



## Clarence Holbrook Carter The Southern Ohio Museum Collection

"Where you were born is like who your parents were. You can't very well change it. Having Portsmouth as my birthplace has always been such that I have never had any desire to have it otherwise. Portsmouth has always been a most sympathetic, understanding & encouraging place to have grown up in." -- Clarence H. Carter

As a Portsmouth native, Carter was instrumental in convincing the city of the need for an art museum. He also donated many of his artworks to the collection and encouraged his family and friends to do the same.

"Clarence Carter and this place are forever linked. When the Southern Ohio Museum opened in 1979, he was here to cut the ribbon. Five years later he returned to celebrate his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. He came again for his 90<sup>th</sup>." -- Sara Johnson, Senior Curator Emeritus

Carter is an internationally famous artist with work in over 50 public collections, and he exhibited in over 50 one man shows during his lifetime. Ever innovative, Carter even helped to develop a new fiberglass based art paper called "scintilla." His work defies categorization. The artist explains his aesthetic, "...at no time did I ever follow any school. I have painted my world as I have seen it and felt it."

"Ever since I was a child, even before I went to school, I always said I wanted to be an artist. In a way, it made life very simple for me." -- Clarence H. Carter

Carter was encouraged in this pursuit and took private art lessons in his youth. He won many first prize awards for his work at the Scioto County Fair and later at the Ohio State Fair. He attended college at the Cleveland School of Art. Carter was noticed there by the director of the Cleveland Art Museum, William Milliken, and went on to win awards at the Cleveland Art Museum's spring shows. Milliken encouraged Carter to study abroad and expand his horizons. Carter's first trip to Europe was invaluable to his artistic career and also forever impacted his personal life, as he met and fell in love with his wife, Mary Griswold, on the boat ride back home.



"Behind the Tents" 1945 oil on panel  
Gift of the artist to the school children of Portsmouth



"Self Portrait" 1928 watercolor

"The advice and guidance that William Milliken gave to me in those early days helped to mold my career. He encouraged me to always be myself which strengthened my convictions."

"When I was in art school, one of my professors said that there was only one painter he had ever seen who knew what he wanted when he started, and that was me."

"My credo is simple and changeable. I may not change radically, but if I wish to, I have no preconceived theories to hold me back." -- Clarence H. Carter



"Ohio River Pilot" 1932 oil on canvas

Greenup County, Kentucky, across the river where my mother was born and spent her girlhood; and adjacent Adams County to the west, where my father was born & raised."

-- Clarence H. Carter

"Ohio River Pilot" epitomizes Carter's regional imagery, along with his use of lighting, color and geometric composition. Carter recalls his inspiration for this painting, "The pilot of the ferry let me steer the boat while he ate his lunch. So many times I had crossed on this ferry to visit with my cousins, aunts & uncles in Kentucky."

### American Scene Painting

Carter is best known for his Regionalist paintings early in his career during the 1930s and 40s.

"Many of my paintings have been made near my birthplace in Portsmouth, Ohio, where the winding Scioto empties into the Ohio River. The hills that rise from the river hold many memories of my youthful feelings..."

"Although I have travelled and lived in many localities, my work done in these far-off places had been invariably tinged with the early thoughts and feelings first experienced in the Ohio Valley.

Portsmouth was the hub of the places I explored, loved & felt most deeply about – Scioto County, where I was born; Portsmouth, where I grew up;



"Wheeling Steel Mill" 1955 watercolor

Carter painted many rural scenes, but he was also drawn to the industrialization and mechanization surrounding him.

"The powerful blast cannonading from the furnaces was as dramatic as any battlefield. Man had to be there to have some kind of control over this gigantic, powerful world, but his existence was a fragile, shadowy one."

-- Clarence H. Carter

"Let Us Give Thanks" is perhaps Carter's most important and well known painting. It won the popular prize in 1943's Carnegie International Exhibition, and a respected art critic wrote of it in the NY Times, "More deeply and sympathetically than did Grant Wood, Carter explores the American Spirit."



"Let Us Give Thanks" 1943 oil on canvas



"Belle and Will" 1936 oil on canvas

### Portraits

Carter painted many portraits, most of his family members. Many of these portraits are pervaded by a stillness & a sadness that reflects Carter's early life.

"Life isn't always pleasure & prettiness. I like things where it makes you think. You just don't look at it as visual experience, but an emotional experience too."

-- Clarence H. Carter

Throughout his career, Carter's work focused on life and death. He had a hard upbringing in a relatively poor family. He lost two infant sisters and his father by the time he was sixteen years old. To Carter, this showed him early on that, "...life and death are both important and that man must always reconcile the two."

"Now, looking back, it seems that I was made aware of the vastness of the universe and that something more powerful than any one of us was always bearing down upon each life existing at any given time upon this planet."

-- Clarence H. Carter

### Circus Paintings

During Carter's childhood the travelling circus was a regular summer fixture, and he often found temporary summer employment working behind the scenes. Many of these scenes found their way into Carter's paintings:

"My fascination with the circus and the activities that revolved around it came very early, as did my interest in art. In fact, they went hand in hand. The margins of my school books were always a temptation to draw circus parades raveling around each printed page."

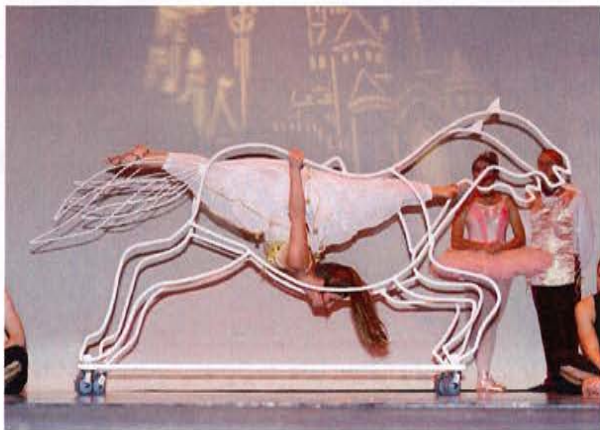
Though the Big Top is not the seasonal event it once was, Carter's legacy lives on here through the performing arts. The museum's affiliate, Cirque d'Art Theatre, teaches circus arts to area children and adults, and even performs on equipment inspired by Carter's paintings, custom made right here in Portsmouth.



"Merry Go Round" 1949 oil on canvas



"Carousel by the Sea" undated gelatin silver print



Cirque d'Art Theatre performance on Carter inspired apparatus

### Snapshots

After Carter's death, a chest of drawers was found in his studio. Carter's sons gifted the contents of his studio to the museum, and hundreds of photos used for reference in his paintings were found in one drawer. Carter had never mentioned these photos during his lifetime to anyone other than his immediate family. They are a valuable glimpse into the artist's process.

## Over & Above Series

From 1963-67, Carter worked on a series of animals peeking over walls. This work dealt with the barriers in communication between people and animals and also amongst people themselves.

"The same thing that prompted me to do stairs existed with walls....It's the mystery of what is hidden. You have to probe behind to see what is there. It's a mysterious subject."

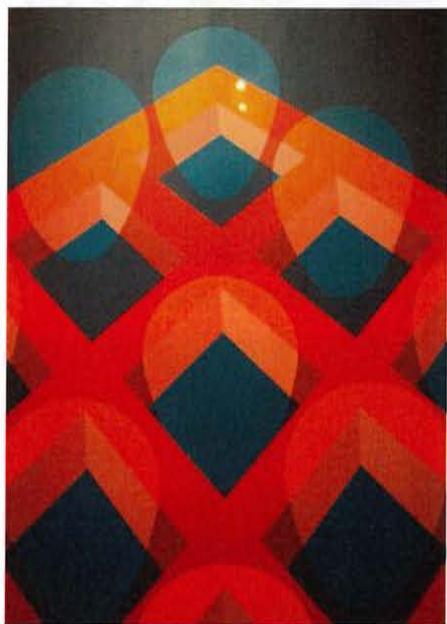
"It is the mysterious & magical elements in life which have always captivated me, things suggested but only partly seen."

"The barrier creates a tension that heightens the mystery of the subject & isolates it from us. It is across this barrier that we perceive the silence & pervading mystery which transport the subject to the realm of conjecture." -- Clarence H. Carter

## Ovoids

An Arabian proverb asks, "What has neither foot nor head nor tail, and is neither living nor dead? An egg."

Late in his career, Carter adopted the ovoid shape as the consummate symbol in his work. The "Mandalas" series from 1964-83 concentrated on ovoid and circle shapes in concentric patterns and a variety of colors.



"Transection No. 4: Space Grid"  
1973 serigraph on scintilla

Begun in 1965, Carter's "Transections" series placed the ovoid in architectural settings with motifs of staircases, walls and doorways. The "Eschatos" series, started in 1973, explored death, resurrection, final judgment & immortality with the ovoid existing in dark, turbulent landscapes.

"Pure abstraction never satisfied me completely....symbols work emotionally, visually & abstractly." -- Clarence H. Carter.

A student once asked him, "Why are you obsessed with egg shapes?" Carter answered, "The egg is a universal symbol of life & death & rebirth. It concerns existence, past, present & future."

Carter explains his symbol in more detail, "The egg, the ovoid shape – the germ & the 1<sup>st</sup> principle of everything. The shape of the egg affirms life, but biological life in time passes away, becoming spirit. The ovoid becomes simply a void. In death the shape remains only in silence – eternal all-encompassing silence."

Famous Appalachian writer and Greenup County, KY, native, Jesse Stuart described his relationship with Carter, "I have known Clarence Carter from the time he was 'dabbling with paints' & I was 'dabbling with words'....We understood each other from the time we met as a

couple of very young boys. And we understand each other still....We were born not more than 20 miles apart. Once when my popularity in my home county was at its lowest ebb, I cleared out for Portsmouth where I taught school. The people were exceedingly kind. Maybe Portsmouth is an artist's city."

Portsmouth is an artist's city, and Clarence Holbrook Carter is, deservedly, her most celebrated Artist.



"Over and Above No. 3" 1968  
acrylic, feathers & sand on canvas

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