

## James Vullo Reconsidered: Traversing the Decades

*Too many artists are prone to paint the other fellow's picture..., this is not for me. For me it is to find rapport with simple things and the subjects I know and love...*

—James Vullo<sup>i</sup>

As suggested by the range of work by Buffalo artist James Vullo (1914 -1999), he was a uniquely creative individual whose production traversed a variety of stylistic approaches and methods over extended periods. He transitioned through adaptations of American Scene painting, abstract cubism, a reductive abstract expressionism, and a body of work in black and white, which all are a reflection of a determined artist charting his own course apart from the artistic mainstream. Vullo's American Scene images of Buffalo during the 1930s and 40s, and his cubist works of the 1950s, began to garner some critical recognition for him during his lifetime; and it is likely this work that would ignite a reconsideration of his place among the ranks of Buffalo's most notable artists. The collection of his work at the Burchfield Penney Art Center with additional significant holdings of his work in other western New York collections, makes organizing this retrospective a relevant and fitting tribute to a distinguished artist of the region. Of additional significance to its presentation at the Burchfield Penney Art Center is Vullo's great admiration for Charles Burchfield whose work he held in the highest esteem.<sup>ii</sup>

Vullo can be seen as a true American regionalist since his hometown of Buffalo served as the lodestar of his creative life—a singular force of inspiration that was the primary vehicle of his artistic expression. A friend observed that both his realistic work and his abstractions represent “highly stylized colorful segments of Buffalo's heritage,” and the neighborhood and businesses he knew on the West Side of the city are reflected in his work.<sup>iii</sup> His artistic intention, beginning in the 1930s, was to “create a mood of nostalgic memories,”<sup>iv</sup> which he achieved through his treatment of local subjects.

To Vullo, the importance of the city of Buffalo cannot be overestimated. His profound sense of place, which is so pronounced in his work, is central to his artistic identity. The connection to Buffalo commenced from his youth spent on the lower West Side of Buffalo, and he later recalled that he saw the city with “love, and the creative eye of an artist.”<sup>v</sup> From the 1930s, he turned to the local scene when he began to paint seriously, producing mysterious and fantastical interpretations of his actual surroundings, as in a surrealist work of this period, *Summer Night*. *Summer Night* is representative of his most dreamy and gothic compositions with the ghost-like figures emerging from below ground and the heavy foreboding sky, although this similar sentiment is also evident in the whimsical and colorful scene of lion tamers.

The works of this period that picture dreary and desolate streets, faltering residences and buildings, and views around the Old Barge Canal, echo the pervasive somber mood of the Great Depression years in Upstate New York and elsewhere in the country and draw on local reality and real places.

From the early 1940s, Vullo's work was informed by his war experience; he enlisted in 1942 and served as an infantryman in the South Pacific. While stationed in the Philippine Islands, Hawaii, New Guinea, and in the United States, he produced many ink and pencil drawings. Some of these sketches—included to understand the origin of his art practice—are included in the exhibition, the artist reported that, “those drawings are dear to me, and very documentary, some 400 drawings were done while I was serving overseas.”<sup>vi</sup>

Following the conclusion of the war, Vullo returned to Buffalo, which marked the beginning of a period of honing his aesthetic vision. In a profusion of stark realistic representations of Buffalo, his compositions exhibit clean emphatic draftsmanship and a sense of melancholy, calling up some parallels to the stylized approach seen in the watercolors of Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), whose work Vullo closely studied. Vullo later recalled of his idol Burchfield that, “above all people now painting he makes beautiful sense.”<sup>vii</sup> In everyday local street scenes, such as *Mac's Clam Stand*, *Elmwood and Utica*, and *Forgotten House*, Vullo employs the watercolor medium to great effect using a sober palette concentrated with shades of gray and brown washes and a skillful use of expressive line to delineate his scenes, which capture a sense of unease and gloom of the post-Depression era. A similar sense of this can also be found in the work of Burchfield, as seen in such works as *November Storm* (1950), and *December Storm* (1941) both in the Burchfield Penney Collection.

Some critical appreciation began to come Vullo's way in the 1940s. *Mac's Clam Stand* won the most notable early award—the Patteran Purchase Prize at the annual Western New York Exhibition in 1943 at the Albright Art Gallery, which was subsequently selected for acquisition for its permanent collection.<sup>viii</sup> The work was an oil variation done from a more distant vantage point than the watercolor of the same title and subject. Vullo appears to have made a practice of revisiting some favored subjects, such as *Mac's Clam Stand* [Page 10] and other locales, including representations of the Buffalo skyline, the skyway, street views, harbor views, the Old Barge Canal, and the peanut grinder. He reworked compositions from different perspectives, and in different proportions, media, and styles.

The somber and expressive representation of the local storefront in both views of the clam stand bears a kinship to the type of work other American Scene painters besides Vullo and Burchfield were producing, such as John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, David Burluk, Aaron Bohrod and many others, who looked to their regional surroundings as a means of defining a new American art.

Vullo's watercolors are infused with energy from vibrant and bold draftsmanship that often rely on dark and wavering outlines and watery washes of color that play up the transparency of the medium. While approaching his subject is an essentially realistic way, his compositions also have a highly stylized and interpretive quality, emphasizing and playing up defining aspects of his subjects. He asserted in his own words that his response to his subject was, “an emotional one—an art born deep of subconscious involvement and cannot lend itself to fancy embroidery surface... They are proper aspects of the environment in which I was born and nurtured.”<sup>ix</sup> *Mac's Clam Stand* is a prime representation of a work that reflects that deeply felt personal connection and the strong sense of place that Vullo successfully translated into his art.

In 1949, Vullo won the James Carey Evans Memorial Prize for the best watercolor, in the Western New York Exhibition at the Albright Art Gallery for *Buffalo Skyline* [Page 16]. This exceptional watercolor profiles the beloved urban setting with varicolored vertically stacked geometric forms that give it the suggestion of an imposing metropolis. The work was praised by the jurors. Art critic Emily Genauer said that Vullo achieved “solidarity of forms” with “spontaneity and lightness of the medium.” Painter Robert Gwathmey thought he had caught “the spirit of the city,” and sculptor Paul Manship commented on the “fine craftsmanship” of the work.<sup>x</sup> In this composition, the bold verticality and geometry of the building silhouettes harness the notion of urban energy and also suggestion of greater substance and solidity than his work of the thirties.

Although Vullo was most closely identified with urban subjects, he was also a prolific painter of marines and landscapes and had a strong feeling for nature. He used outlines and applied pale limpid washes of color fluidly in such compositions as *Two Horses*, *Bethlehem Steel* and *On the Waterfront* [Page 17, 18, 19] which underscore the artist's fine sense of line, seen in the light calligraphic touch that artfully highlights and defines detail. This is also seen to great effect in an exceptional landscape, vividly colorful and bold, *Wild Spring* [Page 20] celebrates the sheer beauty of nature rather than the industrial. With regard to technique, Vullo explained that early on he learned, “his sketches were made more effective by first wetting the drawing paper and then portraying his subject...while still wet.”<sup>xi</sup> He continued this practice of using wet paper when he turned to watercolor, which gives his compositions a particular sense of fluidity and animation that is particularly evident in *Wild Spring*.

Some of his outdoor scenes have an upbeat whimsicality and exceedingly expressive and exaggerated to the point of caricature, particularly in the carnival subjects, such as the watercolors of the *Lion Tamers*, *Roller Coaster* which exhibit forceful and jagged contours, a brightly colorful palette, and pure and joyful sense of expression.

The influence of modernism, particularly cubism, begin to emerge in Vullo's art in the 1940s as he introduced reductive and angled forms that were more interpretive than realistic. Besides Charles Burchfield, Vullo cited the work of a disparate group of artists, including Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, Rembrandt van Rijn, Pieter Brueghel, Käthe Kollwitz, and José Clemente Orozco, as influential for his art. While caricature, mastery of line, and emotionality are qualities that define the work of Goya and Daumier and are most evident as sources for Vullo's approach. Other artists such as American modernist John Marin also seem to have shaped Vullo's ideas about composition and representation, as seen in the casein, *Rocky Coast* and also some

watercolors of marine scenes; to Marin, who was considered the foremost American watercolorist of the time and whose work Vullo must surely have known. In early modernist watercolors of city and marine scenes by Vullo, he introduces calligraphic outlines, fragmented forms, distilling of details, and compression of space, typified by compositions such as *On the Waterfront* [Page 19]. In works such as this Vullo's own modernist vocabulary and singular style are coalescing, however the work of other early modernist artists can be seen to inform and contribute to his approach.

By the 1950s, an adaptation of cubism subsumed Vullo's artistic aesthetic as his subject matter grows increasingly abstracted with geometric fracturing. He also embraced the medium of casein—a flat opaque pigment that radically differs from the transparency of the watercolor medium that he had been primarily using up until this time. Casein has been in use since ancient times and like tempera, is a fast drying, water soluble pigment. The flattened cubist spatial planes of his casein paintings are reinforced by the flatness of the pigment itself, and the subjects he was producing were by his own account composites and largely, done along the waterfront, which lent themselves to the use of this medium.<sup>xii</sup>

In the early 1950s, Vullo expanded his submissions to exhibitions beyond Upstate New York, and he gained entry into several national exhibitions, including at the Brooklyn Museum, the Riverside Museum, the Butler Institute of American Art, and the National Arts Club; and in watercolor exhibitions in Washington, D.C. and Birmingham, Alabama. He also won several regional awards, including the 1951 Patteran Prize at the Albright Art Gallery for an early cubist watercolor, *The Bird Stone*, yet beyond these milestones, wider national recognition eluded him. One reason for this may be his rugged individualism as well as his lack of identification with any particular trend or movement, which he justified with the assertion: "I have no time to be suave, and sophisticated, or avant-garde, or fashionable. My work is often raw, unpolished, and peppered with enough vulgarity to repel the fastidious, there isn't too much of this sort of painting around now days."<sup>xiii</sup>

Even as Vullo's compositions begin to embrace cubism in the 1950s, his interest and artistic response continued to be sparked by the rich visual vocabulary he found in the city of Buffalo and its surroundings as he left behind literal depictions of the city. Works such as *Fish Store*, *New Buildings*, and *Water Tower* show how the artist breaks down the subjects by partitioning and splintering forms and compressing space. This is particularly evident when comparing *Summer Night* and *Fish Store*, which were executed years apart and treat the same subject by different stylistic means. Vullo's use of gouache, another flat opaque pigment, gives the facture a feeling of flatness and reinforces the flattened spatial perspective of these modified cubist compositions.

Vullo's art seems to follow a trajectory in the fifties as he breaks away from his reliance on reality in favor of allover colorful geometric complexes whose decorative patterning emphasizes color and artistic arrangement.<sup>xiv</sup> *Ventilator* and *Cubist Structure* illustrate his increasing tendency toward geometric fragmentation and his predisposition toward an opulent and chromatic palette. The multicolored stacked panes and rhythmic patterning of the image surface are evocative of mosaics and stained glass, and yet even as the subjects become more abstracted, there is some distant sense of subject matter retained.

In 1960, Vullo made his first visit abroad, winning a trip to Paris for a slogan contest with his talent for word games. Seeing the City of Light had an unusual effect on him and surprisingly reinforced the importance of his roots as the wellspring of his creativity, prompting him to remark that, "Seeing Paris made me take a new look at Buffalo with fresher eyes. The loveliness of that city...made me realize that imagination is my magic carpet, not a jet plane. The things that make expatriates and fascinate artists there are here, or anywhere if you have inner creativity."<sup>xv</sup>

In the 1960s, Vullo's work again underwent another stylistic realignment as he abandoned complex abstractions in favor of simplified compositions and lone figures, eliminating all but the most salient identifying specifics. Although still picturing local subjects, he continued working in casein and also produced many drawings in sumi ink. Vullo referred to his work of this period as "landscape drawing" and of attempting to "create a very dynamic and moving arrangement of black and white forms which happen to be landscape form or shapes thereby making an effect and moving type of drawing."<sup>xvi</sup> In works such as *Self-Portrait*, *Under The Skyway*, *Buffalo State Construction* and *Letchworth Gorge*. Vullo's compositions can be seen evolving toward an expressive type of abstraction. A contemporary reviewer aptly described the direction of his work of this time by saying, "Although some regard him as an abstract expressionist, he does not fit neatly into any category. His stark, simple forms are

about as far away as one can get from nature without abandoning it completely.”<sup>xvii</sup> And, the critic went on to astutely observe that, “Without reliance upon color and texture, and without the blending of forms into an atmospheric uncertainty, Vullo seeks to express nature’s poetic content by means of reducing it to its lowest abstract denominator. Like others...he searches for personal expression in an idiom expressive of the times.”<sup>xviii</sup>

In Vullo’s late production from the 1970s through the 1990s, earlier styles in which he had previously worked resurface in a manner that is reinterpreted and streamlined. He resurrected his earlier method of working in ink in black and white, and he also produced colorful cubist compositions that rethink his means of depicting urban subject matter, as in *Goldome* and *Factory Yard* in which he largely stripped away distracting features and created collapsed planes of pure and beautiful color through which he experiments with perspective, space, scale, and line.

A reappraisal of James Vullo’s work is long overdue. Even by the time of his death in 1999 and despite the fact that several notable museums had previously acquired works by him, his obituary largely overlooked his artistic contribution and instead focused on his work as an art instructor and his two hobbies: kite flying and wordsmithing.<sup>xix</sup> Some of this may be due to his dedication to regional subject matter, which he explained, “I like painting the life I know right here in Buffalo and Western New York. My themes are found in the commonplace, because I find much hidden beauty in it...All prosaic...but the wonderful challenge is making something alive and beautiful out of all this. I truly love the things I paint...I go toward reality and life, I do not run away from it.”<sup>xx</sup>

Another factor in the lack of broader recognition may be the individualistic direction he pursued with his art apart from timely art world trends. He remained a true artistic original to the end, as he asserted, “I have always tried to stress my own individuality, testifying to a sense of self. I won’t have anyone telling me how to paint or what to paint.”<sup>xxi</sup> James Vullo pictured his native region in a broad array of manners, celebrating the picturesque in styles ranging from realism to abstraction. Upon closer review and a reconsideration, it becomes clear that he was able to universalize and celebrate the local in a remarkable body of work that is distinctly his own.

–Valerie Ann Leeds, PhD