

Johann Berthelsen: An American Artist

by Frank Burke

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1883, Johann Berthelsen immigrated to the United States at the age of seven and settled with his mother and siblings in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a port city on Lake Michigan. Fascinated with drawing and painting from a young age, he never received formal training. As a young man, he was encouraged by the landscape artist, Svend Svendsen, whose tonalist rural snowscapes appealed to Berthelsen.

Having abandoned formal schooling after the fifth grade, he worked various

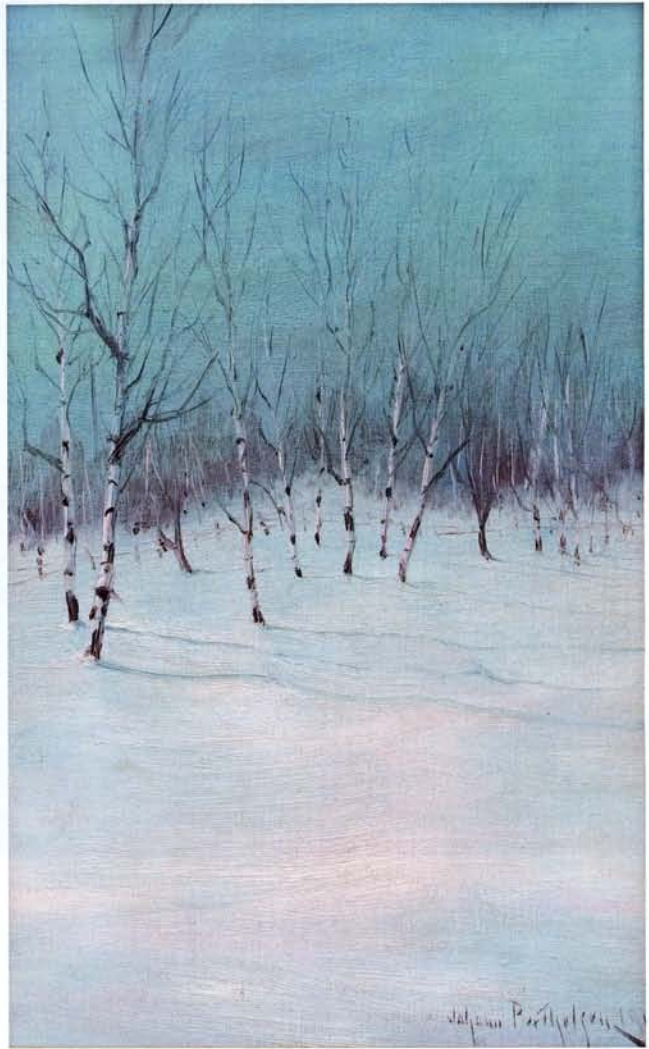
Johann Berthelsen: An American Artist is on view from November 16, 2014 through January 18, 2015 at the Rahr-West Art Museum, 610 North Eighth Street, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, 54220, 920-686-3090, www.rahrwestartmuseum.org. The exhibition will travel to the Richmond Art Museum, Richmond, Indiana, May 30 through July 25, 2015.

jobs before moving to Chicago as a young man to pursue a career in theatre. Offered a full scholarship by William Ziegfeld, brother of producer Florenz Ziegfeld, he studied at their Chicago Musical College. Upon graduation, he enjoyed a successful career as an opera and concert singer, touring the U.S. and Canada.

In 1913, at the age of thirty, he became the youngest-ever head of the voice depart-

ment at the Indianapolis Conservatory of Music. He also became part of the city's social and artistic circle that included Metropolitan Opera tenor Orville Harrold, the writers Booth Tarkington and Theodore Dreiser, the poet James Whitcomb Riley, the industrialist Carl G. Fisher, and the individual who became his life-long best friend, the portraitist Wayman Adams. Though vastly different in style, Adams and





All illustrated images are by Johann Berthelsen, collection of Lee Berthelsen.

ABOVE: *Still life*, c. 1960s, o/c, 36 x 24.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Wisconsin Woods*, 1915, o/c, 16 x 10.

RIGHT: *Paupers Drive*, c. 1960s, o/c, 28 x 38.

LEFT: *The Hellgate*, pastel, c. 1930, 18 x 23.

Berthelsen often worked together and commented on each other's technique. Adams would paint over twenty notable portraits of his friend, including a life-sized canvas depicting Berthelsen about to take the stage for a concert.

In 1920, Berthelsen and Adams left Indianapolis to establish themselves in New York. Adams' studio received commissions from many important figures including Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, while Berthelsen established a highly successful voice studio, attracting leading singers from Broadway and the operatic stage. However, throughout the 1920s,



Berthelsen continued to develop his artistic style. In 1925, he was elected to the American Watercolor Society, but also devoted

time to pastels and mastered the medium, using only his finger and the chalks.

Berthelsen's exceptional work attracted



national recognition. His subjects included New York scenes, especially views of Central Park and the East River. Although he rarely dated his artworks (and then usually

only if they were inscribed on the back to an individual), his Central Park pastels can be approximately timed by virtue of the changes depicted in the surrounding New

York skyline. His nocturnes, especially those depicting boat traffic on the East River, clearly show the influence of Whistler. As his style matured, his interpretations became more Impressionistic.

With the coming of the Great Depression in 1929, Berthelsen's voice studio quickly evaporated and, now with a wife and three children, he was compelled to sell most of his possessions. In an effort to support himself and his family, he turned to art. He quickly discovered that the paintings that sold best were his scenes of New York in the snow.

Despite his Impressionistic style, Berthelsen's New York paintings, which covered the period from the early '30s until his death in 1972, were meticulous in reflecting changes in the skyline and in such details as automobiles and fashions. This fidelity to a place and a period has accounted for his popularity among New Yorkers as well as art enthusiasts.

In time Berthelsen's work caught the attention of a number of prominent people, and his paintings appeared in the collections of CBS president William Paley, singer Dinah Shore, columnist Walter Winchell, and Broadway star Ethel Mer-



ABOVE: *The Old Fifth Avenue Bank, New York City, 1955, o/c, 24 x 36.*

RIGHT: *United Nations Building, New York City, c. early 1950s, o/c, 20 x 24.*

ABOVE LEFT: *St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, c. 1960s, o/c, 16 x 12.*

ABOVE FAR LEFT: *Central Park Lake and Capstow Bridge Looking Towards, 5th Avenue Hotels, c. 1960s, o/c, 30 x 25.*

LEFT: *Rockbound Stadium, c. late 1940s, o/c, 20 x 24.*

man. Frank Sinatra was especially impressed with his work and owned over thirty of his paintings. Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary General of the United Nations, asked for a rendering of the UN building, which he placed above his desk.

A move to New Milford, Connecticut, in 1942 was the start of an eight-year sojourn that would reveal Berthelsen as a masterful landscape painter. His winter and summer scenes in the Connecticut countryside provide a superb counterpoint to the urban paintings.

By 1950, Berthelsen's popularity necessitated a move back to Manhattan and later



to Greenwich, Connecticut—within easy traveling distance from the New York galleries. In 1971, he was struck by a hit-and-

run driver on Madison Avenue. The shock of the accident brought on a rapid physical
(continued on page 127)

Berthelsen (continued from page 63)

decline, and he died in 1972. Today, his work is represented in over fifteen museums and, internationally, in numerous private collections.

As Berthelsen's recognition increased, so did the value of his paintings. In order to provide a resource for galleries, collectors, and museums to authenticate his father's work, Lee Berthelsen established The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, LLC. The Conservancy's mission includes bringing the artwork, as well as information about the artist, to a wider public. A documentary on Berthelsen's life, produced by the Conservancy, continues to be shown on public television, and a regular newsletter provides scholarship on the artist and links the Conservancy with Berthelsen collectors and enthusiasts. In addition, the website, www.berthelsenart.com, contains video features about the artist.

In the words of Lee Berthelsen, "My father was an exceptionally generous person and as a singer, teacher, and artist understood the joy of communicating with the public. These exhibitions are an important moment in fulfilling both the Conservancy's purpose and my father's wishes."

Strand (continued from page 105)

tographs with texts written throughout the region's history—ranging from explorers' accounts and political tracts to letters, poems, diaries, and sermons. The result, *Time in New England*, was published in 1950.

In 1950 Strand and his soon-to-be wife, Hazel Kingsbury, relocated to France. They purchased a home in the village of Orgeval, northwest of Paris, in 1955, and remained there until the artist's death in 1976. Remarkably, this is where Strand had his first personal darkroom.

In 1963, Strand was invited to Ghana at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah, its first president following the end of British rule. Fascinated by Ghana's democracy during these years, Strand was excited to photograph a place undergoing rapid political change and modernization. Portraiture was central to the project and the project, led to the publication of *Ghana: An African Portrait* (1976).

In Strand's later years, he would increasingly turn his attention close to his home in Orgeval, often addressing the countless discoveries he could make within his own garden. There he produced a re-

markable series of still lifes. These were at times reflective of earlier work, but also forward-looking in their exceptional compositions that depict the beauty of myriad textures, suggest free-flowing movement, and evoke a quiet lyricism.

The last major retrospective dedicated to Strand was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1971. In 2010, the Philadelphia Museum of Art began to acquire the core collection of photographs by Paul Strand. Together with other photographs already owned by the Museum, the acquisition makes the Philadelphia Museum of Art the world's most comprehensive repository for the study of his work.

Forsyth (continued from page 125)

he never hesitated to express. His habit of firing off letters in the heat of the moment alienated friends and associates. His family seemed to take his diatribes in stride. A lucid writer, he had a fondness for waxing eloquent, often sarcastically, about the artwork of others. He was not above competitive jealousy, sometimes insulting fellow students' work in Munich, or later denigrating colleagues in his professional life.

He was quick to take offense, often assuming the worst of others, going on the attack before finding out the motivations or reasons behind an individual's actions. At his worst Forsyth was judgmental and self-righteous, ready to condemn on superficial grounds. Also a terrible worrier, he paradoxically procrastinated when it came to important business correspondence. But Forsyth was not unaware of his own personality flaws. His correspondence with family and close friends revealed perceptive self-humor. He wasn't averse to playing the fool for a laugh. He loved to be in front of an audience and excelled at giving spontaneous public presentations.

Although they maintained civility, T. C. Steele and Forsyth never enjoyed a warm friendship after a territorial squabble over student exclusivity at the Indiana School of Art in 1894. Steele and Forsyth's personalities could not have been more dissimilar. T. C. Steele was a diplomat; tactful, deliberate, and sensitive to others. He cultivated respectful relationships with his patrons and worked hard to accommodate them. Forsyth declared his strong opinions publicly as well as privately. Rarely considering consequences, he said whatever he thought, even to those whose support was badly

needed. As artist Edward August Bell commented in 1893, Forsyth was eternally "spoiling for a fight."² However, the two were interminably linked as members of the Hoosier Group, and worked in tandem to help found the Society of Western Artists in 1896.

Forsyth's reluctance or inability to play politics or kowtow to several of the city's more privileged citizens didn't suppress his need to be among people. His interest in individuals from all walks of life attracted numerous friends. He loved joining groups and organizations, always wanting to be part of the action. A leader of the Bohe Club in his early days; an active member of the Irvington Group, Literary Club, Portfolio Club, Century Club, Optimist Club, and Masonic Order; and an uninhibited thespian in two different amateur acting groups, he easily bonded with others. Forsyth's household kept an "open door" policy, welcoming the children's neighborhood friends as well as Herron students, faculty, fellow artists, relatives and acquaintances. Lively dinners with opinionated conversation were the norm.

A self-educated man, Forsyth was an avid reader of history, art, poetry, and politics; three walls of his library were crammed with books, many of them in German. Perhaps due to his exposure to opera in Munich, music, particularly opera, was a life-long passion. But visual art was his calling and life-long work, and his contribution, as part of the Hoosier Group, to Indiana's fledgling culture was enormous.

These artists weren't concerned about being "painters of their time" but more about continuing a tradition, built upon the shoulders of other artists before them. The Hoosier Group artists were the Regionalist painters of our country. They captured the sense of place in midwestern America with honesty and originality, pioneering a unique American visual identity and artistic independence from Europe's pervasive influence.

Interviewed extensively, Forsyth also wrote about the significance and meaning of his fellow Indiana artists' work. "The Hoosier Group...has brought a certain distinction to its State, has almost founded a school, has done creditable work that may be more sought after and treasured as the years go by than it is today unless history fails to repeat itself. Above all it has held steadfastly to an ideal."³ That ideal was to