

In a spacious, light-filled barn in a meadow near Ogunquit, Maine, the painter Mark Baum spent the last years of his life making elegantly symbolic abstract paintings. His was a long journey as an artist, and his style changed greatly over the years. Born in 1903 in Poland, he emigrated to the United States when he was sixteen years old and became a naturalized citizen in 1926. Baum was active politically and ran unsuccessfully for the New York State Senate. He viewed New York City as enchanting and dynamic but as a flawed place for family life. Baum worked on the WPA/FAP in the easel division, and some of his early works still exist in government buildings.

At the end of World War II, Baum traveled to Pennsylvania and saw the anthracite coal mines of the region and the plight of miners struggling to make a living. He returned to that Pennsylvania mining district the following spring and spent the next three summers painting the people, their workplaces, and their dwellings. These are dark and powerfully brooding works in a brusque figurative style. Baum's formal artistic education consisted of courses taken at the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and other studies at the National Academy of Design in New York City. He had a one-person show at the Whitney Studio Galleries in 1929 and enjoyed a growing reputation as a painter of American scenes.

While his painting was of first importance, Mark Baum had a family to support. He was a highly skilled furrier and worked part of each year as a cutter of fur coats. In the 24 January 1954 issue of *Life* magazine, Baum was featured along with fellow artists Helen Leidoff, Israel Levitan, Paul Mommer, and Joseph Solman in the article, "The Things They Do For Art." It described Baum's work as a furrier and Solman's part-time job as a betting-window clerk at the racetrack besides their artistic pursuits.

Baum's precise draftsmanship and his conceptual approach to painting gave his city views an odd static quality that pleased people who enjoyed the art of Grant Wood and also that of American "primitive" painters. However,

Baum was anything but a regionalist, and he had a restless spirit that craved innovation. In the mid-1950s, his art changed radically as he evolved a system of abstraction derived from a staircase motif in one of his earlier figurative paintings. Triangles and diagonals in repeated patterns came to dominate his art, and the scale of his paintings grew with the clarity of his purpose and result. Baum wrote, "In the beginning there was a staircase. Out of its elements a unit emerged. The unit evolved." And so it did, into

several decades of beautiful abstract works full of rich color and intricate visual syntax. Baum's paintings are in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others.

By the 1960s, Baum was spending his summers in Maine near the historical seaside art colony of Ogunquit. His work was vastly different from the typical Maine landscapes favored by the Ogunquit school, but he did find modernists in the community, and they enjoyed and supported his efforts. His time in Maine grew longer and his trips back to New York occupied just the winter months. Baum painted in a grand barn adjacent to his white frame house in a meadow. In later years he showed at the Salander-O'Reilly Gallery and often took part in local exhibits at the Ogunquit Gallery.

Out of numerous journal entries and essays, Mark Baum emerges as a lover of nature, a poetic spirit, and a person who believed that abstract art touches a deeper level of reality. His sketchbooks are full of notations, for example: "We look at the universe; the vastness of the billions of stars and space without end—physical aspects—we related to it continuously with a sense of awe...Materialism has spun a web of retardation around man's efforts." Baum the political activist and idealist poured his entire energy into his abstract paintings, believing that they could express his humanism as well as his poetic aspirations. Working in his studio-barn during the last decades of his life, Baum pressed his artistic program to the limit and created large, commanding canvases full of color, light, and dazzling patterns. He was able to paint until the year before his death in 1997.

--Susan C. Larsen, Ph.D., Art Historian, Curator. Tenants Harbor, Maine, 2003