

## Clarence Holbrook Carter (1904-2000)

*Over and Above Series (Fox)*, 1963

Pencil, gouache and feathers

H. 29.5 x W. 21.5 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum.

Michener Art Endowment Challenge.

Gift of Mr. Wm. A. and Anne Stetson Rawak.



### In the Words of the Artist

“Well evidently I have a very stubborn nature and when somebody advises me not to do something I’m more determined to do it.” -Smithsonian Institute Archive, 1964

“It is the mysterious and magical elements in life which have always captivated me, things suggested but only partly seen. One element in this strange world of partial knowledge is the world of other creatures. We look at them in fascination and wonder. From this strange world of fact and fancy stare back images, both real and unreal, of what perhaps we might be to others, but never to ourselves—the Somebody Else. The barrier creates a tension that heightens the mystery of the subject and isolates it from us. It is across this barrier that we perceive the silence and pervading mystery which transport the subject to the realm of conjecture.” -Art Voices, n.d.

“Most of us need a physical handle. It's difficult to be totally abstract...Pure abstraction never satisfied me completely even when I realized there's another realm beyond what most people consider reality. The symbols have broader meaning for me than human figures in a given environment. For me, symbols work emotionally, visually and abstractly.” -The Morning Call, 1984

### About the Artist

Clarence Holbrook Carter, well-known for his large architectural paintings and symbolic landscapes, made his early reputation as a painter of the American scene in the 1930's and 1940's. These early drawings, watercolors and oils are realistic portrayals of rural America that sometimes express despair and loneliness spurred by the Great Depression.

In the mid-1920s, William Mathewson Milliken (1889-1978), a curator and future director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, took an interest in Carter's career by helping to build his reputation in the Cleveland art community and encouraging his studies in Europe. Following World War II, Carter's style changed. Accomplishments in the field of advertising design encouraged experimentation and abstraction in his work. During the 1950s and 1960s, his work took on an increasingly surrealistic style with "monsters" and imaginary animals stalking fanciful landscapes. A prominent series of the period, *Over and Above*, features oversized animals leering at the viewer over a wall that dominates the lower portion of his large canvases. Carter's *Transections* and *Eschatos* series incorporates floating, transparent ovoid shapes transposed onto

architectural landscapes. They represent the artist's conception of the human spirit striving for perfection.

Carter studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art from 1923 through 1927, then began his travels abroad to Italy in which he remained for several months. Ready to return to the U.S., he traveled on a transatlantic ship used to transport livestock and met his wife to be Mary Griswold. Returning to Cleveland, Carter taught at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Carter was then asked to be the director of the Federal Art Project for Northeastern Ohio, a position he held from 1937 to 1938. Carter went on to teach at the Carnegie Institute from 1938 to 1944.

In search of new surroundings, Clarence Carter moved to Holicong, Bucks County, Pennsylvania with his wife Mary Griswold Carter and their children in 1944. In 1948, he settled in in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. During his career, Carter was involved with the regional art community and served as a judge at the annual Phillips' Mill Community Association Art show. Author James A. Michener was a longtime friend and admirer.

In a 1971 magazine article, James Michener wrote the following about artist Clarence Carter, "...toward the end of the century the museums of America will be searching for examples of work done by this gifted man for his canvases are masterful demonstrations of the painterly art." Carter's paintings were classified under the regional umbrella of Bucks County artists and were sought out across the country. Carter's work is in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In addition, his work can be found at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. and in his home town at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

## Looking Questions

- What do you see? Explain all the details you can find.
- Identify the focal point of the work. What draws your eye to this location?
- What part of this painting is closest to the viewer? Farthest? Explain.
- Examine the surface of the work and describe its texture. What materials did Carter use?
- Where do you think this image is taking place? Why?
- Explain the colors Carter used in the work. Why do you think he chose them?
- Is this painting more realistic or abstract? Explain your answer.
- Carter's body of work often contains objects that could be considered symbols. What components of this work would you consider as symbols? Explain your answer.
- How do you think the fox feels in this work? Why?
- Explain how you feel when you look at this painting. What makes you feel this way?
- If you could tell a story about the work, what would it be?
- Why do you think Carter chose to make this painting? Explain your answer.

## About This Artwork

During the 1960s, Clarence Holbrook Carter created a series of large canvases and small drawings featuring birds, giant insects, and other animals peering over walls. The crisp style and mysterious mood of this work are important elements of the magic realist style employed by Carter in many of his best-known paintings. As a boy, Carter visited the circus and was mesmerized at the huge and quiet animals that would peer over the fence and stare at him in silent conversation.

This particular work is divided horizontally across the first third of the canvas creating a definitive change in space and depth. Painted in a realistic manner, the fox is peering at us over a wall of some kind, invoking a quiet dialogue with the viewer. The setting of the work is approached in a surrealist manner with the feathers seeming to float in the air above us or perhaps laying on the ground in front of the fox. In describing Carter's work, author and art collector, James Michener remarked: "They impress some viewers as menacing, but I have always found them to be the quintessential evocation of the animal kingdom." Michener explained further, "They avoid the purely fanciful constructions of wildlife seen in European surrealist paintings, but they are so forceful in their imagery that they dominate the mind in a different way. They are very successful in creating a mysterious sense of animal life and are of increasing interest to those of us who are trying to determine what man's relationship to nature should be."

The position of the fox in this image forces our attention to its placement and at the same time requires our recognition of the collage and textural elements within the painting. Gouache on canvas is combined with textural elements such as fibers and actual feathers. The composition is very monochromatic with the exception of the artist bringing the viewer's attention to the bright yellow eyes. Carter states, "I've used the eye quite a bit. It says a lot. It says the whole person. ...they allow those inside to look out and take in the world outside. They fascinate us from the outside as we study their expression and get a glimpse of what is going on inside. They fire your imagination and wish to pierce their mystery."

## Themes

*Over and Above Series (Fox)* addresses a variety of themes for discussion and lesson planning. These include:

Animals in Art	Fables	Symbolism
Rural Living	Magic Realism	Interaction
Economy	Satire	Perspective
Surrealism	Abstraction	

## Key Vocabulary

Contrast	Emotion	Farmstead	Fable
Collage	Narrative	Perspective	Portraiture
Proportion	Realism	Representation	Shape
Space	Symbolism	Texture	Visual Weight
Voyeurism	Depth	Surrealism	Great Depression

## Interdisciplinary Connections

Interdisciplinary connections can be made between *Over and Above Series (Fox)* and a variety of subjects. The lesson plan ideas listed below for elementary through high school students are provided as a means to enrich your curriculum and make meaningful connections with the work by Clarence Holbrook Carter.

## Visual Arts

- Examine and describe the various textures within the work by visiting the Google Art Project: [www.google.com/culturalinstitute/collection/james-a-michener-art-museum](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/collection/james-a-michener-art-museum). This variety brings different elements of the work into focus which create a visual impact. Using collage materials create a mixed media work with a variety of tactile textures.
- Explore realism in your drawings by examining the shapes used to create the portrait of the fox. Select an animal and draw a realistic portrait of it using shapes, analogous colors, and a range of values. Taking Carter's composition as inspiration, use perspective and the positioning of your animal to create a visual dialogue with your audience. Find other images from his *Over and Above Series* online which include: #13, (Bird), 1964; #21 (Oxen), 1967; #9 (Reptile & Bird), 1963; #14 (Ostrich), 1964.
- Looking closely at the work, describe the emotion the fox might be feeling. Can you think of other works of art that show emotion? Look at Pablo Picasso's, *The Old Guitarist*, completed in late 1903– early 1904 found in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Take a photograph of yourself portraying an emotion. Combine it with collage materials and color to help explain your feelings.

## Art History

- There is a long history of cultures incorporating animals into art. Identify a culture or time period to explore this idea. Create a timeline focusing on this culture to represent the usage of animals in art and their symbolic presence through time. Integrate technology by using PowerPoint and uploading work into a SlideShare presentation.

- Carter used the process of collage in the approach to his work. Think about how collage has shaped the visual arts over the past century. Refer to the 1959 responsive article by Clement Greenburg to Art News. Begin with the cubist movement and travel through the history of collage (implied or actual) as it enters the 21st century. From your explorations, select a style that interests you and create a collage with a reflective artist statement.
- The term magical realism was coined in 1925 by German art historian Franz Roh to describe the burgeoning art movement known as Neue Sachlichkeit (“The New Objectivity”). This art depicted ordinary subjects with a mysterious and detached manner. Explore this movement and its contributions to the Surrealism movement as well as the use of perspective/proportion as essential elements in design.
- Carter’s body of work journeys from realistic candid scenes of people, to the magic realism of his *Over and Above Series*, to fairy tale creations of monsters, then architectural landscapes of tombs, caverns, and ovals in his *Transections Series*, and finally his surreal landscapes with mystical eggs symbolic of life in his *Eschatos Series*. Explore his shift from Realism to Surrealism by investigating his body of work. Discuss the difference between works such as Ezra Davenport, 1929 to his later works as *Departed*, 1986.

## Language Arts

- Refer to childhood stories that include animals such as *The Fox and the Grapes* from Aesop’s Fables. Discuss some of the stories associated with the fables and the paradox and allegories held within the text. Consider modern parodies and how they have shaped our contemporary mindset.
- Discuss the phrase and its meaning: “As sly as a fox.” Think of behaviors of other animals and create idioms or similes that match the animal’s traits. Using an animal of your choice, create a list of its characteristics to help construct your phrase. Add a drawing to illustrate your phrase depicting satire or humor.
- The subject matter of Carter’s work can be considered satirical or humorous. Look at the other works in his *Over and Above series*, and write a short essay comparing them for these satirical elements. Discuss which of the works creates the strongest impact regarding this idea and explain why.
- The fox can be considered a symbol in Carter’s work. Discuss the ideas and meaning this fox could be portraying. Relate this symbolism to other literary works portraying animals as a vehicle to convey a message.

## Social Studies/History

- Carter returned to the United States from Italy on a transatlantic transport ship containing livestock. This may have deeply influenced his relationship with the portrayal of animals in the Over and Above Series. Research transatlantic travel in the early century with regard to transportation of goods along with the economic advancements over the last century.
- Carter's early career as a painter was greatly influenced by the Great Depression and its impact on daily life. Many of these works depict realistic scenes of solitary people that present the mood of loneliness and despair. Research other artists that were greatly influenced by the Great Depression. Connect with other historical events and discuss this impact on artistic expression and invention.
- In Carter's composition, the fox's expression gives us the idea that he is proud of his recent hunt. This can be inferred by the feathers included on the surface of the work. The fox has been a long time nuisance for farmers everywhere and they have needed to protect their poultry and livestock from its predatory nature. Examine the many traditions of the farmer, from past and present, regarding the protection of their livelihood.

## Math and Science

- Proportion in art refers the comparison of one object as it relates to another. Factors include relationships of height, width, depth, and distance. For example, one could state that the fox is located on one third of this work of art and two thirds of this work contains feathers. Look at objects within a picture frame and discuss the relationship of these objects in terms of proportion. Materials for this activity could include found objects and a rectangular cut paper frame.
- Identify animals and their natural habitats located in the Bucks County area. Determine where the animals reside on the food chain and graph them accordingly using pictographs.
- When artists create works of art they sometimes use geometry as the building blocks. How many geometric shapes can you find in Carter's artwork? Create your own object or animal by using geometric shapes, (either by drawing or paper cut outs), or wood tangrams.

## More Michener Connections

Discover these additional works and/or artists either at your next visit to the Michener or the Museum's online collections database to compare and contrast them with the work of Clarence Holbrook Carter:

"An "Over and Above" Lesson for Students!" An "Over and Above" Lesson for Students! Learn with the Michener Art Museum. Web. 23 July 2015. [www.learn.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.learn.michenerartmuseum.org)

Clarence Carter, *Merry-Go-Round*, 1949, oil on canvas, 21 1/2x32 1/4, private collection, photo courtesy of Clarence Holbrook Carter. Bucks County Artists Database, [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org)

Clarence Carter, *Over and Above #13*, 1964, oil on canvas, 75x77, photo courtesy of Clarence Holbrook Carter. (Bucks County Artists Database, [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org))

Elsie Driggs, (1898-1952), *Moonstruck Goat*, 1957, oil and pieced fabric on primed canvas, H. 16 x W. 16 inches, James A Michener Art Museum. Museum purchase funded by Agnes and Robert Hagan, 2004.13.2

## Resources

### Websites

"1972 Cleveland Arts Prize for Visual Arts." Cleveland Arts Prize. Web. 06 August 2015. [clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/clarence\\_carter.html](http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/clarence_carter.html).

"AAH." *Academic Session 10: Reading 2013*. Association of Art Historians. Web. 23 July 2015. [www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference/2013-conference/session10](http://www.aah.org.uk/annual-conference/2013-conference/session10).

"About This Artwork." *The Old Guitarist*. Art Institute of Chicago. Web. 23 July 2015. [/www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/28067](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/28067).

Boehm, Barbara Drake, and Melanie Holcomb. "Animals in Medieval Art". Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/best/hd\\_best.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/best/hd_best.htm) (originally published October 2001, last revised January 2012)

"Carter, Clarence Holbrook" The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History. Web 23 July 2015. <http://ech.case.edu/cgi/article.pl?id=CCH2>

"Clarence Holbrook Carter on The Google Art Project", Google Cultural Institute. Fri 25 September 2015. [www.google.com/culturalinstitute/collection/james-a-michener-art-museum](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/collection/james-a-michener-art-museum).

"ExplorePAHistory.com - Stories from PA History." *ExplorePAHistory.com - Stories from PA History*. Web. 23 July 2015. <http://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=1-9-14&chapter=2>.

Greenberg, Clement. "Greenberg: Collage." Greenberg: Collage. Art and Culture, Substantially Revised from an Article in Art News, September, 1958, 1959. Web. 24 July 2015. [www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/collage.html](http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/collage.html).

Kovalenko, Anne. "The Egg And Clarence Holbrook Carter." *Tribunedigital-mcall*. The Morning Call, 20 May 1984. Web. 24 July 2015. [http://articles.mcall.com/1984-05-20/entertainment/2421550\\_1\\_stairs-acrylic-symbols](http://articles.mcall.com/1984-05-20/entertainment/2421550_1_stairs-acrylic-symbols).

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138 South Pine Street, Doylestown, PA 18901  
[www.MichenerArtMuseum.org](http://www.MichenerArtMuseum.org)  
[www.Learn.MichenerArtMuseum.org](http://www.Learn.MichenerArtMuseum.org)



"Magical Realism and Art History." *Magical Realism and Art History*. ArtHistory.net. Web. 24 July 2015. [www.arthistory.net/artstyles/magicalrealism/magicalrealism1.html](http://www.arthistory.net/artstyles/magicalrealism/magicalrealism1.html).

"The Artists Say: Clarence H. Carter." Artvoices Magazine. Web 16 August 2015. [www.artvoicesmagazine.com/](http://www.artvoicesmagazine.com/).

"The Idiom Connection." *The Idiom Connection*. 1997. Web. 23 July 2015. [www.idiomconnection.com/](http://www.idiomconnection.com/).

### **Books for Teachers/Youth**

Barber, Richard W. *Bestiary Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library*, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764: With All the Original Miniatures Reproduced in Facsimile. Woodbridge [England]: Boydell, 1992.

Lehner, Ernst. *Symbols, Signs and Signets*. Newburyport: Dover Publications, 2012.

Moerbeek, Kees, and Chris Beatrice. *Aesop's Fables: A Pop-up Book of Classic Tales*. New York, N.Y.: Little Simon, 2010.

Trapp, Frank, and Douglas Dreishpoon. *Clarence Holbrook Carter*. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.

### **Other**

Oral history interview with Clarence Holbrook Carter, 1964 April 13, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-clarence-holbrook-carter-11654](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-clarence-holbrook-carter-11654)

### **Pennsylvania Common Core Standards:**

English Language Arts: ELA.CC.1.2.A/B/D/F/G; ELA.CC.1.3.A/C/F/G/H; ELA.CC.1.4.C/M/N/O/Q/S/U/V; ELA.CC.1.5.A/C/F. Mathematics - M.CC.2.1.C/D; M.CC.2.3.; Reading in Science & Technical Subjects - CC.3.5.B/E/I.; Reading in History & Social Studies - CC.8.5.A/B/D/G.

### **Pennsylvania State Standards:**

Science - 3.3.A6/A7; 3.4.A; 4.3.A/B; 4.4.A/B/C/D; 4.5.A/B.; Social Studies - 8.2.A/B/C/D; 8.3.A/B/D.; Visual Arts - 9.1.A/B/C/E/J; 9.2.A/D/E/G/H/I/L; 9.3.B/E/F; 9.4.B/C/D.

### **Credits**

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