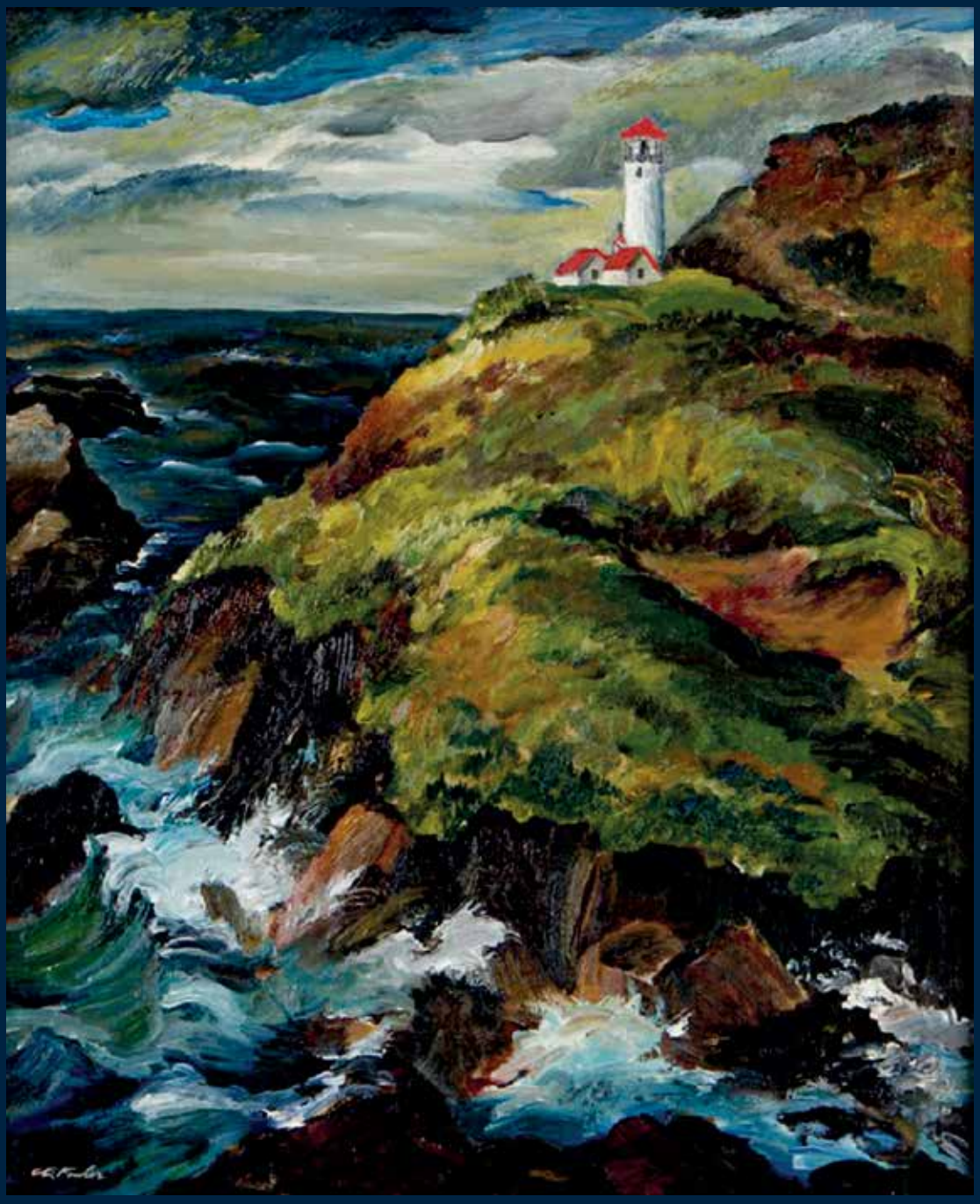
Constance Fowler

TRADITION AND TRANSITION



Constance Fowler at her easel, Willamette University. Published in Willamette's yearbook, *The Wallulah*, 1947.

Constance Fowler

TRADITION AND TRANSITION

by Roger Hull

Constance Fowler (1907–1996) was a painter, printmaker, author, and educator during a career that spanned more than sixty years, twelve of them as a faculty member at Willamette University. Best known for the expressive realism of the paintings and wood engravings she produced in the 1930s and 1940s while at Willamette, she later worked in personal variations of the abstract movements that dominated American art after World War II. With many others of her generation, Fowler came of age as an artist of the American scene but matured in an era of radical reassessment of the nature of art and the fundamentals of making it. In the course of six decades, her prints and paintings saw major transitions and transformations, yet from the beginning her art was suffused with the restlessness and animation of modern expressionism.

Born on June 2, 1907, in International Falls, Minnesota, Constance Edith Fowler attended public schools in Aiken, Cayuna, and Crosby, Minnesota, and moved with her family to Pullman, Washington, in 1923. Her parents, George Fowler (from England, a butcher) and Matilda Einfeld Braacher (from Hamburg), established residence in Pullman so that Constance and her younger sister, Margaret, could attend Washington State College while living at home.

Constance Fowler took courses from the painter William McDermitt and others at Washington State, earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in Art in 1929. She completed a year of graduate study at the University of Washington, then moved with her family to California and, a short time later, to Salem, Oregon. They bought a farm on Swegle Road east of town in 1932. That year, she painted her earliest surviving work, *Beach Cliff* (Figure 1), which presages much that Fowler came to be known for: a lifelong love of the Oregon coast, a reckless and exuberant painting style, and an ongoing interest in formal distortion and abstraction as a means of expressive intensity. In *Beach Cliff*, Fowler depicts the waves and the eroded sandbanks as a continuous surge of energy, reflecting her interpretation of nature as being perpetually dynamic, always in flux.

In Salem, Fowler painted designs on lamp shades, taught art lessons for one dollar a session, and in 1934 volunteered as advisor to an art club at Willamette University.

FIGURE 1.
Beach Cliff
1932
Oil on Masonite panel
23 1/4 x 28 3/8 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University
Gift of the Family of Connie Fowler, 2002.027

In 1935 Bruce Baxter, the university's president, hired her to teach art and to establish an art department (art lessons had been offered at Willamette since the nineteenth century by Marie Craig and others, but there had been no department in recent memory). Fowler set up shop in cramped quarters on the third floor of Eaton Hall near her office in the building's west tower. She bonded with her students (see Figure 2) but was an independent loner on the generally conservative Willamette faculty of the era. She found an aesthetic and cultural soul mate in Bennet Ludden, who joined the music faculty in 1943, and they remained in contact until Fowler's death. He compiled a catalogue of Fowler's artworks in 1969, donated a collection of her prints and paintings to the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in the 1990s, and upon his death in 2012 left a bequest that supports this publication.

Fowler also remained in contact with her Willamette students James Elliot (who became the director of the art museum at the University of California, Berkeley) and David Foster (who served as head of the art department at the University of Oregon). In the 1990s, Foster incorporated Bennet Ludden's catalogue into an illustrated compendium on Fowler's life as an artist. Despite her abiding friendship with several men, she never married, in this way paralleling the lives of many other female educators and artist-educators of her era, including Oregon's Helen Blumenstiel, who taught art at Linfield

FIGURE 2.
Constance Fowler (middle row, second from right) with her students, members of the Paint Spots art club, Willamette University.
Published in Willamette's yearbook, *The Wallulah*, 1939.

FIGURE 3.
Brunk's Corner
1938–1940
Wood engraving published in *The Old Days in and Near Salem, Oregon* (Seattle, 1940)
6 x 8 5/8 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University
Gift of Constance Fowler, FOW92.016

College, and Ruth Grover, who taught classes at the Lincoln County Art Center and elsewhere. For women such as these, the independence of a professional, creative, and personal life did not mesh with matrimony. Known to her family members and friends as Connie, and on at least one youthful occasion signing her work with "Conni," she more often than not used the signature "C. E. Fowler," perhaps as a way of deemphasizing gender as she navigated the male-oriented professional art world of her day.

Like many American artists of the 1930s, Fowler was drawn to the regional scene and found ways to merge realism and abstraction. Many works, including *Heceta Lighthouse* (1937; front cover), *Parkersville Hotel* (1938; private collection), and wood engravings such as *Brunk's Corner* (1938–1940; Figure 3), pit historic architecture against the corrosive forces of nature in the same period that Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, and in Michigan Carl Hall were exploring a similar dynamic. Fowler's works are descriptive and often documentary but at the same time convey a mood of disquiet: paint is applied in surging brushstrokes and dark, often brooding colors, while the chisel marks on her engraving blocks are aggressive gouges that reflect emotional intensity. The Pacific Northwest—and seemingly life itself—was a turbulent realm for Constance Fowler.

In some early works, Fowler set aside her Depression-era interest in regional historic sites in favor of abstraction, as with her untitled gouache of a landscape or park (Figure 4) with its affinities to *Blaue Reiter* German Expressionism. A rare example of near-abstraction in Northwest painting of the 1930s, it anticipates Fowler's more extensive explorations of nonrepresentational forms in the postwar period.

During the summers of 1936, 1937, and 1938, Fowler was the recipient of Carnegie grants set up to help art teachers complete their Master of Fine Art degrees. Carnegie programs were offered on two campuses in the country—Harvard University and University of Oregon. Fowler studied at Oregon with the head of the architecture department, Walter R. B. Willcox (whom she held in high regard throughout her life), and the painter Andrew Vincent, among others. She completed her M.F.A. in 1940.

FIGURE 4.
Untitled landscape abstraction
1930s
Gouache on paper
8 x 6 ¾ inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Gift of Florence Kubin,
KUB94.001

For her Master's thesis project, Fowler made twenty wood engravings of historic sites in the Willamette Valley, which she published (with her own text) as the book *The Old Days in and Near Salem, Oregon* (Frank McCaffrey's Dogwood Press, Seattle, 1940). From this set, the engraving of the house at Brunk's Corner reveals her interest both in describing a particular site and structure (still in existence on Highway 22 west of Salem) and in expressing a mood of unease by means of heavily incised lines and jittery light and dark contrasts. Fowler's wood engravings of rural subjects imbued with historic or mythic significance provide a Pacific Northwest variant of the work of Thomas Nason, Clare Leighton, and the others who helped establish the golden age of American wood engraving in the 1920s and 1930s. But Fowler avoids the calm deliberateness of the prints by Nason and Leighton in favor of the sense of urgency that underlies much of her art.

Between 1935 and 1947, Constance Fowler was loosely associated with a group of Oregon artists who also saw the state's valleys, mountains, ocean beaches, and isolated settlements as the basis of a distinctly regional expressionism. The philosopher of this Oregon regionalism was the painter Harry Wentz (1875–1965), who taught at the Museum Art School in Portland beginning in 1910 and, in conversations with painters and architects, inspired a Northwest aesthetic. Arthur and Albert Runquist and Charles Heaney, Wentz's students, were among the many artists who subscribed to this aesthetic, as did Fowler. Her work was exhibited repeatedly in the Portland Art Museum and Seattle Art Museum annual exhibitions of Northwest artists. She was one of seven Oregon artists represented at the New York World's Fair of 1939, exhibiting her wood engraving *Pioneer Church* in the exhibition *American Art Today*, which also included works by Louis Bunce, William Givler, Charles Heaney, Lloyd Reynolds, Anne Kutka McCosh, and Martina Gangle—all of whom were establishing themselves, as was Fowler, in the cultural history of the Northwest.

FIGURE 5.
South Commercial Street, Salem, Oregon
ca. 1940
22 x 24 inches
Oil on canvas
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Gift of Roger and Bonnie Hull in
memory of Piatt and Fanny Hull,
HUL97.001

In 1942, Fowler's painting *Stayton Mill*, depicting a flour mill southeast of Salem, entered the permanent collection of the Seattle Art Museum as the winner of the Katherine B. Baker Memorial Purchase Prize. Fowler's expressive intensity attracted the attention of Robert Tyler Davis, director of the Portland Art Museum, who selected her as one of thirteen to be represented in the exhibition *Oregon Artists* at the San Francisco Museum of Art (January 12–February 7, 1943). Her fellow painters in the San Francisco show included William Givler, Charles Heaney, David McCosh, Carl Morris, C. S. Price, Albert Runquist, Andrew Vincent (who had been her teacher in the Carnegie summer programs at University of Oregon), and Charles Voorhies.

Fowler judged Salem of the 1930s to be one of the nation's most beautiful towns and continued to focus on subjects in and around the capital city in the 1940s. *South Commercial Street* (ca. 1940; Figure 5) depicts a man leaning on the railing of a bridge located just south of Trade Street, near the present-day Civic Center. In the spring of 2013, this bridge was destroyed to make way for a new one, and the site is otherwise much changed since 1940 when the bridge overlooked the roundhouse of the Salem Water Department. Fowler found in the bridge railing, roundhouse, and tower an almost European vignette, reminiscent of scenes by Maurice Utrillo. But her distinctive treatment of the tree, with its angled trunk and billowing foliage that fuses with the energetic stream of clouds, injects a cyclonic element into the otherwise tranquil depiction.

FIGURE 6.
Back of Main Street, Independence
(also known as *Moon Reflection*)
1945
Oil on canvas
24 x 30 inches
Collection of Matt and
Judy Wilder

The painting *Back of Main Street, Independence* (also known as *Moon Reflection*, 1945; Figure 6) sets a blockade of buildings into a landscape of heaving, grass-covered hummocks and spookily agitated trees feathering into a roiling sky. The buildings, which in the painting range in color from brick red to light pink with a preponderance of grays and browns, are still to be seen near the river in Independence, Oregon, a few miles from Salem. The irregular geometry of the buildings, the active paintwork, and the subtlety of the colors, which suggest a bath of pale moonlight in the moments before a storm, transform a familiar reality in magical or maybe menacing ways—regionalism and expressionism again merging in Fowler's distinctive manner.

Fowler taught at Willamette for twelve years, resigning in 1947 (in frustration over what she perceived as its lack of support of the arts) to take a teaching post at Albion College in Michigan, where she taught until 1965. (Her successors at Willamette were Esther Huffman and, beginning in 1948, Carl Hall.) As a teacher Fowler is remembered for her wit, humor, fairness, and open-minded encouragement of students to pursue art on their own terms. "I always knew my idea would keep its integrity and would be examined carefully, without being threatened," recalled her student and friend David Foster. "But she was a strong critic."[1] Fowler said that in teaching she "found congenial people with seriousness of purpose and enthusiasm for discussion and experimentation. At the same time I have been able to continue my own work, so you see, I teach to paint and paint to teach."[2]

Leaving Oregon in 1947 was a major step in Fowler's life, taken at a crucial moment in the cultural history of the United States, as well, with World War II at an end and both American and immigrant European artists calling into question the values of

FIGURE 7.
Toad
1955
Wood engraving
8 x 11 1/2 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Gift of Constance Fowler,
FOW94.045b

American Regionalism and realism, which had dominated the Depression and war years. Fowler's life and work provide a window not only onto her particular career but also onto a period in American art during which assumptions about art changed radically, and established artists faced the challenge of reinventing themselves and their artwork.

Although Fowler's realism had always been marked by expression and mood, the postwar phenomena of Abstract Expressionism and complete nonrepresentation were as challenging for her as they were for many of her contemporaries the country over. She spent the rest of her career experimenting with vocabularies of organic and geometric abstraction. As early as 1947, she deployed ribbons and washes of color down the surface of her canvas (see frontispiece) in an approach that she continued to explore throughout her career. Her prints of the 1950s include wildly calligraphic, at times even scribbled, renditions of birds and toads (see Figure 7) and a fanciful rendering of amoeba-like organisms that she titled *Stunt Night* and then renamed *Faculty*

FIGURE 8.
Stunt Night
(also known as *Faculty Meeting*)
1953
Linoleum cut
10 1/2 x 13 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Bequest of Jacqueline Maag,
2005.008.006

Meeting (1953; Figure 8), reflecting her exasperation with her Albion (and formerly Willamette) colleagues who she felt talked too much about too little.

As Carl Hall wrote in *The Oregon Statesman* in 1957, "Constance Fowler refuses to be pigeon-holed in a certain creative category. Disappointment will be felt by those who feel an artist should not evolve, change, and grow and that once an artist has done something liked by many people there is no reason to change."[3] Aware that she was perplexing some of her viewers as she embraced abstraction, she wrote with a note of ruefulness in her unpublished second book, *About Understanding Art*: "The term 'abstract' causes many mortals to barricade the windows of their minds and reach for the aspirin."[4]

The mixed-media *Tracking Station* (1962; Figure 9) combines Fowler's study of both straight-edge and painterly abstraction while also reflecting her recurring interest in the human invasion of outer space. The expressionism of her earlier oil paintings continues: in *Tracking Station* the mood verges on the cataclysmic or apocalyptic. Aspects of Wassily Kandinsky's art come to mind at various levels here, although Fowler brought her own mordant sensibility to this and most everything else she created.

During her Midwest years, Fowler exhibited at the Butler Art Institute in Youngstown, Ohio, The Detroit Institute of Arts, and other prestigious venues, but the halcyon days of her career lay behind her—in the prewar and wartime era in the Pacific Northwest. She once stated, facetiously, that she could find nothing to paint in Michigan, and it seems to be the case that much of the work she made while living in the Midwest was inspired by the forces and formations of the Oregon coast.

FIGURE 9.
Tracking Station
1962
Mixed media on canvas
30 1/4 x 38 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Gift of Constance Fowler,
FOW94.072

FIGURE 10.
Low Tide
ca. 1975
Oil and sand on canvas
18 x 22 1/4 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Gift of Joey Hadfield,
2001.001.001

With family and friends in Oregon, her ties to the Northwest were strong. Her Salem friends included the landscape architects Elizabeth Lord and Edith Schryver and the art patron Opal Young. Fowler spent her summers in Oregon, creating and periodically exhibiting her art, and in 1965 she retired from teaching to settle in Seal Rock on the coast. In a project that renewed her ties to her earlier life in Oregon, she arranged in 1969 for the publication of seventy-five portfolio sets of *The Old Days*, the engravings printed this time by Wilbur Shook of Newburg, Oregon, from the cherrywood blocks that Fowler had carved in the late 1930s and originally published in 1940.

Residing in Seal Rock with her mother (as she had in Salem and Michigan as well), Fowler continued to show her work in Salem, Coos Bay, and Lincoln City in group and one-person shows. In response to the beach environment, she used painterly abstraction to suggest the patterns of sand, tide pools, and wetlands. In *Low Tide* (ca. 1975; Figure 10), scabby patches of gray, tan, and white form an amorphous lower zone that gives way to blue pools of shallow water accented by orange shapes, splashes of reflected light that recall passages in works by Paul Gauguin and the Fauves. In some of these densely textured nature abstractions, Fowler mixed sand with the pigments to achieve the coarse graininess of ocean beaches.

Of necessity living frugally, she recycled some of her earlier engravings and made new images, reproducing them in offset printing or Xerox as note cards that she sold in gift shops and galleries throughout western Oregon. Her Christmas cards featuring talking sea gulls reflect her humorous and ironic sensibilities, her skeptical,

FIGURE 11.
Angry Sea, Angry Rocks
1983
Watercolor and gouache on paper
15 x 17 inches
Hallie Ford Museum of Art,
Willamette University
Elmer Edwin Young Purchase
Fund, YNGAF92.01

essentially liberal political consciousness, her interest in current events, and her outspoken nature.

In 1986, Fowler returned to Salem and settled in a mobile home park on Auburn Road Northeast, where she continued to paint. She participated in Willamette University's sesquicentennial art exhibition in 1992, showing her gouache *Angry Sea, Angry Rocks* (1983, Figure 11). In a statement reflecting her long-held belief that the distinction between animate and inanimate matter in nature can be a false one, she said: "It is . . . a creation about the sea attacking the rocks and the resentment of the rocks. During high tide or storms, I tend to watch the rocks more than the waves."[5]

As late as 1993 she was working on a large, thinly painted abstraction of ocean waves and spray (back cover) that brings the viewer dangerously close to surging and cascading water that seems to flow over the edge of a cliff and into our space. This work, which Fowler considered unfinished, is clearly about painting as a process: rivulets of thin pigment trail downward, suggesting that she was interested in calling our attention to medium and process as well as the terrifying forces of the sea.

Constance Fowler suffered a stroke in 1993 and spent her last years in a nursing home in Oregon City. She died on May 11, 1996, at the age of eighty-eight. The record of her place in the art history of the region is preserved in the materials she gave to Willamette University in 1993–1994. Fowler donated her biographical records, correspondence, exhibition catalogues and fliers, reviews, publications, manuscripts, and selections from her library, as well as examples of her prints, printing blocks, paintings, and drawings. These collections are housed in the university's Pacific Northwest Artists Archive and the Hallie Ford Museum of Art.

In her work from the 1930s until late in life, Fowler was intense and forceful in her expression—using her painting and engraving tools to suggest currents of movement and energy and, at times, even anger or hostility. Fowler had the sense of things moving and shifting, of processes under way, forces threatening a breakup. What the Romantic era called the "sublime" and the twentieth century "expressionism" is always near the surface in her art. Her life's work as a whole is an ever-changing corpus with roots in traditional art that, from the beginning, were perpetually challenged by Fowler's instinct for transition, transformation, and change.

Roger Hull is Professor of Art History *emeritus* at Willamette University and the Senior Faculty Curator at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art.

NOTES

All materials cited are housed in the Willamette University Archives and Special Collections.

1. David Foster, interview with Roger Hull, Willamette University, 28 Mar. 1996.
2. Constance Fowler, in "Introducing New Albionites: Comes From Northwest To Art Post Here." *Albion Evening Recorder* [Michigan] 24 Oct. 1947.
3. Carl Hall, "Images" (review of Constance Fowler exhibition at Bush House Museum, Salem), *Oregon Statesman* [Salem] 28 July 1957: 15 (section III).
4. Constance Fowler, *About Understanding Art*. Unpublished manuscript.
5. Constance Fowler, artist's statement, 1992.