

Life on the Lakeshore

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Johann Berthelsen occasionally painted his family in his work. In this picture, Berthelsen, his wife, their children and their dog enjoy a winter outing at Central Park in New York City. SUBMITTED

A Brush with greatness

World-renowned American Impressionist
Johann Berthelsen cherished Manitowoc roots

By Frank Burke
For HTR Media

Just as Monet is primarily known for his paintings of water lilies, and John Singer Sargent for his portraits of society people, the great American Impressionist Johann Berthelsen is most noted for oils that capture the beauty and excitement of New York City in the snow.

Collected by such luminaries as Frank Sinatra (who owned more than 30 of his works), publisher William Ran-

ON THE NET

For more information about Johann Berthelsen, visit www.berthelsenart.com.

dolph Hearst and UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, Berthelsen's work is also prized for the manner in which he captured the mood and spirit of New York City from 1920 to the early 1970s.

His attention to detail in both the architecture and the surroundings — unusual for an Impressionist — provides a vivid panorama of the growth and development of the New York scene.

Unknown to many curators, collectors, and experts is the fact that

both the man and his art were heavily influenced by the city in which he was raised and which he would forever consider his hometown — Manitowoc.

Berthelsen's son, Lee, said: "My father and his brothers emigrated to the United States with their mother from Denmark. They initially settled with her sister in Manistee, Mich., but

shortly moved to Manitowoc at the urging of her brother, Capt. Paul Nielsen, who owned and captained the schooner Emma L. Nielsen, named

for his late wife."

In a brief autobiography written for his children when he was 85, Berthelsen vividly described his arrival in Manitowoc.

"It was in the winter-time," he wrote. "From the Eighth Street Bridge where the boat landed, we walked up the street to Washington Street. ... It was a moonlit night, beautiful snow. I remember walking single file in the snow about two blocks to my uncle Paul's home, and in the distance you could only see the glow of the fire, the beautiful coal fire in the coal stove. ... They had a nice big home there, and we remained there for

See ARTIST, Page C2



Johann Berthelsen painted this scene of winter shoppers along Fifth Avenue in New York City. SUBMITTED



Johann Berthelsen painted this scene of Fifth Avenue and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. SUBMITTED



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Artist

Continued from Page C1

awhile.”

A short time later, the family moved to a house at 611 N. Seventh St.

Berthelsen's mother, Karen, a skilled and experienced nurse, was shortly in demand as a nurse and midwife. The Berthelsens were related to the Rahr family and, occasionally, when his mother was called for an emergency or a delivery, Berthelsen would stay with them.

Because the young Berthelsen initially spoke no English, school was difficult.

“The children would always make fun of me, you know,” he wrote, “and so some of them would say, ‘What’s your name,’ and in order to tell them I couldn’t speak English, I would say, ‘nothings’ and for some years I was called Johnny Nothings. I never resented that, although the ‘nothings’ hung onto me for a long, long time.”

Added Lee Berthelsen: “As a child, my father was very energetic and a little wild. His mother had to take away his bicycle for fear he would hurt himself. He was a favorite of Father Rogers at St. James Episcopal Church and often pumped the organ for him. Realizing my father’s considerable intelligence, and seeking to instill some discipline, Father Rogers obtained a scholarship for him at St. Johns Military Academy. Unfortunately, he refused to go and left school after the fifth grade. That was as far as he ever went with formal schooling.”

In those days, it was not uncommon for young children to go to work, and Berthelsen quickly found a position in a chair factory. One day, while working at the band saw, he became distracted and accidentally cut off the index finger of his right hand. Fortunately, a local doctor was able to reattach it successfully, but the nerves were severed and he was unable to move it.

Ironically, this was the hand with which he held his brushes.

Early on, Berthelsen developed a love of the arts — especially painting and drawing — although few of his early works survive. Those that do reflect his interest in capturing snowscapes. Long walks in the surrounding country and in the Wisconsin woods resulted in a deep appreciation of the power of snow to transform the landscape and alter the colors of earth, trees and sky.

At age 18, Berthelsen

left Manitowoc for Sturgeon Bay, where he obtained work in a barber-shop. Always an enthusiastic participant in amateur musicals and theatricals, he seriously considered becoming an actor.

Berthelsen eventually moved to Chicago, where he met an old friend, Carl Cochems, whose brother, Eddy, was a noted athlete, coach and inventor of the forward pass. When he confided to Cochems about his theatrical ambitions, Cochems laughed and reportedly said, “Why, you shouldn’t study acting. You ought to study opera with your voice.”

Shortly thereafter, a local voice teacher recommended him to the Chicago Musical College that was owned by the Ziegfeld brothers. Following graduation, he toured the United States and Canada in opera and sang on the concert stage to very favorable notices.

Travel took a heavy toll, and in 1913 he was pleased to accept an offer from the Indianapolis Conservatory of Music to become the youngest-ever head of its Voice Department. All the while, he continued to paint and became best friends with portraitist Wayman Adams, who would, in the course of a distinguished career, paint several presidents and Supreme Court justices.

In 1920, they moved to New York, where Berthelsen established a highly successful vocal studio. Among his pupils were leading opera singers, Broadway stars and the woman who would later become his wife. He continued his artwork, concentrating on watercolors and pastels, and in 1924 was elected to membership in the American Watercolor Society.

With the advent of the Great Depression, his vocal studio dwindled, and he was forced to find another means of supporting his wife and, by now, three children. An artist friend told him, “If you could do in oil what you can do in pastel, you will be a great success.” Berthelsen immediately dedicated himself to refining his technique and was shortly selling works to galleries — though in those troubled times, they barely brought enough for a bag of groceries.

Said Lee Berthelsen: “We moved frequently, and I can recall my father receiving notices that we were about to be dispossessed. One Christmas, when there was no money for presents, he distracted us by doing a painting of a tree brilliantly decorated and a mountain of colorfully wrapped gifts. We were



An early painting by Johann Berthelsen of a grove of birch trees in Manitowoc. SUBMITTED

never hungry, but we came awfully close.”

Slowly, Berthelsen's work began to catch on. Its warmth and accessibility were quickly appreciated by gallery owners who recommended him to wealthy patrons who wanted pictures of their homes. Characteristically, Berthelsen depicted them as they would appear at the height of a blizzard.

His reputation grew, and by the post-war period the family was living in much more comfortable circumstances due, in large part, to his growing list of distinguished clients.

Louis Armstrong commissioned a picture of Times Square, where he was appearing at the Paramount Theatre, as an anniversary gift for his wife.

Dag Hammarskjöld asked for a portrait of the UN building that he displayed behind his desk and titled “Tranquil-

ity.”

When Frank Sinatra heard that Berthelsen had formerly taught voice, he reportedly confided to him about a vocal problem he was having, and Berthelsen helpfully obliged.

By the time of his death in 1972, Berthelsen's reputation was secure and growing, so much so that forgeries of his work were becoming a problem.

Lee Berthelsen, after a distinguished career in the hospitality industry, was determined to address his father's legacy and, in 2009, founded The Johann Berthelsen Conservancy, LLC. Located in Milwaukee, where Lee Berthelsen lives today, the conservancy exists to expand an appreciation of his father's work among the public, to provide a resource for the authentication of his paintings, and to ensure that his legacy passes intact to another genera-

tion.

A documentary video on his life has been shown multiple times on Wisconsin Public Television, and an exhibit of his work at a major New York venue is under discussion.

Said Lee Berthelsen: “As often as he could, whether he could afford to or not, my father would come back to Manitowoc to visit his mother. He was well aware of the influence the area had on him, both as an individual and as an artist. His experiences with his Uncle Paul and his love of the Lake Michigan waterfront was later

reflected in his pictures of watercraft on the East River and New York Harbor. He knew where navigation lights should be placed, what colors they should be, and how the wake spreads out from the prow of a ship.

“His snow scenes reflect the Wisconsin lake-effect storms with their heavy winds and large flakes, and the mood the paintings depict of a place that, like his hometown, is as much a small town as a great city. My father might have left Manitowoc, but without a doubt, he always carried a part of it with him.”



Johann Berthelsen painted this scene of the skating rink at Rockefeller Center at Christmas. SUBMITTED

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