



Olin Dows, 1937.
Courtesy Wilderstein Preservation.

Olin Dows, Painter

Cynthia Owen Philip

“Images are my language,” Olin Dows told the interviewer Harland B. Phillips in 1963. From childhood, he knew that painting was what he was meant to do. There were only two periods in which Dows did not paint. One was when he was touring Italy and using all his energy to absorb its splendors. The other was during the Depression when he was administering federal art programs and was totally immersed in other artists’ work. Painting was the unifying force of his life.

In the course of the same interview, Dows identified three sources of inspiration that molded his esthetic sensibility. Strongest and most encompassing was the special ambiance in which he was raised. Born at Irvington-on-Hudson in 1904, his father was Tracy Dows, the youngest child of an extremely successful New York City grain merchant. His mother Alice Olin was descended from the prominent, historically deep-rooted families of Rhinebeck, New York. Four years later the Dows acquired an immense expanse of land there and commissioned the accomplished architect Harrie T. Lindeberg to build a handsome, spacious Colonial Revival house with magnificent views of the Hudson River and the ever-changing Catskill Mountains. They called the property Fox Hollow. “God only knows how much growing up in a beautifully sited house of good design and with good furniture, surrounded by acres of well-kept lawns, fields, and woodlands affects one’s perceptions,” Olin Dows told Phillips. He was acutely conscious that being privileged to take such an environment for granted permanently shaped his innermost being.

Equally important was the contiguous country seat, Glenburn. Though small by comparison—it was only sixty-six acres—it was passed down without break from generation to generation of his mother’s family from the original Beekman grant on through the Livingstons, Tillotsons, Lynches and Olins. In 1937, Dows himself inherited it. Unlike Fox Hollow, Glenburn was ancestral. A profound attachment to this land and the continuity of its heritage was the lens through which Dows perceived life. Perhaps not always overt, it was, nonetheless, the subtext of all his art. His countless landscapes and plant drawings pay tribute to it, as do his murals in the Rhinebeck and Hyde Park post offices and his illustrated volume memorializing his friend, neighbor, and very distant cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.



Market, Acapulco, woodcut, 1933.
Courtesy Brenda J. Klaproth.

Dows' second source of inspiration was the work of Robert Chanler, a multilayered original. While still a boy, Dows attended an exhibition of this neighbor's highly imaginative decorative screens. Chanler also painted murals. Those embellishing the veranda walls at Rokeby, his Livingston-descendant family's country seat, are lively neoclassical floral garlands and urns; those adorning the nursery depict jet black crows congregating above an orange poppy field at sunset. Dows immediately came under Chanler's spell if not his tutelage. The screens he so enjoyed painting throughout his life are among the most vibrant of his works. One of his earliest designs was of fantasy zebras, a motif to which he would return again and again. His first mural, painted when he was twenty years old, was a floor-to-ceiling fresco of playful fluffy white owls positioned amid stylized blue vines. It encircles the parlor at Callendar House, another of the great Livingston estates.

The third influence hints at Dows' innate, if suppressed, sensitivity to the visionary. It was an illustrated volume in his father's fine library, of William Blake's *Book of Job*. "I've always loved it," he told Phillips. "I still have it. I bought it from my father when he was selling some of these good things...I still look at it often." Dows was fortunate that, although his family's interests were more literary than visual, they recognized his need for training and, while he was still a boy, engaged C. K. Chatterton of Vassar College to give him drawing lessons at Fox Hollow. It was a good start. Chatterton was a careful and considerate teacher who also took Dows to New York City museums and exhibitions.

Then came St. Mark's boarding school, a good education, but bone dry as far as art was concerned. He produced a few political cartoons and painted on his own, but there was no instruction. Nor was developing artistic talent one of Harvard University's missions. However, during his two years there, he took pleasure in attending lectures by the enthusiastic art historians Paul Sachs and Bliss Perry. They made a strong impression, for Dows came to believe that a civilization expressed itself best through its painting. For instance, he thought it difficult to understand the economic basis of the French Revolution without knowing the works of Watteau and Fragonard.

Even more important were the wider opportunities offered by Cambridge and Boston. Dows spent hours studying the splendid collections at the Fogg Art Museum, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He also frequented the commercial galleries. Still he found time to attend evening classes at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's architectural school, then located at Copley Square. There he attended sculpture and life as well as architectural drafting classes.

Reminiscing, Dows wished he had stayed at Harvard for three years and received his degree, but his parents had offered him a trip abroad after two years, and off to Paris he went. Through inertia he enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. It was not a great success. He would have been better off if he had studied with a



Tortilla Makers, woodcut, 1933.
Courtesy Brenda J. Klaproth.



Hudson View, four-panel screen, 1929.
Painted for Alice Huntington Juta.

very good master, he later said, but he did not then know in what direction he wanted to go. At this time, his “great enthusiasms” were eclectic. In addition to Robert Chanler and William Blake, they were Maxfield Parrish, Charles Dana Gibson, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and George Bernard Shaw.

Back in the United States, Dows spent two years at the Yale Art School. Students did Beaux-Arts type projects there, too, but painting all day every day with detailed criticism along the way together with the stimulation of fellow students was exactly what he needed. During this period he gave a few lectures at Wesleyan College where both his great-grandfather and his grandfather had been president. He passed muster, but he left grateful that, unlike most of his artist friends, he possessed an independent income and did not have to teach in order to live.

From Yale, Dows went on to the Art Students League in New York City. The most important event of this period was the summer he spent with fellow artists in Mexico. They painted and traveled, delighting in the primitive vitality of colonial sculpture and architecture. In Mexico City they stayed in a student boarding house. The great muralist Jose Clemente Orozco was abroad at the time, but they

made the acquaintance of Diego Rivera who, under the government-sponsored arts program, was working on an immense mural in the Palacio Nacional. The impact of that exciting summer was enormous, especially on his screen painting.

By 1930, Dows felt he had mastered the skills he needed to become a full-time professional artist and called an end to his formal art education. This did not mean that he stopped trying to perfect his craft. On the contrary, he always sought criticism from fellow artists, from patrons, and from friends. After all, he confided to Phillips, "it's better to be criticized than neglected." Besides, he added, his mother had always been very outspoken, so that criticism had long ceased to worry him.

And so Dows went home and painted both in oil and watercolor what he saw around him—spreading landscapes, picturesque barns, and single trees, often with no human being or even animal in sight. The Ferargil Gallery in New York City exhibited his work. Despite the Depression, it sold reasonably well. He was supremely happy in his vocation. The philosophic framework within which he worked was that the recognized western tradition was the solar plexus of American art; that a lifetime was not long enough to develop one point of view; and that painting was more craft than expression.

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Trees and River, 1953.
Courtesy Southlands Foundation.

In the early thirties, when Olin Dows was sharing a lovely Georgetown house in Washington, D.C., with his mother—his father had moved permanently to London in 1931 and leased Fox Hollow to a girls' school—he became a close friend of Edward Bruce, a serious amateur painter as well as an advisor to the U.S. Department of the Treasury on Phillipine sugar and on silver. It was Bruce's vision that artists should be included within the category of jobless professionals benefiting from the New Deal federal relief programs. The first outcome was the Public Works Art Project, a crash relief program administered by the Treasury. Organized on a regional basis and manned by volunteers, many of whom were well-known museum directors, artists, and distinguished activists, it employed 3,700 artists who produced over 15,000 works of art in the six months between December 1933 and June 1934. The PWAP was superseded by the Section of Painting and Sculpture, organized within the Treasury's Public Buildings Procurement Division. Its mission was to adorn new federal buildings—mostly post offices and court houses, but including ocean liners and terminals—with murals and sculptures. Much smaller and with higher standards than the PWAP, in its eight years it awarded 1,400 contracts on a juried competitive basis. It was not intended to be a relief program.

Dows worked as an administrator in both the PWAP and the "Section." In the former he was assigned Virginia and Maryland as well as Washington, D.C.; in the latter, his region included all the states east of the Mississippi River. When it became apparent that the Section would benefit from an infusion of artists and dollars from the newly-established Works Progress Administration, Dows was given the Treasury's relief program to manage as well. In general, the master who won the commission was paid by the non-relief fund and the assistants from the relief fund. The painting of the murals in New York City's Custom House by Reginald Marsh and ten helpers is a good example of how effective the system was.

Of course, some rivalry existed between Section and WPA artists. Looking back, Dows believed it was a healthy thing. The Section drew more experienced and conservative artists, the WPA younger, evolving talents, many of whom would later become leaders in the postwar art world. Among the artists who participated in the programs were Isamu Noguchi, Willem de Kooning, Chaim Gross, William Zorach, William Gropper, Ben Shahn, and Milton Avery. If there was a thorn in Dows' flesh it was Stuart Davis, who, as head of an artist union, led a strike against the government. It seemed "pretty grotesque" to Dows that artists should protest against their only source of work.

Otherwise Dows was very happy with the programs' accomplishments. At that time, magazine covers and advertising constituted most Americans' contact with art. To stimulate interest in their work, program artists were expected to seek



Catching Sturgeon in the Hudson.
Mural at the Hyde Park Post Office.

out local ideas and opinions. When the murals were painted *in situ*, watching the process became a community event. Under such circumstances, it was natural the designs were usually conservative. After all, Dows pointed out, “one couldn’t experiment on a post office wall in the same way as at a studio easel.” Moreover, American artists had scant experience with painting murals. The new visual language it demanded was in itself inhibiting. “None of us worried about producing great art,” Dows said. “Great painting can’t be stage managed.”

In summing up the government programs, he later said they “coughed up cash at a very important time to a great many artists and were administered almost everywhere with real understanding, sympathy, and knowledge.” Even “the big-shot artists were more interested in the job than what they got out of it. In adding to the country’s culture, they did a very important social job.”

If Dows had a special enthusiasm, it was for the WPA art-center program. Its exhibitions and classes for children and adults, he believed, did more to stimulate the postwar cultural boom than anything else the programs did. That many of the centers developed into small regional museums he deemed one of the most exciting phenomena of his lifetime.

Dows also recognized that his three years in the program were personally liberating. “I never felt so much a part of a group as I did then,” he said. “We were a pretty funny outfit, rather individual and out-spoken, but we brought Treasury credit.” He was pleased and surprised to discover he was a good administrator, even though he hated to judge others—in his opinion, one of his faults. When he left the programs in 1938, well before they were phased out, it took him a year to dispel his yen to return. Working with such a cutting-edge and affable group was “a sort of dope,” he ruefully observed. “It gets into your system and when it’s not there you miss it.”

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Dows went back to his old life for multiple reasons. In 1937 his father died leaving Fox Hollow to him and his two sisters, Margaret and Deborah. They sold it to Vincent Astor. At the same time his mother gave him her half share of Glenburn. In an informal family settlement, Deborah traded her share for land where she established the renowned equestrian school, Southland Farms. In 1939, he renovated Glenburn which had been unoccupied for fifteen years. Having torn down one wing and added a studio, he moved into it with his mother. While the work was being done, he paid a visit to Margaret who had married a Swedish diplomat and was living in Egypt. There he would begin again to paint landscapes and market scenes. The stimulus from this exotic culture was similar to that he had received during his summer in Mexico. His paintings possessed a special vigor. Still interested in the operation of government-sponsored art, on the way home he took time to investigate the programs in Germany and Italy.

Once settled in Rhinebeck, Dows won the commissions to paint murals in the new Rhinebeck and Hyde Park post offices. Working closely with President Roosevelt, he was successful in specifying that both buildings be replicas of early Dutch structures—in Rhinebeck the 1700 Kip-Beekman-Heermance house; in Hyde Park, the 1760 Bard house. These murals reflect his deep-grained nostalgia for his own past, an emotion Roosevelt shared. In order to elicit local comment before executing the murals, he displayed scale models at Rhinebeck's Starr Institute. In the introduction to this exhibit he wrote: "This mural scheme consists of a consecutive series of daily and historic incidents connected with Rhinebeck soil, from the autumn day Henry Hudson sailed by, until today. I have emphasized the landscape and those simple activities which bind our lives to the past and to each other....Running parallel with this basic theme, are the trends which we share with our whole country: the discovery of land; its acquisition and distribution; immigration from abroad and from East to West; the development of transportation and communication....There is a hopeful and healthy continuity of faith and living that controls these innovations. That is why they are in the background of the modern panel, framed by apple trees." For Dows, cultural change was subordinate to the enduring landscape. To give the murals a wider audience before he installed them in the post office, Dows arranged for their exhibition at the Art Students League in New York City.

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For a few months before and after Pearl Harbor, Dows worked with the Office of Civilian Defense in Washington. In 1942 he enlisted. While at Camp Meade, Maryland, he sketched, painted, and photographed scenes of basic training. Soon he was asked to join the Army's Artist Correspondent Unit—an idea he had earlier suggested to his government friends—and was sent to England to chronicle American troops preparing for combat. He was given the rank of sergeant. Fifteen of his many watercolors were included in the exhibition of the Unit's work that traveled to twenty-eight American cities to elicit support for the war effort.

During this prolific period, Dows also found time to organize exhibitions of American art in England. Then he was assigned to the 35th Infantry Division to record the Normandy invasion. Into battle he carried a notebook, a fountain pen, a camera, and a carbine. He stayed with his division as it fought through France and finally linked up with the Soviet army. For persuading fifty-six German soldiers to surrender in the Battle of the Bulge—he spoke fluent German as well as French—he was awarded a Bronze Star, Legion of Merit.

Dows' major project when he returned to Glenburn after the war was a commemorative book about Franklin Roosevelt's life at Hyde Park. His expressed intention was to convey the quiet mood of the place. He protested that he did not regret the quite natural passing of that way of life. But the gentle text, filled with quotations from family letters, and many of his 174 drawings verges on the romantic. In addition to providing a way of expressing the terrible void made by the death of his colleague and friend, the book was, perhaps, a delayed reaction to the horrors he had witnessed during the war.

At the same time, the illustrations may also have been a professional reaction against the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism in American art. The post war art world had little patience with realism. Dows wrote: "I like, and it is quite natural for me to like the picturesque, the handsome view, the graceful rhythm, and I make no apology for it." He took it as a compliment when the art dealer, Maynard Walker, who had organized the Art Students League mural exhibit, told him that his drawing was "very dull, tight and old masterish."

In clinging to what he called his "objective" style, Dows was aware he would be left out of the excitement—and the art markets—created by the new movement. But, it was not in Dows' temperament to lay down his brushes. Always a hard worker, he continued to paint, sketch, and design screens in his studio and out-of-doors seven hours a day. And he continued to exhibit and sell his work in New York City, in Washington, D.C., and in Poughkeepsie. Moreover, the ephemera he gave to his friends and relatives on celebratory occasions are often very beautiful as well as charming and, sometimes, witty.

In 1950, when Dows was forty-six, he took a step that probably astounded himself as much as it did his family and friends. He got married. His wife, Carmen Vial de Senoret, was the widow of a Chilean diplomat and a distinguished diplomat in her own right. For six months of the year they lived at Glenburn—his mother removed to a contiguous property he had bought in 1944—and for six months they lived on a hacienda in Chile. In many respects the property was similar to Fox Hollow. It was an immense dairy farm with magnificent views of distant snow-capped volcanic mountains. The spacious sun-filled house was set in dark green fields. However, its color scheme was far less restrained. The adobe walls were painted yellow and pink as well as brilliant white and its roof was red tile. The landscape was challenging to paint, and paint it he did, catching its subtle colors and nuanced light. In a style that incorporated this new visual experience with what he had learned long ago in Mexico, Dows' screens, depicting exotic flora and peasants active in their daily routines, were powerful and much in demand. Three happy and prolific decades rolled by, broken at the end only by Carmen's death in 1978. Three years later, Dows suffered a heart attack. On June 7, 1981, aged seventy-six years, he died. Eulogized for his thoughtfulness, his modest gentle manners, his tactful interest in the well-being of his friends, as well as for his artistic achievement, he left an unfillable void. It was not only that his death marked the passing of a generation, it was that throughout his life he had remained true to his vision. It is good to know that the previous fall the gallery at Vassar College opened its season with an exhibition of his screens, water colors, and paintings and that, at the time he was stricken, the Salander-O'Reilly Gallery in New York City had organized a retrospective of his prints and screens. Today, the work he produced for the Army, most of which remains in the possession of the United States Center of Military History, circulates on loan.

Although Dows liked to describe himself as a traditionalist, he had great respect for experimental art forms. "Fundamentally an artist's role is what they produce," he told Phillips. "It is very subjective. What is there is the quality of personal expression." But, he added, "there is also the artist's role as a teacher of other professionals, amateurs, and the future audience. That is their second social function....The important thing is that there be breadth of patronage, even to the extent of the Museum of Modern Art's fur-lined cup." Dows also believed that the availability of a broad range of art scholarships was vital. The goal was to have as much variety of opportunity as possible. Government support was fine, he said, but it was only one element. Dows' guiding principle was that art is

crucial, not only to individuals, but to the country as a whole. He was a man for our age as well as his own.

Acknowledgments

The idea for an exhibit to honor Olin Dows was conceived one morning in 1997 when two Museum of Rhinebeck History board members were traveling north to visit friends in Vermont. One mentioned Olin Dows and, to pass the time, they named friends and acquaintances who owned one or more of his paintings. As the list grew and was interspersed with anecdotes and remembrances of the artist, his family, and his contributions to Rhinebeck and the greater community, the concept of an exhibit emerged. On April 25, 1998, with the assistance of numerous individuals and organizations, the Museum of Rhinebeck History mounted the exhibit "Olin Dows and Public Art in the New Deal." This essay about Olin Dows and his work was written to accompany the exhibition..