An abstract collage artwork featuring various colors and textures. The composition includes a large, textured yellow shape on the right, a blue shape in the center, and a green shape on the left. There are also smaller shapes in orange, red, and brown. The overall style is modernist and naturalist, with a focus on color and form.

Will Henry Stevens:

Naturalist/Modernist

Huntsville Museum of Art

Will Henry Stevens:

Naturalist/Modernist

Organized by the Huntsville Museum of Art
and the Estate of Will Henry Stevens

Curated by Peter J. Baldaia
Director of Curatorial Affairs,
Huntsville Museum of Art

Lead Sponsor:
Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC

Additional Sponsors:
Alabama State Council on the Arts
Huntsville Museum of Art Guild



cover: *Untitled #834* (detail), oil on panel, 20 x 22 inches



Foreword and Acknowledgments

I first encountered the memorable work of Will Henry Stevens in 1996, not long after arriving in the Southeast to assume my new position as Chief Curator of the Huntsville Museum of Art. I was researching a planned exhibition of contemporary American glass, and had arranged to travel to western North Carolina to visit artists associated with the Penland School of Craft. My liaison for the trip was John Cram, the visionary founder of New Morning Gallery and Blue Spiral 1 in Asheville. John graciously arranged all of my visits and spent two days driving me to various studios located across the region, opening my eyes to the rich artistic talent that permeates this region. The trip became the first of many return visits over the years.

Back in Asheville, I was particularly impressed seeing Will Henry Stevens' engaging work at Blue Spiral 1. Stevens' accomplished paintings, pastels, and watercolors struck me as both familiar and unusual, with some embracing traditional landscape conventions, and others morphing into lyrical hybrids of realism and abstraction. On subsequent visits to the gallery, I always made a point of spending time with the artist's works on display, and hoped that one day I could organize an exhibition of his art in Huntsville.

That hope has at long last been realized with **Will Henry Stevens: Naturalist/Modernist**, which presents 54 hand-selected works encompassing the arc of Stevens' unique stylistic journey. On behalf of the Museum, a special thank you goes to Michael Manes, Director of Blue Spiral 1, for affording me the opportunity to organize a major exhibition of Stevens' work. The gallery has been more than generous in providing access to their holdings, facilitating loans, packing works for transit, and providing images and materials for the exhibition and catalogue. I particularly appreciate Blue Spiral 1's lead sponsorship for this project, as well as the additional support of the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the Huntsville Museum of Art Guild.

My heartfelt thanks goes to David Reyes, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections, and Katherine Purves, Registrar, for tackling the many behind-the-scenes aspects of this project, ensuring its success. I am also thankful that independent scholar and art historian J. Richard Gruber agreed to contribute an insightful essay to the exhibition catalogue. And award-winning graphic designer Scott Panciera deserves praise for his conception, design, and supervision of all aspects of production of this catalogue and related project materials.

Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to Will Henry Stevens, for providing such a rich legacy of artwork for present and future generations to discover, admire, and enjoy.

Peter J. Baldaia, Director of Curatorial Affairs
Huntsville Museum of Art

Dedication

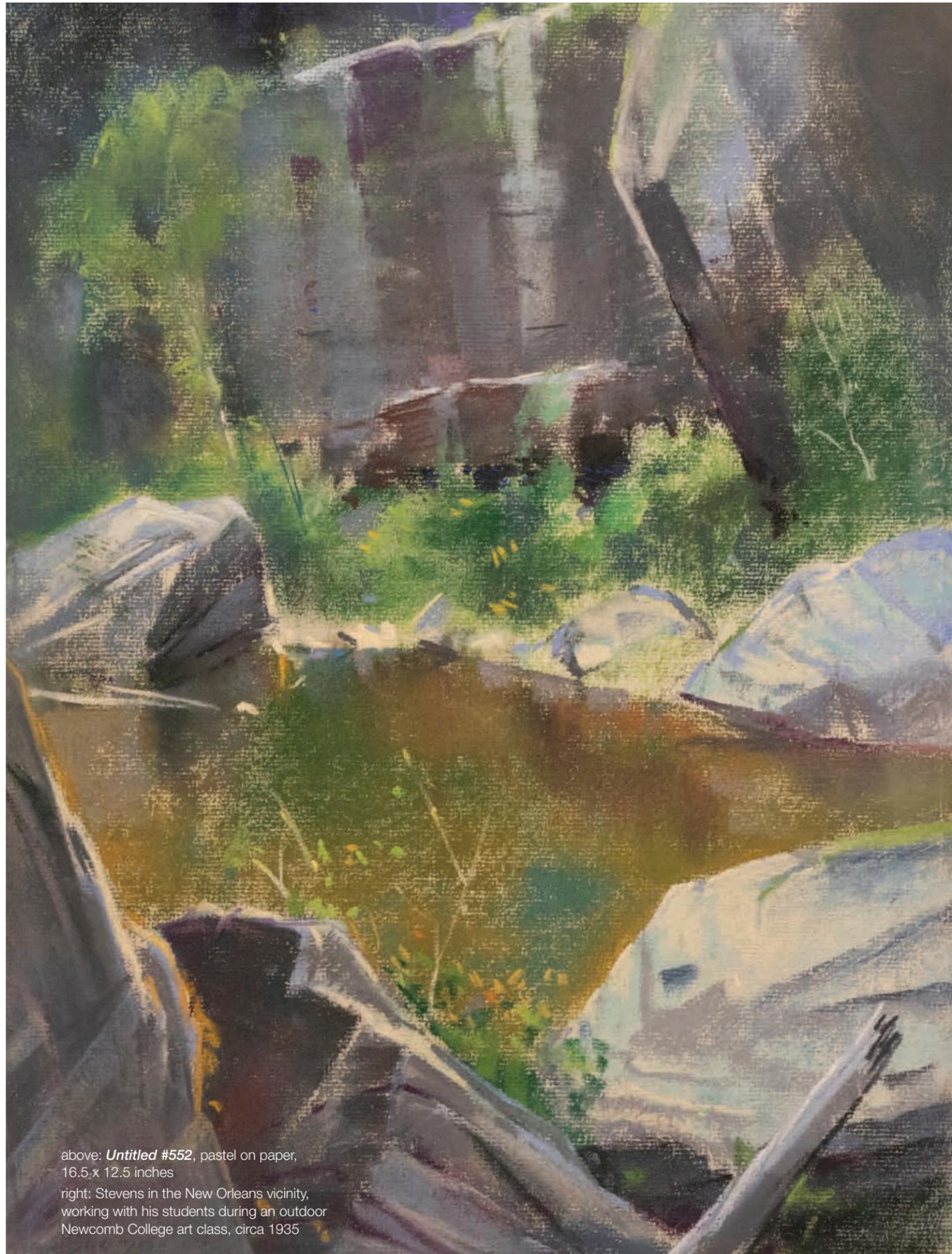
This exhibition and catalogue is dedicated to my mentor and friend, John Cram (1948 - 2020), who is often referred to as the "godfather" of the arts community in Asheville, North Carolina. Though, his legacy in the region has reached far beyond art. He was a pioneer of downtown Asheville's renaissance and an architect of the arts scene that has made the region an international destination.

With only \$500 in his pocket, Cram moved to Asheville and opened New Morning Gallery, an arts and crafts gallery in the Biltmore Village neighborhood of Asheville. Soon after he began the annual Village Art & Craft Fair, drawing supporters from across the Southeast. Over the next fifty years Cram's impact on the region was broad, affecting both private and public sectors. In the 1980s he joined the Tourist Development Authority Board and advocated for funding and legislation to promote tourism, inject money into revitalization efforts, and support conservation trusts to preserve the area's natural beauty.

Cram opened Blue Spiral 1 gallery on December 31, 1990 with a vision of creating a home for the many artists who had settled in the region in the mid-to-late 20th century. Additionally, he needed a suitable space to exhibit the recently acquired estate of Will Henry Stevens. Cram worked tirelessly to promote awareness of Stevens, whom he considered one the South's best kept secrets and most prolific treasures. It was his goal to place his works in not only private collections but, more importantly, public spaces for all to enjoy. Following in the footsteps of Stevens, Cram saw the collection as an educational tool and one that could be used as leverage to help protect the natural beauty surrounding us. After a few years of representing the estate, he developed the Will Henry Stevens Revolving Land Trust, to which a portion of all Stevens' sales are given. Over the last three decades that trust has helped to protect thousands of acres of public lands in North Carolina and to this day we continue to honor this ambitious and heartfelt mission.

Though Cram's business success was quite significant, he felt his most lasting accomplishments were the successes he had in helping preserve public lands for future generations. It is through exhibitions like these that this work continues and the impact of Will Henry Stevens continues to grow.

Michael G. Manes, Gallery Director
Blue Spiral 1



The American Journeys of Will Henry Stevens

J. Richard Gruber

On foot, as was his habit, or on his bicycle, he gradually came to know New Orleans and its environs. He carried sketchbooks and painting materials in a knapsack and made forays into the countryside, much as he had been doing since his Indiana days. He would take the ferry across the Mississippi River, then journey into the farm country, along the bayous and streams... The shacks and cottages, the boats, the river and the bayous became favored subjects.

—Jessie Poesch¹

Will Henry Stevens was a visionary artist and an inveterate explorer who seemed to be at home in the world of nature, on foot or on his bike, with his art supplies on his back, as Jessie Poesch described. He traveled at his own pace, whether it be in the bayous of Louisiana, in the mountains of North Carolina, or along the Ohio River's wooded shores. On some journeys, he decided to linger, as Poesch wrote. "He sometimes stayed overnight with the country people—farmers, trappers, fisherman, hunters—who lived close to nature. He spoke of his respect for the bayou people who 'have never tried to subdue nature and have harmonized their lives with natural order.'"² Stevens was a born traveler whose manners and values were rooted in the nineteenth century, yet whose intuitions and spirit were attuned to the evolving path of the twentieth century.

As this essay will show, the evolution of Stevens' life and art can be tracked, to a significant degree, by following this trail, the direction of his journeys, during the first half of the twentieth century, in the world of nature and through the American art world. As he did in the natural world, Stevens moved easily, with confidence, in cities and in the advanced art world, even in urban art centers like New York and New Orleans. During his career, he lived in a wide range of American cities—large and small, in the North and the South—beginning in his native Vevay, Indiana. Later, Stevens lived and worked in (and around) Cincinnati, New York, Louisville, Biloxi, Asheville, and New Orleans.

This concept of the journey, and the journeys, of Will Henry Stevens will be considered on two levels in this essay. First it will focus upon his physical and literal travels across the Eastern United States (and beyond), with a consideration of

how those journeys informed his art forms and techniques. Second, it will focus upon his movements into, and through, the twentieth century American art world, where he met influential figures, developed lasting networks and friendships, and absorbed a wide range of styles, aesthetic theories and philosophies (which he shared with his students).

Stevens will be considered, as well, as a figure who served as a significant cultural pollinator, an art connector—moving from region to region, art city to art city, school to school, student to student, art colony to art colony, art exhibition to art exhibition—connecting people, places, art and ideas. He was not alone in doing this. A number of his teachers, mentors and colleagues did the same, artists such as

Frank Duveneck, Van Dearing Perrine, William Merritt Chase, T.C. Steele, Ellsworth Woodward, and William Woodward. In this, he shared similarities, despite their very different personalities, with an artist like Thomas Hart Benton, a painter, muralist, writer, and teacher who was also known for his expansive American travels, and for his studies, sketches and observations of what came to be called "the American Scene," which informed his influential mural projects.

Notably, Stevens also shared qualities with earlier artist-



above: *Untitled #552*, pastel on paper, 16.5 x 12.5 inches

right: Stevens in the New Orleans vicinity, working with his students during an outdoor Newcomb College art class, circa 1935



left: *Untitled #396* (detail),
pastel on paper, 18 x 14 inches

explorers, figures such as John Abbot, William Bartram and John James Audubon. In 1807 and 1808, for example, Audubon traveled past Vevay along the Ohio River, on his way to Louisville, where he worked from 1808-1810. Unlike these earlier artist-explorers, however, Stevens possessed a twentieth-century vision, informed by nature, yet he was attuned to more abstract and non-objective realms, as noted by Jessie Poesch. "Stevens was one of the pioneers of modernism in the American South. He was different from most of his contemporaries in that, while he was drawn to experimenting and creating abstract art, he never abandoned working directly from nature."³

1881-1901

In considering the art of Will Henry Stevens, one naturally turns to Vevay and the Ohio River Valley. There he developed a distinctive sense of place, as well as a spiritual attunement to his native region's rivers, streams, hills, forests, plants, birds and other creatures. His earliest paintings were inspired by the landscapes he discovered along the Ohio River. Vevay is an historic city located on the north shore of the Ohio River, between Louisville and Cincinnati. Ancient migration trails, including the legendary Buffalo Trace, passed nearby, bringing buffalo, then Native American tribes, then pioneers and explorers, all crossing at the north and south shores of the Ohio River.



Vevay, the county seat of Switzerland County, Indiana, was founded in 1802 by Swiss settlers, in what was considered then to be the western frontier. During the next year members of the Lewis and Clark expedition passed Vevay, traveling on the Ohio River, toward the Falls of the Ohio, in Louisville, the departure point for their Corps of Discovery. In the steamboat era, Vevay became connected to thriving river cities such as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, Natchez and New Orleans. During the Civil War, Vevay was positioned, literally, on the line that divided North and South, on the Mason-Dixon line, the border between free state and slave state, a destination point for the underground railroad, which bridged the shores of the Ohio River. This border, literally and metaphorically, was one that the sensitive Stevens could see, and increasingly understand, growing up in Vevay.

Will Henry Stevens was born in Vevay, on November 28, 1881, to Ella Dimock Stevens (1848-1923) and Edward Montgomery Stevens (1845-1922). He had an older brother, Clarence Dimock Stevens (1872-1931), who served as a professor of



left: *Untitled #1403* (detail),
pastel on paper, 12.5 x 16.75 inches

English at the University of Cincinnati. His father was a local pharmacist, and an amateur artist. Edward Stevens shared his knowledge of grinding and mixing medical compounds with his son, who later used those skills to create his distinctive pastels (and later taught his students to make their own pastels).

Ella Dimock Stevens' family history reflects the richness and complexity of cultural life in Southern Indiana in the 19th century. She was born in New Harmony, Indiana, located on the Wabash River, where Robert Owen established a model community in 1825, one where he hoped education and social equality would flourish. Despite its short life, Owen's New Harmony attracted a wide range of educators, naturalists, geologists, and early feminists, many of them remaining after Owen's community dissolved. Raised in such a progressive environment, Ella Dimock Stevens may have nurtured a related level of intellectual curiosity in her sons. The example of her life could have been an influence upon the artist's teaching philosophy, one that inspired the lives and careers of many women, including the Newcomb College students he taught from 1921 to 1948.

Growing up, Stevens roamed along the waters of the Ohio River and in the surrounding woods and countryside, finding inspiration in nature. During his formative years he read Emerson's essays, and Thoreau's *Walden*, becoming

immersed in the thoughts of the Transcendental writers. Recognizing her son's talent, his mother arranged for Stevens to take his first art lessons in Vevay, from a Miss Ward, around 1891. He attended high school in Vevay, and studied at Wabash College preparatory school, in Crawfordsville, Indiana.⁴

In 1894, as Stevens was advancing as a student of art, a group of Indiana artists, called the "Hoosier Group," established precedents that would ease his future transition into becoming a professional artist in Indiana. These artists—T.C. Steele (1847-1926), William Forsyth (1854-1935), J. Otis Adams (1852-1927), Otto Stark (1859-1926), and Richard Gruelle (1851-1927)—acquired reputations of regional, and national, significance. As Rachel Berenson Perry has noted, "the five artists were considered leaders in a potential movement to establish a distinctly American school of painting," one based in the Heartland, far from New York, independent of the Eastern art world.⁵

Two years later, in March of 1896, a larger group of regional artists, representing art circles in six cities—Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit and Cleveland—founded the Society of Western Artists, an organization that later nurtured the career of Stevens. Three of the founders—T.C. Steele, J. Otis Adams, and William Forsyth—were members of the "Hoosier Group" who joined other "Western" artists seeking national recognition of their art, to bring it "before the public in a more satisfactory way."⁶ As Rachel Berenson Perry has shown, their definition of the "West" was different than ours today. "But at the turn of the last century residents of Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, and Indiana considered themselves to be in the West... Despite the 1890 census's claim that Brown County, Indiana, was the center of the nation's population, the Ohio Valley remained politically and culturally 'Western.'"⁷

right: *Untitled #700* (detail),
pastel on paper,
16 x 20 inches





Untitled #522 (detail), pastel on paper,
23 x 19 inches



above: *Untitled #1218*,
pastel on board, 14.5 x 16.5 inches



above: *Untitled #1658*, 1949,
oil on panel, 23 x 25 inches



above: *Untitled #1441*,
pastel on paper, 22 x 17 inches,
Collection of the Huntsville Museum of Art



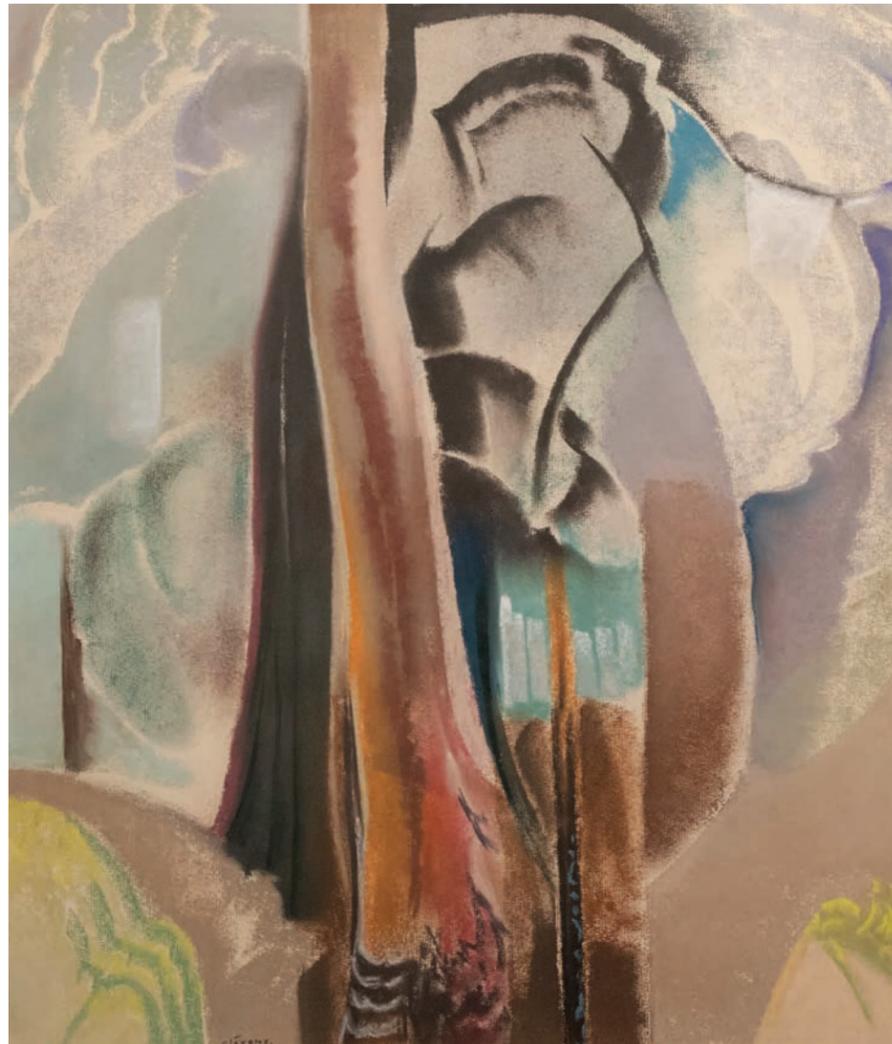
above: *Untitled #1059* (detail), 1945,
pastel on paper, 14 x 20 inches

1901-1910

In 1901, Stevens journeyed upriver to Cincinnati, where he enrolled in classes at the Cincinnati Art Academy. Cincinnati was a city of significant wealth that proudly supported a vibrant cultural community. One symbol of the city's stature was the Cincinnati Music Hall and Exposition Buildings (1877-1879), a massive complex built in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood that served as the first home of the art museum (founded in 1881). In May of 1886, the Cincinnati Art Museum opened its Romanesque Revival building in Eden Park, known as "the Art Palace of the West," designed by Cincinnati architect James H. McLaughlin. Construction of the Cincinnati Art Academy, designed in the same Romanesque Revival style by McLaughlin, was underway then, and opened not long after the

museum. Rookwood Pottery, where Stevens later worked, was located in the nearby Mount Adams neighborhood, a short walk from the museum.⁸

Stevens took painting critiques with Frank Duveneck, drawing classes with Caroline Lord, life classes with Vincent Nowotny and costume classes with Henry Meakin.⁹ Also active in Cincinnati were two artists associated with the art of the Far West and Southwest, Joseph Henry Sharp and Henry Farny. They established their national careers there, reflecting Cincinnati's early ties to the opening of the West.¹⁰ From these faculty members and Cincinnati's working professional artists, Stevens learned practical lessons in how to navigate a path through the evolving American art world. Stevens also had access to the collections of the Cincinnati Art Museum, where he could study works by Ameri-



left: **Untitled #746**,
pastel on paper,
21 x 19 inches

can artists such as Benjamin West, Hiram Powers, Frank Duveneck, Joseph Henry Sharp and Childe Hassam.¹¹

The greatest influence at the Art Academy, and in the larger Cincinnati art world, was Frank Duveneck, who was nationally and internationally recognized as an artist and teacher. A native of Covington, Kentucky, with family roots in the local German community, Duveneck studied and worked in Germany. He was tied to the Munich school of painting, known for its thick paint, heavy layering, and dark, old-master-inspired tonalities. In 1900, after teaching earlier with the Art Academy and Rookwood Pottery, Duveneck joined the Art Academy faculty; by 1905 he was chair of that faculty. Stevens later stated that while he recognized Duveneck's artistic influence, he did not seek to emulate his art or style of painting.¹² Stevens increasingly sought a lighter palette, and a lighter hand, in his art.¹³

Stevens entered the art world as a professional artist in 1904, when he was employed by Cincinnati's Rookwood Pottery, one of the country's most esteemed Arts and Crafts pottery enterprises. Rookwood was founded in Cincinnati in 1880, by Maria Longworth Nichols Storer, who built a new Arts and Crafts style factory for the pottery in Mount Adams, near the museum, that was completed in 1892.¹⁴ This is where Stevens worked, and where he met Grace Hall, a designer at Rookwood, who became his future wife. In 1906, Rookwood sent Stevens to New York, to supervise an installation of their architectural tiles at the Fulton Street and Wall Street subway stations.

below: **Untitled #1689**, pastel on paper, 14.25 x 16 inches,
Collection of Paige and David Alcott

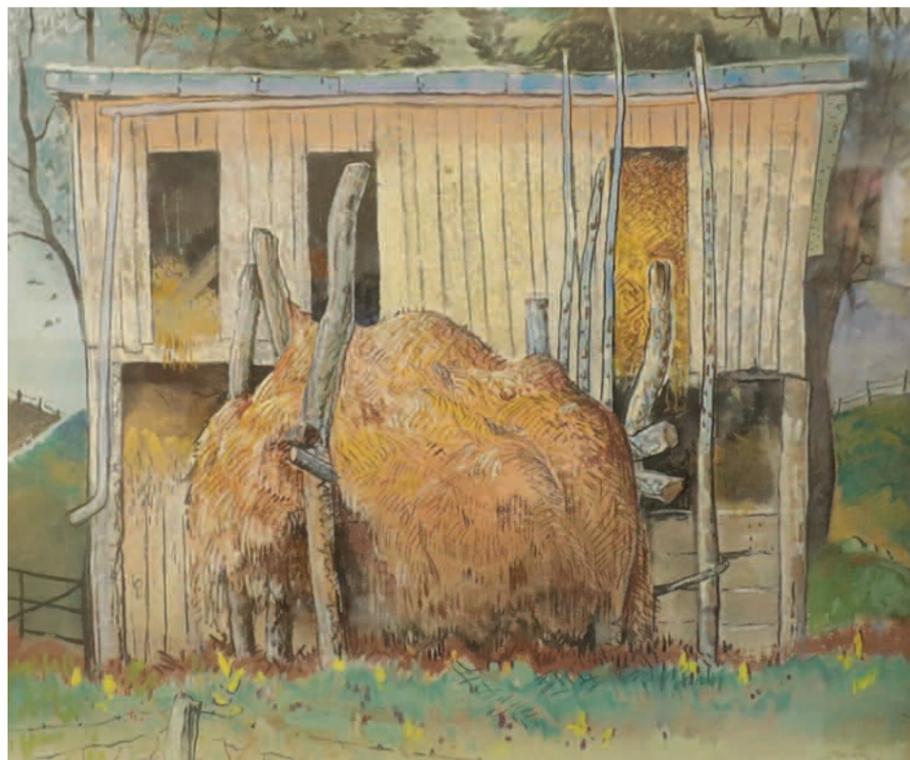


above: **Untitled #1691**, 1944,
mixed media on paper, 14 x 16 inches

He remained in New York, and enrolled in classes at the Art Students League (1907-1908). William Merritt Chase was a dominant influence on the Arts Students League then, just as Duveneck was at the Art Academy in Cincinnati. Like Duveneck, Chase made little direct impact on his art, yet, once again, Stevens was exposed to one of the most influential artists (and art personalities) working in America. Other, practical lessons were to be learned from that experience. He took classes that were more influential with Jonas Lie and Van Dearing Perrine, and soon began to paint landscapes in the Hudson River Valley, inspired by Perrine's work, and working methods, in that area. This experience

may have influenced his way of seeing and painting in the Ohio River Valley, and in the Appalachian Mountain region.

In 1907, one year after arriving in the city, Stevens was given his first New York gallery exhibition, featuring his pastels, at Mary Bacon Ford's New Gallery (where Lie and Perrine also exhibited), from March 4-30. The next year he was included in a group exhibition there with Lie, Perrine and Eugene Higgins, then was given a second one-man New Gallery show, from February 17-March 14, 1908, (featuring 41 pastels and 8 oil paintings). Even as he was taking classes at the Art Students League, he was becoming a highly productive artist. Albert Pinkham Ryder, an American master, visited his



above: *Untitled #1162*, 1942, pastel on paper, 14 x 16 inches

show, and gave him advice, as Stevens later recalled. “Now remember, you are a poet. Don’t do what so many painters are doing today—painting out before nature all the time. Just walk out in the pleasant time of the evening.”¹⁵

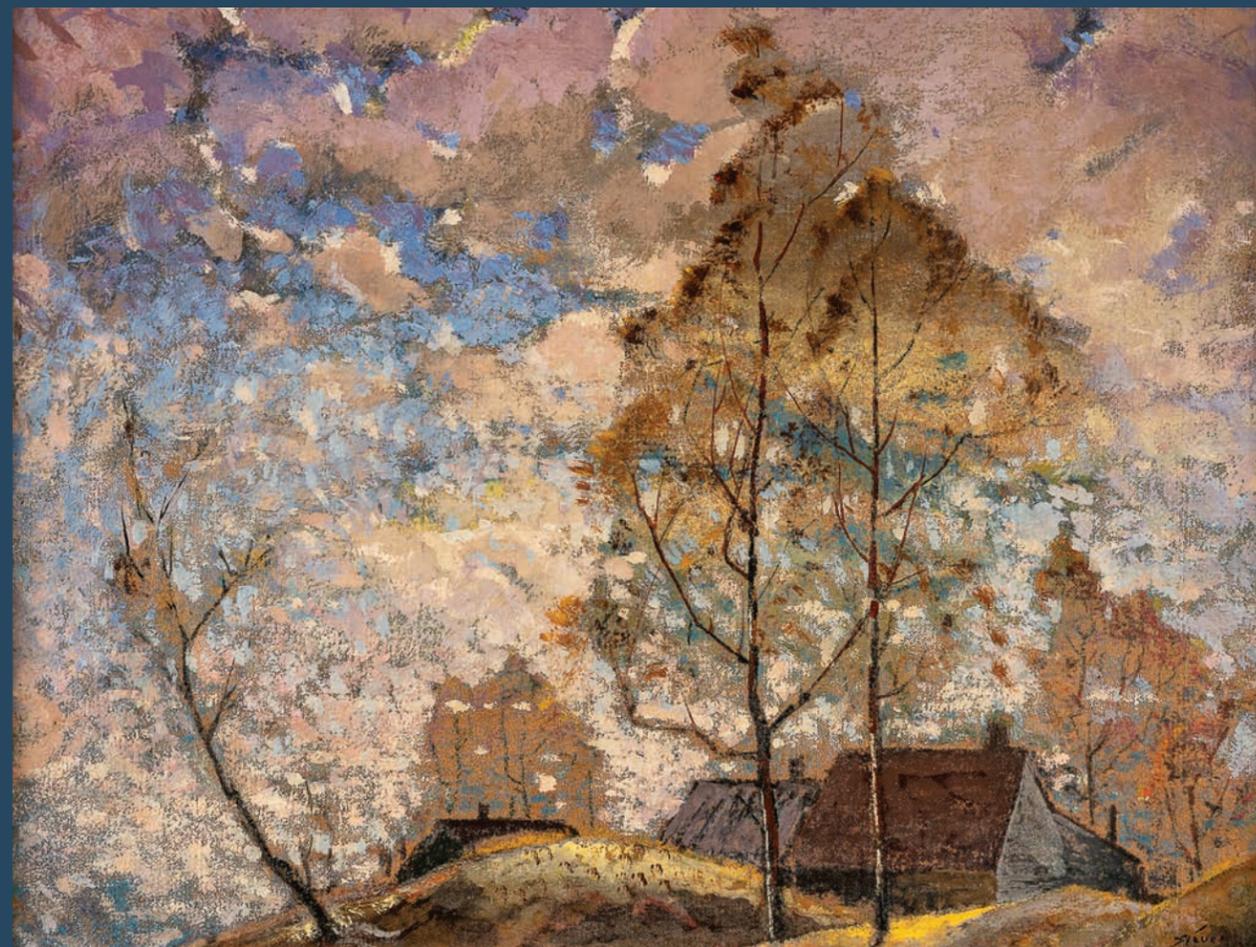
Realism, the style of painting advocated by artists such as Duveneck, remained a dominant direction in the art world. In 1908, paintings of contemporary life and urban reality by Robert Henri and *The Eight* were first shown together at the Macbeth Gallery in New York. The Eight included Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, Maurice Prendergast, Ernest Lawson and Arthur B. Davies. Stevens knew, and maintained friendships with members of the Eight, including Henri, Bellows, Glackens and Luks.¹⁶ In contrast, that year, Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery presented America’s first American exhibition of Henri Matisse’s work. Between 1908 and 1913 abstract and non-objective art was often featured at Stieglitz’s gallery.¹⁷

In New York, from 1906-1910, Stevens was exposed to some of America’s most

advanced art and artists, as well as some of its leading realist painters. These competing trends, realism versus abstraction, informed the ongoing direction of his art over the coming decades. When he returned to the Ohio River Valley in 1910, he discovered that the progressive trends evident in New York were less influential there, as many artists were painting in late Impressionist manners, inspired by the landscapes of French painters. Others worked in the Tonalist mode, creating landscapes with darker and more somber colors, marked by a more introspective approach to an American landscape and spiritual environment that had been severely impacted by the course of the Civil War.¹⁸

1910-1920

In 1910 Stevens returned to Vevay, where he maintained his home and studio for the next decade. During this decade Stevens developed his concepts of a sense of place, and enhanced those notions in his work, while refining his



above: *Untitled #1011*, oil on canvas, 15 x 20 inches

“These bayou people have never tried to subdue nature but have harmonized their lives with the natural order. I feel the same way about the mountain people. But on the whole our Western culture has ignored the Oriental point of view. In the West the idea is superior. I think that is a mistake.”

—Will Henry Stevens

below: *Untitled #485* (detail), pastel on paper, 18 x 22 inches



patterns of artistic travel and exploration, along with the working and teaching systems that served as the foundations of his career. He married Grace Hall in 1910, the Arts and Crafts metalworker he met when they both worked at Rookwood Pottery. In 1912, their only child, Janet, was born (she became a jewelry maker and a member of the Southern Highlands Craft Guild). Notably, both of his parents were alive and living in Vevay during this decade, contributing to the important sense of family life that Stevens valued.

During these years he traveled often, and returned to New York regularly, maintaining ties to his art world friends and colleagues, visiting museums and galleries, and studying artistic trends. In 1912, he visited Washington and the Freer Gallery, where he discovered Sung dynasty paintings, a lasting influence on his art, leading to his ongoing interest in Taoism and Eastern philosophies. In that same year, Kandinsky published *On the Spiritual in Art*, a volume that became very influential upon Stevens and his art.¹⁹ While he was in New



above: *Untitled #1319*, pastel on paper, 16 x 20 inches



above: *Untitled #1299*, oil on canvasboard,
18 x 22 inches



above: *Untitled #1324*, pastel on paper, 16 x 20 inches

York, Stevens remained connected to the leading artists of his region, and the South, through the exhibitions of the Society of Western Artists. He was included in their exhibitions from 1907 to 1910, along with established artists such as T.C. Steele, William Forsyth, William Woodward, and Ellsworth Woodward, from New Orleans (Ellsworth Woodward would hire him to teach at Newcomb College, in 1921).

Beginning in 1912, Stevens' focus shifted to Louisville, where he taught and painted until 1920, retaining his home and family base in Vevay. In this period, Louisville, unlike Cincinnati, Indianapolis and St. Louis, did not have a public art museum. The J. B. Speed Memorial Art Museum, designed by Arthur Loomis, opened in 1927, after Stevens was in New Orleans. In 1909, recognizing a need, the Louisville Art Association was founded, and hosted changing exhibitions at the Louisville Free Public Library building. Stevens exhibited there, with the Society of Western Artists, and the Louisville Art Association in 1910, 1911, and 1913. By 1910,

a second group, the Louisville Artists League, was founded and presented an exhibition of paintings devoted to the city's parks (many of them designed by Frederick Law Olmstead) and surrounding forests. Artists known as Louisville Tonalists, including Carl C. Brenner, Harvey Joiner, and Patty Thum, were active at the turn of the century, and were recognized for painting the city's parks, beech woods, diverse forests and wooded areas in a manner described as capturing "a nostalgic sense of fading beauty, a reminder of life's transience."²⁰ Such a painting environment, and range of subjects, were ideally suited to Stevens and his art.

In 1916 he expanded the range of his travels and landscape explorations with the initiation of his annual trips to Western North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee and North Georgia, where he painted and explored in the Appalachian Mountains. In these mountain environments, he was able to apply his interest in modernism and regional subject matter, with classical Sung Dynasty painting and Eastern philosophy, incorporating mists, clouds and atmospheric perspectives.



above: *Untitled #628*, 1934, pastel on paper, 18 x 22 inches

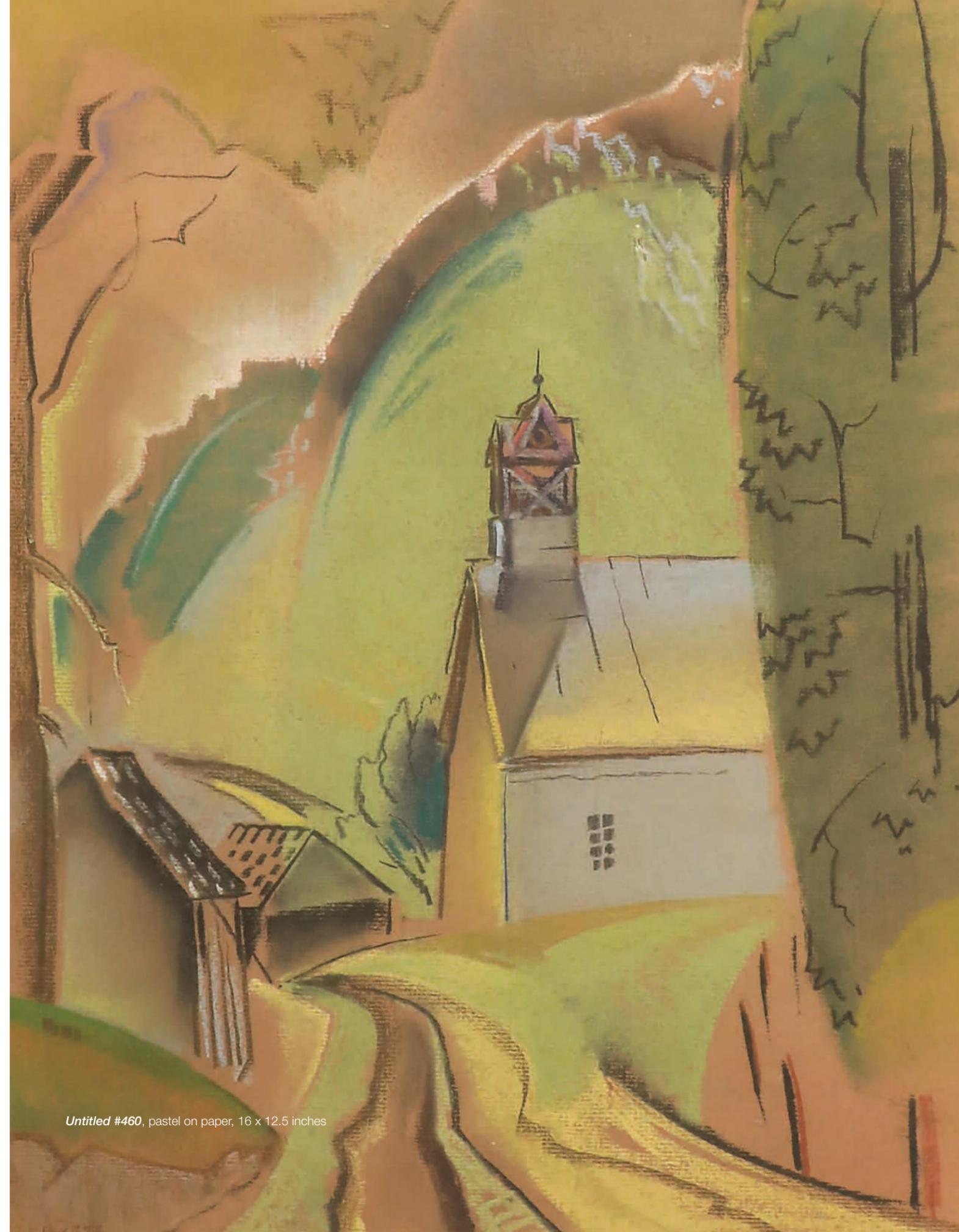
A number of works in this exhibition demonstrate the evolution of these interests, reflecting his painting in the Ohio River Valley and in the Appalachian Mountains. By 1916, as he became increasingly known for these works, he became a member of the Cincinnati Art Club, and exhibited regularly there; in 1920 and 1921 he was given one-man exhibitions at the Closson Galleries in Cincinnati. During this decade, Stevens supported himself, and his family, as a dedicated working artist and teacher, underscoring his artistic independence.

Beginning in 1918 and 1919, he expanded his range of exploration, once again, from the Ohio River Valley and

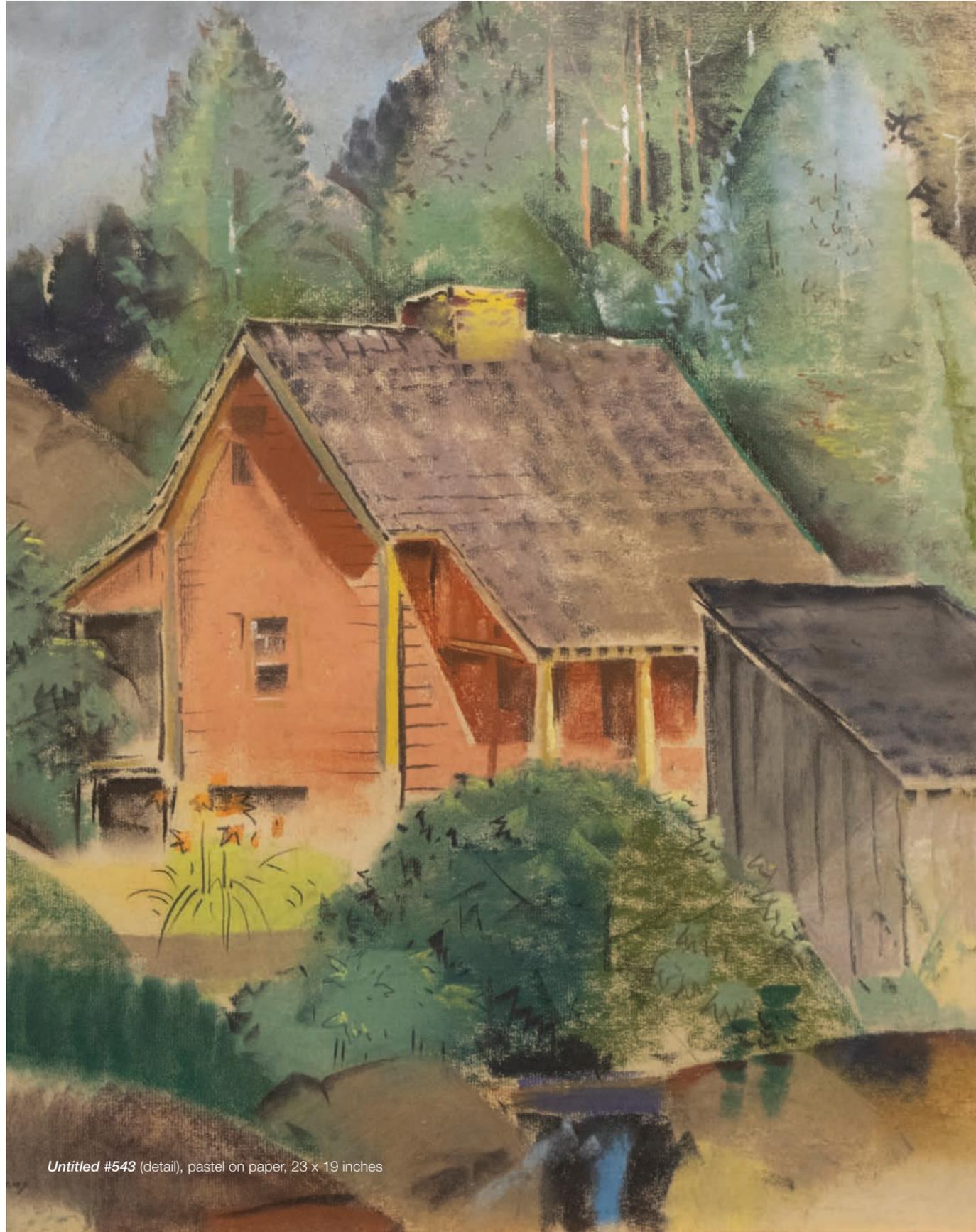
the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi and Louisiana Gulf Coast region, specifically focusing on Biloxi, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana. There he painted scenes in and around water, one of his favorite subjects, including many of the area's beaches, streams, woodlands, and Gulf Coast vistas.

1920-1936

After two years of painting and summering on the Gulf Coast, Stevens accepted an academic position at Newcomb College, offered by Ellsworth Woodward, who had become increasingly familiar



Untitled #460, pastel on paper, 16 x 12.5 inches



Untitled #543 (detail), pastel on paper, 23 x 19 inches



above: Stevens standing behind seated students on the bank of the Cane River at Natchitoches Art Colony in northern Louisiana, circa 1925

with him, and his work. Initially Stevens and his family moved to Biloxi, where he painted the city's famous lighthouse (in a work now included in the permanent collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art). He commuted by train to New Orleans for an extended period, then the family moved to New Orleans, where he started teaching Uptown, at Newcomb College, in 1921.

Stevens arrived in New Orleans at the beginning of the Jazz Age, at a time when New Orleans, like much of the nation, was moving to a new stage in celebrating America's emerging culture after the challenges and losses of World War One. The city had an established history as a major Southern art center. Here Stevens found a new home, and a worthy place, for his art and his teaching skills. There was a notable city art museum, the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art (opened in 1911), where his ally, Ellsworth Woodward, held a significant influence over the museum's collecting, programming and administrative decisions. The city's French Quarter was becoming a Bohemian enclave, the South's equivalent of Greenwich Village in New York, attracting a range of artists, writers, and musicians. It was the era of

Prohibition, and the era when women achieved the right to vote. Modern skyscrapers appeared on Canal Boulevard, new hotels and offices buildings appeared in the Central Business District, and new technologies began to change the pace of life in the Crescent City. The French Quarter, under assault by these modern forces, found itself endangered. William Woodward led the preservation movement there, emerging to protect the historic architecture of the Quarter, bringing renewed attention, locally and nationally, to its architecture, courtyards and distinctive urban environment.

During the 1920s, a growing number of creative American figures moved to the French Quarter, a place that became increasingly familiar to Will Henry Stevens. Reflecting the richness and diversity of this environment, in 1925, writer William Faulkner and artist William Spratling published a book, *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles: A Gallery of Contemporary New Orleans*. Local writers and artists featured in their book included Sherwood Anderson, Ellsworth Woodward, Grace King, Lyle Saxon, Caroline Durieux, Alberta Kinsey, Weeks Hall, Oliver La Farge, and Joseph Woodson "Pops" Whitesell. The French Quarter

right: *Untitled #643* (detail),
pastel on paper,
13.75 x 16.75 inches

was home to a national literary journal, *The Double-Dealer*, *A National Magazine from the South*, Le Petit Theater du Vieux Carre, the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans (chartered in 1922) and its New Orleans School of Art. Stevens joined the Arts and Crafts Club after its founding, and came to know, and work with, many members of the extensive New Orleans arts scene.

Only one year after he began his teaching duties at Newcomb College, Stevens was appointed director of the Natchitoches summer art school, where he worked into the 1930s. In the late 1920s he taught during the summers at the Texas Artist's Camp in San Angelo. In 1921 his works were featured in another exhibition at the Louisville Art Center, along with notable American artists, including his teachers from the Art Students League, William Merritt Chase and Jonas Lie. During the 1920s and 1930s his art was exhibited in other cities including New York, Cincinnati, Houston, Kansas City, Dallas, Charlotte and Indianapolis.

Stevens developed many new professional colleagues and associations in New Orleans, and across the South, during the 1920s and 1930s, none more important than his relationships with William and Ellsworth Woodward. The Woodward brothers moved to New Orleans in 1884, the year that the city hosted the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, charged with opening and advancing an art department at Tulane University. William also opened the school of architecture at Tulane and taught at the university for many years. After years of activity



in the New Orleans art world William retired, due to his health, and moved to Biloxi in 1921, the same year that Stevens arrived to teach at Newcomb College.²¹

Ellsworth, William's younger brother, was a founder of Newcomb Pottery and later Dean of the School of Art. In 1925 he began to serve as the acting director of the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art, a position he held for fourteen years, and also served as president of the museum's board for six years. He was a founder of the Southern States Art League and its president for sixteen years. In all of these positions he was a leading advocate for Southern art, for art that was regional in focus.²² Later, in the 1930s, he became

a Gulf Coast supervisor of WPA art programs, expanding his influence over the Southern art world. The Woodward brothers advanced the art, and art worlds, of New Orleans and the South in profound ways during the years from 1884 to 1939. Stevens was closely aligned with them as this unfolded, in the 1920s and 1930s.

As the opening of this essay indicated, Stevens often left the city to seek out the intimate details, quiet histories and natural environments of the more remote locals in a changing America, what was called the "American Scene". He took sketching trips out of New Orleans, heading to the West Bank,

below: *Untitled #356*, pastel on paper, 22 x 26 inches



above: *Untitled #676*, pastel on paper, 16 x 20 inches

Westwego, and beyond, sometimes alone, sometimes with his students. There they discovered bayous, cabins, fishing boats, old houses and other subjects of interest. During the summers, in the Appalachians, sometimes accompanied by students, he discovered another range of related subjects and inspiring environments.

In these places, he found signs of old orders, of passing traditions, of changing lifestyles as modernity moved into the once hidden and isolated regions of the country. He described his response to these places, and to the people he found there, to Bernard Lemann. "These bayou people have never tried to subdue nature but have harmonized their lives with the natural order. I feel the same way about

the mountain people. But on the whole our Western culture has ignored the Oriental point of view. In the West the idea is superior. I think that is a mistake."²³

Beginning around 1936, while Stevens maintained an interest in naturalistic paintings based upon his travels, he looked increasingly toward an expanding exploration of an abstract and non-objective vision. In the winter of 1926-1927 Stevens became more focused on the possibilities of abstraction in his art forms, following a visit to an exhibition in New York, accompanied by Bernard Lemann, where they saw works by Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Rudolf Bauer. His ongoing research into the writings of Kandinsky, Ouspensky and others



Lurking Menace (detail), 1944,
oil on panel, 27 x 36 inches

“As a metaphor for our deepest fears, the painting eerily prefigures Stevens’ death from leukemia, and his last painting of a tiny orb suspended in an empty space of gray is a premonition of his imminent departure into an uncharted realm.”

—Percy North



above: *Untitled #417.00*, 1946, oil on panel, 36.5 x 47.5 inches, Collection of John Cram and Matt Chambers

left: *Untitled #1191 (detail)*, 1946, oil on canvasboard, 18 x 14 inches

advanced his consideration of the possibilities inherent in an abstract vision.

An important transitional stage in his process of moving from naturalistic to abstract painting has been identified by Jessie Poesch as the creation of what he called “semi-abstracts,” works that result from working on representational and abstract images at the same time. “He was working along two parallel lines. These parallel lines soon became intertwined. He introduced shifting perspectives, juxtaposed or overlapping images, patterned and textured backgrounds, sometimes daring divisions while skillfully balancing the total compositions into paintings that had, as a point of departure, a rural scene, perhaps a village, or a farm, or farmhouses, a tree or a forest. He sometimes called these semi-abstracts.”

1936-1949

At the end of this week, we shall return to you your exhibition. We thank you very much and surely appreciate your generosity in allowing us to have it here at Black Mountain College... I am impressed with your sensitive musicality for color and your ability to handle a multitude of forms and to combine them to an organic whole...

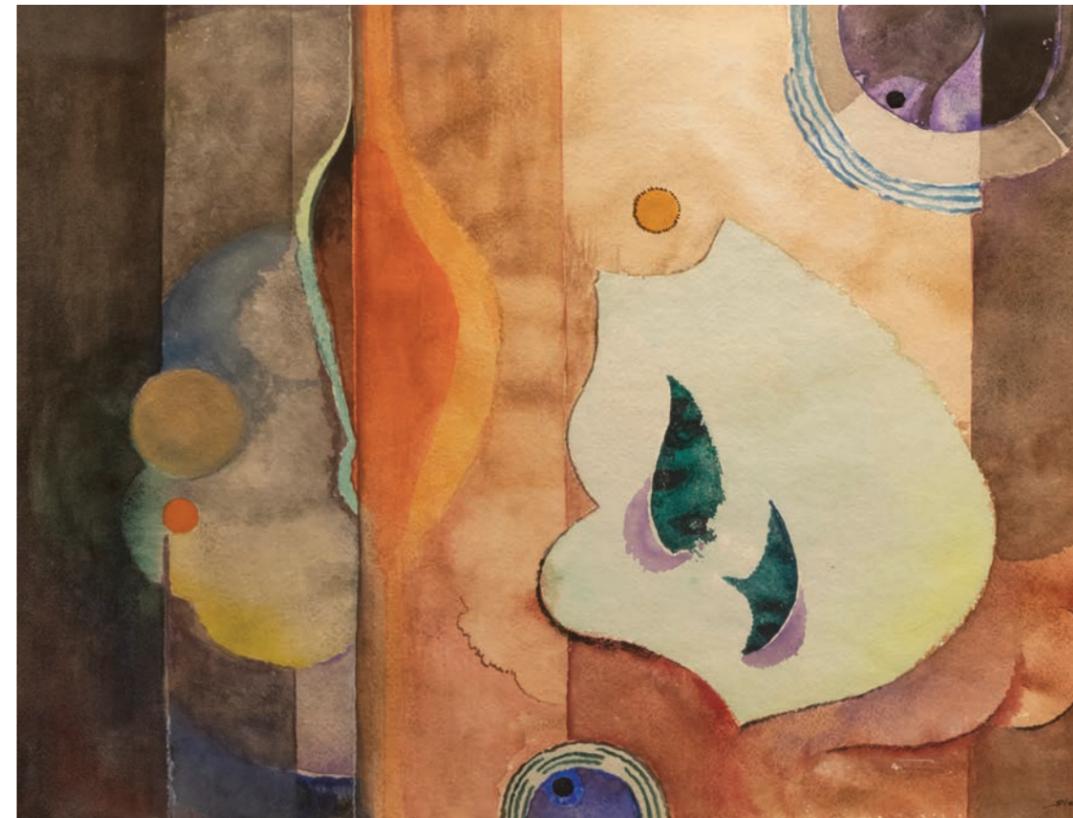
—Josef Albers²⁴

In February of 1944, as World War II continued in the European and Pacific theaters, Josef Albers, the visionary artist and teacher, made these perceptive remarks about the abstract works of Will Henry Stevens. Albers had arrived at Black Mountain College in 1933, the year of its founding, leaving his position at



above left: *Untitled #614*,
pastel on paper, 22 x 26 inches

below left: *Untitled #580* (detail),
watercolor on paper, 15 x 19.75 inches

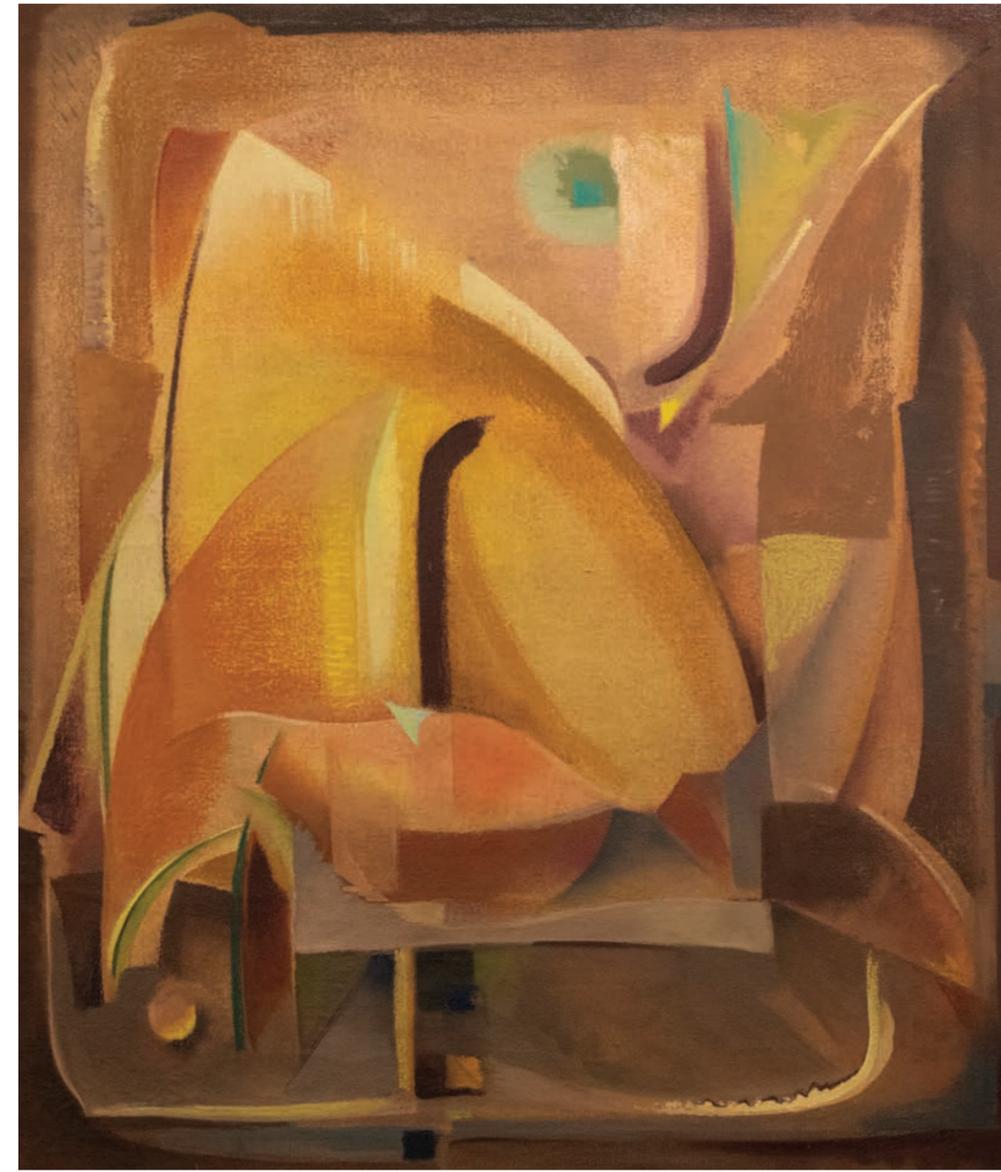


the Bauhaus when he fled Nazi Germany. By 1944, Stevens was a respected artist and professor of art at Newcomb College and had been active in the American art world for over four decades. One, in fact, who was able to cause Albers, a master of color and color theory, to write that he was “impressed with your sensitive musicality for color.”

Stevens, like Albers, was a familiar figure, both as an artist and as a teacher, in Asheville and in Western North Carolina. He began hiking, exploring and painting in the mountains in 1916. After he moved to the Gulf Coast and began teaching at Newcomb College he established the annual routine of spending summers with his family in the cool air of the mountains, where he enjoyed exploring, teaching art classes, and painting landscapes, in a naturalistic style. Those paintings are the other works Josef Albers referred to in his letter: “I must confess that I expected some of your representative paintings, of which I remember they are in a gayer key.”²⁵

Both directions in his work, included in this exhibition at the Huntsville Museum of Art, were on display in New York in 1941, when Stevens was featured in a pair of contrasting exhibitions. One, presented at the Kleeman Gallery, focused only on his naturalistic works. The other, held at the Willard Gallery, focused exclusively on his abstract and nonobjective works. The unique nature of Stevens’ 20th century artistic vision was reflected in this duality, in his ability to work, successfully, in both abstract and representational styles. Stevens explained this apparent dichotomy to Bernard Lemann. “I do not draw a line between objective and non-objective...I am doing both and will continue to, so long as either seems vital to me.”²⁶

When Josef Albers wrote to Stevens in 1944, following the exhibition at Black



above: *Untitled #1291*,
oil on canvas, 30 x 26 inches

Mountain College, both artists were at mature stages in their careers, and both were equally impacted by the realities of a world at war. Those war-time conditions changed after “V-J Day” in August of 1945, setting loose the emergence of America as a leading political, military and economic world power, as what was called a “superpower.” In 1941, publisher Henry Luce had anticipated America’s emergence as a world leader in his *Time* magazine editorial “The American Century,” when he called for Americans to advance a “vision of America as a world power...which will guide us to the authentic creation of the 20th Century—our Century.”²⁷



left: *Untitled #837*, 1942,
mixed media on paper mounted
on panel, 22 x 18 inches

The abstract and non-objective art forms that Stevens created during the 1930s and 1940s, while also maintaining his naturalistic painting style (reflecting the dominance of “American Scene” and Regionalist painting), became more aligned with advanced national art movements after World War Two. Leading Surrealist artists fled Europe, as Albers had earlier, and moved to New York and other cities during the war years, bringing their advanced visions and theories to America. When the war ended, the United States became an international cultural and artistic power. New York City became the world’s new art capital. Both Stevens and Albers witnessed America’s emergence as a world art power in the years from 1945 to 1949, as Abstract Expressionism became the leading force in the American art world, and beyond. Critic Irving Sandler described these events as “The Triumph of American Painting.”²⁸

Stevens witnessed these changes while he advanced his version of abstract and non-objective art, as he taught at Newcomb College and participated in the events of the evolving postwar New Orleans art world. His two 1941 exhibitions in New York were intended to mark a turning point in his career, back in the city where he had exhibited his paintings and pastels in 1907 and 1908, as an emerging artist. These 1941 exhibitions should have shown him to be a highly diversified American artist, one capable of mastering multiple styles. And they should have positioned him, in the coming years, when abstract art was emerging forcefully on the national scene, as a pioneering abstract artist from the South. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 altered his plans. Despite this, Stevens persevered. In the summer of 1943, he taught in Lebanon, Virginia; in 1944, he exhibited his abstract works at Black Mountain College; and during the war he exhibited with the Arts and Crafts Club in New Orleans.

A major work, featured in this exhibition, marks the final period of his art. Titled, *Lurking Menace*, dated 1944, it may have been seen in the Black Mountain College exhibition. Like works by many of the Abstract Expressionists, it is a dark and brooding painting. Percy North has written about the artist’s abstract paintings of this period, singling out the unique qualities of *Lurking Menace*. “Shapes of birds, animals, fish and human faces are frequently camouflaged in the matrix of compositions so that they can only be discerned by perceptive viewers. The interlocking shapes of the uncharacteristically brooding *Lurking Menace* coalesce to suggest a dangerous crustacean.” Continuing, North offers an intriguing conclusion. “As a metaphor for our deepest fears,



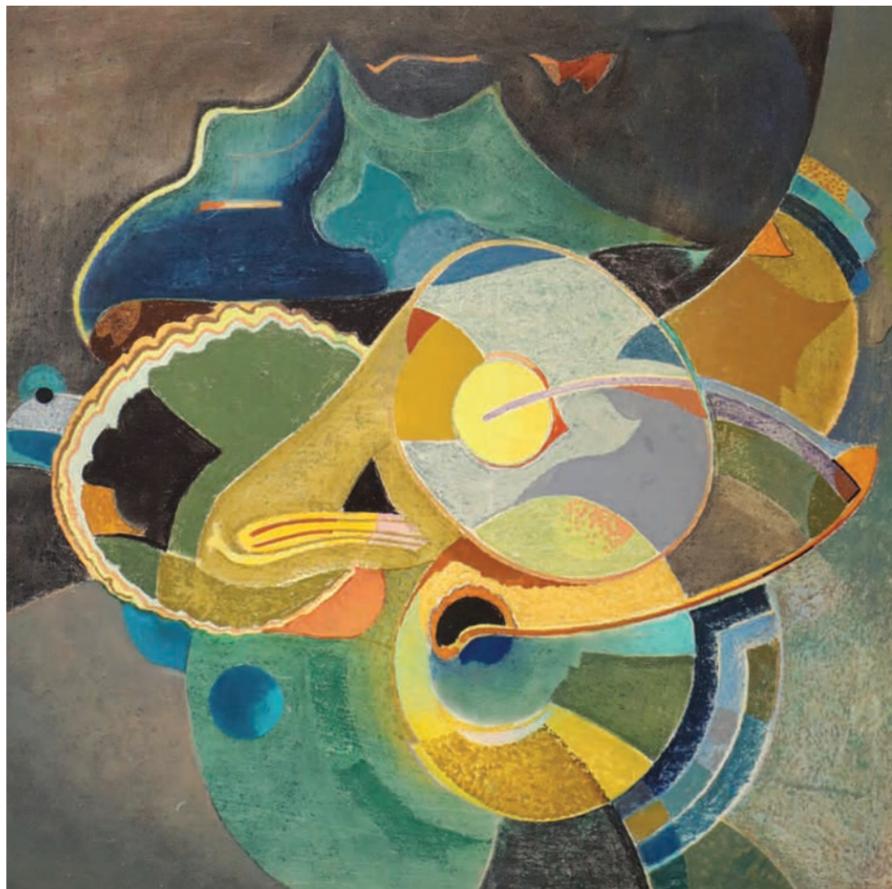
Untitled #506 (detail), oil on panel,
33.75 x 28 inches

right: *Untitled #838*,
oil on panel, 21.5 x 21 inches

the painting eerily prefigures Stevens' death from leukemia, and his last painting of a tiny orb suspended in an empty space of gray is a premonition of his imminent departure into an uncharted realm."²⁹

In June of 1948 Will Henry Stevens retired from the Newcomb College faculty after twenty-seven years of teaching. A *Times Picayune* editorial, published on July 7, 1948, suggested how significant his service to the community had been, noting that "because of his sterling traits and service to art in this community, the impending departure of Will Henry Stevens...causes the most sincere regret." Continuing, it added that as a "landscape painter, and in more recent years as a composer of non-objective paintings into which he put all of the many things he knew concerning color and its harmonies, Mr. Stevens made a mark which, in the opinion of many will grow more distinct, more widely appreciated with the years."³⁰

Stevens and his wife Grace moved back to Vevay, where they lived in a restored historic house, close to the Ohio River, in the environment that had first inspired him as an artist. He worked in a newly constructed studio that adjoined the house. By that time, as scholars have indicated, massive evolutions were occurring in New York studios and galleries, as artists established signature styles and gestures. Curator David Anfam has stated that the years from "1946 to 1948 witnessed Abstract Expressionism enter a new maturity." Curator Lisa Phillips offered a description of artists working in the period. "By 1950, most of the original Abstract Expressionists had arrived at their individual signature styles... Jackson Pollock's drip paintings (1947); Mark Rothko's floating, rectangular expanses of color (1950); Clyfford Still's excoriated dark fields (1947); Franz Kline's architectonic black-and-white gestures (1949)."³¹



Stevens worked in his studio, but both he and Grace suffered from poor health for some time after their move, and his condition continued to be troublesome. In a June 1949 letter from Vevay, he wrote: "This country is very lovely at present and I enjoy seeing it but so far am not finding it paintable. If I could hike out into the hills I would find material but haven't the strength for that now... Things are coming on in the studio which by the way is proving a good work place. Nothing I am doing is very large and mostly non-objective." As he battled the leukemia that would end his life, he persevered in the studio, advancing his vision of a distinctive American abstract art.

One can only imagine, however, in the final days of his life, how he might have responded to the question posed in an expansive article in the August 8, 1949 issue of *Life* magazine. "Jackson Pollock, Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?"³² Stevens died of leukemia, in a hospital in Madison, Indiana, less than three weeks later, on August 25, 1949.



above: *Untitled #1228*, 1947,
oil on canvas, 26 x 22 inches

Footnotes

¹ Jessie Poesch, *Will Henry Stevens* (Greenville, SC: Greenville County Museum of Art, 1987), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ Rachel Berenson Perry, *William Forsyth, The Life and Work of an Indiana Artist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), xv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ "An Art Palace Opens," in Sarah Sedlacek, editor, *Cincinnati Art Museum, Collection Highlights* (London: Giles, 2008), 10-17.

⁹ Poesch, 8.

¹⁰ Sedlacek, 164-179. See also, Susan Labry Meyn, *Henry Farny Paints the Far West* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 2007).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 107-142. The works of notable American artists on view in the museum then included Benjamin West's *Ophelia and Laertes* (1792), Hiram Powers' *Eve Disconsolate* (1859-61), Duveneck's iconic *The Whistling Boy* (1872), Joseph Henry Sharp's *Harvest Dance* (1894) and Childe Hassam's *Pont Royal, Paris* (1897).

¹² "I didn't like his class at all. He scraped out everything on my canvas, then painted a Duveneck... I did not care for Duveneck's work, though I recognized his ability to grasp character in portraits. He was admired for his very direct method... but I was not interested in that type of thing with its emphasis on dexterity... I wanted design." Quoted in Poesch, 8.

¹³ Recent scholarly and museum reevaluations have underscored Duveneck's prominence—as an artist, teacher, art lecturer, art juror and art personality—on an international level. See Julie Aronson, editor, *Frank Duveneck, American Master* (Cincinnati: D. Giles Limited, 2020).

¹⁴ Sedlacek, 104-134. See also Nancy E. Owen, *Rookwood and the Industry of Art: Women, Culture, and Commerce, 1880-1913* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 201).

¹⁵ Quoted in Poesch, 9-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ For a consideration of the abstract art of Stevens within the context of the Stieglitz Circle, see Charles C. Eldredge, "Nature Symbolized: American Painting From Ryder to Hartley," in Edward Weinberger, editor, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 112-129.

¹⁸ See David A. Cleveland, *A History of American Tonalism: 1880-1920* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2010); Charles C. Eldredge, *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 1979); and J. Richard Gruber, *Elliott Daingerfield: Art and Life in North Carolina* (Blowing Rock: Blowing Rock Art and History Museum, 2011).

¹⁹ During this period, when Picasso and Braque developed Analytic Cubism, Gallery 291 gave Picasso his first one-man exhibition in America. Modernist Arthur Dove had his first one-man exhibition at Gallery 291, presenting abstractions and pastels from his *Nature Symbolized* series (works that are related, in ways, to the later abstractions of Stevens). European and American advanced modern art was seen in The International Exhibition of Modern Art (the Armory Show) in New York, then traveled to Chicago. European and American avant-garde art was also exhibited in The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters, in 1916.

²⁰ John Franklin Martin, "Painting," in John E. Kleber, Editor, *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 685-686.

²¹ See Robert C. Hinckley, editor, *William Woodward, American Impressionist* (New Orleans: Robert C. Hinckley, 2009)

²² Prescott N. Dunbar, *The New Orleans Museum of Art, The First Seventy-Five Years* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 42-56.

²³ Bernard Lemann, "Will Henry's Nature. The Pictorial Ideas of W. H. Stevens," unpublished manuscript, 1948.

²⁴ Josef Albers letter to Will Henry Stevens, February 16, 1944, Will Henry Stevens Archives, Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Lemann, "Will Henry's Nature."

²⁷ Quoted in Lisa Phillips, *The American Century: Art & Culture, 1950-2000* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999), 11.

²⁸ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting, A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

²⁹ Percy North, "Beyond the Surface: Themes and Variations in the Abstractions of Will Henry Stevens" (Asheville: Blue Spiral 1, undated).

³⁰ Quoted in Poesch, 63.

³¹ Lisa Phillips, *The American Century*, 14.

³² Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism, From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 394-400.



above: Stevens painting on the bank of the Cane River, northern Louisiana, circa 1930

“On foot, as was his habit, or on his bicycle, he gradually came to know New Orleans and its environs. He carried sketchbooks and painting materials in a knapsack and made forays into the countryside, much as he had been doing since his Indiana days. He would take the ferry across the Mississippi River, then journey into the farm country, along the bayous and streams...The shacks and cottages, the boats, the river and the bayous became favored subjects.”

— Jessie Poesch

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