

HAPPY NEW YEAR

# Chestnut Hill Local

Philadelphia PA

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## An old Philadelphia master gets a new look at Woodmere exhibit

by Mark D. Mitchell



A new exhibition, now open at Chestnut Hill's Woodmere Art Museum, offers a new perspective on one of the Philadelphia region's own "old masters," the painter John Folinsbee.

A celebrated landscape painter of the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Folinsbee spent much of his career in New Hope. Based on his place of residence, Folinsbee is largely – and inaccurately – associated with New Hope Impressionism, an oversimplification that the current exhibition, "John Folinsbee and American Modernism," definitively corrects.

Curated by Kirsten Jensen, director of the Folinsbee catalogue raisonné project, the exhibition offers an insightful selection of works drawn almost entirely from private collections and the privately administered Folinsbee Art Trust.

These rarely-seen paintings include recent rediscoveries made during Jensen's extensive research as well as prize-winning masterworks that were widely published and exhibited during Folinsbee's lifetime but have largely been out of sight since his death in 1972.

Folinsbee's move to New Hope in 1916 was both a blessing and a curse, and so it remains. The artist had been wheelchair-bound since a childhood bout with polio and doubtless enjoyed the area's ready access to scenery along the banks of the Delaware as well as the company of the many other artists he encountered there.

In the eyes of his contemporaries as well as of art historians, however, that move irreversibly aligned him with the stylistically conservative New Hope Impressionists. "John Folinsbee and American Modernism" suggests a new context for Folinsbee's experience there, however, associating him preliminarily with a younger, more forward-looking generation of artists active in New Hope that became known as "the Independents." As Jensen points out in the catalogue, there remains much to be learned about the artists of that group and Folinsbee's relationships with them.

The installation sets out pre-New Hope with Folinsbee's beginnings in a quasi-Impressionist aesthetic – witness his fabulous "Poughkeepsie Bridge" (1913/14) with its Monet-like scene of modern industry in harmony with nature. As Jensen points out, however, the painting also signaled a shift, as Folinsbee here introduced a new style of squared brushwork that led him away from such Impressionist aesthetics, even as they persist in the painting's overall effect. The "tonal" Impressionism that Folinsbee had learned as a young man in Connecticut – another great regional bastion of Impressionist-inspired practice in America – did not stay particularly long in his art and was largely eclipsed by the mid-1920s.

The exhibition's keynote is Folinsbee's powerful "Trenton Platform" (1929), which shows a sweep of train tracks racing into the distance overlooked by a set of gritty urban houses. Presented in a dark, limited palette, the painting has a striking force of design and modeling. The yellow signal lights along the tracks demand caution, but also seem to radiate meaning and elusive symbolism.

We admire shapes of the blocky composition, but also the remarkable echoes, such as the contour of platform's eave that loosely echoes the houses' interconnected rooflines across the expanse of sky. Jensen describes this kind of effect as an interest in creating "interior space" – whatever you want to call it, it is compelling.

Much emphasis in the exhibition is placed on Folinsbee's relationship with the art of the French painter Paul Cézanne, including several works that closely mimic Cézanne's example. Folinsbee's attention to a "constructive" style of painting is framed as the legacy of Cézanne's technique, as is the Folinsbee family's 1926 trip to France to travel and paint in Cézanne's footsteps. Folinsbee's devotion to realism would balance out his more abstract stylistic interests. The complexity of that exchange is beautifully documented in Folinsbee's several quarry scenes, with their planar cliffs jutting up through space.

As Jensen effectively asserts and the paintings bear out, Folinsbee's art maintains an expressive depth that has hitherto gained little recognition. In "Night" (1949), for example, which is one of the show's stars, an eerie town square centered on an old cannon stands empty beneath a tumultuous sky. As the crescendo of a dramatic sweep of late career works, "Night" is an inspired choice that leaves the visitor incapable of contradicting the assertion that Folinsbee was no mere Impressionist.

One of the great and seasonally appropriate delights of the exhibition is its winter scenes. The color in Folinsbee's snow and ice, filling in the spaces among his barges and buildings, softens his industrial scenes, the subjects for which he was best known. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Folinsbee was not motivated to treat modern social injustice or inequality in his work. Instead, he concentrated on the character of his landscapes and the life that filled them. The lushness of his snow flattered the artist's dynamic use of paint as well as his Pennsylvania subjects.

"John Folinsbee and American Modernism" provides an abundance of fresh perspective and useful information for longstanding admirers of the artist's work and newcomers alike. It is not to be missed. Interpretively, in addition to the thoughtful wall texts, the presentation includes the voices of friends, family, and scholars on numerous Acoustiguide stops that are easily accessed by cell phone. And the exhibition's catalogue provides a lasting record of the show's contributions.

The exhibition's installation in the Woodmere's main gallery highlights recent refurbishments made since the appointment of the Museum's new director, Bill Valerio. Installed on both the gallery's main floor and balcony, the exhibition is appropriately scaled to provide each work with breathing room so that it can be given adequate time and attention without spending the day. The paintings included are each representative of a key dimension of the artist's multi-faceted development, with single works standing in for larger trends in his career.

"John Folinsbee and American Modernism" is not the artist's first appearance at the Woodmere. The museum bought Folinsbee's "Shag Rock" for its permanent collection from a group exhibition held there in 1956, and he later received two prizes from the museum in 1961. The present exhibition validates those early accolades for a distinguished painter of our area and also opens a new chapter in the appreciation of his work.

*"John Folinsbee and American Modernism" runs through March 6, 2011. For hours and admission information, visit [www.woodmereartmuseum.org](http://www.woodmereartmuseum.org).*

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