

WHITNEY

Press Release

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**AN AMERICAN MODERNIST REDISCOVERED --
WHITNEY PRESENTS *OSCAR BLUEMNER: A PASSION FOR COLOR*
Through February 12, 2006**



Oscar Bluemner, *Azure*, 1933
Oil on canvas; Collection of Elaine and Henry Kaufman

Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color, organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, is a thorough reappraisal of Bluemner's place in the pantheon of key figures of early 20th-century American art. Curated by Barbara Haskell, the exhibition surveys the artist's entire *oeuvre*, from the architectural renderings of his early years to the later intensely symbolic, color-infused landscapes that reveal an artist at the height of his expressive powers. On view from October 7, 2005 to February 12, 2006, *Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color* is the most comprehensive retrospective to date of Bluemner's work.

Respected in his lifetime and revered today by connoisseurs of early American modernism, Oscar Bluemner (1867-1938) remains relatively neglected by the general public. An important member of the circle of artists that formed around Alfred Stieglitz's "291" Gallery, he is best known for his boldly simplified geometric compositions and provocative use of color. Bluemner's works fused the expressionism of German Romanticism and German philosophical traditions with the vanguard

aesthetic styles being developed in France in the early years of the century. The result was a unique union of ecstatic, emotional expressiveness with order and discipline. His works, multifaceted and compelling, sustained a continual dialogue not only with contemporary developments in European and American painting, but also with the full sweep of Asian and European historical art.

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About the Artist

Oscar Bluemner was born in the small Prussian town of Prenzlau, in 1867, into a family of architects and painters. Following the architectural careers of his father and grandfather, he enrolled in the prestigious Royal Technical Academy in Berlin to train as an architect. There he met with success, not only for his building designs -- for which he won the Royal Medal of Architecture in 1891 -- but also for the exceptional craftsmanship of his architectural drawings. Four months after graduating, he precipitously fled the country in opposition to Kaiser Wilhelm II's conservative views on contemporary art and architecture, as well as the growing militarism of his regime. As Bluemner later wrote, he "ran away a rebel" from a world which seemed "too hard and sterile from tradition for so tender a plant as a still vague thought of a new style."

Arriving in the United States in 1892, Bluemner worked as an architect for the next 20 years, specializing in what he called "pictorial architecture" -- urban buildings and country homes that demonstrated particular sensitivity to color and light and were integrated into the landscape as if part of a single composition. His most notorious architectural achievement was his 1904 design for the Bronx County courthouse, over which Tammany Hall architect Michael Garvin claimed authorship, causing a noteworthy scandal. Bluemner's suit against Garvin and his subsequent political activism against Tammany Hall proved pivotal to the dismissal of three borough presidents -- including Joseph Haffen of the Bronx -- and the 1909 election of reform candidate John Purroy Mitchel as President of the Board of Alderman. (Mitchel is credited with drafting the city's first comprehensive budget, with a full accounting of all of the city's resources. In 1913, he dealt a crushing blow to Tammany Hall, winning the mayoral election on a fusion ticket by a large plurality.

He was New York City's youngest Mayor, serving from 1914 to 1917.)

Bluemner was vindicated as the rightful architect of the Bronx courthouse in 1906, yet it was not until 1911 that he was financially compensated. Disillusioned with the business of architecture, he turned his energies to painting, resolving to design buildings only when financial insolvency demanded it. During this period, Bluemner became active in the modernist art circle which formed around Alfred Stieglitz's "291" Gallery. Similar in age and cultural heritage, the two men developed a unique friendship and collaboration. Bluemner contributed essays to Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work*; Stieglitz, in turn, supported Bluemner's art through sales and exhibitions at his various galleries.

Buoyed by Stieglitz, and flush with the proceeds from his suit against Garvin, Bluemner took a seven-month trip through Europe in 1912, arriving in time to see the important large surveys of vanguard art in Germany, France, and England. The exposure changed his outlook. Upon his return he scraped down the oils he had created in 1911-12 and moved his art further into abstraction by accentuating the bold structural clarity of his compositions and the expressionist intensity of their color -- which, by then, he regarded as the agent of subjective expression. In 1913, Bluemner's work was included in the landmark Armory Show; in 1915 his oils were featured in a one-man show at Stieglitz's "291" Gallery. The synthesis of crisp, tightly structured geometric forms and juxtapositions of bold, primary color, however, proved too vanguard for American audiences, and the show was not a financial success.

In 1916, dissatisfied with the materialism of city life and longing for the intimate connection between nature and man he had earlier sought in his architectural practice, Bluemner moved with his wife and two children to rural New Jersey. There he continued to develop his pictorial vocabulary of overlapping shapes, bold contours, and strong contrasts of color and tone. Despite support from the prestigious Bourgeois Gallery, Bluemner's finances remained dismal.

In 1926, chronic poverty caused the death of his wife. Grief stricken, Bluemner moved to South Braintree, MA. Over the next two years, he sublimated his despair in symbolic paintings and watercolors whose dream-like stillness and isolation synthesized the duality he felt was inherent in all things. These paintings, particularly those of suns and moons, anticipate the subsequent work of Arthur Dove. Shown at Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery in 1928, they confirmed Bluemner's place as a singularly gifted American modernist. Few sales, however, were forthcoming. His economic outlook

fared no better in 1929 when the Whitney Studio Galleries showcased a series of his small-scale oils, which he created from multiple layers of thin, transparent color and varnish. The jewel-like luminosity of these nocturnes notwithstanding, they evoked dark moods of foreboding and danger.

As Bluemner neared his 70th year, his isolation deepened. His elegiac *Compositions for Color Themes* fused strident primary color and clearly delineated forms, intimating ecstasy and sorrow. Tree and house forms serve as male and female actors in a poignant drama of loneliness, alienation, and longing. Critics responded enthusiastically to this work, seeing in it the self-expression through color-form that had characterized Bluemner's art from the beginning. Unfortunately, critical acclaim coincided with the onset of physical deterioration. Following an automobile accident in 1935, Bluemner was stricken by stomach, eye, and heart disease. Nerve-induced insomnia and paralysis soon followed. Suffering from chronic pain and unable to walk, sleep or see, he committed suicide in the early morning hours of January 12, 1938.

Catalogue

Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color is accompanied by a scholarly monograph which takes advantage of recently revealed archival material as well as extensive historical research. Written by Barbara Haskell, it analyzes the systematic evolution of Bluemner's work and places it within the context of the artist's life and the aesthetic currents of European and American modernism. The catalogue also includes a chronology of Bluemner's life, along with an exhibition history, bibliography, selected writings by the artist and an analysis of Bluemner's working method by conservator Ulrich Birkmaier. The definitive book on the artist, the catalogue furthers the exhibition's aim of re-positioning Bluemner within the pantheon of major figures of early 20th-century American art.

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, Louise Nevelson, and Lucas Samaras, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become a measure of the state of contemporary art in America today.