 1908 and 1913, this group of artists presented one of the strongest fronts of American artists in the face of increasing European influence on visual culture. Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer and George Bellows are now recognized as the progenitors of a broad history of American art; the first generation of the Cleveland School proceeded from the similar but contrasting modes of William Sommer, Abel Warshawsky, and August Biehle. Future chapters will discuss Gaertner’s work in the context of these artist’s works and the effect each of these artists had on Cleveland’s emergent and

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<sup>21</sup> Rotraud Sackerlotzky, *Henry Keller’s Summer School in Berlin Heights* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Artists Foundation, 1991), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Sackerlotzky, *Henry Keller’s Summer School*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson and Steinberg. *Transformations in Cleveland Art*, 27.

dissenting aesthetic spheres. Generally speaking, Gaertner trod the line between form and function: his works suggest a political activism yet also an interest in aesthetics. In 1922 Carl Gaertner was in--between college and full time employment; he was working in commercial art, a career stint we know little about, while also teaching one or two evening art classes in the Cleveland area. At this time he contributed to the May show, where he first came in contact with a mentor-figure who is not usually discussed in the Gaertner story: George Bellows.<sup>24</sup> Though Gaertner never formally studied under the elder artist, he would have seen Bellows' renowned boxing scene *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909, Cleveland Museum of Art) in 1922, the year it was acquired by the museum. That year or after, Bellows was the guest juror of the May show. Captivated by Gaertner's handling of paint, he awarded the young Clevelander a prize. Though this was the extent of their interaction that we know of, Bellows was a celebrity artist by this time, and his endorsement of Gaertner's painting would have been a significant boost for the young artist's standing in the community.

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<sup>24</sup> I thank Mark Cole, Curator of American art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, for the many conversations about the connections between Gaertner and Bellows.



Figure 1.7 Carl Gaertner, *The Furnace* (originally titled *The Shops*), 1924. Oil on canvas, 37 x 42 inches. Cleveland Museum of Art.

Two years after winning Bellows' approval, Gaertner followed up with *The Furnace* (Figure 7), the first of his major industrial oil paintings to incorporate the lessons he learned from Bellows. In this painting, Gaertner portrays a familiar Cleveland landmark, the blast furnaces at the Otis Steel Company, in sumptuously thick paint. A dramatic difference in the scale of the workers and the furnace itself is exaggerated by the skin-like paint application on the furnace and the gestural, suggestive strokes loosely comprising the worker's faces. This work is emblematic of Gaertner's multi-faceted boundary crossing. Though the workers are the least articulated element of this work, their placement and the application of the paint around them clearly tells us that they were not afterthoughts. Gaertner neither ignores the realities of working-class life nor

exposes it fully. Viewers could surmise these laborers are off duty, or perhaps wonder if they are factory employees at all—possibly instead being residents of the homes in the background. In Gartner’s day, more politically conservative painters omitted imaging the workers and more liberal ones featured the factory floor and site of production as a preferred trope. Thus, Gaertner toys with showing the grit of the site of production, but veers away from a purely Impressionistic color study by laying in a garishly toxic river, wafts of smoke, and a working class neighborhood mangled with power lines. It is too vague to easily classify politically, yet too shrewd to relegate to a simple corner of regionalist genre. Harkening to both Bellows and his contemporary expressionists like Biehle, Gaertner’s employment of non—local color (green river, blue snow)—is one of the many ways he acknowledges masters in other genres yet remains decidedly in his own idiom. The picture is painted from far away, but at a normal museum viewing distance it reveals itself to be very cubist sort of work, with aggressively intersecting planes—the receding of the furnace, the sloping neighborhood, escaping smoke, and tumbling river—done in terse brush strokes. The surfaces are sumptuous: Curator Mark Cole described Gartner’s application of paint as being “like cake icing.”<sup>25</sup> The obvious care for the arrangement of paint in the picture highlights his personal interest in giving careful characterization to areas important in the Construction of Cleveland’s civic identity.

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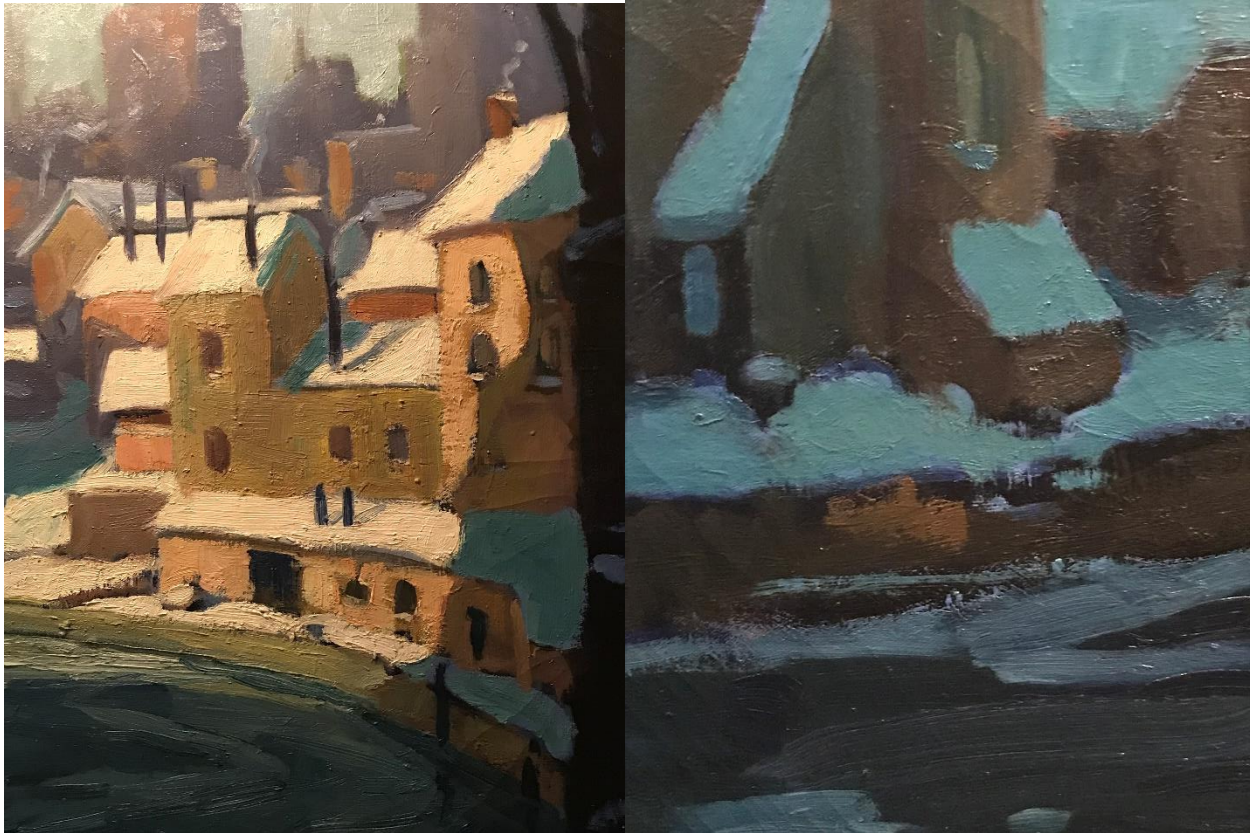
<sup>25</sup> Mark Cole, interview by the author, Cleveland Museum of Art, November 1, 2017.



Figure 1.8 Carl Gaertner, title unknown, 1930s; in the collection of The Union Club, Cleveland, Ohio.

A second painting by Gaertner further demonstrates his connection to Bellows: an industrial snowscape—the epitome of Gaertner-ness painted a few years after *The Furnace* (Figure 8). Fewer buildings feature in this industrial scene than others, and the alternating horizontal layers of snow and river give this painting a bold rhythm. The painting bears the Bellows-esque shadows: we read this scene as white snow in shadow, even when a point-blank-range viewing proves it is actually blue paint next to white paint (Figures 9 and 10). Snow might be such a consistent theme in Gaertner’s work for reasons deeper than Cleveland’s northern weather. The snow is a perennial renewing of Cleveland’s natural purity, a blanketing of optimism that makes the grim reality of the toxic and devastated rivers more bearable. Instead, the languishing river emerges as the subject of this painting. I notice the light on the face of the

building strikes against the red doorframe. Here the architectural elements seem plotted out with care, though his expressive nature comes forth most with the snow and river. His framing reveals a passion for this river in its dull state—a demonstration of Gaertner’s taste for the anti-glamorous.



*Figures 1.9 and 1.10 Detailed shots of Carl Gaertner, Untitled Winter Landscape, in the collection of the Cleveland Union Club.*

Terms like “regionalism”, “American scene,” and “realism” create dysfunctional aesthetic hierarchies during this time, as they are vague, overlapping terms. In dealing with the vagaries of terms from the past, it is useful to understand how they are understood in the present. Art historian Henry Adams makes a point to unpack “modern” as a term applied to groupings of

art movements, suggesting it is most useful when applied to artists in Paris.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, he argues that “modern” is best applied to American cultural history with regard to “modern life,” that which has to do with invention, industrialization, and progress in America’s urban centers. In this case, “modern art”, when used as a term for Cleveland’s artists, encompasses all art and visual culture having to do with artist’s contemporary experiences of the developing city around them.<sup>27</sup> This term, while still vague enough to be borderline unhelpful, does effectively provide a way to speak of Cleveland’s fine and visual media together. Within a few decades, modern art in America became synonymous with the very streamlined responses to European movements happening in the New York School. Though certainly integral aspects of American visual and cultural history in the twentieth century, the modern art of the New York School has traditionally been canonized as the purest form of American art, at the expense of the myriad variants of national expression elsewhere in the nation. Gaertner and his peers frequently garnered attention beyond the limits of Cleveland, demonstrating that regional art centers had some fighting chance in the struggle against the hierarchy developing between non-objective abstraction and “folk art,” then a catch-all phrase for untrained or traditional arts as well as realistic movements from the Midwest or elsewhere.

His career as a teacher positioned him at the crux of Cleveland’s inter-weaving of classes. His impressive museum exhibition record ingratiated him with the institutional elite. Yet the imagery which endeared him to generations of Clevelanders is the result of Gaertner’s keen

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<sup>26</sup> Henry Adams, *Painting in Pure Color: Modern Art in Cleveland Before the Armory Show, 1908 – 1913* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Artists Foundation, 2013), 9.

<sup>27</sup>Against the Grain: The Modernist Revolt’ by William H. Robinson, presents Cleveland’s modernist movement as a working-class reaction against entrenched social institutions and materialist values in a city dominated by the practical concerns of commerce and industry.



awareness of Cleveland's artistic worlds, and his ability to interact with them meaningfully without fully giving himself over to any one artistic worldview. I think that many Clevelanders sense this when looking at Gaertner's paintings. Their awareness of the immediate reality of the mundane makes these paintings stages for the experience of the city's ennui and radiant grit. Viewers may each bring a different sense of aesthetic context to the works. Much like the city of their creation, Gaertner's paintings are captivating reflections of an industrial city's self perception. Gaertner eludes simple periodization precisely because of his world-crossing.

## **Chapter Two: The Flats and Their Artists**

“Cleveland in the 1920s was a yeasty place, socially, culturally and intellectually”  
Lauren Hansgen, *Art in the Veins: The Legacy of the Edmonson Family in Cleveland*

Known colloquially as The Flats, the area of Cleveland that is demarcated by and contained within the Cuyahoga River’s bends has been a crucible of industrial advancement, culture, and economic thrashing throughout the last two centuries (Figure i). It is a region rich with manufacturing history and an ever-changing industrial landscape. That this area central to the core of the city was a manufacturing hub is a notable distinction from other American cities, which tend to be skirted by their manufacturing presences.<sup>28</sup> Changes in the industrial landscape have been captured by artists since the time of Joseph Parker in the 1830s. Parker primed locals to pride themselves on their consumption and appreciation of fine taste; he modeled the level of attention an artist could give to his surroundings to infuse seemingly objective renditions of familiar spaces with civic pride. Cleveland’s artists have long shared a creative impetus towards defining new civic icons; among them, the Flats and its factories remained a perennial source of pride and identity. Gaertner’s attraction to the Flats grew from their prominence in Cleveland’s landscape and culture, inspired later artists, and contributed to the solidification of the Flats as a significant aspect of Cleveland’s civic identity.

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<sup>28</sup> Andrew Borowiec, *Cleveland: the Flats, the mill, and the hills* (Chicago: Center For American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008), ix.

Dawning interest in the Flats as a proud symbol of Cleveland's industrial might at the turn of the twentieth century laid a valuable precedent for the boundary crossing by Gaertner in the next century. Spatial awareness was an early marker of high Cleveland art and is a quality arguably definitive of Gaertner's Cleveland. Between 1923 and 1956, Gaertner produced dozens of works focusing on this iconic Cleveland location. Ranging in size from thumbnail sketches little more than two by three inches to oil paintings in the realm of three by four feet, Gaertner's industrial landscapes of the Flats build upon one another and bring the viewer deeper into the artist's fascination with manufacturing and its effect on quotidian rhythm. Each riffs off his groundbreaking composition in *Up The River at Upson's* (Figure 3.1) which places nature and factory into a tense spatial balance, which could be upset or maintained by the workers, who's impact is suggested and left open for the viewer to surmise. To better understand Gaertner's images of the Flats, however, requires a knowledge of the shape and contents of the region as well as how it has been portrayed by other Cleveland artists over time. This comparative study will demonstrate how Gaertner fits into this narrative of the city in a lasting way.

In 2006, a young Cleveland photographer named Andrew Borowiec commenced a photography project in the downtown industrial Flats area of Cleveland (Figure 2.1). His artist statement focused on his fascination with Cleveland's industrial sites: "Some of them look like lonely places, and some others look a little bit scary—but they all speak to the strength and hard work that created this country, and they capture the real pride that Clevelanders feel, far more than any other American city I know."<sup>29</sup> Located along the Cuyahoga river west of Euclid Street and Terminal Tower, the Flats are a shell of their 1920s' and 1930s' glory. Formerly the winding river bends housed sprawling complexes for U.S. and Standard Oil, where refineries chugged

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<sup>29</sup> Borowiec, *Cleveland: The Flats*, 8.

along in tandem with the tugboats braving the hairpin bends to haul raw materials in and out. Blast furnaces belched and slag dumps simmered with the refuse of a bustling steel manufacturing city. Today the might and majesty of this area is mostly known to artists like Borowiec through the works of predecessors like Gaertner. Curator Les Roberts delivers an impetus for experiencing the Flats in the preface to Andrew Borowiec's recent photography project: "There is a terrible beauty about the mills. Drive down to the Flats some time—not where there were once factories replaced by restaurants and night clubs now closed and awaiting the next wave of gentrification, but into the belly of the Flats."<sup>30</sup> Crammed between the Old Foundry at the northern mouth of the Cuyahoga and the first Sherwin Williams paint factory only a few miles south lay the rumbling inner core of the Flats. The industrial hub feathers outward in all directions—west into Ohio City across the river and east towards Euclid Boulevard—and Gaertner's work bridges the gap between the massive concentration of industrial might in the river bends and the equally massive concentration of wealth in the steel industry's corporate offices towering over them.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 8.



*Figure 2.1 Andrew Borowiec, Blast Furnace #5 and #6, ISG, 2002. Andrew Borowiec (American, 1956). Gelatin silver print; 32.4 x 47.6 cm. Gift of Mark Schwartz and Bettina Katz in honor of James and Hanna Bartlett 2009.158.2 Cleveland Museum of Art*

The landscape of the Flats evokes the full cycle of manufacturing, wealth and patronage. Gaertner is well remembered for his reflections on this cycle in his paintings. Though few others made a career of painting the Flats, it is worth noting one of Gaertner's notable contemporaries. One hundred years before Borowiec took his camera to capture the remaining grit of industrial Cleveland, the groundbreaking industrial photographer Margaret Bourke-White made waves as a female artist receiving major commissions from the steel companies in the Flats. Her work has been the gold standard of Cleveland industrial photography since the mid-twentieth century; her vision is bookended poignantly by Borowiec, in pursuit of photo-documentation after the crash of the steel industry in the 1980s saw most of Bourke-White's subjects sold as scrap metal.

Boroweic's and Bourke-White's modus operandi parallels that of the industrial landscape painters of the nineteenth century. The artist Joseph Pennell, who documented the "Wonders of Work" in America and Europe in prints and drawings, declared, "Work to-day is the greatest thing in the world, and the artist who best records it will be best remembered."<sup>31</sup> Gaertner's works live on in this way, while celebrating the environment of work over the process of work itself.

Gaertner lived in or near the Flats until the late 1920s, on the east side of the Cuyahoga and not too far from the art school. It is unknown where exactly his home was, though his son relays the family's oral history that Gaertner would spend time as a young man strolling through the Flats, as a sort of industrial flaneur, to study the landscape and paint.<sup>32</sup> A general location for Gaertner can be assumed based upon the downtown location of his father's general store, somewhere close to 248 Euclid Street. A few curious art writers have pondered the origins of the artists interest in the Flats. Some, like Cleveland art critic Steven Litt, assert that Gaertner's repeated depictions of this industrial landscape signify a despairing and withering cynicism towards capitalism and the relation of man to the earth.<sup>33</sup> Others pass over Gaertner quickly, assuming he is a middle-of-the-road traditional scene painter. There are certainly aspects of Gaertner's industrial landscapes which relate to each of these highly polarized takes on the artist's work, but to force such an interpretation obscures a more nuanced sense of the artist's intention that is available in the under-utilized Cleveland Institute of Art (CIA) scrapbook, and in the family history as kept by the artist's surviving son. One article found in both the scrapbook

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<sup>31</sup> Betsy Fahlman, Eric Schruers and Russell W. Graham, *Wonders of Work and Labor: The Steidle Collection of American Industrial Art* ( University Park, PA: Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum at Penn State, 2009), 16.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Gaertner Jr interview with author, March 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Steven Litt, "Cuyahoga Valley Still Rises Up To Inspire Artists," *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), December 22, 2004, Arts & Life, E6. Accessed at ArtNEO archive, November 3, 2017.

and the artist's file in the Cleveland Museum of Art's archive (Figure 2.2), briefly mentioned that the artist enjoyed strolls with a camera, much like his peer industrial artist Margaret Bourke-White, or his plein-air painter colleagues.<sup>34</sup> Considering all the many assumptions as to what prompted Carl Sr. to fixate on the Cuyahoga's riverside steel plants, Carl Gaertner Jr. swiftly dismissed polarized readings in favor of a more wholistic one: "He just liked shapes!" Carl declared. "He lived near the Flats and enjoyed walking around and observing the forms of the landscape. He was like the industrial Rembrandt."<sup>35</sup> Gaertner's Cleveland breathed fire and raced down train tracks and ore elevators. Its landscape is jarring and elegant in its disarray—alluring to artists like Gaertner, whose interest was piqued by the processes of manufacturing but paled in comparison to his fascination with the form of manufacturing sites.

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<sup>34</sup> James Frankel, "Great Gaertners from Small Sketches Grew," *The Cleveland Press Weekend Page*, June 20, 1953. Hard copy accessed in the Cleveland Museum of Art Archive, March 13, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Carl Gaertner Jr. interview with the author, March 2018.



Figure 1.2 "Great Gaertners From Small Sketches Grew," local arts feature showing the lone surviving Gaertner prep photo, top left, for his last ever painting *Early Shift*, 1952.

Before discussing how Gaertner and other artists depicted the Flats, an introduction to the work happening in the Flats is in order. The buildings comprising this iconic landscape belonged to a handful of steel companies, each preeminent in some stage of the industry's development. Carl Gaertner's industrial landscape paintings were done during and following the steel industry boom which created the city. Gaertner's life coincided with many landmark developments in Cleveland. Nineteen years before Gaertner was born, Charles F. Brush successfully illuminated Cleveland's Public Square—a major train terminal bordering the Flats—with the world's first



electric arc street lighting.<sup>36</sup> This development introduced massive installation of electric street lights to the city. Not long afterward local businessman John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company, located in the Flats at Kingsbury Run, emerged as a dominating force in the realm of petroleum refining and marketing.<sup>37</sup> The first open-hearth steel produced in America had come from Cleveland's Otis Works in 1880. The first electric street car was to go into operation on Cleveland's streets in 1884. As Nancy Coe Wixom wrote in 1983, "The excitement of innovation was in the air."<sup>38</sup>

Gaertner was thrilled by these technologies and their impact on an otherwise potentially dingy manufacturing hub; his industrial landscapes convey his appreciation for the Flats with sublime enthusiasm. They were beloved by Clevelanders of varying aesthetic and political convictions, and many Clevelanders had connections to the factories depicted.<sup>39</sup> Otis Iron and Steel Company, Republic Steel, and Emma Steel each shadowed each other in the Cuyahoga industrial Flats. Their massive footprint on the river valley landscape anchored Cleveland's sense of civic pride to its thriving industrial economy and the workers propelling it ever forward. Otis Iron and Steel Co was first to thrive in the area; a mill was established in the 1870s, ultimately moving to the Cuyahoga's west banks in 1912.<sup>40</sup> By this time more artists were attracted to the distinctive interaction between land and machine in the Flats. With an additional number of blast furnaces installed on the river's west bank, the Corrigan-McKinney Steel Co. played a role in the

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<sup>36</sup> Nancy Coe Wixom, *Cleveland Institute of Art: The First Hundred Years* (Cleveland, OH: The Cleveland Institute of Art, 1983), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ann T. Laurence and Joan M. Schattinger, *Cleveland's Flats on Tour: A Self Guide to the Riverfront* (Cleveland, OH: History Associates, 1979), 33.

<sup>38</sup> Wixom, *Cleveland Institute of Art*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> In my fall interview with Mark Cole, he discussed that though there were certainly ethnic divisions within the city's geography, there was a good deal of class blurring. Culturally, he said, it would not have been uncommon for neighbors to alternately be part of the factory work force, and then part of the capitalist class.

<sup>40</sup> In the 1870s, Otis Iron and Steel broke new ground literally and figuratively, by establishing the Lakeside Works Mill, as well as the new process of producing commercial grade steel with an open hearth furnace. *History of Steel in Cleveland* (Cleveland, Ohio, USA: ArcelorMittal Steel Company, 2018), 1.

expanding industrial landscape until being absorbed into the larger, considerably more prominent Republic Steel Co in 1935. The Republic Steel Company possessed the structures that Gaertner was most drawn to in the Flats, making appearances in the paintings *The Furnace*, *The Popcorn Man*, *Call of a New Day*, and others. Interestingly, Gaertner's connection to these sites seems almost eerily supernatural: 1952 marked the year of Gaertner's death, as well as the destruction of most of his favorite steel furnaces in the Flats.<sup>41</sup>

Cleveland is stitched together by the winding Cuyahoga river, and its veins are the railroad tracks which catalyzed the city's early rise to national industrial prominence. Coursing through these veins are vast amounts of coal and ore from Michigan and Pennsylvania, being pumped in to power the impressive industrial expanse of steel production in the river valley; flowing out through these veins are artists and laborers, who solidified Cleveland's cultural and economic force by bringing its goods to other part of the nation. The Flats act as a borderland that mediates between industries and cultural idioms. Contrasting with the stationary heft of surrounding facilities, boats infamously navigate treacherous hairpin bends to meet unloaders, furnaces and elevators, exchanging ore and coke for finished steel. Train lines merge with a network of expansive bridges, some of which—like the elevator bridge on Eagle Street or the Center Street swing bridge—are the last of their kind in the nation. To outsiders, the shape of the Flats could seem otherworldly, though locals range from an oblivious familiarity to a comfortable embrace of these sites.

“When the Flats does well, so does the city,” quips local historian Matthew Lee Grabski.<sup>42</sup> Over the course of Cleveland's rising, the industrial river valley rapidly developed

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<sup>41</sup> *History of Steel in Cleveland*, ArcelorMittal, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Lee Grabski, *Cleveland's Flats*, Images of America (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 5.

and became a sort of civic icon for the identity and pride of the city. The windy river delineated a changing industrial landscape at the start of the twentieth century. Working class neighborhoods along its banks were in flux, such as the Irish Town Bend settlement. For the first two decades of the century a crook of the river (Figure v) became the gathering point for the city's Irish immigrant workers, though by the mid-1920s, the Irish Town Bend settlement had begun to disperse throughout the city. Over the next two decades the immigrant and working class populations in the Flats would continue to boom. Employment rates in Cleveland's iron and steel industry increased dramatically between 1860 and World War II; during these years over 30,000 workers entered this field.<sup>43</sup> Growth in Cleveland's manufacturing sector was sustained through the Great Depression. Ever expanding and making technological headway, the Republic Steel company continued to assert itself as a dominant force in the steel industry. Republic Steel remained on the forefront of developments in steel making technology through the 1960s, when it brought two basic oxygen furnaces to the Flats, a boon for Cleveland."<sup>44</sup> As Republic Steel remained a constant fixture on the east banks of the Cuyahoga, the predominantly immigrant working class neighborhoods on the facing west bank did as well. Whether factory workers lived in Slavic Village on the east side or in Tremont, Ohio City, or Duck Island on the west, work in the mills and factories was just a short walk down the hill. Where there were factories, workers and their communities were close by.

The human aspect of work in the Flats is a significant portion of the reading of Gaertner's industrial landscapes. While not usually present in the scenes, Gaertner cleverly evokes the human reality of industry—from the shop floor workers to the wealth of top floor company executives—in his scenes through framing space with structures and shadows. Gaertner's

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<sup>43</sup> *History of Steel in Cleveland*, ArcelorMittal, 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

paintings are imbued with his distinctive creation and sustenance of symbolic systems. As a whole they envision new transcendent unities—not just combinations of things like people and place but new zones of joinder by creative connection and juxtaposition of unlike things. His paintings offer motifs of the sublime tempered with a realist understanding of the worker and Impressionist aesthetics joined with social realist shrewdness and color blocking evocative of printmaking. In Gaertner's scenes of the Flats, dynamic tension is created by alternately pairing people and place, people in built environments, and built environments affecting and being affected by the natural environment. They cross, in a way, the division between mind and body. By focusing on labor through depictions of the site of labor, and emphasizing the effects of labor on the workers lives through their strategic absence, Gaertner's industrial landscapes thus also participate in the cultural phenomenon Michael Denning refers to as the laboring of American culture. In these scenes, labor as a theme is extended to the periphery of the factory world. Neighborhood and workplace are intimately intertwined, as they were in workers' experience. The spaces defined by labor beyond the factory, such as walkways, exteriors, and neighborhoods, are brought together with images reflecting the effects of work. Labor is the underpinning of the consumers' world. It is also a thing the laborer can consume in purchasing these images. Gaertner's images of the Flats both participate in that crossing and document ways in which it was happening in Cleveland life. In later years Gaertner occasionally inserts workers into his manufacturing scenes. However, the dearth of workers included in his scenes of industry in Cleveland.

Gaertner's industrial subject matter, peculiar approach to commenting on labor, and careful aesthetic choices make his Cleveland Flats scenes excellent material for a new critical interpretation utilizing the history of The Cultural Front movement in America in the early

twentieth century. The next chapter will discuss how the technique and genre of Gaertner's industrial landscapes interacted with contemporary art styles and patrons; as Gaertner's works are difficult to categorize aesthetically, this chapter presents a thematic understanding of Gaertner's works which would benefit scholars seeking to re-establish the artist's relevance to American twentieth century cultural history. Gaertner strategically crosses between canonical visual idioms and his paintings beguile easy political and economic interpretations. Yet these qualities are precisely what allow for a new reading of Gaertner which argues for his participation, even if peripheral, in the Cultural Front. The Cultural Front was a series of social and aesthetic crossovers, not just ones involving political party membership, and Gaertner's images of the Flats both participate in that crossing and document ways in which it was happening in Cleveland life.

The Cultural Front was the intersection between industrial and cultural work forces, and as the population of the Flats continued to diversify and the realm of the arts grew more expansive, a wave of artists working in this region worked in tandem with the goals of the Cultural Front (implicitly or explicitly). The histories of the "Cultural Front," a term that was coined by Michael Denning, but might also be expanded to encompass the work of Elizabeth Cohen, Elizabeth Faue, and others, on 1920s and 30s labor and politics emphasize the diverse cultural and ethnic makeup of this movement, which Denning argued was deeply rooted in a "New generation of plebeian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis."<sup>45</sup> It was often second generation Americans and workers forming alliances with older generations of modernists in the workplace, neighborhood and consumer market that embarked on what Denning calls the laboring of

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<sup>45</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xv.

American culture. As workers fought for and earned more collective rights and workplace autonomy, a shift in consumer power began to emerge. Workers had more buying power, and to attract them advertisers embraced an aesthetic which sympathized with working class tastes. During the Great Depression, attitudes about labor, consumerism, and aesthetics were tightly interwoven. The cultural products born out of the geopolitical pockets of the Cultural Front explicitly dealt with labor as a theme and often carried political messages; implicitly they elevated both the cultural position of the working class and expanded art patronage beyond the cloistered work of the elite.

Thus, the absence of the worker in Gaertner's industrial landscapes does not render these works socially and culturally neutral. By understanding the multifaceted phenomenon of the laboring of American culture, his scenes of the Flats can be said to embody a deep respect for the worker, and a masterful understanding of how to create a cultural product which is sympathetic to the lived realities of the working class and, simultaneously, the aesthetic preferences of the elite consumer class. For one, he spent his childhood years in the and presumably would have been familiar with the locals who patronized his father's hardware store. Some of Gaertner's works might include elements of pastiche, but many—like those pictured in the Press Weekend article--were observed on his long walks, studied in person, photographed, and reflected upon. These plein air preparatory sessions are one way Gaertner merged the practices of the art elite—outdoor studies of this nature were common in Impressionist circles, even in Cleveland—and the lived reality of Cleveland's multi-ethnic workforce. His time in the Flats also yields an appreciation for urban grit which connects Gaertner's training in Cleveland's modern art circles with the tradition of urban realists and Ashcan school artists before him. This sensitivity would have been appreciated by those whose workplace he was portraying; he fit very well into the

tradition of Clevelanders celebrating their local landmarks, and many appreciated that Gaertner's paintings elevated the Flats to status of icon. The works beg the question of access: which of these ground-level works were painted in situ, and how was he able to gain access to these areas? Margaret Bourke White inserted herself into these landscapes and later caught the attention of prominent steel executives who began sending her there on commission. It is unknown if Gaertner earned this sort of access. The closest clue is a heartfelt letter and contribution to Gaertner's memorial fund sent to the Cleveland Museum in his honor from an executive at a bolt company related to Upson's in the Flats. While this only suggests at a personal relationship between the artist and the companies he painted, it nonetheless reinforces the degree of social, aesthetic, and economic boundary crossing achieved by Gaertner's Flats scenes.

Gaertner's industrial landscapes of the Flats convey a layered message about the brutal realities of work during the 1920s and 1930s: though the daily tasks of the laborers are rarely pictured, images such as the untitled landscape in the Cleveland Union Club (Figure 1.8) reveal the devastating ecological conditions and byproducts of steel manufacturing in the Flats. Many of Gaertner's industrial landscapes feature the Cuyahoga itself as the main character in a tale of industrial production. Here, Gaertner places the viewer firmly in the chilling, unforgiving downtown environment through which steel and other workers would have trod daily. Icy bridges, snowy banks, and river ooze characterize Gaertner's Cleveland. Yet here, Gaertner employs his non local color—blue snow shadows and lime green river sludge—in conjunction with bright swaths of light. Using rays of sun in a bleak landscape is a common method of composition for Gaertner, and is truly one of his most successful qualities. Bright light and jarring color are often combined in Gaertner's industrial landscapes to raise the viewers

awareness of the Cuyahoga river's infamous toxicity, a detail which allows Gaertner to further boundary cross between aesthetics and class consciousness.

This untitled painting (Figure 1.8) is a prime example of Gaertner's adept ideological boundary crossing; the subject embodies what Denning calls the "laboring of American culture," by which, in the context of Gaertner's work, I mean an attention to the act of labor and its effects on workers and their surroundings, and the end result is a sumptuously painted and seemingly apolitical work which appealed to the tastes of the upper class. Up close the arrangement of the strokes ask the view to consider where, and why, the artist applied two colors next to each other, or blended together. Gaertner's patches of paint appear to be carefully assembled. Up close, for example, the three patches of snow visible below the river are placed next to each other with precision. There is a hard boundary between the blue used to convey shadow on the left and the white drift extending from under the bridge. This crisp arrangement of parts that blends visually into a softer whole brings to mind the precise art of lithography, prevalent in Cleveland's art world at the time. Colors are not blended so much as applied in layers. (Figure 2.4) Visually this contributes to the success of Gaertner's employment of atmospheric perspective. In this landscape, the snow above the river is more smooth and blended than below the river, which aids in reading the scene as if the viewer were present in the fresh snowbank. Gaertner again employs various shades of blue to contribute to this atmospheric effect, with the snowbank in the middle of the river an altogether different color of paint than what is used around the canvas.





*Figure 2.3 Detail of Carl Gaertner, Detail of Title Unknown, 1930s; in the collection of The Union Club, Cleveland, Ohio.*

This scene is an excellent example of how Gaertner quietly drew the viewer into present day dialogues about worker's rights and the effect of labor on the environment. Striking against the snow is the jarringly green river. This garish color is used in other of Gaertner's Flats landscapes, though unlike the snow, his color choice of greens for water is less for visual trickery and more to objectively document a reality of his world. Gaertner's life fell in the middle of a century of spontaneous surface burning. Resulting from severe industrial pollution, these fires were subsumed in the mythos of the Flats. They were an unpredictable byproduct of an otherwise booming region—for all their beauty, nonetheless tragically taking lives and destroying the equipment needed to sustain jobs and families in their wake. Tension between classic romantic American notions of man's feebleness in the face of nature's brute power, and the landscape as spiritual locus, and later the threat of man's machines exacting revenge upon him, are all cultural tropes that can be read into these paintings.

When analyzing Gaertner's rendering of manufacturing and ecological impact, another theoretical reading probes his nuanced care for worker's wellbeing. Leo Marx's theory of the Machine in the Garden encapsulates Gaertner's concerns that as industry exerts power and control over the worker, the worker is forced into a position of dominance and destruction over the land, which in turn threatens to make human spaces uninhabitable. By applying the lens of Marx's Machine in the Garden to Gaertner's industrial landscape, viewers gain a stronger understanding of Gaertner's nuanced and multi-faceted sympathy for the worker. His avoidance of characterizing either man or the land in a position of superiority over the other acknowledges the tense relationship between steel workers on the river and the treacherous equipment they operated; his use of vivid color recognizes the ways in which man's labor comes to bear on his own lived environment.

Marx's framework carried forward Romantic ideals about the sublime power of nature into a more anxious, technologically advanced age. The Cuyahoga river forms a boundary of sorts throughout the city, yet one that is poised to be repeatedly crossed. It designated neighborhoods and economic opportunities. It functioned as an industrial borderland and also as its own complete space with an identity and purpose for the city. The river and its valley are an important locus of Clevelanders relating to space and industry. It is an icon and an identity. The early settlers clung to it despite outward migrations, and their vision of an industrial promiselands on the rivers banks would finally be realized at the turn of the twentieth century. As the steel industry nestled into the valley and rail lines catalyzed further industrial growth, Cleveland's civic identity grew increasingly industrial, and as a result, the artists did too.



*Figure 2.4 Carl Gaertner title unknown – Evening In the Flats, c. 1930s; In the Collection of the Union Club,*

In another painting at the Union Club (Figure 2.5), Gaertner employed a jarring color palette, completely distinct from his usual tones. Through comparisons with photographs by Margaret Bourke-White, this structure is the furnace of the Otis Steel Company, which repeatedly appears in Gaertner’s industrial landscapes. The light captured in this scene is spectacular. Cleveland art dealer Bill Tregoning has been a major proponent of Gaertner’s art market into the present day; according to him, this painting fits the criteria for a “great” Gaertner with its unexpected rendering of local subject matter. It marries Tregoning’s criteria for greatness with Cleveland’s criteria for Cleveland greatness—scenes of the Cleveland Flats. This work is one of the rare Flats landscapes which views the industrial structures face-on, rather from an oblique angle or from above. This directness of view is less common in Gaertner’s industrial landscapes though it appears occasionally in his vacation paintings from Bermuda. If such a straight on approach felt unnatural to Gaertner, he corrects the straightness of the composition by including a curving train in the foreground, bringing in the curvilinear coasts often seen in Gaertner landscapes. In this scene Gaertner again uses the power of suggestion to invigorate the

scene. Gaertner painted this particular factory from more than one angle; in a small gouache picturing the site from above, the furnace's position in a crook of the Cuyahoga is evident (Figure 2.6). Gaertner tells the story of the machine in the garden with these two scenes. In the frontal composition, it might seem that the workers of Otis Steel have erected a monument to human advancement, powerful in its production and yet tamed by human hands. Yet seen from above, the machine is taunted by the zig zagging force of nature as the Cuyahoga pushes around it. Gaertner tells two stories of the workers not pictured in these images. The extremely curvy nature of the river cutting through the Cuyahoga Valley infamously posed problems for ore boats trying to reach the steel yards and getting caught in the bends. Such accidents resulted in stress for workers, and increased pollution to an already acrid river. The extreme angles in Gaertner's industrial landscapes are further proof of his oneness with Cleveland's environs. Gaertner was wonderfully observant, and perhaps he felt it most true to the nature of life in the Cuyahoga river valley to compose his paintings a little caddywompus. In the mind of Gaertner, even the might of Cleveland's steel industry was beholden to the whims of nature, and the choices of the workers carry the power to disrupt this balance of power, or restore it.



Figure 2.5 Carl Gaertner, *Untitled – Study of Otis Steel*, gouache on paper. In the collection of Jim Woods, Akron, Ohio.

Carl Gaertner’s envisioning of his native Cleveland’s Industrial Flats embodies the upheaval of mid-America in the early twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Under a cursory appraisal his industrial landscapes could be dismissed as traditional provincial mementos. However, this site drew artists from all media and motivations to its banks. Gaertner’s visions of this area are particularly interesting as a result of his understanding of the Flats as an icon of labor and class in Cleveland. Gaertner’s seemingly mundane renderings of the penumbra of industrial life thwart the time-honored trope of the artist as societal menace. Rather than exist as an alien observer,

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<sup>46</sup> What he leaves us is a significant documenting of a disappearing Cleveland: his pre-1952 paintings of the steel mills and furnaces in the Flats precede the establishment of the Historic American Engineering Record and the advent of Industrial Archaeology in this country by more than a decade. As scholars turn their attentions towards abandoned, threatened, and disappearing sites of moments from our nation’s industrial past, Carl Gaertner’s paintings of Cleveland provide valuable documentation of the spatial reality of life in the shadows of these structures as well as the way they impressed themselves on a collective local psyche. Today, many, if not most, of these structures have been lost to the changing tides of steel production—rendered logistically or economically irrelevant and either repurposed or destroyed.

Gaertner actively traverses aesthetic and civic boundaries, demonstrating how an artist can fully recognize the aspirations of the New Deal art programs of the 1930s by deconstructing rigid distinctions between high and mass culture on thematic, aesthetic, and economic levels.

Arguably Gaertner was more interested in painting from observation than some of his peers, who perhaps brought the critical eye of the Impressionists to their paintings and sought to make suggestions of light and color against the backdrop of a factory landscape, rather than sucking the marrow out of the landscape itself. Gaertner's industrial landscapes defy simple aesthetic characterization. Instead, they firmly exist within the history of the Cultural Front aesthetic movement, as results of Gaertner's personal labor which engage with the theme of labor at large. He was deeply invested in highlighting the distinctive way that the Flats and the strange power dynamics of man, factory, and nature contained therein contributed to Cleveland's sense of self. As art historian Michael D. Hall writes, "Intense observations of an evolving region combined with the personal commitment to portray the American heartland led to the creation by Great Lakes artists of images with a distinct regional character. Immersed in the milieu, many were compelled to seek and portray the unaffected truth of a place understood fully only by living there."<sup>47</sup>

Gaertner depicted the unaffected truth of the Flats. Few artists during his time or since have gazed upon these sites and structures with quite the same nuance as he did. As will be discussed in chapter three, many of Cleveland's painters did at some point image the Flats or specific factories in their works. For many these structures were peripheral to a modus operandi such as striving to equate one's art with emerging, mechanistic European avant garde. For Gaertner, the Flats was an ideal subject to celebrate and explore the relationship of the working class

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<sup>47</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Paintings of the Great Lakes Scene: Highlights from the Inlander Collection of Great Lakes Regional Painting* (Traverse City, MI: The Denno Museum of Northwestern Michigan College, 1996), 9.

Clevelander to his city, and invite upper class patrons to relate in a similar way. His aesthetic choices outlined in the following chapter only support this boundary crossing.

# **Chapter Three: The Problem of Genre in Cleveland and Gaertner's Aesthetic Boundary Crossing During the 1920s**

“In the modern art movement...Cleveland was one of the first American cities to answer the new call, and the group that first saw the light was numerous and able.” – Louis Rorimer

“That weren’t done by no rookie,” chuckles collector Fred Fotchman, recalling the mountain twang of the antiques dealer who sold him his small Carl Gaertner (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). A conservator, Fred has developed a refined ability to identify Gaertner’s telltale brushstrokes over his multi-decade career; he is also a painter, and deeply appreciates how brushstrokes serve as a sort of thumbprint, revealing aspects of a painter’s personhood. Upon stumbling across the painting, Fred immediately recognized the work as a Gaertner. He says it was first the crisply rendered chimney atop the small house that indicated the work’s authorship, followed by the shadow patterns applied with heavier paint than many of the other structures, which should appear solid, but are waiflike afterthoughts to a painter more focused on the geometry of light. The work is unsigned. This is not uncommon for works easel-sized or smaller, particularly if the artist travelled and painted on the go, as Gaertner was wont to do. Just to confirm his hunch, Fred thought the shop owner would know more about the painting. The shop owner’s droll response didn’t so much provide explicit details, yet it was an astute observation.





*Figure 3.1 and 3.2 Collector and Conservator Fred Fotchman with his untitled Gaertner at his home in Columbus, Ohio. Interview with the author, November 2017.*

It is hard to imagine Gaertner as a rookie. Little of the art produced during his student years in the early 1920s, if any survives, is accessible; the earliest paintings that survive were award winners. Whatever paintings Gaertner may have done as a young student with a less certain hand or eye for color and composition are not kept or recorded at his alma mater, the Cleveland School of Art; the family does not have works prior to the mid-twenties, and the Cleveland Museum's Gaertner exhibition records start in 1923. It would almost appear that the young art student simply established himself with incredible landscapes and industrial compositions. No doubt the rookie Gaertner was talented, and flourished under the expert tutelage of Henry Keller and the older cadre of Cleveland School artists. A lesser discussed biographical detail of Gaertner's life is that as a high school student he declared a professional interest in mechanical design. Little is known about this early career switch. Gaertner's early interest in mechanical design reveals something important about the artist as a Clevelander: like the artists before him he was compelled to marry the practical and the aesthetic in his work, and closely related to the realm of manufacturing. Gaertner's early interest in the mechanical

arguably catalyzed a life-long interest in manufacturing processes, and his curiosity about mechanical design lent a specificity to his renderings of manufacturing sites which invites particular reflection. It was this specificity that made his paintings so popular with such a large swath of Cleveland's art audience. Gaertner's active participation in the broader cultural dialogue about style, purpose and politics can be appreciated in how he synthesized aesthetic modes and transgressed boundaries between worlds. His works, largely due to his specific visual choices, resonated and related to viewers coming from working class and upper-class backgrounds. Though these groups tended towards different aesthetic tastes, Gaertner managed to appeal to both groups consistently, a skill that merits further exploration.

Fotchman's encounter raises the question: what aesthetic qualities earmark a painting as a Gaertner? Gaertner's paintings were very much of their time; in terms of subject matter and composition they acknowledge and borrow from the American Regionalist movement. In their palette and application, however, the works could be read as subtle forays into expressionism, and in their mood and scale also resonate with aspects of the social realist movement in painting. Gaertner existed in the midst of increasingly passionate aesthetic debates while a student at the Cleveland School of Art from 1921–1924.

He likely participated in them as a new teacher himself, as “while still a student, Gaertner began instructing at South High School in Willoughby.”<sup>48</sup> There was hardly a time during his life when Gaertner was not teaching. The overlapping years of his early aesthetic development as well as the establishment of his pedagogy surely reinforced the development of his own distinctive vision. Gaertner's art did evolve over time, but without drastic aesthetic detours. He

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<sup>48</sup> Henry Adams, *Painting in Pure Color: Modern Art in Cleveland Before the Armory Show, 1908 – 1913* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Artists Foundation, 2013), 9.

clung to his vision of Cleveland, and adapted it when Cleveland did. Immediately upon his art school graduation, Gaertner joined the staff of his alma mater teaching evening art classes.<sup>49</sup> During the 1920s he would also assume part-time teaching positions at Western Reserve University and John Carroll University. These various early teaching positions aided in the exposure the young artist was beginning to receive. The Cleveland Institute of Art scrapbook is filled with numerous announcements between 1925 and 1952 of Gaertner teaching summer classes, weekend art workshops, and evening continuing education art classes (Figures 3.3. and 3.4).

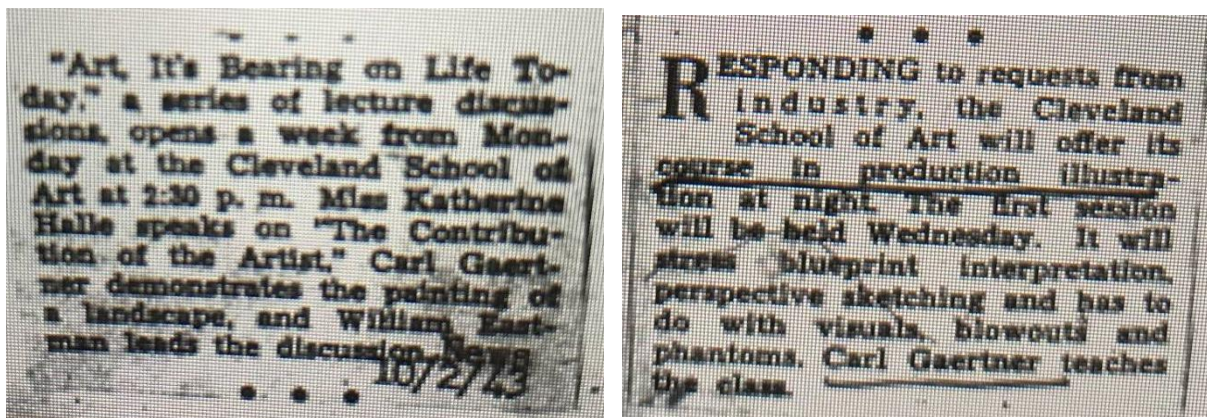


Figure 3.3 and 3.4 Examples of myriad local newspaper announcements for Gaertner-led art classes outside of the art school. These include a lecture announcement and an industrial illustration workshop. Clippings found in *The Cleveland School of Art Scrapbook*, vol. 9 -50. Accessed at the Cleveland Institute of Art Library, 2017-2018.

It was not just his frequent teaching roles garnering the young artist attention: in 1926, Gaertner completed his most well-known industrial oil, it is also one of his largest. Only two years elapsed between *The Furnace* (Figure 1.7) and *The Pie Wagon* (Figure 3.5), and already Gaertner's technical advancement is apparent. Certain visual elements trace this work to the artist's

<sup>49</sup> See figure 3.3. These are excerpts from either the Cleveland Plain Dealer or the Cleveland Daily Press; not all pages in the Cleveland Museum of Art scrapbook are labeled with original source info.

appreciation for *Stag at Sharkey's*. The ambiance of the riverside air adeptly pays homage to Keller's instruction while heralding Gaertner's own, independent eye for capturing light. Politically, this is a piece which can be mined from many directions, and while Gaertner's exact sympathies remain a mystery, it is a work which lends itself well to a reading in the context of the Cultural Front.



Figure 3.5 Carl Gaertner, *The Pie Wagon*, 1926. In the Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio.

*The Pie Wagon* is captivating. A close reading of its visual elements provides a framework for further analysis. The composition very much follows the rule of thirds. Read vertically, the three natural sections are the sky, the buildings, and the snowy foreground. Read laterally, the furnace, the broad walkway, and the light pole at the right edge divide the work into

another dynamic three-part arrangement. Gaertner carefully composes his paintings in a way that transports the viewer into the environment: with such flat, static visual reference points like the sides of large buildings or dark electric poles, the movement of walking workers or billowing smoke feels more alive. Gaertner also frames his compositions so that the forms of the furnaces create a natural rhythm—here, two sets of four smokestacks anchor the bustle of activity on the snowy ground in a visual balance with the murky, turbulent sky. The effect is metaphysical as well as visual, evoking Gaertner’s fascination with portraying factory, nature, and humankind in tentative balance with each other. This feeling of conditional balance, where human players and the forces which control them threaten to cataclysmically overpower each other at any moment, is palpable in many of Gaertner’s scenes, but particularly this one.

It is this hyper-awareness of the delicate balance of power in the realm of manufacturing which imbues this painting with its Cultural Front potential. Cleveland, despite its large steel industry and active CIO, had surprisingly few labor strikes. Only one in 1949 appears in the historical record, in the archives of the Republic Steel Company held at the Western Reserve Historical Society.<sup>50</sup> Gaertner’s imaging of the relationship between worker and corporation reveals a sage awareness for the delicate politics of the labor movement at this point in American history.

With an enigmatic stance towards the nature of work, Gaertner depicts workers around their factory; they are presented in a neutralized relationship to the spaces they inhabit. Rather than depict the workers in power skirmishes with heavy machinery or controlling forces of nature like fire and steam to power mechanisms that themselves exact power over nature,

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<sup>50</sup> Republic Steel Corporation, "Republic Steel Corporation and the United Steelworkers of America, (C.I.O.), Today Signed an Agreement Covering Insurance and Pensions Terminating the 36 Day Strike," news release, November 8, 1949, accessed March 16, 2018 in MS 4949 Republic Steel Corporation Records, 1895 – 2001, Container 343, The Western Reserve Historical Society Library, Cleveland, OH.

Gaertner shows humans and factory in tense equilibrium. This painting's grey atmosphere is less the result of the factory casting shadows, exerting some sort of poetic, sublime power over man. Instead, both factory and human figures are under the overcast influence of the lake effect weather. In a way, this factory is painted with more ambivalence than in 1924's *The Furnace*; paint is applied more painterly and flatly, reducing the insinuation that the factories are being personified in some way. *The Pie Wagon* is an observation and a quiet rebellion in its own right. By neither claiming nor rejecting explicit sympathy with the cultural front or the local steelworkers' union in this image, Gaertner subverts two assumptions: that an artist responding to work and economy must be, at their core, contrarian; and that the laboring of American visual culture must necessarily engage explicitly with the process of work. Gaertner welcomes the viewer into the personal reality of these workers, a more powerful act of social engagement than this painting receives credit for.

In 1923 Carl Gaertner captivated jurors at the Cleveland Museum of Art's annual competitive May Show with a painting of a local bolt factory titled *Up the River at Upson's* (Figure 3.6). What made the painting so arresting was its rendering of the elements of factory, nature, and the human spaces that mediated between them, as part of a larger whole, an effect that Gaertner achieves through rich surface textures but also through a wintry snowscape that frames the massive cylindrical structures of the plant and river into a visual conversation. This rendering represented at once a borrowing from and a declaration of independence both from his Cleveland School of Art mentor, watercolorist Henry Keller, as well as from the so-called Precisionists.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, Gaertner did not align himself with this group, who specifically

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<sup>51</sup> For a good introduction to this genre, refer to Montclair Art Museum. *Precisionism in America, 1915-1941: reordering reality*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994.

depicted industrial manufacturing and structures with a sleek new avant-garde attention to power and movement. Precisionist industrial landscapes approach a Cubist simplicity without fully departing from visual reality. Thematically compatible with the Precisionists and similar to the Great Lakes watercolorists like Keller and Urban Realists like Bellows in terms of light and paint application, Gaertner's aesthetic enacts its own sort of boundary crossing. Not only is this resistance interesting in itself: bucking the limits of mainline academic genre would have been an appealing quality for a Cultural Front artist to have, and Gaertner's multi-faceted challenge to accepted norms in contemporary painting further place him in the realm of the laboring of American culture.



*Figure 3.6 Carl Gaertner, Up the River at Upson's, 1923. Oil. This canvas has also been misplaced over time, though was once catalogued for the May Show at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1923. Most likely this painting was passed down in the family who purchased it. The only picture that survives is held by the Cleveland Museum of Art Archive.*

Gaertner's teachers devoted themselves to different aesthetic ideologies. Following the Armory Show in 1913, Cleveland's art world was increasingly split between artists choosing modern styles such as Impressionism to elevate the beauty and character of Cleveland, while maintaining a conservative mindset about the limits of visual provocations like non-local color and organic form, and artists embracing avant-garde styles which they felt aligned more with their more progressive worldview. In terms of training, Gaertner's world of artists begins with the generation of Ohio watercolorists before him—artists in the circle of his teacher Henry Keller, at a moment when Ohioans in particular were navigating the influx of avant-garde techniques while determining which of the American ideals expressed in their concurrent urban



realism counterparts they would bring forward into their artistic world. Many artists comprise the network of style and influences into which the young Gaertner entered, though not all are pertinent specifically to this present discussion of his landscape paintings. In 1908 William Sommer returned to Cleveland from New York, and with him came the teachings of Robert Henri.<sup>52</sup> Sommer was later introduced to Impressionist techniques by Abel Warshawsky, and around the same time in 1912 Biehle began to experiment with fauvism and other more avant-garde styles.<sup>53</sup> These artists crossed paths through overlapping tenures as teachers and students at the Cleveland School of Art, during the time of Gaertner's study and early career.

Gaertner and his fellow Cleveland painters witnessed a sea change in American art styles, yet each hovered somewhere in the periphery of American Scene—a genre which emphasizes relatable experiences and familiar customs in American life. This genre is most often painted in a realistic style, though not necessarily a photorealistic one. Scenes depicted could be literal documents of things witnessed by the artist, such as Gaertner's later West Virginia hog butchering series, or pastiches of recognizable locations and happenings, such as some of Gaertner's steel factory landscapes which clearly document known sites like Republic and Otis steel, though from angles impossible to access in real life. The Cleveland school artists interested in American Scene remained true to the purpose of the genre, while pushing its limits in terms of visual style and paint application. This purposeful ambiguity was noted with interest by a reviewer at a Whitney Museum exhibition in 1937—a feat for regional artists, as commercial celebration in larger eastern cities for supposedly quaint scenes was rare at this time—who wrote, "Many of the artists display considerable freshness in style and manner of approach; While principles of abstraction are detected now and then, most of the work tends to be pretty

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<sup>52</sup> Adams, *Painting in Pure Color*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

straightforward, often marked by intelligent simplification and seldom confining itself to academic conventions.”<sup>54</sup> Despite having exhibited two works in the 1913 Armory Show, Keller adhered closely to this straightforward version of American Impressionism. During the summer months, Keller’s highly popular plein air painting classes grew increasingly popular, with prominent peers of Gaertner’s filling their ranks. Though Gaertner showed signs in his paintings of at least respecting the basic instruction of his teacher, he was notably absent from these summer sessions. Perhaps the reason Gaertner not part of this group was because “the students who had urged Keller to start the summer school looked at him as their leader, a man who had progressive ideas in contrast to the older professors....”<sup>55</sup> Or maybe it was that Gaertner didn’t want someone to follow. Gaertner maintained an interesting power balance with the art school figures around him: never once was he remembered as cocky or standoffish, yet neither is he remembered or recorded as painting in a manner clearly similar to any fellow painter or teacher.

Despite his frequent return to the theme of industry and manufacturing, Gaertner was not known to expound upon any potential political underpinnings in his work. In the 1920s Gaertner’s works make a departure from the style of his teachers, which has in recent years been mined for political implications. True, the nature and timing of Gaertner’s aesthetic changes could correlate to a veiled political subversion. However, by too quickly placing Gaertner in the category of communist propagandist or leftist critic, some of the nuance and ambiguity which serve as theoretical trademarks of the artist are lost. It is his adept maneuvering between worlds and realms that makes these paintings such insightful documents.

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<sup>54</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, “Cleveland Artists Have Display Here: Exhibition of Oils, Water-Colors and Prints will Open Today at Whitney Museum Fresh Style Is Noted,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 1937, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Rotraud Sackerlotzky, *Henry Keller’s Summer School in Berlin Heights* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Artists Foundation, 1991), 10.

Though it would be rash to suggest each artist claimed their aesthetic territory in a black or white sort of way, Gaertner most certainly resisted putting all his eggs in one basket. It is surprising that his interesting consideration of genre did not garner him a more lasting, widespread memory after his death. In 2000, following Christine Fowler Shearer's landmark Gaertner retrospective, local critic Steven Litt commented on this fact, "Gaertner's critical view of the modern age marks him as a contrarian in the context of American regionalist painting and art."<sup>56</sup> It could be that Gaertner, in his shrewd understanding of the boundaries he needed to tread to maintain his clientele across economic, social and aesthetic divides, maintained a very tight balance between genres in order to never lose his sales. Many artists who worked in regionalist styles lost their clientele and their popularity by not evolving with national tastes during and after the Depression, when increasingly political and abstract works increased in popularity. To survive economically, many eventually abandoned American Scene painting, which was dismissed as provincial and simple by critics like Clement Greenberg. As evidenced by the consistent trajectory of his industrial landscapes during this decade and his increasing volume of small- to medium-sized watercolors, Gaertner displayed an awareness of his worlds by following his own vision of market-appropriate genre during the turbulent 1930s. The stability afforded to him by never losing his job gave him a safety net to resist the status quo—like other artists adapting their styles to appeal to tenuous patronage—and also maneuver between the lauding of his clientele and the sharp eye of Cleveland's harsh conservative art critics.

Despite a very strong display of modernist tendencies in art produced after World War I in Cleveland, its artists on the whole remained rooted in tradition and visual realism. The response Cleveland artists had to the introduction to modernism in visual art has been described

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<sup>56</sup> Steven Litt, "Grim Visions: Work of Once-Popular Artist Re-Emerges at Beck," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sunday, April 16, 2000: Art and Life, 1.

as “a stiff rebuff.”<sup>57</sup> Grace Kelly would go on to become one of the leading art critics in the city. In 1911 she infamously “launched her writing career...with a free-lance article that denounced the impressionists as ‘freaks’ interested only in fame, money, and ‘slapping on paint in unique ways with the deliberate intention of attracting attention.’”<sup>58</sup> Keller’s Impressionistic fanbase notwithstanding, a group of artists under Kelly’s convictions began gathering in March 1913. Artists uninterested in provocative avant-garde approaches started to regularly convene at the Gage Gallery and formed The Cleveland Society of Artists, “which became the city’s conservative rival to the Kokoon Klub”—a rowdier, Fauvist bunch led by fellow Cleveland School alumnus William Sommer. Within the Cleveland Society of artists were George Adomeit, whose images of the Flats were lovely and nearly objective; William Edmonson with his refined aesthetic, informed by study at the Academie Juilien in Paris; and Frederick Gottwald, who put an idealized, sentimental spin on the Flats’ network of bridges. This group’s “goal of upholding traditional values and standards of craftsmanship” was well received by Grace Kelly, who reviewed one of the society’s earliest shows with the frank judgement “...Good, sane, serious work is prevalent.”<sup>59</sup> Gaertner joined this group, but maintained his membership despite a growing number of gritty, urban realist labor scenes.

Gaertner canvas presents more than landscape or architecture—we are entering the environment of an attentive community member who comes strikingly close to capturing and conveying the ineffable quality of the sensation of space, calculating the edges of shadow with aplomb, using them to guide us through a mesmerizing new experience of our daily realms. Light plays a leading role in the characterizing of Gaertner’s landscapes as distinct from others.

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<sup>57</sup> William H. Robinson and David Steinberg, *Transformations in Cleveland art, 1796-1946: community and diversity in early modern America* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996), 91.

<sup>58</sup> Robinson and Steinberg, *Transformations in Cleveland Art*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

It is atmospheric. He depicts penumbral geography, but the border between light and shadow is crisp, determined. Shadows are often found cast in the middle regions of a painting's scene, and often along the bottom or into a corner as well. This framing of space with light enlivens the canvases and conveys a deeply dimensional picture plane. It invigorates and activates the space, initiating the viewer into Gaertner's perspective and experience. Most images are lit from above or within, but the light is frequently soft and dispersed, an evocation of Cleveland's characteristic smogginess.

The smoggy air is also a tool which Gaertner uses to introduce viewers to the environmental world of Cleveland. The deceptively "blank" sky of *The Pie Wagon* (Figure 3.5) in the Cleveland Museum of Art is found in some of his other works, and some of these later works employ this same sky in such a way to remind us the air in *Pie Wagon* was not an afterthought. For example, in *Building Ships* (Figure 3.6), wispy columns of red, mauve, blue and orange dance around textured, swirling brushstrokes in a sky whose color is somehow simultaneously puce and lavender. Perhaps this is the reality of Cleveland's industrial pollution. This work continues Gaertner's subverting of the materiality of our lived world, as he does with wooden poles made to appear more solid than metal ones, like in the *Pie Wagon*. In this work, the shadow's outline, though bearing some areas of stippled softness, is much more definite than the presumably wood or metal shipyard scaffolding behind it.



Figure 3.7 Carl Gaertner, *Building Ships*, date unknown. Oil on canvas, The Cleveland Union Club, Cleveland, Ohio.

Gaertner employed a masterful arrangement of light sources to give this visually complex scaffolding its definition. He did not paint each bar its natural, local color and return to highlight or lowlight; rather, every aspect is painted with one confident, jaunty brush stroke, each a color mixed by Gaertner to simplify yet augment the dazzling brightness of the sun off this multifaceted surface. The human figures in this scene are mere suggestions—more abstracted than they were even in *The Furnace* (Figure 1.7). Unlike *The Furnace* and *The Pie Wagon*, their scale to the industrial structures here is realistic. This painting is aesthetically similar to many of Gaertner’s works, even beyond the industrial subject, in that it appears monochromatic at first glance. In actuality, the painting is comprised of countless mixings of similar colors to create the effect of an industrial site washed in the sun.

The sun-washed glow of this painting points towards another aspect of Gaertner-ness: his keen eye for light, and the interaction between manmade forms and the atmosphere. An apt analogy for this artist's rendering of invisible space would be to say he is the Canaletto of Cleveland: his fondness for the water in Cleveland's landscape and lake effect weather becomes a defining aspect of the artist's vision for his city. Gaertner rarely left Cleveland and its periphery. The notable exception was a family trip in the 1920s to Bermuda, which resulted in a series of studies which are an interesting foil to his industrial works. One such small watercolor in the family estate, represented by art dealer Michael Wolf, depicts a white house set against a grey sky (Figure 3.8). Raking light across the house's surfaces and corners imbue the scene with a tense energy as the viewer, like in the Flats paintings, wonders if disastrous weather is inevitable. According to Wolf, the Bermuda scenes are an overlooked and important aspect of Gaertner's career: though they differ somewhat noticeably from the rest of his works, they arguably display the artist's deepening love affair with how light gives shape to peripheral spaces. Gaertner's tropical departure from industrial imagery was brief, but it is worth noting how the maritime location of the island would have created a similar atmospheric condition to working near the shores of Lake Erie, despite the difference in climate. The effect of the Bermuda studies is seen in *Building Ships*. Bright strokes of pure white and yellow punctuate the ship's scaffolding and disperse sunshine on the smoggy river. Though Cleveland lacked the drama of Bermuda's storms, Gaertner latched onto the lake's turbulent weather and used atmospheric light to continue his painting's inquiry into the hard-won balance between man, factory, and nature: "he thrived on the emotional and sometimes dismal atmosphere in this region (referring to Cleveland)— We don't get as much sun as we like here, and that was certainly the case for Gaertner. When the sun comes out here, it is a big deal. It brightens

everyone's mood. As a product of Cleveland, this would have inspired Gaertner. He would have been very happy to be within such brightness." Gaertner would continue to employ dramatic light in his industrial scenes; among collectors today, bold, swirling clouds such as in *Second Story, Back* and *The Popcorn Man* are among the most desirable traits in a Gaertner. In one sense, Gaertner's use of the weather in his visual story telling connects him with American Scene style narratives and the emotional intensity of the Urban Realists before him. Yet the gestural swaths of smog, smoke and clouds in his work, combined with the terse strokes of pure color used to convey raking light, suggest an artist more interested with marrying avant-garde visuals with narrative traditions than in sticking firmly to one mainline genre.





*Figure 3.8 Carl Gaertner, untitled gouache (Bermuda Scene), gouache on cardboard, 15 x 20 inches. In the family estate held at Wolfs Gallery, Cleveland.*

Reductive readings of Gaertner's industrial landscapes and a fleeting appreciation for his use of light arguably factored into Gaertner's unfortunate obsolescence in American taste. Gaertner's paintings of the 1920s remind contemporary scholars to trace the vestiges of out-of-vogue genres in the visual thinking of artists working in times of aesthetic transition. Gaertner kept one foot in each corner of an increasingly urgent debate within Cleveland's realm of art production about aesthetics and worldview, while also reconsidering aspects of past generations of artists in the terms of his day. Gaertner's work is still had on American painters even following the New York Armory Show and subsequent effects of avant-garde modernism on local painting communities.

# **Chapter Four: Carl Gaertner's Transgressive Professional Identity and Social and Cultural Boundary Crossing in Depression Era Cleveland**

“...How much more impressive is a row of blast furnaces, oil wells, and coal breakers, than trees!” - American Painter Joseph Pennell, proclaimed while visiting the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, Pittsburgh<sup>60</sup>

The paintings and activities of Carl Gaertner between his hiring at the Cleveland School of Art in 1927 and his sudden death in 1952 demonstrate a peculiar and distinctive interweaving of Cleveland's industrial economy and popular visual culture. This is particularly apparent in Gaertner's work during the 1930s. Prior to the depression, Cleveland had established itself as one of the nation's major hubs of manufacturing, shipping, politics, and art. At the end of the 1920s Cleveland's art market bore the distinctions of a thriving, cross-class web of cultural exchange. Healthy ideological competition between artists' groups spurred on well-attended and widely stocked art shows. Patrons sought paintings from Gaertner and his circle, became aware of the thriving local printmaking scene, and sought after artisan handicrafts sold at the yearly Cleveland Museum May Show. Attendance at these shows surged. Sales from high to low end price points flourished. New markets were continually emerging, enrollment in local art programs was increasing, and the museum was cementing its status as a gathering place for the civically minded art fan.

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<sup>60</sup> Fahlman, Schruers and Graham, *Wonders of Work and Labor*, 16.

But by 1930, as elsewhere in the nation, Cleveland's steady, symbiotic artistic and commercial flourishing was quickly stymied by the onset of the depression. Cleveland artists began to lose their jobs, as even the wealthy patrons lost expendable income for art projects. No corner of the formerly sturdy art market was left untouched. The museum and the neighboring Cleveland School of Art were not immune. Records of layoffs and related hiring decisions are not kept for these years; however, peripheral histories of Cleveland School artists briefly mention the many positions lost by artists in Gaertner's circle. In the modicum of depression-era cultural consistency, Carl Gaertner's job as an instructor at the Cleveland School of Art remained secure; unlike many of his peers he held this single job for his entire career.

Gaertner's consistent employment during the Depression had two implications for his boundary crossing. The 1930s were a crucial period for Gaertner's career, and were it not for the chance survival of his job teaching college-level painting, he would have lacked the stability that lends itself to a consistent painting career. He had consistently predictable amounts of time in which to paint, as his teaching schedule allowed him to paint at home many evenings, as well as weekends and summers.<sup>61</sup> All of these factors—his consistent employment, frequent participation in large exhibition, and visual interactions with artists and middle class consumers—contributed to the making of Carl Gaertner and his world and supporting his social, economic, and aesthetic boundary crossing. These factors can be utilized by scholars as an interpretive framework to glean information on the cultural transformations at large as a result of the reciprocal exchange of creation—how Carl Gaertner's envisioning of his native Cleveland's Industrial Flats embody the upheaval of mid-America in the early twentieth century, and how his

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<sup>61</sup> Interviews with Michael Wolf and Carl Gaertner Jr, conducted by author March 2018.

stance within American modernist painting invite a problematizing of language used to structure our art historical canonizing at the expense of oversimplified and classist narratives.

The issue of Gaertner's aesthetics leads naturally to a consideration of the Federal Arts Program during the 1930s, as it is impossible to discuss Gaertner's worlds without paying attention to transformations precipitated by the Great Depression. He never entered the Work Projects Administration (WPA), which employed most of Cleveland's aforementioned artists and their pupils. Though this may seem isolating in a sense, and a boundary that he did not cross (arguably costing him the chance for more civic exposure sooner), the result was a decade of focused movement within the world of Cleveland academia. He arguably crossed boundaries between practitioner and professor in a way that other artists were not logistically able to. The prolonged career in the academic world was a vantage point from which Gaertner could transgress boundaries between professor and practitioner, elite and worker, and more broadly, artist and society. Gaertner's paintings, in particular the direction they took during the 1930s, created a captivating dialogue with the visual culture of Clevelanders at various levels in his art market. This chapter will look at Gaertner's enmeshing in the Cleveland School, assess the impact of the Depression on his paintings from this era, and posit that these elements of stability and varied art market engagement yield important though frequently neglected frameworks for his considerable canon of work.

As Depression grew near, Gaertner secured his first official teaching job as a part-time instructor in the design dept at Case Western. Since his appointment at Case Western in 1925 Gaertner had found employment in the more industrial niches of the art world, working in some of the city's commercial printmaking shops. There is little-to-no specific information on this time in Gaertner's life; unlike other Cleveland printmakers-turned-painters like George Adomeit, it is

also unclear which printmaker Gaertner worked for. During the thirties it was the commercial printmaking industry that helped sustain artists suffering from the effects of the Depression. For scholars interested in placing Gaertner firmly within the context of the Cultural Front, the twists in Gaertner's career during the Depression years are especially beguiling. The transition from printmaker and laboring artist to professor was a major professional boundary crossed, with great effect on Gaertner's immediate community for the next few years.

With its over-a-century-long appreciation for beauty and pragmatism, the establishment of the Cleveland School of Art is perhaps the most important cultural event to precede Gaertner. Oscar Wilde visited Cleveland in February 1882 and famously noted the city's lack of an art school. Within a year, society ladies rallied by socialite Sara M. Kimball and petitioned the board of the fledgling Case Western Reserve University, under whose banner a small art program was forming, to devote funds and building space to forming a new, independent art school.<sup>62</sup> Before the museum, the school was the main organizational hub for the arts. From as early as 1906 the school organized public exhibitions of student work and local artists, fostering cultural exchange between artists at various stages of professional development and success, as well as between consumers and patrons.<sup>63</sup>

Teaching at the Cleveland School of Art allowed Gaertner more than just stylistic mobility and financial security: it was a locus of and foundation for his world-building and boundary crossing. Here he continued his work of contributing to what Michael Denning calls the laboring of American culture. His work was to foster in artists an empathetic, passionate eye for regional culture, and an attention to the surprising aspects of mundane experiences—such as

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<sup>62</sup> Nancy Coe Wixom, *Cleveland Institute of Art: The First Hundred Years*, (Cleveland, OH: The Cleveland Institute of Art, 1983), 8.

<sup>63</sup> Robinson, William H., and David Steinberg. *Transformations in Cleveland Art, 1796-1946: community and diversity in early modern America*. (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996), 72.

distinctive shadows in a skyline or the neglected beauty of common walkways—which create a sense of shared civic identity and pride. Gaertner’s teaching model was another way he declared his independence from Keller’s influence: rather than endeavor to raise a crop of new students up in the same way, Gaertner devoted himself to fostering and drawing out each artist’s individuality. His approach to teaching reveals much about the artist that has been lost to time. Anecdotally this popular artist has somewhat of a reputation for being stern, which is incongruous with other oral histories recalling a fine gentleman who was known for throwing festive house parties with his wife.<sup>64</sup> However, a return to the archival record corrects this. An endearing 1941 headline from the *Cleveland Daily News* quips “Believe In Yourself! Gaertner’s Art in May Show Proves a Philosophy” (Figure 4.1). Ray Bruner, local art writer, secured for this article one of Gaertner’s few recorded interviews. In it, Gaertner asserted his transgressive attitude toward genre while also encapsulating his teaching paradigm: “In a painting eye power is not everything. All eye power without personal interpretation will not make a picture. Then a fellow must believe in himself if he wants to be a good painter, and not try to follow in somebody else’s footsteps.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Interviews with Mark Cole, November 2017, and Carl Gaertner Jr, March 2018, conducted by author in Cleveland, Ohio.

<sup>65</sup> Ray Bruner, “Believe In Yourself! Gaertner’s Art in May Show Proves a Philosophy,” *Cleveland Daily News*, May 3, 1941. Cleveland Museum of Art Archive, accessed March 13, 2018.



Figure 4.1 and 4.2 Clippings from the Cleveland Museum of Art's Archive, Cleveland, Ohio

In 1948, Gaertner's warm and whimsical teaching made headlines again with "Jumping Jumbo Thrills Artists" (Figure 4.2), in which Gaertner is pictured with some of his students on a plein air painting field trip to the local circus. Gaertner's knack for consuming plebian cultural commodities such as the circus while instilling the need for a keen artistic eye exemplifies his astounding flexibility between Cleveland's social, economic, and aesthetic worlds. Gaertner's position at the school put him at the forefront of a social network of artists and patrons, and the longer he taught there the more fondly his reputation spread beyond the school and into the city. One former student told a newspaper in 1947, "He was a great teacher and never was he so happy as in the success of those he taught. He was a warm human soul, an unselfish friend, a profound influence upon young and old."<sup>66</sup> One such student under his influence was the

<sup>66</sup> CMA clippings file (Art News Review, January 1947).

renowned painter Hughie Lee Smith (Figure 4.3). Few students kept detailed records of their mentorships with Gaertner, though some correspondence survives between the artist and his pupil in which Gaertner's ready support of his pupils, regardless of how closely in style they remained to their instructor, is evident. One of the most indelible mementos of this nature is a scrapbook made by one of Gaertner's summer students at a summer class in Toledo, Ohio. Unbeknownst to the family, Gaertner's pupil documented and preserved Gaertner's thorough teaching, annotating candid photographs with Gaertner-esque phrases such as "Mix it like this" and "What's your trouble?" (Figure 4.4). This photo album was mailed to Gaertner's widow following his death, a small gesture of this teacher's impact on students far and wide.



TO Hughie Lee-Smith African-American painter + lecturer, NY, NY  
MEMOR'S HILL FARM  
RTE. ROAD 2 1/2  
WILLOUGHBY, OHIO

July 8, 1945

Dear Hughie,

I was very glad to hear from you and your show in Chicago and the murals for the Navy. Good luck on your watercolor show in September!

We have been away - New York and then to Pennsylvania - a little vacation which I needed, now I am back to painting for next Fall shows and plan to teach through Aug. morning only.

I will be very glad to help you in any way to get a Guggenheim and I know every one at school will be glad to help too.

Let me know how you come out and good luck

Sincerely  
Carl Gaertner

Figure 4.3 Carl F. Gaertner to Hughie Lee-Smith, July 8, 1945, Carl Gaertner research file, The John and Susan Horseman Collection of American Art Archive, The John and Susan Horseman Collection of American Art, St. Louis, MO.

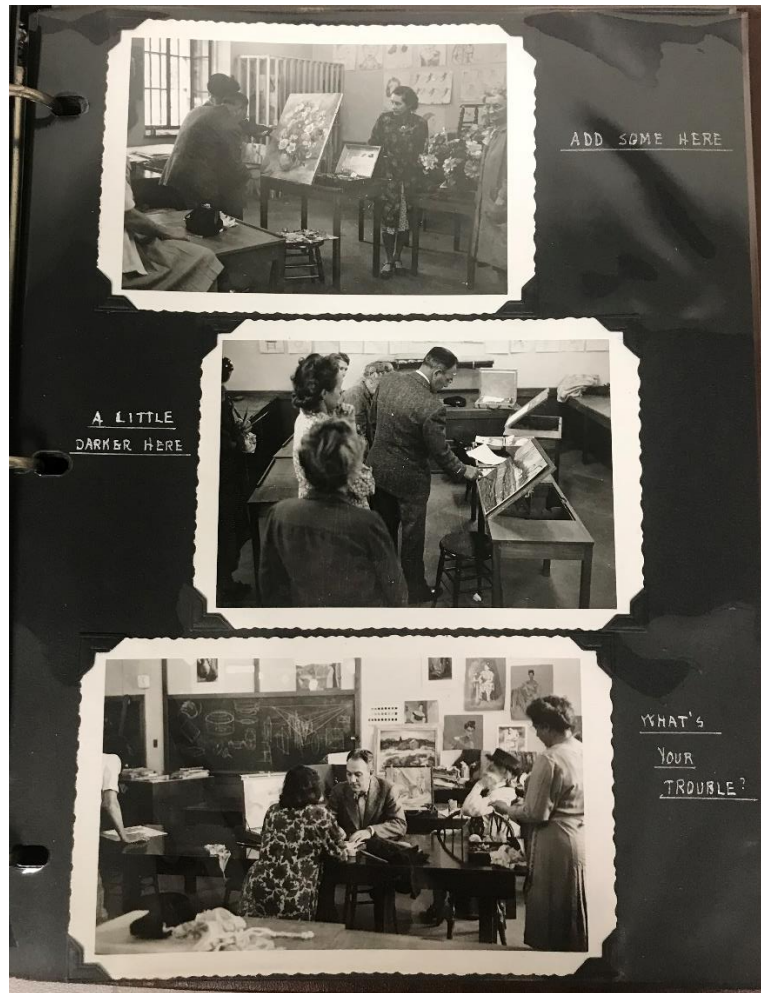


Figure 4.4 Carl Gaertner teaching, photographs from family album. In the private collection of Carl Gaertner Jr., Cleveland, OH.

His employment at the school provided him a platform from which he developed recognition from other regional art schools. Starting in 1933 he began teaching in the summers as well: that summer was spent summer teaching in West Virginia at White Sulphur Springs.<sup>67</sup> This undertaking would serve to inspire an interesting development in how Gaertner imaged labor in his artwork. Exposure to more rural laborers over his Depression-era summers in West Virginia prompted the closest he came to an outright political moment in his paintings. Rather than portray factories, he began to portray the laborers. In a surprising move the artist began focusing

<sup>67</sup> Clippings in curatorial and exhibition file of ArtNEO archive

on acts of labor and production, but beyond the realm of the machine. After the Depression Gaertner developed a still more sincere appreciation for manual labor. Gaertner is often still thought to have avoided the human figure in his work, though really, human characters play an important role in his later years. Gaertner's fascination with the shift from agrarian life to industrial life displays a sort of meta-awareness that also places him firmly within the ethos of the Cultural Front artists.

The short period of West Virginia paintings may seem to veer from Gaertner's thematic norm, but this change in his work over time towards process and people allows for a more rich reading of all his labor themed works. As curator Mark Cole articulated, Gaertner consistently displayed a respect for labor. According to Cole, the artist's canvases from the 1920s and 1930s are generally regarded as his best, and these are the years in which he most consistently painted labor and industry. Cleveland's transition from an agricultural center to a capitol of industry defined the city's character; its continued evolution during the 20s and 30s were of existential interest to Gaertner. On this subject, Michel Wolf emphasizes that Gaertner was not simply interested in industrial structures: he was boggled by the presence of industrial flourishing in the middle of a rural, agrarian region.<sup>68</sup> Gaertner's subject matter remained fairly consistent throughout his career, with variations in tone, composition, and style coinciding with select life events or changes in circumstance. Some might notice a decline in factory scenes after the late 1930s. I asked his son, Carl Gaertner Jr., about this; to him, the answer was obvious: "He moved!" Gaertner married Adelle Potter in 1938, and around this time the pair moved out of the city seeking more space to raise a family. The simple logistical side effect of this move was that his daily strolls no longer took him past and around industrial sites. Gaertner Jr. warns of reading

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Wolf, Interview with the author, November 2017.

too much into the decreased frequency of industrial subject matter, citing his father's life long interest in Cleveland's industrial landscape and the interplay of form and light they caused.

As Cleveland continued to thrive as an industrial center, Gaertner's paintings underwent a slight and slow change: his subject matter expanded and probed further into perhaps the core of American labor, the farm. Perhaps bolstered by his consistent financial gains from the May Show and his stable income, Gaertner's paintings changed over time with regards to their content, and only slightly did they change aesthetically. Starting in the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Gaertner's fascination with manufacturing and industry took a turn towards the rural, where he felt there were similarities to be drawn out. In the West Virginia paintings, he sculpts the face of a woman at market with the same luscious brush strokes as he applied to *The Furnace* in 1924. Her inscrutable expression and tense posture in relation to the vegetable vendor bring the delicate, tense equilibrium between figures at opposing ends of the capitalist system—producer and consumer—prove that Gaertner's agricultural series is truly an extension of his Flats series. In another untitled painting from these summertime farms, the fires under a rendering pig prepared for slaughter are painted as vigorously as the single instance of his blast furnace interior. At a time when regional and scene paintings were falling out of vogue, Gaertner uniquely blurred the boundaries between patronage groups and produced a series of essentially American Scene paintings that struck a chord with Cultural Front sympathizers as well as his established elite buying class.<sup>69</sup> Partly this was arguably due to his slow, controlled foray further into avant-garde touches. His strategic timing of exaggerating brush strokes and laying in color as if patchwork was alluring enough for artists increasingly enamored with abstraction, while remaining true to the edgy grit favored by more working-class consumers. Michael Wolf credits

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Wolf interview with author, November 2017.

this to his simple finesse with a brush: “He could make more out of muck and mire than any artist I’ve ever seen – the amount of colors in his much and mire would have taken a lot of time.”<sup>70</sup> Gaertner’s agrarian paintings are one of his most fascinating demonstrations of the laboring of visual culture. He is transgressing the boundaries between landscape, scene painting and industrial composition; he is elevating the status of those being left behind and threatened by mechanical processing—farmers—to the same level of power as workers with gargantuan steel ladles, slag dumps and cranes. Gaertner proved here his commitment to remaining intimately connected with workers at the site of production, but humanizing them by celebrating their lived environments. For his West Virginian subjects, these boundaries were blurred. After many years of exploring the spaces associated with work and the penumbra of work, Gaertner evolved over time to comment explicitly on the people and processes of work, while still maintaining his veiled personal position to Cultural Front politics.

During his lifetime Gaertner sold his works for a wide range of prices; his market popularity and accessibility add to the curiosity of where this artist fell within Cultural Front politics. However, popular demand for his work commodified his paintings on local and national levels. The catalyst for the demand for Gaertners was The May Show: a yearly exhibition of regional artists held at the Cleveland Museum of Art, which since its inception aspired to be a welcome mixing pot for all artists and consumers. This annual event was attended by buyers at all levels; it was also one of the major sites of interaction between Gaertner and his peers in the WPA. This exhibition was the passion project of CMA’s curator William Milliken, without whom a discussion of Gaertner’s growing market is impossible.

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Wolf interview with author, November 2017.

William Milliken, then the director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, was a key figure in Gaertner's world; his influence on Gaertner's success during these years was indirect, yet substantial and is somewhat overlooked. Had not William Milliken been in Cleveland at the start of the 1930s, the Depression may have taken an even further toll on the city's artists. As both head of the region's Public Works of Art Project and the main proponent of the Museum's cross-media yearly purchase show, Milliken is an integral part of the cultural machine that produced Gaertner. As a staffer of the Cleveland Museum of Art and ardent supporter of local arts programming, Milliken was poised to enter the national dialogue regarding the role of the arts during the nation's economic strain. The Great Depression decade bore witness to one of the most expansive unions of the worlds of art, labor, and government in American history: the Federal Arts Programs continue to provide modern citizens with a framework within which to examine how citizens relate to each other through the arts and policy, and how a broader sense of national identity is constructed or reinforced through these two realms. Often times the leaders of the various Depression-era arts programs were government officials with little understanding of art and patronage, or arts professionals unsure of how best to mediate between patrons of art and non-art-engaging citizens, or between locals and their governmental superiors. In the vast web of arts project leaders, William M. Milliken of Cleveland, Ohio stands out. Simultaneously the director of one of the nation's largest and oldest art museums and the regional figurehead of the Public Works of Art Project in the upper Midwest, Milliken was distinctly sympathetic to all parties involved in the successful execution of such a federal aid initiative.

Milliken was an impressive arts administrator from the very beginning. In 1919, only two years after the establishment of the Cleveland Museum of Art, he was hired away from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City by the Cleveland Museum's Decorative Arts

department. Immediately he advised the museum's board on a number of acquisitions. While a curator's role is largely to identify and fill needs within the museum's collection by way of acquisitions, it can be arduous to fulfill these duties—particularly in economically or politically trying times. Boards must be convinced and donors persuaded to facilitate even mundane acquisitions. 1919 marked the start of a minor economic downturn in the city that would last until 1921. Despite the inopportune economic climate for substantial art museum purchases, Milliken succeeded in fostering a notable museum collection. He documents some of his memorable early acquisitions in his memoir *A Time Remembered*, which is organized around memories with various members of the museum's board or patronage.<sup>71</sup> Some of his notable acquisitions were successful due to his keen social fluidity; for example, having hob-knobbed with the wealthy family of Ralph King during various dinner parties in the 1920s, Milliken secured the first ever purchase of an Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec painting in an American museum. When Milliken proposed to the committee the purchase of an oil painting by the artist, King drew upon his experience of Milliken's artistic worldview to substantiate Milliken's address to the board that the work would be a boon for the whole of Cleveland. Had King not have known Milliken's ranging interests and appreciation for making great art accessible to all, the board might not have agreed to such a substantial acquisition so soon after Cleveland's economic struggles.

This example would not be the only time that Milliken's firebrand vision of cultural and civic unity would lead to breakthrough institutional achievements. The dexterity with which Milliken made his institutional transition and finessed near immediate museum purchases for the small Decorative Arts department would serve him well in bringing the efforts of the PWAP to

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<sup>71</sup>William Mathewson Milliken, *A Time Remembered: A Cleveland Memoir* (Cleveland, OH: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1975).

regional fruition. From the start of his time in Cleveland he demonstrated an ability to earn the respect of other arts leaders via his sage eye for art of value to the whole community.

Milliken believed that the art museum was not an isolated, rarified sort of institution. He was passionate about the museum functioning as a different sort of civic center, one wherein the arts could be used to amplify local education and development. Milliken notably expanded and developed the museum's education department. By hiring Case Western Reserve University art history professor Thomas Munro as head of museum education, Milliken built a meaningful connection between museum patrons and students. "Mr. Milliken promoted the already well-established extension department, working in connection with Cleveland public schools, branch libraries, and suburban schools."<sup>72</sup> Under his directorship many such connections were established between the museum and the broader Cleveland community; programs and partnerships were sought with a variety of organizations to share the cultural wealth. Thus, the concept that the arts had the ability to serve citizens at large, not just those in the art world, took hold in Cleveland and became familiar.

The May show also furthered the Museum's accessibility; no economic barriers per se keeping folks in Cleveland from experiencing art, but there remained some psychological ones, due to the class striation in the city. The May show's democratic appeal and selection of artists and themes was likely so beloved in that it created a heightened sense of welcome for all walks of life to experience the high culture on display at the museum. The cultural front as an extension of populist consumerism often bumped up against the more traditional, elite art market and its purchasing power. Carl Gaertner's industrial landscape paintings were done during and

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<sup>72</sup> Henry S Francis, "William M. Milliken," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (April 1958): 105.



following the steel industry boom which created the city. They were beloved by Clevelanders of varying aesthetic and political convictions. A range of sales prices allowed these pieces to be accessible across a spectrum of social classes as well. Gaertner's financial accessibility set him apart from other painters at the time. Not only was he able to produce consistently, the May show afforded him the opportunity to exhibit with regularity—an essential aspect of maintaining a financially viable artistic career. The records of the May show, held in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Ingalls Library, show that almost annually during the Great Depression Gaertner was entering multiple large scale oil paintings in categories such as Industrial Cleveland, Industrial (general), and Landscape.<sup>73</sup> However, his thorough attention to all aspects of work and labor in and around Cleveland also extended beyond the site of production to the non-factory sites which shaped the off-duty hours of working class Cleveland life.

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<sup>73</sup> The Cleveland Museum of Art Ingalls Library, "May Show Database," The Cleveland Museum of Art Archives, <http://library.clevelandart.org/may-show>.



Figure 4.5 Carl Gaertner, *Flying Ponies (Euclid Beach Park)*, 1932. Oil, 44 ½ x 66 ¾ inches. In the collection of Mike and Carol Sherwin, Cleveland, OH.

*Flying Ponies*, 1932, is one painting that represents Gaertner's fluidity and attention to the whole web of life in the 1930s. Michael D. Hall, an art historian of the Cleveland School, has claimed that "Gaertner was an artist acutely in tune with his time."<sup>74</sup> The May Show record speaks to this. Despite the continually strong market for Gaertner's industrial landscapes, the May Show record also reflects a lasting interest in the other aspects of Cleveland life which caught the artist's attention. The industrial landscapes appealed to viewers who, no matter their wealth, loved Cleveland; these works and their Cleveland-ness were elevated by the same display of civic affection in other imagery. He was deeply moved by regional subjects. Near the Flats Cleveland found a respite from the intensity of labor: Euclid Beach, the boardwalk like

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<sup>74</sup> Charles Yannopoulos, "Dark Reality: Carl Gaertner's Paintings Go Beyond Steel and Smokestacks to Show a Bleaker Side of Cleveland," *Cleveland Scene* (Cleveland, OH), April 20, 2000, 47.

recreational area which Gaertner captured in *Flying Ponies*. In a similar way to *Building Ships*, *Flying Ponies* is cast in strong, dramatic light. The internal glow of the carnival ride bursts through the evening's darkness, which has usually been interpreted in an existentially despairing way. Though Hall's essay takes the position that the darkness and energy of *Flying Ponies* suggests a brooding side to Gaertner, it seems more likely that Gaertner's disposition was rather one of a Clevelander intrigued by the role of light and space in framing the spaces peripheral to human activity. The carousel in this painting perfectly suits Gaertner's interests and aids in completing the story of the workers and patrons only suggested in the industrial landscapes.

Some of Gaertner's relevance has been lost or distorted by present day critics mistakenly overlaying contemporary assumptions about the Flats area of Cleveland onto Gaertner's scenes. The critical interpretations by Michael Hall and Charles Yannopoulos have surely played an important role in keeping the artist's tenuous legacy alive and spurring recent interest in the artist's work. Yet to suggest that a dark palette, industrial vision of Cleveland and a lack of direct focus on human activity belie despair leans too heavily on metaphor for an artist interested in observation and reflection. Carl Gaertner Jr. warns against over interpreting his father's work. From a son's perspective, this artist was not somber and morose, but reserved, appraising of his surroundings, and moved deeply by the ineffable qualities of Cleveland life such as sunlight on factories and the colorful blur of a carousel in motion. Perhaps the whimsy of the ride evoked warm memories for the senior Gaertner, of time with his own kids, or of jubilant costume parties he was known for throwing with his wife Adelle. The carnival-esque nature of the carousel could itself have been the reason for his drawing, especially as we know from newspaper scraps he was fond enough of the circus to take his students on a field trip there for art making (Figure 4.2).

Flying Ponies is thus another work which is both useful to understanding the industrial landscapes, and demonstrative of Gaertner's keen sense of local community.

Following the Depression, Gaertner would start to explore the theme of man, factory and nature beyond the Flats. He would remain devoted to industrial Cleveland and yet by introducing new subject matter more attuned to the periphery of industrial life, Gaertner invited his growing May Show audience further across boundaries of class and labor. The rarity of a stable job throughout the Great Depression afforded Gaertner the stability and time to delve deep into his work. Because of his prolific involvement in the May Show—another effect of workplace security during the 30s—Gaertner's scenes of industrial Cleveland would start to become familiar to art world players beyond the Cuyahoga river valley. Works such as *Flying Ponies* mark the artist's finesse at captivating ineffable aspects of working-class life, a talent that would shortly lead to an impressive spike in fame.

## Chapter Five: Gaertner Remembered

In the tight-knit circle of present-day Carl Gaertner collectors, John Horseman's paintings are particularly well known. *Second Story Back* is one of the artist's largest canvases. It is somewhat of a spectacle, as the previous owner, Baldwin Wallace College, kept it stored in a basement where it accrued a fair amount of surface grime from dripping basement pipes. When the work surfaced on the market collectors such as Horseman were eager to acquire it regardless of its condition—much like fans during Gaertner's day readily acquired his smaller watercolors and gouaches despite their less desirable status in his overall pantheon of works. Another of Horseman's large industrial Gaertners, *Night in Pittsburgh* (Figure 1.2), depicts a scene similar to *The Popcorn Man* (Figure 5.1), in the collection of collector Joe Erdelac. Each of these large works are solid demonstrations of Gaertner's technical finesse from his mid-career: thunderous clouds, eerily illuminated street vendors, and occasional figures in shadow create a gothic ambiance which serves the artist's goal of elevating working class and demonstrating the sublime beauty of the industrial realm. Gaertner's ambiance came to a crescendo in works like these, before exploring further into the penumbra of industrial life later in the 1940s and onward. Works such as *Swamp Spur*, also in the Horseman collection, date to a later era in Gaertner's career that found him more interested in the landscape ensconcing industrial sites than the sites and their human counterparts. Other noted paintings from this season of Gaertner's career, *The Watchman* and *George Leaves Today*, hang in the Akron, Ohio home of Jim Woods. Woods and Horseman met and became acquainted as a result of their similar art market interests; their

fondness for the works of hometown hero Gaertner is shared by their art conservator colleague Fred Fotchman, who proudly showed me a Gaertner landscape in his Columbus, Ohio home.



*Figure 5.1 Carl Gaertner, The Popcorn Man, 1930. Oil on canvas, 42 x 60 inches. In the collection of Joe Erdelac, Cleveland, Ohio.*

What is evident among this interconnected group of paintings is the fact that despite any potential hesitancy from twentieth century art critics to acknowledge this, Carl Gaertner's industrial landscapes certainly did undergo clear and intentional changes over time. The earlier works are more explicit about the location of industry and production; over time, the commentary more explicitly turns towards the workers themselves. His color palette and application change as well. He continues to circle pure genre painting and continues to further probe the limits of regionalism, expressionism, and later—social realism. In Gaertner's final years he embarked towards a new kind of boundary crossing. His paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s hone his mastery of atmosphere and ambiance and show an emboldened painter

remaining steadfast in his eye for industrial grit who was increasingly captivated by the unrestrained color and form of the natural world. By the late 1940s and early 1950s Gaertner's consistency of subject matter had garnered him new national attention. However, during these years Gaertner's work wrestled with the limits of regionalist imagery in a market increasingly dominated by abstract expressionism. The artist never sacrificed his distinctive vision of Cleveland nor his preference for realism; rather, he delved deeper into the realm of non-local color and carving form with shadow, which then prompted further contemporary interest in his work. One rave review from 1953 describes this dramatic late-career boundary crossing: "And then—in his last year—came new youth in still life abstractions. 'Carpenter's Bouquet,' exhibited posthumously in the recent May Show, was experiment with pure form. Last summer in Provincetown, working frantically for his fourth show at Macbeth Galleries in New York, he found a new greenish light for his seascapes."<sup>75</sup> Pure forms and jarring light had long been present in the artist's work, and these elements are a good metric for Gaertner's self-aware variations and experimentations in a rapidly changing art market.

For scholars working to re-establish Gaertner's significant contributions to Cleveland's visual culture during the early twentieth century, his post-Depression works must be considered as a bookend to his broody early works. Gaertner never lost his drama, but rather extended his interest in American work and aesthetics to encompass a wider view of an ever-changing industrial landscape. Gaertner's later years see equally consistent production in terms of size and volume of paintings. However, they are often featured less in exhibitions and study, possibly due to their differences from his early works. Having encountered Gaertner's Flats, his visual

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<sup>75</sup> Marie Kirkwood, "Gaertner's Art Reflects Spirit, Youth and Wisdom," *Cleveland News* (Cleveland, OH), June 20, 1953, n.p. Clipping in the Cleveland School of Art Scrapbook, accessed on microfilm, March 2018.

laboring of American culture, and the establishment of his lifetime art market, a deeper investigation of Gaertner's late works and the changes in his art market is due.

In the 2000 exhibition review "Dark Reality," Charles Yannopoulos makes interesting remarks about the lasting legacy of Carl Gaertner. Commenting on Christine Fowler Shearer's exhibition in 2000, Yannopoulos put forth a strong, potentially unfounded opinion which would take surprising root in the art community:

It is easy to appreciate the enormous affection for Gaertner held by those involved in the exhibition, but less easy to share their enthusiasm without qualification. American art did not rocket to international importance after World War II because of artists such as Gaertner. The show is fascinating for what it reveals about the mood of Cleveland and the industrial Midwest after the prosperity of the 1920s evaporated in the Depression. But it does not build a case for Gaertner as a major, underappreciated master.

This claim is itself unqualified, but also subjective. In fact, there is a case to be made for Gaertner as a major, underappreciated master, it is in his market. Coincidentally his market was soaring after World War II. Between winning National Academy of Design shows and garnering selective gallery representation in New York, Gaertner's record proves that American artists painting in alternate ways than Abstract Expressionism were still an active part of the nation's cultural makeup, who certainly added to the nation's cultural standing. Gaertner was a highly appreciated master in his day, underappreciated only in present times by scholars unfamiliar with the scope of Gaertner's involvement in Cleveland after the war.

By the 1940s Gaertner was a household name in Cleveland art circles, and familiar to consumers of lower priced works on paper. He was by then an established fixture in the realm of the Cleveland School of Art as well. As the School developed more local partnerships,



Gaertner's work found an increasingly expanding audience. For example, in 1943 he was one of a group of teachers from the Cleveland School selected to collaborate with the Cleveland Orchestra. Embodying Cleveland's interest in aesthetic intersections, then-director Erich Leinsdorf staged Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and invited select Cleveland School staff to produce original artworks in response to the orchestra piece. "Just as [the Russian composer] Mussorgsky back in the 1870s had been inspired by the artistic works of his friend, Victor Hartmann, so Leinsdorf thought that Mussorgsky's music could in turn inspire more contemporary visual art works."<sup>76</sup> Gaertner depicted the folk tale Baba Yaga (Figure 5.2), in a departure from his standard subject matter that further demonstrated his technical skill and captivating narrative sensibilities.<sup>77</sup> This project is also an example of the interaction between Gaertner and members of Cleveland's two prominent artist groups; John Teyral, Rolf Stoll, Paul Travis, and Frank Wilcox, variously members of the Cleveland Society of Artists and the Kokoon Club were also cited as participants.<sup>78</sup> This was a prime example of Gaertner transgressing the boundaries between Cleveland's economic and aesthetic worlds. His Baba Yaga was reproduced in various publications, easily accessible to locals unable to participate in the symphony's activities more directly. He also displayed a sense of whimsy and drama—to see a familiar folk tale by this local icon would have furthered his cross-consumer class connection. The subject matter cleverly appealed to audiences more familiar with folk culture, but the expressive manner in which he painted it—employing his swift and luscious paint application and surprising color combinations familiar in his factory scenes to masterfully produce an

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<sup>76</sup> "Pictures at an Exhibition" in 2002 Cleveland Orchestray playbill, ArtNEO archive, accessed November 17, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Among the other artists listed on this project was Kenneth Bates, who would later appear in the CMA's files for high paying donors to the memorial exhibition following Gaertner's death. I brought transcripts of a handwritten note from Kenneth to the museum's director regarding his fondness for the artist to Carl Jr., who told me he has many childhood memories of his father's close friendship with "Kenny" Bates. Serves to contradict unsubstantiated anecdotes that Gaertner was cold.

<sup>78</sup> Orchestra playbill, 71, ArtNEO archive, accessed November 2017

expressionist work—perfectly suited the criteria and audience of this collaborative opera house commission.



*Figure 5.2 Carl Gaertner, Baba Yaga, details unknown. Reproduced from "Pictures at an Exhibition" in 2002 Cleveland Orchestra playbill, ArtNEO archive, accessed by author November 2017.*

Gaertner's measured flourishes represent his keen sense of audience. Obviously talented in both modes of painting, he knew how to capture the interest of more avant-garde inclined viewers while appealing to the traditional tastes of the elite industrial class. Milliken recounts a disastrous confrontation of taste wherein the unnamed wife of a prominent partner in the Corrigan-McKinney steel company endowed the purchase of a painting in her husband's honor, only to be horrified upon discovering the museum used her funds to purchase a Cezanne—to her, an abomination of taste and an irreconcilable act of disrespect for her husband. She severed her relationship with the museum as a result. One can only imagine that someone such as Gaertner would have been aware of the precarious line between two highly passionate yet diametrically opposed classes of elite patrons. Choosing to honor their purchase power and his own artistic values simultaneously yielded his body of work, which displays tremendous understanding of

Cleveland's nuanced levels of consumer taste.<sup>79</sup> During the 1940s Gaertner balanced out his few more daring projects with others of widespread reach targeted to the more traditional consumer. He was approached by Hallmark to produce a series of pastoral winter landscapes for the company's national Christmas card designs in 1946 (Figure 5.3). Certainly, being approached for this commission counters Yannopoulos's assumption that Gaertner was a lesser artist.

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<sup>79</sup> William Matthewson Milliken, *A Time Remembered: A Cleveland Memoir* (Cleveland, OH: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1975), 108.



*Figure 5.3 Carl Gaertner, assorted Hallmark Christmas Cards. In the family collection of Carl Gaertner Jr.*



*Figure 5.4 Details of Carl Gaertner's assorted Hallmark Christmas Cards as pictured in Figure 5.3*

Gaertner continued exhibiting in the May show through the forties and into the fifties, with consistently bustling sales records. Patronage at the May show was strong and the patrons were loyal. Artists like Gaertner who returned each year were met with ready buyers from a group who called themselves the Pickwick Club. Pickwick club membership was unofficial and honorary, indicating who had made a May show purchase for more than two years in a row. The director of the museum during Gaertner's day, William Milliken, recalls this group fondly in his memoir, as is it was patrons like them who kept the May show alive: "It was Julia Raymond who, with Lucia (Mrs. Malcolm L.) McBride and Roberta (Mrs. Benjamin P.) Bole, founded the

Pickwick Club. This was some years after I had begun the annual May Show at the Art Museum in 1919. Anyone automatically belonged to the club who had bought works from a previous May Show, and members were always invited to attend a preview of the new Show each spring.”<sup>80</sup>

The perennial return of passionate May show buyers was not just a boon for Gaertner on a financial level: mass perennial attendance to the May show promoted its reputation and attracted a more vast audience every year, which would result in a number of significant east-coast gallerists encountering Gaertner’s work and securing more elevated commissions and projects. Gaertner’s late-career use of color garnered him praise from east coast art elites. The May 1, 1947 issue of *Art Digest* briefly mentions one such moment. That year Gaertner was invited to participate in the Salmagundi Club’s Open Invited Annual, signaling his acceptance into a New York circle which was often at aesthetic odds with the more regional modes of painting. Though Cleveland’s art market was thriving and Gaertner was celebrated at home, the Salmagundi prize was an important moment for the artist and one which proves he ought to have never slipped out of the twentieth century cannon. His entry into the Salmagundi show won, and it was written in *Art Digest*—a nationally circulated publication—that “The \$300 Salmagundi Award went to Carl Gaertner’s *Running Sea*, noted in his one-man show in January for its solid construction and actual weight of surging green water. “Accolades such as this contributed to a wider clamoring for Gaertner’s works. A whimsical example of this national interest in acquiring his works can be found in the Cleveland Museum of Art’s archive, in which a publication from the High Museum of Art in Atlanta can be found celebrating a successful White Elephant gift sale held to fund the museum’s acquisition of Gaertner’s *Eerie Street Boys*.

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<sup>80</sup> Milliken, *A Time Remembered*, 127.

Gaertner's consistent and prolific participation in the May Show granted him exposure to gallerists on the East Coast who were growing increasingly aware of midwestern talent. The May Show attracted dealers, scholars, and critics from Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New York – three cities in which Gaertner began exhibiting during the 1940s. Yearly travelling shows of Cleveland artists were curated from the annual May Show selections, and it was these shows which introduced Gaertner and his peers to art centers across the country.<sup>81</sup> From these travelling shows Gaertner secured his entrances to major annuals in Philadelphia and Washington D.C., from which was born his relationship with the prominent MacBeth Gallery in New York City.<sup>82</sup> As a result of his May Show successes, he was subsequently invited to participate in group shows in Philadelphia at PAFA and at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. Most notably he was taken on by a gallery in New York. This would have two significant repercussions for his career: validation from the mainstream art market on a national level, and the simple logistical fact that, due to his fear of flying, Gaertner would spend much time on the train to and from New York. Gaertner frequently commuted to the city on the Empire State Express train during these years, and the smaller scale watercolor landscapes and studies he produced during these commutes were integral to both his overall aesthetic and his lower-end art market.<sup>83</sup>

As Gaertner produced more landscape studies, critics began to better appreciate how his careful renderings of nature and form emphasized the humans in his scenes. This is another significant aspect of his late career. Gaertner's sporadic inclusion of the human figure in his compositions is often misunderstood as either as disinterest in human stories or an inability to

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<sup>81</sup> Carl Wittke, *The First Fifty Years: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1916 – 1966* (Cleveland, OH: The John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust with the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1966), 54.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Wolf and Mark Cole, Interviews with the Author, March 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Source for the exact train name is a typewritten biographical note with no date or author in the ArtNEO archive, accessed November 2017.

paint humans well. With increased gallery attention came a much-needed revising of how his contemporary critics understood this aspect of Gaertner's approach. In December 1952, Gaertner's New York representative, the Macbeth Gallery, circulated a leaflet on the artist saying "He characteristically chose a day train when he could, because it revealed to him the changing pageant of the America which was his chosen world. The human figure when it does appear in his paintings is never very important, it is merely an exclamation point, a point of interrogation which gave scale to the landscapes that he made his own." This statement is slightly contradictory: the "exclamation point" nature of Gaertner's human figures is precisely a mark of their importance. Because of the way they forced the perspective of their surroundings, Gaertner's miniscule and loosely rendered human figures are integral to his industrial landscapes. By fully rendering the sites of human activity in his work, Gaertner demonstrates his interest in the lives of Clevelanders. Gaertner's late career landscape studies seem unrelated to the industrial landscapes, but actually offer a compelling glimpse at his passion for the balance between humans, the natural environment, and the built environment. Even if Gaertner's works did not all include the figure, he was artistically capable of drawing and painting humans. There remains anecdotal skepticism in the world of Cleveland School collectors that Gaertner's obsolescence was precipitated in part by an inability to paint people. Re-reading the Flats paintings, the West Virginia farm paintings, and Gaertner's sketches from attending art openings (Figure 5.5) prove the artist had never disregarded the human players in his industrial dramas or scene paintings. The Macbeth gallery pamphlet sketches are incredible glimpses into the inner workings of an artist who was continuously interested in the human stories encapsulated in the ineffable spaces between factories and nature.



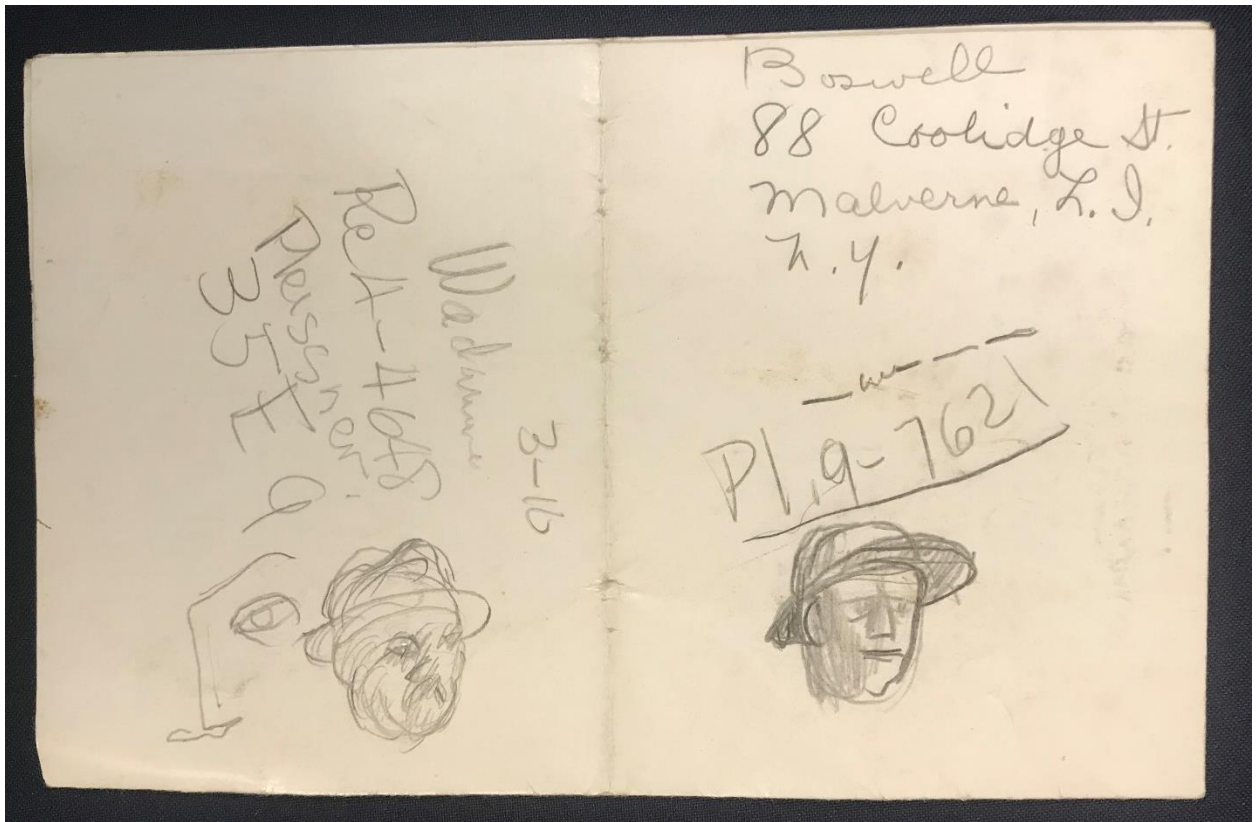


Figure 5.5 Carl Gaertner, untitled sketches from Macbeth Gallery, pencil on gallery pamphlet for opening of Carl Gaertner solo show at Macbeth Gallery, New York, 1947. From the private collection of Carl Gaertner Jr.

Carl Gaertner died suddenly in 1952 of a brain hemorrhage. His loss was a swift blow to the moral of the Cleveland art world and an untimely extinguishing of a nationally accelerated career. Gaertner's lifetime of social, economic and aesthetic boundary crossing came to a head in his last painting and was apparent in the response to his death. *Early Shift*, Gaertner's final work, was lauded in the January 1953 issue of *Art News*, being described as displaying "Rugged solidity of a kind that makes pictures last." This response has arguably been under-discussed in the literature on Gaertner since 2000, and public memory of Gaertner has grown muddled over recent decades. The anecdotal local pride in this artist seems to have remained constant. Gaertner did much to elevate Cleveland's cultural status. Yet scholarly attitudes towards the artist's work

have varied, in part due to the art critical bias towards abstract styles in the mid-twentieth-century, contributing to confusion of how to assess and record the artist's lasting impact. To unravel this web of conflicting art criticism, a starting point is to consider the various cultural influences acting on how art writers formed their own perception of the city of the city.

In the June 20, 1953 edition of the *Cleveland News*, Marie Kirkwood the city's affection for Gaertner with a gentle, positive reading of his art, saying "In his final decade, the sharpness is gone; nature is hoary, mellow, its bald-spots softened by frost, moss, drifts of seed."<sup>84</sup> She is referring to works such as *Swamp Spur*. At this time, the nation has recently emerged victorious in the second world war and is still reaping the economic rewards of being a war time metal provider. Kelly reads Gaertner's late works with optimism: she reads Gaertner's interest in the land as something poetic, the power balance between man, nature and factory having struck a heroic equilibrium. This is largely how Gaertner's works were considered at the time of his death. In the decades that followed, however, Cleveland underwent a series of trials which radically shifted the attitudes locals held towards the Flats and the manufacturing industries. By the mid-1950s Cleveland had begun to accept that years of unregulated dumping into the Cuyahoga River had created a full-blown economic crisis. Between boat accidents in the tight bends of the river, gurgling oil spills, seeping flammable fumes and toxic sludge, the effects of industrial refuse spilling into the river uncontained and minimally cleaned.

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<sup>84</sup> Marie Kirkwood, "Gaertner's Art Reflects Spirit, Youth and Wisdom." *Cleveland News* (Cleveland, OH), June 20, 1953. Clipping accessed in the Cleveland School of Art Scrapbook at the Cleveland Institute of Art Library; no page number available.

Gaertner's contemporary art critics often remembered him as "seeking to heroize industrial subjects."<sup>85</sup> An announcement for a show of Gaertner's at the Steward Gallery waxes eloquent that "A type of Romanticism permeates his compositions via the muted range of color and the carefully placed figure or edifice. Nevertheless, his compositions evoke a nostalgic quality which travels beyond the surface, actually initiating a deeper response from the viewer."<sup>86</sup> Though certainly displaying an admiration for Cleveland and the work which formed its economic identity, Gaertner's paintings never shied away from the harsh realities of pollution in the Flats. Much of his signature ambiance stemmed from his use of lime green paint to depict the river. In the historical context of expressionism and fauvism, it is reasonable to assume that either his contemporary viewers were in denial about the river's toxicity, did not gather that he was commenting on it—instead assuming his non-local color was an ode to the avant-garde—or perhaps, in the case of his wealthier patrons with homes further east in the city, did not notice.

Fifty years later, Cleveland on the whole had come to grips with the failures of their city to maintain the tenuous balance of power between themselves, factory and nature in the Flats. Over the course of one hundred years the river was known to spontaneously erupt into surface fires. Despite this jarring regularity, it took a particularly catastrophic surface burn in the late 1950s for the city to take action. In response to this catastrophe, the government enacted the EPA and Cleveland developed a reputation for being "the mistake on the lake." From there, the national steel economy entered a decline with the Flats following suit. Throughout the 70s and 80s many of the factories were consolidated, relocated, or—a greater blow to the city's dignity—bought out, closed, and torn down to be sold as scrap metal. Following these years of hardships, art

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<sup>85</sup> Fahlman, Schruers and Graham, *Wonders of Work and Labor*, 27

<sup>86</sup> *Carl Gaertner* (Dallas, Tx: The Steward Gallery, 1980), 1. Held in the Cleveland Museum of Art Ingalls Library Archives.

criticism regarding Gaertner's works took a darker turn. In 2000 Charles Yannopoulos put forth a new, popular reading of Gaertner's industrial scenes as being foreboding warnings with darkly philosophical undertones. One line suggests that Gaertner's factory scenes were a metaphor for global conflict: "His landscapes became barren and desolate, as if he conflated the Ohio countryside and the Hudson River Valley with battlefields of World War I, barely healed from the scars of combat."<sup>87</sup> He proceeds to interpret the painting *Shoreway Construction* as an embodiment of atomic anxiety: "But in the absence of overt references to the nuclear age, Gaertner's grim vision seems driven more by something inside the artist than in the world around him. Indeed, the darkness was nothing new in his work..."<sup>88</sup> It would seem that the ebb and flow of his critical acclaim correlates to the ebb and flow of the strength of Cleveland's economy, specifically as it regards the steel manufacturing industry.

Ironically, such melodramatic readings of Gaertner's earlier works contributed to a return to the artist in the art market. Driven now by nostalgia for Cleveland's industrial glory rather than a resonating pride in it, Collectors and dealers have resurrected Gaertner's art market. A further point of irony is present in attitudes today regarding Gaertner's market. It may seem to some cultural historians that the almost total absence of Gaertner paintings from the secondary market in the last forty years is the result of a lack in interest. However, I believe that Gaertner's secondary market has been comparatively slow precisely because of how beloved his paintings are. In 1953 shortly after his death the year prior, the Cleveland Museum of Art staged a full career retrospective, an honor to any artist, as a memorial. In the CMA's archive, the curatorial file for this exhibition overflows with effusive letters of financial and personal support from

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<sup>87</sup> Charles Yannopoulos, "Dark Reality: Carl Gaertner's Paintings Go Beyond Steel and Smokestacks to Show a Bleaker Side of Cleveland," *Cleveland Scene* (Cleveland, OH), April 20, 2000, 47.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

friends, students, and patrons of Gaertner, many with pledges to offset costs associated with staging a large museum exhibition. These clippings also preserve a certain bittersweet energy surrounding the show: a widespread dismay at the community's loss of Gaertner himself, and concurrent surge in appreciation for his paintings. In one internal memo a secretary makes a request for two thousand additional stamps, as the projected volume of five thousand invitations was not enough to meet regional demand for the exhibition.<sup>89</sup> There was a fast boom in sales during and slightly after the 1953 memorial exhibition. Price lists for this exhibition survive in the CMA's archive and show a range of low and moderate prices. Most fall well under one thousand dollars, spanning a fairly even mix of large oils, mid-size gouaches, and small drawings, with a considerably higher price of five thousand dollars for *Early Shift*, his final painting.

Documents in the Cleveland Museum of Art's curatorial files trace this fascinating conundrum of supply and demand for Gaertner's works. To stage this exhibition the museum took loans and consignments from current owners of Gaertner's paintings; with the aid of Gaertner's widow Adele, the museum also introduced a small flood of works from the artist's collection as well. Loan documents outlining the scope and parameters of the show as well as the prices show Gaertner's widow Adelle's eager loaning of works but hesitance to sell them. This would be a double edge sword: Adelle Gaertner's reticence to relinquish her family treasures made the paintings even more rare commodities—an economic boost for Gaertner's market--and great for increasing the anticipation of securing loans of Gaertners to museums, where people were still curious to see them. This added to their value when they did surface for purchase but simultaneously squelched the supply of important circulating Gaertners. As the large-scale

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<sup>89</sup> Memo from archive

scenes of the Flats and similar paintings from Pittsburgh and West Virginia had been purchased into private collections during or before the memorial exhibition, they were passed down through family lines and only surfaced occasionally on the art market. This also created the effect that there was little interest in buying Gaertner's work after 1970, when really, the cherished images were enjoyed in a way that strangely undercut the artist's continuing success. As there was a much larger supply of small watercolors, gouaches and preparatory sketches, and as Adele Gaertner slowly released additional such works in batches over the following years, it is highly likely that the national art market began to associate Gaertner solely with these more commonly circulating small and incomplete works.

The ironic surge for Gaertner's work and the resulting lack of Gaertners on the art market, considered together with a present day nostalgic swing in Cleveland cultural life, a renewed civic compassion for the working class, and a push from within the art world to expand the cannon of American visual history to rectify gross negligence of the past, beckons for a return to the work of Gaertner in art historical scholarship. In particular, Gaertner's industrial landscapes from 1923-1952 are ripe for art and cultural historians of the American twentieth century, for how they embody the conscientious challenging and crossing of social, aesthetic, and economic boundaries. Gaertner's work captures a distinctive vision of civic life, demonstrates how Cultural Front ideals permeated deep into American life, and reveals the fascinating inner workings of a cross-class art market in a prominent regional economic center. For cultural historians Gaertner's works invite a consideration of the way romanticism and industrialism wrestled in visual and material culture. For Art Historians, Gaertner's paintings between 1923-1952 beg an expanded canon which relies less on stringent definitions of genres, and takes more consideration from regional identity markers and their influence on regional and

national art movements. In revisiting outmoded notions of what career rhythms correlate to an artist's legitimacy or enduring success, Gaertner's aesthetic consistency should not be misinterpreted as an unwillingness to explore contemporary art idioms. Abstract Expressionism and other avant garde modalities, though significant contributors to the shape of American visual culture during the mid-century, often exists atop a false hierarchy in histories of American art, clouding our ability to read nuanced, individualized hybridizations from artists interested in the modern yet deeply rooted in their regional vernacular. Gaertner matters because he documented sites of personal and local importance. His images of the Flats specifically engrained themselves into Cleveland's cultural consciousness for embodying aspects of the city which represented aspects of the viewer's individual identities. Few artists during Gaertner's time or since have gazed upon these sites and structures in quite the same way he did—with an eye at once penetrating and transcendent.

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<sup>90</sup> A full copy of all the Smithsonian materials is held on microfilm at the Cleveland Institute of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, where I accessed them; however their copyright statement says I need to cite it as belonging to the Smithsonian, where the originals are kept.

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