

BEATRICE CUMING: Connecticut Precisionist

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Lyman Allyn Art Museum

Beatrice Cuming: Connecticut Precisionist

by Tanya Pohrt, Ph.D., Curator

Beatrice Lavis Cuming (American 1903–1974) celebrated modernity in her dynamic depictions of urban life in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. Merging elements of European modernism with American subjects, she painted street scenes, views of regional industry, quiet interiors, and maritime landscapes. Championing her distinctive industrial aesthetic, Cuming declared, “mechanized America is beautiful,” offering “an expression of life in America that is very exciting.”¹ For Cuming and her Precisionist contemporaries, America’s industrial growth epitomized progress, offering new and dynamic material for artistic exploration.

Cuming joined the Public Works of Art Project in 1934 and produced several etchings before the program shifted to become the WPA Federal Art Project, which employed her into the early 1940s through the state of Connecticut. She submitted drawings, prints, and paintings to the program, and her art was placed in Connecticut schools and municipal sites. Cuming had several focused WPA projects, assisting Aldis Browne on a mural project for the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, and documenting Harbor Defenses on Long Island Sound for six months in 1941. With security clearance, Cuming visited and depicted sites of military importance, including Fort H.G. Wright on Fishers Island. *Untitled [Gun]* depicts an anti-aircraft gun on a disappearing carriage at Battery Barlow at Fort Wright. On the Thames River in New London and Groton, she painted Coast Guard vessels, including *Untitled [Ship Smoke Stack]*, which may depict the cutter Pequot, and sites on the Naval Submarine Base, including *Diving Tower*, a tank used to simulate underwater emergency submarine escape training. In *Construction*, a red crane reflects work in Groton at either the Submarine Base or General Dynamics Electric Boat. One of Cuming’s defense pieces was exhibited at the National Gallery of Art and at the Museum of Modern Art in early 1942, and related works of art were included in her solo exhibition at the Guy Mayer Gallery in New York later that year.

< detail of *Untitled [Ship Smoke Stack]*

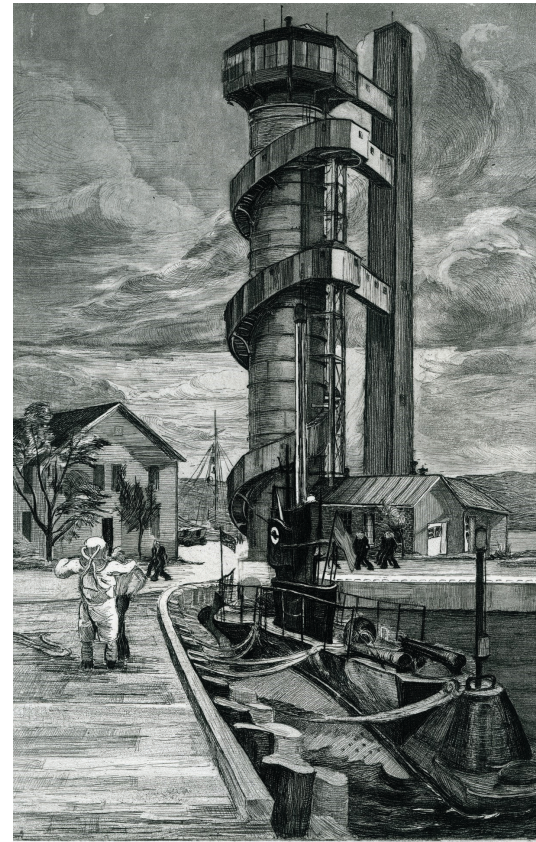
¹ Margaret Mara, “The American Industrial Scene is Subject for Boro-Born Artist.” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY) 12 December 1946, 19.



Beatrice Cuming
Untitled [Gun, Coastal Defense], 1941
Oil on canvas
24 x 36 inches
Collection of Bagley Reid



Beatrice Cuming
Untitled [Ship Smoke Stack], ca. 1941
Oil on canvas
28 ½ x 23 ½ inches
Collection of Bagley Reid



Beatrice Cuming
Diving Tower, 1938
Etching on paper
17 x 12 inches
Lyman Allyn Art Museum
Gift of Elizabeth Ring, 2021.10.18



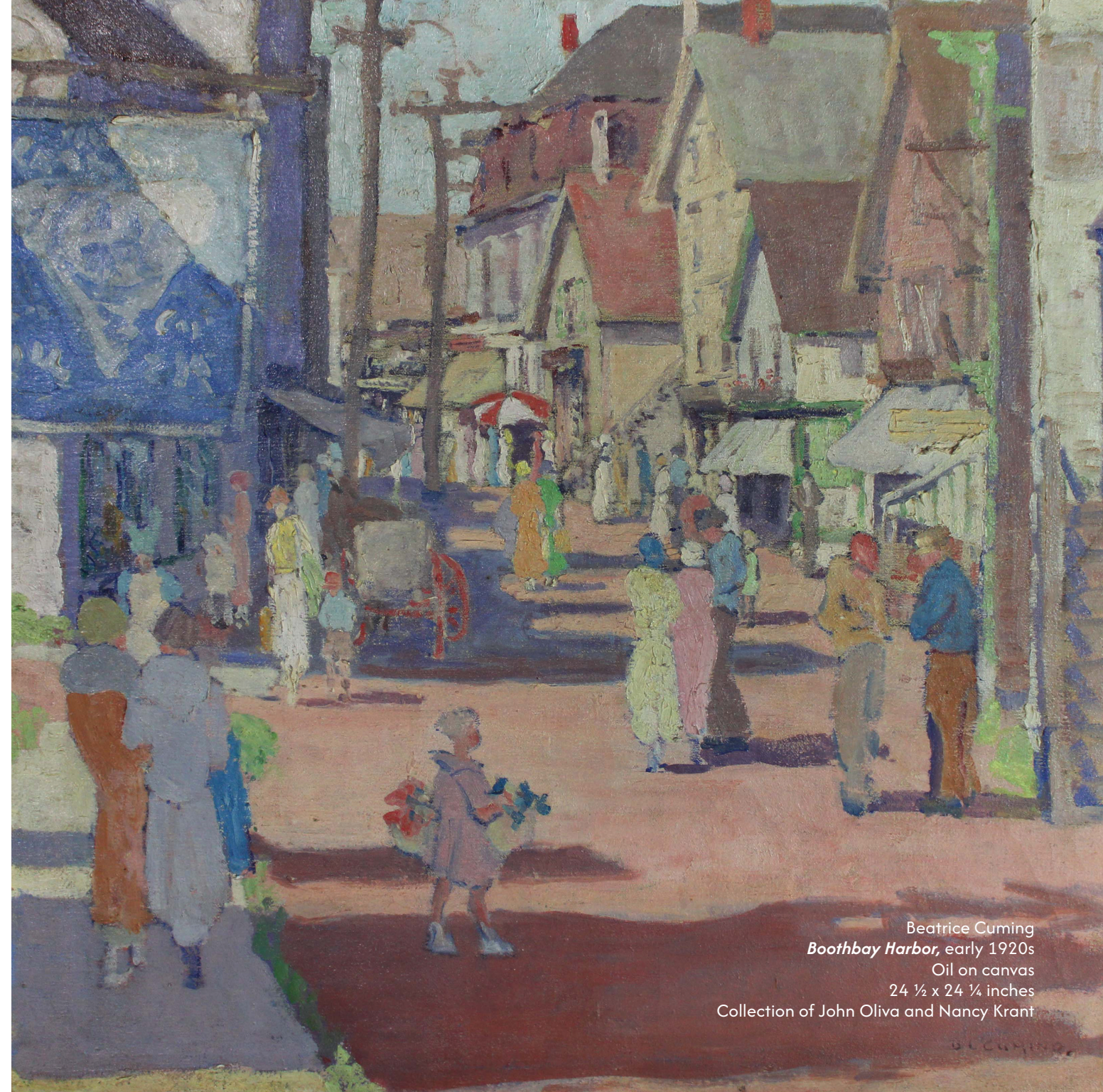
Beatrice Cuming
Construction/Red Crane, 1941
Oil on canvas
36 x 24 inches
Collection of John Oliva and Nancy Krant

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Cuming was the daughter of artist and illustrator Frederick Cuming. A precocious child, she entered and won various art competitions in her youth. She enrolled at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1920 and spent the three subsequent summers studying under the marine painter Henry Bayley Snell in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, painting scenes such as *Untitled [Boothbay Harbor]*. After graduating in 1923, Cuming taught high school in Brooklyn before leaving for France in 1924 to study art. In Paris she attended the Académie Colarossi, the nearby Académie Grande Chaumière, and the Moderne Academy, also studying in the studio of André Lhote. After a year in Paris, Cuming spent a second year traveling and painting in Italy, North Africa, England and Brittany.



Short on funds, Cuming returned to New York in 1926 to pursue freelance illustration. She took classes at the Art Students League and exhibited her work before returning to France in 1929. Cuming spent five years in Paris and Marseilles, in addition to a winter in Tunisia. In Paris, Cuming's encounters with the circus inspired several paintings, including *Acrobats*.

Beatrice Cuming
Acrobats, ca. 1929–1933
 Oil on canvas
 35 x 27 inches
 Lyman Allyn Art Museum
 Bequest of Darius Raymond in memory of
 George Oldershaw, 1995.3



Beatrice Cuming
Boothbay Harbor, early 1920s
 Oil on canvas
 24 ½ x 24 ¼ inches
 Collection of John Oliva and Nancy Krant

A year after returning from abroad in 1933, Cuming got on a northbound train from New York, intending to move to Boston. When the train stopped in New London, however, she was so enchanted by her surroundings that she grabbed her bags and decided to settle there instead. Several years later she remarked that New London was “inexhaustible for subject matter, and in every way agreeable and good for work.” When asked about her choice to paint increasingly industrial subjects, Cuming said she found this material “obviously beautiful, powerful, dramatic, [and] exciting.”²

In downtown New London, Cuming lived in a top floor studio at 130 State Street. She depicted the studio’s interior in *Boarding House Furniture*, with a view out the window overlooking nearby roofs. Several vibrant evening scenes portray the street life nearby. *Untitled [Corner of Bank and State Streets]*, captures a lively and boisterous summer evening, with a diverse group of passersby and a view into Whalen’s drug store and the bar next door. The marquee of the Crown Theatre, just visible at the right beyond the drug store, is highlighted in another painting, *Saturday Night: New London*, which captures a view looking down State Street, with Union Station and the Soldiers & Sailors monument visible in the background. Here and elsewhere, we see the influence of and Cuming’s affinity with the work of contemporaries such as Reginald Marsh, Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, Isabel Bishop, and others.

Cuming painted other distinctive sites in New London such as the Dutch Tavern, the charitable B.P. Learned Mission House, the historic Customs House on Bank Street and a lyrical painting of the circular *Fire House Steps*, in the former New London Fire Station located at 66 Union Street.

² “Beatrice Cuming Finds Inspiration in Local Scenes.” *The New London Day*, 7 August 1937, 17.



Beatrice Cuming
Boarding House Furniture, ca. 1940
Oil on canvas
31 ¼ x 27 inches
Collection of Marjorie M. Geary and Maria Reagan



Beatrice Cuming
Untitled [Corner of Bank and State Streets], ca. 1936
 Oil on canvas
 31 5/8 x 45 1/2 inches
 Private collection



Beatrice Cuming
Saturday Night: New London, ca 1935
 Oil on canvas
 25 5/8 x 31 7/8 inches
 Lyman Allyn Art Museum
 Partial gift of William Bendig, 1992.2



Beatrice Cuming
Fire House Steps, n.d.
 Oil on canvas
 43 x 31 inches
 Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Christian Ghiglia



Beatrice Cuming
Bridge, ca. mid-1950s
 Oil on canvas
 21 x 36 inches
 Collection of Jonathan C. Sproul

Interested in transportation and engineering, Beatrice Cuming painted a variety of bridges, roadways, trains, and subways. In a dynamic composition in yellow, orange, and green, *Bridge* depicts New York's Willis Avenue Bridge, connecting Manhattan and the Bronx.

In New London, Beatrice Cuming painted numerous maritime scenes. *Bell Buoys on the Dock* depicts workers performing maintenance on bell buoys. Important for safety and navigation in and around New London's busy deep-water harbor, buoys help mark the water's depth, note areas of danger, and indicate channel routes. *Impact of White*, circa 1951, depicts a close view of the Mystic Isle ferry, which began running between New London and Fishers Island, New York in 1950. Focusing on light, shapes, and shadows, Cuming shows the vessel's unusual midship entrance for loading cars onto the ferry. *The Architecture of Light* likely represents the same location, New London's city pier, located behind Union Station. The empty dock appears at an unusual angle, receding and appearing to tilt upward, the sun reflecting off the water beyond, obscuring any view of land on the opposite bank. The painting's nearly empty space, long shadows, and warm palette suggest the influence of the Italian surrealist artist Giorgio De Chirico. Here and elsewhere, Cuming experimented with style and technique. While much of her work presents urban and industrial realist scenes, some compositions are more abstract. *Waterfall, Maine* is one such example. With a semi-cubist approach, this abstracted landscape of a waterfall and the built environment contains fragments and layers of visual details.



Beatrice Cuming
Bell Buoys on the Dock, ca. 1937
 Watercolor on paper
 20 x 24 1/8 inches
 Fairfield Museum and History Center
 Gift of Margaret P. Wemer, 2012.2



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Beatrice Cuming
Impact of White, ca. 1951
 Oil on canvas
 23 ¾ x 35 ¾ inches
 Lyman Allyn Art Museum Purchase, 1968.107



Beatrice Cuming
The Architecture of Light, ca. 1940s
 Oil on canvas
 29 x 39 inches
 Florence Griswold Museum; Purchase, 2021.7



Beatrice Cuming
Waterfall, Maine, ca. 1930s
 Oil on canvas
 46 x 36 inches
 Collection of Timothy P. McLaughlin



Beatrice Cuming painted numerous scenes of factories and power plants, exploring a range of shapes, textures, and surfaces visible in smokestacks, scaffolding, pipes, and tanks. In the late 1930s, Cuming depicted a coal-powered electrical plant on the Thames River a few miles North of New London (*Industrial Scene, Montville Stacks*), as well as a sprawling power plant in New Bedford, Massachusetts (*Towering*), a site that Charles Sheeler also photographed and painted in 1939.

Working to support herself as an artist throughout her career, Cuming taught art to children and adults, teaching in the New London Public School system from 1936 to 1940. She led adult art classes at the Lyman Allyn starting in 1935 and later directed the museum's youth art program for many years. In 1942, Cuming directed the summer art colony at Sul Ross State College in the Big Bend region of West Texas. Cuming captured what she described as the "stark grandeur" of the region in *Big Bend Country*.



Beatrice Cuming
Big Bend Country, ca. 1942
Oil on canvas
24 x 32 inches
New London High School Collection



Beatrice Cuming
Industrial Scene, Montville Stacks, ca. 1938
Oil on canvas
35 ½ x 27 ¼ inches
Mystic Museum of Art Permanent Collection
Donated by Otto E. Liebig



Beatrice Cuming
Towering/Smoke Stacks, ca. 1939
Oil on canvas
32 x 24 ½ inches
New London High School Collection

In 1943, Cuming was working as a security guard at General Dynamics Electric Boat in Groton and New London, Connecticut, when the company commissioned her to document its wartime work building submarines. Two 1944 canvases show her compositional range. In the evocative *Welders*, a dark interior is lit indirectly by the blowtorches of crouching workers. *Chubb* shows a later stage in submarine production, as the cylindrical hull of the USS Chub takes shape against the backdrop of the water and open sky.

Cuming's Electric Boat commission brought her to the attention of Standard Oil, which had a substantial presence as an arts patron. In 1946, Beatrice Cuming traveled to the firm's bulk plants in Philadelphia and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, rendering sites that were "a vital connecting link between oil refinery and consumer."³ Six of Cuming's gouache scenes were reproduced in *The Lamp* in October 1946, including the cover image. *Gas Tanks at Standard Oil* depicts the Philadelphia bulk plant, with a double row of reddish and gray gas tanks standing tall. In a related interview, Cuming spoke of her fascination with progress and industry. "There is beauty in the growth of America," she remarked, "We are busy going ahead. We can't go back."⁴



Beatrice Cuming
Welders at Electric Boat Company, 1944
 Oil on canvas
 32 x 39 inches
 New Britain Museum of American Art
 Charles F. Smith Fund, 1972.01



Beatrice Cuming
Chubb, 1944
 Oil on canvas
 34 x 30 inches
 Lyman Allyn Art Museum
 Gift of General Dynamics Electric Boat Division, 1994.2

³ "Scenes in a Bulk Plant, Watercolors by Beatrice Cuming," *The Lamp*, October 1946 (vol. 28, no. 5), 15.

⁴ Margaret Mara, "The American Industrial Scene is Subject for Boro-Born Artist." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY) 12 December 1946, 19.



Beatrice Cuming
Gas Tanks at Standard Oil, ca. 1946
Gouache on paperboard
21 x 29 inches
Collection of Jonathan C. Sproul

 **Lyman Allyn**
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