



Whitney Museum of American Art

Oscar Bluemner's "Expressions of a Silk Town (Paterson Centre)" features a view of Paterson from the Passaic River.

Bluemner: Landscape as emotional prism

Continued from D1

terson Centre)." Completed in 1915 (a nearly identical companion piece was finished the year before), "Expressions" looks upon downtown Paterson from a rocky bed in the middle of the Passaic River. A trestle bridge crosses in the distance. Just beyond it, a cluster of silk mills hugs the high walls cut by the riverbed. The domed tower of what appears to be Paterson's city hall stands by the side. A red smokestack rises in the painting's center as if asserting itself.

Although he modeled his painting on careful studies of landscapes, Bluemner didn't paint landscapes simply to be true to the region's geography. Landscapes for him were prisms through which he could capture and express his emotions, Haskell says, and this is one aspect that made him such a vanguard artist. "He really came to feel this idea of landscape as human theater," she says.

But the mood of his paintings is one Haskell describes as "absolute loneliness." In his more than two decades of work, he apparently never let a human figure appear in his landscapes. Factory windows are made from ghostly brushstrokes. Bluemner crammed entire cityscapes into single 30-inch-by-40-inch perspectives, but every element of the painting feels isolated

from the other. The artist longed for human connections, Haskell says, but he seemed unable to make them in real life. Painting was the only way he could express himself.

Bluemner was born in Germany (then called Prussia) in 1867, and he trained to become an architect. In 1891, while studying in Berlin, he won the Royal Medal for Architecture, one the country's prestigious academics honors.

But German militarism had been growing under Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Bluemner, ever the sensitive soul, faced conscription into the armed forces. Disillusioned, he fled to the United States in 1892.

He resumed his architectural career almost immediately. He designed several New York structures that are still standing, including a pair of Upper East Side townhouses and the Bronx Borough Courthouse. However, a seven-year legal dispute over the authorship of the Courthouse design soured Bluemner's taste for the business. He quit architecture and took up painting full time.

Bluemner's success seemed secure because he mingled with some of the best company of New York's art circles. He was particularly close to the photographer and patron Alfred Stieglitz, who ran the historically important 291 Gallery. "An association with

OSCAR BLUEMNER: A PASSION FOR COLOR

Where: Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Ave. at 75th Street

When: Through Sunday, Feb. 12 (Museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays)

Cost: \$12 adults, \$9.50 seniors 62 and older and students with valid ID. Fridays from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. is "Pay what you wish."

Info: Visit www.whitney.org or call (800) WHITNEY

Stieglitz almost certainly guaranteed fame," Haskell says.

But the reaction to Bluemner's first solo exhibit in 1915 set the tone for his career. He showed all Jersey landscapes and the critics were horrified. "No one had painted factories and landscapes with such violent colors," Haskell says.

Their opinions were particularly shaped by the general anti-German malaise, stoked by World War I. Critics accused Bluemner of making political statements against capitalism. One even invoked a grand hyperbole, describing Bluemner's paintings as filled with "a malevolent spirit of hate," Haskell says.

"The bottom line was that absolutely nothing sold," Haskell says. Bluemner moved his family to Bloomfield the following year.

Haskell notes that Bluemner's personal life was haunted by his tendency to retreat. Rather than fight back, or face responsibility, the artist shrank into society's margins. While in New Jersey, he uprooted his family every six months to avoid creditors collecting back rent, Haskell says.

As his work became more expressive and visually complex, Bluemner grew more hostile to the outside world. He later severed his ties to Stieglitz after his patron sent him a storage bill for \$2.75, which Bluemner refused to pay.

Bluemner's wife, Lina, died in 1926, presumably from afflictions caused by poverty. "She sort of faded away," Haskell says. That year, Bluemner moved his son and daughter to South Braintree, Mass., although he continued to paint New Jersey landscapes until the 1930s.

By the mid-1930s, disease and injury had worn away at Bluemner. In January 1938, nearly blind, crippled and incapacitated, the 70-year-old Bluemner slit his throat and died.

Reach Ed Beeson at (973) 569-7042 or beeson@northjersey.com

BEST BETS

SPEAKING OF PAINTING PATERSON: The Passaic County Historical Society presents an exhibit of paintings by Paterson jazz guitarist John "Bucky" Pizzarelli.

"Music to his Eyes" opens tonight at the Lambert Castle Museum, 3 Valley Rd. in

Paterson. PCHS director Rich Sgritta describes Pizzarelli's style as "folksy" and "whimsical." One of the most striking of the more than 30 works on display, Sgritta says, is of hundreds of schoolchildren watching the Hindenburg blimp fly over the Great Falls of Paterson sometime be-

fore it famously exploded over the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in 1937.

The exhibit runs until March 26. Pizzarelli will attend tonight's opening reception from 7 to 9. \$5 adults/\$4 seniors/\$3 children. (973) 247-0085. — Ed Beeson