



Oscar F. Bluemner  
American, 1867 - 1938

## *Imagination*

1932

casein and watercolor on paper, mounted to paperboard

overall: 79.38 × 58.9 cm (31 1/4 × 23 3/16 in.)

framed: 95.25 × 74.3 × 6.03 cm (37 1/2 × 29 1/4 × 2 3/8 in.)

Inscription: lower right, the Ü formed by L and left edge of M, the outer edge of B extending down and below BL then up through M to form N, the ER in monogram: BLÜMNER; upper center right reverse: 'Imagination'

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase through the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Myron L. Cowen and the William A. Clark Fund) 2015.19.161

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### ENTRY

Oscar Bluemner was an innovative modernist painter who, along with Arthur Dove (American, 1880 - 1946), John Marin (American, 1870 - 1953), Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887 - 1986), and other artists of the Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946) circle, used a European-inspired vocabulary to infuse the American landscape with feeling, energy, and spirituality. [1] However, Bluemner's paintings fit less neatly into narratives of early modernism than those of his peers. He focused neither on the vitality of the American urban experience nor on the restorative qualities of the rural landscape but on an evocative combination of the two, as in this haunting painting of 1932, *Imagination*. His work's resistance to easy categorization, the artist's eccentric personality, and the copious theoretical and technical notes that he kept in his painting diaries lent an air of mystery to Bluemner's career and legacy that was not dispelled until long after his death. [2]

German thought and art were important sources for Bluemner's expressive use of color in paintings like *Imagination*. Following the lead of 18th-century author, philosopher, and artist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and 20th-century expressionist painters Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866 - 1944) and Franz Marc (German, 1880 - 1916), Bluemner endowed color with the ability to express aspects of his inner consciousness and to communicate moods and emotions. [3] When he returned to the United States after a seven-month trip to Europe in 1912, five of his works were included in the historic International Exhibition of Modern Art (the Armory Show) in 1913. In 1916 Bluemner was one of 17 American painters chosen by

Willard Huntington Wright, Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929), and Stieglitz to represent the American avant-garde at the Anderson Gallery's Forum Exhibition, also in New York. The organizers of the show wanted to redirect attention to American modernism in the wake of the Armory Show, which had generated commercial interest primarily in European artists.

In the 1920s Bluemner's work continued to garner support and encouragement from the art establishment, but the artist also encountered challenges, including the death of his wife in 1926, which precipitated his move to Braintree, Massachusetts. Roberta Smith Favis has suggested that his early paintings have more political meaning than might be obvious at first sight and that anti-German sentiment in the war and interwar years may have had a negative impact on the reception and sale of his work. [4]

Bluemner's later works, including his series *Compositions for Color Themes* (of which *Imagination* is part) exhibited at the Marie Harriman Gallery in 1935, increasingly veered toward the mystical and abstract. (Bluemner created the colorful and whimsical cover of the Harriman Gallery exhibition catalog, depicting silhouetted patrons and their printed exclamations and featuring *Imagination* at the upper right [fig. 1]). The artist's continued obsession with red derived less from the color's socialist symbolism than from a wide range of idiosyncratic associations. Bluemner linked red to masculinity, vitality, life, struggle, imagination, and the self. He considered it the noblest color, identifying it as his alter ego and adopting the pseudonym "the Vermillionaire" in 1929. [5]

In *Imagination*, the red hues of the house and sky stand out so intensely against the green foliage and inky night that they assault the viewer's senses, as if the pigment were burning from within. The artist likened his use of color in this series to music's ability to elicit emotional states: "Look at my work in a way as you listen to music—look at the space filled with colors and try to feel; do not insist on understanding what seems strange." [6]

The dreamlike quality of *Imagination* invites the subjective interpretation that the artist advocated. Jeffrey Hayes has noted that Bluemner's late works best embody the artist's mature theories about art's purpose. [7] The startling juxtaposition of complementary colors and the tension between architectural and natural forms in *Imagination* illustrate ideas Bluemner put forth in a 1929 publication, *What and When Is Painting? Today:*

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Without imagination painting fails of its greatest power and beauty: intensity—the maximum inner tension of divergent experiences, emotions, conflicting moods as expressed by dramatic contrast of color and tone and lines. . . . Without intensity, there is no true painting, because painting does not, as poetry and music do, conduct us slowly towards a climax. It rather is the reality of a single isolated, emotional, ecstatic moment, into which it catapults us with an instantaneous and immediate bounce. [8]

That Bluemner writes about his painting in terms of movement —“catapult” and “bounce”—also speaks to the spatial tensions created by the artist’s use of color. The heat of the central red form projects forward, while the cooler green and blue recede. This painting, thanks in part to Bluemner’s tireless research into the permanence of different techniques and materials, has the same capacity to jolt viewers toward “a single . . . ecstatic moment” today as when it was first exhibited in 1935. [9]

Bluemner’s 1935 Harriman Gallery exhibition was an overwhelming critical success. The art critic Emily Genauer wrote that, for Bluemner, “a landscape is . . . only a springboard from which he dives into a sea of color. Nor does he sink there. He emerges a veritable Neptune, king of the brilliant hues into which he has dipped.” Despite the positive press, however, and the fact that the critic Henry McBride called the paintings “eminently buyable,” the gallery did not sell a single picture, and Bluemner continued to struggle to make ends meet. [10] In 1938, after two years of increasingly serious illness and deterioration of his eyesight, the artist took his life. It was nearly half a century before Bluemner’s vital role in early American modernism was rediscovered and his passion for color appreciated anew.

Jennifer Wingate

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



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- [5] Barbara Haskell, *Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color* (New York, 2005), 98.
- [6] Oscar Bluemner, introduction to *Oscar Florianus Bluemner* (Minneapolis, 1939), n. p.
- [7] Jeffrey R. Hayes, *Oscar Bluemner* (Cambridge, 1991), 185.
- [8] Oscar Bluemner, *What and When Is Painting? Today* (South Braintree, MA, 1929), reprinted in Barbara Haskell, *Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color* (New York, 2005), 197–198.
- [9] Guided by a concern for longevity, Bluemner experimented extensively with paints, binders, and supports. He used casein as a binder for his watercolors because he believed it would make them more permanent and lightfast. Ulrich Birkmaier, “In Search of Permanence: Oscar Bluemner’s Materials and Techniques,” in Barbara Haskell, *Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color* (New York, 2005), 181–191.
- [10] Excerpts from Emily Genauer’s review in the *New York World-Telegram*, Jan. 12, 1935, and Henry McBride’s review in the *New York Sun*, Jan. 8, 1935, are reprinted in Oscar Bluemner, “What the Critics Say . . .,” in *Oscar Florianus Bluemner* (Minneapolis, 1939).
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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a paperboard with what is probably Whatman paper adhered by the artist to the surface of the commercially prepared board. Bluemner applied a thin, opaque white ground over the paper that does not conceal the paper’s rough surface texture. Beneath some lifting paint along the lower left edge of the gray shape it is possible to see a line of transparent gray wash on the white ground. This could be underdrawing. Bluemner is known to have gone over this drawing with an inklike liquid. The paint layer is thin but very opaque. Bluemner blended his paint so that there is little evidence of individual brushstrokes and there is no impasto, only slight ridges of paint at the outer edges of shapes. The artist appears to have drawn or underpainted the primary design elements on the white ground and then painted the black background around them. Other design elements were then painted over the black background. The red house was painted before the green grass, and both of these were painted before the gray tree. A darker red paint is apparent under the bright red paint of the house. Around the perimeter of the painting beneath the rabbet of the frame there are traces of dark blue paint added to the black. The black background is in sound condition, but other colors exhibit signs of insecure paint and cleavage in the form of

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extensive cupping in the islands of paint between the fine network of cracks.

Before the painting was acquired by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, a natural resin varnish layer was removed and replaced with a synthetic one. Dare Hartwell, the conservator at the Corcoran, re-adhered lifting paint in 1988. [1]

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### TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Conservation report in NGA conservation files. Hartwell later prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is also available in NGA conservation files.

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### PROVENANCE

The artist [1867-1938]; his estate. Robert C. Graham Jr., by 1969; [1] his son, Robin Graham; purchased November 1978 by (Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York); purchased 26 March 1979 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2015 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] Graham is listed as the painting's owner in the catalogue for a 1969 exhibition, *Oscar Bluemner: Paintings, Drawings*, shown at the New York Cultural Center. Graham was president of the James Graham and Sons Gallery in New York; a Graham Gallery label is on the backing board.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1935 New Landscape Painting by Oscar F. Bluemner: Compositions for Color Themes, Marie Harriman Gallery, New York; Arts Club of Chicago, 2 January - March 1935, no. 23.

1939 Oscar Florianus Bluemner, University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2-28 March 1939, no. 11.

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1969 Oscar Bluemner: Paintings, Drawings, New York Cultural Center, 16 December 1969 - 8 March 1970, no. 71, repro.

1976 Collector's Gallery X, Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, November-December 1976, no catalogue.

1982 Acquisitions Since 1975, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1982-1983, no catalogue.

1988 Oscar Bluemner: Landscapes of Sorrow and Joy, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, 10 December 1988 - 3 September 1989, no. 105.

2005 Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 7 October 2005 - 12 February 2006, unnumbered catalogue.

2008 The American Evolution: A History through Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2008, unnumbered checklist.

2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

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- 1935 Salisbury, Frank. "Oscar Bluemner: Marie Harriman Gallery." *Art News* 33, no. 14 (5 January 1935): 5.
- 1982 Hayes, Jeffrey Russell. "Oscar Bluemner: Life, Art and Theory." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 1982: 361-63, 377, 397 no. 164, 397 no. 165, 397 no. 167, 530 repro.
- 1982 Richard, Paul. "Acquired Art: Corcoran Shows Its Best Since 1975 [exh. review]." *The Washington Post* (23 November 1982): D:2.
- 1991 Hayes, Jeffrey. *Oscar Bluemner*. New York, 1991: 154, 157 repro., 169, 185.

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- 2000 Cash, Sarah, with Terrie Sultan. *American Treasures of the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. New York, 2000: 196 repro.
- 2011 Wingate, Jennifer. "Oscar Bluemner, *Imagination*." In *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*. Edited by Sarah Cash. Washington, 2011: 242-243, 282, repro.
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