Revisiting E.E. Cummings’ Paintings at Brockport

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[Editor’s Note: Since Jonathan Senchyne wrote this article in 2004 and 2005, the SUNY College at Brockport, particularly Frank Short, the Dean of the School of Arts & Performance, has engaged upon a project to restore Cummings’ sadly neglected paintings and drawings. For more information on how you might help in this restoration project, see “News, Notes, & Correspondence” at the end of this issue and/or consult the Brockport restoration web site Preserving the Paintings of E. E. Cummings at http://www.brockport.edu/cummings/.]

Careful readers of captions and marginalia will have seen one or more of E.E. Cummings’ paintings attributed to the collection of the SUNY College at Brockport Foundation. Other institutions familiar to this scene include the Houghton Library at Harvard University, The University of Texas Humanities Research Center, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of Art. Given the size and resources of these other institutions, those familiar with the SUNY College system might find it strange that this small public liberal arts college near Rochester, New York has a collection of artworks befitting a major research university. In fact, Milton Cohen, the only scholar to have done a systematic study of the paintings, writes that the Brockport collection is the “largest and most valuable single collection of Cummings’ paintings” (qtd. in Holcombe). Indeed, the collection of Cummings works at Brockport includes the famous Sky Over Paris and his historically noteworthy Sound Number 5 and Noise Number 1. But—the poet would remind us—they are kept in a little church, not a great cathedral. That little church is a nondescript room in a cement block hallway that could easily be confused for a janitor’s closet from outside. Inside, the room is just large enough for a few tables, a vertical shelf full of oils and large paintings leaning on one another. The room is neither protected from harmful light, nor climate-controlled, a problem for preservationists. Opposite the door is a stout horizontal filing cabinet holding flat works in three drawers descriptively marked “good works,” “repairable,” and simply, “problems.”

The purpose of this paper is to revisit the Cummings paintings at Brockport. I say “revisit” because while others have done interpretive work and written about the aesthetic qualities of Cummings’ paintings, I want to...
pay attention, among other things, to the material history of the collection. The Brockport collection has sustained a great deal of damage over the last twenty-five years, and efforts for proper conservation have consistently stalled. Based on some scattered documents available in the record at Brockport and existing Cummings scholarship, this paper historicizes the Brockport collection from its origins and arrival at SUNY Brockport, through the several (not completely successful) attempts to properly conserve it, and finally to the present. I have supplemented my discussion with photographs of several key works to document the contents of the collection and their conditions.

James and Hildegarde Watson

Altogether, about seventy-five paintings and drawings make up the Hildegarde Lasell Watson Collection, the official title of the collected Cummings work at Brockport. As the name suggests, the collection was granted to Brockport in 1978 by James Sibley Watson soon after the death of his wife, Hildegarde. The Watsons were Cummings’ greatest patrons, and Richard S. Kennedy characterizes J. S. Watson as “Cummings’ closest friend throughout his lifetime” (Dreams 81). Watson befriended Cummings while they were students at Harvard University. When young Cummings composed a jocular sonnet about Watson, he could not have known how true this particular line would ring into the future: “O Watson, born beneath a generous star” (qtd. in Kennedy 82). Watson’s literary, financial, and even spiritual support of Cummings was substantial. Watson, along with another wealthy Harvard classmate Scofield Thayer “became owners of the Dial,” which secured for their circle “an international readership” (Kennedy, Dreams 82). The influential Dial published Cummings’ critical writing, drawings, and poems, and in 1925 Cummings received the Dial award and $2000.00 in recognition of his contribution to American literature. As Cummings aged, Watson’s material support became increasingly direct. In fact, many references to Watson in Dreams in the Mirror describe times when Watson sent money or Cummings asked him for it. For example, in 1950 Cummings wrote to Watson: “perhaps you can help me. I cannot see how to go on unless am sure of 5000$ a year” (qtd. in Kennedy, Dreams 435). Cummings’ paintings provided an easy avenue for the conduct of the patronage, especially as Watson’s wife, Hildegarde, was an art collector. Sibley and Hildegarde purchased paintings directly from Cummings, and Hildegarde would arrange installations and acquisitions of
his works in Rochester. Kennedy goes so far as to say that “Cummings was able to sell paintings only when friends were trying to help him out” (Dreams 406). This seems like a harsh assessment. It is fair, however, considering that after Cummings wrote asking for five thousand dollars, Hildegarde arranged for a paid reading at the University of Rochester and an exhibition at the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. This is not to say that the Watson’s relationship with Cummings was strictly financial. Hildegarde traveled to Harvard to be present for the Charles Eliot Norton nonlectures; she was involved in Cummings’ struggle over his daughter Nancy; and she even looked after Cummings’ health and cared for him in the Watson home where he convalesced after surgery.

And so, from their position of financial security and influence on the cultural scene in Rochester (the Memorial Art Gallery was granted to the University of Rochester by another member of the Watson family in 1913), the Watsons aided the financially troubled Cummings. In return, Cummings sent James and Hildegarde many paintings over the years. If the current contents of the collection are reliably indicative, then Cummings sent them new paintings in addition to ones he had exhibited as early as 1919 as well. Cummings’ gratitude to Hildegarde is inscribed on the back of one of the paintings: “For Hildegarde from Estlin—bonne chance!”

**Contents and History of the Collection**

The seventy-five paintings and drawings currently in the collection vary in quality (aesthetically and materially). Including work from when he was a boy, they represent Cummings’ entire life as a painter. There are some large oils, scores of small oils on shirt cardboards, oils on canvas board, watercolors on paper, pastels on paper and shirtboards, and some of his famous line drawings. They chronicle his boyhood, his relationships with important literary figures like Watson and Scofield Thayer, his brief rise to importance on the American modernist painting scene, his travels abroad, and, as outlined above, his financial insecurities. In fact, early attempts to secure funding for preservation hinged on the bio-

![Figure 1](image-url)
graphical importance of the collection; many of the artworks document Cummings’ important friendships and events in his life.

For example, there is a line drawing depicting James Sibley Watson with his camera (figure 1). Line drawings by Cummings like this one appeared in The Dial alongside Picasso and other important artists. Another version of this drawing was published in CIOPW (charcoal, ink, oil, pencil, watercolor) in 1931. The Brockport version, however, must have been the one Cummings sent to Watson himself. Might this suggest that this version lays claim to being the final one? In the drawing that was published in CIOPW, Cummings pays more attention to drawing the camera correctly than he does to Watson himself. Granted in both versions Watson’s head is obscured, but in the Brockport version Watson’s body is drawn with more care and the camera is drawn with more attention. I suggest that the CIOPW version is a study for, or an earlier version of, the drawing in the Brockport collection.

Other works of biographical significance are Cummings’ Cubist/Synchromist portrait of Scofield Thayer (figure 2), a self portrait from the 1930’s abroad (figure 3), portraits of Marion Morehouse Cummings, and finally a sketch that might depict Cummings’ estranged daughter Nancy. If the sketch is indeed of Nancy, then it marks the turbulent father/daughter reunion of the late 1940’s.

To rely on biographical significance is to say that the drawings and paintings only warrant attention because their creator also happened to be an important poet. This would be a mistake, for as Milton Cohen emphasizes Cummings always considered himself equally poet and painter. Focusing exclusively on Cummings the poet obscures the fact that he drew considerable attention as a painter from 1919 until the mid-twenties. The Brockport collection has several of
Cummings’ *Sound* and *Noise* paintings that drew praise from prominent modernists like Albert Gleizes, Walter Pach, and Gaston Lachaise. These paintings are not merely the dallying of a poet rather, they are part of the history of American modernist art. They map the career of a painter who showed promise early in his career, only to drift into obscurity after “chang[ing] aesthetic direction” and later producing works that were “too hit-or-miss to gain permanent recognition” (Cohen, *Hidden Career* 13).

Perhaps the most recognizable works in the collection are two large oils: *Sky Over Paris,* and *Flowers and Hat: Patchin Place* (figures 4 and 5). These large oil paintings have so far escaped major damage aside from normal aging. At the very least, these paintings demonstrate Cummings’ skill. They are not, however, the most impressive or significant. Earlier in his career, before he had published *The Enormous Room* or *Tulips and Chimneys,* Cummings exhibited a series of abstract paintings as *Sound* and *Noise* compositions. The first of the “crazy quilts,” as he called them, were exhibited at the Society of Independent Artists show in New York City in 1919. *Noise Number 1* is one of the pair that drew critical acclaim that year (figure 6). After the exhibition Gaston Lachaise praised Cummings’ work for its “fitness of form-to-color” (Cummings, *Letters* 49). Writing to his parents, Cummings related the splash that he made:

Gleizes. . . after Picasso—best known among painters of a type—was (to use Lachaise’s phrase) “TAKEN OUT OF HIS FEET” by
the two things of mine at the Independent. According to Nagle, he said later on that they were the “best things in oil” that he had seen “in America.” (Cummings, Letters 58).

Mrs. Lachaise summed up Cummings’ impact at the show, asking him, “How does it feel to be the sensation of the Independent? That’s what everyone is telling me” (Letters 58).

The following year Cummings submitted Sound Number 5 and Noise Number 5 (Figure 7). That year four newspapers mentioned Cummings’ work in reviews. One of them unknowingly gave Cummings the highest Kantian aesthetic praise: “if the paintings can be looked at with the eye, if they can be seen as frankly as one sees the pattern of a roll of linoleum, they are bound to be admired” (Cohen, Hidden Career 6).

Despite the fact that Cummings’ work “held its own among the works of other American Modernists at the time of its exhibition,” he is not remembered for these accomplishments (Cohen, POETandPAINTER 16). As a result, we can see how Noise Number I and Sound Number 5 have been damaged and neglected. The paint is severely cracked on the surface of Noise Number I (figure 6), and there are two puncture holes in the bottom corners of Sound Number 5 (figure 7). Those punctures are visible in an exhibition catalog featuring the painting in 1982.

Elsewhere, damage is more extensive. Figure 8 is a photo of an unidentified abstract that, judging by color and line, may be part of the Sound and Noise series. The canvas has ripped from the stretcher in several places on this painting. On another abstract oil a puncture (figure 9) has been repaired with duct tape on the reverse. The backs of the canvasses
also show an incredible amount of dirt and possibly mildew stains. If there is that much accumulated dirt on the back of the canvasses there must be a lot on the front obscuring the vibrancy of the paint as well.

Despite the collection’s various claims to significance, it has obviously had a troubled history since becoming the property of an academic institution. The greatest problem is that until recently basic strategies for the proper preservation of the works never got off the ground. This is combined with the fact that “Cummings [did] not concern himself with using materials that would assure his work’s posterity” (Holcombe). What Holcombe meant, in her letter to the Getty Foundation requesting aid for restoration, is that Cummings often painted on shirtboards and many times could not afford to work with archival quality materials. Cummings’ troublesome and unorthodox choices of media can reasonably be worked with, however, as other proactive institutions have managed. At Brockport, however, the paintings have always been caught in a situation marked by a lack of institutional interest and funding, compounded by some very fundamental mistakes made early on.

A brief informal written history of the collection claims that from its very beginning at Brockport, the paintings were mishandled. Since there is probably only one copy of it in existence I will quote from it at length. It says:

In 1978... As best can be pieced together, the Foundation Director at the time accepted the works, numbered them (not accessioned or catalogued them) with gold foil non-archival stickers for identification. There is no known report of the specific condition of the works when they were accepted by the Foundation. They were stored in a leaky room in the college’s library for a time.
Eventually they were stored in former music practice rooms around the corner from the Tower Fine Arts Gallery.  

("Historical Background")

In October of that year, fifty-two of the paintings were exhibited at the college and Rushworth Kidder was in attendance to give a lecture. Milton Cohen’s 1981 dissertation, *The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings’ Early Painting and Poetry*, focuses heavily on some of the Brockport paintings, indicating that he must have been around during these years as well. The paintings surfaced in public once more in 1982 for two exhibitions held in Dallas, Texas that were curated by Cohen himself. There was noticeable damage to some of the paintings by this time, as a review of the exhibitions in the *Dallas Morning News* notes the “poor condition of the works” ("Historical Background").

Apparently, the bad press shamed the college into action. After the Dallas exhibitions the most work was done (and financially supported) on the collection up to that point, and since. Some of the art history professors were awarded “an incentive grant from the college to have the collection evaluated by two conservators—[the] Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Lab and the Fogg Museum, Harvard” ("Historical Background"). In addition, the collection was photographed and slides were made. Both of the conservation reports and the slides are still included in the papers associated with the collection. People working on behalf of the collection must have been optimistic. According to the history, “preliminary work on an IMS [Institute of Museum Services] Conservation grant was done” but it was interrupted when the promised “matching funds were pulled by the college administration. . . due to fiscal crisis” ("Historical Background"). With the “resources of the college. . . in a state of decline” the collection was left in “disarray” ("Historical Background"). In 1984 a new gallery director (perhaps the college’s first) instructed students to assign accession numbers and properly mark them in pencil on the works. The collection was also moved out of those music practice rooms and into its current location, a small nondescript room in the Tower Art building that is equipped with vertical shelves for the large framed oils, and a horizontal file cabinet for the flat works. The historical account shares that the room is not climate controlled, but it is cool and dry and remains dark most of the time. This clearly represents an improvement from the leaky room in the library. By my estimate, nothing has changed about this room since that time.
Between 1984 and 1993, there is no record of what happens with the collection. Around the latter date there came a new gallery director named Anna Callouri Holcombe, and a new initiative to secure funds for the collection was bolstered by the impending 1994 Cummings Centennial. In 1993, Holcombe drew from all of the work that had already been done with the hope of convincing the Getty Foundation to grant $12,500.00. The Brockport Foundation again promised to match whatever funds could be secured for this project. In her letter to the Getty Foundation Holcombe writes:

The works conserved. . . will play an integral part in the international E.E. Cummings Centennial Celebration scheduled for 1994. We plan to celebrate. . . on the SUNY Brockport campus with an exhibition of the most important works in the collection in November 1994. A few of Cummings’ paintings in this collection, if conserved in time, would be loaned to the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, for an exhibition of E. E. Cummings’ abstractions planned for the summer of 1994.

Holcombe goes on to outline a clear and manageable platform for the use of the requested funds. The Dean of Arts and Performance promised to install humidity controls if the grant went through. Holcombe had arranged for the Williamstown Regional Art Conservation Laboratory to “carry out the serious conservation work needed” that had been diagnosed ten years earlier (Holcombe). Holcombe even indicated that a considerable amount of money could be saved by doing some of the less intensive work in-house, at Brockport. She named a local supplier that could have furnished the program with archival quality materials, and she even wanted to integrate the “archival matting and framing” into her Museum and Gallery Studies course. By today’s standards most colleges would have publicized this kind of “hands on learning” all over their alumni magazines and in the local press. Perhaps Brockport would have, but, sadly, the Getty Foundation did not grant the money, and thus the Brockport Foundation’s matching funds never came to fruition either.

Again, there is nothing much to say about what went on for the next ten years. Currently the gallery has a new director, Tim Massey. He, along with some dedicated students, have compiled a proper catalogue for the entire collection, and he has worked to “stabilize” the collection, simply to prevent any further damage. When he became the collection’s steward all of the flat works (those on paper or board and not framed) were
placed in the horizontal file one on top of another. Tim and his students have taken each work, placed it in an acid free paper sleeve, and marked the sleeve with the work's accession number. They have also divided the flat works into three categories: “good works,” “repairable,” and “problems.” When I talked to him in April of 2004, Massey seemed optimistic about his ability to prevent any more unnecessary damage to the works, but without the grant money that his predecessors tried for, there is little he can do to stop the aging, drying, and cracking process that all paintings undergo. Massey said that he runs the gallery on about $3000.00 per year, and he tries to put as much of that money as possible toward undergraduate education—a decision that is, understandably, in keeping with the size, scope, and mission of his college.

**Conclusion and Intervention**

Both times that I have presented this paper and these photographs at conferences people have asked the inevitable question upon the conclusion of my remarks: “So what can be done?” As I’ve said, little has been/can be done without significant investments from the Brockport Foundation, the State University of New York, or private donors. I am confident, for the time being, that the current director and his students are doing the best work possible to “hold down the fort,” as it were.

As for myself, and anyone else interested in this issue, there is more research to be done. In this paper I have relied on what documents have been kept in a box with the collection, supplemented by the standard resources available to any Cummings scholar. I have not yet looked at the Brockport Foundation’s files (if they exist) to see if there is any formal record of the transaction between the college and James Sibley Watson. It will also be important to determine, as best we can, when some of the damage occurred. The 1984 history of the collection mentions that there was no record of the conditions of the works at the time that they were accepted. We may be able to approximate their conditions, however, if there were a record of the artworks while they were in the Watsons’ possession. Thankfully, a partial record of this might exist, somewhere.

In his 1993 *Spring* article, “Photographing Cummings’ Art,” Douglas Faulkner mentions traveling to Rochester to meet Hildegarde Watson and to photograph her collection of Cummings paintings:

> When... I arrived at her house, the paintings and drawings were already in the largest room of Hildegarde’s studio.... Hildegarde
trustingly allowed us to remove each work from its frame to reveal its entire image. . . . I chose thirty to photograph. (35-6).

If those photographs have survived, then they provide a record of the condition of the paintings prior to arrival at Brockport. With these in hand, we could begin to piece together how much or how little change there has been since the bequest in 1978.

Still, there is broader thinking to be done about the situation. An open scholarly discussion of Cummings’ paintings is necessary and timely, especially in a moment when the artist’s work is being sold privately on the internet for as much as $11,000.00 per painting. What does it say that certain Cummings artworks are successfully privatized, precisely as those works which remain open to the public—and to scholarship—are quite literally self-destructing? The questions that arise over Cummings’ artwork—the problem of literary reputation, the problem of archival work, the problem of funding in the humanities—each represent urgent and rewarding directions for our thinking about Cummings and the humanities in general.

Is this as isolated and radically local a problem as it at first seems? Allow me to illuminate a few problems that I believe are in some way related to the situation of the paintings. First, those who are primarily interested in isolated single author studies as a major mode of literary criticism—which I really am not—will undoubtedly be frustrated with Cummings’ status in institutionalized literary studies. His value on the English department stock market (so-to-speak) has never really been that great. Despite the fact that no editor would consider an anthology of American literature complete without at least a spattering of Cummings poems, there have been very few books (comparatively) or articles of note in widely circulated scholarly venues related to his body of work. Readers of this journal will remember Richard S. Kennedy delimiting Cummings as a “major minor poet” (“Major Minor” 37). He writes that one should expect a major poet to produce, “a large body of superior verse that does not fade from value as time passes.” While it might be interesting to discuss under what terms might we consider a poet “great,” I think it is more thought provoking to interrogate the distinction of value as such. Which distinctions of value led, and continue to lead, to the literal fading of these paintings, not just the waning of Cummings’ metaphorical stock? Who determines value in and for the humanities?
Certainly whoever was on the board of the Getty Foundation in 1993 made a judgment of value regarding the paintings by not awarding the $12,500.00 grant. And we might ask about Cummings’ value by inquiring into the number of university libraries that subscribe to this very journal, but in doing so, we ought to recognize that university libraries are cutting back on all journal holdings in the humanities. The Getty Foundation may have failed to recognize the paintings once, but the SUNY budget has failed to recognize it year after year, and will likely continue to do so. The point I am trying to make is that the very materiality of the humanities continues to be threatened on multiple fronts. At the very same moment that university administrators are enamored by online journals—humanities without material presence, cost-effective humanities—these paintings cry out the necessity to rethink the liquidation of the physical materials in our discipline. As Cohen writes, “If [the collection] does not receive restorative work soon, an artistic legacy will have been needlessly lost—a loss for scholars, for admirers of Cummings, and for the larger public who could enjoy his art simply as art” (qtd. in Holcombe). Given the ways that value is defined and assigned, Cummings’ paintings are not the only things we hold dear in danger of fading away.

In conclusion, the question must be asked once more: “What is to be done?” I don’t claim to have a complete and practical answer for appreciating and protecting the materiality of the humanities, but I think these paintings, at least, suggest that we need to be more mindful of how we approach scholarship. These paintings in particular beg pre-interpretive work, in addition to traditional hermeneutic interpretation. Much of the discourse about Cummings’ artwork examines the relationship between his visual productions and his poetic creations, his developing aesthetic, and so on. Interpretive work, in and of itself, is not bad,—I would never wish for less thinking—but there are some implicit consequences to doing this work exclusively. The interpretation of these paintings can continue without disruption even as the very artworks continue to deteriorate. Slides, photographs, and reprints, suffice as long as one wants to discuss what a particular painting means or how it is to be understood alongside this or that poem. If interpretation—the making, assignation, or bringing forth of meaning—is the only available avenue for thought, it is clear how such drastic material damage can go unnoticed by nearly an entire body of scholars and administrators for thirty years.
In three of his latest books Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht advocates oscillation between a focus on “meaning effects” and “presence effects” in the humanities. (Cf. for example, Powers 6-8 and Production 1-4.) I agree with him that space (literal space) must be made to account for the presence of cultural objects. Meaning alone cannot account for what is good about a painting, a symphony, or any literary work. Why, for example, are some literary scholars (myself included) hopelessly attracted to handwritten manuscripts even when authoritative editions are available? It is a completely different experience to be present to the very same material as the artist than it is with a reproduction, although interpretive work can be done from both. Cummings, too, may have pondered the split between presence and meaning. He described the *Sound and Noise* compositions as “presentative” works (Cohen, *Hidden Career* 3). Phrasing it this way, Cummings wanted to distinguish his work from representational painting. But, in so doing, he also emphasized the non-hermeneutic in his work, the necessity of its presence. Though there is no substitute for experiencing the paintings’ presence, I hope that I have here made the artworks in the collection present to readers, without them being able to put their fingers into the scars, so-to-speak.

[-Geneseo, Ithaca, and Syracuse NY](#)

[Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the 2004 American Literature Association Annual Conference in San Francisco, California and the 2005 New Jersey College English Association Conference at Seton Hall University.]

Notes

1. One such example is on page fourteen of *Selected Poems*, edited by Richard S. Kennedy, which features one of Cummings’ Mount Chocorua watercolor paintings.

2. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is very close to one of the earliest uses of “to visit” from 1382 CE: “to come to (persons) in order to judge of their state or condition.”
Works Cited


The Hildegarde Lasell Watson Collection. Tower Fine Arts Building, SUNY Brockport, Brockport, NY.


