WORK STANDING UP

THE LIFE AND ART OF PAUL FONTAINE

Work Standing Up, and Dad's Other Lessons for Success

Claudia Fontaine Chidester

My father, Paul Fontaine, was a painter, but he was nothing like the stereotypical image of an artist as isolated, disorganized, impoverished, and impractical. His life and art were marked by the years of the Great Depression, the harshness of war, the challenging but invigorating life of an expatriate—in countries where he had to learn, at least minimally, the language—and the unending responsibility of being a father to three daughters, all while working to establish his career. His experiences taught him lessons about the best way to live, and we children experienced, in part, the outcomes firsthand. In what follows, I have used some of his lessons as mileposts for the journey his life took; the dates indicate roughly when the idea was introduced.

OPPOSITE
6. Paul and Claudia, Austin, Texas, c.1995.

1913
Grow up Speaking a Foreign Language

My dad had a vivid physical presence, set off by an awesome laugh and a thick New England accent. He had bushy eyebrows that shaded his baby blues better even than his floppy tennis hat; and his right forearm, twice the size of his left from playing tennis, was covered with a thick layer of blond hair—so thick that mosquitoes never got through. In the evening, he would sit with his feet up, reading aloud magazine articles he thought were interesting. He would later repeat what he learned to anyone who would listen, whether in a trailer park or his office. He asked questions from and complimented perfect strangers and joked about nearly everything. To me, he was fearless, but I know he worried a great deal.

Paul Emile Antoine Fontaine was from Worcester, Massachusetts, pronounced *wistah,* a city renowned for its unique accent. Imagine the Kennedy accent, but draw out the *ah*'s just a little more and put a step into the last syllable of the sentence, as if you were snapping a fishing line or asking an abrupt question.

Dad was born to French-Canadian Americans, Elzear Hermenegilde Fontaine and Mary Adwilda LaPlante, endearingly known as Pepe and Mimi, two humble, eighth-grade-educated French Catholics. His father spoke exclusively French at home in Cedar Falls, Rhode Island, where there was large population of French-Canadians. In spite of strong family ties, Pepe made his way west, to Worcester, in the early 1900s.

Mimi, a diminutive redhead, was born in Worcester to a seamstress and a lumberjack. Her father abandoned her mother and her and two brothers for unknown reasons. He might have been killed while felling a sixty-foot pine and word just never reached the family, but the results were the same: Mimi's mother could not care for the children by herself, so she temporarily handed them over to a group of nuns who ran an orphanage near Montreal. Those weren't good times for the LaPlante siblings—Mimi's brother nearly died from malnutrition and exposure. In time their mother started working as a seamstress and keeping a boardinghouse, and so was able to get her children back.

Pepe, a newcomer in the city, lived at the LaPlante boardinghouse, where Mimi played piano in the afternoons. For added entertainment, Pepe would come down from his room to sing while she played, and so the romance began. Pepe started to pursue a profession to support a family; an enterprising young man with some carpentry skills, he became an undertaker.

7. *Right to left*: Four generations of French-Canadian lineage: Great Grandmother Rocheleau, Grandmother Fontaine, Elzear Fontaine (Pepe), and Paul Fontaine, c. 1916.

There was steady business in taking care of the dead, and it served the family well into the Depression. Unlike other services, people always paid for burials. Three handsome boys were born, and even as each pursued his own path and passion, they were bound by the common cultural bond of the French language, learned from their parents.

Worcester, like many East Coast cities, was built by immigrants from many different cultures. There were sections of the city, wards, for French-Canadians, the Irish, Italians, Poles, Armenians, and other eastern Europeans. Dad's best friend, an Armenian named Leon Hovsepian, taught Dad about an entirely different set of cultural mores, unfamiliar food, and a tragic history. He heard firsthand about the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks, since Leon's parents escaped it to come to the States. In Worcester, it was common and expected for families to be respectful and tolerant of the linguistic and other differences of their neighbors, although Dad mentioned most all the boys knew how to box.

Speaking French served Dad well later in life, even with the guttural French-Canadian accent of Worcester. He enjoyed going into Parisian bookstores and negotiating a good price for books such as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and others banned in the United States. He could communicate directly with artists who spoke only French and German. He could chat with our neighbors when we camped on the French Riviera. He lacked the classic Parisian lilting rhythm, but wherever he went, his ability to adapt and to endear himself to friends with his knowledge of a European language and European customs opened doors and opportunities. Though the son of an undertaker, he came across as someone who had had a privileged education.

1932

Have a Father Whose Habits You Disdain

Pepe was a dandy. His handsome, slight build and dark complexion gave him the look of an accountant more than an undertaker. He bought a new car every year, and he wore only tailored suits. His profession required him to look respectable in order to reassure grieving widows of his soundness as a person and a businessman, but Dad was furious when he learned that the $30 monthly salary he was sending home to help the family was being squandered on nonessentials. He and hundreds of other artists had jobs with the Civilian Conservation Corps, a federal program to keep citizens employed during the Depression, and he sent his pay home to help with his brother's school tuition. When he learned that the money had been spent on a new car instead, he stopped sending any more home.

Dad felt disdain for the Catholic Church. His family's house was across the street from the French Catholic church on Hamilton Street, with a good view of the priests' activities. He marveled at how they drove big cars, often with golf clubs in the rear seat. The Fontaines could hear the boisterous laughter of boozy partygoers at the rectory, even during Prohibition. Somehow the priests had access to a "sanctified" supply of alcohol.

Mimi often recounted to the children the abuses she and her siblings had suffered at the hands of the nuns in the orphanage in Montreal. "We could smell the meat cooking but were only served porridge," she would tell them, instilling in Dad a deep distrust of organized religion that was confirmed by what he saw across the street. His mother's stories most likely lay behind one of his final works at Yale, which helped earn him a yearlong traveling scholarship.

8. CCC camps, c. 1935. Watercolor, 14 x 21 in. (35.56 x 53.34 cm). Collection Hovsepian, Worcester, Massachusetts.

OPPOSITE

9. *Fantasy..influenced by false prophets,*1940. Egg tempera on gesso panel. Location of painting unknown.

1938

Know What You Want to Do by Fifteen and You'll Find a Way to Make Money at it

When I was sixteen, my father and I were sitting around the table one afternoon. I recall vividly his answer to my remark that a new boyfriend had some romantic notion about taking care of a lighthouse on the coast. "So, he wants to be a light housekeeper?"

Although it was typical of him to turn someone's serious interest into a joke, he went on to explain how he arrived at his own profession. When he was eight, an elderly woman asked him to draw a picture for her. He drew an upside down car, which delighted her, and she enrolled him in the School of the Worcester Art Museum. But more importantly, his favorite uncle, Uncle Arthur LaPlante, who had left school at age nine to help support the family and ended up as a barber, insisted he make up his mind at age fifteen. Arthur wrote him a letter, which he summarized: "If I was willing to make the sacrifice needed to be a painter, all my efforts and thoughts should be directed towards that end." He convinced my father, who already had the romantic idea and only needed a push.[1]

From then on, Dad remained serious about his intended profession and sought out opportunities to paint as many different subjects as possible—one of them being the trains at freight yards. He initially wanted to paint the workers, but the trains ended up being marketable subjects. He recalled in a letter a time when, halfway through a watercolor, the train he was trying to capture on paper began to move. Fortunately, he was being watched by the superintendent of the roundhouse. When he realized Dad's predicament, he told him not to leave and then signaled the engineer to move the cars back and instead move some others. The superintendent bought the painting and then commissioned him to paint a steam engine. Dad wrote, "The following week he wanted to know where the locomotive was to pose." During the summer of 1938 he created paintings for the Boston & Albany Railroad and found his first patron, Mr. Ayres. It was his first realization that he could make money by making art.

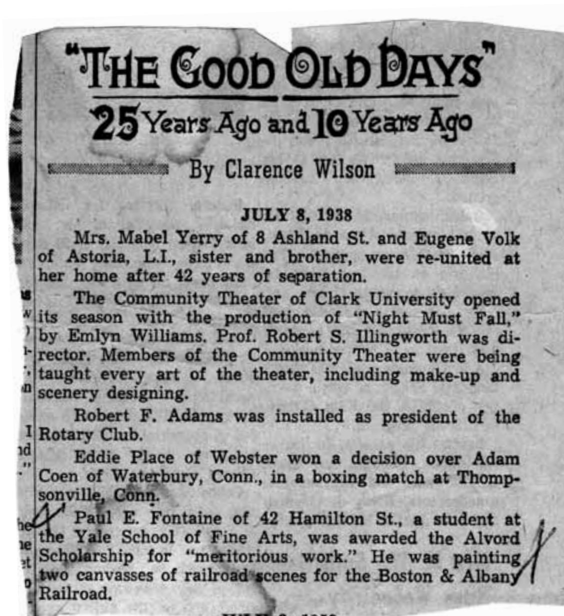
While at the Worcester Art Museum school, he was an assistant to Umberto Romano, who had a commission to paint murals in the Springfield, Massachusetts, post office. Dad received payment for that job as well. The sketches for the murals traveled to the Whitney Museum, in New

York City, and the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington, D.C., in 1936.

By the time he graduated from Yale in 1940, he had earned seven scholarships. The School of the Worcester Art Museum helped pay Dad's tuition at Yale, and Worcester's director, Francis Taylor, had the museum match the school's scholarship. Because of his four years of art training at Worcester, Dad needed only two and a half years at Yale to complete a BFA, normally a five-year program. During the Depression, there really was no way for middle- or working-class students to attend college except by relying on the aid provided by the endowments of established schools. As a rule, those schools that charged the most also had the most to give, so he aimed for the best.

Dad took a variety of odd jobs also: running slides for art classes, providing art critiques at local academies in Waterbury and Cheshire, giving private lessons, and later working for the Burnham Glass Studio of Boston on murals of the life of St. Thomas More for the Cathedral of St. Mary in Peoria, Illinois. He also worked at the New York World's Fair in the summer of 1939.

Between commissions, scholarships, and working multiple jobs, he was finding his own way.



"THE GOOD OLD DAYS"

25 Years Ago and 10 Years Ago

By Clarence Wilson

JULY 8, 1938

Mrs. Mabel Yerry of 8 Ashland St. and Eugene Volk of Astoria, L.I., sister and brother, were re-united at her home after 42 years of separation.

The Community Theater of Clark University opened its season with the production of "Night Must Fall," by Emlyn Williams. Prof. Robert S. Illingworth was director. Members of the Community Theater were being taught every art of the theater, including make-up and scenery designing.

Robert F. Adams was installed as president of the Rotary Club.

Eddie Place of Webster won a decision over Adam Coen of Waterbury, Conn., in a boxing match at Thompsonville, Conn.

Paul E. Fontaine of 42 Hamilton St., a student at the Yale School of Fine Arts, was awarded the Alvord Scholarship for "meritorious work." He was painting two canvasses of railroad scenes for the Boston & Albany Railroad.

10. New England landscape, c. 1935.
Oil on board, 18 x 24 in. (45.72 x 60.96 cm).
Collection Estate of Vera Fontaine.

11. Notice about Fontaine in the *Worcester Evening Gazette*, July 8, 1963.

1940

Marry a Woman Who Is Above Your Standing but Not Your Skills, Who Likes Taking Risks, Who Is as Handsome as You, and Sometimes Smarter

12. Virginia and Paul's wedding, August 24, 1940, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

My mother's story is as complicated as my dad's. They met at the Yale School of the Fine Arts, one of only two units of the university that accepted women; the other was the School of Nursing. Her father worked for her grandfather, who was an artist as well as a banker and owned a printing company in Milwaukee, the Hammersmith Printing Company. Her grandfather took her to Yale and paid her tuition. Her own mother and father were not convinced that art training was the best route for her, but it was everything she wanted to do in life. She had spent most of her summers—when she wasn't riding horses, sailing, or teaching swimming at camp—painting with her grandfather. Mother was trouble for her own mother, a teetotaler Christian Scientist. Mother was open about her smoking and too often was caught with beer on her breath.

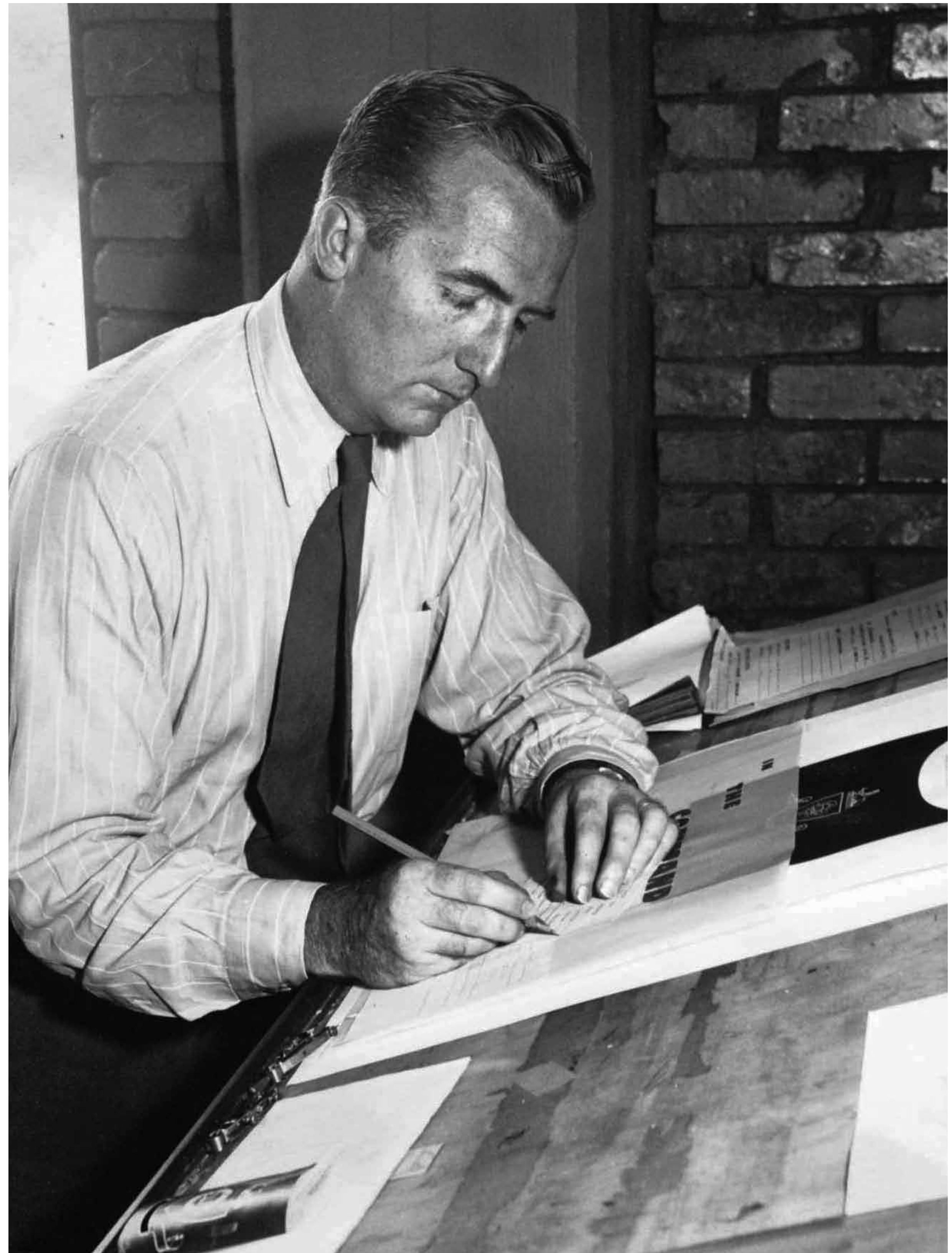
During her first two years at Yale, Mother took full advantage of every opportunity for stimulation. She went down to New York to watch Broadway shows or see exhibitions; she attended outdoor concerts and went to parties, telling her mother with painful honesty how much fun she was having. She overlooked Dad until one day in the library. She had taken all the reference books on Greek architecture, or maybe it was Hans Holbein, and

1950

It’s Not How Much Money You Earn That Makes You Rich, It’s How Much You Keep and What It Can Earn for You

53. “It’s Time to Tax Your Patience Again” cartoon, *Stars and Stripes,* March 14, 1965,11.

54. Fontaine at his first real job, designing publications for the U.S. government in Hoechst, 1950.



Dad was excited that his money would go further as a member of the civil service than if he had a job stateside, mostly because the government took care of so many necessities. You could eat in the chow line and buy food, clothes, and housewares for a fraction of what civilians paid; even our rent was covered. But he really didn't know much about money except not to spend it. It wasn't until Mother suggested he speak to a family friend who knew a bit about investing that he figured out how it worked. Starting in the 1950s, Dad sent nearly a third of his paycheck to Merrill Lynch until he discovered mutual funds and realized that the broker was making more money than he was off his investment. Dad was also an avid follower of Louis Rukeyser, who later hosted the leading financial talk show on public television. Dad read his book *How to Make Money in Wall Street* and tried to never miss a showing of *Wall Street Week*.

Dad read about different investment ideas every day up to his death.

1953

Have a Press Card— It Gives You Free Entrée to Where You Want to Go

Dad was asked in 1953 to take over as art director for the European edition of *Stars and Stripes,* the newspaper for the armed services. We moved from robust Frankfurt to its cultural cousin, Darmstadt. Darmstadt, only thirty minutes away, was charming: a nineteenth-century German country getaway for Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, Darmstadt-born Alexandra, mixed with neighborhoods of Jugendstil architecture, the German version of art nouveau. *Stars and Stripes* had the unique mission of being both a source of news and a voice for soldiers and civilian government employees stationed in Europe. It had journalists and photographers in every major European city, and the paper's AP wire reported on events from the States.

The headquarters for the paper were in Griesheim, outside Darmstadt. The former German airfield came with a swimming pool, apartments converted from barracks, a clay tennis court, and a press club with weekly entertainment. It was our version of a suburban country club. Unlike the base, which housed the soldiers, we were like a small city-state of civilians. At the time, the paper employed hundreds of civilians, both German and American.

What I remember best was Dad's spacious art department: ten or more large drafting tables under enormous windows and the pervasive reek of ink. He worked with Jack Hauser, a man who so resembled Santa Claus in his portliness, deep voice, and readiness to chuckle about almost anything, that I would bound up the stairs to visit any chance I could. No one was quicker to smile and laugh than he, except maybe Dad. The two of them put out the feature section of the paper and drew cartoons for seventeen years.

Being a member of the press had more benefits than just intelligent and jolly camaraderie; it meant free or nearly free entrée to any event, and free was good. He used his press pass at the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Guggenheim. Even if admission was by donation, he used the card. He used it at the French Open. He even tried it at the opera. It worked at the Venice Biennale.

It also meant receiving free publications. We had access to a wide range of magazines—*Reader's Digest,* the *New Yorker, Fortune,* and *Playboy*—as well as free comic books for me. Between *Casper the Friendly Ghost, Archie,* and *Superman,* I amassed a collection of comic books that amounted to twenty knee-high bundles; I neatly tied them together with string and sold them to my German friends just before we left the country. I'm pretty sure Dad shared his *Playboys* with our German neighbor downstairs.

OPPOSITE

55. *Stars and Stripes* identification cards, 1968, 1970.

BELOW

56. *Stars and Stripes* New Year's party. Neil and Marie Doherty in center. Virginia and Paul to right.

RIGHT

57. "Almost everyone reads stripes," *Stars and Stripes* ad.

58. *Stars and Stripes* Art Department, 1958. Jack Hauser discussing the layout of the feature section.

almost everybody reads stripes

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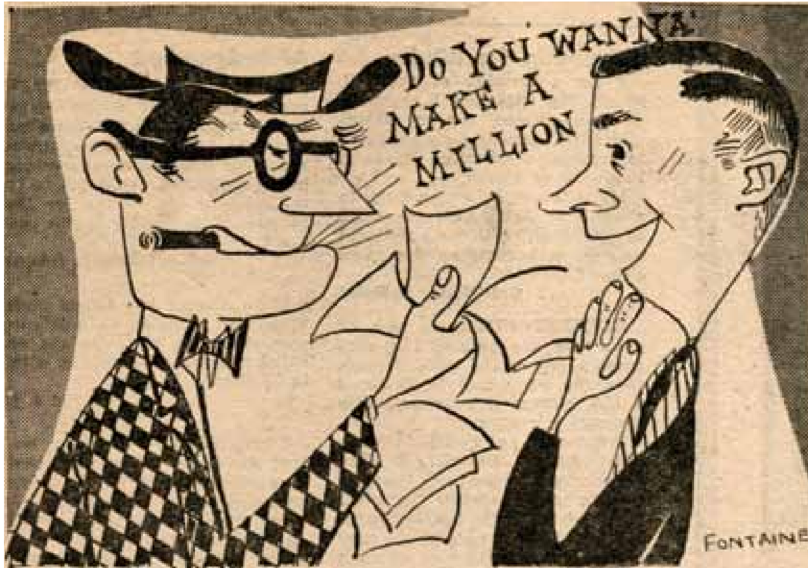


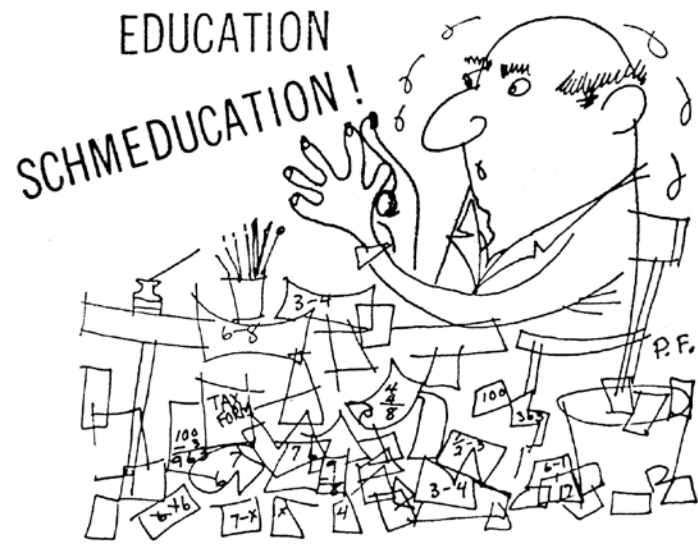
FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

59. "Tell Ya What I'm Gonna Do," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, April 26, 1955, 14.

60. "Hoboes Can Live it Up Now," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, January 10, 1955, 14.

61. "Lorelei: Lure of the Rhine," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, December 29, 1963, 11.

62. "Germany's New Generation," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, October 19, 1963, 12.



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

63. "Education, Schmeducation!," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, October 24, 1962, 14.

64. "Ever See a Blue-faced Booby?," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, January 29, 1963, 11.

65. "Services Study Seasickness," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, February 1, 1955, 14.

66. "Pet Therapy," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, October 8, 1963, 14.

67. *Stars and Stripes* news desk, c.1962. *Back row, from left*: Dexter Freeman, Don Benett, Paul Fontaine (*standing*), George Payette (*center, facing front*).

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

68. Paul and Gigi at the pool for *Stars and Stripes* employees, Griesheim, Germany, c. 1958.

69. Fifth anniversary of Peter Jaeger (*center*) and Emil Batko (*right*), 1967.

70. Evaluating the *Stars and Stripes* Santa coloring contest with the German artist Jürgen Schumann (*right*).

Aug. 28. 61

LUFTPOST
PAR AVION VIA AEREA

Dear Grandmother,
I am having a wonder-
ful time in Ascona,
Swizerland with Carol.
We have been waterskiing
and swimming. We have
been here a week and
it is almost time for us
to go home, so I can have
my birthday party and be
in school on time. The lady we are
staying with is Mrs. Van der Schalk,
a good friend of mother's. Love GiGi

To Mrs. P.W. Ham
N. Stowell Ave.
Milwa

71. Postcards from Fontaine vacations.

1962

Make Friends, Be Friendly, and Have Friends in Every City

Another advantage to being part of the U.S. government overseas is that it paid for travel home every two years. Since Dad listed his home residence as Davis, California, where Mimi lived with our uncle, the U.S. government would pay for our travel across the entire country after we landed on the East Coast.

Our VW bus, packed with camping gear and only a few suitcases, came over on the boat with us. That was before it was cheaper to fly. One year we sailed on the *Queen Mary,* which I have terrifying memories of from holding on as we listed during a storm near the Rock of Gibraltar while my parents, still onshore, were trying to get onto the last boat to the ship. When I was ten, I sneaked into the ship's movie theater, which I wasn't supposed to be in, and saw a horrifying movie: behind the secret doors of a mansion, tarantulas were being trained to come out on demand and kill a target. I never recovered from that, and have been respectful of spiders since.

We would start in New York and stay on Park Avenue at the art-filled home of Dad's former colleague Dan DeLuce, who had been the AP bureau chief in Frankfort, and his wife Alma. We would visit the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and the Metropolitan Museum, and then head to Boston and stay with Dad's former employee Robert Friedmann and his wife, Inez, in Brookline and visit another set of museums. We would slowly work our way across the country, through Chicago, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and San Diego. We stayed with relatives or my parents' chums from college, the war, or *Stripes,* all the way from one coast to the other and back again. Museums were our only form of entertainment. Movies or amusement parks were not on the roster. I cried when we passed Disneyland while Dad yelled in disgust that he wouldn't waste his money on the $5 entry charge.

1964

Work Standing Up, Play Tennis, and Avoid Processed Foods

Dad was a sickly kid, with continual digestion problems. As an adult, he caught the flu every year and hepatitis twice, and suffered from heart disease and a leaky heart valve. Pepe, his father, died at age fifty-two from a massive coronary, and both of Dad's brothers had multiple bypasses in their sixties. Dad managed to delay open-heart surgery until his late seventies. How did he postpone the family fate? He was fanatical about healthy eating, read every health book he could, and exercised. In art school he read *Healthy Bodies* (1936), which emphasized eating raw foods, a concept that provincial French-Canadian cooking hadn't really adopted.

Soft drinks and cheap white bread, though readily available in commissaries, were forbidden in our house. "Poison" is what he ranted at seeing my mother bring them home—to spite him, I think. Then there was Linus Pauling's book on vitamin C, which inspired Dad to concoct drinks of pure ascorbic acid in water, along with a dab of niacin. Then it was yogurt; he made his own. In 1964, the Germans already had yogurt makers. We learned to love yogurt before it was a fad. Mixed with a few tablespoons of honey, it wasn't half bad. Then he read that Far Eastern diets, consisting mostly of rice, contributed to longevity and that Asian cultures had the lowest rates of heart disease in the world. So we had rice days: we each learned how to cook rice in a pressure cooker, how to run cold water on the pressured lid until the steam finally stopped, meaning it was safe to open. We made rice pudding, rice chow mein, rice at every meal. Boy, did we miss noodles.

Except for Mother, we all followed my father's fads, believing in his passion to find the next solution. Mother preferred snails in garlic butter, brains in egg casserole, white asparagus with butter, very fresh (out-of-the-tank fresh) trout, and tongue in raisin sauce. Her relatives all lived into their nineties.

Dad had been instructed in art school to paint standing up, that sitting down was unhealthy. Painting while standing required exertion and energy and made you work faster. Faster painting led to more work, more shows, and more money. At any rate, standing up worked better when painting with water.

ABOVE

72. Fontaine using unusual tools for special effects.

RIGHT

73. Fontaine just coming off the courts.

1970

Be Willing to Live in a Tent When Trying Something New

I spent my youth camping in tents, but living permanently in a tent was a new adventure. In 1969 the European edition of *Stars and Stripes* was reducing its staff. The U.S. Armed Forces in Europe were going through a reduction in force, and circulation revenue was diminishing. Dad's days in Germany were numbered, but he wasn't about to be taken by surprise and forced to return to the States unprepared. At the library he found every book on retiring on a modest income. First he was inspired to move to Maine, because of the low taxes, but then the harsh winters were a problem. He read *The Maple Sugar Book* and thought seriously about becoming a maple sugar farmer, which worried me, since we had been city people our entire lives. Helen and Scott Nearing's romantic description of living close to the land, independent of city demands, attracted Dad but, thankfully, not for too long. Mother kept her mouth shut. They were considering sending me off to boarding school in London while they made the adjustment. I think it was called Badminton, an inappropriate name unless that was an intended profession. The subliminal suggestion that proficiency in the sport was a subset of skills learned there gave me pause. I started imagining what it would be like at thirteen without my parents. With a generous education fund from grandmother Myrtle, my sisters had been to boarding schools: Carol in France and Gigi in Germany. I never got half of the opportunities they did, although I can't say I complained. As the first two children, they had dance lessons, music lessons, and even tennis. The only lesson I ever got was to learn how to sew at the shop belonging to Mother's seamstress. Mother sent off for the school material; I was hopeful that I would get the boarding experience, maybe.

The Maine discussions got weirder and weirder. The seasonal plague of black flies countered the idea of living near the romantic coast. Low taxes seemed to contribute to the poor reputation of the schools. Dad struggled with this vision for a few months, until he discovered Mexico. Was he going through the alphabet, or were books starting with *M* the only ones in the library? Actually, Gigi, having

BELOW

74. "Tips for a More Enjoyable Camping Trip," cartoon, *Stars and Stripes*, April 26, 1959, 11.

RIGHT

75. Richard Severo, "In a Trailer Park, Camaraderie and Peace," *New York Times*, December 19, 1971. Caption: "Paul Fontaine, an artist, has lived in trailer park for a year likes to snack on bananas, he and wife Virginia, stack outside."

75. The Fontaine home for almost three years.
Yuca Trailer Park, Guadalajara, Mexico, c.1970.

just spent two years in Spain, made the suggestion. She thought her Spanish would be useful. Unfortunately, Dad had to relay the harsh news that she would be expected to work and Mexican immigration laws forbade it. The idea still stuck.

Mexico on $5 a Day clinched it. I think Dad got it down to $2.50.

Instead of boarding school, I was sent to live with Carol and her young family, in Erie, Pennsylvania, under the assumption that my parents would be making the initial scouting trip to Mexico midyear and didn't want to interrupt my schooling. Gigi was dropped off in Boston with $500. So instead of a British experience, I got a suburban, middle-American experience, which, for a city kid who was accustomed to taking a streetcar or bus to any place I desired with no supervision, was beyond culture shock. It was prison. Gigi got the city, but Boston's Brahmin culture, with its own constrictions, wasn't any easier for her.

My sister meant no harm and gave me the best home she could. But life in Erie lacked the freedom I was used to. I endured it for twelve months. I watched TV, ate TV dinners, babysat my toddler niece and nephews, rode my bike, and tried to make out in the bushes around the golf course.

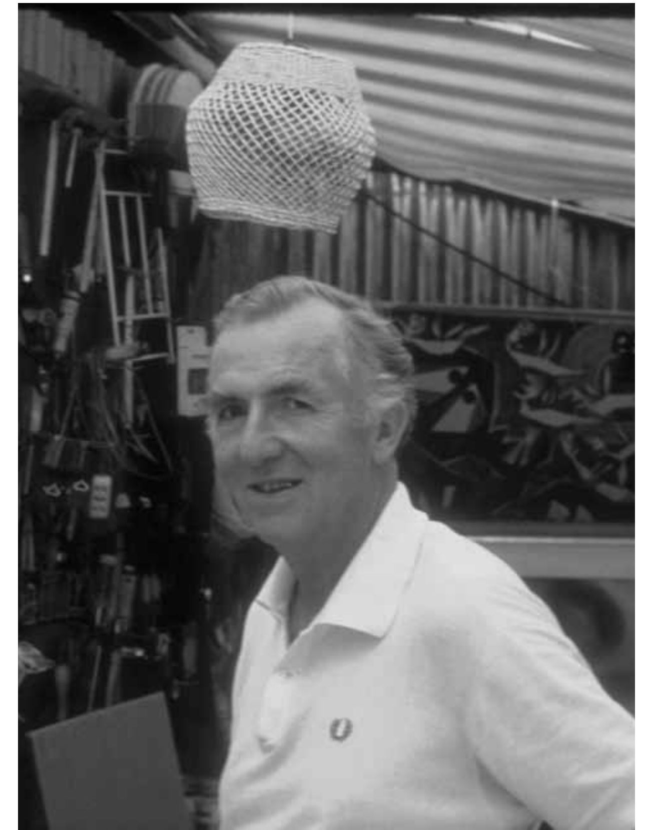
When Mother and Dad finally showed up the following summer to get me, they hadn't in fact been to Mexico yet. Dad had managed to delay retirement for six more months, keeping his income that much longer and giving them time to sell the art collection. We were all going together, and I was first in line.

We arrived in Guadalajara at the Yuca Trailer Park, following the tips in *Sanborn's Guide* for safe traveling in Mexico, just ten days after leaving Pennsylvania.

The weather was nearly perfect. It was dry and 75 degrees year-round. The three of us slept on cots with air mattresses and sleeping bags in the same twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot orange canvas tent that Dad had purchased at least twenty years earlier. That tent had been our vacation home for at least two adventures a year and sometimes an entire summer. Now it would be our home for six months.

The tent was equipped with a porch overhang that was covered on two sides. It made something like a foyer that fit perfectly over the pink-and-white-tiled, ten-foot-by-three-foot patio. This little entryway served as our dining and living room and part of our kitchen, housing our stove and a small table with triangular stools for eating. Our tent was huddled next to the outside wall of the trailer park, which was lousy with bougainvillea spilling down the fourteen-foot wall and partially covering the broken glass and barbed wire along the top. It was cozy. There were carefully placed grassy areas every few feet in the campground. If you had a thirty-six-foot trailer, a grassy knoll came with the patio. Our rent was $30 a month.

In the center of the trailer park was a deep mosaic pool, flanked by an enclosed clubhouse, empty except for card tables and Ping-Pong tables, a washing area, and restrooms with hot showers. The park had over two hundred sites, and most of the winter it was filled with trailers that stayed the season, peppered with a few year-rounders. We became the tenters that lived year-round. We were the only ones who lived in a tent, or later, a shack.



LEFT TO RIGHT
77. Fontaine's first show in Mexico: a watercolor show at the University of Colima, Colima, Mexico, 1971.

78. Fontaine in his studio attached to the shack.

Dad, after six months, was still not ready to move into the city and more permanent housing, but he decided to make one concession. He would trade canvas for tin. One of the thirty-six-foot spots had a semipermanent screened-in tin structure over the porch and its tile patio, which Dad bought from the owner for $150. He then hired a tailor to line the entire inside of this shack with floor-to-ceiling muslin curtains and to cut two curtain doors to break up the six-foot-by-thirty-six foot space into a seating area, a sleeping area for two cots, a kitchen area, and the tiny but separate spot for my cot and clothes. He hired a tentmaker to fashion a studio out of orange-and-green-striped canvas that attached to nearly the full length of our abode. Inside it had a curiously warm and cozy feel from the orange hue. Our place wasn't ordinary or expansive, but nevertheless inviting. My new high school friends enjoyed visiting, out of curiosity if nothing else. Dad contacted his journalist friends, who immediately came down to write a story, and he ended up in the *New York Times.* The brief fame bought him a little more time with Mother, who, except for her daily drowning in vodka, was quite self-controlled.

I was enrolled in a college prep school that had only sixty students, and I was once again free to roam a city on public transportation. We stayed in the larger spot (at $50 a month) for another full year, until Mother finally grew tired of washing dishes with a hose on our grassy knoll—or was it that Dad wanted a real studio?

Becoming an Artist: Paul Fontaine's Early Years

Margaret Stenz

This chapter traces Paul Fontaine's education, from his studies at the School of the Worcester Art Museum and the Yale School of the Fine Arts through his service in World War II and the establishment of his career as a professional artist. A dedicated student, Fontaine won many awards, fellowships, and commissions. Yet, like many artists of his generation, his life and career aspirations were shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. These early years, full of successes and struggles, built the foundation for his career as a professional artist.

OPPOSITE
88. Drawing of man with turban, Worcester Art Museum class, 1934. Pencil, conté, or charcoal on paper, 26 x 19.5 in. (66.0 x 49.5 cm). Private collection.

89. Portrait of Leo Fontaine, c. 1934. Oil on canvas.
Location unknown.

A native of Worcester, Massachusetts, Fontaine showed an intense interest in art at an early age. He began taking art classes at the School of the Worcester Art Museum when he was eight years old, and by the time he graduated from high school he was determined to pursue a career as an artist.[1] Fontaine enrolled full-time at the museum school at age nineteen in 1932, at the height of the Great Depression. The decision showed his commitment to become an artist—enrollment at American art institutions dropped off precipitously during the Depression, since art classes in hard times were seen as a luxury. Fortunately, Fontaine's talent was recognized early on, and he won numerous awards and scholarships that allowed him to attend art school at almost no cost. Very little of Fontaine's work from this early period has survived, but the extant examples show a young artist of great promise. Around 1934, he completed sensitively executed oil portraits of his younger brothers, Leo (fig. 89) and Russell (fig. 90). The three-quarter-length portrait of Leo, who is dressed for a game of tennis and carries a racket and a ball, is a study in blue: the dark blue tennis

pants and light blue sweater, along with a softer blue background, beautifully complement Leo's blond hair and blue eyes.

Surrounded by the Worcester Art Museum's rich collection of American masters of watercolor, Fontaine early on specialized in the medium. He later recalled that the outstanding paintings at Worcester were a huge influence on him, particularly the many great works by Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and Albert Pinkham Ryder.[2] Worcester, which boasts notable works by Childe Hassam, John LaFarge, and Maurice Prendergast as well as ones by Homer and Sargent, has been called "one of the finest collections of American watercolors in public hands," and in the 1920s its holdings rivaled those in larger institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Brooklyn Museum.[3]

While watercolor in the nineteenth century was most often associated with the "earnest efforts of ladies and Sunday painters," it underwent a reappraisal after the death of Homer in 1910.[4] Homer was, according to his biographer Lloyd Goodrich, "the man who more than any other raised watercolor to the artistic level of oil."[5] In the 1920s, talented younger artists such as John Marin, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, and Charles Demuth focused on watercolor, helping reinvigorate the medium. During the 1930s, Hopper and Reginald Marsh, as well as Regionalists such as Millard Sheets, Adolf Dehn, and John Whorf, specialized in the medium. By 1941, the *Magazine of Art* could confidently say that "ever since Winslow Homer" there have been American artists who excelled in watercolor:

While it continues to be a favored and satisfactory vehicle for the amateur, some of our finest artists have created their best and most spontaneous work in watercolor.[6]

During the Depression, artists often depicted America's traditional rural life. The dominant style of that era, Regionalism, also called the American Scene movement, is associated with images of the heartland by John Stueart Curry, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and others. In fact, many artists across the country depicted the

90. Portrait of Russell Fontaine, c. 1934. Oil on board, 30 x 30 in. (76.2 x 76.2 cm). Collection Estate of Vera Fontaine.

91. Massachusetts farm scene, c. 1932. Watercolor, 12 x 16 in. (30.5 x 40.6 cm). Private collection.

OPPOSITE
92. Umberto Romano assisted by Paul Fontaine, Leon Hovsepian, Lincoln Levison, and Charlotte Scott, working on the mural *Aftermath of WWI and the Depression*, 1936–37. Springfield Post Office, Dwight Street, Springfield, Massachusetts.

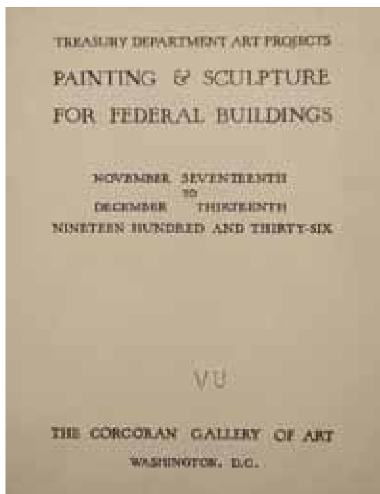
93. U.S. Treasury Department Art Projects, Painting & Sculpture for Federal Buildings, November 17–December 13, 1936, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

94. Catalogue page for Umberto Romano assisted by Paul Fontaine, U.S. Treasury Department Art Projects, Painting & Sculpture for Federal Buildings, November 17–December 13, 1936, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

unique identity of their regions. In the Northeast, painters depicted rolling hills dotted by barns and other farm buildings, evoking the region's strong rural tradition, rugged and simple lifestyle, and ability to live off the land. Fontaine's works of this period—evocations of the landscape in his native New England—can be seen as reflecting this Regionalist context. One painting (fig. 113) shows a snowy landscape set against a vivid blue sky; walking among barren trees are the tiny figures of a hunter and his hounds. In his early watercolors, the colors are subdued—for example, an untitled scene of a small farm with a farmer and two grazing cows (fig. 91) is executed with ink wash, wetly painted, but the rich gray tones of the wash contrast with the warm ochre tones used to depict the barns and farm buildings. Fontaine's experimentation with the application of pigment on wet paper is evident here in the trees, which suggest movement on a breezy, overcast day. Though Fontaine was a great admirer of Homer and Sargent, his simplified compositions, limited palette, and brush effects reveal an interest in condensing the scene to its most essential elements in order to produce a composition that evokes rather than describes a time and place. This pared-down, expressive style reappeared later in his watercolors painted in the Virgin Islands and Italy.

Along with numerous other artists of his generation, Fontaine participated in several New Deal programs designed to promote art and employ artists, including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In 1935, Fontaine and his friend Leon Hovsepian, also a student at the School of the Worcester Art Museum, were awarded posts as CCC camp artists; they had been recommended for the position by Francis H. Taylor, who was the museum's director as well as the New England regional adviser to the Bureau of Painting and Sculpture of the Treasury Department.

The CCC, one of the most popular and successful New Deal programs, provided jobs to young men ages seventeen to twenty-three who could not otherwise find employment. Its workers built and upgraded state and national parks, their roads, service buildings, campgrounds, and trails; updated methods for fighting forest fires; and planted trees. Fontaine's job was to record for posterity the scenes and activities of the CCC camps (fig. 8). In an article announcing



TREASURY DEPARTMENT ART PROJECTS

PAINTING & SCULPTURE

FOR FEDERAL BUILDINGS

NOVEMBER SEVENTEENTH
TO
DECEMBER THIRTEENTH
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND THIRTY-SIX

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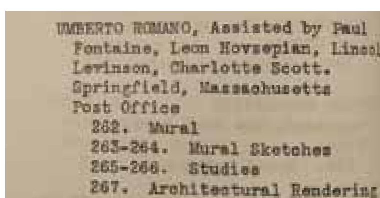
THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C.



UMBERTO ROMANO, Assisted by Paul
Fontaine, Leon Hovsepian, Lincol
Levinson, Charlotte Scott.
Springfield, Massachusetts
Post Office
262. Mural
263-264. Mural Sketches
265-266. Studies
267. Architectural Rendering

Fontaine's appointment, the *Daily Boston Globe* described the position as follows:

In place of the draughty garret and the meager diet of bread and cheese which romantic tradition associates with the indigent artist, these youthful wielders of the brush and pen are given warm, spotless living quarters and three 'man-sized' meals a day.[7]

They also received a monthly salary of $30 ($25 of which was sent to their parents back home). The U.S. government planned to select and retain a number of paintings and sketches as part of a touring exhibition and as a government collection.

Soon after returning from their six-month stint with the CCC, Fontaine and Hovsepian were employed by the WPA as painting assistants to Umberto Romano, one of their favorite teachers at Worcester. Romano had won a commission to decorate the U.S. post office in his hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts, with murals depicting the town's history. Executed on heavy canvas in Romano's Springfield studio, the murals were begun in 1935 and completed in 1937.[8] Though Romano later worked as an abstract expressionist, his work of the 1930s reflected the classical modernist style, which melded the refinement, simplicity, and solidity of classical art with contemporary themes. Working with Romano on the commission was surely a significant experience for the young artist and likely played a major role

in his choice to continue his education at the Yale School of the Fine Arts, where mural painting was a major focus.

Fontaine enrolled at Yale in 1938. He finished the five-year program in two and a half years, having already completed many of the required courses at Worcester. Francis Taylor again provided invaluable support, securing a matching grant to pay for Fontaine's studies at Yale.

Established in 1869, Yale was one of America's oldest and most prestigious art schools, known for providing its students with a thorough grounding in traditional, academic art methods. Profiling the school in 1940, *Life* magazine noted that Yale offered "the most complete art education in the country," teaching students "everything from drawing apples to designing railway stations" (fig. 98).[9] Instruction also included extensive practice in drawing the human figure. (For examples of Fontaine's work in this area, see figs. 15, 95, 96, and 97.) Fontaine's future wife, Virginia Hammersmith, wrote to her mother in 1936 of her hopes that her solid grounding at Yale would lead to work as a muralist:

The winner of the Prix de Rome will talk over the radio Tuesday night—it's sort of a toss-up between two of the boys in the tempera class. Tempera will be the greatest medium for mural painting and Yale is the best school for mural painting and that's why we win the Prix de Rome and paint the U.S. Capitol walls. Oh, well, I'll be doing something worthwhile yet.[10]

It is likely that Fontaine, with his mural experience, was thinking along those same lines. Virginia's letters also mention her work on Beaux Arts projects, in which teams of students

OPPOSITE

95. Drawing of seated man from the back, knee raised, 1938. Pencil on paper, 25 x 19 in. (63.5 x 48.3 cm). Private collection.

ABOVE

96. Drawing of back of man, 1938. Conté on paper, 24 x 18 in. (60.0 x 45.7 cm). Private collection.

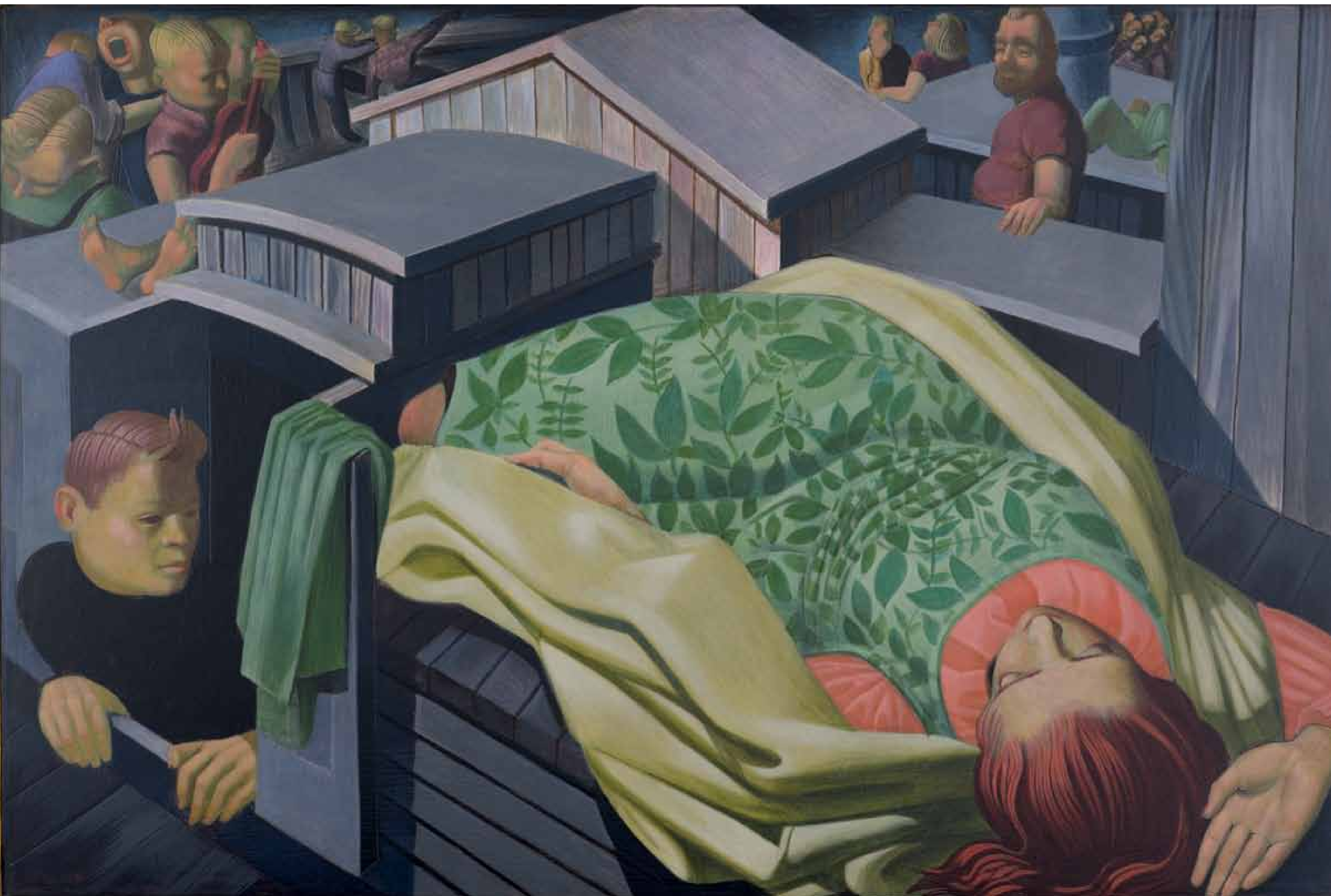
RIGHT

97. Drawing of standing nude woman, Yale University art class, 1938. Conté on paper, 24.75 x 18.75 in. (62.7 x 47.6 cm). Private collection.

98. "Tradition and Technique are Watchwords at Yale's School of Fine Art," *Life*, February 12, 1940, 47. Caption: "Barbara Melendy, fourth-year student, dresses up a seated dummy in order to study the effect of drapery across its lap. Behind her is fifth-year student, Paul Fontaine." On the easel behind Fontaine is his painting of an adult baptism.

OPPOSITE

99. *Boat Party*, 1938–39. Egg tempera on gesso, 20 x 30 in. (50.0 x 76 cm). Composed from sketches made while sailing to Nantucket on an old two-masted schooner from Boston. Private collection.



Fontaine in Germany: An American Abstract Artist Abroad

Mary Brantl

The study of abstract expressionism has followed two paths. In one, American abstract expressionists, often equated with the New York School, are posed in contrast to the more humanistically subjective Europeans. Countering that divisive reading is one that treats abstract expressionism as a universal language, a concept rooted in early twentieth-century abstractionists from Kandinsky to Malevich, though it is fundamentally challenged by those who view abstract expressionism through a Cold War lens.[1]

OPPOSITE
119. Solo exhibition, Frankfurter Kunstkabinett, June 1950.
Left to right: Godo Remzhardt (art critic), Hanna Bekker, Paul Fontaine, two unidentified persons, Virginia Fontaine.

120. Exhibition with Alexander Calder and Louise Rösler, Frankfurter Kunstkabinett, February 1953.

OPPOSITE
121. "Art trip to Dusseldorf to see the French show, Spring 1950." *Back, left to right*: Alo Atripp, Mrs. Otto Ritschl (Dora), Mrs. Ottomar Domnick (Greta), Vicki Noonan, Tom Noonan, Ottomar Domnick. *Front, left to right*: Virginia Fontaine, Hanna Bekker, Otto Ritschl.

In this context it is little surprise to discover an expressionist artist whose geography challenged the norm by slipping between the cracks. One such case, much to our loss to date, has been Paul Fontaine. American born and raised, Fontaine worked on WPA-sponsored art projects, as did contemporaries such as Mark Rothko and Arshile Gorky, but his postwar career with the military and *Stars and Stripes* and, more so, his continued residence in Germany ensured Fontaine's marginalization outside the central thrust of the American abstractionist movement. Concurrently, his acknowledged status in Germany as an expatriate American artist proved equally problematic.

One of the rewards of postmodern studies in acknowledging the constructed nature of the historic master narrative is to open our eyes to those left on the margins. It is in this context that we are granted a long-overdue opportunity to recover Paul Fontaine as both the artist he was and the challenge he remains to our historiographical modeling.

The Years in Germany

The postwar years saw Fontaine in transition. Initially stationed in Paris, he continued to travel there throughout his years in Germany, exhibiting in 1949 at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. Soon after he and his family settled in Germany, Hanna Bekker vom Rath's Frankfurter Kunstkabinett became his central venue, its founder and director both a friend and supporter. Kunstkabinett exhibitions gave Fontaine exposure and positioned him in a context of other abstract voices—most notably in 1953 with Alexander Calder (fig. 120).

If Fontaine's time in Germany divides biographically into the years in Frankfurt (1945–53) and those in Darmstadt (1953–70), artistically a far more meaningful marker is 1947, when his acquaintance with German painter Willi Baumeister (1889–1955; fig.124) began. It was Virginia Fontaine who, meeting Baumeister in the summer of 1947, saw in him someone Paul would like, as she reported to her mother:

Paul and Baumeister hit it off fine—conversing in French—and they were pals in no time. Paul is a novelty over here as he is the only abstract American artist the modern German painters have a chance to meet.[2]

She described Baumeister as the lone artist left in Germany from the "great Bauhaus": "He is 56,

plump, & jovial—a real 'old master' who turns out a mountain of work himself" and is "the greatest single influence on the young painters in Germany today." He was perhaps the greatest single influence on Paul Fontaine as well.

During this period, Fontaine came to know pivotal German dealers and artists (fig. 121 and fig. 31 offer a who's who). Contemporary painters such as Otto Ritschl and Ernst Wilhelm Nay, as well as earlier expressionists—among them, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Emile Nolde—grew in his regard, especially those who had managed to work, despite being forbidden to do so, through the Nazi years.[3] Hans Hartung, who arrived unexpectedly at the Fontaines' home with the collectors Ottomar and Greta Domnick early in 1949, reappeared the two days following, reportedly getting on famously with Paul.[4] Hartung, whom Virginia described as "one of the finest abstract painters in all of Europe," was "all the rage of Paris . . . completely non-objective and very good."[5]

In the late 1940s, Fontaine's aesthetic became increasingly articulate. For him, modern art shared two characteristics: "emphasis on the beauty of order and of the materials themselves, and absorption in the drama (that is the expression) of the individual creator (be he painter or sculptor) whose intimate expression commands an equally intimate response from the spectator."[6] Fontaine acknowledged diverse sources of inspiration, everything from nature to formal elements such as color or pattern as well as the tendency of such sources to work in multiples: "one idea giving birth to another, a color suggesting a form, a line disintegrating into a tone, forms added onto forms, one idea expanding into another" until a moment when "nothing more can be added without becoming trivial."[7]

The watercolors done during the war years reflect a growing energy and abstract quality in Fontaine's work: smudges suggest forms, lines invite the eye's movement across the space of the paper. But while watercolor continued to play a critical role in preparatory sketches, in Germany Fontaine worked increasingly in oil, soon in water-based casein (supporting his "wet" aesthetic) and, once available, acrylic. His process—from initial drawings to increasingly large canvases—remained consistent.[8]

The transition to abstraction was not an easy one. One of the most telling letters surviving in the Fontaine Archive is a transatlantic missive to "Dearest dear beloved Paul" from Virginia. After noting that they were "in for a humdinger of an adjustment period" as she prepared to join her husband in Europe, she went on to talk about the direction of his painting. Although she had previously suggested increasing the degree of abstraction in his work, she pointed out that it was not a demand for change but a recognition of his abilities:

My deductions were: you have a very natural beauty in your work, you have better variety in color range, your design is very sound but—lacks the violence of convictions; I wonder if the continued softness in your brushwork is reflecting your mild easygoing disposition too obviously? . . . So, if I am criticizing your work, I am actually speaking of you and your mental outlook . . . To me, abstract form is more basic in expressing fundamentals and far more direct, and the natural form is a crutch for the undeveloped creative mind . . . So the natural step in progress is to reduce one's work more and more to fundamentals.

While affirming that Paul was "one of the finest watercolorists in the country," Virginia encouraged him to make "a more positive statement."[9] Paul thought that Virginia's arguments were "sound," noting, "I'm not satisfied with any of my work."[10]

While Fontaine was finding his own voice, no artist was more significant to him than Willi Baumeister.[11] For example, Baumeister commissioned a series of lithographs from Paul for publication, and also made efforts to promote Fontaine's work.[12] Wrote Georg Gusmann in a 1961 review of the *Organon '61* exhibition in Leverkusen:

Currently living in Germany, American Paul Fontaine is inspired and influenced by Willi Baumeister without simply following Baumeister's way of ciphers and totems. He is more geometric than his German counterpart, his color palette more nuanced and on occasion

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

122. *Composition*, 1949. Oil on board. Exhibited in 1949 at the Salon de Réalités Nouvelles, Museum of Modern Art, Paris. Location unknown.

123. *Yellow Shield in Black (Dog Days)*, 1948. Oil on board, 32.5 x 21.5 in. (82.6 x 54.6 cm). Private collection.

124. Willi Baumeister in his studio, Stuttgart, c. 1947. Photo by Virginia Fontaine.

125. *Untitled*, 1947. Watercolor, 14 x 21 in. (35.5 x 53.3 cm). Private collection, Boston.

sublime, unbound, such that the representation always proves conclusive.[13]

By the time Fontaine met Baumeister, the German's art had moved from his mechanistic figures of the 1920s (see, for example, his *Apollo* [1922], Galerie Valentien, Stuttgart), seemingly colored by contemporary friendships with Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier, among others, and from his cubist-inspired *Wall Paintings* (for example, his destroyed *Wall Painting with Segments II* [1920]), into the increasingly textural *Tennis Players* of the early 1930s and the abstract, symbolic, and even mythic works represented by *Ideogram* (1938; Baumeister Archives) or the pictographic *Africa I* (1942; Baumeister Archives). Works of the later 1940s, when Fontaine first came to know Baumeister, were once again moving from strong, linear studies exploiting the full extent of the canvas—for example, *Slight Movement* (1952; Kulturekreis der deutschen Wirtschaft im BDI e.V.) and his so-called *Metaphysical Landscapes,* such as *Cheerful Landscape* (1949; Frankfurt am Main Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut) or the works seen behind him in figure 124—to large, still fields of color often dominated by large areas of solid black, as in the Montaru series of the early 1950s.[14] Virginia described Baumeister's evolution thus:

His early work was easily recognizable for his flat non-objective shapes on a plain field, usually black on white or tan, and his abstracted figure compositions where his awareness of Schlemmer and Léger was felt. Today, there is far more use of varied textures and color in his work and his canvas is filled with a continually moving design from edge to edge.[15]

Baumeister's presence is most apparent in early Fontaine abstractions such as the untitled work seen in figure 125, its composition reminiscent of the Baumeister abstract "landscapes" seen behind the artist in figure 124. Yet whatever Baumeister's influence, Fontaine never committed to the symbolic, at times pictographic style characteristic of the German artist. Fontaine's *Yellow Shield in Black or Dog Days* (1948; fig. 123) may initially recall the gestural strokes of a late-1930s Baumeister, but on second glance

offers looser brushwork and a ragged edge quite contrary to the style of the German artist. In the center of this image, Fontaine plays with the surface of the picture plane, and that same spatial playfulness is found in other works of the late 1940s, notably the *Composition,* (1949; fig. 122), a work shown at the Salon de Réalités Nouvelles, and—enhanced by mixed media—an untitled work of 1948 (fig. 126). Similarly, Fontaine's *Rhythm in Black and White* (1947; fig. 127), though momentarily recalling Baumeister's *Ideograms,* is all too much about the picture to participate in the latter's suggestive symbolism.

Fontaine's development from the 1950s to 1960s saw a shift from centralized forms such as that seen in figure 130, a work shown in the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting of 1951 (at the Carnegie Institute), or the more landscape-oriented *Green Spot* (1951; fig. 129). Similarly, this period signaled a move away from the half-curved shapes that anchor a number of his early abstractions: the untitled works in figures 126, 128 and 131 (c. 1952), and, to a lesser extent, *Green Spot* (fig. 129). These paintings were, wrote the noted art critic Will Grohmann, "expansive" and "symphonic" in their effort "to draw connections with rhythm and music."[16] And Fontaine's compositions took on greater mobility than before: figure 132 (1950) offers fragmented forms spatially energized by suggestive thin lines; in *August,* (1953; fig. 146) forms are inscribed calligraphically across the surface; and a similar but far

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

126. *Drawing*, c. 1948. Oil crayon and gouache on paper, 15.7 x 20.0 in. (39.9 x 50.0 cm). Collection Domnick, Nürtingen, Germany.

127. *Rhythm in Black and White*, 1947. Oil on board, 13.8 x 10.0 in. (35.1 x 25.4 cm). Collection Estate of Hanna Bekker vom Rath, Germany.

128. *Untitled*, c. 1952. Silkscreen, 13.9 x 24.6 in. (35.2 x 62.4 cm). Example of print given to W.J.H.B. Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

OPPOSITE

129. *The Green Spot*, 1950. Oil on board, 30.5 x 39.4 in. (77.5 x 100.0 cm). Property of Cornelia Ebeling, Wiesbaden, Germany.

Paul Fontaine '51

130. *No. 25*, 1951. Oil on board, 28.7 x 27.9 in. (73 x 71 cm). Collection Estate of Vera Fontaine. Exhibited at the Pittsburgh International of Contemporary Painting, Carnegie Institute, 1951.

131. *Untitled*, c. 1952. Oil on board, 21.3 x 31.5 in. (53.9 x 80.0 cm). Private collection. Three other paintings evolved from this idea; see, for example, fig. 169.

132. *Untitled*, c. 1950. Oil on board, 17 x 21 in. (43.2 x 53.3 cm). Private collection, Boston.