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Hans Stoltenberg: Painter of Rural Wisconsin

Hans John Stoltenberg was a Wisconsin artist who specialized in painting landscapes depicting either woodland scenes or rural scenes with farm buildings. Although born in Germany, most of his life was spent in Wisconsin and almost all of his canvases are of Wisconsin subjects. In what follows we will present an outline of his career.¹

Stoltenberg was born near Flensburg, Schleswig-Holstein, on 8 April 1879. His father, Joachim Stoltenberg, was German, but his mother, Anna Fredricksen Stoltenberg, was Danish. There were seven children in the family, four boys and three girls. Stoltenberg's father made a meager living by working in a factory which produced sheet copper.

Stoltenberg grew up in a rural area about twenty miles from Flensburg. The locality was then part of Germany, but was ceded to Denmark after World War I. The local countryside was wooded and beautiful, but the family was poor and lived crowded into two rooms of a rustic cottage. Each day Stoltenberg walked to school wearing wooden shoes.²

Sometime during the 1880s Stoltenberg's father died. Wilhelm, the oldest son in the family, immigrated to America in 1885 and found work in Milwaukee as a house painter. In 1891 Stoltenberg's widowed mother left Germany with her remaining children, sailing to America on a converted cattle ship.³ The family joined Stoltenberg's brother in Milwaukee, where Anna eked out a sparse income by doing piece work for a clothing manufacturer. Forced to help support the family, Stoltenberg no longer attended school but worked as a water carrier on a construction site. An older brother, Frederick, found work as a painter and decorator with Brown and Harper, a decorating firm in downtown Milwaukee. Around 1895 Hans was hired as an apprentice by the same firm and from his brother Frederick learned the trade of a master grainer, a craft which involves the application of paint in such a way that pine panels can be made to resemble marble or quarter-sawed oak.⁴ At about

the same time he began to take an amateur interest in art, painting his first picture at the age of sixteen. His early work was modeled on paintings of the Munich school and tended to make lavish use of dark colors, particularly browns.

Stoltenberg was married on 2 March 1905 to Helen Spencer (1879-1932), a native of Milwaukee. Her father, James T. Spencer, was a boilermaker born in Milwaukee.⁵ Her mother, also born in Milwaukee, was a daughter of immigrant parents from County Clare, Ireland. Helen Spencer was evidently Catholic, as her wedding in Milwaukee to Hans John Stoltenberg was a Catholic ceremony. Coming from Schleswig, Stoltenberg's background was presumably Lutheran. They subsequently had two children, a son and a daughter. In 1906 Stoltenberg became a naturalized United States citizen. City directories and other local records indicate that he and his family lived in Milwaukee until around 1911 but then moved to Wauwatosa on the western edge of Milwaukee County. Stoltenberg continued to work as a grainer, however, and presumably found some way to commute into the city.

Wishing to obtain some training in art, Stoltenberg turned to the Milwaukee Art Institute, now defunct but at that time located at 772 Jefferson Street in downtown Milwaukee. The director of the Institute from 1914 to 1924 was the artist and art educator Dudley Crafts Watson (1885-1972), who organized evening art classes there. Watson was quick to recognize Stoltenberg's potential and to develop it. He encouraged him to take up landscape painting and saw to it that he put more light and color into his work. Acknowledging his debt to Watson, Stoltenberg stated in 1924: "The little that I know he taught me. He puts new eyes in a fellow. He really freed me."⁶ Watson was equally enthusiastic about the progress made by his pupil. Writing in a local newspaper around 1924 he said:

Mr. Stoltenberg's development in the last three years has been almost miraculous. For from a tight, hard, dry technique, uninspirational and uncolorful, to a fluid dash and brilliancy of light comparable to our best American artists, is considerable advance in so short a time.⁷

The Art Institute also gave Stoltenberg his first chance to enter his work in public exhibitions and to win formal recognition. One of his paintings won an "honorable mention" from the Institute in 1920 and similar honors were quick to follow.⁸ He joined the Wisconsin Painters and Sculptors and began to enter his work in their annual shows. When two of his paintings were exhibited at the Milwaukee Journal's Gallery of Wisconsin Art in 1927, they caught the attention of Carl von Marr, the distinguished former director of the Munich Academy. Marr looked

thoughtfully at the two paintings, asked about the artist, and thought it remarkable that Stoltenberg had never been outside of Milwaukee for his training. He expressed the opinion that Stoltenberg's work showed both talent and individuality.⁹

During the 1920s Stoltenberg succeeded in establishing himself as a professional artist and began to make a living from his painting. His work was now placed on sale by local art dealers, such as the F. H. Bresler Gallery and the Krumbholz Gallery.¹⁰ Like many local artists, he began by painting at scenic areas in southeast Wisconsin, such as Prospect Hill and Holy Hill.¹¹ Later he made excursions by car to other parts of the state, including Door County in northeast Wisconsin and the villages of Black Earth and Mount Horeb west of Madison.¹² He painted fishing shacks at Bayfield on the Lake Superior shore and painted at the Porcupine Range in Upper Michigan.¹³ He also painted at the Indiana dunes on the south shore of Lake Michigan and ventured as far afield as Canada. Sometimes he made sketches from inside his car, which he had adapted for the purpose. This must have been particularly convenient when working on the winter landscapes which he often painted.

Stoltenberg's paintings typically show the woodlands and farms of rural Wisconsin, but in the course of his rural excursions he sometimes painted buildings of some particular historical interest. During the summer of 1937, for example, he was painting near Onalaska, Wisconsin, in the La Crosse Valley when his attention was drawn to a farmhouse which he proceeded to paint in its landscape setting. It was only later that he was told by a local resident that the house was the boyhood home of the Wisconsin writer Hamlin Garland (1860-1940). Stoltenberg then sent a photograph of the painting to Garland, who wrote back to confirm that the house was, indeed, his boyhood home.¹⁴ Stoltenberg later donated the painting to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, where it remains today. He also painted the birthplace of the folklorist Jeremiah Curtin at Greenfield, Wisconsin, and one of his paintings shows the old Fisher School, a one-room schoolhouse near his home in Wauwatosa. When the building was torn down and replaced by a modern structure, Stoltenberg presented the painting to the new school.¹⁵

During the Depression years some of Stoltenberg's pictures were placed in local public schools by the WPA Federal Art Project.¹⁶ Later he often donated paintings to hospitals and nursing homes. A number of his paintings can be found today in local libraries or in the possession of local civic and fraternal organizations. Milwaukee newspapers during the 1930s frequently commented on the appearance of his work at local exhibitions. He had a number of one-man shows, including one at the Oshkosh Public Museum during the summer of 1935.¹⁷ At another such show, held at the Milwaukee Art Institute in 1938, the local press reported that twenty-one of his paintings had been sold.¹⁸



Hans John Stoltenberg, *Open Stream in Winter*, c. 1924. Oil on canvas. (Photo: Milwaukee Art Museum, Samuel O. Buckner Collection, M1924.3.)

Wauwatosa had been a rural area when Stoltenberg settled there before World War I, but by the 1930s it had been built up into a suburb. In 1938 he built a new home and studio at Brookfield, Waukesha County, west of Milwaukee. The house is located at 2560 Pilgrim Road and stands on a hill in a wooded area. A stream called Indian Creek runs through the one-and-a-quarter-acre property.

In 1956 the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that Stoltenberg was convalescing from a serious illness which had required hospitalization.¹⁹ He later toyed with the idea of moving to San Francisco, where his daughter, now married, was living. He spent a few weeks in California, but then returned to Wisconsin. Around 1961 the house in Brookfield was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Hans J. Keerl, commercial artists. Stoltenberg spent the last fourteen months of his life at Cedar Lake Nursing Home in West Bend, where he died on 17 January 1963.



Hans John Stoltenberg, *Lake Michigan Shore*, c. 1928. Scenes like this one, depicting the woodlands of southeastern Wisconsin in winter, are among Stoltenberg's most characteristic works. (Photo: Milwaukee Art Museum Archives.)

Stoltenberg's work has been much appreciated in Wisconsin but has generally failed to win recognition elsewhere. His work does, in fact, have certain limitations. His most typical canvases are small, perhaps because he found such paintings to be more readily salable. But some of his paintings are more ambitious and the best of these deserve careful attention. Consider, for example, his *Open Stream in Winter*, which dates from around 1924 and is now in the permanent collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum. It is about a yard square and larger than most of his paintings. The foreground of the picture is dominated by a woodland stream which seems to move as it flows toward the viewer in a zig-zag pattern. A thick layer of snow, brightly illuminated in the winter sunshine, lies on either side of the stream, while a line of trees stands in the background of the painting. *Winter Sunshine*, exhibited at

the Milwaukee Art Institute in 1936, is a similar painting. Again, bright sunshine illuminates a woodland scene, this time one in which the branches of the fir trees are heavily laden with snow. The viewer's attention is directed across a narrow wooden bridge which is flanked by trees. Still another typical example of Stoltenberg's depiction of nature scenes is *Lake Michigan Shore* (see above).

Stoltenberg's work can be found in only a few public museums, such as the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Kenosha Public Museum, and the West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts in West Bend, Wisconsin. Perhaps the time has come, however, for his work to reach a wider audience. Writing in 1949, the *Milwaukee Journal* compared his work to that of his more famous contemporary David Garber (1880-1958).²⁰ There is, in fact, a certain kinship of both intention and sensitivity between the two artists, both of whom created compelling sun-drenched evocations of the rural Midwest.

It is not my view that there is or ever has been any distinctly German-American school of art. Nonetheless, one must recall that Stoltenberg's first steps toward becoming an artist were taken in Milwaukee before World War I, where the local art scene was heavily influenced by the German academic tradition, then centered in Munich, Düsseldorf, and Weimar. Most of the leading professional artists in Milwaukee at the turn of the century were trained in this tradition and reflected its standards of taste, including a commitment to representational art and a rejection of such avant-garde trends as Expressionism.²¹ The major local art dealers, such as Frank H. Bresler and John O. Krumbholz, specialized in providing their patrons with works imported from Munich.

Stoltenberg's basic outlook was undoubtedly affected by such influences, but he never remained bound to the German academic tradition and soon evolved toward a more open style. In this respect his development was similar to that of such other Milwaukee painters of his time as George Raab and Gustave Moeller, who received training at German academies but later fell under the spell of French Impressionism.

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Notes

¹ For biographical information about Stoltenberg, I am particularly indebted to the artist's daughter-in-law, the late Ruth Ann Stoltenberg. Biographical information of a general nature can be found in the following encyclopedic reference sources: Peter Hastings Falk, *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1985), 599; *Who's Who in American Art* (New York: Bowker), vol. 1 (1936-37), 409; vol. 2 (1938-39), 505; vol. 3 (1940-

41), 62; 1959 ed., 551; Glen B. Opitz, ed., *Mantle Fielding's Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Apollo Book, rev. ed. 1983), 902.

² *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 December 1924, sect. 4, p. 4.

³ Naturalization records indicate that Hans Stoltenberg reached America in 1891 but that his brother Frederick arrived in 1892. Such records, however, depend upon the recollection of the petitioner and cannot always be relied upon. The *Milwaukee Journal* reported on 17 February 1963 that Frederick had reached Milwaukee before Hans.

⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 November 1953, sect. 6, p. 6.

⁵ Stoltenberg's wife, Helen Spencer, does not appear to have been related to the socially prominent Milwaukee family which included Robert C. Spencer, founder of a local business college, and Robert C. Spencer, Jr., a celebrated architect.

⁶ *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 December 1924, sect. 4, p. 4.

⁷ Clipping from an unidentified Milwaukee newspaper around 1924 in the archives of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

⁸ *American Art Annual* 26 (1929): 317.

⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 7 August 1927, sect 2, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, 22 November 1953, sect 6, p. 1.

¹¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 16 August 1936, sect 7, p. 6.

¹² *Milwaukee Journal*, 24 October 1943, sect. 7, p. 8.

¹³ *Milwaukee Journal*, 3 November 1936, sect. 7, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, 6 February 1938, sect. 7, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, 30 May 1937, sect. 7, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Bulletin of the Milwaukee Art Institute* 2.3 (Nov. 1936): 4-5.

¹⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 March 1935, sect 7, p. 7.

¹⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, 27 February 1938, sect. 7, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 20 May 1956.

²⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, 17 April 1949, sect. 7, p. 6.

²¹ For a critical discussion of the Milwaukee art scene at the turn of the century, see Gay A. Donahue, "Society of Milwaukee Artists, 1900-1913." (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1981).

