

The following essay was written in 1999 by Francis R. Ricci in the catalogue for the exhibition titled "Sterling Strauser: A Modernist Revisited." The essay is reprinted with the permission of the Reading Public Museum.

## **A Modernist Revisited**

**by Francis R. Ricci**

There is no end to the explanations of why artists become what they are and do what they do. Homely, in the best sense, energetic, brilliant at times, Sterling Strauser passed through the 20th century eclipsed by America's avant-garde. For those willing to take another look, his was a fullsome response to the physical world, a libidinous sense of fat-nuanced paint, confident tonal structure and narrative passion for small town America, family oriented life. Although his attributes were not enough to establish as yet his place in the lists of major modernists, they make Strauser an artist more than worthy of revisiting. Hence, this retrospective.

Self taught, he started painting in 1922 at age 15 and early on established himself a tenacious realist in the tradition of the Ashcan School, Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins. He firmly believed an artist should work from life as it was lived in the "real" America: rural, small town, and stay away from pretentious symbolism. To be sure, Strauser's response to the European avant-garde which was supplanting and even repudiating realism, was to become interested in the theory and to adapt it. This places him squarely among the 20th century's modernist painters. However, such adaptation was not at the expense of the immediacy and visual character of his best work. Warm and sheltering by nature, he did not fall victim to provinciality. He was an artist immersed in a particular place and time - an old-fashioned modernist who at the time he matured artistically found himself in the situation where the need for theoretical justification was no longer just an issue for the avant-garde but also for those painters like Strauser who upheld the conservative values of realism.

His life-long concern for the commercialism and emptiness in much of American art which he felt demeaned American culture, further unites him with other like-minded American Modernist artists and critics.

Looking at the assembled works in this retrospective, at its humor, intensity, diversity and poignancy, particularly of the late work like *Sight*, it may look, at first, like a group show. Considering the many subjects and styles in which Strauser worked we are led, however, into the spontaneous, complex, wonder-filled world of the artist we all would have liked to have known. His is an art that is engaged, intuitive and physical, and mindful of, but not prey to art world fashion. So it is with a profound sense of pride that we have accepted the responsibility of presenting the imposing contents of Sterling Strauser's work in this, his first posthumous retrospective.

### *A Compulsion to Paint*

With the thousands of works of art by European and American modernist artists which have been exhibited and discussed in scholarly articles, popular periodicals and all manner of books, it is hard to believe that a relatively modest show of approximately 145 paintings done between 1922 and 1995 could make a difference in our understanding and appreciation of the 20th century. Yet, this is exactly the case with the long overdue Sterling Strauser. It is indeed, **A Modernist Revisited.**

Barely known outside of a small circle of very enthusiastic collectors, Sterling Strauser's art is still fresh, vibrant and astonishingly varied. Succinctly structured it is expressively suggestive and never loses sight of the joy in painting. There are figures, portraits, landscapes, still lifes, genre and religious themes that have big, bold shapes, broad areas of generally descriptive, sometimes arbitrary color and lots of "breathing" room. We see, for example in Strauser's *Flower Lady* painting of 1978 a picture that explodes from his "center of interest" to the edge of the canvas and his completely impulsive use of pigment as a plastic material to be squeezed out of tubes with a primordial freedom and sensuousness. The painting thus becomes a complete record of the artist's creative energy passing over the surface. The net effect: a fully realized record of enormous vitality and grandeur lacking unnecessary embellishment or surrender to decoration.

Although he adopted for himself the non-mainstream location of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, Sterling Strauser firmly believed - knew - that there would be a time for his general recognition over and above that he received from his champions such as David "Papa" Burluk, Grey Carter, Myron King and Jim Sittig. He allowed as how an artist's responsibility, if he has a responsibility, is to his public - to produce art which has meaning, relevance and, above all, is a true expression of the artist's feeling. He had to achieve "self satisfaction" which was the only true measure of the artist's work. He had to want to "produce" and be miserable if he could not. This meant, for example, that "producing" was more important than traveling or doing other things which would cause "lost time" - time spent not painting. Strauser readily pointed out that

if Cézanne did not have to travel he did not although he acknowledged that travel could be good for the artist's wife.

Throughout his life, (he died in 1995) Strauser believed that "You paint as you do, because you paint when you do." He had adopted this philosophy from Bruce Albert, his geography teacher at Bloomsburg (Pennsylvania) State Teachers College which he attended in the 1920's. Albert taught that "You live as you do because you live where you do." Strauser believed that:

*You paint one way when you are young and vigorous and you have to economize on materials and you paint another way when you become mature and stronger. You paint another way when you become middle aged and wiser and you paint another way when you are an elderly person and your energy is not as abundant and you have to focus it more intently but at the same time you become more affluent and can buy materials and use them without worrying about the cost of heavy loaded paint. Just slap it on. You must have absolute freedom to use material without thinking (about the cost).*

Above all, though, Strauser maintained that the artist has to have a real compulsion to paint. Intuitively he recognized that art, particularly modern art, was the result of compulsion and impulse - that magical combination which produces the creative act which, in turn, reveals the depths of the artist's spirit. He also knew that he would need to control this energy within the bounds of the ordered life he chose for himself.

### ***Overview of Modernism***

The American Art scene around 1900 was tranquil and quite safe. Under the watchful eye of the National Academy, which controlled the training of artists, the prevailing taste reflected the European salon; stereotyped landscape; insipid portraits and sentimental narratives based on classical models. Museums were serious studies in stuffiness and a far-from-free art market was dominated by Old Masters, academicians and a few established European artists. One of the first evidences of Modernism in America was the American Ashcan School's - the "Eight's" - break (1907-1910) from the Academy's conservative stranglehold to present their art which they insisted had to reflect the realities of life as they knew it. At the now famous Armory show of 1913 organized by Arthur B. Davies, George Bellows, Walt Kuhn, et al, most of the sales were of "degenerate" foreign works even though it had been conceived as a way to promote American painting. After New York, the show traveled to Boston and Chicago.

Although not as well known as the Armory Show, "The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters" in New York in 1916 presented the public with a well-organized survey of American Modernism which would have an even more significant influence on the development of 20th century American art. Included was work by many who would become America's foremost modernists: Thomas Hart Benton, Arthur G. Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Man Ray and Charles Sheeler, to mention a few.

*Modernism* is a term that has described bursts of various forms of artistic achievement at different times, particularly in the 20th century. In concept, composition, complexity and dimension, America's "Modern" artists have produced art of great power and beauty. Sometimes it is highly aesthetic (Avery, Baziotes) or very thematic (Rauschenberg, Warhol) but it is always exciting, stops us in our tracks and makes us think. When it is completely abstract or nonobjective it may present a first impression of chaotic lines, shapes and colors which do not describe anything recognizable. Nevertheless, Modernism was part of the 20th century movement away from art's traditional look through the "window" into the real world towards the questioning and analysis of art itself and to the tapping of the artist's personal feelings about himself or the changes in his world. This, of course, had been hastened by the development of photography and the introduction into the west of non-western cultures. The influence of Native American culture is found in the early work of artists like Max Weber, Marsden Hartley and, of course, Georgia O'Keeffe. It is seen later in the work of artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Jackson Pollack. An Asian connection may be found in John Marin, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Tobey. After Modernism art would no longer be easy.

One key period of particular interest here is that between the two World Wars or, more precisely, the years between 1920-1950. It was in these years that Sterling Strauser (1907-1995) emerged and matured with an art that celebrated America's transition from aesthetic follower to international leader of the art world. One of the fundamental reasons for this transformation lies in the acceptance of the conceptual changes inherent to abstraction; for example, from nature (Arthur Dove, John Marin, Charles Sheeler); thematic (Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky); non-objective (the ultimate form of abstraction) and subjective (surrealism). Even within the solid tradition of American landscape there was a shift from the richly metaphorical Hudson River paintings to the sensuous work of Arthur Dove.

The keyword for 20th century art is abstraction, even though abstraction has been present in western art ever since pigment was first placed on cave walls and three dimensional figures were created. Indeed, artists from Egyptian tomb painters to medieval manuscript illuminators to J.M.W. Turner, incorporated abstract imagery in their art. In America too, abstraction has been around "from the beginning." One has only to look at the work of the early limners and gravestone makers as well as that of the Amish quiltmaker and itinerant carver.

One of the key questions concerning *Modernism* then is: Who created the first completely abstract painting? Vrubel? Kupka? Picabia? Wassily Kandinsky's non-objective paintings are frequently cited as the "first" but these were actually done a few months after Arthur Dove's series of paintings had been done in America independently of European influence in 1910. Indeed, the work of all these artists became a self-conscious means of visible expression. One thing we can agree on, though, is that out of all these efforts, abstraction became the defining artistic language of the 20th century.

Some of the achievements of 20th century artists such as Sterling Strauser reflect the vital flow of artistic influence from Europe to America. It begins with the *Cubism* which is found in

Strauser's early portraits and goes on to the modified *Fauvism* in his still lifes and *Surrealist* inspired genre painting. Cubism, as developed by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque represented nothing less than the total reconstitution of images in space, even though Cubism was grounded in the objective. So, too, was the work of the Fauvist artists like Henri Matisse and André Derain who chose non-naturalistic color for expressive purposes. The "object" was still at the heart of Surrealism as advocated by André Breton, even though it rejected the reality of the senses and the order of reason.

Despite these developments, the American concern for objects found a new relevance and vitality within the context of 20th century painting. For example, the basic concepts and techniques that lay at the root of still life - spatial arrangement, illusionism and surface treatment - made it well suited for Strauser's reconstruction of its forms, relationships and textures. This aspect of Strauser's work illustrates his untrained, instinctive rejection of tradition and acquisition of new standards and values concerning reality. Some of this was also fueled by the growing belief in the purity of folk art and by examples from what were thought to be less developed civilizations and the felt need to revert to childhood. Ironically, skeptics often dismiss modern art as something a "two-year old might do" while modernist artists, in the belief that children can perceive the essence of an object, appropriated their characteristics.

So it was that by 1940 Abstract Expressionism emerged in New York. Penetrating the hidden world beyond conscious organization and the limitations of the image, artists became concerned with the act of painting as the way to universal understanding. Streaks, splotches and slashes of paint became visions of unrestrained emotions. No longer concerned with illusion and with renewed demands for large canvases to transmit heroic content, Abstract Expressionism at last "kicked over all the traces."

Like others in his generation, Strauser was not quite willing to go that far; still, he admired the abstract art of Kenzo Okada (1902-1982) who had come to the United States from Yokohama, Japan and early on made unexpected color choices and a dashing vigorous gesture part of his autobiographical approach to painting.

Sterling Strauser's and 20th century art, then, is nothing if it is not a reflection of our rapidly changing environment. Indeed, all aspects of our culture have been deeply affected. What we see in Strauser is part of its reflection.

### ***Before The Armory Show***

The critical hysteria it engendered and its "explosion-in-a-shingle-factory" description did much to establish the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the 69th Regiment Armory as the first foray of modern art in America. While central to America's exposure to European modernism, the Armory Show actually came on the heels of many years of familiarization by American artists, collectors, and critics of the artistic revolution in Europe. Well before 1900 a few pioneer

collectors such as William H. Crocker in California, the H. O. Havemeyers in New York and Mrs. Potter Palmer in Chicago were collecting advanced impressionist works. American artists who identified with modern French masters included Theodore Robinson (Monet) and Mary Cassatt (Degas). Post-impressionism was more difficult to accept although the collecting of Gertrude and Leo Stein in Paris, Harriet Levy in San Francisco, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone in Baltimore and John Quinn in New York, among others, was particularly daring. Gertrude Stein's Salon in Paris was an important if informal connection for introducing European Modernism to America's avant-garde artists. An equivalent link can also be found later in post World War I New York in Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's Greenwich Village parlor Studio Club/Galleries (1918-1930) which included the realist artists Guy Pene du Bois, Yasuo Kuniyoshi and others.

From the turn of the century to 1913, just about every significant American modernist traveled to Europe and, in particular, to Paris. (Of course, American artists had been traveling to Europe and adapting European styles to the American temperament since before 1800.) Carles, Dove, Hartley, Marin, Sheeler, the Russian born Walkowitz and others lived in Paris for various lengths of time; indeed, by 1908 there were enough young Americans for charter members Weber, Steichen, Maurer and Patrick Henry Bruce to form the New Society of American Artists in Paris. Many Americans were in or visited Matisse's classes and Rodin's studio. Rodin received his first show in America at Alfred Stieglitz's Photo Secession Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in January, 1908. Matisse's first show followed in April. The artists' own experiences and Stieglitz's exhibitions thus did much to stimulate the adaptation of European modernism in America.

1910 was another significant year. In March, Stieglitz showed Carles, Dove, Hartley, Marin, Maurer, Weber, et al. In November, it was Cézanne, Manet, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec and Rousseau. Picasso's analytical Cubism was particularly upsetting to the New York press when a group of his watercolors and drawings was shown at 291 in April 1911.

Indeed, the seminal role played by Alfred Stieglitz in the introduction and development of modern art in America, is now generally acknowledged. In this regard, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. will present *Alfred Stieglitz and Modern Art in America* from January 28 - April 22, 2001.

Another thread about to be picked up at the time of this writing lies in the influence of the British critics Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's (also a painter) writing on American collectors' taste in the 1920's and Fry's influence on post World War II American Modernism. Two modernist British exhibitions were presented in London concurrently with the Strauser retrospective: *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant* at the Tate Gallery in London (a few weeks before the Strauser exhibition) and in America in 2000. *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art* was presented at the Courtauld Gallery.

## ***Fauvism***

The critical mass leading to the modernist explosion in the use of color was reached in 1901 when Henri Matisse, André Derain and Maurice Vlaminck came together in Paris. This encounter would lead to the development of an exciting no-holds-barred use of color albeit on a scaffolding of recognizable subject matter and perspective, Fauvism as this movement would be derisively called in 1905, was not so much about theory as it was about the temperament of the casually associated individual painters such as Georges Braque, Albert Marquet, Louis Valtat, et al who joined with Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck. The group's first public encounter was at the Salon d'Automne in October of 1905. The extravagant, vivid and turbulent paintings they exhibited led to their name which means in French: "wild and dangerous beast."

The movement had a short life, from 1905-1907 by which time the artists' interest had turned to other pursuits - in particular, Cubism. Its legacy, however, was the recognition of the chromatic energy within painting and the freedom to adopt an exuberant and irreverent character to the form of painting. Cubism's refusal to conform, even to the point of being strident would also become part of the character of modern art.

The Fauvist movement in America began with the American Modernists who studied in Paris with Matisse such as Alfred Maurer, Patrick Henry Bruce, Morgan Russell, et al and their successors who adapted the emotional value of color to their work (Oscar Bluemmer, Abraham Walkowitz and Marguerite and William Zorach, to mention a few.) The American movement, although generally not acknowledged as such at the time, was also spurred by Alfred Stieglitz who showed Matisse at his Brownstone, top floor, 291 Gallery in New York. Then, too, there were the collectors such as Gertrude and Leo Stein, Etta and Claribel Cone, and Dr. Albert Barnes. Despite many negative reviews, there was some favorable criticism from a few writers. For example, Matisse's work was championed by the artist-critic Walter Pach who had met Matisse in 1907 at Michael and Sarah Stein's rented villa, the Casa Ricci, in Fiesole, Italy.

Intuitively, Sterling Strauser recognized the strong emotional impact and rejuvenating possibilities of color and the accompanying simplification of form, flattened space and spatial distortion and made it part of the psychic energy in his art. He knew this renewal would sustain him and his viewers in the most satisfying way. He simply could "not not" make art and not make anything of it. The free and unfettered use of color achieved by speaking directly to the spirit would help Strauser express his sense of where we are and who we are while always providing pleasure.

### ***Cubism***

One of the most significant art forms associated with modernism was in the assemblage and collage-forms introduced with cubism and then made part of a very personal vocabulary by artists such as Kurt Schwitters. His use of discarded materials or found objects to construct new

poetic identities is directly related to the Dada artists such as Jean (Hans) Arp and Hannah Höch who rejected the high aesthetics of art and sought a return to the primitive, basic instinct.

The exhibition of Cubism in America begins with Alfred Stieglitz and his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. Hartley, Marin and Maurer were shown in 1909 and again in 1910 along with Carles, Maurer and Weber who is generally acknowledged as America's first practitioner.

American painters such as Arthur B. Carles, Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky and Alfred Maurer who engaged with Picasso's and Braque's Cubist transformation of Western art adapted the European's aesthetics to American themes. In his portrait of *Cullen Yates, N.A.*, Strauser, too, borrowed the surface illusion of Cubism while never losing sight of the naturalistic basis for his art. He saw the kaleidoscopic possibilities to be found in familiar things and so pushed the boundaries of American art. He intuitively eliminated extraneous details, simplified and flattened forms rather than faceting and rearranging them. To the Cubist grid of black lines and fractured forms Strauser added a highly personal sense of color, texture and rhythm. Although only a few examples remain such as *Homage to Chaim Gross* 1940 and *Walking Chair Bird*, 1984 his wit and whimsy led him to explore the possibilities inherent to the found object. Somewhat isolated in Pennsylvania, he developed a cosmopolitan, even international approach to art which belies the chauvinistic, provincial label usually assigned to the non-metropolitan based artist.

### ***Expressionism***

Strauser's inner eye led him to transform recognizable objects into vibrantly expressive forms and luscious, creamy colors. "Truth to nature" meant getting at the meaning of things and this meant intense, expressive, sometimes arbitrary color equivalencies.

This also meant development of a repertoire of brushstrokes: smooth, choppy, broad, curved, slashing, his marks (heavily modeled impasto) testifying to the physicality of paint and painting. They also bespeak a benign solitude that is a remoteness from prevailing "isms" and a peacefulness inherent in a felicitous family atmosphere. Representation and abstraction coalesce through his concern for harmonious composition above the necessity for specific detail. The excitement and emotion he feels is translated into shapes, spaces and color which form a uniquely "Strauserian" response. He was mapping out his place in the world by reaching out to the ungraspable.

Although expressionism usually leads to a stylization that contains and denotes emotion, Strauser's stylization is exhilarating. He presents visual facts directly and boldly in quick, vigorous strokes and dramatic hues as in this catalog's cover illustration, *Interstate 80* painted in 1985. Looking down from a mountain top vantage point, *Interstate 80* is stretched in a sweeping arc before us with the majesty and panorama of Hudson River views where everything is heightened, energized and in flux. Mountains roll rhythmically, clouds tumble across the sky, a small lake brilliantly reflects the sun's light, and foliage takes on apparitional forms. It recalls the



"Cold War" period in our history when President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed that \$130 billion be spent on an Interstate System to facilitate the nation's creation of an efficient road system to move civilians and the military.

This part of the world Interstate 80 spans Pennsylvania from East to West passing just to the south of East Stroudsburg and to the north of Bloomsburg according to Strauser, shows Eisenhower's "broader ribbons across the land" as impositions on nature. His mountains, hills and valleys are pristine, but man has made inroads into the landscape. One senses a wonderfully Boshcian quality as opposed to Monet's gentrified Giverny. *Interstate 80* invokes a kind of dreamscape, inviting yet somehow foreboding. It also provides a response to Jack Kerouac's question "Wither thou goest America?" in his *On the Road*. But questions of style and expression aside, there are also moments when Strauser's personal realism becomes downright visionary in the tradition of Arthur Dove or Georgia O'Keeffe. In *On the Road at Sunset*, 1975, shapes and hues undulate, roll and thrust about each other with a sensuousness and freedom that transcends description. Exterior appearance becomes inner perception.

### ***Dada***

Usually thought of as a pre-Surrealism movement, Dada was founded in Ziirich in 1916 by a group of refugee artists and writers who, dismayed and disillusioned by World War I ridiculed all of the then existing values in art. Primarily literary, the group included a Rumanian poet, Tristan Tzara; Alsatian painter and sculptor Hans (Jean) Arp; Swiss painter Sophie Taeuber-Arp (she married Hans in 1921), and Germans Hugo Ball and Richard Hülsenbeck. Tzara and Arp went on to become associated with Marcel Duchamp who transplanted Dada anti-art to New York with Francis Picabia and Man Ray. Hülsenbeck. brought together a group in Berlin and Max Ernst established a group in Cologne; however, by 1919, the Dada Center had shifted to Paris.

Dadaists expressed themselves by publishing, making experimental films, constructions and paintings. They also presented entertainments which were wildly irresponsible not to mention destructive - the first "happenings" which outraged and mystified a public which nevertheless was drawn to see the "off-the-wall" costumes and obscene posturing and to listen to the recitation of nonsense poems accompanied by gongs, rattles and the hammering of brass tubes. Containing within itself the seeds of its own destruction, Dada all but disappeared by 1922 when it was succeeded by Surrealism - a word used by Apollinaire to describe a play he wrote in 1917 and adopted by André Breton. Its legacy: the collages by Arp, no-purpose machines of Picabia, avant garde cinema (e.g. *Retour à la Raison*, 1923 by Man Ray) and "readymades" of Marcel Duchamp such as his *Fountain* (a common urinal) of 1917. The "readymades" were the first manifestation of the "anything goes" freedom makers could claim for their production simply by declaring it to be "art."

### ***Surrealism***

Although it has been described as "the greatest artistic commotion of the 20th century" and has encouraged artistic freedom, surrealism, which began as a literary movement, has never really been popular in the United States with either artists or the public. If asked to identify a surrealist artist, chances are most Americans would name only Salvador Dali who, paradoxically, while not one of the most important surrealist artists, is one of this century's most recognized artists second only perhaps to Picasso. Surrealism's status stems from its turn away from humanity's rational facilities and turn towards the imagination and the world of dreams - a wholly new bias which was associated with religious magic. This new bias redefined artistic effort making life and death, the real and imaginary, and past and future no longer opposites. Furthermore, the Surrealists constituted a militant brotherhood ruled over by the notorious guru André Breton. Breton proclaimed that the only pure thought was subconscious thought and insisted on maintaining campy insolence, praise for the primitive, rejection of sentiment, and celebration of madness, black humor and brutal eroticism - not exactly American "stuff" and certainly not consistent with Strauser's ethos even though his great friend David Burliuk painted visions of classical order deposed in a landscape scattered with classical columns, statuary, dwarfs and simpletons (*Pope and Future*, 1939).

Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism* which appeared in 1924 proclaimed self-invention as superior truthfulness and gave it redemptive esthetics. The exercise of reason and the full possession of self as fundamentally irreconcilable was not a tenable rationale for Americans even within the cult of *Modernism* which encouraged artistic ego and unbridled originality. Nonetheless, the Surrealist legacy is still found within the work of contemporary artists who have taken up such issues as gender, sexuality, identity, and the question, "What is reality?"

Thus, looking for Surrealist clues to interpret Strauser's art would at first not seem to provide a likely source for explanations. One aspect of Surrealism (and Dada) which appealed to Strauser was its "freeing-up" the artist's expressive possibilities to include caricature and humor. He would emphasize these elements throughout his career. It is interesting to speculate, also, on Dali's early Surrealist works of 1929-1930 which included a series of disembodied heads that, in turn, were related to sculpted heads in Picasso's still lifes of the period. Could these have been a springboard for Strauser's heads of the 30s such as that of the American landscape painter *Cullen Yates*? One also needs to remember that Alfred Maurer painted a series of Cubist - Surrealist heads before taking his life in 1932.

### ***"Peoples Art"***

Employed and relatively secure in the 1930s, Strauser did not respond to the Depression with themes expressing concern for social or moral decay or economic or political issues or any of the revolutionary elements associated with the "Peoples Art Movement" of the period. True enough, he was concerned with the forms of art patronage and was aware of the growing social protest that appeared in magazine illustrations and newspaper cartoons. He was concerned about the elitism and commercialism in the art world that was heavily biased toward European art. Focused on his family and his small town, rural Pennsylvania lifestyle he did not succumb to the

anger, disillusionism or anticapitalism which affected many of his fellow artists, particularly those in New York like Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Louis Lozowick and the Soyers. He did find in the Mexican masters (Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siquieros) and particularly Rufino Tamayo, resonance with the representational styles and themes that he felt dignified art.

### ***Abstraction***

While some artists reflected the effects of the Great Depression in the 1930s, others (Burgoyne Diller, Ilya Bolotowsky, George L.K. Morris and Werner Drewes) searched for a better, ideal world - one of order, harmony and stability - which they believed could only be universally achieved through abstraction. Guided by Piet Mondrian's *de Stijl* they developed an art of lines, circles, rectangles and areas of flat color. Besides the inevitable machine-like metaphors with its technological promise came something completely different, strange, sometimes apparitional biomorphic shapes which seemed to pulse with life. The appeal in either event was to an aesthetic which would be common to all - a kind of international language of perception, recognition, understanding and joy. These artists stripped away the baggage of the past and produced images of a vitality and renewal which would lead to utopia. The persuasiveness of this appeal was also felt by Strauser who was able to balance his individuality and need for harmony, clarity and stability against any predetermined artistic "movements."

### ***Folk Art***

Although the idea that there could be a folk art in America produced by those not formally trained in art first appeared at the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia and at the sesquicentennial of 1926 also held in Philadelphia, during the early 20th century American Folk Art was acquired by antiques collectors who used it for decorative accents. Since then, this attitude has changed, and folk art is recognized as central to the theme of American art. Case in point: Folk Art - the creations of the usually anonymous, non-formally trained - were objects of great interest to a number of modernist artists such as Charles Sheeler as they were to Sterling Strauser. Besides being "useful" what the folk artist made were bold, direct and fresh expressions of the joy in life and the beauty in nature. They reflected a pride in home and place and satisfaction with the small everyday pleasures.

Coinciding with Strauser's maturation and interest as an artist was an increasing national interest in Americana - the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection was being formed and the Williamsburg Restoration project was begun in 1929. The Sturbridge Museum in Massachusetts, the Henry E Dupont Winterthur Museum in Delaware, and Greenfield Village in Michigan were all similarly inspired by the richness of the American Folk tradition. Then there was the Museum of Modern Art's landmark exhibition of the *Art of the Common Man* of 1932 which directly linked the simplicity, directness and boldness of modern art with that produced by the folk (and tribal) artist.

The folk artist reflected a keen interest in the world in which he was a vital part: the cycle of birth, marriage, and death; the succession of the seasons and the ever-changing years. Accepting the role he or she felt was part of God's divine plan, the folk artist was motivated to make the place he was to occupy during his brief stay on earth as attractive and comfortable as possible. Of course, he would also do this for his family, particularly the children who would live on. His house, barn, furniture, quilts, needlework, pottery, iron, tin and stone ware, were all substantially utilitarian, but joyfully decorated.

The stark linear images of the itinerant folk artist are, for example, very reminiscent of Paul Klee. Carved wooden shop sign figures are Leger-like. Indeed, the visually delightful color, line and pattern in 19th century utilitarian bed quilts is esthetically linked to modernist abstract art. By 1971 quilts were recognized as a true art form and exhibited at the Whitney Museum at its *Abstract Design in American Quilts* show. Their crisp clarity of design and arresting patterns and colors, as well as their exuberant use of materials and technique all had resonance for the 20th century. Redware with wild designs in dark-colored slip and bizarre vinegar graining on furniture were applied with the energy of children's finger painting. For Strauser, it was a "natural" to work in this traditional American approach: vigorous, simple, reductive, "flat" and with a bold use of color.

Then, too, there are hooked rugs. Because of his wife Dorothy's interest and skill in making them, Sterling was hooked on hooked rugs. Meant to be walked on, the life span of a hooked rug was relatively short yet the women who made them - never thinking of themselves as "artists" - cared to make them fanciful and a delight to behold. A truly indigenous American folk art, they are remarkable for their inventiveness and innocent charm. Unlike quilt-making, oftentimes a communal activity and somewhat restricted to more-or-less standard designs, hooked-rug making allowed for unbridled creativity. They were in perfect resonance with Sterling's aesthetic of free expression.

### ***A Strauser Portrait***

Obscured in histories of the origins of art is the primitive belief in the shaman's magical power to "capture" an individual by creating their image. The development of portraiture thus implied that what is more important is more than exterior likeness; it is rather about the soul within and the power of the artist to reveal it. Among the ways that this is done, the artist employs selective presentation, distortion and exaggeration. This, in turn, led to comic representation, satire, and caricature. What we call the image depends on the artist's intent and the viewer's perception.

In the latter part of the 19th century, caricature, with its penetrating characterization and use of abstract form to provide identifiable significance became a forerunner of modern Art. For example embedded in expressionism is the high purpose of getting to the essential nature of 20th century life through demoniac and grotesque equivalencies in form and color.

The free use of imaginative power came to Strauser in the subjectivity with which he intuitively grasped his vision of his sitter which derived directly from his rapid working technique: spontaneous and sketchy. His "short-hand" could always be understood; it involved strong draftsmanship and the creation of a kind of linear puzzle which could be deciphered by the observer. With a few deft strokes he established physiognomy and transposed form to give us new insights into identifiable subjects.

Along with their sketchy, casual look, the work has an aura of domesticity and a feeling of intimacy. Strauser's unidealized vision is softened by sensitive outlining, scribing and selective erasures (Strauser claimed his finger made an excellent eraser). His incisive touch reflects the affection he feels for the people he so closely observes.

Strauser's portrait of *Dr. Paul Kenneth Nase* (c. 1967), the Reading Ophthalmologist who performed the detached retina procedure on the artist in the summer of 1967 is an excellent example of Strauser's evocative and sensitive portraiture which hovers in that fine balance between the gently humorous and affectionately caricatured. His economy of line, delicately yet vigorously and expressively cut into the paint surface captures the respect and compassion Strauser felt for Dr. Nase whose Ophthalmoscope is worn much as the helmet lamps of the coal miners and railroad workers that Strauser knew and loved so well.

Taking inspiration from Rembrandt whose portraits he so much admired, Strauser's self portraits are straightforward and honest embodying a quality of truthfulness that is revealed in his brush strokes - small, descriptive points of color, agitated swatches or smooth, broad sweeps. In each the viewer reaches a new level of understanding and intimacy with the artist who, while revealing a different aspect of his exterior self to us always projects the central humanity of the man.

### ***Strauser Landscapes and Still Lifes***

Strauser's landscapes and still lifes hover in a wonderful balance between concern for picture-making and revelation about place and object. The delicate exploration in portraiture gives way to bolder, more assertive handling in the landscape. Going one step further in the still life, Strauser uses brushiness, the palette knife and weight of paint to convey a sense of the physicality and ripeness, for example, of flowers. Such work reaches deep into the synergism between Strauser's eye, hand and intellect to transpose patches of pigment into vibrant light, form and material substance; lines describe form, contour space and establish compositional structure. His images are thus kilims of paint and descriptors of place. Instinctively he came to grips with the same issues of complexity and the variety of formal concerns as had each of our major modernist painters.

### ***The Strauser Method***

Even when considering the vast array of painters, movements, styles and techniques from antiquity to the present day, the Strauser "Floating Oil" Method is unusual, indeed:

*Everything about the "Strauser Method" is unorthodox. Everything I do is in direct violation of what is recommended in the art manuals. (For example) Take a raw piece of masonite, sand it rough, coat it with linseed oil, add gesso, smear your background paint on with a one-inch house painting brush in a heavy impasto, draw into this wet background with ... charcoal and start laying in your colors with a knife. If the background support is dark, use Titanium white, it is a more powerful cover. (And don't forget to use the) built in eraser at the end of your finger. (It) allows for changes easily and quickly.*

He arrived at this method partly because it allowed him to work quickly given the restraint of the limited time available to him to paint (evenings) and partly because, by breaking the rules, he felt he would be able to work more freely and achieve more interesting results. He particularly admired John Marin's ability to work rapidly and forcefully.

Strauser's method also incorporated the abandonment of perspective which he felt was partly the reason for Cézanne's greatness and he admired the "oriental scheme" which was "much better" because it did not use vanishing points. Perspective could and did "ruin" many paintings, he remarked.

### ***About the Author***

Francis R. Ricci is currently Education Curator at the Reading Public Museum and Director of the Art Discussion Series at the Institute of The Arts. He studied at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Fleisher Memorial and received an undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a Masters Degree from Drexel University. He has provided fine arts consultancy services, and taught at the Pennsylvania State University - Berks Campus, and Alvernia College. He produces, writes, directs and hosts "Art in Review" which appears on Reading's BCTV.