

The Founders of the Woodstock Artists Association A Portfolio



Woodstock Artists Association Gallery, c. 1920s. Courtesy W.A.A. Archives. Photo: Stowall Studio.



Carl Eric Lindin (1869–1942), *In the Ojai*, 1916. Oil on Board, 7³/₄ x 9³/₄. From the Collection of the Woodstock Library Association, gift of Judy Lund and Theodore Wassmer. Photo: Benson Caswell.



Henry Lee McFee (1886–1953), *Glass Jar with Summer Squash*, 1919. Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20. Woodstock Artists Association Permanent Collection, gift of Susan Braun. Photo: John Kleinhans.



Andrew Dasburg (1827–1979), Adobe Village, c. 1926. Oil on Canvas, 19½ x 23½. Private Collection. Photo: Benson Caswell.



John F. Carlson (1875–1945), Autumn in the Hills, 1927. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 60. Greenwich Art Gallery, Greenwich, Connecticut. Photo: John Kleinhans.



Frank Swift Chase (1886–1958), Catskills at Woodstock, c. 1928. Oil on Canvas, 22½ x 28. Morgan Anderson Consulting, N.Y.C. Photo: Benson Caswell.



John F. Carlson



Yasburo



Carl Eric Lindin



Frank Swift Chase



m^oFee

The Founders of the Woodstock Artists Association

Tom Wolf

The Woodstock Artists Association has been showing the work of artists from the Woodstock area for eighty years. At its inception, many people helped in the work involved: creating a corporation, erecting a building, and developing an exhibition program. But traditionally five painters are given credit for the actual founding of the organization: John Carlson, Frank Swift Chase, Andrew Dasburg, Carl Eric Lindin, and Henry Lee McFee. The practice of singling out these five from all who participated reflects their extensive activity on behalf of the project, and it descends from the writer Richard Le Gallienne. In his essay, “Woodstock,” published in 1923 by the WAA, and written in consultation with many of those involved, he singled out these five men as the original organizers of the Woodstock Realty Company, the stock company that bought the property in the middle of the village and oversaw the building of the gallery.

The WAA was created in the ebullient period of prosperity in the United States following World War I. It came on the heels of Hervey White’s first Maverick concerts and the building of the Maverick Concert Hall, another of Woodstock’s long-standing cultural institutions, in 1919. The five artists who are the focus of this essay reflected the aesthetic and art-political philosophy of the WAA, in that they represented both the conservative and the avant-garde tendencies that existed among the artists of Woodstock, and throughout the United States, in the years after the Armory Show of 1913 in New York City.

Before 1902 Woodstock was a small farming village with some industry that was on occasion visited by artists looking for compelling Catskills sites for their landscape paintings. In 1902 Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead, a wealthy British expatriate, decided that Woodstock was the right place to start a colony of artists and craftsmen in the spirit of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement, John Ruskin, with whom he had studied at Oxford, and William Morris, whom he knew from London. With his wife, Jane, and kindred spirits, Hervey White, a writer, and Bolton Brown, an artist, Whitehead created Byrdcliffe. He started inviting artists to the colony in 1903, providing them with housing and studio space. In many ways his idealistic experiment did not work out as he hoped—for example, the production of furniture, which was supposed to support the

venture, lasted only about a year. But the colony did succeed in drawing artists to Woodstock, and by the late Teens there were scores of them living or sum-
mering there. Ambitious and aware of their numbers, they decided to create a
place for their work to be exhibited.

Late in 1919 a small group, Chase, Dasburg, Lindin and Neilson Parker, a
businessman sympathetic to the arts, bought a lot for the future gallery for
\$1,000. They selected a site right in the middle of town, where the Rose-
Beekman store had been located until destroyed by fire. Then the artists formed
two complementary organizations. The Woodstock Artists Association was
charged with running the exhibition space and setting its artistic policies. The
Artists Realty Company dealt with the finances of buying a space and erecting
a building. Its primary method was the sale of stock in the Company to inter-
ested parties: 200 shares were sold at \$50 apiece to raise \$10,000. There was
considerable overlap among the personnel of the two organizations, as it was a
cooperative venture among sympathetic people. (The Realty Company termi-
nated its existence in 1970 when a movement was successfully organized to have
its shareholders donate their stock to the WAA membership, who then became
owner of the lot and gallery at 28 Tinker Street).

Once the lot was purchased, the WAA Directors drew up plans for their
gallery. They sent their ideal plan to an architect friend of painter Birge
Harrison's, William Alciphron Boring, "for a colonial façade and blue printing."
Boring had learned his trade in Paris and in the offices of McKim, Meade and
White. He was best known for the buildings at Ellis Island, which he and his
partner, Edward L. Tilton, had designed after winning the competition as rela-
tive unknowns. Around the time Boring designed the WAA building he was
appointed Director of Columbia University's School of Architecture, a position
he would hold for a decade before becoming the first Dean of the school. In
gratitude for his plans for the WAA, according to his memoirs, "six of the artists
each sent me a beautiful picture." His initial design for the WAA was well-
received, but estimates from contractors, between \$10,000 and \$12,000, proved
too expensive for the organization's budget. After considering several other pro-
posals, the Directors took the suggestion of Henry Lee McFee and returned to
Boring's plan, simplifying it by eliminating storerooms and studios. What was
left was a spare, functional building, very different from the elaborately sculp-
turesque, multicolored, Beaux-Arts style of the buildings on Ellis Island. It was
a simple box-like structure with a pitched roof, paneled on the exterior with hor-
izontal bands of wood and painted white. Its calm façade was ornamented only
with four oval porthole windows symmetrically placed flanking the central

doorway, which was framed by pilasters and surmounted by a plain white pediment. An example of the popular colonial revival style, it suggests that this is an institution where American art is shown, in a building that reflects the native architectural vocabulary.

Metalworker Captain William Jenkinson, one of the most active of the original WAA Directors, was charged with contracting out the construction of the building, with a budget limited to \$6,500. He was authorized to use “the best stock trim possible.” The work was done by Griffin Herrick, who was probably related to Fordyce Herrick, the chief builder of the Byrdcliffe colony. For the job the WAA borrowed \$2,000 from the Kingston Trust Company and set about raising money by holding benefit dances, performances, and auctions of small art works. Eager to get into action, the Directors leased a temporary space in the Art Students League building so they could hold an exhibition in June 1920. It featured 45 artists and opened with a costume ball. Exhibitors paid a rental fee for wall space, and were charged a commission of 15% on works sold. The amounts would vary, but the practices of renting exhibition space and charging commissions on sales would remain part of WAA policy for years (today there is a \$50 membership fee instead of rental of wall space, and the commission is 35%).

By 1920 the character of the WAA was established. It was made up of dedicated artist-volunteers for the most part, dominated by men and by painters. Several women played active roles in the running of the organization, such as Alice Wardwell, the sister of artist James Wardwell, photographer Eva Watson Schütze, artists Zulma Steele, Carla Atkinson, and others, but they were considerably outnumbered by the men. WAA exhibitions were held only during the summer months; for the rest of the year the space was empty or rented. Crafts were given a role in WAA shows, but sometimes they were shown in separate exhibitions. Soon after the founding of the organization a committee was set up to oversee crafts submissions, and at times craft sales were charged a slightly higher commission than fine arts. In 1939 a group of artists, including active WAA members, founded the Woodstock Guild of Craftsmen, an organization specifically dedicated to supporting craft work.

American artists at the time of the founding of the WAA were polarized in reaction to the Armory Show in 1913, which exposed the country to radical new tendencies in European art. Some adventurous and cosmopolitan American artists developed their own versions of modernism, while others continued practicing more traditional styles of art-making. They were people who devoted their lives to precarious careers, and they had passionate feelings about art. The WAA was formed by artists who lived together in a small community, and they

made an explicit attempt to create a non-doctrinaire situation where artists of all persuasions could exhibit their work. Partly born of self-interest, in that the gallery would give artists exposure, and partly from a genuine open-mindedness and camaraderie, these ideals were built into the first constitution of the WAA:

It is the purpose of the Association in these exhibitions to give free and equal expression to the "Conservative" and "Radical" elements, because it believes a strong difference of opinion is a sign of health and an omen of long life for the colony.

The organization held its first exhibitions in its new gallery in 1921, and some members of the group were critical of the level of quality. Soon thereafter, a committee to select works for a traveling exhibition, headed by Eugene Speicher, who was then becoming one of the most successful portrait painters in the United States, decided that, "there was not enough work of a high enough standard to be 'sent on the road' to represent the WAA." The committee suggested that the exhibition be postponed and that it decide by ballot which artists to invite. Similarly a committee was created for exhibitions at the WAA to look at submitted works and to chose which would be shown. Some judicious splitting of hairs was involved in describing this group as "a selecting committee rather than a jury," for juries were associated with the antiquated and elitist National Academy of Art and Design in New York City. The committee was to be composed of five conservatives and five radicals, and the resulting group included some of the major talents of Woodstock's art scene, and some of the most active members of the WAA: George Bellows, John Carlson, Frank Swift Chase, Konrad Cramer, Andrew Dasburg, Birge Harrison, Henry Leith Ross, Henry Lee McFee, Eva Watson Schütze, and Eugene Speicher. Of the ten, Cramer, Dasburg, and McFee were certainly among the radicals, but from today's perspective it is difficult to be sure who their two comrades would be. Perhaps one was Schütze, who is now respected for her photographs, but whose little-known paintings are simplified and graphic in a somewhat modernist manner. But the other six seem firmly in the conservative camp.

The concern for "quality" may have been justified, but it also indicates that some members of the WAA were setting themselves up as judges and finding others lacking. This contrasts with progressive developments in New York City, where artists created the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 to avoid just such tendencies: any artist could exhibit at its shows for the price of the hanging fee (except R. Mutt).

Although they seem remote today, tensions between modernists and conservatives were real—they led WAA President, Carl Lindin, to threaten resignation in 1925. In his letter to the Directors, he praised the early years of the organization,

The Gallery then was a place where all the different schools could be represented and where the artists could learn from each other how to better express themselves, a temple where all the creeds could meet and where the divine idea of beauty could be seen and perhaps understood, in its many differentiations.

But there was a problem with this idyllic system: “You all know that almost from the start there has been a decided unwillingness on the conservative side to exhibit together with the modernist group.” He must have been appeased, because he remained President of the organization almost up to the time of his death in 1942. But the tension between the radicals and the conservatives is one of the animating issues of the WAA in its early years, and it can be seen in the works of the five founders.

It is not surprising that the gallery’s architect came recommended by Birge Harrison, because Harrison was virtually the sixth founder of the WAA. He, with Lindin, was one of the early painters involved with Byrdcliffe, the colony that first brought numerous artists to Woodstock. Harrison was respected by all for his dignified and genial personality, his worldliness, and his poetic landscape paintings, which were usually snow scenes, marines, or nocturnes. He was the oldest of the Directors of the WAA. When Lindin, as President, was unavailable for a meeting in the early days, Harrison ran the meeting. Except Lindin, all the founders were students of Harrison from the Art Students League summer school in landscape painting at Woodstock that he started in 1906.

Of the four younger founders, Carlson and Chase followed their teacher’s example by painting landscapes in a painterly, representational style. Carlson was Harrison’s assistant at the League school, and when Harrison died in 1929 Carlson replaced him, in turn naming Chase as his assistant. McFee and Dasburg also were students and admirers of Harrison, but after being schooled in his sensitive approach to landscape they rebelled and adopted modernist styles of painting.

Lindin was the logical choice to be the President of the WAA. Having come to Woodstock from Hull House, the famous Chicago settlement house, he was independent of the Harrison circle. He was friends with writer and

proto-hippie Hervey White, one of the founders of the Byrdcliffe art colony. In 1902, when the Byrdcliffe buildings were being constructed, Lindin was already there with White, and he made Woodstock his primary residence for the next four decades. Born in Sweden, he had studied art in Paris before coming to the United States. Artistically he occupied a middle ground between the conservatives and the moderns, and as President he was the ideal person to mediate between them. His own style was conservative, loosely painted but realist, comparable to Carlson and Chase. But the latter were conservative in subject as well—both were self-defined landscape virtuosos who rarely painted other subjects. Lindin painted mostly landscapes, but he felt at home with portraits and still lifes, and this breadth is something he shared with Dasburg and McFee. His early work includes realistic watercolor drawings of academy models, which were followed by modest landscapes and moody nocturnes that he painted, as Harrison had, in the early years of the twentieth century. In contrast, his *In the Ojai*, from 1916, with its quickly brushed oranges and purples, shows an almost Fauvist openness to color. Later in his career, he changed to a monumental style of simplified realism with closed, clearly defined forms—a period style that finds affinities in contemporary works by artists as different as John Sloan and Georgia O’Keeffe.

Like Lindin, John Carlson was also Swedish; he came to Woodstock in the early years of the Byrdcliffe colony, and it was he who recommended Birge Harrison to run the Art Students League in the village. He is celebrated for his snow scenes, which may have appealed to him because of memories of his Scandinavian origins. The subject was also favored by the Impressionists; like them, Carlson loved the white reflectiveness of snow and reveled in the opportunities to ladle creamy passages of paint onto his canvases.

Carlson was known as the archconservative of the Woodstock art world. But today, when the twentieth century is over and apprehensible as a closed, finite unit of time, we can look back and re-evaluate some of the distinctions that seemed so important during the period. And there are elements in Carlson’s painting that mark him as a twentieth-century artist, aware of modernism and incorporating its practices. Thus his snowscapes have a thickly painted tactility that asserts paint as a physical substance in its own right. His impressive, five-foot-long *Autumn in the Hills* features passages of bright, complementary color that are applied in broad patches of textured paint, and that are as vivid as passages in many modernist abstractions. But in the end these passages function as parts of a realistic view of trees above a sweeping river and convey an easily legible, representational view—but one painted by an artist

who seemed to be responding, perhaps reluctantly, to innovations in the visual arts as practiced by some of his more modernist contemporaries. Carlson constructed many of his later landscapes from patches and swatches of paint that serve as blocks, building a firm pictorial structure to reproduce a recognizable scene. His technique recalls Cézanne's method of combining observation with solid structure, and Cézanne was a primary inspiration of Woodstock's "modernists."

Similarly, Frank Swift Chase is ranked among the conservatives. Like the Impressionists, he relied on painting what he saw. And like them, selecting a scene, and framing it to determine its composition, were among the decisions most crucial to the appearance of the final work. In his *Catskills* he chose a Fall scene dominated by an explosion of yellow and orange foliage that creates a coloristic jolt more violent than what is seen in the works of a card-carrying modernist like McFee, who sought a calmer, more classical ideal in his painting. The thickly painted, ominous grey cloud that hovers behind the fiery foliage in *Catskills* gives it an emotional tension. Chase's paintings are the heirs of the Northern Romantic tradition, and, although Chase was more faithful to the scene as perceived, they evoke a spiritual kinship with Van Gogh who also had an emotional response to nature and rendered it with expressive, tactile paint.

So what did separate the conservatives from the modernists in this division that was so clear to the founders of the WAA, whom Le Gallienne likened to "the lion and the lamb living happily side by side?" We have seen that in some of their paintings Carlson and Chase approached the modernists, and even surpassed them, in bright color and aggressive paint handling. In 1929 Carlson published the highly successful *Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting*, in which he counseled:

The beginner in painting copies nature in all its literalness. He makes his painting look like the place. Soon he learns to omit the superfluous, grasp the essentials and arrange them into a more powerful and significant whole.

This consistently anti-modernist painter recommended something other than direct mimesis, the treating of the painting as an aesthetic structure with its own integrity apart from its subject. In a 1924 article Andrew Dasburg, a leader of Woodstock's modernists, said much the same thing:

My preoccupation is with the physical reality of my medium, which, through the character of the motif, I try to proportion into such pleasurable relations of color to shape that the canvas will have a form interest of its own in harmony with the associations we, through common experience, bring to it.

After the Armory Show, Dasburg's interest in modernism led him to paint some dramatically abstract works, encouraged by his first-hand experiences with the avant-garde in Paris, and by his Woodstock colleague, Konrad Cramer, who had encountered advanced modernism in his native Germany before he came to the United States in 1911. These two made a trio with McFee, who like them painted a few abstract works after the Armory Show before returning to recognizable subjects in the later Teens. But they all treated their recognizable subjects in a manner considered modernist at the time. In 1923 Dasburg wrote about his American peers, "Almost everyone that can be called 'modern' has at some time or another shown an influence of Cubism in his work." Here he parted ways with Carlson, whose dedication to the landscape as perceived was too strong to permit the geometric distortions basic to the Cubist style.

Writing about his paintings of this period, Henry Lee McFee felt that space "could be as important as the thing itself, if it was shaped, modeled, realized as thoroughly as the object." This concern, he felt, "very naturally led to an interest in Cubism, which takes an important place in my development." His involvement with Cubism is clear in his *Glass Jar with Summer Squash*, where the angular facets of the glass vessel fragment the surrounding objects seen through it in a manner both realistic and Cubistic. The table that supports the still-life objects dissolves into the background space in a Cubist manner, and McFee's sober color scheme also recalls the Analytic Cubism of Picasso and Braque, augmented by restrained areas of rose, gold, and pale blue. In his Sante Fe landscapes of a decade later the artist continued to paint harmonies of subtly varied colors, with geometric blocks of architecture complementing undulating hills. In the progression from the Teens to the 1920s we see McFee firming up his style, and paring down the ambiguous Cubist dissolving planes, a development that will continue in his work. In his later years McFee concentrated on still lifes, continuing his firming up of form and focusing on a few everyday objects rendered realistically with warm, limited colors and carefully considered geometries to achieve a sober monumentality.

McFee was born in St. Louis and never traveled abroad, unlike his friend Andrew Dasburg, who was born in France. Dasburg grew up in the United

States, returning to his native country for a formative, six-month visit from 1909 into 1910. During that trip he spent time with his friend, Morgan Russell, one of the first Americans to make abstract paintings. He also studied Cézanne's work closely, met Picasso, and visited Matisse's studio. After being introduced to some of the most radical aspects of School of Paris modernism, he returned to Woodstock and spread the word. His early works reveal that he mastered the Harrison mode. After the Armory Show (where he was represented by a sculpture) Dasburg made a few dynamic full-fledged abstract paintings, but his *Adobe Village* from the 1920s signals a return to representation, tempered by the Cubism he so much admired. The lively, thickly brushed vocabulary of Carlson and Chase, ultimately derived from Impressionism, has been replaced by a cool, thinly painted surface. The buildings that dominate the New Mexico landscape are simplified into rectangular volumes rhythmically punctuated by rectangular windows. Even the mountains in the background take on geometrical contours, while the light-infused colors communicate a sense of the landscape around Sante Fe, which increasingly became Dasburg's home after his first visit there in 1916.

To today's eyes Carlson's *Autumn in the Hills* and Dasburg's *Adobe Village* might not look very different: both are landscapes, painted in oil on canvas in the mid-1920s. But at that time, they embodied two opposed aesthetics, one rooted in Impressionism, the other in Cubism. In 1919 and the years that followed, these artists, and their colleagues, managed to put their aesthetic differences aside enough to found the Woodstock Artists Association. It represented all these artists as a place where works of many types, genres, styles, media, and persuasions could be shown. That the WAA is still going strong today, fulfilling a twenty-first-century version of its original mission, proves the potency of the vision of its founders.

Notes

Essential to this, as to any historical project dealing with Woodstock, is Alf Evers, both his advice, and his book, *Woodstock, History of an American Town*, 1987, The Overlook Press. For the present study, an extremely helpful source was Molly Sullivan's Senior Project written at Bard College in 1985: *The Formative Years of the Woodstock Artists Association (1919-1929)*. Minutes of WAA meetings, as well as policy statements and a clipping file, are available in the WAA Archives. Quotations are from these, except those from the sources listed below. Richard Le Gallienne's essay, "Woodstock," was published by the WAA in 1923. *Memories of the Life of William Alciphron Boring* is available in typescript at the Avery Library of Columbia University; the architect is profiled in *Ellis Island Historic District*, New York City Landmarks and Preservation Commission, 1993, p. 17. The quotation about the "selecting committee" is from "The Woodstock Art Association," *The New York Times*, June 18, 1922, VI, p. 6. "R. Mutt" is the name under which Marcel Duchamp submitted his *Fountain* to the 1917 exhibition of The Society of Independent Artists. Carlson's statement is from

Carlson's *Guide to Landscape Painting*, 1958 (first edition, 1929), Dover Publications, p. 14. The first quotation from Dasburg is from Alexander Brook's "Andrew Dasburg," *Arts*, July 12, 1924, p. 26; his second statement is from Andrew Dasburg, "Cubism—Its Rise and Influence," *Arts*, November 1923, p. 280. McFee's statement is from Henry Lee McFee, "My Painting and Its Development," *Creative Art*, November 1931, p. xxix. This text was based on an essay published by the WAA to accompany its exhibition, *The Founders of the Woodstock Artists Association* (2000); valuable assistance for that project came from Linda Freaney, Carol Brener, and Angela Gaffney-Smith.