

Marvin Cone: A Personal Perspective

By John Hallmark Neff

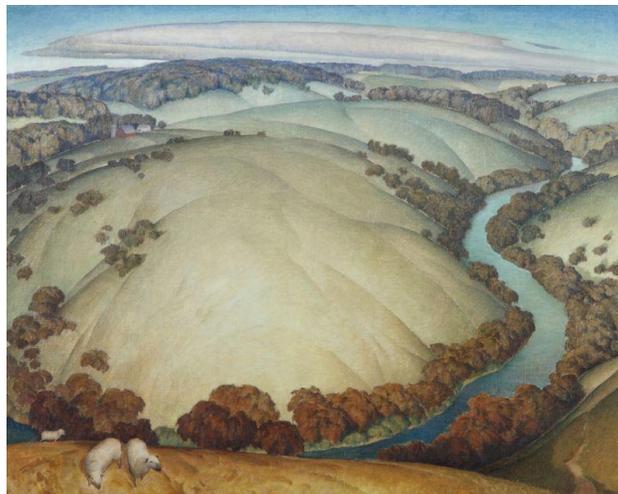
Marvin Cone (1891-1965) was a presence when I was growing up in Cedar Rapids, respected, private, focused on his family and his painting. As a teenager I visited him once in the late 1950s at his home at 1721 5th Avenue where he famously painted in a four by four foot square area of the small living room. I was careful not to stay too long. As kind and encouraging as he was to young people (and everyone else it seems), I sensed he was anxious to return to painting, standing at his easel, making the most of the afternoon's light. Not until 1960, when he retired from Coe College after 41 years of teaching, was he able to paint full time. As happened earlier in his career, this opportunity was underwritten by a group of friends.¹

For a young person discovering the arts, that kind of even brief personal connection was a gift: to see that artists are real people, have lives, families, a good sense of humor, even create paintings.

Arts education was then a jewel in the 1950s in the Cedar Rapids Public Schools under Archie Bauman. Great teachers provided us with opportunities to become acquainted with artists beyond our immediate experience. I remember a documentary film with Alexander Calder in his studio, images of swirling scarlet leaves intercut with the bright red elements of his revolving mobiles. Another segment presented a young poet in a sailor striped shirt, Richard Wilbur, and his young daughter, whom I met not long after in Connecticut: artists and people, just like Marvin Cone.

¹ Thanks to Sean Ulmer for the invitation to revisit Marvin Cone and his work; to Robert and Joan Kocher, friends of the artist at Coe College for the last five years of his life, for responding to my questions with their remembrances; Sue Taylor, Grant Wood and Hans Bellmer scholar for fielding a question while on sabbatical; Leslie Wright; Terri Elaine Strug; and Stefanie Kohn, of The National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids for fielding an out of the blue query concerning two artists, Marvin Cone and Grant Wood, who rarely if ever appear in their archives.

The Public Library had a good section of art books on many cultures that I borrowed for weeks. I also remember one summer's Saturday morning art classes there up on the third floor, climbing the 5th Street stairs past a figure painting by Conger Metcalf who'd studied with Cone and gone to Boston. His work was nothing like his teacher's - a credit to them both. Once an adult student told of discovering an early Grant Wood in its frame at the Salvation Army Store on First Street, N. E. This seemed impossible - an overlooked Grant Wood less than twenty years after his death. But though certainly not forgotten (Grant Wood Elementary School, which I attended, opened in 1951, graced with a suite of his prints lining the library walls, its school colors green and yellow, like corn), his work was not as esteemed as it would be again. My father had told me stories about Wood from the early 1920s when he was in one of the artist's art classes at McKinley High School. He showed me a fragment he'd kept of a painted border made under Wood's supervision. Such episodes made Wood, who died two years before I was born, feel less distant, still part of the late 1950s cultural landscape and mythology of Cedar Rapids. Marvin Cone, however, was still painting.



Marvin Cone, *River Bend No. 5*, 1938

Caught up later in college and graduate school in my own enthusiasms for 19th and 20th century European art, perhaps taking the legacy of Grant Wood and Marvin Cone for granted, I nevertheless felt an affinity for their work, linked to it by family and friends of friends, displayed in homes, schools, and elsewhere in the community. A favorite

memory is of Cone's fine *River Bend* paintings (*River Bend #4* from 1938) that hung for years over the fireplace mantle at the Cedar Rapids Country Club. I came to love that painting, astonished that it was not then on the walls of a museum but simply there, without fanfare, not unlike Marvin Cone.

Over the years since that visit there would be other Marvin Cone moments, seeing his paintings in a gallery or at auction, reacquainting with the Cones in the Museum of Art and the Coe College Library during visits to family in Cedar Rapids. In retrospect, I suppose this regular pilgrimage to see the work of an artist I had actually met, a friend of friends, was a touchstone within a rapidly expanding world for me of other artists, times, and cultures, none of them from Iowa.

Marvin Cone was forthright in his teaching and recorded remarks about his objectives as a man and as an artist. He sought the essentials within his direct experience of nature - "nature" meaning anything he looked at deeply as a point of departure for his art. Later in his studio he carefully pared away details in order to design and execute a painting that, through his process, became an expression of himself. Wary at times or bemused by the evolving modernisms of his European and American contemporaries, Cone was himself remarkably consistent, even as the subject matter, the 'what' that he felt too often interfered with the 'how' of painting, expanded every few years. This upset some patrons who wished he'd paint more clouds or Iowa barns. But Cone painted primarily to challenge himself; and he worked at his own pace.²

Since the impressive trajectory of his work from the 'teens to 1964 can be seen in the detailed catalogue raisonné published in 1990, or on this website, I will not attempt to

² Wood's flower pot and junk assemblages, *Lilies of the Alley* (c. 1925), parody both folk art and Dadaist icons such as Morton Schamberg's notorious pipe fittings in a mitre box sculpture *God* (1917), possibly a collaboration with the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Cone's 1953 *French Horn, Flute and Piccolo* was apparently painted in response to listening to a favorite work of classical music at a Cedar Rapids Symphony concert. As a variation on his contemporary abstractions stemming from the interior architecture of vacant rooms (but with an allusive title), Cone's painting bears little relationship to the more radical synesthetic paintings of F. Kupka and Wassily Kandinsky some forty years earlier who were attempting to visualize sound, evoking, in turn, paintings made after the music of Richard Wagner in Theosophist publications such as *Thought Forms* (1901) by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater. Cone's work is neither a parody nor a serious critique of synesthesia but rather a gentle nod to its conventions.

summarize it here.³ Instead I'd like to comment on several paintings by Cone that continue to amaze, confuse, and even disturb me, or have over time become more essential to my understanding of his achievement.

Nor will I attempt to chronicle the long friendship with Grant Wood which others have done well and at length except to clarify briefly that although they shared many things in common, and are frequently discussed together, they were distinctly different artists and men whose work and careers underscored each individual.

Cone, for instance, had taken his college and art school degrees and become a professor, painting when he could; Wood, however, was engaged in making a living from art at an early age. A farm boy and jack of all trades who could make or fix most anything, Wood applied his skills to advising clients on the decoration and furnishing of their homes. His paintings such as *American Gothic* (1930) made him a famous and often controversial figure, as well as a sought after illustrator of books and a printmaker with national distribution.

Cone and Wood shared early training in design. Cone, as Wood, was a skilled cartoonist and illustrator early on; but as a professor teaching French and both painting and drawing as well as "art orientation" (art appreciation) four and a half days and four nights a week, Cone decided that he must direct his time and energy to family and to oil painting.⁴

Even so his easel paintings are modest in size if not in scale and rarely exceeded 30 x 40 inches; even his few triptychs are not much larger. Unlike Wood, he painted no

³ Cone painted some watercolors and gouaches (most early, or studies for oils), but not many, and we have too few of his masterful drawings. (See Joseph S. Czestochowski, *Marvin D. Cone and Grant Wood, An American Perspective* (Cedar rapids: Cedar Rapids Art Association, 1990), pp. 94-109 for the most extensive illustrations of Cone's works on paper). He did several small relief sculptures of family, but essentially made no prints. See Joseph S. Czestochowski, *Marvin D. Cone, Art As Self-Portrait* (Cedar Rapids: Cedar Rapids Art Association, 1990), still the definitive work on Cone.

⁴ Robert Kocher explained that Cone arranged his heavy teaching schedule so that his day classes ended at 2 p.m., allowing him the rest of the afternoon to work in natural light.

murals nor designed stained glass windows. I assume these self-imposed parameters reflected his preference to work at home undisturbed.

Cone also preferred to paint with a limited number of colors on his palette, applying their endless mixtures in successive thin layers of pigment using small brushes of good quality: he wanted his paintings to endure.⁵ Friends marveled that he painted in the family living room without incident. His workmanlike approach carried over to his handmade frames, each painted and rubbed to complement a specific painting. When his paintings were sent off to exhibitions or sold, Cone usually signed them, in small capital block letters of great precision in colors and locations to fit the overall design. Rarely, however, did he inscribe the dates.

Then, as now, I am struck by the admirable simplicity and modesty of it all - his focus, concentration, and the dedication to his art. As I learned later, he had a clear plan for his life in order to make his painting possible. A believer in good design in all things, seeing there the difference between success and failure, Cone imparted his “guidance” to his students (a term he preferred to “teaching”) through his own example: prioritizing, self-discipline, and keeping sight of larger issues, while freely exercising his wry skepticism and sense of humor, curiosity, and imagination.

Marvin Cone’s paintings are, of course, much more complex and even problematic than I first discerned over fifty years ago. Formally, his compositions and use of color are deceptively simple, not least in the unexpected nuances of color and tone, juxtaposing both closely related and discordant hues that surprise and reward our attention. Nor are the implied narratives of his paintings all quite so straightforward, comfortable, and art-for-art’s sake removed from the wider society in which he lived and worked.

⁵Cone felt Grant Wood’s technique the worst he’d ever seen, combining high gloss, Damar varnish, and sometimes drying on a hot air register. (From Robert Kocher, July 27, 2012). The unequal drying of layers led to serious cracking. See *Spring In The Country*, 1941, illustrated in Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood, The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 61 for one example.

Although it is Grant Wood, for example, who is known for his engagement with social issues, it is surely no coincidence that in the late 1930s and early 1940s, years of worldwide depression and uneasy peace leading up to Pearl Harbor, Cone painted several important clouds - in - landscapes compositions in which his usual colorful panoramic scenes of tranquil Iowa summer afternoons are displaced by dark and threatening skies, paintings with titles such as *Thunderhead(s)* (1938-39 and 1943), *Prairie Storm* (1940) or *Storm Clouds Over Church* (1943), all traditional metaphors for social or spiritual unrest.



Marvin Cone, *Storm Clouds over Church*, 1943

In 1938-39 Cone also painted *Habitation*, first in what became a long series of interiors of seemingly vacant rooms. Some are wide-angle in scale and format, others are vertical and close up. All of them, however, are bare of furniture but with doors (and prominent doorknobs) closed, partially open, or in combination casting mysterious intersecting shadows. Steep, narrow staircases twist upward out of sight. Many of Cone's empty rooms, however, are in fact occupied, disrupted by unsettling, if whimsical portraits of a glaring "Uncle Ben" or other "family" portraits, many poorly lit and askew. In *Night Prowler* (1941), a large dark cat pauses by an ascending staircase. And in other variations, Cone interjects resident spirits - the deceased, but not departed - as

distinctly human shades or hovering outlines visible against darker walls, but only one per painting, each alone.



Marvin Cone, *It Happened Here*, 1948

Such paintings as *This Was the Room* (1945), *Dear Departed* (1946), *Strange Vigil* (1946), *The Watcher* (1947), *It Happened Here* (1948), and Cone's 1938-39 series of *Stone Fruit* remind us that Cone (and Wood) were fascinated by cemeteries, coming of age during the waning years of the Victorian obsession with death and the afterlife. Cone redirected this into a delight in ghost lore and avid reading of detective and mystery fiction. Nevertheless, his silent rooms seem possessed. I've imagined Steven King owning one, so well do these Cones evoke the uncanny, a sense of menace in the familiar: *Habitation*, with suspicious dark puddles oozing from under the baseboard, would be perfect.

Cone thought highly of these stark interiors with their shifting planes of light and shadow. It seems that Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art in New York was thinking of them, too, when she considered Cone for inclusion in her *Americans 1943: Realists and Magic-Realists* exhibition.⁶

⁶ See Czestochowski, op. cit., p. 46, as 1942 in the chronology. Cone was considered but not included in Miller's exhibition of 14 artists of the past and 28 contemporary artists practicing 'realisms of two kinds, that which we see in nature, and that realism of the imagination.' (*Americans 1943: Realists and Magic-Realists*, Feb. 10 - March 21, 1943)

On the whole, however, Cone's work is less theatrical than the haunted interiors, more measured, even slow to reveal itself; in other words, easier to scan than to see. His paintings demand those five minutes of our attention that Cone urged his students to give to any painting, but especially to those they didn't like or were ready to pass by.

For example, we can see his subtle mind at play in the details of two paintings depicting the same corner pharmacy, both viewed looking down from a second story window across the street, painted eight years apart: *Before the Window* (1930-1931) and *Two for Fifty-Five* (1938-1939). Cone's earlier version of the red and white sign reads "Two for Fifty-One ¢." In the later painting, *Two for Fifty-Five*, Cone shifts our attention to the same but updated sign by using it for his title. Has Cone thereby slipped in a subtle reference to inflation, an indirect social critique? Subtle, because the two paintings were never exhibited together, or even juxtaposed unless at home. Was it then at most a private joke for Cone and his friends, or simply coincidence?



Marvin Cone, *Before the Window*, 1930-1931

Returning to *Before the Window*, this time far to the left of the impressive pigeon, in the wedge of sunlit sidewalk below the rippling curtain, we see the artist demonstrating how our sense of vision attempts to respond to the simultaneous, conflicting demands of bright light and shadow. He differentiates, for instance, the partial silhouettes of pedestrians that merge seamlessly into their own sharp cast shadows. To their

immediate right, however, he ups the stakes. Here a man is bisected by bright sunshine and deep shade as he walks from one into the other. Perceptually, this represents a challenge nearly impossible for our sight - and most cameras - to resolve: to see the man whole, what with our eyes straining open to register the darks and squinting down to cut through the glare. Cone's image renders both effects at once, but resolved as pigment on canvas. This man carries under his arm a large gray rectangle that we read as 'white' in the shadow: is it a canvas? Is this man an artist and if so, could it be a self-portrait, embedded in the pattern? In such details Cone keeps us engaged, even if we are at first unaware of what he's done and how.

These two paintings exemplify his process: close observation, analysis, technique subordinate to the overall design, a motif reconsidered, though not repeated, as we see in *Two for Fifty-Five*. Cone presents the same location, but it is a completely different painting resulting from new decisions and details: sunlight is now dim, diffused by rain and watery reflections. Its mood is reinforced by his muted palette of colors tinged brown and gray, altogether a more sober time and mood.

Although trained in a realist tradition, a representational artist, Marvin Cone was aware of the larger art world beyond regional realism. As with many others, he gradually (and belatedly) evolved into an abstract artist over the last fifteen years of his life. These late works continue to grow in my esteem.

These later paintings seem to fall into at least two categories: the explicitly geometric, some featuring overlapping rectangles such as *Shapes on Shapes No. 2* (1957), and others composed of colored rectangles abutted flush to the surface like *Blue, Gray, and Coral* (1964). Comparatively few in number are another group such as *Golden Web* (1963) that suggests more intimate evocations of nature or natural processes. Delicate, immaterial, even mystical, they pulse with pictorial energy.⁷

⁷ See also Cone's *Experiment with Curves No. 2*, (Alternative title, *A Wiggly Light*), 1963, illustrated in Joseph Czestochowski, *Marvin D. Cone and Grant Wood, An American Tradition*, p. 92. According to Robert and Joan Kocher, the irregular curved shapes against a darker background were prompted by an



Marvin Cone, *Blue, Gray and Coral*, 1964

Intermixed with these two groups are singular paintings that clearly mediate between Cone's major earlier themes, such as the room and stair paintings that are aptly seen as bridges to his late abstractions.⁸ I understand these special paintings as Cone's means to remind himself - and his viewers - of the strong continuities that underlie his late work, sometimes literally. For instance, isn't that Golden Object in Cone's *Golden Object Suspended* (1959), one of his Iowa barns in silhouette, hiding in plain sight? Are the angled glowing lines drawn from his interior doors and staircases? Even the dark background seems to be a close-valued pattern of Cone clouds?

My four favorite Cones are *Enigma* (1961), *Davis' Dummy* (1938), *Inner Light* (1950) and *Pattern of Rectangles* (1957), superlative paintings that I see whenever possible. In *Enigma* I perceive an elegant visual pun, literally as "riddle," something hidden to be unraveled, decoded. (See *In Jugular Vein*, a still life from 1931 to confirm that Cone was not averse to puns, even bad ones). For although a vertical painting, *Enigma* suggests that Cone radically transformed his signature horizontal landscapes, here reduced to contoured shapes without details or natural color, and rotated vertically 90 degrees, superimposed on one another with small protruding elements marking the layers like tabs on file folders. The right and left sides of these now vertical "landscapes,"

aerial view of a river viewed by Cone on an airline flight to Washington, D.C. to see his new grandson ca. 1961.

⁸ As in Czestochowski, 1990, p. 37.

seamlessly merge down their centers, echo their respective “horizons” across the canvas to either side.



Marvin Cone, *Enigma*, 1961

Cone, of course, designed abstract armatures to organize all his paintings, whatever their subject, and believed in the abstract underpinnings of reality, of geometries micro and macro invisible to the unaided eye. So *Enigma* is different more in degree than kind from Cone's other late paintings, paintings that suggest he was increasingly preoccupied with questions of existence. What better example than *Enigma*, an abstract painting transforming a montage of reoriented countrysides and probably cityscapes as well, turned inside out, into an illusion of an abstract painting? Cone's title and forms familiar from earlier paintings help us decipher what is, in fact, not such an enigma after all. I like to think of it as another act of guidance to encourage those who think they cannot access modern art. Perhaps *Enigma* was also a kind of summation of his own journey as a painter as he confronted his own mortality?

To conclude this personal reconsideration of Marvin Cone in 2012, what might be useful areas for further research? From many, I offer two suggestions.

First, see him in a broader context, recognizing that his training, travels, and intellect encompassed more than his beloved Iowa and the Midwest. If his work didn't reflect the same path of Modernism that we identify with advanced painting in his contemporaries such as Arthur Dove (1880-1946) or Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), it's not that he was unaware of them. He made different decisions, had a different temperament, different ambitions. It would be useful, however, to clarify possible personal connections to the European, Mexican, as well as the American avant-garde. We know, for example, that Marvin Cone admired British artist Ben Nicholson (1894-1982) whose spare landscapes and strict geometric abstractions are only loosely like his own, and the Precisionist paintings of Charles Sheeler (1883-1965). He let us know that he was well aware of Picasso and that he had opinions.⁹ So far, however, there seems to be no evidence of a Czech (or other) avant-garde visual arts counterpart in Cedar Rapids to the presence of Anton Dvorak in nearby Spillville in 1893 writing his *New World Symphony*.¹⁰

⁹ *The Picasso Number*, dated 1938-1939 in Czestochowski, 1990, # 348, p. 187, though not illustrated. According to Kocher this painting includes in the background an issue of *Time Magazine* featuring Pablo Picasso on the cover. I don't recall ever seeing this painting. The Picasso cover in question appeared on February 13, 1939, suggesting Cone either modified a work in progress to include the image, or that it should be dated to 1939 alone. It is listed 15th of 15 paintings exhibited just three weeks later, March 4 - 20, 1939, at Cornell College in nearby Mount Vernon, Iowa. Cone included it in three other exhibitions that year, suggesting to me that he was aware of how its title and associations added another dimension to the range of work on display. Cone's use of overlapping diagonal planes and prismatic light effects should also be compared to the cubist-inspired paintings of German-American painter Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956), who, in addition to being a significant cartoonist and photographer, carved and painted wooden cities, trains, and figures for his children. See Cone's fanciful carved castle, *Houses that Jack Built* (1928), from the nursery stores of Mother Goose, illustrated in Czestochowski, 1990, p. 75. Cone often uncrated works of art arriving for the Cedar Rapids collectors Owen and Leone Elliott, whose major collection was given to the University of Iowa Art Museum in 1968. Among works of interest with regard to Marvin Cone are Picasso's *Flower Vase on a Table* (1942) with its structure of angles and vectors, acquired in 1956, and one of Feininger's best paintings, *In a Village Near Paris (Street in Paris, Pink Sky)* of 1909, acquired in 1959. Both can be seen on the University of Iowa Art Museum website. This Feininger bears comparison with Cone's later city paintings and is of particular interest not only because Cone undoubtedly knew it personally, but because its French subject is similar to buildings Cone had painted on his 1920 and 1929 trips to France.

¹⁰ According to Stefanie Kohn, (telephone call July 27, 2012), Wood's and Cone's names do not appear in the archives of The National Czech Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids, suggesting, she says, two different worlds, East Side and West Side of the city. Nor did the Czech community collect art, she says, it being solid working-class with more of an interest in folk art and glass.

Second - and related - understand Cone's relation to caricature and social commentary. John Sloan, Everett Shinn, George Bellows, Edward Hopper, to name just a few, all had prominent careers as illustrators before succeeding as painters. The crowds in the famous boxing and Billy Sunday paintings and prints by Bellows (1892-1925), for example, are rife with faces comparable to those in *Side Show* (1935) and *Carnival Graces* (1943) and similar Cone genre scenes. (Cone's faces are more drawn than painted, unlike Bellows).

Miguel Covarrubias (1904 -1957), precocious Mexican artist, dance impresario, Mezzo-American anthropologist, and illustrator, is another comparison. His celebrity and ethnic caricatures, include dancers and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance, appeared widely in *Vanity Fair* and other publications. Furthermore, Covarrubias is also a link to Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), author, critic, photographer, synonymous with the New York avant-garde, who was one of the first to recognize and promote the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.¹¹ Van Vechten, whose family commissioned portraits by Grant Wood and bought work by Cone, famously fled Cedar Rapids and was, apparently, a non-factor in the city's cultural life. If so, then how ironic is the absence of Van Vechten's cosmopolitan perspective given Cone's awkward and uncomfortable circus and side-show paintings with their black performers? Van Vechten's legacy in Cedar Rapids, if any, would be important to pin down.

In sum, Cone's work deserves and demands to be studied with new eyes by new generations, the better to understand and appreciate it in a context wider than perhaps even he knew.

All Images © Estate of Marvin Cone

¹¹ Covarrubias introduced Van Vechten to the then new 35mm camera, facilitating Van Vechten's later career as portraitist and documentarian of the leading artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

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