

Allentown Street, n.d.

Walter Emerson Baum (1884 – 1956)

oil on masonite

Collection of the Bucks County Intermediate Unit

#22



Biography

Walter Emerson Baum was born in December 1884 in Sellersville, Pennsylvania. One of the only Pennsylvania Impressionists to be born in historic Bucks County, Baum lived his entire life in Sellersville and captured its scenes often in oil on canvas. Baum was described as the man "who discovered the beauty of Main Street." Baum worked en plein air, painting snow scenes outdoors from nature even in the worst winter storms. Baum's wife, Flora, was a constant companion and often joined him on his painting outings.

Baum remains most famous for his paintings of Bucks County landscapes and small rural houses that he created during painting outings in and around Bucks County and the Lehigh Valley in the 1920s and 1930s. He also painted scenes of historic Manayunk outside of Philadelphia, the streets of Allentown and Tamaqua, all in Pennsylvania. By the 1940s, Baum stopped working with oil paint and started to experiment with tempera (an egg based paint) and casein (a milk glue based paint) with irregular results. When using these materials, he used a very loose and uncontrolled style of brushwork. He was a very prolific painter and produced thousands of paintings.

A skilled and beloved teacher, Baum painted with his students outdoors in the en plein air tradition of both the French and American Impressionists. Baum was inspired by the work of his fellow New Hope School painters, Edward Redfield, Daniel Garber, and George Sotter.

Walter Baum was a fellow of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He studied with William Trego from 1904-1910 and then continued his studies at the Academy with Trego, Daniel Garber, and Thomas Anshutz in 1910. In 1925, at the height of his career, Baum won the prestigious Sesnan Gold Medal for his landscape composition called *Sunlight and Shadow*. This painting is presently in the collection of the Allentown Art Museum in Allentown, PA.

In Baum's later years, he focused his talents on establishing the Allentown Museum of Art, the Kline-Baum Art School in Allentown, and the Bucks County Traveling Art Gallery (now called Art on the Move). He was also an art editor and critic for the Philadelphia Evening and Sunday Bulletin. In 1938, he published a book on the Pennsylvania German heritage in Bucks and Lehigh Counties called *Two Hundred Years*.



His works are included in major collections including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Toledo Art Museum, the Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy, The Michener Art Museum, and the Allentown Art Museum.

Walter Baum died in his native Sellersville, Pennsylvania, at age 72.

This painting really looks like it is going back into space. How did the artist do it?

Walter Baum used many artistic techniques to make his two-dimensional paintings look three-dimensional. He used both atmospheric and linear perspective in this painting. With atmospheric perspective, an artist can combine overlapping, shading, color and detail fading, size changes, and placement to create this sense of depth. With linear perspective, an artist uses a vanishing point. Do you see examples of these techniques when you look at *Allentown Street*?

It looks like this paint is really thick!

Walter Baum faithfully followed the advice of his teacher and mentor Birge Harrison: "Use plenty of pigment also -- great 'gobs' of it. A well-furnished palette is half the battle. Squeeze out twice as much color as you think you can possibly need, and then use it all. Look at the work of our friends Redfield, Sorolla, Foster, Schofield, Dougherty, Dearth, Chase -- all the good painters. It shows clearly that they have plenty of paint upon their palettes. Never count the cost of your pigments. Use them as if they were the very dirt under your feet." If you have ever learned anything about Vincent Van Gogh, you know this is the way he loved to use paint as well!

In the 1920s Baum fully embraced this idea. The visual surface effects of his works were as interesting as his subject matter. He was able to combine his love for thick, rich paint with attention to detail in the scenes he painted. He was a bold and confident painter. He had full command of his palette and brush. When you look at a Baum painting, you can always tell where it was painted, whether at an old *Mill Race*, along *The Narrows*, or in the *Sellersville Mill Village*.

What is it like to paint outside?

Walter Baum's son once said, "My father strapped an easel to his car's fender, a palette to his door and painted away while my mother relaxed in the backseat, reading novels."

Artists like Baum thought that painting outside was the only way to really capture the light and color of a scene accurately. No matter what the weather, he would bring his paints, pencils, easel and canvas outside to work. His children even remember their father going out in several pairs of pants and layers of shirts and sweaters, with fingerless gloves for brush control.

Just imagine being an en plein air artist. No matter what the weather, you would bring your paints and pencils and easel and canvas outside to work. In the cool air along the river in spring, in the shaded groves of a forest in fall, in the driving wind and snow of winter, the heat and humidity of summer, the sandy and salty air of the seashore, and even to watch a bridge burning like Edward W. Redfield did in when he painted *The Burning of Center Bridge*!



It is believed by Walter Baum and all the Pennsylvania Impressionist painters and Impressionists around the world that looking at a subject in natural light would best help the artist to capture the feeling of the place accurately. The things that were most important to artists who painted outdoors were everyday life, light and dark, brushstrokes, outdoor settings and weather and atmosphere.

Even in the worst weather, Baum preferred painting outdoors. Some of Baum's largest canvases were done in-studio from smaller studies, but he is known to have painted 30 x 36 inch canvases in the snow. If the weather was too bad, he set up inside his car -- adorning canvas, dashboard and floor mats alike with drips of paint.

Many artists throughout recent history loved to work in this style, but the invention of a portable easel and paint in tubes helped 19th and 20th century artists carry their work outside more easily.

Did the artist paint other street scenes?

Walter Baum painted many street scenes. Walter Baum loved to paint both rural and urban life when he worked on his paintings. Although he lived in Sellersville, he often traveled to Allentown, a small city about 30 miles north of Sellersville. It was in this city that he saw bustling scenes – cars zooming, trains rushing, beautiful arched bridges and brick factories.

What is the Circulating Picture Club?

Baum had a unique vision that art should be available to everyone. He began the Circulating Picture Club and the Allentown Art Gallery to benefit the general public and local schools in 1933. Through this program, paintings created by local artists were made available to the public through a free loan program. The collection has now grown to over 1000 paintings, many of which are made available for display in offices and corporate campuses throughout the Lehigh Valley.

The Depression hit the art world in America hard. Fortunately, Baum regained the privacy of his family's home before the Depression, relocating his Saturday art classes to Allentown. His wife Flora handled the secretarial and business records, while the Allentown school district provided space and supplies for the class. He used one classroom as an art studio, and there he taught art classes to many people of all ages. Out of one room Baum created a gallery filled with his works. He also borrowed art made by teachers and students, and anything else he could have donated by artists from New Hope to Philadelphia. In the winter of 1933 Allentown's school district allotted two more rooms for his growing art class.

Described as a close, affectionate group dedicated to the making of art, adults and children, beginners and advanced students were welcomed by the Baums. His involvement in this business as well as his interest in the art school and Allentown Art Museum kept him financially healthy through the Depression. He actively worked in the area during this time to help promote the work of his fellow artists.



Walter Baum began the Circulating Picture Club and the Allentown Art Gallery to benefit the general public and local schools. Baum's vision grew rapidly. On March 17, 1934, the Allentown Art Museum opened. Hundreds of people attended the opening event, touring the schoolrooms with seventy canvases on display. Judge Frank Trexler spoke on his long held hope for an Allentown Art Museum. The main speaker was the art critic of the *Philadelphia Ledger*, Dorothy Grafly, who acknowledged the grass roots effort of the Baum art group to spread the "gospel" of art appreciation.

In 1933, the Circulating Picture Club provided paintings created by local artists to the public. This collection has now grown to over 1000 paintings. This important part of the Baum School of Art's educational program is represented in the numerous paintings, drawings, prints, ceramics, and sculpture that have been collected over many years. Today, the Baum School of Art owns most of the artwork. In addition, a significant portion of the Circulating Picture Club collection is on permanent loan from various artists. The Circulating Picture Club continues to provide funding for programs at the Baum School, as the artwork is made available for public display in offices and corporate campuses throughout the Lehigh Valley area.

Learn More

Bring your own paper, pencils, crayons, pastels, watercolors or acrylics outside! Then begin creating a landscape. See the activity sheet "Create a Landscape" below.

Take a closer look at cities here. See the activity sheet "Look at Cityscapes" below.

Learn how to use perspective in a work of art. See the activity sheet "Perspective" below.

Related Images

To see more images of the work of Walter Baum, visit:

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, at www.phila.org

Toledo Art Museum, Toledo, Ohio, at www.toledomuseum.org

James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA, at www.michenerartmuseum.org

Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, PA, at www.allentownartmuseum.org

If you are interested in looking at art created by Impressionist artists in France, including Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Mary Cassatt, Pierre Renoir, and Berthe Morisot, visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art at www.metmuseum.org.

Related Links

To learn more about Walter Baum's connection to art history, arts education and area art museums, visit:

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, at www.pafa.org.

Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, PA, at www.allentownartmuseum.org

Baum School of Art, Allentown, PA, at www.baumschool.org



Art on the Move is the current traveling art exhibition coordinated by the James A. Michener Art Museum and the Bucks County Intermediate Unit #22. Learn more about this exciting program at www.bucksiu.org or www.michenerartmuseum.org.

For an interesting overview of Impressionism, complete with illustrations, quotations, and additional links, visit Art Lex, a complete online arts dictionary, at www.artlex.org.

