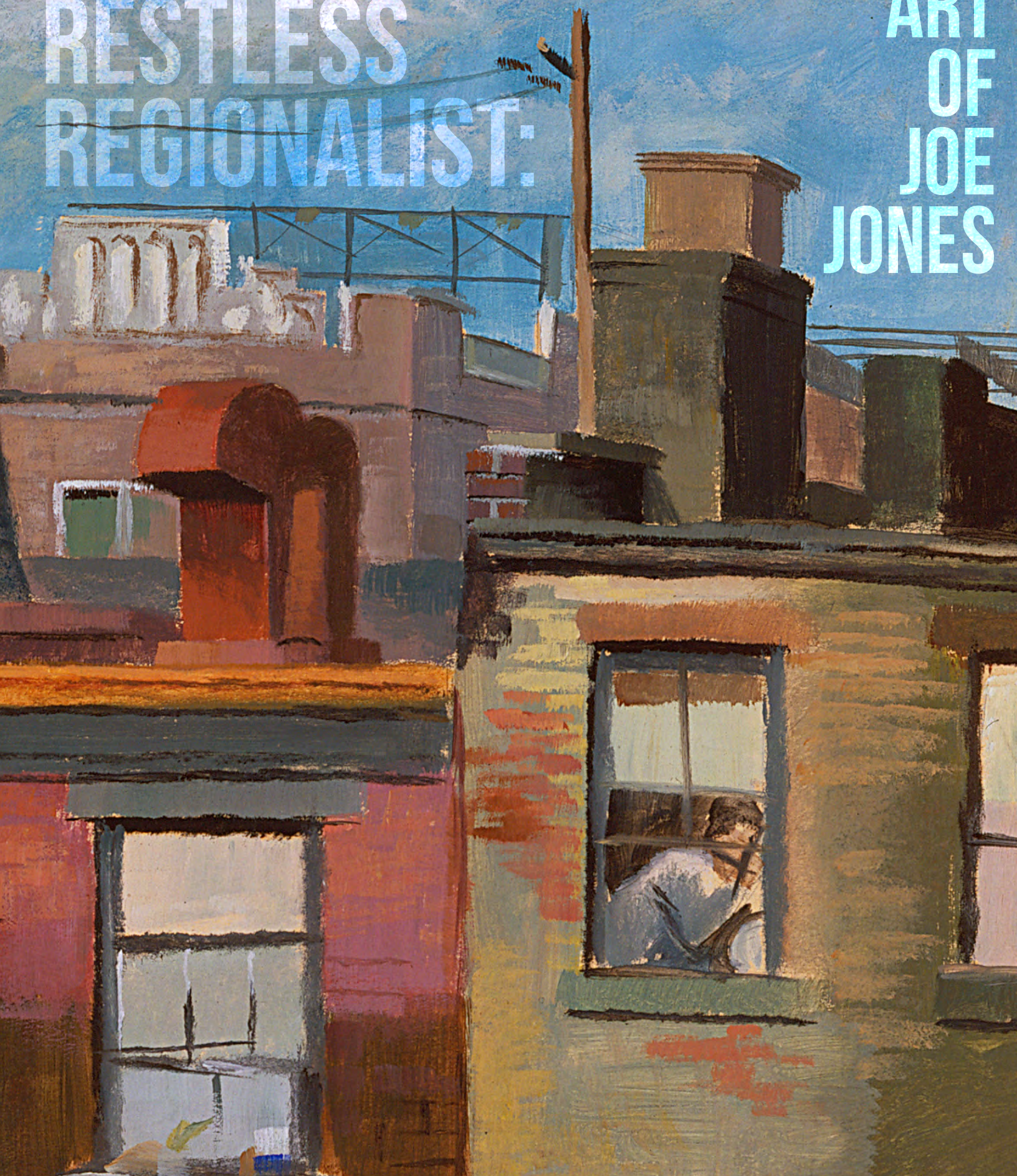


A RESTLESS REGIONALIST:

THE
ART
OF
JOE
JONES





A RESTLESS REGIONALIST: THE ART OF JOE JONES

ALBRECHT-KEMPER MUSEUM OF ART

St. Joseph, Missouri

June 9 - September 10, 2017

BIRGER SANDZÉN MEMORIAL GALLERY

Lindsborg, Kansas

November 5, 2017 - January 21, 2018

LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION:

The Moffett Collection

Cyrus Moffett

Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art

Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University

Denver Art Museum

St. Louis Mercantile Library, University of Missouri - St. Louis

Thomas Jefferson School, St. Louis

Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery

D. Wigmore Fine Art, Inc. New York

David Kodner, Kodner Gallery, St. Louis

Susan Teller Gallery, New York

John and Susan Watt

Roland and Marcia Sabates

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“I’m not interested in
painting pretty pictures
to match pink and blue
walls. I want to paint
things that will knock
holes in the walls.”

Joe Jones

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Jan. 29, 1933



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
View of St. Louis, ca. 1932
 Oil on canvas
 Saint Louis Art Museum,
 Gift of Mrs. Robert Elman,
 ©Heirs of Joe Jones

INTRODUCTION

Joe Jones came of age in the 1930s, when the world turned upside down with a stock market crash and Great Depression, when both the economy and Midwestern farmlands were disintegrating. He was known as an American Scene painter, recording activity in his native St. Louis but also visually commenting on the inequities he saw in everyday life. Despite his poor beginnings, the artist was recognized as a major talent in New York City astonishingly early in his career, at age 24. His career can be divided into two dramatically different sections—the American Scene period from 1931 through 1942, and his mature phase of distilled landscapes composed of transparent color fields and calligraphic line, created from 1943 until his death in 1963. Jones's time in Alaska with veteran artist Henry Varnum Poor divides the two phases of his oeuvre, leading to the inescapable conclusion that direct exposure to Poor's work and methods influenced Jones enough for the younger artist to go in an entirely new direction.

The core of this exhibition that covers Joe Jones's entire career comes from the Moffett Collection of Kansas City. James and Virginia Moffett, with their son Cyrus Moffett, have been collecting work by Jones for more than two decades and lent paintings to the significant Jones exhibition mounted by the Saint Louis Art Museum in 2010, *Joe Jones: Radical Painter of the American Scene*. Prior to that the Moffetts also organized a modest Jones exhibition in 2004 at the Thomas Jefferson School in St. Louis, of which James Moffett is an alumnus. Since then, the Moffetts have been planning for a more ambitious Jones showing, acquiring works and donating select pieces to the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in St. Joseph, Missouri, to the Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University, and to the Thomas Jefferson School.

The first Jones painting the Moffetts purchased was *City Rooftops*, discovered in a small gallery in Aspen, Colorado. The oil was sitting on the shop floor and belonged to the gallery owner, who was quite reluctant to let the painting go. Virginia Moffett was so struck by the work that she would not take no for an answer, not giving up until they could purchase the piece for their growing collection of American regional art. The "Hopper-esque" qualities of *City Rooftops* greatly appealed to Virginia, reminding her of a favorite painting in the Saint Louis Art Museum's permanent collection. The monumental *View of St. Louis* (1932) had always made her stop and stare, but it was years before Virginia absorbed the artist's name, Joe Jones. It was a happy surprise to realize she had unknowingly discovered the same artist in Colorado in such an unlikely setting.



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
City Rooftops, ca. 1935
 Oil on paper
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people in many institutions went to great lengths to see this exhibition be as comprehensive a showing of Joe Jones' work as possible: Director Brett Knappe and Registrar Megan Benitz at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art; Curator Elizabeth Seaton and Registrar Sarah Price at the Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University; Board of Trustees member Mariner Kemper, Director Christoph Heinrich, Curator and Director of the Petrie Institute Thomas Smith, and Curatorial Assistant Meg Erickson of the Denver Museum of Art; Curator Julie Dunn-Morton and Board member Robert Morrissey of the St. Louis Mercantile Library; Director Ron Michael of the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery; and Kathleen Kelly at the Thomas Jefferson School in St. Louis. Susan Teller and Deedee Wigmore of their galleries in New York and David Kodner of his in St. Louis have generously lent work from their inventories to widen the scope of the exhibition. John and Susan Watt have been early collaborators, offering their 1944 portrait of Joe Jones painted by Henry Varnum Poor as soon as they heard of the exhibition plans. Roland and Marcia Sabates have shared three Joe Jones prints, including the unusual 1953 "paintagraph," *Quiet Cove*, which provides a wonderful example of Joe Jones' later style.

Undying gratitude is due to essential research contributors Gail Windisch, Jane Myers, and Liz Seaton, whose impressive contribution to American art history via their exhibition and book, *Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists 1934–2000*, included sharing material on Jones collected during their years of preparation for the book and accompanying catalogue raisonné. Peter Poor, a longtime friend of the Sandzén Gallery, shared his father's diaries, photographs, and family recollections. Curator Peter Harrington at the Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University Library shared his own extensive work on the World War II War Art Unit, as well as the 1943 photograph of the war artists together in San Francisco seen in this exhibition. Archive clerk Nancy Warren of the Jannes Library at the Kansas City Art Institute found background information on Edward Laning. And, Reverend Jamie Jones contributed personal recollections to round out this history of his father.

JOSEPH JOHN JONES (1909–1963)

In 1933, when Jones's oil painting *Road to the Beach* was first included in the Museum of Modern Art's *Painting and Sculpture from 16 Cities* exhibition, influential *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell recognized Jones's landscape as "one of the best pictures in the show."¹ This launched the 24-year-old's career, setting a precedent for favorable attention the rest of his life, even when producing Marxist views of workers uniting to throw off their chains and scenes of African American lynchings. Jones's interests extended to panoramas of wheat fields and farmers harvesting, and all five of Jones's New Deal post office murals are of farming subjects.

Jones earned a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1937, proposing to study the effect of years of soil erosion on Midwestern farms. The turning point for the artist came with his World War II adventure as an artist correspondent, charged by the US government to record military life on the frontlines and sent to the North Pacific theater in 1943. As the experienced leader in charge of the younger war artists, Henry Varnum Poor (1887–1970) had an enormous influence on Jones. His light, gestural drawing style provided a model for Jones's practice during the Alaskan sojourn, prompting the dramatic shift in the younger artist's approach to painting thereafter. Thirteen years after his review of Jones's first New York solo showing, in 1946 Jewell mused in *New York Times* pages on the artist's new work that the "homespun has now completely disappeared, replaced by a sophistication that expresses itself by dazzling, swift calligraphy."²

Jones's relationship with the New York-based Associated American Artists (AAA) bridged the two halves of his career, beginning with the AAA publication of Jones's 1938 lithograph *Missouri Wheat Farmers* (in this exhibition) and ending with the posthumously published edition of his 1963 *Harbor Fog* (also in this exhibition).



Joe Jones, 1909–1963
Landscape with road by sea, ca. 1933
Ink wash on paper
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

JOE JONES AND THE ST. LOUIS ART WORLD

Jones grew up in an industrial city that valued the arts. By the 1920s the City Art Museum (now Saint Louis Art Museum) had been well established, the St. Louis Art Guild was going strong, and there were regular exhibition opportunities around town. Jones saw cutting-edge American art in person, along with the national magazine articles he claimed to have read regularly when he first became interested in art. In July 1930, a show of eight important American Scene artists was mounted at the City Art Museum, lent by the Rehn Gallery of New York City. In that show was Poor's *March Snow* and Edward Hopper's (1882–1967) watercolor *Yawl Riding a Swell*, both of which won purchases prizes, and in a concurrent local showing and singled out for positive praise was Jones's *Stevedores*.

Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), and Grant Wood (1891–1942) were also represented in the New York crowd in that exhibition, and Jones eventually got to know and exhibit with all of these important American artists. By December 1935, when Wood was staying with Benton in Kansas and discussing the state of American painting, he said his "latest enthusiasm is for Joe Jones of St. Louis."³ On a lecture tour, Wood continued to St. Louis, where he was interviewed at length by the city's *Post-Dispatch*, and explained the tenets of the new regionalism in art. He noted that all artists have their own, unique methods of expressing their place in time, and that "I am tremendously impressed with Joe Jones, whom I have just met here, whose subjects are drawn from economic, industrial, political phases of American life. His personal experience and observations have made him reach conclusions different from mine, but the point is, he has something to say and the power to say it."⁴

Joe Jones's family background was working class, with his immigrant Welsh father Frank J. Jones (1868–1939) and American-born, German-descent mother Anna A. Roehrs (1878–1964) settling in north St. Louis when they married. Joseph was the youngest of five siblings. Having little patience for formal education, Jones finished the eighth grade at Benton Grade School in 1923 at the age of 14 and apprenticed with his father, joining his brother as another of the family housepainters, and earning his own union card.

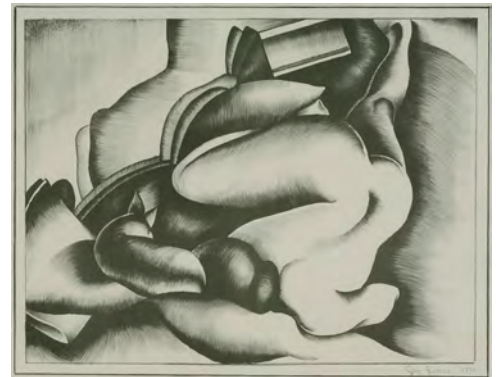
In 1930 Joe was 21 and still living at home, but working as a painter for a decorating company. He entered two works in the St. Louis Art Guild's "Black and White Competitive Exhibition for St. Louis Scenes," his pieces *The Christy Plant and Tuscan*, *St. John's and Temple Israel*. At the end of the year Jones married Freda Sies, a divorcee four years older and known as an aesthetic dancer.

The next year Jones sent two paintings further afield, exhibiting outside of St. Louis the first time in the juried annual Midwestern Artists' Exhibition held at the Kansas City Art Institute February and March of 1931. His oil paintings *Tower Tops* and *Industrial* were among the 205 works chosen that year from 1,200 entries. Jones exhibited in local shows, at the F. Weber Company for art supplies and the City Art Museum's annual exhibition, Paintings by American Artists. In November Jones organized his first one-man exhibition at Lisbeth Hoops's dance studio. On display for a month were 26 oils, including the oil portrait *Freda* (in this exhibition), and three lithographs including impressions of *Laclede Christy Co.* and *Nude* (impressions of each also in this exhibition). Jones's paintings were well received in St. Louis, and that December radio station KMOX commissioned him to paint his first mural in the reception area. Although no longer extant, the mural was photographed, revealing scenes of St. Louis's monumental buildings and shiny new automobiles, devoid of human habitation but providing evidence of their industry.

In the 1932 spring annual of the St. Louis Art Guild, Jones's painting *Still Life* captured the \$100 Otto Spaeth Prize for modern painting. He next won the \$50



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Laclede Christy Clay Co., 1931
Lithograph on paper
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Nude, 1931
Lithograph on paper
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Freda, 1931
Oil on canvas
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
New England Summer, ca. 1933
 Oil on canvas
 Collection of Cyrus Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
 Untitled landscape, ca. 1935
 Oil on canvas 33 1/2 x 40
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Three Men and a Tree, 1937
 Lithograph
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

Healy Prize for St. Louis scenes in the Black and White Competitive Exhibition. Together with Sheila Burlingame, Joe Jones offered classes for advanced art students, advertising his teaching of color techniques, design, and lithography.

PROVINCETOWN AND COMMUNISM

In 1933 Jones had a one-man exhibition of 28 works with St. Louis Art Guild. Ten prominent citizens were so impressed with the charismatic young artist's potential that they formed a syndicate, the "Co-operative Art Society" also known as the "Joe Jones Society," intending to fund the artist's living for seven months and hoping to recoup their investment in painting sales.

At this time Jones met Elizabeth Green, who became a close friend and patron for more than a decade. In May, Elizabeth, Joe, and Freda drove to the East Coast. The first stop was Washington, DC, for a whirlwind tour of all the art museums, then they headed up to New York City. They spent about a week in Manhattan, planning a visit to the New School of Social Research where new murals by José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) and Thomas Hart Benton had just been completed in 1930. The three arrived at their final destination of Provincetown, Massachusetts, in June.

The plan was for Jones to study all summer in the famous Provincetown art colony, learning from experienced artists. However, never one to follow expected paths, Jones neglected the established artists and instead spent time with a more bohemian crowd studying the philosophies of Karl Marx and officially joined the Communist Party. He committed himself henceforth to portraying social issues and while in Provincetown, painted *American Justice*, an antilynching commentary on racist America, along with the triptych *New Deal* (aka *Capitalism*).

While he was away, Jones's painting *Clay Mine* was on exhibit in the St. Louis Art Guild show. The jury included Grant Wood, who declared *Clay Mine* to be the best of 248 works in the exhibition and awarded it the \$200 St. Louis Art Guild Prize. Declaring for Communism did not seem to affect Jones's prospects.

AFRICAN AMERICANS REPRESENTED

In September, Jones held an exhibition of 28 paintings and some lithographs with support from his Cooperative Art Society funders. At the end of the year the funding cooperative decided to move ahead with the original plan to support another disadvantaged young artist in turn. Elizabeth Green stepped in and arranged financial backing for Jones to teach free art classes at St. Louis's Old Courthouse where the St. Louis Art League regularly met. He held evening courses for unemployed students twice per week, about half of the students African American. Jones was always attuned to the plight of blacks in a white America who, to his mind, were always the worse off in the capitalist society. His monumental painting *American Justice* (1933) was an image of bed-sheeted Ku Klux Klan figures calmly standing around the broken body of a half-naked, lynched young woman spread on the ground.

Most lynchings occurred in the deep South, but they happened in Missouri as well. Even to the little art colony of Ste. Genevieve south of St. Louis, state troopers were called twice in 1930 to put down violent racial confrontations, resulting in the entire African American population being forced to leave town. From 1882 to 1968 federal anti-lynching laws were introduced in Congress, but not one bill passed the Senate due to opposition from the Southern Democratic voting bloc. Finally, on June 15, 2005, the US Senate formally apologized for its past moral failures occurring when action was most needed.

Jones went on to depict harsh images of all social ills, but revisited the subject of African Americans trying to get by in an unjust world until the 1940s, when he shifted to pure landscape scenes. In 1935 his work *Lynching* was included in the exhibition *Struggle for Negro Rights* held at the ACA Gallery. Jones's 1937

canvas *Without Mother* depicts an African American boy trailing a long white bag and looking up to the sky in despair. This glimpse of Dust Bowl life was chosen with 35 other living artists' work to travel to Paris for the 1938 exhibition *Three Centuries of Art in the United States*, organized by the Museum of Modern Art for the Musée du Jeu de Paume. His 1939 lithograph *Three Men and a Tree* (included in the exhibition) is one of his more sympathetic scenes, depicting a father gently drawing down a murdered son from a tree limb, a composition that evokes traditional descent from the cross Christian imagery.

Jones continued to highlight African American subjects in his socially aware work, painting friends and neighbors who lived in the same poorer areas of St. Louis. His entry in the 1939 New York World's Fair was the full-length portrait *Negro Boy* (later titled *Hope and Hard Times*), and he regularly participated in exhibitions to support the African American cause. In 1946 Jones exhibited work in a New York show for the benefit of the George Washington Carver School, presenting work by leading African American artists together with others interested in the problems of and furthering the achievements of artists of color.

Jones's 1934 Unemployed Art Class completed its first mural project of chalk on fiberboard 16 feet high by 36 feet long in January. The mural depicted local scenes of a protest march, an African American river baptism, and riverfront barge workers. The opening reception for the mural was decorated with Communist propaganda posters lent by a Kansas City dentist. Not all St. Louisans appreciated the gesture or the mural. Vandals broke into the building to destroy the posters on March 3, and left graffiti threatening to destroy the art as well.

That fall, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration appointed Bonnie Bonine to assist Jones in teaching the Unemployed Art Class, but in December the class was ordered to vacate the premises. Accusations had been made that Jones was using classroom space for Communist meetings, and the doors were padlocked. Protests were raised and on January 4, 1935, an exhibition of the Unemployed Art Class's works was arranged at the Artists and Writers Union, "Art: Free or Dictated," and Jones was invited to speak at the accompanying symposium.

ROAD TO NEW YORK

As a poor boy from the slums of St. Louis, Joe Jones's steady rise to success as a New York artist of stature could not have been predicted. His *Road to the Beach* oil was picked to be in the Museum of Modern Art's *Painting and Sculpture from 16 American Cities* exhibition from December 13, 1933, through January 1, 1934, and was mentioned in a *New York Times* review by Jewell as the best piece in the show. December 1933 also marked the beginning of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the trial run of a federal relief program for artists. Jones qualified, and over April and May of 1934, his PWAP-funded work *Street Scene* (now in the Smithsonian collection) was included in the *National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project* showing at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, along with photographs of the St. Louis Old Courthouse mural. Later that year, in November, Jones's painting *Wheat* was in the galleries of the Whitney Museum of Art in New York, in the Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, and he continued showing work virtually every year at the Whitney for most of his career.

Not everything was working out as well that November of 1934. On the 30th, Freda was arrested during a demonstration at City Hall against the St. Louis mayor's stance on unemployment relief. She was fined \$500 (an enormous sum for the time) and six months in jail, a very stiff sentence for disturbing the peace. To earn more, Joe began working as art editor for the *Anvil*, a leftist literary magazine produced by his friend Jack Conroy (1899–1900), well-known author of the proletarian novel *The Disinherited*. Jones worked for the publication until 1935, when it could no longer support salaries.



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Lay O' the Land, 1940
Color lithograph
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Struggle, 1935
 Oil on panel
 David Kodner, Kodner Gallery St. Louis, MO



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Farmer with Load of Wheat, 1936
 Oil on canvas
 D. Wigmore Fine Art, Inc. New York, NY

Within days of being granted a divorce from Freda mid-February of 1935, on grounds of “general indignities,” Joe Jones headed to New York intending to stay for about a month. He rented a room for \$4 per day and wrote home to say he was seeing “fifty museums” a day and, perhaps more seriously, also reported plans to take a four-day-per-week lithography class. With the confidence of the many successes of paintings chosen for so many group shows in the previous few years, Jones set out to find a gallery that would mount an entire exhibition of his work. He began at the top, asking the Rehn Gallery and the Downtown Gallery about solo shows, but was not impressed by the crassly commercial nature of both galleries.

The spring of 1935 marks an astonishing milestone in the brash young artist’s career. At the age of 26, Joe Jones presented his work to critical acclaim in a Manhattan one-man exhibition at the ACA Gallery, from May 19 through June 1, although the artist himself was not able to stay in the city long enough to see the show. The checklist included some of Jones’s more ambitious pieces: *American Justice*, *Roustabouts*, *We Demand*, and *Red Earth*. Along with complimentary newspaper reviews, *TIME* magazine requested an interview and described a “handsome, aggressive youngster who takes no patronage from anybody.”⁵ The *New Yorker*’s art critic, Lewis Mumford, wrote at length in a weekly column devoted to declaring the best of the season. The “most important retrospective” went to Alfred Steiglitz photographs at An American Place; “best murals” went to William Gropper’s for the Schenley Corporation; accolades for publicity went to both Salvador Dalí and Benton. And, held until last reveal, the season’s “most promising young artist” was Joe Jones. Mumford admired Jones’s technique, and saw in his subjects “an earnestness, a fierceness, a powerful reaction to the somberness of life among the starving and the stunted and the oppressed.”⁶

WHEAT FIELDS AND DUST BOWLS

Surprisingly, the young artist decided not to relocate to the big city and capitalize on his newfound celebrity. Instead, he returned home to the Midwest in April before his exhibition was up to spend time in wheat fields. Jones spent the summer harvest time with farmers and sharecroppers of St. Charles, west of St. Louis. His own harvest was a collection of “richly colorful and compositionally complex canvases” and sketches that provided material for several years afterward.⁷ Although the enduring story is that the artist mowed and bundled wheat stalks alongside farmers and itinerant laborers, it is extremely unlikely that Jones actually wielded any farming equipment himself. His letters of the time describe observations amid the action, but not of being a part of it.

In May 1935, Jones wrote to Elizabeth Green from St. Charles about a new painting of a tree, *Struggle*, seen in this exhibition. “I am working on a new portrait, this is a single tree half shattered (I suppose by lightning) and dead, the other half is putting up a tremendous struggle to live. The trunk is twisted and knarled [sic] and making an effort to supply the sparse but healthy foliage with life. The tree is making a grand fight to live, and so expresses an element that is always admirable.”⁸

In August Jones traveled to Mena, Arkansas, where he had been engaged as a special lecturer on proletarian art at the leftist Commonwealth College. He was scheduled to give four talks, and was commissioned to paint a mural of Arkansas laborers in the school’s dining hall. Jones was funded to travel around Arkansas in order to gather photographic images to use for the mural, collecting material to inspire a masterpiece. The artist finished the mural in early September, having included dynamic scenes of striking miners and a lynching attempt. Jones traveled east with “Mother” Ella Reeve Bloor, an activist in the South who had also been invited to the college to speak, stopping at Little Rock, Memphis, St. Louis, and was in Washington, DC, by September 10.

That autumn, Elizabeth Green had initiated discussion with Edward Rowan, head of the Treasury Relief Art Program (TRAP). Rowan had seen Jones’s work up at

the ACA Gallery and was impressed by the young artist's painting and treatment of his subject matter. Jones liked the idea of the new federal program that had artists working on decorating public buildings, but decided the proffered \$79 per month salary was not enough on which to survive. He wrote to Green, explaining that "the government can be a patron of the arts, but I do know artists as well as other workers have to be paid a living wage, and when they are not, they will have to fight for a living wage just as other workers do. . . . I want to do murals, which you know, but they will be honest, intelligent and I expect to be paid for them."⁹ In Washington on September 11, Joe Jones attended a dinner party along with Rowan and turned down the TRAP work but heard about the Resettlement Administration's (RA) mission to tour small towns and depict American scenes. Jones followed up on the RA program in 1936, accepting employment to travel through the Dust Bowl.

Jones's next exhibition in Manhattan was held at the Walker Galleries, invited by Maynard Walker who was also actively representing the Regionalist triumvirate of Benton, Curry, and Wood. The exhibition *Paintings of Wheat Fields* was held the first two weeks of January 1936, to great acclaim. Jones wrote to Green that there was a "general feeling now that I am in the first place as an artist in America; this sound[s] incredible" but he was pleased to have been dubbed "the Professor of Wheat" by the press.¹⁰ Few people of the time connected images of farming with Jones's more obvious paintings of striking unionists or overloaded dock workers. But the politics of Dust Bowl America were complicated. More than 100 million acres were adversely affected by drought and bad land management from 1930 until about 1936, along the middle of the United States. Failed attempts at soil conservation combined with extreme deflation of the US dollar, which led to uncountable foreclosures and prompted new programs for the federal subsidy of not tilling crop lands beginning in 1933 with the Agriculture Adjustment Act. Following the Walker exhibition, Jones's wheat paintings went back to St. Louis, where *Farmer with Load of Wheat* (in this exhibition) appeared in the March show of painting and sculpture at the St. Louis Art Guild.

Over July and August of 1936, Jones took on the RA task of touring Dust Bowl sites, seeing the devastation firsthand, and collecting photographs that would inspire later paintings, such as *Departure*, depicting a man amid swirling dust turning his back and walking away from his home. Some of his finished works were reproduced in a St. Louis newspaper in September. In October, Jones wished to continue the work and applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship to do a series of paintings on the effects of drought and soil erosion upon American farms. As references on the application, Jones lists artist Reginald Marsh (1898–1954), art critics Mumford and Jewell, and the directors of both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He was awarded the Guggenheim for 1937 as one of six from a pool of 1,000 applicants, and was given \$1,800 to visit western Oklahoma and the Mississippi Delta for his work on sharecropping and the dust bowl.

WPA YEARS, TREASURY SECTION OF FINE ARTS MURALS

Federal patronage of the arts had not been enacted in America until exigencies of the Great Depression warranted it. The federal government then took on responsibility to keep artists employed. The trial program, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), was put in place by President Roosevelt, who had been convinced by artist George Biddle (1885–1973) to begin paying artists a living wage, just as carpenters, plumbers, and housepainters were. *New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewell announced the start of the new government program in the December 17, 1933, pages, reporting that the Federal Civil Works Administration had noted that "artists have to eat and pay rent: that they do not live entirely on 'inspiration'. . . . At the same time, the artists who are to benefit will be given employment in their own field and under conditions calculated not to deflate inspiration."¹¹



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Wastelands, 1937
 Lithograph on paper
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Departure, 1938
 Oil on canvas
 Denver Art Museum:
 Gift of Morton D. May, Jr.



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Men and Wheat,
 Oil on canvas;
 Post Office mural Seneca, Kansas
 Used with the permission of the United
 States Postal Service®. All rights reserved



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Missouri Wheat Farmers, 1938
 Lithograph
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Boy with Pipe, ca. 1939
 Color lithograph
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

Jones had avoided the New Deal relief programs that simply employed artists to create paintings and prints, or hired them to teach art classes in their local areas. However, he did earn five public mural commissions for post offices in Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri—all of which depict harvesting scenes. Unlike the Federal Art Program (FAP) that required artists prove financial need before joining and getting on the payroll, the TRAP/Treasury Section of Fine Art (“the Section”) mural commissions were entirely competitive, based on artist jury decisions. As a separate entity from the FAP, the Section was a depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) program that oversaw the decoration of government buildings from 1934 through 1943. Post office spaces around the country were deemed excellent sites for new murals and the New Deal administration began competitions for artist proposals to fill them.

In July 1937 Jones wrote to the editor of the *St. Louis Star-Times*, protesting Missouri’s seeming exclusion from Federal Art Project commissions, as he did not believe state officials were helping to secure relief funding for artists. The very next month Jones won the mural project for the Magnolia, Arkansas, post office. The artist traveled to Magnolia, scouting around the town taking photos. He submitted studies of his plan for the space, but was informed by Rowan in October that his design was not acceptable for Magnolia’s tastes. Rowan suggested that everyone would prefer the “splendid landscapes which you did in your series of easel paintings dealing with the story of wheat.”¹²

The next year Jones was invited in September to complete a mural for the post office at Charleston, Missouri. He was given 138 days to finish the project but took only three weeks to paint the mural in his studio, and was paid \$670. The mural, *Harvest* (1939), was criticized by the local community because it pictured a wheat harvest rather than cotton picking, the region’s main crop. Juries of selection often did consider what inhabitants might endorse, but overall there was an underlying preference for designs that presented visions of America that embodied a “cultural myth that made life seem more beautiful.”¹³ In July, Jones took on the post office mural project for Anthony, Kansas, painting *Turning a Corner* in just about a month after submitting the design proposal, and was paid \$730.

The *LIFE* magazine issue for December 4, 1939, showcased the winning sketches from the “48 States Competition” the year Jones was awarded the post office mural commission for Seneca, Kansas. The caption for his mural study reads, “Seneca, Kan. in the heart of the great wheat belt will have Joe Jones’s mural to fit in with Seneca’s surroundings.”¹⁴ It reported that 1,475 artists had submitted designs for the 48 commissions that year, and there is an extant photograph showing jury member Henry Varnum Poor evaluating Jones’s design entry. The initial study included a tractor and only fields of golden wheat, but the Seneca postmaster insisted that a variety of crops should be depicted as better representing the truck farms of the region. He also felt the tractor was too specific to a certain manufacturer and therefore was improper advertising. Jones painted in a corn field, and signed his own name on the front of the tractor. The Seneca mural, *Men and Wheat* (installed February 1940), is shown in this exhibition via projection of a high-resolution photograph. Jones’s last post office mural was for Dexter, Missouri, in the southeast corner of the state. The artist’s proposal for a corn harvest scene was accepted, but the design’s composition took several tries before being approved.

ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS (1934–2000)

Jones’s *Missouri Wheat Farmers* lithograph (based on his mural composition for the Magnolia post office, and shown in this exhibition) was his first AAA collaboration, offered in an AAA sales catalogue for 1938. The print drew wide attention, and was included in the influential *A Treasury of American Prints* chosen and written about by Thomas Craven in 1939. Craven noted Jones’s catholicity of taste in preferring work by “El Greco, Titian, Daumier, Goya, Rembrandt, Rubens,

Picasso, George Grosz, and Orozco,” concluding the young artist’s own work showed “considerable originality.”¹⁵ Craven went on to comment on details in *Missouri Wheat Farmers*’ “brilliant” composition that deftly brought reality to bear, making a glimpse of two men “at rather dull work a beautiful picture to see.”¹⁶ Jones collaborated with AAA on a total of 19 prints from this 1938 lithograph through his final work, *Harbor Fog*, completed in 1963. Only two of his AAA print subjects were of people laboring; the rest were all landscapes done in his later spare, abstracted style of composition.

The AAA had been established in July 1934 to market original, signed fine art prints for \$5 (equal to \$91.45 in today’s dollars) from editions of 250 impressions each through department stores across the nation. The first AAA print sales were launched in October 1934. The next year AAA sent out its first mail order catalogue, which proved such a popular sales method that distribution through stores ceased early on in the association’s 66-year history. However, the flagship AAA Galleries opened in New York on Madison Avenue in 1936 and was a successful storefront for collectors to stop in and perhaps meet their favorite artists while they browsed current print offerings and toured painting exhibitions.

From the late 1930s through the 1940s, Joe Jones was on the AAA board of governors with 20 other artists including Benton, Aaron Bohrod (1907–1992), and Adolf Dehn (1895–1968). There is an archive photograph of a 1942 board meeting at the Gotham Hotel in New York City showing AAA founder Reeves Lewenthal (1910–1987) and 19 artists circled around a large table, with a smiling Jones front and center.¹⁷ Having the board of artists was likely a marketing ploy, as Benton noted in his autobiography that “artists had no hand in policy or management,” reflecting that Lewenthal was no doubt very shrewd for keeping all business matters in his own hands, away from the “disruptive possibilities of artistic pride” with its very strong opinions.¹⁸

Jones had kept busy in 1939. His lithograph *Wastelands* (in this exhibition) was exhibited with local artists in the St. Louis Art Center, and his photographs were featured in a June 4 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* spread, “Joe Jones Photographs the Seamy Side of St. Louis.” A snapshot of a tough-looking boy with a pipe in his mouth provided the model for two of Jones’s prints made that year: a simple black-and-white lithograph of the boy, and the more complex color lithograph in this exhibition, *Boy with Pipe*. An impression of this print and of *Taking It Easy* (also in this exhibition) were shown in the September exhibition at the City Art Museum, sponsored by the local branch of the American Artists’ Congress. That fall, Jones got word that his entry in the New York World’s Fair, *Negro Boy*, had won a second-place prize in the comprehensive *American Art Today* exhibition. The artist had been chosen for the regional committee of selection for the fair, and as a member had been able to choose one of his own paintings to show. Jones produced several scenes of the St. Louis slums at this time, such as the oil *Luncheon* and the lithograph of the same title, and lithograph *Heritage*, all of which are in this exhibition, and provide a glimpse of the darker side of society in which children have to rummage in trash bins to find food scraps in order to survive. In November 1940 Jones put a selection of these St. Louis slums pieces in a solo show at the ACA Gallery in New York, together with some examples of his earlier work.

By July 1939 Jones had been seeing Grace Adams Mallinckrodt, who was married to the grandson of a St. Louis millionaire. Within a year, Joe and Grace were caught in his Croton-on-Hudson cottage, and the public scandal resulted in a very speedy divorce trial in June 1940. All ended well, as Jones and Adams married as soon as the divorce was final, on October 24. The couple moved to New York and then settled finally in New Jersey, and went on to have four children together, with their first child Peter Paul Jones born in 1941 on June 12.

Jones’s work continued to find favor among critics and other artists as well as the viewing public. In 1942 the artist’s *Harvesting* won the Jenny Sesnan Medal for Landscape at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, judged by a jury of well-known American artists including Frank Mechau (1904–1946) and Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1893–1953).



Joe Jones, 1909–1963
Oil Barges, 1939
 Lithograph
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909–1963
Heritage [aka *A Poor Heritage*], ca. 1939
 Lithograph
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909–1963
Luncheon, 1939
 Oil on canvas
 David Kodner, Kodner Gallery St. Louis, MO



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Ad for American Tobacco
Page from *LIFE* magazine August 16, 1943
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Artists of the War Art Unit, San Francisco 1943
From left: Joe Jones, Willard Cummings, Aaron Bohrod, Charles Shannon, Edward Laning, and David Fredenthal. Seated: Henry Varnum Poor and Howard Cook.
Courtesy of *Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library*



Henry Varnum Poor, 1887-1970
La Moselle (aka *Valley of the Moselle at Metz*), 1918
Watercolor on paper
Greenough Collection, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery

WORLD WAR II

American artists were intensely patriotic when it came to supporting their country and war efforts. When war was declared after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, 10,000 artists banded together and organized Artists for Victory, Inc. In a grand gesture of support, the Metropolitan Museum turned over galleries to allow the association to curate and install an unprecedented exhibition of contemporary American painting, sculpture, and graphic art in December 1942. The museum provided \$41,000 for purchase prizes, of which John Steuart Curry was first-place winner for his *Wisconsin Landscape* oil. Jones had two paintings juried into the exhibition, *Winter in Dutchess County* and *Yellow Grain*, both purchased from the show.

By 1942, Lewenthal had arranged for Abbott Laboratories of Chicago to subsidize war posters designed by AAA artists. Benton produced his incendiary *Perils of War* poster series for Abbott to distribute. Jones completed posters of a Vassar hospital operation in 1942 and then finished another design in early 1943, writing to Elizabeth Green that Abbott “gives the posters to the government free and mine is hoped to fill a need in the agriculture dept.”¹⁹ Abbott Laboratories was an important supplier of life-saving pharmaceuticals such as penicillin to the military, so it was a natural choice for corporate support of art for the armed forces. AAA had a long relationship with Abbott Laboratories, which developed an impressive corporate collection over the years. In 1962, Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, held a major exhibition of 400 paintings from the Abbott Labs collection, *A Corporation Collects*, including work by Jones. The company was known for providing poster-type but good-quality reproductions of the original collected art to physicians’ offices around the county. Jones’s 1944 oil *Dakota Wheatfields* was distributed as a limited edition by Abbott Labs in 1950.

At the same time, but unrelated to the war effort, 19 AAA artists were also being commissioned by the American Tobacco Company for paintings to use in their Lucky Strike cigarette advertising campaign. Jones’s painting *The Tobacco Expert* was used in the ad published in the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine from September 1943, as seen in this exhibition. However, in this case, most of the artists and Lewenthal himself discovered that the business collaboration was not a congenial arrangement. The president of American Tobacco censored the artists’ work, directing paintings be changed to suit imagined, idealized American scenes of the tobacco agriculture that were at odds with what the artists observed in the field. Jones wrote to Green in September 1942 that he was pleased with his painting for the company, despite having to make “so many compromises.”²⁰

WAR ART UNIT

Lewenthal also wielded considerable influence over the selection of civilian artists to act as war correspondents in March 1943, serving with George Biddle on the War Department Art Advisory Committee. That January, Biddle had prepared a paper entitled “Organization and Selection of War Artists and Writers” with a list of 17 artists he thought would be suitable for a military commission. Biddle had been thinking about the role artists could play in wartime service, writing to Henry Varnum Poor in June of 1942 to discuss what their profession could do during the crisis. Poor had already been considering similar possibilities and drafted a proposal for an “Artists Corps” and submitted it to the Office of War Information. Between Biddle, Poor, Lewenthal, and Rowan working in the advisory committee, by the beginning of February 1943, they came up with an initial list of 32 artists with 13 alternates who would be invited to join the newly formed War Art Unit.²¹

These artists would be dispersed to theaters of war around the world—to North Africa, Alaska, Europe, the South Pacific, and sites on the home front. A few of the artists were already serving in the military but the civilians would be paid a

salary equal to army captains—and Biddle, who had been a captain in World War I, a salary equal to a colonel's—and would all be provided uniforms with noncombatant patches instead of rank insignia. Creating the new corps required adding a federal budget line item of \$250,000 to provide each civilian artist a \$3,800 per annum salary. All sketches, paintings, and even notes taken down during the contract period would be the property of the US government. Background checks on all the artists were required, and Biddle had to personally vouch for Jones, who had been an outspoken member of the Communist Party. Jones had to swear that he never had any intention of disrupting the American government.

In March 1943 the Jones family hosted a party for his solo show opening at the AAA Galleries, exhibiting 26 canvases that immediately created a buzz in New York art circles. Harvest scenes of wheat farming and corn fields as well as views of gnarled trees featured in this showing of new work. Also seen were glimpses of the artist's family, with several portraits of Jones's wife Grace and infant son Peter on display. In following weeks well-known artists visited the exhibition; Grace brought baby Peter to the gallery several times to charm gallery-goers and reporters alike, but his father was en route to the West Coast and Alaska.²²

In early March the advisory committee had sent out instructions and statements of purpose to its chosen artists. Each War Art Unit sent to a particular theater would be under the command of a unit leader but the unit would be responsible to the region's military commanding general under the auspices of the US Army Chief of Engineers. The mission the artists were charged with was clear:

You are not sent out merely as news-gatherers. You have been selected as outstanding American artists, who will record the war in all its phases; and its impact on you as artists and as human beings. . . . What we insist on is the best work you are individually capable of; and the most integrated picture of war in all its phases that your group is capable of. . . . Any subject is in order, if as artists you feel it is part of War; battle scenes and the front line; battle landscapes; the wounded, the dying and the dead; prisoners of war; field hospitals and base hospitals; wrecked habitations and bombing scenes; character sketches of our own troops, of prisoners, of the natives of the country you visit . . . the nobility, cowardice, cruelty, boredom of war; all this should form part of a well-rounded picture.²³

Henry Varnum Poor was in charge of the Alaska Unit, comprising himself, Jones, Edward Laning (1906–1981), Willard “Bill” Cummings (1915–1975), and later arrival Ogden Pleissner (1905–1983). Poor had been in World War I as a Regimental Artist in France, and so had the benefit of wartime experience behind him. In this exhibition is an example of his work from the earlier conflict, a scene of French countryside portrayed in the watercolor *La Moselle* of 1918.

Poor landed in San Francisco on April 2, 1943, and reported to the Camouflage Office of the District Engineers Office in order to connect with all the artists assigned to South and North Pacific destinations, where combat continued against Japanese forces. The whole uniformed group of war artists was waiting for Poor, impressing him so with their good looks that Poor thought they outrated any bunch of officers he had ever seen: “Joe Jones, big and bulky, his neck set forward on his heavy shoulders, big, sensuous, humorous mouth, and bright shrewd eyes. He seemed very much at home and had been there ten days or so. Like the wise man he is, he had thought the whole plan too good to be true, so had cleared out of New York as soon as possible to get it started.”²⁴ Poor noted that Cummings was the only military man present. Cummings had a sensitive face and a “spick-and-span” turnout, and turned out to be tougher and more willful than he looked. Bohrod also had a neat face and figure, compact and looking purposeful in his uniform and reminding Poor of the French officers known in the first world war. Poor described David Fredenthal (1914–1958) as having a “hesitant and perpetually worried air” and Edward Laning as possessing “an intelligent



Edward Laning, 1906-1981

Joe Jones Asleep, 1943

Pencil & ink wash on paper

Courtesy of the Susan Teller Gallery, NY, NY



Joe Jones, 1909-1963

Mid-night on the Bering Sea, ca. 1943

Oil on canvas

On Loan from Thomas Jefferson School, St. Louis, MO



Joe Jones, 1909-1963

Eskimo Women Fishing, 1943

Oil on canvas

Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Henry Varnum Poor, 1887-1970
Portrait of Joe Jones, 1944
 Oil on masonite board
 Collection of John and Susan Watt

face” and precise and reserved in manner.²⁵ Bohrod, Fredenthal, and Howard Cook (1901–1980) were headed to the South Pacific, and Cummings, Jones, Laning, Poor, and Pleissner to the North, bound for Alaska and the occupied Aleutian Islands.

The Alaska group traveled to Seattle, then took a military sea transport to Fort Richardson. The artists sketched crew members at their duties, soldiers trying to keep entertained with boxing matches and the like, and each other. Poor sketched Jones while the other artist was sleeping and Poor complained in his travel diary that “Joe snores at night, but claims I do too.”²⁶ Laning’s detailed sepia drawing *Joe Sleeping* is included in this exhibition. They arrived in Fort Richardson on May 5, 1943, and Jones wrote that the Alaskan setting was “beautiful and very paintable.”²⁷ Laning wrote a thoughtful letter to Lewenthal in which he said, “The prospect has a two-fold fascination here. There is the war with the enemy, and an endless war with nature to be fought at the same time. We aren’t going to lack for material, God knows, and if we don’t do good work it will be our own fault.”²⁸ The artists decided to explore different regions of the vast Alaskan territory. Cummings and Laning chose to observe combat conditions on the Aleutian island chain, Poor picked the Fairbanks area where Russian troops were camped and made plans to continue northward to the coastal Eskimo country where the Alaska Territorial Guard was being established. Poor’s diary recorded, “Jones, with his social-conscious point of view, was much intrigued by reports of the Negro troops who had largely built the Alcan Highway and were now at Livingood, north of Fairbanks, doing lumbering operations.”²⁹

All the War Art Units had been efficiently and generously outfitted with an abundance of art supplies, and each artist was issued his own camera. Photographs show Jones wearing his camera around his neck in many different situations, suggesting that the artist likely had it on his person most of the time. He had used one to good effect on his Guggenheim mission gathering Dust Bowl scenes, and Poor noted that on the Alaska trip “Joe, free and easy and democratic, prowled around with a camera, as he was accustomed to taking and making a free and personal use of photographs.”³⁰ Laning was described as always sketching, even in public, taking no notice of others crowding around, in contrast to Poor himself, who was never comfortable working while being watched. But, reflecting on the artists’ presence among the soldiers, Poor concluded that having drawing and painting being done in their midst was a fine thing, and that “Everywhere, I have not seen a better morale builder than the War Art Program.”³¹

In June, Poor and Jones flew together to see the army post at Tanana Crossing (aka “Tanacross”), which was set beside a swift, deep river. Henry recorded that “Joe told stories of *his* river, the Mississippi, and I of *my* river, the Kaw, and the war seemed, as it was, very far away.”³² Jones changed plans and dropped the idea of traveling the Alcan Highway in favor of accompanying Poor to experience Eskimo country: “We settle it, and both feel that we’re again at the start of a fine adventure—and the adventure in friendship is not the least of it.”³³ The two American artists headed off to the Yukon, exploring, fishing, and sketching the people they met on the way to Nome.

Joe Jones and Henry Poor stayed in several Eskimo villages distances away from the army post at Nome, but spent the most fruitful time in Unalakleet, getting to know the residents and their way of life. About his time in that village, Jones wrote home, “I have fallen in love with the Eskimo people, they are a sensitive and intelligent people with delightful ways and very friendly.”³⁴ At the end of their time in Unalakleet, Poor noticed that with several artists “sketching around the village, the place had become very art conscious.”³⁵ The two Americans were asked to display their work before leaving, so an exhibition was organized in two large classrooms of the village schoolhouse. Jones and Poor were then made members of the Alaska Territorial Guard and felt they were being adopted into the tribe. Upon arriving to collect the artists, Major Marvin Marston observed, “Well, you’ve had the first art show ever held in the Arctic.”³⁶

July 9 saw them on the Bering Strait, traveling on Major Marston's relatively small boat, the *Ada*, and at the mercy of unpredictable weather and icy seas. Jones's painting *Mid-night on the Bering Sea* included in this exhibition dates from this time, as the artist sketched his impressions of 'white nights' in the Arctic, when the sun never really sets during the summer months.

On July 1, 1943, not two months after artists had arrived at their assigned war theaters, the US Congress abruptly terminated the War Art Unit program by slashing arts funding from the federal budget. In letters home to the States to object, troops in North Africa noted that five senators had recently visited and required special planes, fleets of cars, entertainments, and security details, then wondered if that "did not cost the United States taxpayer as much, if not more, than the \$100,000 art appropriation Representative Joe Starnes of Alabama successfully carved out of a \$71,000,000 [actually \$71 billion] war department budget."³⁷

The Art Units got word in mid-July, as Poor reported in his book on the Alaska experience. Lewenthal wrote to inform Biddle, who was in North Africa: "Not only were we eliminated, but the Section of Fine Arts was liquidated, Special Services in the Army involving painting was stopped and the Graphic Division of the OWI [Office of War Information] was eliminated. This is indeed a blackout of Art in America."³⁸ Stationed on Rendova Island in the South Pacific, Bohrod's feelings were captured in his diary: "I would rather this had happened after I had returned to the States. . . . One of us might, conceivably, have had his head shot off; and at the same time Congress was giving us this kick in the pants. They might have waited to judge the results of the venture before they moved to wipe out the thing."³⁹

LIFE MAGAZINE

Lewenthal convinced *LIFE* magazine to pick up the civilian commissions as hires for their own war correspondence. Most of the War Art Unit artists jumped at the chance to continue reporting on combat zones around the world. Laning, who witnessed dramatic conflict in the Aleutian Islands as Allied forces wrested control back from occupying Japanese soldiers, was sent to Italy in 1944. The *LIFE* issue for September 17, 1945, featured documentary sketches by Laning and Tom Craig (1909–1969), a *LIFE* artist since 1942. Laning's published drawings were of Italian scenes, contemporary to the artist's drawing in this exhibition, an untitled view of the Piazza del Popolo in Rome. Laning himself was wounded when sketching near Minturno, Italy, and the *LIFE* article quotes him describing battle, "The sound of shells passing over . . . is one having a kind of density which should be visible but is not."⁴⁰

LIFE sent Aaron Bohrod to Europe after the War Art Unit was defunded and he had returned to the States. His lithograph included in this exhibition, *Church in Luxembourg* (1946, published by AAA in 1947), was sketched while he was stationed in France. The artist was featured on the cover of the April 30, 1945, issue of *LIFE*, the headline "LIFE's War Artists: 24 Pages of Color" emblazoned under a photograph of Bohrod with a sketchbook open on his lap while seated in the midst of building rubble. The article also announced the magazine's plan to donate all finished artwork to the US government as a historical record of the war.

In Alaska in early August 1943, a sleepless Poor mulled over the sad end of the war artist program that had been "so much more than just so many individual artists going their separate ways and sending in their reports, I knew this was done for. The high glow of real patriotism and pride which we all had felt was done for. We were repudiated by Congress."⁴¹ Poor was angry at the waste and futility at this "petty penny-wise act of Congress carried out in spite and ignorance" but did not believe that carrying on under the *LIFE* magazine banner would create the same working environment. He felt that no matter what the liberal impulse intended, "the insidious pull of a magazine policy and a magazine public would be there to haunt us and in its own way govern and modify our work, if only through the process of selection



Edward Laning, 1906-1981
Untitled view of Piazza del Popolo, ca. 1944
Pencil & ink wash on paper
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

according to their standards.”⁴² Poor chose not to accept the *LIFE* offer, and arranged to return home to New York before the August 20 deadline for demobilization. He divided all the remaining art supplies to save enough for Laning and Cummings, who were still in the Aleutians, with the rest to go to the USO (United Service Organization) and Special Services to distribute to soldiers around the world. His daughter, the artist Anne Poor (1918–2002), was inspired to join the US Women’s Army Corps and was stationed in the Philippines, sketching and recording her own wartime experiences.

It seems quite likely that Poor’s decision to turn down *LIFE* magazine’s offer of continued war artist work influenced Jones to do the same, given Jones’s usual tendency of taking on whatever work came his way. Jones went home to New Jersey, and he and his family spent the remainder of the summer on Martha’s Vineyard. On October 1, 1943, the Jones family moved to New York City, on West 11th Street, and *LIFE* negotiated directly with the artist for him to finish his Alaskan portfolio. Jones used this time to experiment with pastel over colored ink and watercolor, and to participate in exhibitions again. He showed in the Carnegie Museum of Art’s annual Painting in the United States exhibition, and his oil *Eskimo Women Fishing* (1943, in this exhibition) appeared in the Whitney Museum’s Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Art from November 23 through January 4, 1944. Reviewers immediately noted a change: “Joe Jones (when will he ‘find’ himself for good?) submits an entirely new style.”⁴³

By 1944 the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) had set up an Art in War Gallery. In January of that year the exhibition *Paintings of Americans at War Commissioned for LIFE Magazine* went on a US tour, and included the work of artists Bohrod and Laning, who had continued on as war correspondents with the magazine. At the end of the year, on December 15, 1944, the AIC opened *The Army at War: A Graphic Record by American Artists*, which also was on a national tour and included 20 artists who were each featured in the accompanying exhibition catalogue. Work by Jones, Bohrod, Poor, Biddle, Pleissner and 15 others was displayed on behalf of the US War Department, and the exhibition committee in charge of organizing had been headed by Eleanor Roosevelt. In March some of Jones’s Eskimo subjects were shown at Grand Central Art Galleries in New York as part of the *American-British Goodwill Art Exhibition*, organized by Artists for Victory. The show traveled to London in June of 1944. The June issue of *London Studio* was devoted entirely to American art, and featured the work of Benton, Bohrod, Curry, Dehn, and Jones, among others, with Thomas Craven writing on painting and Carl Zigrosser on graphic arts.

RADICAL STYLE SHIFT

Jones’s time in Alaska was life-changing. His newfound friendship with Poor directly influenced the rest of his painting career. While getting to know Jones, spending time together on the way to Alaska, Poor had written home to his family from Seattle describing the younger artist: “Jo Jones + I are in a room together—Bill + Laning in another . . . Jo is really a swell fellow + his canniness is not only for himself—he’s very open hearted. Pretty coarse grained, but that doesn’t matter in this relationship. Besides I think that surface coarse grain hides more real perception + fineness than Laning’s precision.”⁴⁴

Jones’s new and different work was noticed immediately upon his return home from Alaska. Some reviewers embraced the new look, with its distilled, calligraphic lightness and economy of line, others did not. A solo show at the AAA Galleries up in January of 1945 generated press, both in New York and in St. Louis. The exhibition displayed 24 canvases depicting Martha’s Vineyard, the Hudson River Valley, and Alaska. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* rhapsodized: “Joe Jones has dispensed completely with the laborious element which his earlier paintings contained. He now relies wholly on the thrill of painting and works in the sketchily aesthetic calligraphy which he developed as artist reporter during his brief travels with the U.S. Army

Engineers.”⁴⁵ Jones’s hometown paper, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, reported, “The artist, puffing on a corncob pipe, explained that the style was a complete departure from his representational type of painting. The new canvases, done since his return from the Aleutians, are more imaginary and calligraphic.”⁴⁶

Jewell, the critic who had seen Jones as the up-and-coming artist from his first New York show in 1935, and had written about Poor regularly over past decades, also raved about Jones’s new style shown off at the AAA Galleries:

Joe Jones, at the gallery of the Associated American Artists, revealed at full length the resources of his new style. This Middle Western artist has gone through numerous phases since his first appearance, some years ago, as a fresh exponent of American landscape. The “homespun” has now completely disappeared, replaced by sophistication that expresses itself in dazzling, swift calligraphy . . . racing brush, gay arabesques seen in his works such as *Midnite [sic] on the Bering Sea*. . . Possibly Henry Varnum Poor has had something to do with this surprising stylistic turn-about. Or is it just that Joe Jones, in his own words, has “taken the work out of painting and left only the joy?”⁴⁷

ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS, POSTWAR

In 1944 Jones visited Poor at his handbuilt Crow House in New City, New York. During that time Poor painted the *Portrait of Joe Jones* seen in this exhibition. After otherwise spending the year settling in his permanent home in Morristown, New Jersey, and establishing his studio to suit himself, traveling, and exhibiting widely, Jones was drafted into the Army Special Services in 1945. By April 7 Jones was at Fort Dix but under quarantine, bored, and looking forward to getting fit and trimmed down during training. He reported to Poor that he had taken up with some Puerto Ricans who spoke only Spanish, and that he had been in an art discussion with an engineer and a women’s brassiere salesman, and convinced them to try their own hands at drawing.⁴⁸

Jones came down with mumps, with fever and swelling, in mid-April, and took a while to recover in hospital. The next letter to Poor was from June 2 at Fort Knox, Kentucky, in which Jones related far more dramatic events. He had collapsed from heat exhaustion in training and been revived by artificial respiration and was going to a medical board about a hernia that had just been discovered and everyone was jealous of, wanting to know how to get one too.⁴⁹ Jones expected to be allowed to quit physical training and go back to Fort Dix for the art instructor duty. The very last letter to Poor from military environs was short and sweet: “Henry—At last! Going to the separation center tomorrow morning. Should be home by the week-end—See you very soon—will call first—Joe.”⁵⁰

When Jones got home for good, he threw himself into making art and working toward exhibitions in all the important annuals such as for the Carnegie Institute, the Whitney Museum, along with the St. Louis City Art Museum. He also stepped up the process of creating new prints with the AAA, which had become his sole representing gallery. Jones’s son James recalls helping his father with a press in his home studio, on the second floor of the family’s Morristown residence, watching prints be made and pulling a lever now and then.⁵¹

Jones was involved in all the AAA projects conceived in postwar exuberance. In February 1945, executive director Lewenthal decided to expand operations and open a Chicago gallery; Jones was one of the featured artists in the grand opening sales catalogue, still claiming “Missouri” as his Midwestern home. The new quarters were expansive, claiming 6,000 feet of commercial shop space on Michigan Avenue. In 1947 an AAA Galleries opened on the West Coast, in the exclusive Beverly Hills shopping district, but did not remain in business very long. In the spring of 1950 both the Beverly Hills and Chicago art galleries were closed, and the AAA kept to its New York City base on Fifth Avenue until closing its doors for the final time in January of 2000.



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Fishing Village, 1949
Lithograph
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Quiet Cove, 1953
Paintagraph on paper
Collection of Roland and Marcia Sabates



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Little Harbor, 1949
Stonelain ceramic, ashtray form
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

Over the 1940s and 1950s the AAA experimented with a variety of artistic endeavors. In 1938 a full-color sales catalogue had offered color reproductions of artists' paintings, in a process they dubbed "gelatone," for the reproduction of work in another medium, using a half-tone-collotype hybrid of light-sensitive gelatin for photography. Those prints were offered for \$7.50 each, at a time when "advances in photomechanical printing technology offered the hope of producing facsimiles of higher and higher fidelity."⁵² Gelatone sales were not very encouraging, however, and they were not marketed very long. "Paintagraphs" were the next color printing experiment, touted as "multiple originals"—new designs done in a new art medium, which meant they were not copies of anything.⁵³ Sadly, the efforts to develop collectors' interest proved about the same as for gelatones, so the first offering of paintagraphs in 1953 was also the last. Jones's paintagraph, *Quiet Cove* (included in the exhibition), was his only foray into the reproductive medium.



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Grain Elevators, ca. 1945
 Gouache on paper
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

Associated American Artists introduced their Stonelain ceramics line in 1949, producing new designs through 1953. Joe Jones participated in the first year of production, hand-painting on demand six different tile titles and one ashtray design, *Little Harbor* (1949), which originally sold for \$15 and is included in this exhibition. The November issue of the *American Home* magazine for 1950 advertised Jones's *Little Harbor*, citing the many uses for this little ceramic piece that could serve as an ashtray or a candy and nut dish, "and is a most fascinating conversation piece." More than 50 AAA artists were involved in Stonelain ceramics, some hand-painting each piece and others allowing production staff to decorate or glaze.

AAA artists were also designing textiles in the early 1950s. "Fine art by the yard" was produced by M. Lowenstein & Sons Signature Fabrics, which manufactured apparel-weight fabrics, and by Riverdale Fabrics, which took care of the upholstery weight for home decorating. Fifty-three artists lent their names to colorful yardages, including Grant Wood and Aaron Bohrod. The *Boston Post* featured designs by Jones, "a celebrity whose original oil-in-pastel hues sells for thousands of dollars."⁵⁴ His four fabric patterns were Lineal Antics, Antique Watermarks, Fleurs de l'Air, and Playground of the Gods.

In September 1946 Gimbel Brothers Department Stores announced an ambitious mural project to be undertaken by fourteen AAA artists, who would portray views of Pennsylvania in oil paintings, watercolors, and drawings. An unprecedented \$100,000 was earmarked for the artists to fan out across the state and catch the flavor of various industries taking place. Artists were expected to follow their own taste in choosing what to depict, but were encouraged to actively avoid too much duplication of subject. Bohrod chose to paint Pittsburgh cityscapes while Biddle's subjects were dairy farming and livestock raising. Jones painted Pennsylvania's railroads, airfields, river traffic, and Lake Erie steamers.⁵⁵ An exhibition of all 115 finished works premiered at the main store in 1947, and then *Pennsylvania as Artists See It: The Gimbel Pennsylvania Art Collection* toured around the state. In 1959 the artworks were donated to the Universities of Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh. There is some speculation that Jones's gouache *Grain Elevators* (in this exhibition) may have been done for this project.

The First Annual National Art Competition sponsored by the AAA in July of 1946 awarded \$5,000 in cash prizes to up-and-coming young artists to concentrate on printmaking through opportunities to work with AAA printers and have their new prints distributed across the nation. A reviewer singled out "Joe Jones' breathtaking lithographic landscapes, with grey areas of incredible transparency against daring blank paper passages" for praise.⁵⁶ At the time the art world was just becoming enamored with nonrepresentational art of pure color or line, dismissing American Scene and socially conscious representational work as outdated and irrelevant. Jones's distilled landscapes could suit the new moderns who wanted abstract expressionist as well as traditionalists who appreciated lovely geometries of recognizable forms.

EXHIBITIONS OVER THE 1940s AND 1950s

Despite the change in style and subject matter, Joe Jones's work continued to be in demand during the 1940s and 1950s. He continued to submit paintings to all the annual exhibitions he had grown accustomed to participating in during the 1930s, and regularly showed at the Pennsylvania Academy, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, the Whitney Museum in Manhattan, and the National Academy along with other venues around the country that extended special invitations. Jones taught art courses in a variety of settings during these decades: at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; at the Morristown Boin Arts & Crafts Center; the St. Bernard's School in Peapack-Gladstone, New Jersey, a college preparatory about 30 miles away from Morristown; and at the Summit Art Association in Summit, New Jersey.

Critics generally approved of Jones's dramatically different style and subject matter that developed in the 1940s. In November 1947 the artist had another one-man exhibition of paintings and drawings at the AAA Galleries that was written up in the *New York Times*, which declared that "Joe Jones has come a long way from the towering cornfields and busy harvesters first associated with his name and still farther from the dead-end streets and hammered home messages of social consciousness to which his sympathies moved him in the depths of the depression . . . turned to sea coast and orchard with a sketchiness of effect and staccato, almost stenographic statement."⁵⁷

Over the years Jones continued to show at the New York AAA Galleries, regularly selling paintings along with new print editions. A one-man exhibition in October of 1951 generated interest and reviews of his street scenes, fleets of boats, and still lifes with flowers like his *Poppies* of 1948, in this exhibition. The artist remained a realist, having recognizable subjects in his work, but was very much "after his own fashion, refusing to cope with the whole chaotic rush of facts, excluding most and dealing delicately with those that remain . . . a record of appearances [that is] brilliantly economical, laid out in spare, skeletal designs which have the same thin clarity of the ghost-pale colors and much of the clean precision of the handling. It is an art that is all surface and suggestion, but visual suggestion only, as the unvarying poetic note here is one of disengaged serenity."⁵⁸

TIME magazine also interviewed the artist and reviewed the 1951 exhibition, announcing in its pages, "Angry Man Calms Down." Jones stated that his then-current aim was to create space, not objects, thereby rejecting hundreds of years' preoccupation with light and shade and modeling three-dimensional form. The artist reflected on his career history, which began as one of the "angriest proletariat painters of the 1930s," whose canvases were "packed with demonstrators, motherless waifs, and starving victims of capitalist greed" painted in his Communist fervor.⁵⁹ The glamor of being a revolutionary eventually wore off, and as Jones became more successful he had no time for party politics. The artist recalled his 1943 trip to Alaska as a war artist, when he began to experiment with delicate lines and low-toned colors, and in a show held the next year, "people said they were French. What the hell—they were more Japanese than French, and anyway I'm American and they were paintings."⁶⁰

The 1950s proved to be a particularly interesting decade for Jones. He experimented with sculpture and poetry. He collaborated in 1953 with the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978), of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, illustrating her article for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* 75th Anniversary Supplement. Mead's "Modern Youth in a Changing World" was accompanied by drawings of a drive-in theater, a party of young people in a conga line dance, and several bicyclists together.⁶¹ In 1954 Jones showed at the Detroit Institute of Art with old friends Ben Shahn (1898–1969) and Charles Sheeler (1883–1965), and the next year exhibited with eleven other AAA artists at Halls Department store in Kansas City, in the "Special Exhibition of Contemporary American Art."



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Silver Landscape, 1947
Oil on masonite board
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Poppies, 1948
Oil on canvas
Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, gift
of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Grey Barn, 1948
Oil on canvas
Collection of the St. Louis Mercantile
Library at the University of Missouri-
St. Louis



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Jersey from the Hudson, ca. 1950
 Watercolor on paper
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Grey Cliff, 1950s
 Oil on canvas
 Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, gift of
 James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Boat Harbor, ca. 1950s
 Gouache on canvas
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

In October 1956 Joe Jones showed recent work at the AAA Galleries in Manhattan that included four oil on canvas murals painted for the dining rooms of the Four Aces, a quartet of passenger/cargo cruise ships of the American Export Lines. The artist also showed recent land and seascape studies of Bermuda. The *New York Times* reviewed the exhibition thoughtfully: “Jones is an artist who cares more for idea and design than he does for finish though his thin washes of cool color are undeniably picturesque . . . Jones’ great purpose is to simplify natural forms almost into symbols of themselves. Thus a few dashing straight lines make a boat.”⁶²

A 1957 exhibition at the AAA Galleries of paintings, prints, and drawings features the artist’s recent watercolors of his favorite coastal views of boats on the water. “Jones has carried on his later sketchiness and almost monochrome gray tonalities about as near to vanishing point as they can well be profitably pursued. His harbor scenes have a somewhat oriental suggestiveness, the scantily linear black outlines of hulls and spars and sails taking on something of calligraphic character. . . . But a nostalgically poetic mood persists throughout.”⁶³

In this show the daring artist also added an entirely new component to his visual expression, with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporting: “A man of tangential talents, Joe Jones has also written poetry for each piece of work, not an explanation but the result of his experiences in having done the work. The poetry has been recorded to the accompaniment of Japanese lute music and the records are also on display.”⁶⁴

In 1945, Jones had painted a somewhat angular, abstracted portrait of Cecile Boksenbom included in this exhibition. A letter written in 1957 to his longtime friends Jack and Ceil Boksenbom provides a rare insight into Jones’s thoughts about his youthful connections with communism in the 1930s, expressing himself in a wry manner: “My political affiliations ended about seventeen years ago and my belief in that political party ended even before that—so in that area of reference [sic]—the issue is dead and I don’t see what is to be accomplished by me saying I hate the Communist Party while there are so many other things I hate at least as much.”⁶⁵ Joe Jones’s son James confirms that his father parted ways with the Communist Party about two years after joining. Joe asked his friend Roger Nash Baldwin, the cofounder and director of the American Civil Liberties Union, how to go about quitting the Party, and Baldwin responded with the very practical answer, “If you want to get out, just stop paying dues.”⁶⁶

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Joe Jones lived life at full tilt. Henry Varnum Poor’s diary entry of January 13, 1962, reads, “At dawn saw a green car + Joe Jones struggle out ‘stoned.’ Had arrived at 5 a.m. + slept in the car! Breakfast and lunch and a good visit. Very sound + good review of my work.”⁶⁷ Poor and Jones had kept up their friendship over the two decades after the war, visiting and communicating sporadically. Soon after World War II was over, Poor had founded the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine in 1946, along with fellow Alaskan War Art Unit artist Willard Cummings and another combat artist, Sidney Simon (1917–1997), who had been in the South Pacific to draw along with doing field reconnaissance. Anne Poor joined the faculty and was the vice-president, second in command after her father. Skowhegan continues today as an emerging artists’ summer residency, where for nine weeks faculty teach and encourage young artists to reach their full potential.

Jones worked hard painting, making prints, and participating in exhibitions all over the country. In 1961, the artist was engaged by *TIME* magazine to paint two pictures for their covers. The weekly magazine had covered Jones since 1935 and his first one-man show at the ACA Gallery in New York, revisiting the dynamic artist sporadically over ensuing years. For the May 19 *TIME* cover, “Travel: The Faraway Places,” Jones painted places he had never been into a collage of beckoning shores, after browsing through photographs of places that he would want to visit: a Tahitian girl with her palm tree sits near the cliffs of Beirut, with a Greek island and the harbor of Portofino, Italy,

coming together for a picture of the dream vacation. For the December 15 cover, Jones was charged with painting a holiday scene for the Christmas season, and finished an abstracted scene of city shoppers based on impressions of downtown Atlanta. The artist continued the theme of travel and faraway places in his own life the next year, mounting a solo show in San Francisco at Maxwell Galleries the summer of 1962.

LAST HURRAH

Early in 1963 Joe Jones was working on his lithograph *Harbor Fog* (included in this exhibition), and had finished signing about 100 of the planned 250 impressions for the AAA edition. The 54-year-old artist had a fatal heart attack on April 9, 1963, in his Morristown home of 19 years, survived by his wife Grace and four children, Peter, Timothy, Katharine, and James. Poor's diary for Tuesday, April 9, records the call from Morristown to say Joe had died that morning. He noted that Jones had a heart failure the previous month, but that when Poor had visited the younger artist in the hospital he had seemed fairly well. "Then with this second one had just fainted + gone. Very hard to realize + accept. He had seemed such a member of the family—then for years had scarcely seen him."⁶⁸ Poor went to Morristown for the funeral two days later at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, but thought it "a dismal ceremony, no flowers, canned music, endless reading of scripture + praying—no warm, human words about Joe."⁶⁹ At the Jones home afterward, Poor wandered around, noticing the "incredibly cluttered and disorganized studio + work rooms. No one but Joe could possibly make sense of it. Very sad. Split between so many things half done, half understood—also his life that way. But brilliant + full of promise—and tragically unfulfilled."⁷⁰ Grace Jones asked Poor to help her sort through Joe's things, so a few weeks later he went to Morristown for the last time to help Grace appraise Joe's paintings, drawings, and all sorts of projects at which Jones had tried his hand at.⁷¹

TIME magazine printed a very short obituary on the housepainter's son who had burst on the art scene with shocking canvases like *American Justice* and had been a working-class hero, and then mellowed over the years into a softer Japanese style in his easel painting and landscape murals. In the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Joe Jones's controversial past was forgotten, as he was summed up as "a modernist who in recent years abandoned Midwest nature scenes for New Jersey seascapes and paintings of boats."⁷² His hometown mentioned the early successes, selling his painting to the Met at age 28, earning a Guggenheim Fellowship, and being a war artist, but no hint of his social activism or Communist Party history.

Over the next two decades the artist and his work was largely forgotten, even in the city he had lived for almost 20 years. The Morris Museum of Arts and Sciences mounted the exhibition *American Realism of the 20th Century* in 1980, comprising around 100 paintings, prints, drawings, and sculpture. Pointing out that "realism" is a vague term in art definitions, the curator focused on the "progressive" artists after the turn of the century who highlighted the underside of everyday life to reveal society's ills, to the "social realism" and "regionalism" of the 1930s which "invested native scenes with political overtones."⁷³ At the end of a *New York Times* review article of the exhibition praising the paintings of John Steuart Curry, Reginald Marsh, and Georgia O'Keeffe, almost as an afterthought, the critic mentioned two New Jersey artists—one contemporary surrealist collage-maker "and Joe Jones, a virtually unknown but interesting Social Realist who lived in Morristown" who had died in 1963.⁷⁴

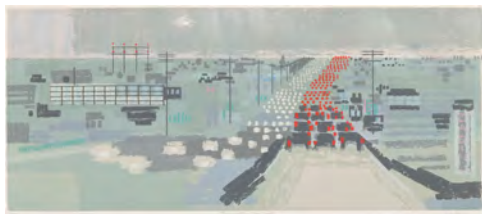
It was not until 2010, when the St. Louis Art Museum put together the exhibition *Joe Jones: Radical Painter of the American Scene* and its accompanying scholarly catalogue, that Jones's reputation as an important social realist was recovered. The show focused on Jones's earlier career up through 1942 and brought his name back to public attention, fulfilling the promise of his first splash onto the art world in 1935. Then, as again now, his work was deemed "well designed, well painted, vigorous, honest" and forthrightly faced the truth in American society with a personal conviction and passion in his art.⁷⁵



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Portrait of Cecile Boksenbom, 1945
Oil on canvas
Kansas State University, Marianna Kistler
Beach Museum of Art, gift of Jim and
Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Harbor Fog, 1963
Lithograph
Collection of James and Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Head Lights and Tail Lights, 1960
 Color screenprint
 Kansas State University, Marianna Kistler
 Beach Museum of Art, gift of Jim and
 Virginia Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Against the Sky, 1961
 Color screenprint
 Collection of Cyrus Moffett



Joe Jones, 1909-1963
Tropical Harbor, 1959
 Color lithograph
 Collection of James and Virginia Moffett

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