

Cuming, Beatrice Laving



BEATRICE CUMING

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Beatrice Cuming was born in Brooklyn, New York on March 25, 1903. She attended the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, going on to study under H.B. Snell for three summers at Boothbay Harbor, Maine. After graduation she taught art classes at the Girls' Community High School for a year before deciding to go into free-lance commercial art. Using her earnings from free-lancing, Cuming moved to Paris in 1924. There she studied at the Colarossi, the Grande Chaumière and Moderne Academies, and at the André Lhote Studio. After a year in Paris she travelled and painted in Italy, North Africa, England, and Brittany before returning to New York in 1926. In 1928 she studied at the Art Students League. In 1929 Cuming returned to Paris where she completed her studies. In the early 1930s she moved to Kairouan, Tunisia with her companion, author Dahris Butterworth Martin. In Tunisia, Cuming and Martin met an Arab who acquainted them with the local customs and taught Cuming Arabic. The exotic landscape and customs proved to be a great inspiration to both Cuming and Martin. In 1943 Dahris Martin published a book recounting their adventures in North Africa titled *I Know Tunisia*.

Cuming returned to America in 1933 with a new appreciation for the American landscape. She later recalled, "I was overwhelmed by the wealth of material for an artist here, by my own keenness for it and the feeling of belonging and wanting to be nowhere but here." In 1934 she boarded a train intending to move to Boston. When the train reached New London, Connecticut she was so struck by the beauty she saw around her that she disembarked the train and started a life in that town where she gravitated towards industrial subjects: steam trains, power plants, harbors, and factories.

In 1934 Cuming joined the Public Works of Art Project. When the program dissolved, she was transferred to the WPA Federal Arts Project. Under the WPA she completed 150 easel works. They were allocated to the Norwich State Hospital, Hamden High School, Connecticut State College, Undercliff Sanatorium, Middlesex County Temporary Home, Fairfield State Hospital, Internal Revenue Office, New Britain High School, Lincoln School, Norwalk High School, Cedarcrest Sanatorium, Middlesex County Temporary Home, Long Lane Farm, Rocky Hill Soldiers' Home, Mystic Oral School, Laurel Heights Sanatorium, Southbury Training School, Monroe Center School, and Fort Wright in Fishers Island, NY. Many of Cuming's works for the project were etchings depicting the New London area. She created many of her prints at a print studio set up by the WPA in New York City. She assisted Aldis B. Browne in the execution of a mural for the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

To earn money in New London, Cuming offered art classes to children and adults at her New London studio. She served as the caretaker for her studio and residence, and therefore did not have to pay rent. She also taught art in New London public schools from 1936 until 1940. In 1937 she took control of the Young People's Art Program at the Lyman Allyn Museum. In 1943 she was commissioned to paint the construction of a submarine at the Groton submarine plant. She was also hired to paint watercolors of the Standard Oil Company in New Jersey.

In 1942 Cumming travelled extensively in the Southwest United States. She spent a summer in La Jitas, Texas where she was the Director of the Summer Colony at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas. She was surrounded by wilderness in her quiet cabin, and this environment inspired a number of paintings of nature's beauty. She spent her next summer in a secluded, rented house in New Mexico. An interesting footnote to this time in her life is that she was investigated by the FBI because they suspected she was spying on the Los Alamos nuclear bomb facility. There is no record that their suspicions were true.

In 1958 Cumming designed her own home in New London. It featured a personal studio on the top floor, a first floor living area, and a basement studio for teaching classes. Towards the end of her life she could not afford to live in the house alone, so she moved into her upstairs studio and rented the downstairs living quarters. Cumming resided in the house until her death in March 1974.

Sources: *Beatrice Cumming 1903-1974: Exhibition Catalogue* (1989); *AskART*; WPA Biography; "Cumming, Beatrice," Jim Collins and Glen Opitz, editors, *Women Artists in America* (Apollo, 1980); *Social Security Death Index*; *Fielding's Dictionary of American Painters* (1986), p. 193; *Who Was Who In American Art* (1985), p. 142; "Cecile Tyl research material on Beatrice Cumming [ca. 1913-1990], Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, at <http://sirir-archives.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?uri=full=3100001~!212485~!0>; "Artists' Colony Opens Gallery At Noank," *Hartford Courant*, August 26, 1947; Edward Alden Jewell, "National Gallery Gives Loan Show," *New York Times*, May 16, 1941; Edward Alden Jewell, "Art Shows Offer Marine Subjects," *New York Times*, February 3, 1942; "Among One-Man Shows," *New York Times*, February 8, 1942; Edward Alden Jewell, "The American Artist And The War," *New York Times*, February 8, 1942; Edward Alden Jewell, "National Gallery Birthday," *New York Times*, May 17, 1946; Edward Alden Jewell, "Art on the Summer Circuit," *New York Times*, August 24, 1947; Howard Devree, "Pioneer Modernist," *New York Times*, April 27, 1952; William Zimer, "New London's Quirky Individualist Left a Records of the City's Geometry," *New York Times*, March 4, 1990.