

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Exhibit Reviews

Modern Visions, Modern Art: The Cone Sisters in North Carolina. At the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum, Blowing Rock, North Carolina, August 3 through November 30, 2019. Curated by Dianna Cameron and Carrie Streeeter, sponsored by Wells Fargo.

Modern Visions, Mountain Views: The Cones of Flat Top Manor. At the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum, Blowing Rock, North Carolina, July 20 through November 30, 2019. Curated by Jordan Calaway, sponsored by the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation.

Blowing Rock Art & History Museum (BRAHM), located in a North Carolina mountain resort town, may seem an unlikely venue for *Modern Visions*, two exhibitions on the Cone family, southern Jews distinguished as industrialists and art collectors. Like its subjects, however, *Modern Visions* is not a provincial production. The Cones' significance rests on brothers Moses and Caesar, who created one of the South's great textile empires, and their sisters Etta and Claribel, who rank among the foremost early collectors of modernist art. Usually the narratives of the Cone brothers and sisters are distinct storylines, but as BRAHM's name implies, art and history belong under one roof. Under the rubrics of *Modern Visions, Modern Art: The Cone Sisters in North Carolina* and *Modern Visions, Mountain Views: The Cones of Flat Top Manor*, BRAHM has integrated the narratives. The link, as the exhibition illustrates, is family, and the locus is the country estate of Moses Cone, now a national park on the outskirts of Blowing Rock.

The first surprise is discovering BRAHM. The professionalism of this exhibit dispels expectations of a small-town, local museum bravely run by dedicated volunteers with limited resources. The setting is a modern, well-appointed building, obviously endowed well, and the installation is first rate. For the most part, *Modern Visions* is a book-on-the-wall exhibition of text panels, graphic art, photographs, and documents enhanced by a few artifacts from the Cone mansion, some sculpture, and personal belongings. The catalog, *Modern Visions, Modern Art: The Cone Sisters in North Carolina*, edited by curators Dianna Cameron and Carrie Streeter, is an artifact in itself, a tribute to the art of bookmaking.

Modern Visions consists of three galleries, each dedicated to a specific theme. The first room, "Mountain Views," depicts family and business life at Flat Top Manor, the country home that Moses and Bertha Lindau Cone built in 1901. The second room presents Cones in each of the localities where the extended family established itself: Baltimore, Asheville, Greensboro, and Blowing Rock. The third and largest room houses "Modern Art" with representative drawings, etchings, artifacts, and paintings including original Matisse oils from Etta and Claribel's collection.

The visitor enters the exhibition through "Mountain Views," the local history component curated by Jordan Calaway of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation. Centered on one wall are two large portraits of Moses and Bertha Lindau Cone commissioned in 1953 for Moses Cone Hospital in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Cones, a Baltimore family who headquartered their textile enterprise in Greensboro, were drawn to the North Carolina mountains, as were others of their class, for the healthy air and scenic setting. Moses died in 1908, and his widow Bertha resided at and managed the property until her death in 1947. Flat Top Manor, a thirteen-thousand-square-foot beaux arts estate house, was set amid 3,500 acres with sweeping views. The baronial lifestyle attests to American acculturation and upward social mobility. Cone was the son of an antebellum immigrant Bavarian who made the classic American rise from storekeeper in rural Tennessee to wholesaler in Baltimore. His industrious sons, the world's largest manufacturers of denim, reprised their father's economic ascent in boldface.

As southern Jews, the exhibit illustrates, the Cones were not provincials but cosmopolitans. A newspaper observed that their "house and grounds" show them to be "people of refined and cultured tastes." Photos

(Courtesy of Leonard W. Rogoff.)

capture Flat Top Manor in its heyday along with a few artifacts—a brass headboard, a checkbook, a leather wallet—attesting to comfort and wealth. The home included the latest conveniences: telephone, gas lighting, and hot and cold running water. The title *Modern Visions* is well chosen. Among the houseguests, in 1904 sister Etta brought her friend from Baltimore and Paris, the modernist writer Gertrude Stein. In 1907 Stein sent a letter to North Carolina, which included personal regards from Picasso illustrated with a sketched self-portrait. Rustic Moses and Bertha hung a Renoir and a Picasso in their Appalachian mountain house. At the gallery's center is a steam trunk that accompanied the family on a global tour in 1906. One large photo captures the Cones atop an elephant in India. The Cones were great consumers as well as travelers, and the exhibition includes a Chinese tray and Hindu busts from that journey that found their way into North Carolina homes.

Moses Cone did not envision his estate merely as a scenic and salubrious summer retreat but as a businessman's proposition. The country house's first floor included an office as well as a parlor. He promoted commercial agriculture in a hardscrabble, subsistence Appalachian economy, planting some thirty-two thousand apple trees. He told a newspaper reporter in 1903, "I believe in Apples." He also pioneered scientific forest management. The exhibit includes a milk bottle from a working Cone dairy. On his passport, the traveling textile magnate identified his profession as "farmer." Bringing commerce to the countryside was a southern Jewish vocation, and the mindset that brought the mills to the cotton fields saw economic opportunity in forestry and agriculture in the mountains.

A second gallery consists of modular spaces dedicated to each of the domiciles of the extended family that included thirteen siblings. Under "Baltimore" are cameo portraits from the Carrie Cone Long album, begun in 1884, which attest to wealth and social status. Etta is depicted in a formal riding outfit while Claribel, a pioneering woman physician, holds a stethoscope. "Signs of Success" includes a cigar box featuring advertising portraits of patriarch Herman with his sons. A small oil portrait, c. 1809, of ancestor Moses Kahn, a merchant in Altenstadt, Bavaria, was given to Sydney Cone by a relative during a family sojourn to Germany in 1886. That a Jew had his portrait painted in early nineteenth-century Germany suggests that upward social, cultural, and economic mobility preceded their American immigration. The art and music that suffused Cone households reflected German acculturation. An "Asheville" panel titled "Making Moves for New Opportunity" underscores the economic progression typical of German Jews as well as the ways they transplanted their social and family culture in new locales. The exhibit clarifies how family ties connected Jews no matter how distant the outposts. Carrie Cone Long, whose Asheville home was a favorite family destination, was both a civic and Jewish community leader while her husband served a Cone mill and led the local temple. Other portraits illustrate various Cones glamping in their decorously countrified mountain retreats, including an almost comic photo of the regal Claribel lounging in a log cabin. The "Greensboro" module traces the industrial enterprise that underwrote the mansions and baronial lifestyle. Yet, as the texts and photos make clear, the sisters, however much they indulged themselves in European sojourns, collecting avant-garde art, were rooted in family. Residents of

Baltimore, they frequented Asheville, Blowing Rock, and Greensboro to visit siblings. Photographs of Etta cavorting with her nieces show her as an adored aunt.

The final gallery, "Modern Art," curated by Dianna Cameron and Carrie Streeter, is subtitled "The Cone Sisters in North Carolina," although the exhibit again attests to cosmopolitanism. Spinsters Etta and Claribel were habitués of Paris and, through Gertrude Stein's family, became acquainted with a bohemian crowd that included Matisse and Picasso. Claribel spent years in Germany, first as a medical researcher and then as a Germanophile. Their collection included Matisse and Picasso paintings in the hundreds, but also Renoir, Cezanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. Their tastes were personal. Their Baltimore apartments were a private museum that drew critics, scholars, and artists including Matisse, who became a family friend and is represented by two oil paintings, "Painter in the Olive Grove" and "The Music Lesson: Two Women Seated on a Divan," as well as lithographs and a sculpture. In Baltimore the sisters underwrote local artists, including Ben Silbert, who did etchings of them. They bequeathed the Cone Collection to the Baltimore Museum of Art while duplicates and works on paper went to Woman's College of the University of North Carolina (now UNC-Greensboro). Both institutions lent artwork. One is startled to see from a distance classic Cezannes, Renoirs, or Van Goghs until a closer look reveals them to be lithographic copies by Jacques Villon. One gallery could by no means be comprehensive, and the exhibit represents but a sampling of the collection's depth and breadth. As in their Baltimore apartments, the artwork is presented freely rather than chronologically. The sisters were eclectic collectors, and here one sees a Rembrandt etching, Persian miniatures, works from the Vienna School of Art, as well as vitrines containing bracelets and a lap robe.

BRAHM's rhapsody to the Cones elides controversies. There is no discussion of Cone Mills' labor practices, its union busting, or corporate paternalism. Questions of race are also not addressed. Moses Cone Memorial Hospital in Greensboro, a beneficiary of the estate, did not desegregate until 1963 under a landmark court order. The family's philanthropy in the African American community is also unexplored. Julius and Laura Weill Cone supported African American education, and Laura received death threats for her civil rights advocacy. Moreover, several art critics and historians have challenged the radicalism of the Cone sisters' collecting. The

sisters, they note, preferred representational art and mostly avoided cubism. Nor is the family contextualized in the broader scheme of post-Reconstruction, southern Jewish settlement.

Southern Jewry is the theme of this journal, but not that of this exhibition, nor are academics the target audience. The exhibition does importantly redress one facet of the Cones that has been largely overlooked, if not downplayed, in the park's interpretation. *Modern Visions* does not shy away from the family's Jewish and immigrant heritage. One text panel offers an excerpt from the frequently cited ethical letter that Herman Cone carried to America in 1846, reminding him that he is entering a new place "where the Jew is not excluded." But the Cones were significant because of their contributions to art and economic histories, less so for their Judaism even though they were members of the German-Jewish "crowd" and were institutionally affiliated and married and buried by rabbis. The exhibit offers graphic understanding of the family culture beyond the Cones' well-documented roles as industrialists and art collectors. The interpretation is insightful, intelligent, and attractively presented, and any visitor will come away better informed. The exhibit provides social and cultural balance to the economic focus that is more typical of representations of southern Jewry. It elucidates how the family nexus survived the dislocations of geographic mobility.

Finally—and by no means last—is the catalog, *Modern Visions, Modern Art: The Cone Sisters in North Carolina*, edited by exhibition curators Dianna Cameron and Carrie Streeter. Designed by Nathan Moehlmann of Goosepen Studio & Press and printed by Graphius in Ghent, Belgium, the catalog is beautifully produced from its covers to its color plates. The curators contribute an informative essay on "'The Spirit of Appreciation: Seeing Two Sisters' Visions.'" Family memoirs by two Cone descendants, art historian Nancy Hirschland Ramage and musicologist Edward T. Cone, capture the family in its full humanity and, given the writers' academic credentials, provide context and perspective. Streeter collaborated with Appalachian State University historian Neva Specht in tracing the provenance of the Cone photographs from the Carrie Cone Long album and with Jordan Calaway of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation in providing cultural histories of the Cones' North Carolina residences.

Modern Visions illustrates what a local museum at its best can contribute to larger understandings. The exhibition roots its subjects in their

place and time, but, textually and graphically, it also locates the Cones not just as neighbors but as citizens of the world. Not only did Jews acculturate to the South, as *Modern Visions* demonstrates, they transformed it as well.

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