

# ROBERT & N. BLAIR

THE WATERCOLOR TRADITION IN WESTERN NEW YORK



ROBERT & N. BLAIR  
THE WATERCOLOR TRADITION IN WESTERN NEW YORK

DECEMBER 9, 2000 - FEBRUARY 3, 2001

BURCHFIELD-PENNEY ART CENTER  
BUFFALO STATE COLLEGE  
1300 ELMWOOD AVENUE  
BUFFALO, NEW YORK 14222-1095

DECEMBER 9, 2000 - JANUARY 12, 2001

ART DIALOGUE GALLERY/  
THE WESTERN NEW YORK ARTISTS GROUP  
ONE LINWOOD AVENUE  
BUFFALO, NEW YORK 14209-2203

**Sponsors**

Robert N. and Jeanette Blair  
Harold and Doris Dibble  
Mr. and Mrs. Sherlock A. Herrick  
Dr. L. Halliday Meisburger  
Dr. Charles Rand Penney  
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Weston Phillips  
Murray and Wendy Warner

**Contributors**

Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth M. Alford  
The Richard and Rita Auerbach Family Foundation  
Mr. and Mrs. Eric L. Hedstrom  
Warren and Virginia Lane  
Braman and Marion Pomroy  
Robert and Jean Schultz

**Supporters**

Eugene and Leona Antkowiak  
Mr. and Mrs. William G. Bausch  
Dr. and Mrs. Nick Califano  
Dr. John B. Cart  
Diana Dillaway  
The Finline Gallery  
Mr. and Mrs. Richard L. Freeman  
Mr. and Mrs. David W. Gow  
Gerald C. Mead, Jr.  
The Margaret E. Mead Endowment  
Meibohm Fine Arts, Inc.

Norberg Art and Frame Shop  
Mrs. Frederick S. Pierce  
Lenore H. Rubin  
Mrs. Edgar Slotkin  
Mrs. Harlan J. Swift  
Stanley and Sharon Tirrell  
Mr. and Mrs. William L. Van Schoonhoven  
Sandra Drew Warner  
Steven and Amy Warner

**Friends**

Mrs. Margaret C. Bothner  
Dr. and Mrs. Giles B. Hamlin  
Mrs. Phyllis Lutwack

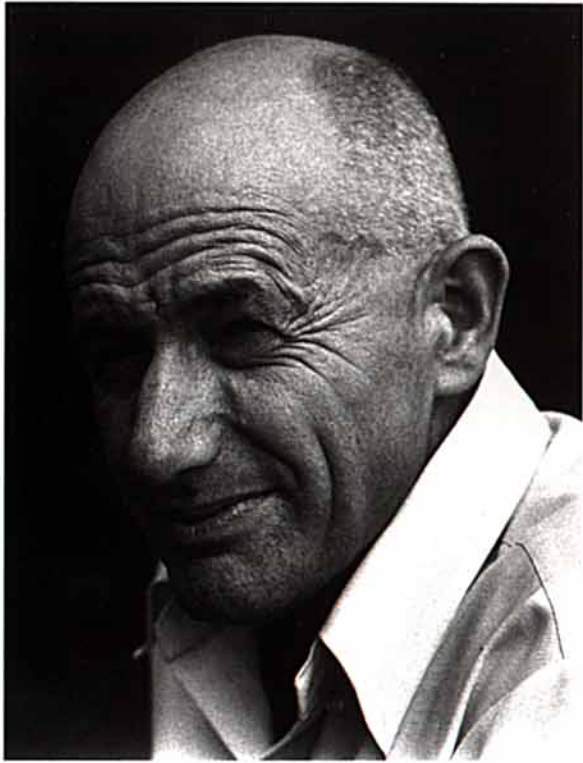
The Burchfield-Penney Art Center receives general operating support from the New York State Council on the Arts, the City of Buffalo, the County of Erie, the Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Trust, the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation, and individual and corporate memberships.

**Lenders to the Exhibition**

Bruce Blair	Gail McCarthy
David Blair	Gerald C. Mead, Jr.
Robert N. and Jeanette Blair	Albert L. Michaels
Buffalo Seminary	Charles Rand Penney
Burchfield-Penney Art Center	Sarah Prochowik
Joseph Cardina	Harriet and Mortimer Spiller
Harold and Doris Dibble	Nancy Weekly
Mr. and Mrs. Sherlock A. Herrick	and anonymous lenders

© 2000 Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo State College and The Western New York Artists Group, Art Dialogue Gallery. All rights reserved.

On the cover: **Harbor Ice**, 1981, watercolor and paper, 28 x 39½ in. *The Charles Rand Penney Collection of Western New York Art at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo State College, Gift in memory of Gretchen Rand Penney, 1991.*



Robert N. Blair is one of Western New York's most accomplished living watercolor painters. Over the course of his long career, he received more than twenty awards and honors including two Guggenheim Fellowships. His work has been featured in countless group exhibitions and more than thirty solo exhibitions in museums such as the former Albright Art Gallery and the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site in Buffalo, and the Museum of Art, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, New York. In 1985, the then-named Burchfield Art Center presented a solo exhibition of his World War II works. Subsequently, the artist donated a large number of these works to the Center's collection in an extremely generous gift. Many prominent corporations and museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Butler Institute of American Art, have also acquired his paintings.

## INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### Burchfield-Penney Art Center

The Burchfield-Penney Art Center and the Art Dialogue Gallery/Western New York Artists Group are proud to present *Robert N. Blair and the Watercolor Tradition in Western New York* to celebrate the accomplishments of this 88-year-old artist. The Burchfield-Penney Art Center is representing works from the artist's entire career, while the Art Dialogue Gallery is featuring Western New York subjects.

The extent to which Bob Blair has touched the lives of people in our community is evident in the great outpouring of enthusiasm and support for this retrospective exhibition. Divided among two sites, it presents just the tip of the iceberg of this prolific artist's creative output. The greatest amount of respect and affection is offered to Bob for his congeniality and cooperation in organizing the exhibition. We hope that this exhibition provides the tribute he so richly deserves for more than fifty years of artistic achievement.

We are extremely grateful to the artist's wife, Jeanette and their son, Bruce, and to their close friend, Wendy Warner, for their profound dedication and efforts to document paintings, to provide information, and to facilitate the research, selection, and preparation of works for the exhibition. Without exaggeration it must be said that the exhibition could not have taken place without their benevolent participation.

The Blairs provided the majority of works in the exhibition, many of which have never been shown before. In addition, a great number of people offered to lend works from their collections. We regret that there is not enough space to be able to use all the suggested works. It is exciting to acknowledge such an abundance of Blair enthusiasts. We thank the lenders, whose names appear in the front of the catalog and in the checklist, for sharing their works with the public.

The outpouring of financial support is also highly gratifying. Plainly put, the community loves Bob Blair and has endorsed this opportunity to celebrate his career by exhibiting his work and producing an exhibition catalog. We wish to thank every individual heartily. We are particularly grateful to the generous donations made by the exhibition's primary sponsors, who include Robert N. and Jeanette Blair, Harold and Doris Dibble, Mr. and

Mrs. Sherlock A. Herrick, Dr. L. Halliday Meisburger, Dr. Charles Rand Penney, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Weston Phillips, and Wendy and Murray Warner. We also thank our other contributors, supporters, and friends who are listed in the front of the catalog.

It has been a privilege to work with the Center's professional staff on all aspects of planning, organizing and presenting this exhibition. Of special note, work/study student Amanda Dungan thoroughly researched Blair's extensive exhibition history and assisted admirably. We wish to thank everyone for working together to honor one of Western New York's favorite artists, Robert N. Blair.

**Nancy Weekly**

Head of Collections and Programs  
and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator  
Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo State College



**Gathering Syrup**, 1949  
WATERCOLOR AND INK, 29 5/8 X 39 1/2 IN.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

### Western New York Artists Group at Art Dialogue Gallery

The Western New York Artists Group is pleased to be a part of this celebration of the life and work of Robert N. Blair. This collaborative effort between the Burchfield-Penney Art Center and the Western New York Artists Group at Art Dialogue Gallery is a testimony to this very important artist who, through his artwork, has made such an important contribution to the cultural heritage of Western New York.

This collaboration is a wonderful opportunity for our organization to expand on our series of exhibitions, "A Life's Work," that emphasize the important contributions made by area senior artists. Instead of attempting to cover the full range of Mr. Blair's work, which is very extensive, we are able to focus the exhibition on his works depicting Western New York, with a strong emphasis on the City of Buffalo. Thus we left to the Burchfield-Penney Art Center the task of documenting Mr. Blair's extraordinary career as a whole.

The paintings selected for this exhibit are what I feel exemplify Mr. Blair's strength in watercolor technique. The subjects of the paintings remind us of our area's past when the works were originally executed. There is a strong sense of nostalgia and history that the viewer will experience with our installation. This is intentional on my part as it is a part of our mission not only to represent the best and most talented artists living and working in Western New York today, but to remember our artistic heritage which is timeless.

**Donald J. Siuta**

Director, The Western New York Artists Group  
Art Dialogue Gallery



ROBERT N. BLAIR  
THE WATERCOLOR TRADITION IN WESTERN NEW YORK

Robert N. Blair is one of Western New York's most beloved and accomplished watercolor painters. In the eyes of many, he is the heir apparent to Charles E. Burchfield, who garnered national fame as one of America's greatest watercolorists. Blair is best known for his landscapes of Western New York, Vermont, Maine, and the American Southwest, although he also painted in Canada, Mexico, Ireland, and the Virgin Islands. Horses captured his imagination as symbols of strength in rural life. During World War II, Blair documented his experiences in Europe as a soldier in the paratroop-glider division of the U. S. Army. His first-hand observations of the desolation of cities and their struggling survivors record the enormity of war's misery. Figurative works, including portraits of family, friends, and ordinary people in their work environments, represent another aspect of Blair's career. In addition, the artist produced abstract works of vibrant color that may surprise those who think of him as a romantic landscapist. A simple way to describe Blair is as a gregarious itinerant artist, biker wayfarer, social documentarian, action painter, and landscape impressionist working in all media, but concentrating on the fluidity of transparent watercolor.

Born in Buffalo, Blair knew early on that he wanted to be an artist, so he sought formal training at the Albright Art School. From 1931 to 1934 he studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Charles Burchfield thought Blair's early work showed great promise when they were introduced. On

May 10, 1934, Burchfield recorded in his journal:

P. M. Dr. Fleming brings out a young artist (Robert Blair) whom he had spoken of before. He brings water-colors in and shows them rather bashfully. I was delighted with them—for the first time in my experience of looking at the work of young artists. I felt a desire to see more of it, and asked him to bring his summer's work around next Fall.

Genuine encouragement offered by such a well-established artist meant a lot to the 21-year old Blair. His small, straight-forward watercolors already demonstrated his regard for landscape and people who worked outdoors. He cherished, too, the opportunity to see Burchfield's paintings periodically, as he would for dozens of years to come as their friendship developed. Although nearly a generation apart—Blair was born in 1912, the year Burchfield entered the Cleveland School of Art in Ohio—Blair and Burchfield each harbored a love for the land through an identification with place, empathy for the common citizen, and a fierce sense of individuality that is clearly evident in their artwork. Even though he admired Burchfield's paintings, Blair was not a Burchfield imitator. A few paintings, such as the untitled mixed media painting in Albert L. Michaels' collection, show a Burchfieldian sense of fantasy in nature or a suggestion of nature's sounds or music. Yet the artists developed diametrically opposed techniques in watercolor painting, while maintaining a collegial friendship.

Blair's boundless energy led to experimentation with painting techniques and concepts that

he considers to be self-taught. At times he combined media, adding black ink, oil glazes, and thin acrylic washes to his watercolors. He made use of unusual implements, such as kitchen tools, twigs, screwdrivers, or coarse-toothed combs, depending upon what was readily available. With these tools and his own fingernails, he scratched linear patterns through more thickly impastoed paintings, especially oils and acrylics. For his watercolors, many times he started by drawing a simple composition of geometric shapes to provide the foundation for his improvisation. He favored a free, gestural technique on wet paper applied with large, wide brushes, and he tried wetting just the front, or both the front and back of the paper for different effects. Then he would develop details, to varying degrees, with smaller, pointed brushes, one of his assorted, spontaneous tools, or black Chinese ink sticks utilized like crayons. "The element of risk is part of the challenge in watercolor," he believed. Thriving on his special skills, Blair sometimes worked under difficult conditions. He posited that by working in the dark using a flashlight or candles for illumination, his subconscious was released to beneficial results. Defying all practicality, he even attempted to work while crawling on his belly during Army exercises and, later, while driving his motorcycle. No challenge escaped him.

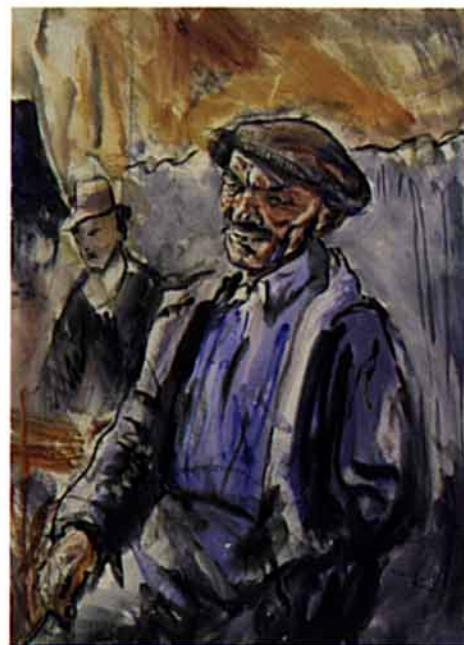
For materials Blair favored tube watercolors in a full spectrum of colors: light and medium cadmium reds, acra red, English red, Indian

red, Ultramarine red, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, manganese blue, Prussian blue, ultramarine blue, oxide of chromium, permanent green, viridian, ivory black, burnt sienna, raw sienna, and burnt umber. He occasionally also used ultramarine red, Venetian red, golden ochre, green earth, manganese violet, Mars violet, Payne's gray, lamp black, Mars black, Chinese white, and titanium white. He used both hot-pressed, and better, cold-pressed papers, ranging from 72-pound weight Arches or Fabriano to some as heavy as 300-pound sheets. He also used the same rolls of Whatman watercolor paper Burchfield ordered that were 43-inches wide by whatever length chosen, resulting in large-scale paintings such as *Wild Horse Canyon* (c. 1955-60) which is more than 92 inches high, and *Four Corners of the Southwest* (c. 1978). The largest paintings he produced were murals for sites as diverse as the Bethlehem Steel Plant in Buffalo (c. 1951), Village Green-Olean House in Olean, New York (c. 1961), and an United States Army building in Berlin, Germany (1945).

Blair's artwork reflects a lifetime in the guise of an itinerant artist, as practiced in the 18th century, taking journeys from his home in Holland, New York to Vermont and Maine to paint farm life and the rocky, ocean coast. He often traveled by motorcycle, enjoying the solitary experience, sometimes riding thousands of miles to the Southwest. He admired the watercolor paintings of British virtuosos Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), John Constable (1776-1837), and John Sell Cotman (1782-1842), who were clearly ahead of their time by making strides toward abstraction. Unarguably Blair fits in the long history of American watercolor painting, having employed some of the same strategies and

focusing on similar landscape and human subjects as his predecessors Winslow Homer (1836-1910), James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), and John Marin (1870-1953), to name just a few.

Early memories of drawing and painting from the age of four or five foreshadow Blair's need to create. He remembers being enchanted as a child by the family farmstead in Fletcher, Vermont that would provide a hypnotic spell luring him back year after year to paint its citizens, their horses, the spirit of the earth, and both the hardships and pleasures to be found there. Blair captures the naive quality of small town life in *Fletcher Election* (c. 1940) through his skewed perspective, not unlike John Marin's depiction of *Phippsburg, Maine* (1932). (It may not be obvious to the viewer, but in *Fletcher Election* Blair makes subtle inferences about the rumor that voters were paid to go to the polls.) In regard to Blair's portrayal of Fletcher's citizens, who can't recognize the self-absorbed, sullen attitude conveyed in *David Gillian's* pursed lips and staring eyes as he leans against the kitchen cabinets to pour himself a glass of orange soda that he hopes will alleviate the tedium of his adolescent experience? In *Mowing* a strong man, whose shoulder muscles bulge from the arduous task of mowing an enormous field, leans back as a pair of strong, white horses pull him past a barren tree that suggests a parched, inadequate crop. *Elmer Hooper* momentarily stops his hoeing, so perturbed at the interruption of his work that he glares to the side without making eye contact. The three stages of man, a classic trio painted between 1932 and 1941, contrast radically with *Barn Dance*, where inhibitions are abandoned in favor of



**Bar at Lackawanna Steel Plant** C. 1940  
WATERCOLOR, 26 $\frac{3}{8}$  X 19 $\frac{3}{4}$  IN. (SIGHT)

wild dancing, loud music, and the opportunity to mingle with the opposite sex. The exaggerated geometry of the roof beams, glaring yellow lights, modulated patterns of blue and red, as well as animated brush strokes contribute to his energetic impression of the rambunctious activity so necessary to counter New England's demanding way of life.

Following the tradition of wet, transparent watercolor painting, Blair is cognizant of the 19th-century masters, such as Winslow Homer. His *Stormy Weather* (c. 1960-70), with its watery turquoise sea and wind-whipped sailboat, is reminiscent of Homer's famous oils *Breezing Up* and *The Gulf Stream* crossed with the lush coloration, simpler compositions, and thin washes of Homer's





**Self-portrait**, FLETCHER, VERMONT, C. 1932-41  
 INK ON PAPER, 13 $\frac{3}{8}$  X 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  IN.  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

watercolors of the Bahamas, Florida, and Bermuda dating from 1898 to 1901. Blair's watercolor, *Silver Sea #2, Ocean Point* (1946), depicts the turbulent Atlantic Ocean off Maine's coast that tosses sailboats as if they were small toys, with even more force than in Homer's similar oil composition, *On a Lee Shore* (1900). Both artists covered some of the same territory. Homer painted near Prout's Neck, Maine, and in the Adirondacks and Québec. His resulting placid 1895 watercolors of men in canoes on mirror-like water near misty, pine-covered landscapes are still, transcendental moments. By contrast, Blair's Canadian tour-de-force, *Lake Nipissing*, bellows with all the power of a primordial event. Huge flashes of light pierce the cloud-dominated sky while trees strain against the cold winds

that churn up choppy water. It is a choice example of Blair's intention to capture energy through his self-styled expressionism.

In 1966 for *American Artist*, Blair explained the origins of his becoming an "action painter." He wrote: "What motivated this approach? As a self-taught artist in the 1920's, I had arrived by experimentation at a way of working in linear abstraction (at the time I probably never had heard the word abstract) that developed from a speedy and rhythmical swirl of subconscious line which would gradually emerge into a freely interpreted subject. Watercolor by its free nature became tied in with this approach. At the same time, for broader effects, use was made of the hand and fingers, and still later, the arm, for smear."

Public recognition in Buffalo burgeoned after Carl Bredemeier, at Charles Burchfield's suggestion, gave Blair his first one-person exhibition at the Bredemeier Gallery in 1937. From 1938 until 1942, Mrs. Morton gave him exhibitions in her gallery on 57th Street in New York, which resulted in favorable reviews in the newspaper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased *Horses in the Rain* in 1940 with the Hearn fund for the advancement of contemporary art. This was just the beginning of constant public admiration that has taken form in more than thirty solo exhibitions from Portland, Maine to Columbia, South Carolina. In New York State some of his solo exhibitions were held at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo Museum of Science, Upton Gallery and Burchfield Center of Buffalo State College, Kenan Center, and the Theodore Roosevelt National Historic Site.

In addition to painting professionally, Blair started teaching at the Buffalo Museum of Science in 1938. Beginning in 1939, he taught for many years at the Art Institute of Buffalo. After World War II, he served as the Art Institute's director from 1946 to 1949. The environment fostered camaraderie among the region's most active artists. There he developed a close friendship with David Pratt, Joseph Orffeo, and Walter Prochownik, among others. Ironically, during this period, he received a letter from his friend, Charles Burchfield, who advised him:

*Just between you & [me] and the proverbial gate-post, I think you have more potentially on the ball than any of the younger Buffalo group. The thing to watch out for of course, is always to keep strong and be healthily dissatisfied with what you have done; and avoid the crowd—don't get involved in art societies to the point that they crowd upon your time, and, worse still, your artistic consciousness. The only way to develop your art is to go your own lone way, and let the devil take the other crowd-loving artists who can't be alone. An artist has all he can do and more fighting his own battles without taking on the welfare of a group he may belong to. This may sound hard & anti-social, but I never heard of an artist who really amounted to anything who was social in his outlook.*

*There's a lot of free advice, and maybe like many free things, it's just worth what it costs.*

One can only assume that Blair took this advice with a grain of salt because he loved the company of other artists. An active member of the Buffalo Society of Artists, he also joined The Patteran Society, a group of "radicals" who had splintered from the more traditional BSA artists in 1933. The Buffalo

Print Club also captured his attention after the Second World War. Blair's artwork has consistently earned him gold and silver medals, as well as other watercolor prizes, in group exhibitions such as Western New York and Buffalo Society of Artists' annuals, Chautauqua and Cooperstown nationals, and exhibitions of art and watercolor societies in Olean, New York, Alabama, and West Texas.

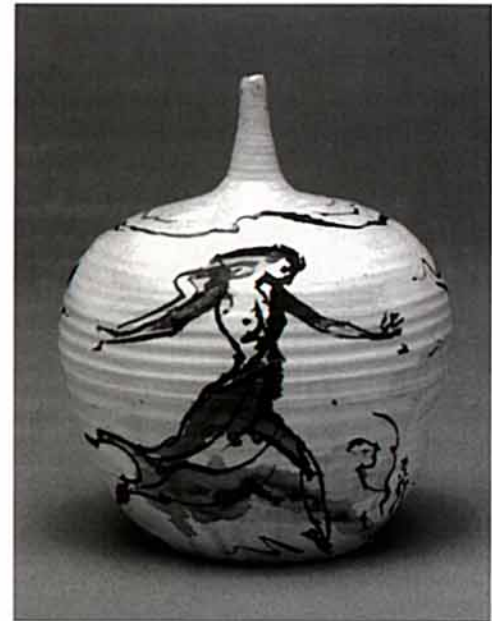
In one of his more unusual collaborations with artists, Blair worked with ceramist Gail McCarthy to produce a number of hand-decorated ceramic works, similar to the energetic paintings on ceramic plates that Picasso produced in the 1960s. McCarthy threw stoneware or porcelain plates, pots, and cups on her potter's wheel, then altered some of them by denting the sides or collapsing the top to make the works asymmetrical. She offered to smooth the ridges that naturally formed by her fingers lifting the hollow form from a lump of clay, but Blair found the texture to be pleasing. Using either glaze or acrylic paint, Blair drew and painted female nudes, animals, landscape motifs or abstract shapes on the surfaces. McCarthy remarked recently that "Bob has such an innate understanding of form. His drawings wrap around the pot, perfectly proportioned to the different shapes."

When he was not working with a group, Blair relished times of solitude when he could focus on his subject in depth without distractions. The sights and sounds of a bustling city attracted Blair, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. The racing train engine—the ultimate machismo symbol of the era—attracted Blair, as it had enticed Reginald Marsh (1898-1954), Edward Hopper (1882-1967), and Charles Ephraim Burchfield (1893-1967). *Buffalo Bound* is Blair's most powerful image,

an icon for the industrial identity of the city. "The train yards of Buffalo were another inspiration," Blair said, "where the speed and clamor were a symphony of sight and sound, with the billowing smoke under bridges and the echo of the engines on the factories at night. These were studied by the hour even in the worst weather." Blair's panoramic view of a *Buffalo Train Yard* provides distance and a more impressionist perspective that is more akin to Monet's *Gare St. Lazare* than the close-up views of commanding engines by his American colleagues. His portraits, such as the *Broadway Market* vendor among his plump vegetables and the craggy laborer in the *Bar at Lackawanna Steel Plant*, are insightful character studies. Perhaps it is his own ineffable personality that relaxes his subjects, so he might gain their trust and portray their life stories as reflected in their facial features, hand gestures, and fragments of their surroundings.

Before he entered the U. S. Army in February 1942, Blair painted his disturbing watercolor, *Junk Man/Giddy Up*, *Silver*. Retrospectively, in 1966, he recalled that "Environment had a great deal to do with the style. Vermont's country dances carried on with vigorous energy, and the unsettled situation of the world gave rise to a desire to put an ultimate of violence into paint. The violence—the gesture became the main subject often times. The theme of a junk man in the midst of his rusty iron became to me the symbol of the times."

Before going overseas, Blair painted a religious mural in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment Chapel at Fort McClellan in Alabama. In August 1943, in front of the finished mural, he married Jeanette Kenney, a painter he had met at the Art Institute of Buffalo. They raised three



ROBERT N. BLAIR AND GAIL MCCARTHY  
**Untitled**, c. 1970s  
ACRYLIC ON WHEEL-THROWN PORCELAIN POT,  
5 X 4 IN. DIAMETER  
COLLECTION OF GAIL MCCARTHY

children: Jeanne, who died in 1965, David, and Bruce.

Blair served in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment in Fort McClellan, the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division in Europe, and the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division in Berlin. His desire to draw and paint spontaneously in the field was discouraged until General Liebel granted him permission to carry his art supplies anywhere as long as it didn't interfere with his duties as a soldier. Small drawings and action sketches could occasionally be made *in situ*, but larger watercolors were created back at camp. In Europe Blair was thrust in the middle of some of the most horrific battlegrounds. His accounts of the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, where Allied troops fought Germans in the frozen





**Train Yard-Central Germany**, c. 1945-47  
 WATERCOLOR, 30 X 22 IN.  
 COLLECTION OF BURCHFIELD-PENNEY ART CENTER,  
 GIFT OF THE ARTIST, 1985

countryside in January 1945, are firsthand, documentary experiences. American troops suffered extremely heavy casualties. The tragic desolation of war was evident in the ruins of Berlin, Cologne, Essen, Hamborn, and other cities. The survivors caught his attention in these places, especially women, dwarfed by the devastation, who gathered bricks from the rubble. The only hopeful, delicately hued works portray scenes in France. Blair's humanist spirit prevailed while he created painful memories about the horrors of war. In 1985, the (then-named) Burchfield Art Center presented these powerful World War II works for the first time in *Robert N. Blair: A Soldier's Portfolio*, and the artist subsequently made a remarkably

generous donation of nearly all of these works to the Center's collection.

After the war the fickle, powerful sea on the coast of Maine, like Vermont's bucolic hills, never ceased to provide Blair with fertile subject matter. Having spent such a good portion of his life visiting the region, Blair gained a personal appreciation for its paradigmatic images: the salty spray of turbulent ocean waves hitting enormous boulders, as in *Breaking Wave* (c. 1979), and orchards transformed magically by the drama of the seasons, as in *Winter in the Grove* (c. 1945-50). Guggenheim Fellowships in 1946-47 and 1951-52 enabled Blair to travel by motorcycle through much of the United States and Canada. He went out west a number of times beginning in the 1960s, and he traveled to Mexico with his son, David. The vastness of space in the American Southwest, and its explosive color extremes resulted in bold landscape paintings. With numerous return trips, Blair developed an increasingly abstract representation of the mountains and plains that mirrored the magnitude of the land, one of his most compelling being *Escarpment* (1972), painted with watercolor and acrylic on paper. He capitalized on the brashness of color that is possible with acrylic paint to exaggerate the iconic mountain vistas. A natural extension of the use of space and color in Blair's Western paintings, was his indulgence in purely non-objective paintings that are color fantasies. Still, if inspected closely, the basic elements of landscape are often present, as titles suggest in *Cave Light* and others.

Blair's incredible aptitude for capturing the distinctive characteristics of a region and its

people is what makes his work so appealing. One might compare him with the poet Robert Frost who is known for his ability to transform the events of New England farming and personal experience into profound statements about life. Consider the poem "Mowing" by Robert Frost and imagine Robert Blair reading its lines as a mantra for himself.

There was never a sound beside  
 the wood but one,  
 And that was my long scythe  
 whispering to the ground.  
 What was it it whispered? I knew not  
 well myself;  
 Perhaps it was something about the  
 heat of the sun,  
 Something, perhaps, about the lack  
 of sound—  
 And that was why it whispered and  
 did not speak.  
 It was no dream of the gift of  
 idle hours,  
 Or easy gold at the hand of fay  
 or elf:  
 Anything more than the truth  
 would have seemed too weak  
 To the earnest love that laid the  
 swale in rows,  
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes  
 of flowers  
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright  
 green snake.  
 The fact is the sweetest dream that  
 labor knows.  
 My long scythe whispered and left the  
 hay to make.

That kind of sensibility is at the center of Blair's artistic philosophy and surely reflects his honesty and his gifted legacy of work.

#### **Nancy Weekly**

Head of Collections and Programs  
 and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator



**Scything Field, Fletcher,**  
ALSO KNOWN AS **Reapers**, C. 1945-50  
WATERCOLOR, 27 X 40½ IN.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





**Junk Man/"Giddy Up Silver,"** 1942  
WATERCOLOR, 30 X 40 IN.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 1985



**Berlin Ruin-Downtown Section  
with Women Stacking Rubble, 1945**  
WATERCOLOR AND INK, 27 X 40 IN.  
COLLECTION OF THE BURCHFIELD-PENNEY ART CENTER,  
GIFT OF THE ARTIST, 1985

