



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***
Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Smithsonian American Art Museum Launches National Tour of Paintings by Folk Art Modernist Earl Cunningham

“Earl Cunningham’s America” examines the paintings of Earl Cunningham (1893–1977), one of the premier folk artists of the 20th century. The exhibition is on view in Washington from Aug. 10 through Nov. 4; it begins a national tour in 2008.

“Earl Cunningham’s America” is presented under the Honorary Patronage of the President of the United States George W. Bush and Mrs. Laura Bush.

This retrospective presents the artist as a folk modernist who used the flat space and brilliant color to create sophisticated compositions with complex meanings about the nature of American life. The exhibition features 50 of the more than 400 canvases Cunningham painted during his life. The exhibition and the fully-illustrated catalog trace the story of Cunningham’s life and place his work in the context of the folk art revival that brought Edward Hicks, Grandma Moses, Horace Pippin and other folk masters to national attention. Virginia Mecklenburg, senior curator for painting and sculpture, is the curator of the exhibition.

“I am delighted that the Smithsonian American Art Museum is presenting the remarkable paintings of Earl Cunningham, an artist whose works combine the charm of memory painting with the vivid colors of early modernism,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Cunningham’s imaginary landscapes are marvels of the unexpected and the unlikely: pink flamingos dot the shoreline of the Maine coast; New England cottages sit at the edge of Florida swamps; Viking ships float in harbors with schooners; and Seminole Indians wear feathered headdresses. In this make-believe world, Cunningham presents a nostalgic view of the past in which

life is simple and elements of modern life are absent. His fascination with the past was in line with a larger national revival of interest in vernacular culture and American folk art in the 1920s and 1930s.

“Cunningham developed a distinct and personal lexicon that evoked his nostalgic version of an idyllic 19th-century world,” said Mecklenburg. “Recurring motifs—Seminoles, Viking ships, swamps and harbors—are the unlikely ingredients in Cunningham’s ideal model of America, which calls for coexistence, optimism, serenity and racial harmony. Like Norman Rockwell’s Saturday Evening Post magazine covers, Cunningham’s images offer the old and the ordinary as an antidote to change.”

Although Cunningham identifies many locations in the titles of his paintings and includes details that are specific to the place, such as the small figures of golfers in the foreground of the painting “Hilton Head,” the artist takes liberties with the actual appearance of a place. The perspective in Cunningham’s paintings is often distorted with multiple points of view. For example, “Gathering Clouds Off Little River Inlet” and “Safe Harbor–Perkins Cove” combine a bird’s-eye view of the landscape with side views of boats, trees and houses. In “Sunrise at Pine Point Maine,” Cunningham uses viewpoint and spatial configuration to balance broad areas of color with minutely rendered, quasi-descriptive detail. Curtains in the windows of a building, an American flag, a lighthouse, reflections in the water and a winding path are design elements as well as emblematic notations.

Cunningham also is known for his daring use of brilliant color. In “Blue Sail Fleet Returns” (after 1949), he combines bold shades of lavender, mauve, blue, rust, and olive and forest greens. Such paintings as “Seminoles Village, Deep in the Everglades” and “The Twenty-One” feature intensely colored skies at sunset.

The Everglades represented a place of serenity to Cunningham, who was aware of the impact of modern life on Florida’s environment and considered himself a conservationist. Like the places he painted, Cunningham often depicted both general representations of birds and specific species in his paintings. “Seminoles Everglades,” with its dark shadows that evoke the murkiness of the swamps, is populated by a wide variety of birds including flamingos, wood ducks, owls and cranes.

About the Artist

Cunningham was born on a farm in Edgecomb, Maine, near Boothbay Harbor in 1893. He left home at 13 and supported himself as a tinker and a peddler. When he was 16, Cunningham, who lived in a fisherman’s shack on Stratton Island off Old Orchard Beach, began painting images of boats and farms on wood he scavenged. In the early 1910s, Cunningham sailed on one or more of the giant coastal schooners that carried coal, ice, naval stores and lumber between Maine, the mid-Atlantic states and Florida.

In 1915, Cunningham married Iva Moses. During World War I, he drove a truck for a naval yard and visited Florida for the first time. For the next 10 years, the couple spent winters in Florida—Tampa Bay, Cedar Key and St. Augustine. In 1937, troubled by marital problems, Cunningham left Maine and bought land in South Carolina, where he farmed and raised chickens.

Cunningham settled in St. Augustine in 1949, where he opened a curio shop called the Over Fork Gallery. He displayed his paintings there, although the works were not for sale. In 1969, collector Marilyn Mennello convinced Cunningham to sell her a work; and in 1970, she made possible an exhibition of selected paintings at the Loch Haven Art Center (now the Orlando Museum of Art). In 1974, Cunningham's second museum exhibition, "Earl Cunningham: American Primitive," opened at the Daytona Beach Museum of Arts and Sciences.

Cunningham, who had suffered from depression and paranoia, committed suicide Dec. 29, 1977. In 1998, the Mennello Museum of American Art, which is dedicated to displaying the majority of the artist's work, opened in Orlando. Five years later, Cunningham was elected to the Florida Artists Hall of Fame.

Public Programs

A related press release with information on programs, including a symposium Sept. 6, is available in the museum's online press room at americanart.si.edu/press. A full schedule of exciting events at the museum, from talks with artists to performances to behind-the-scenes tours, is available at americanart.si.edu.

Publications

The catalog, published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and distributed by HarperCollins, is written by Mecklenburg, with essays by Wendell D. Garrett, senior vice president for American decorative arts at Sotheby's in New York City; and Carolyn J. Weekley, the Juli Grainger Director of Museums at Colonial Williamsburg. It will be available in the museum store and online at americanart.si.edu for \$45.

Credit

"Earl Cunningham's America" is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The exhibition is made possible by generous support from Darden Restaurants Foundation; the Elizabeth Morse Genius Foundation; the Arts and Cultural Affairs Office of Orange County, Fla.; CNL Financial Group; Bright House Networks; Lockheed Martin; and Friends of The Mennello Museum of American Art. The exhibition's tour is supported in part by the C. F. Foundation, Atlanta.

Tour

Following its presentation in Washington, the exhibition travels to the American Folk Art Museum in New York City (March 4, 2008–Aug. 31, 2008) and The Mennello Museum of American Art in Orlando, Fla. (March 6, 2009–Aug. 2, 2009).

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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