

SEEING AMERICA: Ralston Crawford's *Whitestone Bridge*, 1939-40

Whitestone Bridge is a visual interpretation of the mid-twentieth-century fascination with technology and its promises for the future.



Ralston Crawford (1906 – 1978)

Whitestone Bridge, 1939-1940

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.2

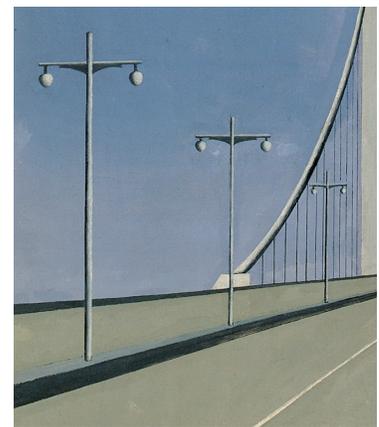
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Ralston Crawford Estate

The Art

The bridge from Queens to the Bronx, known as the Bronx Whitestone Bridge, was dedicated on the day before President Franklin Roosevelt opened the World's Fair in nearby Flushing Meadow Park. The theme of the 1939 World's Fair was the art, inventions, and technology of the future. Ralston Crawford's painting, *Whitestone Bridge*, was begun in that year and finished in 1940. Crawford said his intent was "to express the sensations and thoughts about the sensations that I have had while driving over such bridges. The simplifications and distortions aim at a distillation of these experiences" (*Seeing America*, 243).

Crawford has applied his paint thinly and flatly across the entire canvas. He used a limited palette of white, black, blue, and gray, although his grays range from a cold, steely neutral to a warmer, slightly golden hue. The monochromatic blue sky, a large roughly triangular shape dominating the right side of the canvas, is broken only by one white wispy cloud. The solid gray bridge roadway fills the foreground bottom half of the canvas and juts sharply through the middle ground and into the sky background. Its massive triangular shape is balanced by the more delicate vertical railing supports, light posts, and arch supports. The repetition of the lines and shapes—the railing uprights, the cables from which the roadway hangs—provide a reassuring rhythm and regularity as the bold, converging lines of the roadway and railings draw the viewer irresistibly and deeply into the distance.



As the artist propels our eyes upward, there is a distinct uneasiness about the experience. Where does this bridge go? Crawford has included neither the roadway beyond the arches nor any view of the water beneath the bridge. There is no assured safe haven on the other side, only an insubstantial cloud in the distance. It is a white cloud on a clear blue sky, not a storm cloud, but it is hardly a comfort. The absence of land creates a suspended-in-space sensation. And yet, the asymmetry of the composition is satisfyingly balanced. The viewer is at liberty to reconcile the possible contradictions between fear and adventure.

A *New York Times* reporter covering a posthumous show of Crawford's photography was inspired toward optimism by "a small print circa 1939" of the same subject that made "the sweeping roadway and towering arches of the Whitestone Bridge look like the gates of heaven."¹ Yet the austerity of the image creates a disconcerting doubt. In 1950, Crawford painted *Overseas Highway*, using the same palette of colors, creating a similarly surrealistic effect despite the inclusion of the blue sea beneath the highway.



Ralston Crawford (1906 – 1978)
Overseas Highway, 1950
 Private collection
 Ralston Crawford Estate

The Artist



Ralston Crawford was born in 1906 in St. Catharines, Ontario, but moved in 1910 to Buffalo, New York, the base from which his father sailed as a Great Lakes ship's captain. He himself worked as a sailor in 1926–1927 on steamships to Central America, California, and the Caribbean before studying in Los Angeles in 1927, which led to work at the young Disney Brothers Studio. The qualities required for animation art can be seen in Crawford's later paintings: the clean lines and flat planes that nevertheless suggest a three-dimensional reality.



Stuart Davis (1894 – 1964)
Landscape with Garage Lights, 1931-1932
 Oil on canvas
 Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.3
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery
 of the University of Rochester
 Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed
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In 1927 Crawford relocated to Philadelphia to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, with trips to the artists' colony in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and tours of Paris, Spain, and Italy. In the early 1930s, he was influenced by Stuart Davis's "jaunty brand of **Cubism**." His early subjects were primarily architectural and industrial. He began to experiment with photography in 1937, remarking that he used the camera "as a sketchpad."

Glossary

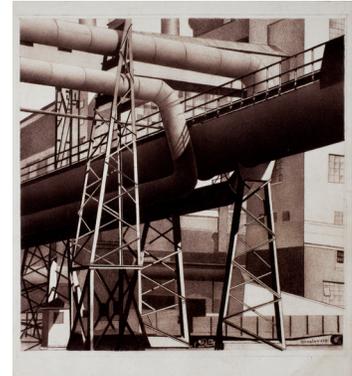
Cubism: Early 20th century avant-garde art movement in painting begun in Paris characterized by fracturing familiar objects into geometric plans and reassembling them, attempting to render three-dimensions on two-dimensional surfaces.

Precisionism: 20th century group of American painters who portrayed scenes of urban life. Originally used by critics as a negative term, deriding their choice of subject matter.

Abstract Expressionism: American art movement that emerged in post-World War II New York that stressed the expressive quality of the act of painting itself.

In the early 1940s Crawford was aligned with **Precisionists** Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler in the New Realist movement. In 1943 he served in the Weather Division of the U.S. Army Air Force, designing charts to make meteorological data more comprehensible to pilots during World War II. This experience enhanced his previous travel experiences, taking him to China, Burma, and India. In 1946, he was sent by *Fortune Magazine* to witness and paint the atomic bomb testing at Bikini Atoll. Partly as a result of this experience, Crawford's painting underwent a shift in style from the "controlled classicism" of *Whitestone Bridge* to "explosive bursts of color and line" (*Seeing America*, 244).

By the time of his death in 1978 Ralston Crawford was largely forgotten, having fallen out of step with the times after World War II, when **Abstract Expressionism** had come to dominate avant garde art. Barbara Haskell wrote in 1985 about Crawford that "Few artists in this century have explored an unpopular style with such commitment and integrity."²



Charles Sheeler (1883 – 1965)

Ballet Mechanique, 1931

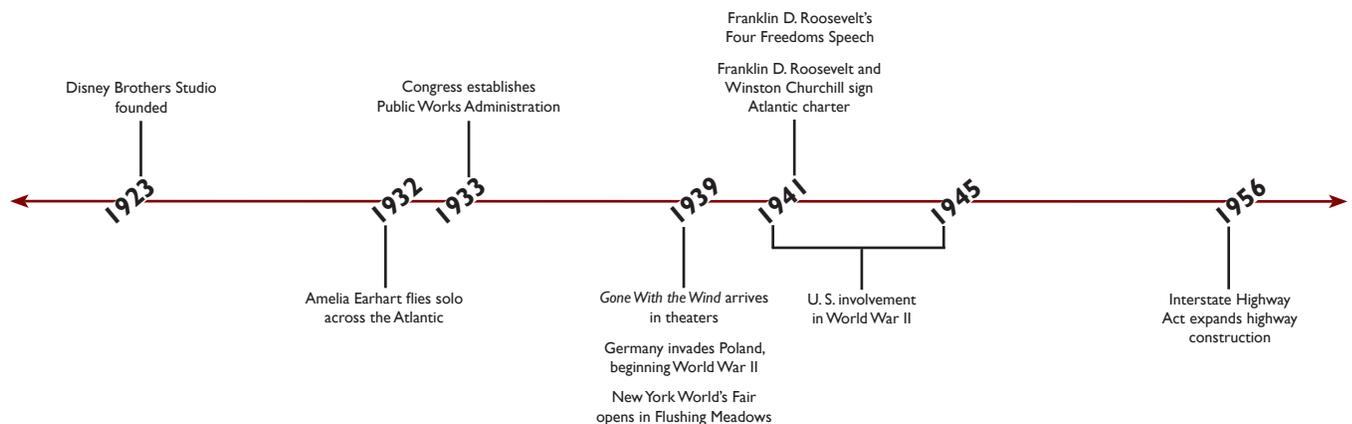
Conte crayon on paper

Gift of Peter Iselin and his sister, Emilie Iselin Wiggan, 74.96

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the

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America



The mid-twentieth century in America was a particularly complex period. The 1920s had been a decade of exuberant laissez-faire capitalism fueling great material and technological growth. But with the Great Depression of the 1930s the role of American government changed dramatically from a passive to an active force in the economy. To combat the economic collapse, the federal government under President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched massive pump-priming public works projects—post offices, schools, roads, tunnels, and bridges among the most conspicuous.

One of the most powerful government officials during this period was the controversial Robert Moses, chief planner, developer, and renovator of roads, tunnels, parks, bridges, and other transit and public services in New York City. Among his great accomplishments was the building of the Whitestone Bridge, approved by the New York State Legislature in 1937 and completed in April 1939.

The bridge made the World's Fair easily accessible for the forty-five million visitors who came to see what was to be the grand future of America and



Alden Krider,

Kansas National Youth Administration

Painting depicting the Activities of the National Youth Administration, 1936

Oil on canvas

National Archives and Records Administration

44-107-1

the world. Within a few short months, however, the world was again at war, and the engineering and inventing that had seemed to hold such promise for improving the quality of people's lives was directed instead to halting the aggression of foreign enemies.

¹Charles Hagen, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, 22 December 1995.

²Barbara Haskell, *Ralston Crawford*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1985).

See also Marjorie B. Searl, "Ralston Crawford: Whitestone Bridge (1939–40)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 240–44.



Nembhard N. Culin

In 1939 the New York World's Fair, 1937

Library of Congress

Portfolio 133, Folder 30

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

Look at the painting; it is a portrait of a bridge! What features of the bridge do you see? What else has the artist included?

Crawford wrote he wanted "...to express the sensations and thoughts about the sensations that I have while driving over such bridges." What sensations do you think he is expressing? How does he do this?

How does knowing the title, *Whitestone Bridge*, shape the meaning of the painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

The precision of Ralston Crawford's *Whitestone Bridge* is almost photographic in quality. What makes this painting more or less appealing to you than a photograph? Compare this painting with the photograph. How are they similar? How are they different?



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Dave Frieder

Bronx-Whitestone Bridge

Photograph

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

American artists lived through periods of great technological change. Many paintings record the transformation of the national landscape while others capture Americans' excitement about the technology itself. What do you think was the point of view of each of these artists?



George Harvey (1800 – 1878)

Pittsford on the Erie Canal - A Sultry Calm, 1837

Oil on panel

Gift of the Margaret M. McDonald Memorial Fund, 2005.33

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Stuart Davis (1894 – 1964)

Landscape with Garage Lights, 1931-1932

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Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

Compare the visual imagery of Crawford's *Whitestone Bridge* with an excerpt from Maria Terrone's 1998 poem "Gulls and the Man" which was inspired by the bridge. How does Crawford use color, line, shape and composition, as well as representational objects to convey his message? What words of Terrone's are most effective? How does she use composition, color and rhythm as well as specific images to convey his message?

Shocking to me: the solitary man
perched high on a girder of the Whitestone Bridge,
until his yellow hard hat bolts
into sight, his wind-burned face,
legs that ride a wedge between sky and sea. Closer,
and more startling still:
grasping a tiny whisk broom, he dusts the ledge
with a motion delicate and precise—
a jeweler brushing a watch's gears.

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

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Ralston Crawford (1906 - 1978)
Whitestone Bridge, 1939

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.2
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of the University of Rochester