



LEE ALLEN

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA MUSEUM OF ART
June 9–July 29, 2001

BRUNNIER ART MUSEUM, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
August 28–November 25, 2001

Self Portrait, 1929

Born in 1910 in Muscatine, Iowa, Edwin Lee Allen was, as he recalls, always interested in art. When he was eleven years old, his father gave him his first set of oil paints—a gift his father would later regret. Although his father wanted him to discontinue his formal education after the eighth grade, Lee, as he became known, worked his way through East High School in Des Moines, Iowa (where the family had moved in 1918), by delivering Western Union Telegrams on his bicycle. Lee's father had completed his formal education through correspondence school and had become a highly successful design engineer for C.E. Erickson Advertising Novelty Company in Des Moines. He wanted Lee to work full-time and finish school through individual study. Lee refused and, with the support of his stepmother—his own mother had died in 1918 from the flu epidemic—Lee was allowed to complete high school although he paid all his own school expenses. When Lee expressed a serious interest at age sixteen in pursuing an artistic career, his father tried to discourage him from what he believed was a life destined to poverty.

Despite his father's hostile reaction to his artistic interest and prowess, Lee was fortunate to have been encouraged in his artistic pursuits by his stepmother and the art instructor at East High, Miss Harriet Macy. As Lee recalls, she encouraged his wide-ranging curiosity in a variety of art media including drawing, painting, printmaking, design, modeling, and sculpture. She introduced Lee to Mr. J.N.



Corn Country, 1935

Darling, the famous cartoonist from the *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune*, who gave Lee permission to use his etching press. This was indeed a step forward from Lee's initial 4" by 4" prints made by running small plates through his stepmother's hand-roller-wringer. Later, Lee made the acquaintance of Arthur Asa Dillon, a skilled professional engraver and etcher, who taught Lee many innovations with the print medium.

After Lee graduated from East High School in 1928, he attended summer school and one full year at the Cumming School of Art in Des Moines. Charles Cumming had earlier founded the art departments at Cornell College (1880) and at the University of Iowa (1909). In the fall of 1929, Lee enrolled at the University of Iowa to study art. Lee also competed in juried art competitions in the Art Salon at the Iowa State

Fair. At the 1928 Iowa State Fair, Lee was awarded first prize in the black and white category and in 1929, Lee's etching *7th Street Viaduct* won first prize. Also in 1929 he took second prize in the black and white drawing category and first prize in oil painting while Grant Wood won sweep-stakes. Lee recalls meeting Grant Wood both years and discussing his interest in studying art at the University of Iowa. Wood invited Lee to visit him at his studio in Cedar Rapids at 5 Turner Alley and to attend his night sketching class. Lee accepted this offer and commuted to Cedar Rapids from Iowa City using the Inter-Urban Railroad several times. He also accompanied Wood on sketching forays to the Amana colonies several times.

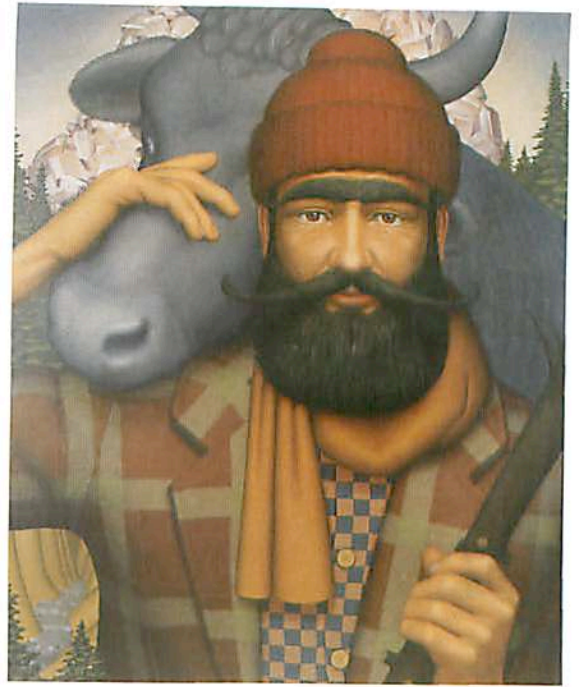
During Lee's years of study at the University of Iowa, he worked at the New Idea Decorating Company which created decorations for a variety of campus events including elaborately painted stage sets and backdrops for sorority and fraternity parties. Lee continued his relationship with Grant Wood and traveled to Stone City during summer weekends when Wood's art camp was in residence to partake in the artistic activities offered there. He would drive to Stone City from Iowa City and sleep in his car so that he did not miss out on the invigorating artistic environment.

In 1933, Lee returned from a short visit to the Chicago World's Fair and found a note pinned to his door from Grant Wood stating: "I have been appointed director of the Midwest District W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) Art Project and I would like to have you work with me." Lee immediately telephoned his acceptance. As Lee records in his own autobiographical notes:

The W.P.A. work was somewhat varied. An over-life-size statue representing the Indian Chief Blackhawk was done in clay by Holland Foster, Thealtus Alberts, and me from a small model original by University sculpture instructor, Harry Stinson. Holland Foster and I built a scale model of the new Fine Arts building that was just barely under construction, for the benefit of the architect and contractors. Along with several others I helped enlarge the Grant Wood design for mural panels to be placed in the stairway of the library of the Iowa State University at Ames, Iowa. We painted them in Iowa City in the swimming pool of the old women's gym (now torn down) on the University of Iowa campus and, when finished, they were installed in Ames.

After completion of the new art building several of us moved into its 'mural studio' at the northern end of the building. We were commissioned to do a tryptich for an alcove on the ground floor of the same Ames library previously mentioned. Grant Wood did the small, preliminary drawings, Francis McCray enlarged and refined the drawing, while I was given the privilege to work out the color for it with colored pencils and chalk on a scale model tryptich, perhaps six feet long. Only a handful of us were left to do the final painting because the original government project had been completed. Except for Grant and Mac, the rest of us were registered as students and paid \$42.00 per week out of government 'Student Relief' funds.

Lee continued his study of mural painting during the summer of 1935 when he and fellow Iowa student Milton Schoof traveled to Mexico to study with Diego Rivera. Grant Wood wrote a letter of introduction for the pair and they joined other American artists in Mexico who were also there to learn how to use the fresco medium for murals for public buildings in the United States. After Lee returned to Iowa, he completed



Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox, 1936

what he believed to be the first fresco panel done in Iowa. The subject was taken from a watercolor sketch of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan. This fresco panel, measuring approximately 30" x 44," was left in the basement of the UI art building and is now presumed lost or destroyed.

Lee also submitted his own mural designs on an oil painting on canvas in competition for the decoration of new post offices in Iowa and was awarded the commissions for the murals *Soil Conservation* for the Onawa, Iowa, post office in 1937 and *Conservation of Wild Life* for the Emmetsburg, Iowa, post office in 1940. The painting, which formed the preliminary design for *Soil Conservation*, was included by the Whitney Museum in their exhibition *The American Century: Part I, 1900-1950*.

In 1936, Lee painted *Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox* and it was accepted for the American Show at the Art Institute of Chicago; the painting was later included in the traveling portion of that show and toured several public galleries in the United States. It was later purchased by Dr. Clarence Van Epps, former head of the Neurology Department at the UI Hospital. Along with *Corn Country, 1935*, and *Decorator's Shop, 1933*, it was donated by Dr. Van Epps to the UI art department. Unfortunately, *Decorator's Shop*, which won the first prize for painting at the Iowa State Fair Art Salon of 1933, was eventually lost or stolen from the Iowa Memorial Union where the University's art collection was often displayed prior to the opening of the UI Museum of Art in 1969. The other two works, *Paul Bunyan and*

the Blue Ox and *Corn Country*, are now in the Museum's permanent collection.

Lee had been roommates with Emil "Gus" Bethke during the 1930 school year. Bethke was hired by Cecil O'Brien, professor of Ophthalmology at the UI, to be an ophthalmic illustrator. Lee often accompanied Bethke to the hospital and learned from him how to use the instruments necessary to make detailed ophthalmic drawings. In 1931 when Bethke left the UI for a job at Columbia Presbyterian in New York City, he suggested Lee Allen as his successor. Lee turned down the position, preferring instead to pursue a career in fine art. However, in November 1937, when the illustrator's position in Ophthalmology was once again open, Lee reconsidered and accepted. He had married in 1936 and, with a baby on the way, decided that the opportunity for regular income was too advantageous to refuse. He vowed to himself that he would not exhibit or sell another painting as long as he was in the department. He felt that if he did so, his interests would begin to conflict and he might not succeed either as a fine artist or as a medical illustrator.

Lee kept his word. Except for painting on vacation, the creation of oil portraits of department heads (Dr. Clarence Van Epps of Neurology, Dr. John Randall of Obstetrics/Gynecology, and Dr. C.S. O'Brien of Ophthalmology) and relief portraits cast in bronze of UI medical school professors (Dr. C.S. O'Brien of Ophthalmology, Dr. Stewart Cullen of Bacteriology, Dr. Alson E. Braley of Ophthalmology, Dr. Herman Burian of Ophthalmology, and Dr. Frederick C. Blodi of Ophthalmology), Lee confined his artistic pursuits to medical illustration. He was president of the Association of Medical Illustrators in 1959, and was a founding member and the first president of the Ophthalmic Photographer's Society in 1969 as well as being President of the American Society of Ocularists that year.

One other exception to Lee's avoidance of the "fine arts" must be noted. For the annual Ophthalmology Christmas party, Lee would create a Christmas themed "mural" on the department blackboard. In 1957, the Christmas mural was inspired by the Russian sputnik and eventually led to the acrylic painting of the same subject completed in 1982 entitled *Levity over Gravity*, now in the University of Iowa Museum of Art permanent collection.

After Lee's retirement from the Ophthalmology Department in 1976, he joined David Bulgarelli in private enterprise making prosthetic eyes from a process Lee had initiated in 1945 for the department and training future ocularists. Now Lee felt free to go back to his original artistic interests and he created many paintings and drawings that he showed in a number of area



Wayfarer, 1988



Summer Pattern, 1988

exhibitions. These works were purchased by a number of eager patrons. The *Wayfarer* and *Summer Pattern* both date from 1988 and display Lee's continued interest in the regional subject matter unique to the Iowa rural landscape. He produced many such works before his progressive macular degeneration impeded his visual ability. Even then, however, he turned his scientific training inward and produced illustrations displaying for the first time the progression of this devastating disease. Lee's ground-breaking illustrations appear in *The Hole in My Vision: An Artist's "View of His Own Macular Degeneration"* published in 2000.

—Pamela Trimpe
UIMA Curator of Painting and Sculpture

OPHTHALMOLOGIC ILLUSTRATIONS: BRIEF OBSERVATIONS

When Lee joined Dr. C.S. O'Brien in the Ophthalmology Department in 1937, he fulfilled Dr. O'Brien's desire to have someone paint the fundus (the back of the eye) in color. He did this using a binocular, stand-mounted ophthalmoscope. The patient would place his or her head in the chin rest periodically for Lee to take another look and then he could lean back for a minute while Lee sketched. Lee also learned how to paint the iris and the chamber angle, as Dr. H. Stanley Thompson writes of Allen in the book *A Hole in My Vision*:

Lee had a busy mind; he wanted to understand how things worked, and O'Brien understood that it was important to give Lee the time to pursue his inclinations. O'Brien often spoke of the tyrannical control he had seen professors exercise in European universities, so he deliberately encouraged Lee Allen to write up his findings and submit them as first author to the best journals.

In the late 1930s, gonioscopy [the method of allowing the visualization of the iris/corneal angle of the eye] was becoming a popular technique, and in 1941 Dr. O'Brien encouraged Dr. James Allen to go to New York to learn this technique and bring it back to Iowa. Dr. Allen came back with a discouraging report: he said the technique was difficult and messy because chambered contact lenses were used, and the water put into the chamber quickly ran out, spoiling the view. Lee Allen thought that a contact lens with only a capillary layer of fluid might work better. That afternoon he crafted from plastic a gonioscope that contacted only the cornea. He buffed it up, cleaned it, and brought it out to the clinic and asked Dr. Leinfelder to try it on a patient. The cornea was wet down with a little topical anesthetic and the chamber angle could immediately be seen!

This was, it seems, a typical Lee Allen accomplishment. The current best technique seemed awkward; he saw what was wrong and how it could be improved, so he did it! The new gonioscope stayed comfortably and safely on the patient's eye so that Lee could sketch what he saw in some detail.

For further information on Lee Allen's ophthalmologic accomplishments see:

Wallace L.M. Alward, M.D., *Color Atlas of Gonioscopy* (St. Louis: Mosby Publishing, 1994). Now available through the American Academy of Ophthalmology (2000).

Lee M. Allen, *The Hole in My Vision: An Artist's View of His Own Macular Degeneration* (Iowa City: Penfield Press, 2000).

CHECK LIST (height precedes width)

Self Portrait, 1929
Oil, 36" x 30"

Collection of the Artist

Boat Houses on the Iowa
Oil, 42" x 45"

Lent by Sharon M. Moore

No Spiking, 1934
Watercolor, 18" x 22"

The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of the Artist

Corn Country, 1935
Oil, 38" x 44"

The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of Dr. Clarence Van Epps

*Preliminary Study for Paul Bunyan and
The Blue Ox*, 1935

Charcoal, 34 1/2" x 29 3/4"

The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Lent by Mary Lee Hoganson

Paul Bunyan and The Blue Ox, 1936

Oil, 29 1/2" x 25 1/2"

The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of Dr. Clarence Van Epps

Clarence Van Epps, M.D., 1941

Oil, 28" x 22"

The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of Dr. Clarence Van Epps,
Courtesy of the Neurology Department,
UI College of Medicine

Picnic at Cobblestones, c. 1954

Watercolor, 30" x 24"

Lent by Elizabeth Williams

At Sawbill Lake, 1955

Watercolor, 11" X 15"

Lent by Mary Lee Hoganson

Northeaster, 1956

Acrylic, 31 1/2" x 25 3/4"

Lent by the Department of Ophthalmology
and Visual Sciences, UI College of Medicine

Birch Tree, Tofta, 1960

Acrylic, 34" x 40"

Lent by David M. Bulgarelli

Lake Superior Shore, 1960

Watercolor, 30" x 36"

Lent by Miriam Leinen

Herman Burian, 1974

Bronze relief, 30" x 24"

Lent by the Department of Ophthalmology
and Visual Sciences, UI College of Medicine

Kentucky Tobacco Barn, 1981

Watercolor, 18" x 23"

Lent by Miriam Leinen

Levity Over Gravity, 1982

Acrylic, 60" x 84"

The University of Iowa Museum of Art,
Gift of the Artist, dedicated to his grandchildren

Cloudburst, 1985

Oil, 36" x 42"

Lent by Robert Baller, M.D.

Baling, 1986

Oil, 36" x 42"

Lent by Robert Baller, M.D.

The Window, 57 Years Later, 1986

Oil, 30" x 36"

Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Bruce E. Spivey

Vortex, 1988

Alkyd, 36" x 40"

Lent by Bruce Bedell, M.D.

Wayfarer, 1988

Alkyd, 30" x 36"

Lent by Hansjoerg E. Kolder, West Branch, Iowa

Summer Pattern, 1988

Alkyd, 24" x 30"

Lent by Miriam Leinen

Under a Vivid Sky, 1989

Acrylic, 30" x 36"

Lent by Edward and Shirley Babka

A Day in June, 1989

Acrylic, 35" x 33"

Lent by the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Between Classes, 1989

Acrylic, 17 1/2" x 35 1/2"

Lent by the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Requiem for a Family Farm, 1989

Acrylic, 32" x 44"

Lent by Richard Anderson, M.D.

Gonioscopic Drawings, 1940s and 1950s

Watercolor

Lent by the Department of Ophthalmology
and Visual Sciences, UI College of Medicine

Original Drawings for *A Hole in My Vision*, 2000

Watercolor, pen and ink

Collection of the Artist

Design: Erin McGee

Photos: Steve Tatum

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