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An American Visionary

A talented mid-20th century artist, Robert N. Blair explored the exciting potential of watercolors and inspired countless others to take up the medium.

By Walter Garver



Photo courtesy of Bruce Blair, Holland, New York

Even though prominent American painters like Homer, Sargent and Hopper were creating outstanding watercolor paintings in the first part of the 20th century, they gave priority to their work in oil; they had to. At that time, oil painting was still the medium on which reputations were built.

That bias changed somewhat in the 1940s and '50s when watercolor painting grew in popularity and acceptance. As a result, highly talented artists throughout America started using watercolors as their primary medium of expression. Among them was Robert N. Blair (1912-2003), a

recipient of many awards, including two Guggenheim Fellowships. It was successful painters like Blair who helped pave the way for other artists to work exclusively in watercolor.

The Makings of a Style

The son of an attorney, Blair was born in Buffalo, New York, and in his youth he spent his summers on the family farm in Fletcher, Vermont. It was there he acquired his love of nature and was motivated to paint the splendid scenes he found in abundance around Fletcher. Of the area he said: "There is nowhere else that I know where you

Nature Lover

Blair shared his friend Charles Burchfield's deep love of nature and, like Burchfield, was always searching for different moods in nature to paint. In *Lake Nipissing* (c. 1985; watercolor on paper, 28 x 40½), he captured a storm-tossed Canadian lake he encountered on one of his many trips across North America.

can stand in one spot and turn slowly in a circle and be completely inspired at every degree of the turn."

In particular he loved painting the horses that powered the farm machinery. One mare, Blind Maude, became the subject of a number of his paintings.

time back in the rear before he could do finished paintings. Among the many drawings and paintings he did while in Europe were views of the Battle of the Bulge, the bloody offensive by the Germans that almost split the Allied armies in two.

When the war ended Blair was assigned to the occupation force in Berlin where he did paintings showing the destruction that modern warfare can inflict on cities. An example is *Berlin Chimney Sweep* (at right), done in 1945. In it a young chimney sweep bitterly contemplates what is left of his

city. Many of the chimneys have been left standing only now there are no buildings attached to them.

Home Again

Before going overseas Blair had married Jeanette Kenney, an accomplished artist he'd met in Buffalo. When he returned, they settled into a country home south of the town of East Aurora in western New York. It's an area of rolling hills much like those in Vermont, and it was there where they raised a daughter and two sons.

To generate a dependable income Blair once again turned to teaching. From 1946 to 1949 he was director of the Art Institute of Buffalo. In 1946 he was awarded his first Guggenheim Fellowship, which was followed by a second one in 1951.

Blair also resumed exhibiting his work. His watercolors were included in

shows given by such important institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Butler Institute in Youngstown, Ohio, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In addition, his work was selected for the American Watercolor Society Annual Exhibitions, and he presented one-man shows from Portland, Maine, to Chicago.

A Traveling Man

The Guggenheim Fellowships enabled Blair to take motorcycle trips across the United States, Canada and Mexico where he searched for unique subjects to paint. According to Donald Siuta, director of the Art Dialogue Gallery in Buffalo: "He [Blair] felt he needed to get away from things he was familiar with to create something new and get a fresh perspective on his own work."

In Control

*Strong, sure control of his brushwork and rapid execution of a painting were two main characteristics of Blair's technique. In *Blind Maude* (1940; watercolor on paper, 22 x 30) these traits are apparent in the way he quickly captured the body of the horse and its surroundings with positive, but minimal use of paint.*



Photo courtesy of Jeanette Blair, Holland, New York

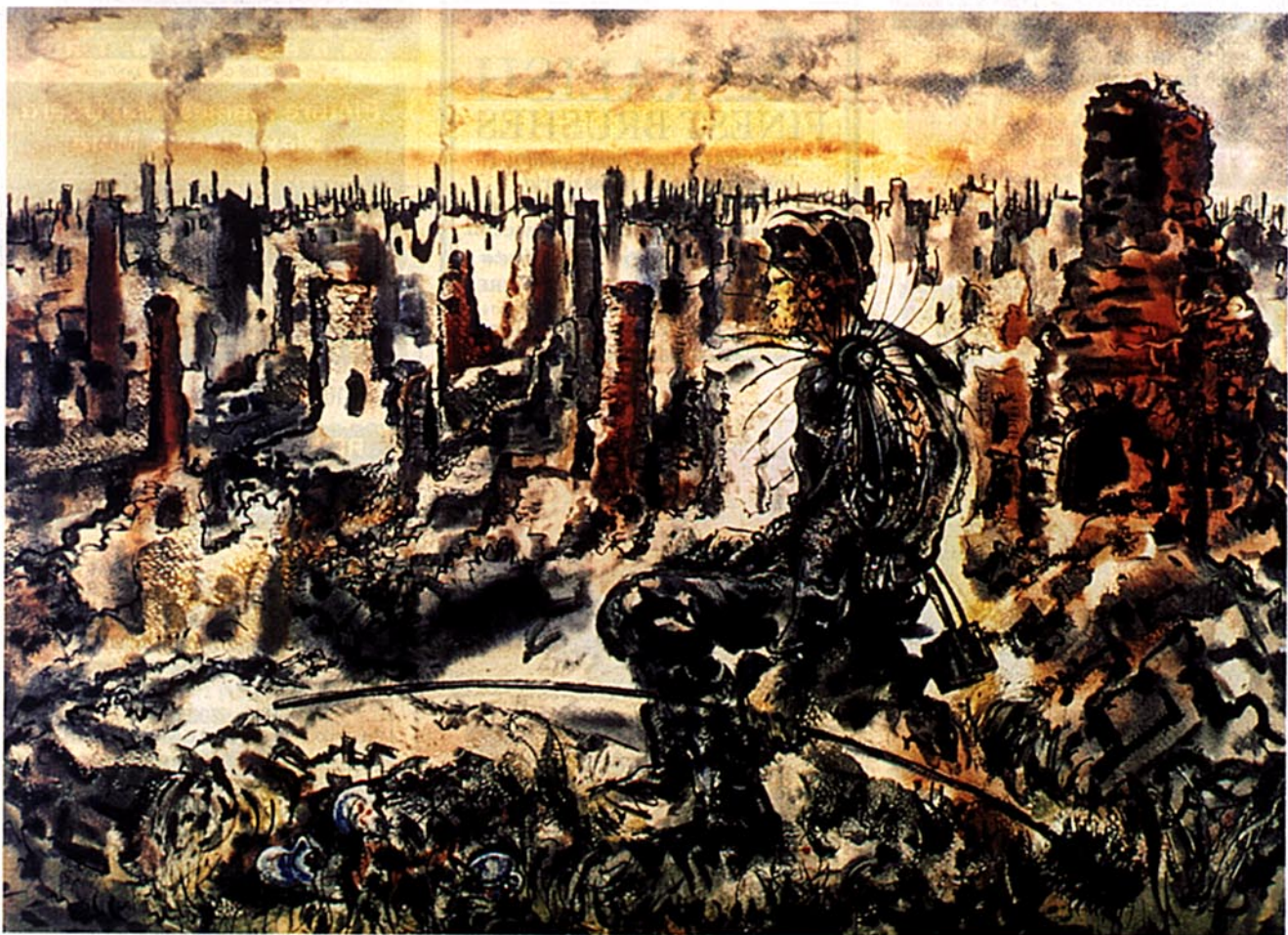


Photo courtesy of The Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo, New York

These excursions continued until Blair was in his 80s. He described his unique way of traveling with this anecdote: "I drove into Taos, New Mexico, with an unbelievably loaded cycle (people looked at me and gasped, even other cyclists)." Among the many paintings he created on his trips were powerful landscapes like *Lake Nipissing* (on page 66), which he painted in Canada around 1985. This watercolor demonstrates Blair's rapid, almost calligraphic style of painting.

A Role Model

Blair's place in the development of American watercolor painting can be compared to the skilled professional actors who appeared in supporting roles, but never gained the recognition the so-called superstars received. Simply put, without their performances films couldn't have been made. Blair introduced many aspiring artists to the joys of watercolor.

The numerous exhibitions of his work gave visual pleasure to the large crowds of people who went to see them. Throughout this country and abroad there are patrons who are proud to have his watercolors in their collections. Without the work of Blair and other exceptionally talented artists like him, watercolor painting would not have reached the status it now enjoys.

To see Blair's work in person, visit the Burchfield-Penney Art Center in Buffalo, New York, which owns 179 of Blair's works. For more information, call The Burchfield-Penney Art Center at 716/878-6011 or visit www.burchfield-penney.org. ♦

A Soldier's View

There were many artists who painted World War II, however; Blair was unique in that he painted scenes from the viewpoint of a frontline soldier. At the end of the war he became a member of the army of occupation and saw firsthand the terrible consequences of modern warfare. This is evident in Berlin Chimney Sweep (1945; watercolor on paper, 22 x 30) in which he portrays a young chimney sweep surveying the remains of his city.



Walter Garver is an award-winning artist who lives and works in Amherst, New York. He's also a contributing editor to Watercolor Magic.