

American Moderns: The Legacy of Marguerite & Gerry Lenfest

by Louise Feder

At the turn of the century, artists began to rebel against traditional modes of expression and exhibition. Although it is frequently associated with Impressionism, the Delaware Valley region also launched some of the most important developments that transformed American art in the twentieth century. A remarkable gift of twenty-seven works from Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest—first with five modernist paintings alongside a significant group of Pennsylvania Impressionist paintings in 1999 and then another gift of twenty-eight more paintings and sculptures in 2010—enabled the Michener Art Museum

to highlight the significant contributions to the development of modern art in America as seen through the prism of our region.

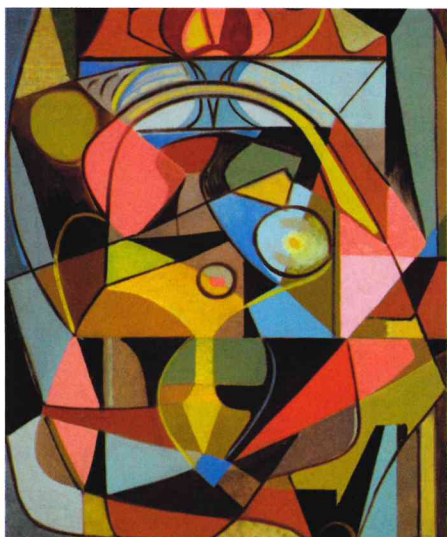
Artists such as Charles Frederick Ramsey, Louis Stone, Charles Evans, Lloyd Ney, and Charles Rosen were actively engaged in the artistic dialogue that resulted in major shifts in American art at mid-century. Influenced by the innovative achievements of the European avant-garde, these painters experimented with such modernist trends as Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Biomorphism, Synchromism, Precisionism, and Neo-Plasticism.

It is worth noting that by the time Modernism came to the New Hope art colony in the 1920s via American artists re-

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locating to Bucks County from Philadelphia and New York as well as returning to the United States from trips abroad in Europe, the prevailing style in the greater Bucks County region was still Impressionism. Long past its years of shocking critics and viewers, the general Impressionist style had become accepted, adopted, and quite stylish. Residents of the Delaware Valley such as Daniel Garber, William Lathrop, and Ed-





All illustrated images are from the James A. Michener Art Museum, gift of Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest.

ABOVE: Louis K. Stone, *Abstraction*, 1938, o/c, 24 x 20.

RIGHT: Bror Julius Olsson Nordfeldt, *The Pigs and the Crows*, c. 1938, o/board, 26 x 32.

BELOW RIGHT: John Fulton Folinsbee, *Canal Bridge, New Hope*, o/c, 24 x 30.

LEFT: R.A.D. Miller, *Rooftops, New Hope*, c. 1931, o/c, 20 x 24.



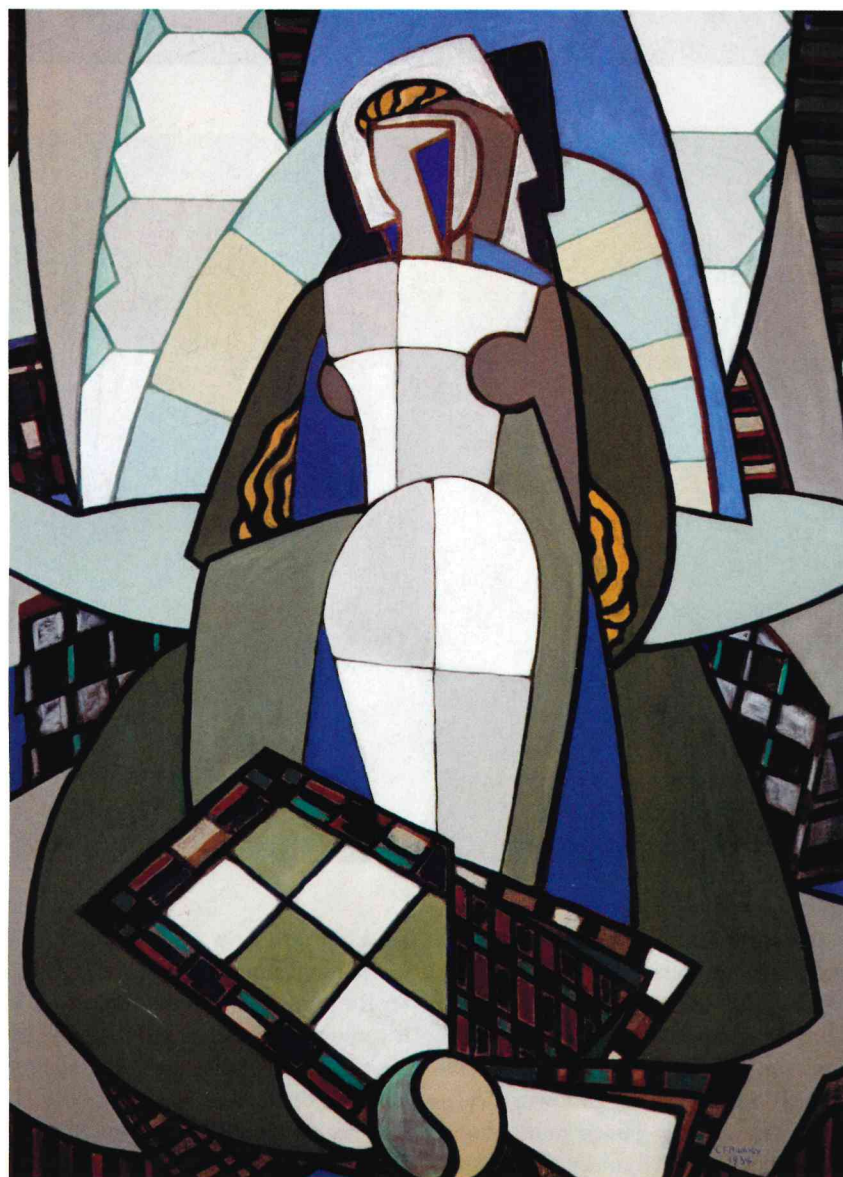
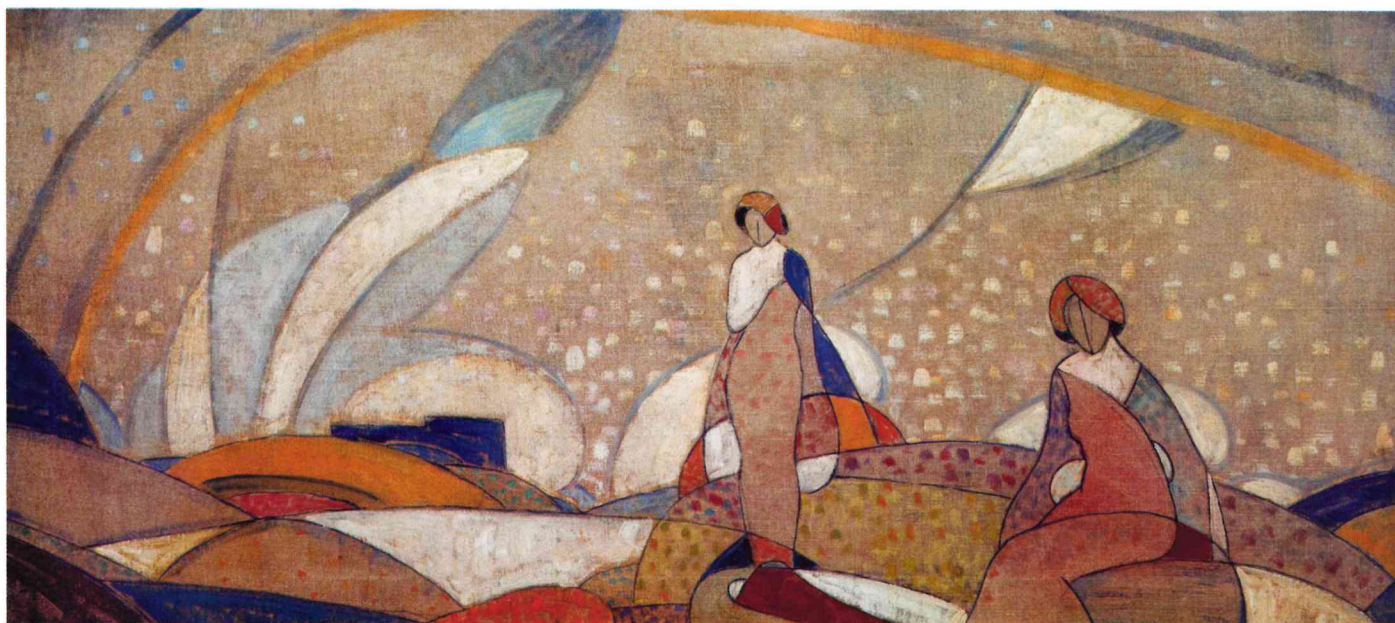
ward Redfield considered themselves landscape painters who were creating, as Guy Pene du Bois wrote in 1915, “our first truly national expression...began under the influence of the French Impressionists. It has restricted itself patriotically to the painting of the typical American landscape.”¹

It is thanks to these established artists’ success and reputation that New Hope became a destination for emerging artists, but when the modern painters and sculptors arrived, there seems to have been an innate desire to subtly separate themselves and respect the old guard from a distance. The two camps were friendly, but while the Impressionists mainly lived outside the busy center of town in order to immerse themselves within the natural landscapes that were the subjects of their paintings, the Modernists gravitated toward the town’s heart, dubbing the area around Mechanic Street the artistic “Latin Quarter.”²

Apart from some grumbling over this new group’s propensity for wearing sneakers and listening to jazz music, New Hope seemed big enough for the two factions for

quite some time. This may have been due in part to the Impressionists’ dominance; they remained the reason most people knew about the region’s painting up through the early 1920s, with only a few Modernist painters settling in town. However, the new arrivals gained momentum when painter Charles Ramsey established

New Hope’s first art gallery, The Blue Mask, in the mid-twenties. It became a center for modernist activity, especially when it came to abstraction. Though he began his career with a focus on the allegorical nude, by the time he settled in New Hope, Ramsey was primarily concerned with and interested in painting the abstracted female



ABOVE: Charles F. Ramsey, *Ladies in the Valley*, c. 1925, o/c, 18 x 40.

LEFT: Charles F. Ramsey, *The Modern Woman*, 1934, o/c, 40 x 30.

RIGHT: Joseph Meierhans, *The Jazz Trio*, 1942, o/c, 40 x 50.

BELOW RIGHT: Charles Evans, *Yellow Extraction*, c. 1952, o/c, 40 x 46.

form. This subject appeared in his work even through the 1930s with works such as *The Modern Woman*, which were inspired by Fernand Léger's automatous female figures of the same period.

The dynamic between the Impressionists and Modernists shifted slightly in 1930 with the second annual Phillips' Mill juried art exhibition. Though now in its eightieth year, at the time the exhibition was conceived of as a burgeoning tradition-to-be, showcasing the best in local art-making. In 1929, its inaugural year, one hundred and twenty-five works were showcased and judged by well-known area Impressionist painters, such as John Folinsbee, Daniel Garber, and Rae Sloan Bredin, generating excitement within the local artistic community.³

So, when the call for entries was posted the following year, modernist painter Ney submitted a painting in his typical palette of vibrant red, yellow, and blue tones for consideration in the exhibit. The jury members, all of whom still preferred the Impressionist style over Modernist work, concluded that his painting did not fit their vision for the exhibition.⁴



Undeterred, Ney and his modernist friends, such as Ramsey and Stone among others, dubbed themselves the “New Group” (later the “Independents”) and quickly put together a display of Modern paintings to rival the selection of traditional, safe, Impressionist paintings at the Phillips’ Mill. Their exhibition was held in a local abandoned prison and opened the day before Phillips’ Mill, thereby stealing most of the initial press attention and publicity.⁵

The rival exhibition not only furthered the careers of included artists, with Ney notably garnering attention from New York critics, but it also furthered conversation between the two camps. This led to friendly, regular debates over issues of light, composition, and style and also may have offered an opportunity to hold a mirror up to regional artists who had started as Impressionist painters but whose style had

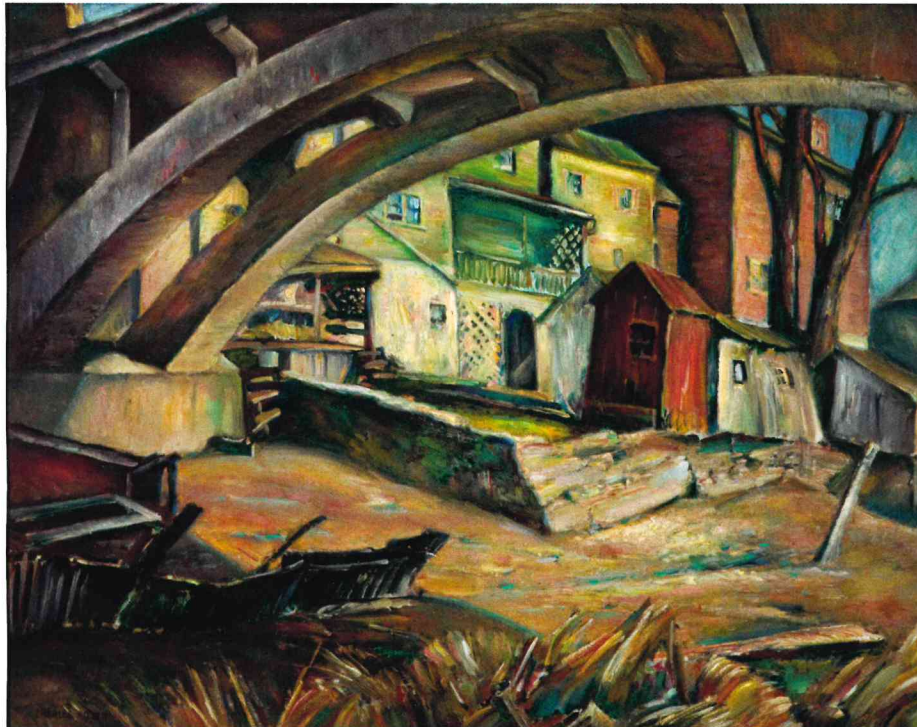




LEFT: Antonio Pietro Martino, *Essington Dock*, o/c, 30 x 40.

BELOW LEFT: Charles Rosen, *Under the Bridge*, c. 1918, o/c, 32 x 40.

RIGHT: Lloyd Raymond Ney, *Mechanic Street, New Hope*, c. 1934, o/c, 30 x 36.



be a lively and tight-knit group. Inspired by the collaborative and improvisational elements found in jazz music, Ramsey, Evans, and Stone founded the Cooperative Painting Project in 1938. The group was occasionally joined by Stanley Kunitz and Ney, and the group's signature changed depending on the letters in the last names of the group members included in each work (e.g. Ravstonev vs. Kuramstonev).

This kind of close collaboration may have come about because of the physical proximity of many of these artists' studios. New Hope was and is a vibrant town, and from the 1930s through the 1950s it provided a center for the region's modernists to live, work, and communicate. Ney passionately noted this camaraderie in a c. 1960s essay titled "The Biggest Little Street in the World," in which he described what Mechanic Street had become:

Mechanic Street, New Hope, Bucks County, Pennsylvania has only two blocks of shops as compared to Provincetown's two miles of free enterprise yet if you join the happy carefree crowds on a Saturday night it will take you the whole evening to "do" Mechanic Street. You might meet celebrities: Budd Schulberg, Paul Whiteman, Helen Hayes, Moss Hart, George Kaufmann, Pearl Buck, Grace Kelly, Anna Russell, Faye Emerson, Shelly Berman, Sheldon Cheney, John Pfeiffer and scores of others well known in the four arts.

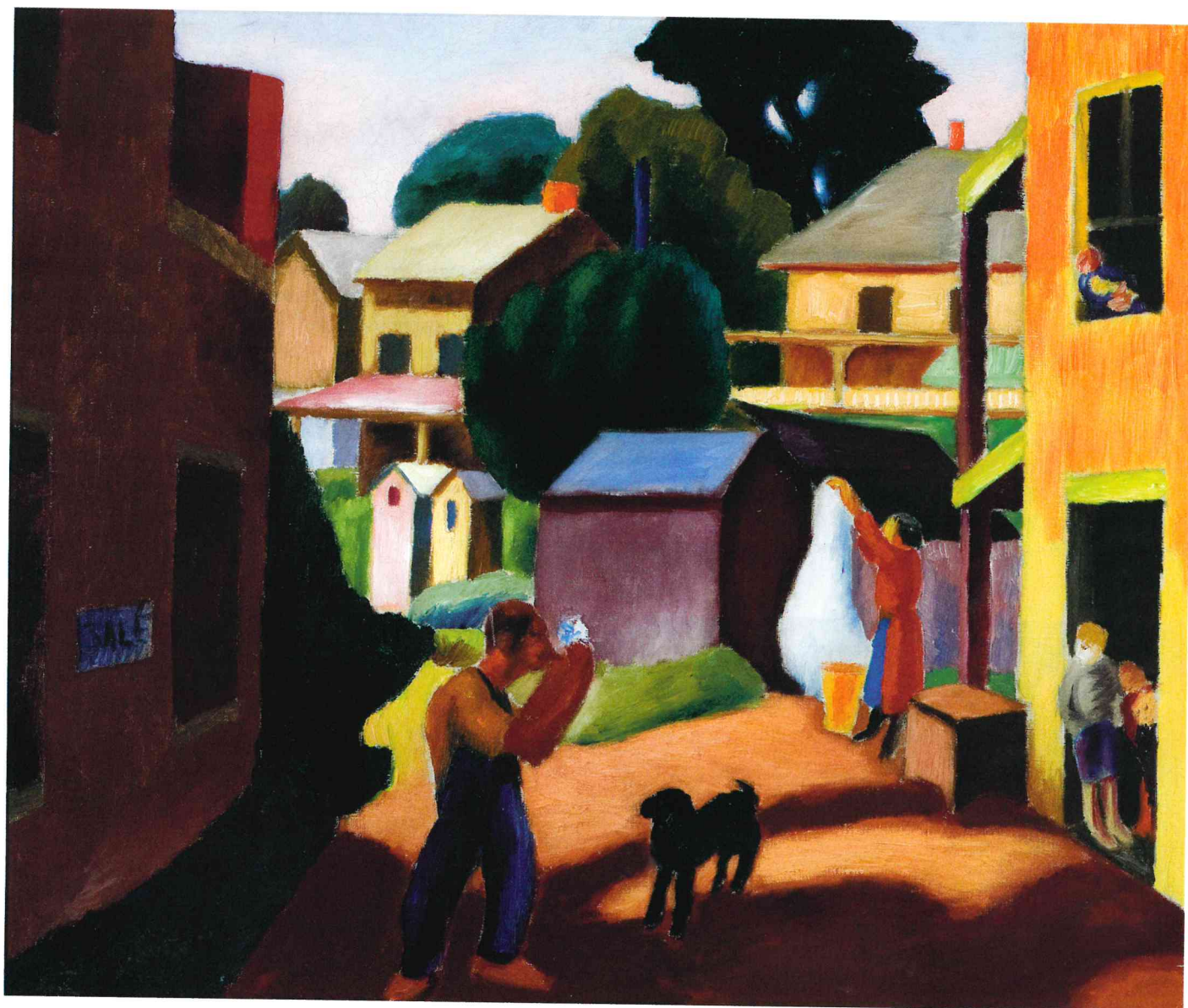
Mechanic Street has a flair for cock-eyed architecture, beatniks, gays, intimate gardens and "characters" in abundance. The shapely red-head sculpture walking down the street with a six-foot constrictor wrapped under her shoulder—the bearded writer carrying fighting cocks under each arm—barefooted crusty joes shuffling along dusty streets—at intervals, very gay parties on barges pulled by belltlingling mules. Noisy extrovert Pete Pascuzzo is the mule-skinner promoter of these excursions and he can entertain you by the hour with his tales of how he won and lost a million dollars on the horses! In-

progressed. In the case of Rosen, this change was a dramatic one, moving from soft landscape paintings, which often integrated decorative patterning found in nature with dynamic vistas, to works like *Under the Bridge*, in which the evidence of industrial intervention into landscape became the focus, presented in a newly abstracted style.

Following the Phillips' Mill exhibition,

the 1930s saw the number of Modernists living and working together in town continue to grow. Money was certainly scarce among much of the community, as was the case with the rest of the country, so creative pursuits were supported by other sources, including New Deal commissions, teaching appointments, and, in some instances, real estate ventures.

The Modernist community proved to



ternationally known sculptor Harry Rosin telling jokes in many languages in the various hang-outs in the quarter—Swiss restaurateur Albert whose Café prohibits children on the premises—Proprietor and folk singer Margit of the “au clair de la lune” café who claims she can do the American can-can if business is bad—Famous Meredith Coates, lecturer and traveler and owner of the Mexican shop, happily shuttling between New Hope and Mexico with his fifth wife. It’s fun from every point of view and our big-little street packs a wallop. The bohemian sections of Paris, New Orleans, Amsterdam, San Francisco can’t touch all the folksy intermingling of all races, color and creeds on Mechanic Street.⁶

Mechanic Street, the art colony of New

Hope, and the surrounding towns proved to provide just the right platform for a community of modernist artists to thrive. Evidence of their accomplishments is revealed in these landmark gifts to the Museum by the Lenfests. All of these works have appeared in numerous exhibitions since their accession into the Michener’s permanent collection, functioning as a valuable resource for researchers, visitors, and members of the Michener. And now, to celebrate the Michener’s thirtieth anniversary, these works are finally on view together in one gallery, underscoring the lasting contributions of our region’s artists to the evolution of twentieth-century American art.

¹ Guy Pene du Bois, “The Pennsylvania Group of Landscape Painters,” *Arts and Decoration* 5, no. 9 (July 1915): 351-354.

² Charles Shaw, “Bill Ney lives! Retrospective show of New Hope artist reveals his artistry and prolificness,” *New Hope Gazette* (New Hope, PA), October 12, 1978, 3, 10.

³ Roy Pedersen, “The New Hope Modernists,” in *New Hope Modernists, 1917-1950*, ed. Roy Pedersen and Barbara A. Wolanin (New Hope, PA: The New Hope Modernist Project, Inc., 1991), 9.

⁴ It is worth noting that over time the Phillips’ Mill exhibition evolved with the times and grew to accommodate a wide variety of styles. In fact Ney went on to exhibit there several times over the course of his career and was presented with a special award in 1960.

⁵ Pedersen, “The New Hope Modernists,” 9.

⁶ Lloyd Ney, “The Biggest Little Street in the World,” c.1960s, Lloyd Ney Papers, James A. Michener Art Museum Archive.