

Will Henry Stevens: Objective & Non-Objective Works

by Jessie Poesch

Will Henry Stevens (1881-1949), a native of Vevay, Indiana, studied at the Cincinnati Art Academy. He first visited New York in 1906 and had two modest but successful shows in 1907 and 1908 at Mary Bacon Ford's New Gallery on West 30th Street. He exhibited pastel landscapes of his native Ohio River Valley, work seen as poetic and notable for color. Thereafter he spent two or three weeks in New

York virtually every year, visiting exhibits, renewing friendships and learning what was happening in the art world.

In 1910 Stevens married and for the next decade he taught his classes in Louisville, Kentucky, and exhibited regularly in cities such as Richmond, Indiana, Indianapolis, Saint Louis, Cleveland and Chicago. Around 1916 Stevens and his wife and daughter spent their first summer in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The area became a second home where they returned

Will Henry Stevens—Convergence: Objective and Non-Objective Works is on view through May 7, 2011, at the Spartanburg Art Museum, The Chapman Cultural Center, 200 E. Saint John Street, Spartanburg, South Carolina, 29306, 864-582-7616, www.spartanburgartmuseum.org. The exhibition is accompanied by a 24-page pamphlet.

every year. The trees, woods, streams, villages and mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia became



All illustrated works are from the estate of Will Henry Stevens.

ABOVE: *No. 861*, w/c on paper, 12 x 16.

RIGHT: *No. 764*, pastel on paper, 14 x 18.

LEFT: *No. 1243*, pastel on paper, 18 x 22.

subjects of his paintings.

Stevens' daughter Janet recalls that a cold winter sent the family to the Gulf Coast. There they met the director of the Newcomb Art Department of Tulane University, and in February, 1921, Stevens joined its faculty, living during the academic year in New Orleans until he retired. The flat, rural areas of the bayous of Louisiana and the Mississippi River became favored subjects for his compositions.

Bernard Lemann, a young student of architecture at Tulane, was a youthful neighbor and they became friends. In 1926 or 1927, Stevens visited Lemann in New York, who had transferred to Columbia





ABOVE: No. 940, oil and mixed media on paper, 34 1/4 x 26 1/2.

ABOVE LEFT: *Non-Objective Forms in Space* (No. 1215), w/c on paper, 19 7/8 x 16.

LEFT: No. 524, pastel on paper, 18 x 22.

RIGHT: No. 1098, pastel on paper, 12 1/2 x 16 1/2.

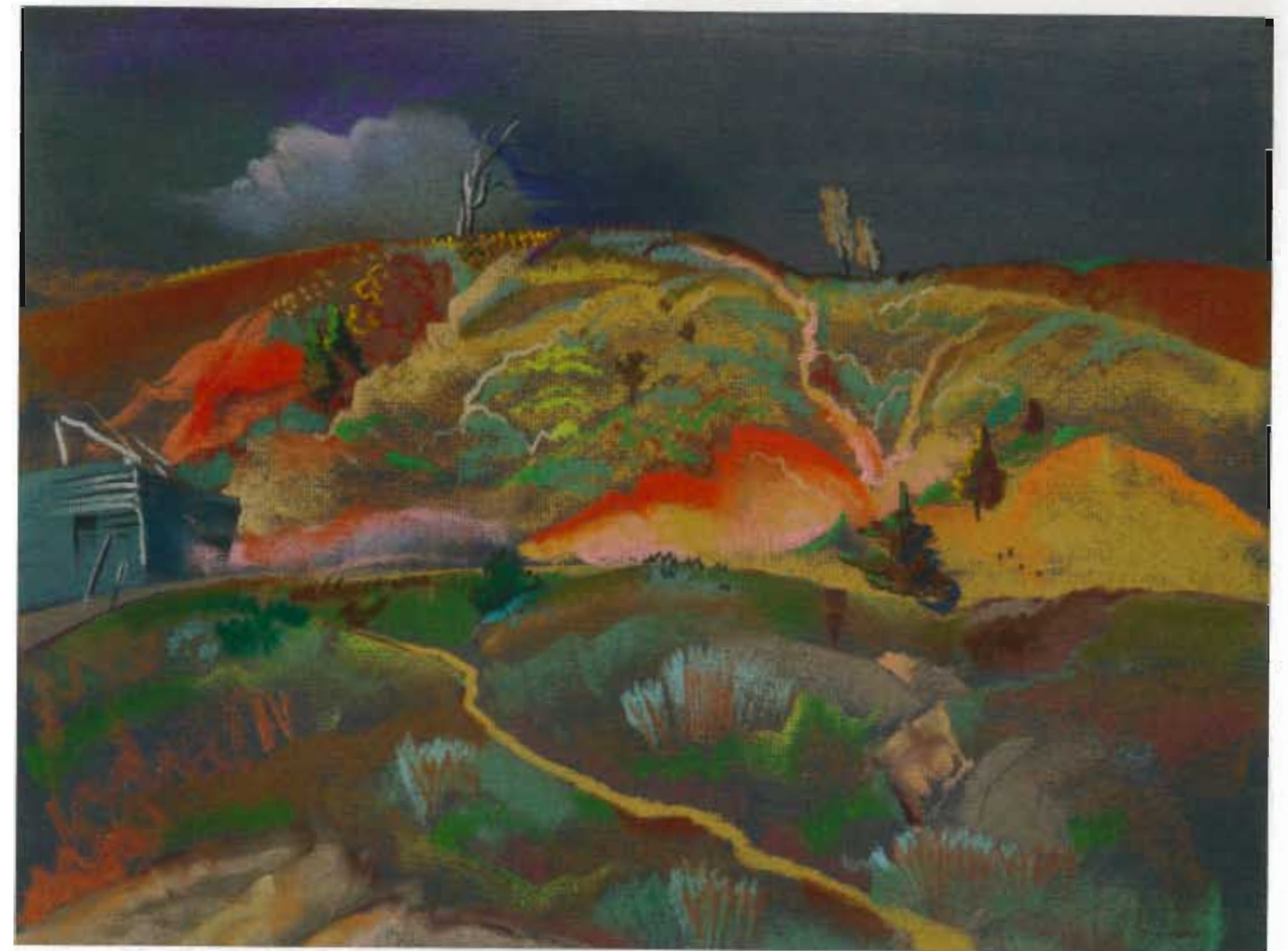
BELOW RIGHT: *Flower and Leaf* (No. 1180), pastel on paper, 16 x 20.

University. Together they visited an exhibit that included "non-objective," or abstract paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, Rudolf Bauer and Paul Klee. Published in 1911 and rooted in Theosophical ideas, Kandin-

sky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* proposed that a "pure" art could be expressed in abstract language and thus convey mystical and spiritual truths that could not be expressed by the direct rendering of objects,

nor through the new mathematics and sciences of the time. For Stevens, this was in harmony with the transcendental ideas he had absorbed in his youth.

Stevens began experimenting with abstract paintings, often making small sketches, then working the compositions up in his studio. Even as he experimented with abstract paintings, he did not forsake painting from nature. He was working along two parallel lines. These parallel lines soon became intertwined. He introduced shifting perspectives, juxtaposed or overlapping images, patterned and textured backgrounds. He sometimes called these semi-abstracts. At the same time, his essentially abstract compositions, whether with soft muted edges or sharp clearly defined lines, virtually always suggest the shapes and



movements of the natural world.

Even in his earliest paintings, critics commented upon his use of color. When Stevens was a young man, he worked with his father, a pharmaceutical chemist, learning to grind materials and prepare emulsions. As an artist, he used this knowledge to grind his own pigments. He favored pastels, and began to experiment with different emulsions and fixatives. A sensitive colorist, he varied his color combinations, exploiting the entire color spectrum.

According to friends and colleagues who knew him, Stevens was a man totally devoted to his art. He always had a following, but sales were slow during the Great Depression, and then became worse with the onset of World War II. Whether objective, non-objective, or in between, Stevens' work resonates with a deep and abiding love and respect for nature.

—For annotation see the exhibition pamphlet from which this article is adapted.

