

JEAN HÉLION
PAINTING IS A LANGUAGE
Paris, New York, Rockbridge Baths

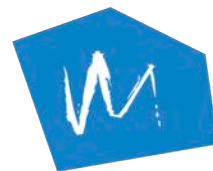
JEAN HÉLION
PAINTING IS A LANGUAGE
Paris, New York, Rockbridge Baths

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Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University

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paper, 4 5/16 x 8 1/4". Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.039.

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THE ELEANOR D. WILSON MUSEUM

HOLLINS
UNIVERSITY

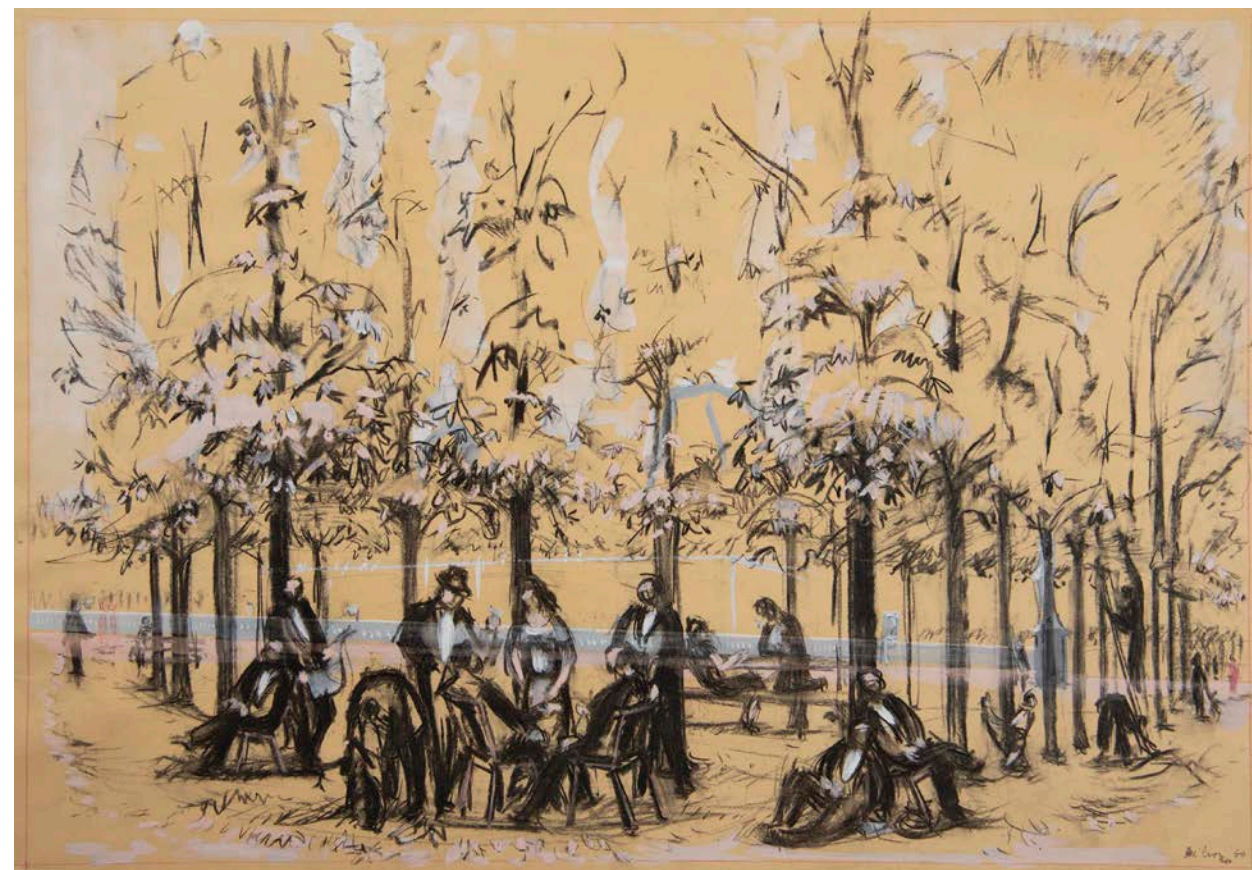


This catalogue is dedicated to Louis Hélion Blair (1939-2020).

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Left: *Louis*, 1942
Pen and ink on paper, 7 x 4 3/8" (sight)
Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair



Study for Luxembourg Gardens, ca. 1965
Gouache and charcoal on paper, 28 1/4 x 40”
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2024.008.001

Foreword

It is extremely gratifying and appropriate that the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University is organizing this exhibition of the works of Jean Hélion. His relationship to the University dates to 1944.

As a result of the generosity of Jean Hélion’s son, Louis Blair, and his wife Suzanne, the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University now owns the largest collection of works by the artist in the United States! To be in possession of such great artistic artifacts, and to be entrusted with Hélion’s legacy, is truly humbling. We are honored to share this collection with you.

This exhibit reflects the breadth of Hélion’s work. We include his most notable works from his well-known abstract and modernist period as well as his later figurative works, landscapes, and nature studies. Hélion’s art is a gift to Hollins, the nation, and the world.

Perhaps what excites me most about this exhibit is the character and commitments Hélion made throughout his life. Hélion is a study in courage. Whether one looks at his decision to return to France to fight the Nazis and ensure France’s freedom – even when he lost his own - or his many artistic turns, when I view his work, I see the way that courage is represented in art. While many describe art as a luxury or mere beauty, Hélion’s work is a testament to the ways that art captures the soul of struggle, the necessity of freedom, and the bravery of everyday life. It is this characteristic of his art that will excite and enchant our students and museum visitors for years to come.

To be able to see and appreciate the many nuances of life captured in Hélion’s work, we indeed owe a great debt of gratitude to his son, Louis Blair, and his wife, Suzanne Blair. We are especially grateful to Suzanne Blair for so generously donating funds to make this catalogue a reality.

In addition to the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, you may find Hélion’s work in museums across France, England and the United States, including the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Gallery in London, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Levavi Oculos,
Mary Dana Hinton, Ph.D.
President, Hollins University

Héliion's Chronology

1904

On April 21, Jean Héliion (originally Jean Bichier) is born in Couterne (Orne), France.

1921

Héliion moves to Paris. He serves as an apprentice designer for an architectural office.

1922-1923

He begins his first paintings.

1928

Héliion exhibits two works at the Salon des Indépendants.

1929

In Paris, he moves to Montparnasse and discovers the works of Piet Mondrian. In November, he meets Theo Van Doesburg of the Netherlands, who founded the journal *De Stijl*.

1930

With Van Doesburg, Otto Carlsund, and Léon Arthur Tutundjian, Héliion founds the group *Art concret* and writes the only issue of the journal. His workshop becomes a place of contact with the Parisian avant-garde for young American artists including Alexander Calder.

1931

Héliion founds the group *Abstraction-Création* with Jean Arp, Albert Gleizes, Auguste Herbin, František Kupka, Tutundjian, Georges Valmier, Van Doesburg (who died that year), and Robert Delaunay. He meets the abstract artists Michel Seuphor, Amédée Ozenfant

as well as the Dadaists and Surrealists Max Ernst, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Duchamp.

1932

Héliion travels to the United States, where he marries Jean Blair, originally from Virginia – the sister of Louise Heron Blair, wife of Pierre Daura.

1933

He writes the preface for the catalogue *The Evolution of Abstract Art As Shown in the Gallery of Living Art* for A. E. Gallatin. At the request of Gallatin, Héliion gives a lecture at New York University to explain abstract art. At the end of the year, Calder travels with him to Virginia.

1934

On his return to Paris, Héliion meets Joan Miró and Jacques Lipchitz. With Arp and Calder, Héliion leaves *Abstraction-Création*. He makes his first trip to London with Gallatin; there he meets the artists Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, and John Piper, and the art historian Herbert Read.

1936

Héliion returns to New York. He meets the art critic Meyer Schapiro and publishes articles in *Burlington Magazine* and *Axis*. In October, Duchamp organizes an exhibition of his works at the Putzel Gallery in Los Angeles.

1937-1938

From the summer of 1937 through April of 1938, he lives in Rockbridge Baths, Virginia.

1939

His second son, Louis Blair, is born. On August 24 he presents himself to the consul of France in Philadelphia to enlist in the French army.

1940

Mobilized, Héliion joins the French army on January 16. On June 19, he is captured by the German army and sent to a prison camp in Pomerania, then to Stettin on a prison boat.

1942

On February 13, Héliion escapes from Stettin. He reaches Paris and hides in the home of the American Mary Reynolds. In October, Héliion secretly passes into the free zone. He obtains his visa for the United States and embarks for Baltimore. Upon his return to Virginia, he begins writing about his captivity in Germany. In May, an exhibition called "Héliion–Daura" is organized at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond.

1943

Héliion publishes an account of his captivity in Germany and his escape (*They Shall Not Have Me*), which immediately becomes a best-seller.

1944

He separates from Jean Blair and leaves Rockbridge Baths. He moves to New York, where he meets with a number of refugee artists, including André Breton, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian, and Amédée Ozenfant. He meets Pegeen Vail, daughter of Peggy Guggenheim, and they are married in November. Between March and April, the

Paul Rosenberg gallery, NY, exhibits his work.

1945

Several personal exhibitions were organized: in January, at the Caresse Crosby Gallery, in Washington, DC, and at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Baltimore, MD; in March, at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in New York. With Pegeen Vail, Héliion travels across the United States and meets with Igor Stravinsky and William Faulkner.

1946

Before returning definitively to France, Héliion destroys parts of his notebooks and his writings.

1963

He marries Jacqueline Ventadour.

1971

After a retinal hemorrhage, Héliion has an operation on the cataracts in both of his eyes.

1983

In October, Héliion, nearly blind, stops painting definitively. He dictates his critical commentary on his paintings (*Mémoire de la Chambre Jaune*).

1987

Héliion dies in Paris on October 27 at the age of 83.

Compiled by Anna Woods,
Hollins University class of 2026.

The Hollins – Héliion Connection

For years, I have built for myself a subtle instrument of relationships – colors and forms without a name. I have played on it my secret songs, unexplained, passionate and peaceful.

Now, with the very same instrument, I have rediscovered, and tried to sing, the casual and wonderful aspects of a world barred from me, for so long, by rows of barbed wire.

Jean Héliion, March 1944 ¹

This exhibition and accompanying catalogue will be an introduction for many to the important work of French artist Jean Héliion (1904-1987), best known for his early modernist paintings, prints, and drawings; his affiliation with important modernist artists working in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s; and being an important intermediary between European and American modernist artists in Paris and New York. Héliion has always been difficult to pigeon-hole into an artistic style, especially his work from the late 1940s until the early 1980s. In an article about Héliion, art critic Jed Perl writes: “He’s a Fauvist and a Cubist and a Surrealist – and of course a realist – and he’s so untroubled about being all of these things at the same time that he can only be himself.”²

Hollins University has enjoyed an 80-year association with Jean Héliion that began in 1943-44 and has grown stronger in the last fourteen years. Héliion’s time living in Virginia was a time of great flux, excitement, and looming change not only in Héliion’s life and art, but in the world in general due to the cataclysmic turmoil and destruction brought on by WW II. Although Héliion is not unknown in the U.S. (see essays in this catalogue by Dr. Genevieve Hendricks and Hollins Professor Emeritus Bill White) the artist is best known in Europe and his work has been the subject of a number of European retrospectives in the past three decades, the most recent being *Jean Héliion: The Prose of the World*, March 22 – August 18, 2024 at the Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris.

This exhibition and catalogue may also serve as an introduction to a large growing collection of works by Héliion, an important aspect of the art collection at Hollins University now housed in the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum. This year marks the Museum’s 20th anniversary.

The first work by Héliion acquired by Hollins College (now University) was a small oil on canvas titled *Abstraction*, 1938 (page 23), purchased from a 1944 exhibition on campus. In a 1944 letter to John Ballator, Héliion states, “I am very glad that the college has decided to buy the small oil. I know that it is entirely due to your influence. Glad also



Fille au Mannequin, 1955

Lithograph on paper, 15 7/8 x 20 1/2” (image)

Gift of Louis Blair in honor of Bill White

Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, 2010.009

that my talks have been enjoyed and that you think they have been helpful. I realize how difficult your task is, with the wide scope that you have so bravely chosen (to) encourage your pupils' gift to painting and furnish them with an understanding of the history of art to its last phase. And I admire the way you tackle it."³ Ballator was hired as a Junior Professor of Art in 1938 and stayed as Head of the Department of Art through 1967.

Héliion had first visited the U.S. in 1932 after marrying Jean Blair, a Sweet Briar graduate from a prominent Richmond, Virginia family. The two "Jeans" settled in Rockbridge Baths, Virginia where Héliion built a studio along the Maury River. Most likely, *Abstraction* was painted in that studio.

The couple had a son, Louis, born February 9, 1939. In 1940, four months before the Nazis invaded France, Héliion left the U.S. to join the French army. Within six months he was captured by the Nazis and held in prison camps in Germany. He made a daring escape, making his way from Berlin to Cologne, then to occupied France, and then to the free zone. From there, he made his way to Lisbon, where he boarded a freighter to Cuba.⁴ In 1942, Helion arrived back in the U.S. where, to aid the Free French, he wrote a book titled *They Shall Not Have Me* and lectured widely on his war experiences. On his return to the U.S., *Time Magazine* wrote: "One of the most sensational escapes from the Nazis in World War II has been made by a leading French abstract painter who comes from a long line of French soldiers and whose great-grandfather fought all through the Napoleonic wars."⁵ The 1943 copy of the book in the Wyndham Robertson Library is inscribed to Rachel Wilson (Hollins class of 1912) by Héliion: "To Rachel Wilson who has been kindly following my sad adventures step by step, and with whom I rejoice that they have come to an end, and I can return to painting."

Héliion did return to painting, moving to New York in 1944 as his marriage with Jean Blair dissolved. In 1945 he settled permanently in Paris. Jean Blair Héliion died in 1944 when Louis was five, leaving their son essentially orphaned. Louis would not know his father until 1983, four years before Jean Héliion's death; in 1983-84 Louis and Suzanne Blair moved to Paris to get to know his French family.⁶

Louis Blair was raised by his great aunt Jean and attended the University of Virginia. After graduating from UVA and receiving a master's degree in engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Louis moved to Washington, DC, where his jobs included staff positions in the Senate and White House. In 1971, he was elected Mayor of Falls Church, Virginia, and for 17 years was Director of the Harry S. Truman Foundation. In 2006, he moved with his wife Suzanne Sessoms Lemon Blair to a farm in Rockbridge Baths, and for more than a decade taught in the International Studies department at Virginia Military Institute.⁷

After moving to Rockbridge Baths, Louis and Suzanne Blair purchased a few paintings by Bill White, Professor Emeritus at Hollins University who taught painting from 1971 until 2010. White and his wife Linda became close friends with Louis and Suzanne Blair. When White retired from Hollins, the Blairs donated four works by Héliion to the collection of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum: *Fille au Mannequin*, ca. 1955 (page 5), lithograph; *Au Cycliste*, ca. 1939, lithograph; *Éléments Écartés*, 1934, lithograph; and *Untitled Six-part Study*, paint on paper, 1975.

After Jean Héliion passed away in 1987, his studio inventory was divided into five "piles," one for each of his sons. His sons and surviving wife Jacqueline Héliion visited Louis Blair's home in Falls Church, Virginia, where they split the U.S. holdings of Héliion's work five ways.⁸ It is this cache of works that Louis received that has come to Hollins University, and from which this exhibition has been selected.

In early 2016, thanks to friendship and guidance from Bill White, Louis Blair donated a treasure trove of almost 400 sketches, drawings, prints, and small paintings by his father to the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University as well as funds to purchase archival flat files and storage materials to safeguard the collection in perpetuity. This was followed by gifts of additional works in 2017, 2018, and 2024, giving Hollins University the largest collection of works by Héliion in the United States.

This collection is an "embarrassment of riches" and portrays Héliion's working process from early student work of the 1920s, non-objective compositions from the 1930s and into the early 1940s, to important transitional works, expressive figural compositions, and abstracted nature studies. As a painter from life, Héliion had a practice of drawing each object or figure that found its way into a painting separately, and making quick sketches of his complex compositions. Many of the sketches in this collection explore the disparate details that went into the finished works. In his book, *Jean Héliion*, Paul Holbertson writes that, "Shop window mannequins, cigarettes, French bread and newspapers, nudes, still lifes, scenes, portraits and allegories have always belonged to the history of painting. However, rather than a faraway cerebral world, Héliion uses them to translate the theatre of the everyday life, the environment that is simply his and ours, without subjecting it to the distortions of an aesthete's distant calculated vision."⁹ Several preliminary drawings for larger paintings have been discovered in the collection and more are yet to be researched and revealed. This rich collection will provide object-based learning and research topics for students and scholars in the years to come.

Included in the collection is a small pastel portrait of Jacques Lusseyran, who taught at Hollins from 1958-1961 and, before that, had been teaching Hollins students studying abroad in Paris. He is best known as the author of the book titled *And There Was Light*, a

World War II memoir and the book that helped inspire Anthony Doerr’s bestselling novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. Jacqueline Hé lion recounts in an email to Louis Blair how Hé lion and Lusseyran met:

We met Jacques Lusseyran in the mid or late 50s. I was still living in Neuilly. Jean and I were invited to attend a meeting of a rather closed philosophical circle. Lusseyran was there as a guest speaker. Amid all the wishy-washy so-called philosophical drivel his dry factual report on how he had to face morally and physically desperate situations during the Nazi occupation of France stood out dramatically. I was also fascinated by his hands fluttering over his notes in Braille. The book he wrote about his experience is overwhelming in its obvious authenticity. His blindness was an asset in the resistance network because he never needed to write anything down. His memory was amazing, never at fault. He was caught, as they all were sooner or later, due to their naïve inexperience in covert activity. All amateur networks were infiltrated by professional enemy agents...

The Hé lion collection at Hollins University contains many such stories. Who could have known that John Ballator with his desire to furnish the students at Hollins with an understanding of “the history of art to its last phase,” exhibiting the work of Hé lion and bringing him to campus to discuss abstract art, would begin a relationship with Hé lion and his work that would continue into the 21st century?

Jenine Culligan, Exhibition Co-Curator
Director, Eleanor D. Wilson Museum

¹ Foreword for an exhibit at Paul Rosenberg & Co, NY, *Recent Paintings by Jean Hé lion*, March 14 – April 18, 1944

² Jed Perl, “An Unknown Masterpiece,” *The New Republic*, April 29, 1996, pp. 27 – 32.

³ Hollins University Archives, unpublished letter from Jean Hé lion to John Ballator, 1944 (month and day illegible).

⁴ Martica Sawin, “When the Artist Went to War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2012.

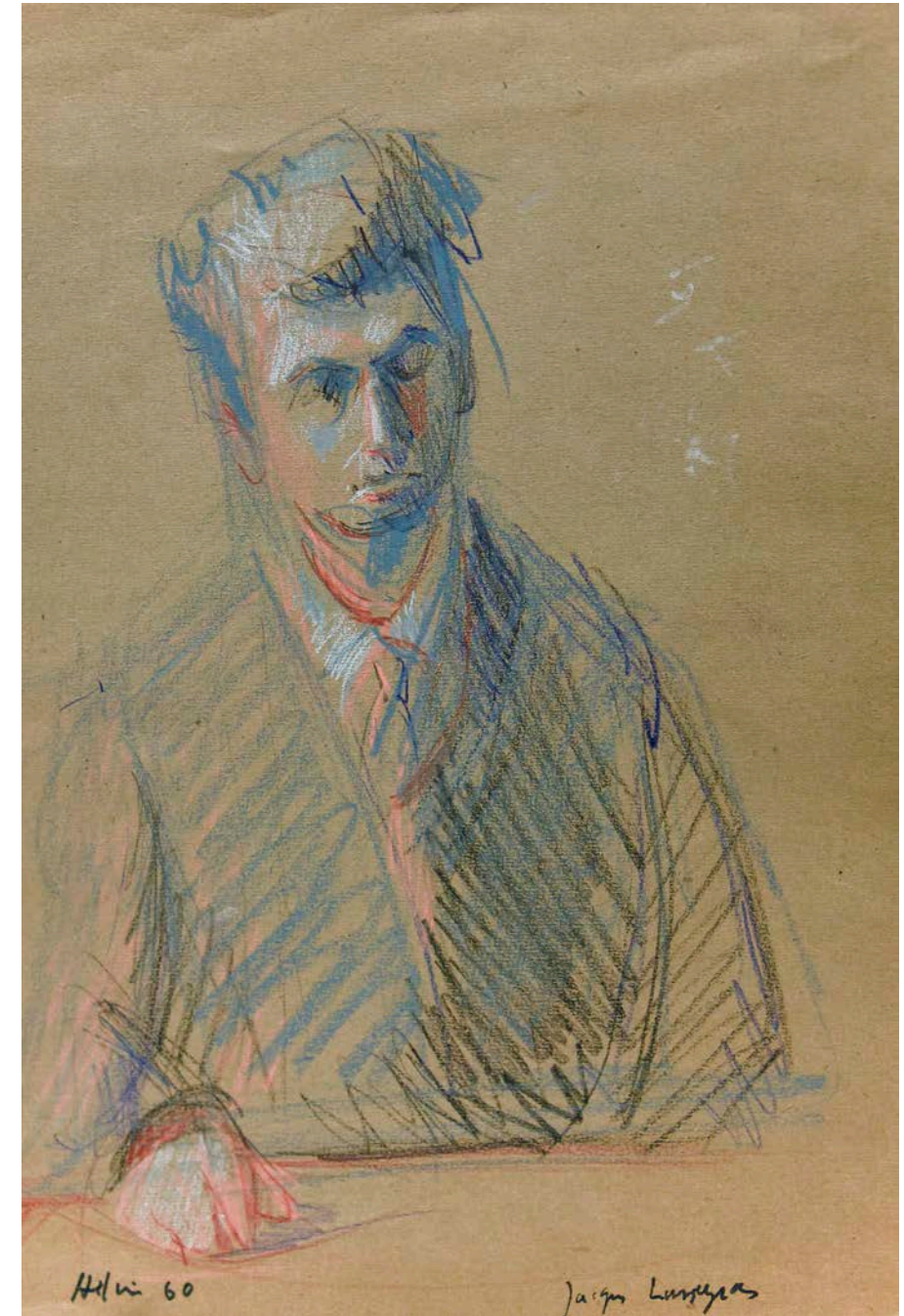
⁵ *Roanoke World News*, October 15, 1943, with thanks to Bill White who photographed this article from the exhibition *Jean Hé lion: The Prose of the World*, March 22 – August 18, 2024, at the Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris.

⁶ Conversation with Suzanne Blair, August 26, 2024.

⁷ Obituary for Louis Hé lion Blair

⁸ Conversation with Suzanne Blair, August 26, 2024

⁹ Paul Holbertson with text by Didier Ottinger, *John Helion*, London: 2004.



Portrait of Jacques Lusseyran, 1960

Pastel on paper, 12 1/2 x 9 1/4”

Gift of Suzanne and Louis Blair

Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, 2018.001



Still Life with Umbrella, 1939
Oil on canvas, 31 x 25 1/4"
Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair

“What I Love and What I Hope”: Jean Hélion’s Embrace of the Everyday

A black umbrella, its curves and folds simplified into bold, almost abstract shapes, stands propped against a sturdy, rustic wooden table. On top of the table sits a white jar, folded papers, and a discarded match, and below it sits a wine bottle as well as the corner of slightly rumpled throw rug. Jean Hélion painted this work, *Still Life with Umbrella* (page 10), in 1939, at the midpoint of the 14-year period between 1932, when the artist first traveled to the United States, and 1946, when he returned to Paris for good. This period witnessed the most profound events in Hélion’s life, including his internment in a Nazi prisoner of war camp from 1940-42, as well as the most dramatic changes in his artistic work, as he evolved from a purely abstract artist to a Baudelaireian “Painter of Modern Life.”¹

A closer inspection of *Still Life with Umbrella* reveals the intensity of this artistic turn as several slash marks are visible, incisions which family members report were made in frustration by the artist after the painting’s completion, when he was still unsure of his path as a figurative painter.² The painting would be mended a few years later when Hélion returned to his studio in Rockbridge Baths, Virginia and definitively became a painter of modern objects, scenes and people. Indeed, his sojourns in both Virginia and New York provided the space, time, and distance for him to begin developing a representational visual language, an evolution that would have been more difficult within the confines of the Parisian avant-garde scene. Both locations provided retreats for him, as his artistic production evolved to encompass the wealth of human experience that could inspire both figurative and non-figurative works alike. He chose to defy expectations and break away from what, for him, were the limiting confines of abstraction, in order to illuminate the extraordinary in the banal and find beauty in both the creative and destructive aspects of art.

Hélion’s first transatlantic voyage took place in the autumn of 1932 when he set off to the United States to marry his second wife, Jean Blair, a native of Virginia whom he had met in Paris. As noted by Jean-Jacques Lévêque, “This stay in America was to prove an important development not only because Hélion met [architect Frederick] Kiesler, [artist] Arshile Gorky, and [dealer] Sidney Janis, but because he anticipated by several years the wave of emigrés fleeing Nazism who, through friendships and exchanges of experience, would weld the European stream of experimental art (a mixture of geometric abstraction and surrealism) to the youthful forces of American art.”³ These initial excursions into the New York artworld, which at the time was still quite small, provided Hélion with both inspiration and community, and would have a profound impact on his subsequent artistic development.

He returned to France in December of 1932 but made his way back to New York in the summer of 1933, continuing to form important connections. One significant contact was with A. E. Gallatin, who played a pivotal role in introducing young New York artists to the work of the European avant-garde through his Gallery of Living Art (renamed the Museum of Living Art in 1936), which showcased “fresh and individual” works by living artists.⁴ Gallatin purchased Héliion’s work, sought his advice while developing his collection, and published his 1933 essay “The Evolution of Abstract Art as Shown in the Gallery of Living Art,” which analyzed contemporary developments in non-figurative art. He also invited Héliion to deliver a lecture at New York University, which was attended by Alexander Calder and Marcel Duchamp, among others.⁵

Héliion had already met Calder, the American sculptor known for his innovative mobiles, in Paris a few years earlier, and a long friendship and mutual inspiration would develop between the two artists. Calder even visited him in his studio in Rockbridge Baths in 1933, and when examining a work such as *Equilibrium* from the same year (page 13), one can observe the ways in which Héliion’s pictorial space develops similarly to his American counterpart’s sculptural explorations. Both artists challenge the viewer to consider the relationships between forms, space, and balance. In Héliion’s work, several irregular, curved shapes seem to float against a neutral background and are distributed in a way that suggests a delicate balance, with each form interacting with the others as they are connected by sinuous and straight lines. This creates a sense of movement and tension within the composition, developed like a magnetic field, where geometric shapes, articulated together by lines, attract, and repel each other mutually.

Following a well-received showing at the John Becker Gallery in New York in January 1934, Héliion returned to Paris for two years. His writing during this period, both published and unpublished, provides insights into his development, as seen in the article “From Reduction to Growth” from 1935, wherein he states:

It is necessary to remove taboos of any sort, though keeping an axis of progression; to constitute paintings, like beings whose terms can develop infinitely, where everything remains possible, instead of paintings where more terms become forbidden as we go on. The work is considered as an organism in growth... Developing and concentrating, at the same time.⁶

One sees his rejection of overly restrictive definitions and “taboos,” in favor of a more open approach, advocating for development and growth through possibility in a natural, almost biological way. This naturalistic analogy is echoed in one of his journal entries from that year when he writes, “Oppositions develop, colors are refined, spaces become more pliable, but the further I advance, the more evident the demands of nature become.



Equilibrium, 1933
Oil on canvas, 29 1/4 x 36”
Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair

The space is provisionally, miraculously filled with light, but the volumes will have to become complete – objects, bodies.”⁷ Such observations reveal the drive of his work toward the figurative as a natural form of completion.

Héliou returned to the US in July of 1936, remaining there until April of 1938. He stayed first in New York, reveling in the city’s spatial rhythms, as witnessed in a letter to Marcel Duchamp where he writes, “We like New York very much, and I work there pretty much as I do in Paris, except that the landscape and the rhythm of the street are different: ardent, bitter, ‘theatrical,’ and childish in an old-fashioned way.”⁸ This detail shows that Héliou had his eye on (street) subjects two or three years before he started drawing and painting them, and that the “theatrical” and “childish” sides of these snapshots of daily life were qualities he “liked” and appreciated. He would formulate this more explicitly in an interview with the abstract painter George Morris published in *The Partisan Review* two years later, stating:

One reason for coming here was to isolate myself from the milieu in which I had developed, and to reconsider everything. New York, so different in every respect, has shown me how much I had been influenced by the architecture of my own country, its density in the cities, the proportion between free space and built space, solid and fluid, curve and straight line, light and dark, hard and soft, and the amount of human motion composed with it...The narrow amount of free space in New York has made me conscious of other variations in my own balance of free space and occupied space.⁹

He spent a year in New York exploring this spatial consciousness before heading south in the summer of 1937 to:

take refuge in the mountains of Virginia, where I had already built a workshop out of Californian redwood. I wanted to be able to think, far from all influences. I wanted to let my abstract art develop toward its end, which I accepted, towards a magnificent concordance of the modern and classicism...in this workshop at Rockbridge Baths, I experienced some sumptuous moments; I pushed my abstract symbols towards their end.¹⁰

The emergence of more naturalistic forms in his compositions and the implicit return of the human figure began here, as the self-taught artist confided to the writer Pierre-Georges Bruguère, “I’ve started (keep this strictly between us, please) studies after my wife, drawings that are still awkward because I’m out of practice in this genre...but they have an odd resemblance to my abstract pictures, which is the best sign of hope.”¹¹ These drawings of his wife Jean Blair developed out of the spatial blocking witnessed in his abstract paintings of the mid-to-late 1930s (pages 18-19). People, places, and things—

the real world—began to enter into his drawings and paintings until, on the eve of his departure for France and for war, he painted a solitary umbrella leaning against a table in his studio in Rockbridge Baths.

From our contemporary vantage point, the slash marks on *Still Life with Umbrella* eerily presage the destruction and violence Héliou would experience and endure during the two years he spent in captivity aboard a Nazi prison ship anchored in Poland.¹² When he returned to the US and resumed his artistic practice, he noted, “In my studio on the table I found piles of sketches left there before I went to war (as they say). This involved a double effort, that of filling in the gaps in my abstraction and the seemingly contrary one of rejoining the world.”¹³ Yet, as he worked, he found continuity in his art, writing in the 1943 essay, “The Making of a Picture”:

My former abstractions have now become images of people and of things. I feel that I have descended from a solitary tower into the street. Sometimes, also, it seems that it is the street that has broken through the solitary tower. All these images I build exactly as I did my abstractions. I used to paint elements that floated into delicately shaded spaces. Now, they have moved on to shoulders, and, very easily, turned themselves into heads.¹⁴

In *Man with Hat* from 1943 (page 20) one can see the transposition of floating planes from his abstract paintings, particularly in the brim of the hat, the interplay of facial features such as the man’s cheekbones and lips, and the delineation of his shirt collar and tie. This is further developed in the *Untitled* 1944 drawing (page 17) featuring another man in a hat, this time shown in profile and upside down, alongside the body of a woman wearing a vibrant red top and blue skirt, her right arm wrapped around her front, her left arm falling behind her back. This transitional work, made in New York after definitively leaving Rockbridge Baths in January of ’44, marks the keen interest he is developing in new motifs, as he writes to Bruguère, “I’m trying with all my being, all my senses, all my ideas and all my dreams too, to produce a completely human body of work...I sing in praise even of objects that have fallen in the gutter, and I emphasize how abstract dream and reality coincide.”¹⁵ High and low, abstract and real, are brought together through his desire to create an art that captures the human experience.

Yet, this move to figuration would alienate him from his admirers and supporters in both New York and Paris, and he would struggle for decades as he worked in the opposite direction of prevailing artistic trends. When articulating the changes that the war had on his work in 1943, he stated, “I well know that I shall never return to any form of painting where I could not show clearly, at the same time, what I see and what I dream; what I conceive and what I remember; what I love and what I hope.”¹⁶ By bringing to

life what is real and what is imagined, Héliion allowed for the simultaneous expression of multiple dimensions of experience and imagination, a holistic approach where all these elements—reality, dreams, ideas, memories, love, and hope—intertwined.

Before his final return to France in April of 1946 he burned a large part of his notebooks, writings, and papers, another destructive act that speaks to the intensity of his work. Paradoxically, at this same moment he reasserted his lifelong pursuit of art as a connecting, creative force. In a piece written for the *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* in 1946, he stated, “Art is a way of living – of living fully – with body, soul, senses, dreams, recollections, and all.... Common, daily life is full of mystery and abstraction. I see no greater mission an artist can give himself than to show this.”¹⁷ By bearing witness to the beauty in the world around us, Héliion’s work invites us to celebrate our daily lives as well, allowing us to explore the fullness of life within the framework of his art.

Genevieve Hendricks, Ph.D., Exhibition Co-Curator
Associate Professor of Art History, Hollins University

¹ See Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon Press, 1964. Didier Ottinger discusses Héliion’s reading of Baudelaire during the late 1930s in “Héliion: The Art of Declaring,” *Jean Héliion*, Paul Holberton, 2004, p. 21.

² Information shared with the author by Suzanne Blair, July 26, 2024.

³ Jean-Jacques Lévêque, “Héliion,” *Cinnaise*, no. 122, January – April 1975, p. 16. Quoted in *Jean Héliion*, op. cit., p. 184.

⁴ A.E. Gallatin, “The Plan of the Museum of Living Art,” *Museum of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection*, New York University, 1940.

⁵ For a full discussion of his contacts in New York, see Debra Bricker Balken, “Jean Héliion’s American Connections,” in *Jean Héliion*, op. cit., pp. 44-50.

⁶ “From Reduction to Growth,” in *Axis: A Quarterly Review of Contemporary “Abstract” Painting and Culture*, April, 1935. Republished in Deborah Rosenthal, *Double Rhythm: Writings About Painting: Jean Héliion*, Arcade Publishing, 2014, p. 27.

⁷ Jean Héliion, *Journal d’un Peintre, Carnets 1929-1962*, vol. I, ed. A. Moeglin-Delcroix, Maeght, 1992, April 28, 1935, p. 45.

⁸ Jean Héliion, letter to Marcel Duchamp, 19 July 1936. Published in *Lettres Duchamp – Héliion*, Les Autodidactes, 2000.

⁹ “The Abstract Artist in Society: Interview with Jean Héliion,” *Partisan Review*, April 1938, republished in *Double Rhythm*, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

¹⁰ Jean Héliion, *A perte de vue*, edited by Claire Paulhan and Patrick Fréchet, IMEC, 1996, p. 67.

¹¹ Jean Héliion, letter to Pierre-Georges Bruguère, 9 October 1937. Unpublished.

¹² For more information on his war time experiences, please see the essay “The Héliion - Hollins Connection” by Jenine Culligan in this catalogue.

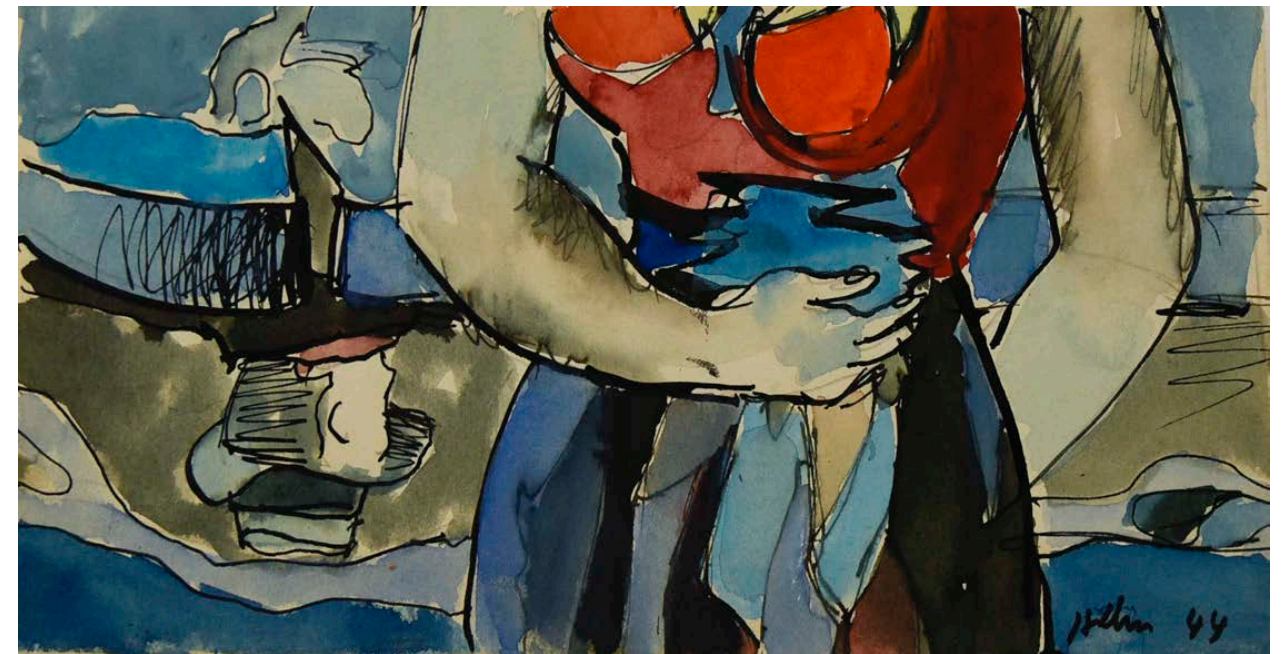
¹³ Jean Héliion, *Mémoire de la Chambre Jaune*, Ecole Nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1994. 165.

¹⁴ “The Making of a Picture,” *The Listener*, BBC Home Service, 1943, republished in *Double Rhythm*, op. cit., p. 160.

¹⁵ Jean Héliion, letter to Pierre-Georges Bruguère, 29 November 1944. Published in *Jean Héliion*, op. cit., p. 193.

¹⁶ “The Making of a Picture,” *The Listener*, BBC Home Service, 1943, republished in *Double Rhythm*, op. cit., pp. 160-1.

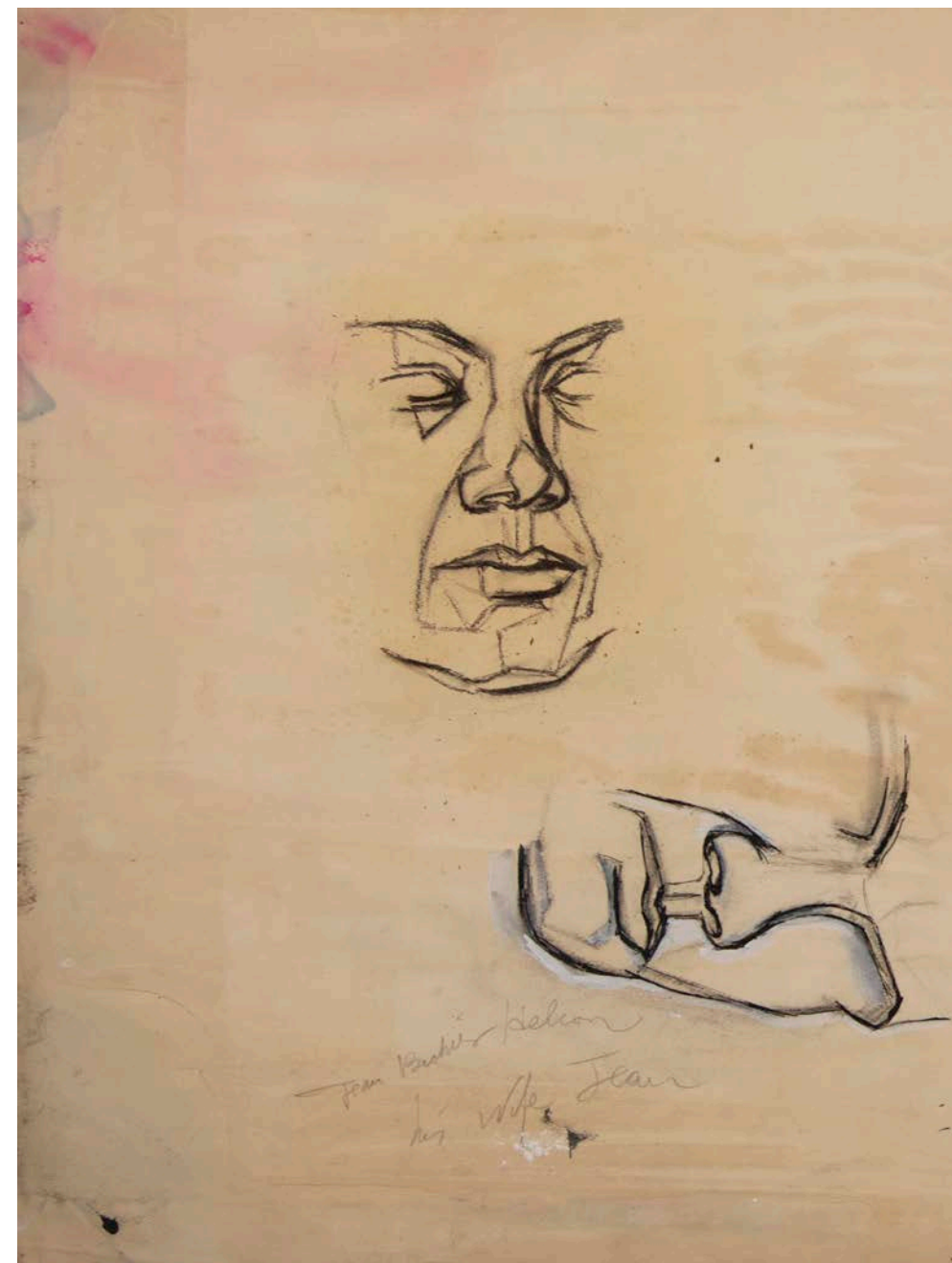
¹⁷ “Untitled Text.” *Eleven Europeans in America*, *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 1946. Republished in *Double Rhythm*, op. cit., p. 167.



Untitled, 1944
Ink and watercolor on paper, 4 5/16 x 8 1/4”
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, 2016.008.039



Untitled (Portrait of Jean Blair), 1937
Charcoal on paper, 24 1/2 x 18 7/8"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2024.008.002



Untitled (Portrait of Jean Blair, verso), 1937
Charcoal on paper, 24 1/2 x 18 7/8"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2024.008.003



Portrait of Man in Hat, 1943
Gouache on paper, 26 x 20"
Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair



Untitled (Subway Newspaper Man), 1943
Ink and watercolor on paper, 8 13/16 x 11 13/16"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.151

Héliion's Impact on Painters in America

Jean Héliion was a unique painter in the development of Modern painting in the 20th century. As a young man, he was finding his way with the emerging ideas about Abstraction.

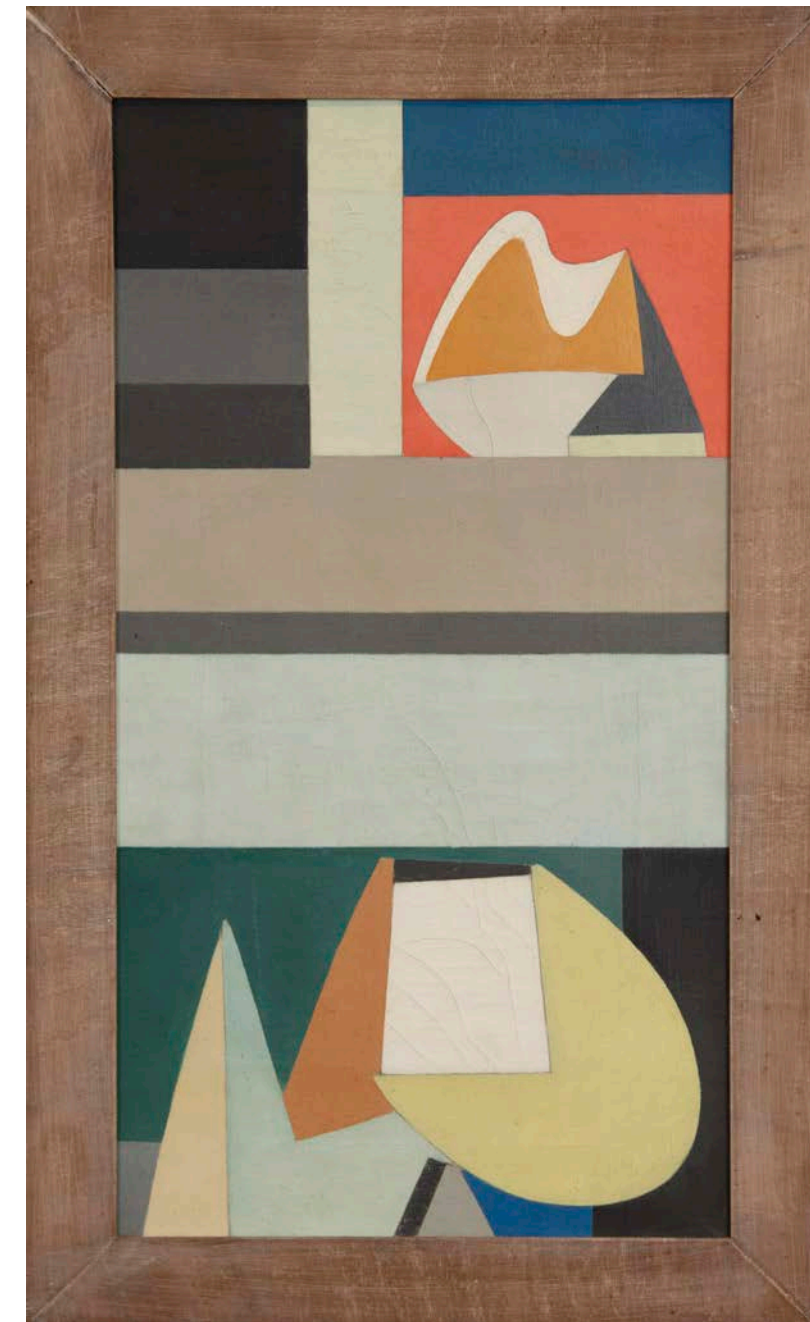
His work transformed after his imprisonment as a French soldier during WWII; he became more concerned with “representing humanism” and so began paintings of heads and figures. His life experience showed him what was absent in “Pure Abstraction.” In the later 1940s, Héliion lived in New York City and met many younger generation painters, including Leland Bell. The hot topic often was, “can American painting rival French painting?” American painting in those days was largely figurative, and the Avant-Garde wanted to challenge that by making paintings that were abstract. By the 1950s, the emergence of Action Painting (later called Abstract Expressionism) became that rival to modern European painting.

By the 1960s, the hegemony of Abstraction was challenged by painters who thought that the issue was not “either or” but “both and” -- that a painting could have roots in abstraction yet still represent an image from the visual world itself. Several painters, including Fairfield Porter, Louis Finkelstein, and Larry Day, made work that acknowledged the long traditions of western painting along with contemporary concerns. Gretna Campbell went outside and began to work as a plein air painter, but with the painterliness of the New York School.

So as these artists who taught at colleges and art schools shared their ideas about this problem of “abstraction versus representation,” it became a central issue for the younger generation, too. Each painter kept trying to resolve this problem in their work. One painter was a significant precedent who experienced this quandary, and it was Jean Héliion. Many of us who were in painting classes in the early 1960s were shown photos of Héliion's works: both the early abstraction and his later works of street scenes and interiors. His works, along with Balthus and Giacometti, were the models of serious contemporary painting.

To my great pleasure, when I arrived to teach at Hollins in 1971, there was a small Héliion painting (page 23) that had been bought from a show at Hollins in the later 1940s. I was able to have it hang over my desk for years until we opened the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum in the Richard Wetherill Visual Art Center at Hollins University where it now resides.

Louis and Suzanne Blair became good friends with us when they moved back to



Abstraction, 1938
Oil on canvas, 19 x 10 1/2"
Hollins art department purchase, 1939
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, 2005.175

Rockbridge Baths from Washington, DC. Louis was the son of Jean Héliion and Jean Blair, and we enjoyed visiting with the Blairs over the years, including spending the night in the studio on the Maury River in which Héliion painted some of his most important abstract paintings. Thanks go to their support and generosity; they made this extensive collection of works by Jean Héliion possible at the Wilson Museum.

Leland Bell, a painter and influential teacher, was the custodian in the NYC building where Héliion lived in the 1940s. Bell became a fierce advocate for Héliion's work. Bell began with abstractions reminiscent of Jean Arp's that had overlapping organic shapes somewhat like a puzzle. His pictures express the flatness of the picture plane, yet suggest the movements not just across the surface but movement into depth as well. His mature works were also based on figures whose gestures are woven together as interlocking shapes with an implied depth, all with dramatic color contrasts.

Harry Naar, Professor Emeritus at Rider University and my art school classmate, spent a year working with Héliion in the early 1970s in Paris. Harry was especially interested in the work of the 1950s when Héliion painted carefully observed still life and interiors. Harry saw in those works a model for serious representational paintings that were steeped in the larger traditions of western painting.

Stanley Lewis, Professor Emeritus at American University, was Bell's student at Yale in Grad school in the late 1960s. Lewis, like Bell, has often had the stature of the "odd man out," meaning that they advocated for a kind of intensity of looking that went beyond the surface likeness to finding a deeper connection to the subject and the formalism of painting. Lewis has shown a level of persistence and fearlessness in his work by cutting apart the canvas and rearranging its pieces to better convey the space he is depicting.

Glen Cebulash is a painter and professor at Wright State, Ohio, whose work is more directly influenced by the look of the Héliion abstractions of the 1930s. Cebulash was Stanley Lewis' MFA student at American University, and they had examined the Héliions to figure out what makes them so clear and complex in pictorial terms, suggesting allusions of the figure.

I was to meet Héliion in Paris in 1974, but it was canceled because he needed eye surgery (he eventually went blind before he died). His fierce advocacy for painting from life has guided me. The later works of Héliion are full of complex color relationships that seem derived for perception and then get pushed into a higher key. This trait of Héliion's work has challenged me to find a connection of colors that evoke feeling and represent something authentic from the subject.

An essay written by Héliion has been like a mantra for me: "Poussin, Seurat and the Double Rhythm." In short, Héliion shows how these two painters connect the "arabesque movement across the surface with a sweeping rhythm into pictorial depth," integrating these two traits. This concern is one that has influenced me and so many other painters of later generations.

Bill White, Painter
Professor Emeritus, Hollins University



Relève de la Figure Tombée, 1983
Acrylic on canvas, 57 x 78 1/2"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2017.003

This is my favorite of our Héliion Collection for several reasons. It is the only one that belongs to me. Louis bought it from his brother, Nicolas, who was an Héliion dealer at the time. It was a very special birthday present.

We had moved to Paris just one year after our marriage in order for both of us to get to know his “French family.” The view is from Héliion’s rooftop studio apartment where we had many happy times and wonderful family gatherings. So I appreciate its sentimental value as much as its wonderful colors and composition.

Suzanne Blair



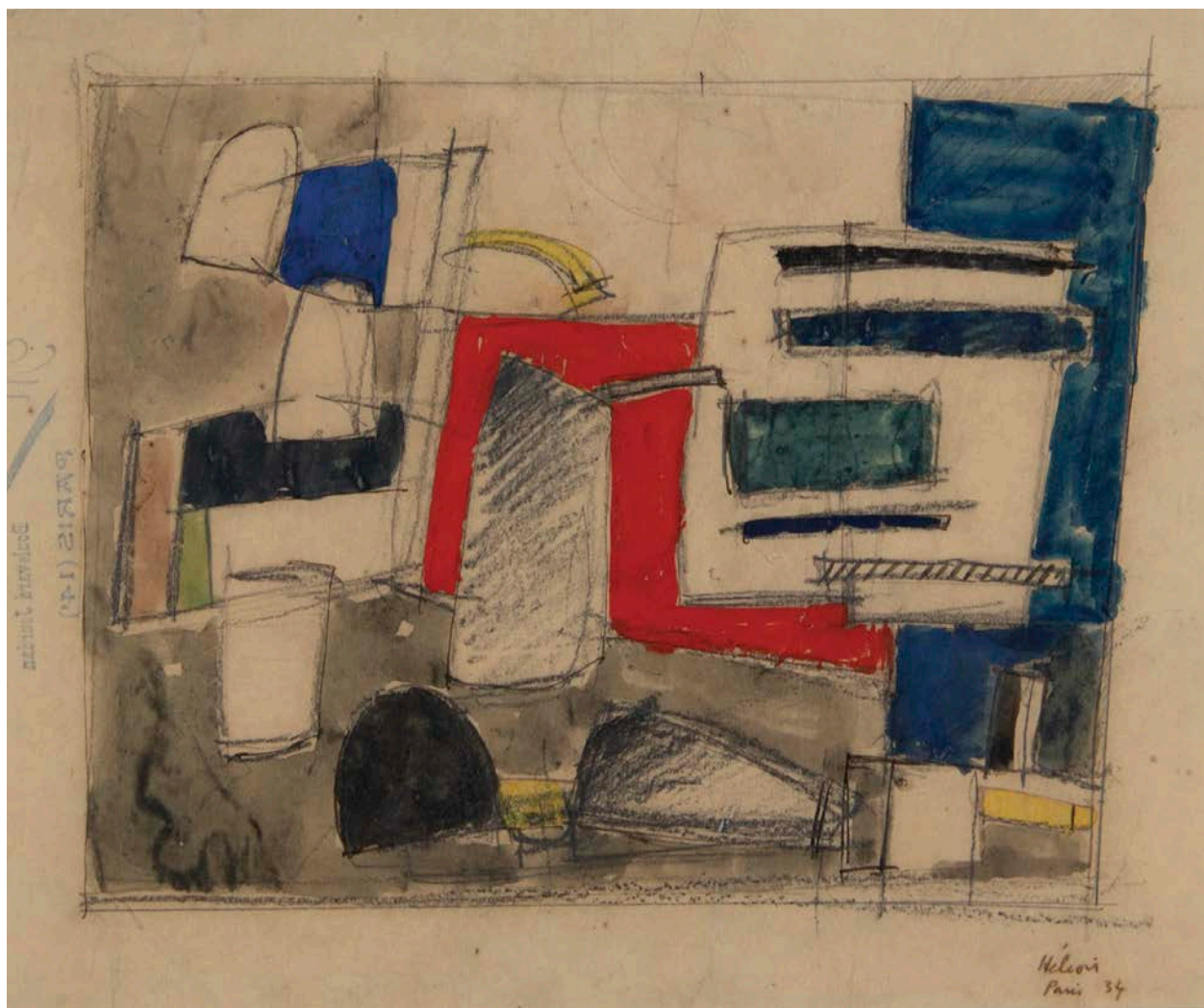
Rooftop, 1960
Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 3/4”
Collection of Suzanne Blair



Self-Portrait, 1926
Oil on canvas, 17 1/2 x 15"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2024.008.004



Still Life with Two Glasses, 1929
Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 31 3/4"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2024.008.005



Untitled (Early Abstract Preparatory Sketch), 1934
 Graphite and gouache on paper, 8 3/4 x 10 3/4" (image)
 Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair



Untitled (Early Abstract - Gift to My Wife), 1934
 Oil on canvas, 13 7/8 x 17 7/8"
 Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair



Untitled (Pegeen), 1946
Graphite, ink, and watercolor on paper, 9 7/8 x 14"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.155



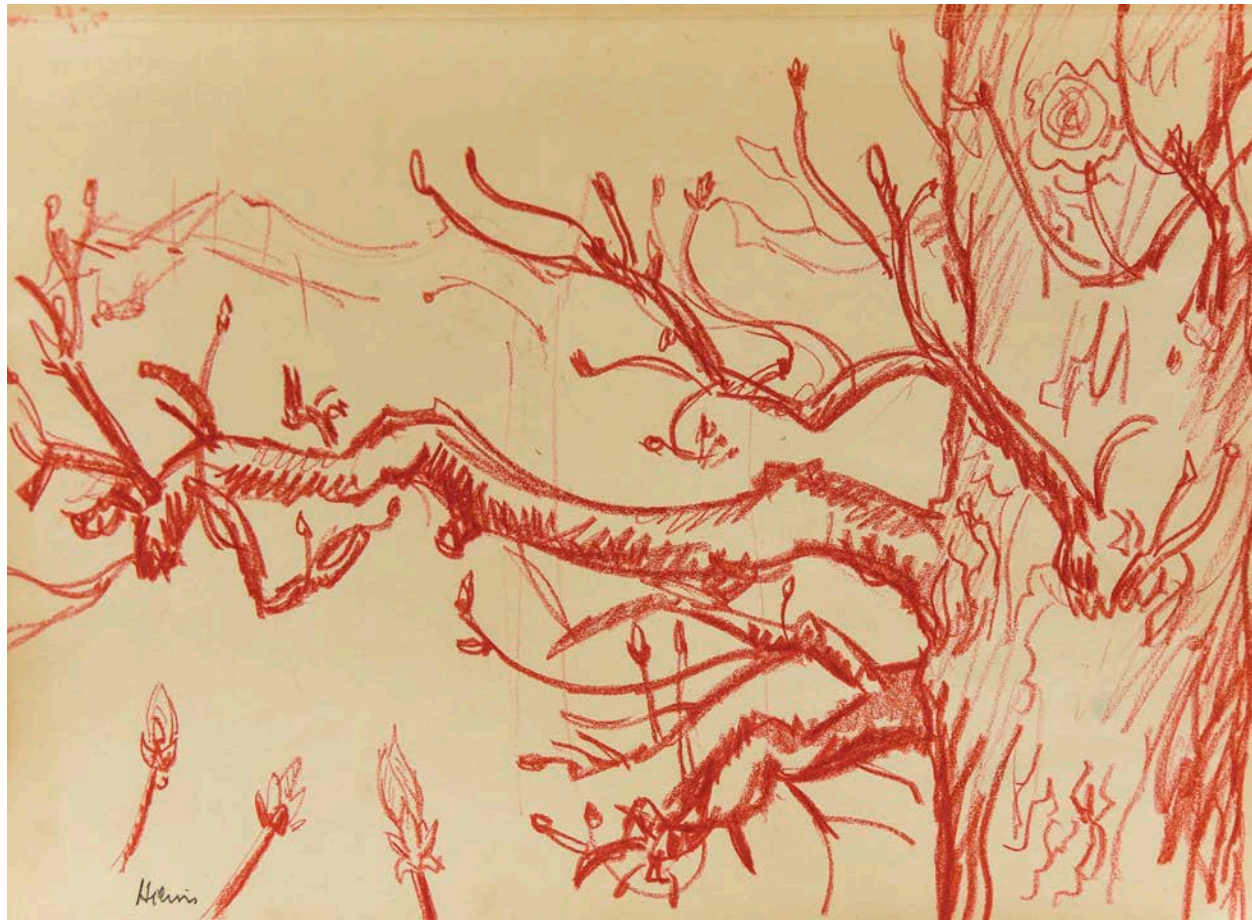
Untitled (Pegeen Reading), 1946
Ink and ink wash on paper, 9 x 11 7/8"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.006.083



Untitled (Newspaper Man, Cyclist, and Fallen Figure on Ground), n.d.
Oil on Masonite, 10 x 13"
Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair



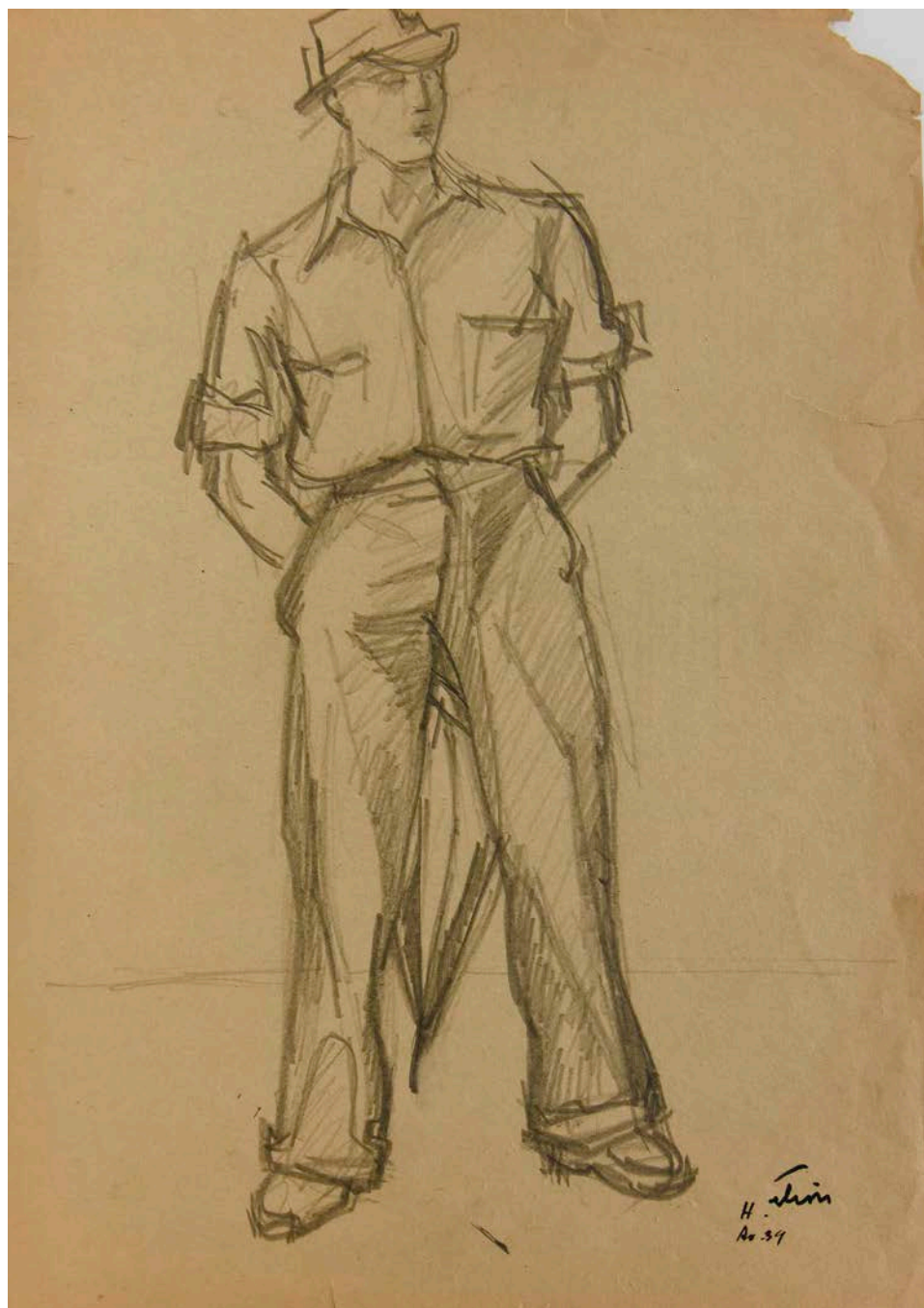
L'Accident, 1979
Oil or acrylic on canvas, 32 x 39 3/8"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.400



Untitled (Red Tree, Luxembourg Garden), 1950
Oil pastel on paper, 10 15/16 x 14 7/8"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.325



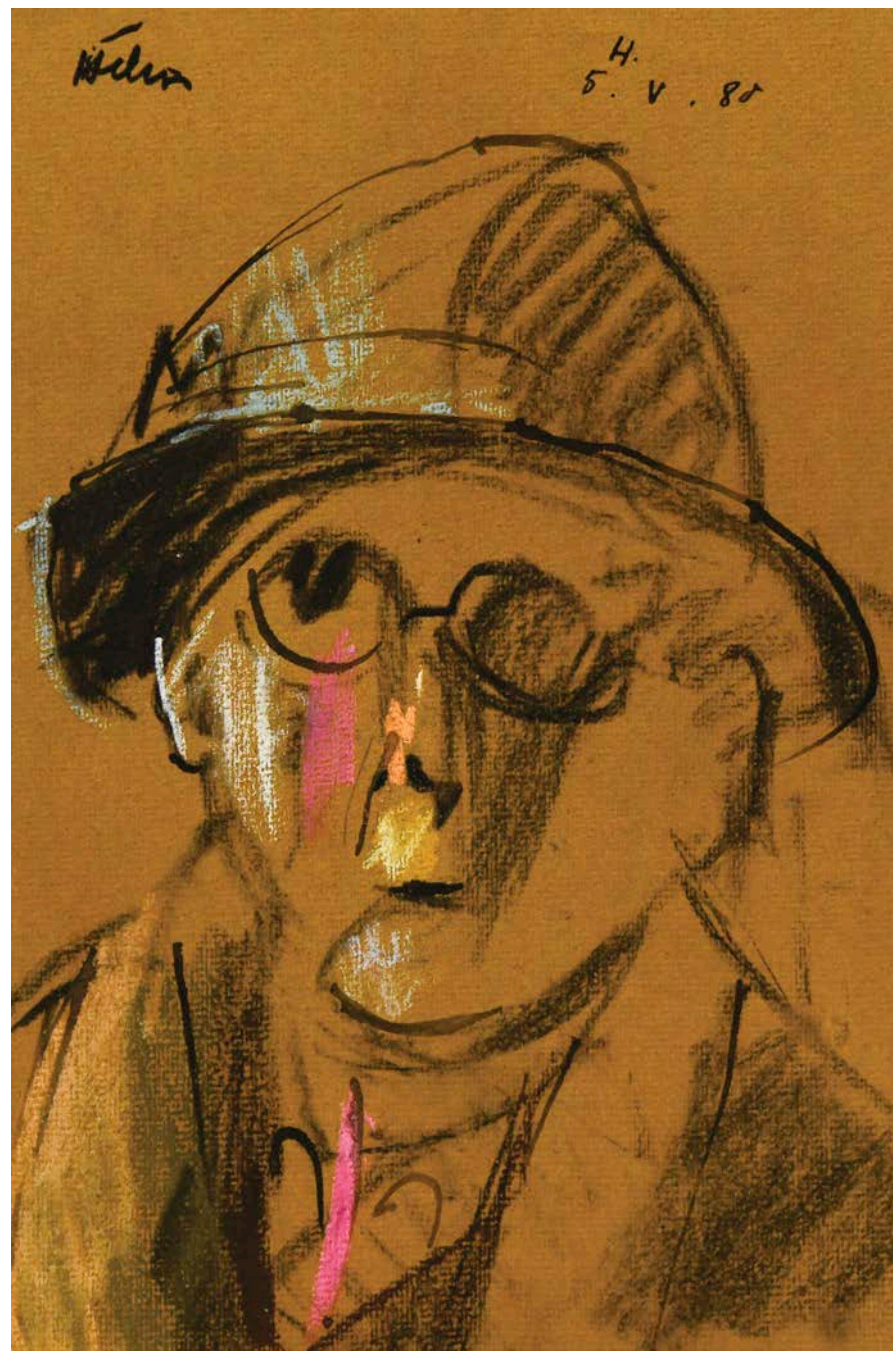
Untitled (Eze and Iris Study), 1951
Ink, watercolor, and pastel on paper, 10 7/8 x 14 7/8"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.048



Untitled (Virginia Man), 1939
Graphite on paper, 14 7/8 x 10 3/4"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.006.201



Allegorie Luxembourgeoise, 1965
Oil on canvas, 44 3/4 x 77"
Collection of Louis and Suzanne Blair



Untitled (Self Portrait as an Old Man), 1980
Pastel and ink on colored paper, 9 1/4 x 6 1/4"
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at
Hollins University, 2016.008.059

Acknowledgements

Sometimes collectors steal your heart with their generous spirit, trust, and appreciation. Such is the case with Louis and Suzanne Blair. Words fall short in thanking them and the Hélicon Family for their generous gifts. In addition to gifts of artwork, the Blairs donated funds to purchase flat files, archival folders, and tissue to properly and safely store this incredible collection in perpetuity. Suzanne Blair has kept the Hollins connection, and the Hélicon legacy, alive following Louis' passing. This exhibition and catalogue would not have happened without her support.

I thank Bill White for being the catalyst that brought this gift to Hollins, and for his ongoing friendship and continued interest in the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum following his retirement. I also thank him for sharing his knowledge of American artists influenced by Hélicon who were working from the mid-20th century to the present.

Working with Dr. Genevieve Hendricks has fortified the collegiality between the Art Department and the Museum. It was a pleasure to carefully and thoughtfully examine together the Hélicon works, select themes for the exhibit, and marvel at the artist's breadth of style and dedication to his practice. Genevieve's expansive knowledge of modernism and all things French gave the work the scholarship and context they so dearly deserve. Her essay brings insight to Hélicon's time in Virginia and this transitional period between abstraction and figuration. We were both thrilled when President Mary Dana Hinton agreed to write the foreword and expressed how excited she was that this exhibition and accompanying catalogue were happening at Hollins.

As a teaching institution, the Museum enjoys interacting with student workers, interns, and volunteers daily. I thank Kailee Hall ('25) and Anna Woods ('26) for all their exceptional assistance with this exhibition.

Mounting an exhibition of this size takes planning, time and effort. As a small staff we do it all in-house: photographing the work and designing the catalogue; mounting, matting, and framing the artwork; researching and writing labels and didactic signage; installing, lighting, and publicizing the exhibit and programs; arranging for the reception, and more. I thank Laura Jane Ramsburg, Assistant Director; Laura Carden, Visitor Services and Programs Coordinator; and Janet Carty, Preparator/Exhibitions Manager for all their hard work. Working with them every day is a dream come true.

Finally, I thank the City of Roanoke through the Roanoke Arts Commission for their continued funding, especially for their support in part for this exhibition and its programs.

Jenine Culligan, Exhibition Co-Curator
Director, Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University

Back cover: *Abstraction*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 19 x 10 1/2". Hollins art department purchase, 1939. Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, 2005.175.

All of the Jean Hélicon works in the collection of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University are gifts of the family of Jean Hélicon, except as noted.

