



Joseph Plavcan
CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION

June 28, 2008 – September 14, 2008
Erie Art Museum

Self Portrait with Wife



The present exhibition, honoring the 100th anniversary of Joseph Plavcan's birth, once again brings together work from all periods of his career as an artist. Many of these paintings have never before been on public display in Erie. A cursory examination will reveal Plavcan's broad spectrum of styles and techniques; a closer look brings to light his mastery of color harmony, strong clear draftsmanship, and his ability to capture elusive and beautiful effects of natural light.

Plavcan's aim was to come to a deeper awareness of every aspect of the world around him, and to communicate this vision to others, but in doing this he was also incidentally preserving a record of Erie's history. While these paintings belong to and document a particular era, they often seem as if they had been painted yesterday, thanks to the freshness of the artist's perception. Plavcan's career is a reflection of the 20th century, and the changes and developments that took place both in art, and in Erie. This exhibition affords an opportunity to look back on where we have come from, as well as to admire the fruits of this Erie artist's truly impressive career.

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Sunburst

Joseph Plavcan was born July 19, 1908, to John and Anna Pruzenski Plavcan. At the time John and Anna were living in Braddock, Pennsylvania, but soon moved back to Erie where they had married.

Plavcan's first exposure to painting was at the Erie Public Library. Dedicated in 1899, the library building housed the Public Museum, the Public Library, and the Art Club. The Art Club of Erie was the ancestor of the Erie Art Museum, and its collection formed the seed of the Museum's collection. Looking at these paintings on Sunday afternoons was the beginning of Plavcan's visual education, and it went hand in hand with his reading books in the library.

Plavcan began his formal study of art in George Ericson's class at Academy High School. Ericson was a successful commercial artist, painting covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* and *McCalls* under the pen name Eugene Iverd. He taught full time for nine years, after which he increasingly devoted his energy to a flourishing commercial career, but he had a knack for nurturing talent and finding scholarships for his students, often sending them to his own alma mater, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, in Philadelphia. At one point, six out of a total of one hundred students at the Academy were Ericson's students from Erie.

Ericson introduced Plavcan to *plein air* landscape painting, which became an obsession for Plavcan during his high school years. Ericson also was the one who insisted that Plavcan continue his art education, recommending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Between a scholarship, a job, and the sale of one hundred small paintings at Sevin's Art Store, Plavcan was able to raise enough money for his first year's tuition. After this, he was able to meet his tuition by merit scholarships.

Plavcan's Academy years were prolific and successful. He won prizes in the Art Club's annual shows all during his student years. He exhibited at the Academy, and his still life *The Blue Pitcher* won a bronze medal in a show sponsored by the Washington Society of Artists. The Academy awarded Plavcan the Cresson Traveling Scholarship for study in Europe, and his experiences there were a lifetime influence, especially his encounters with the watercolors of William Turner, and the paintings of the 15th century Flemish artist Hans Memling.

In 1930, the year he graduated from the Academy, his painting *The Blue Pitcher* was again honored, this time by selection for the 29th Carnegie International, juried by Henri Matisse. The same year two of his paintings were shown in the Art Institute of Chicago's annual show, and *Mechanic Street, New Hope, Pennsylvania* was shown in the 12th Contemporary American Oil Painting exhibition (Corcoran Biennial) in Washington, D.C. This work was the recipient of the Clark prize, and was purchased for the J. H. Bentley collection in Boston. At the time, Plavcan was only twenty two years old. Following these successes he was able to marry Catherine Burns, herself an artist, whom he had met at the Academy. They moved to Erie in 1931, where they later raised a son and three daughters. The Art Club's 1931 Exhibition of Erie Artists included the work of both Joseph Plavcan and his new wife (who was awarded first prize for her entry). That year the Art Club purchased Plavcan's painting *The Red Mill* for its collection.

Plavcan began his forty year teaching career simply because there was no work for artists during the depression years. He started with night classes, but his mentor Ericson, still teaching at the time, suggested that he add another course, teaching art to printers and tailors at Erie Technical High School. Over time more vocational courses were added, eventually amounting to a full time job.



Richard's Foods Market Day

The important thing is coming to an awareness or more total realization of how the human mind perceives. There is an open frontier that is so wide and so expansive in pursuing this color attitude that I would like to live two, three, ten more years to try to express it. If I can't, I hope somebody else does.

– Joseph Plavcan





Flying Duck

The purpose of these classes was to prepare students for a career in commercial art. But Plavcan didn't limit his approach to teaching specific techniques, such as sign painting, in a superficial way. Instead he built the subject up from its fundamentals. He taught that the artist's mission was "to give the world an expanded vision, and a more comprehensive understanding of the human environment." Students had first of all to increase their awareness of every aspect of their surroundings, and this meant going outside to draw and paint, working from life. This was considered unorthodox at the time, and the administration was at first resistant. Eventually, however, the overwhelming success of his students made the effectiveness of his methods clear.

While undertaking a full load of art courses, as well as raising a family, framing, restoring, appraising, and commercial work including portrait and mural commissions, Plavcan continued his own artistic achievements. He took first place at the 1935 Art Club Show, and was invited to exhibit his first one-man show at the Mulvane Art Museum of Washburn College, in Topeka, Kansas. In 1936 he was inducted into Who's Who in American Art.

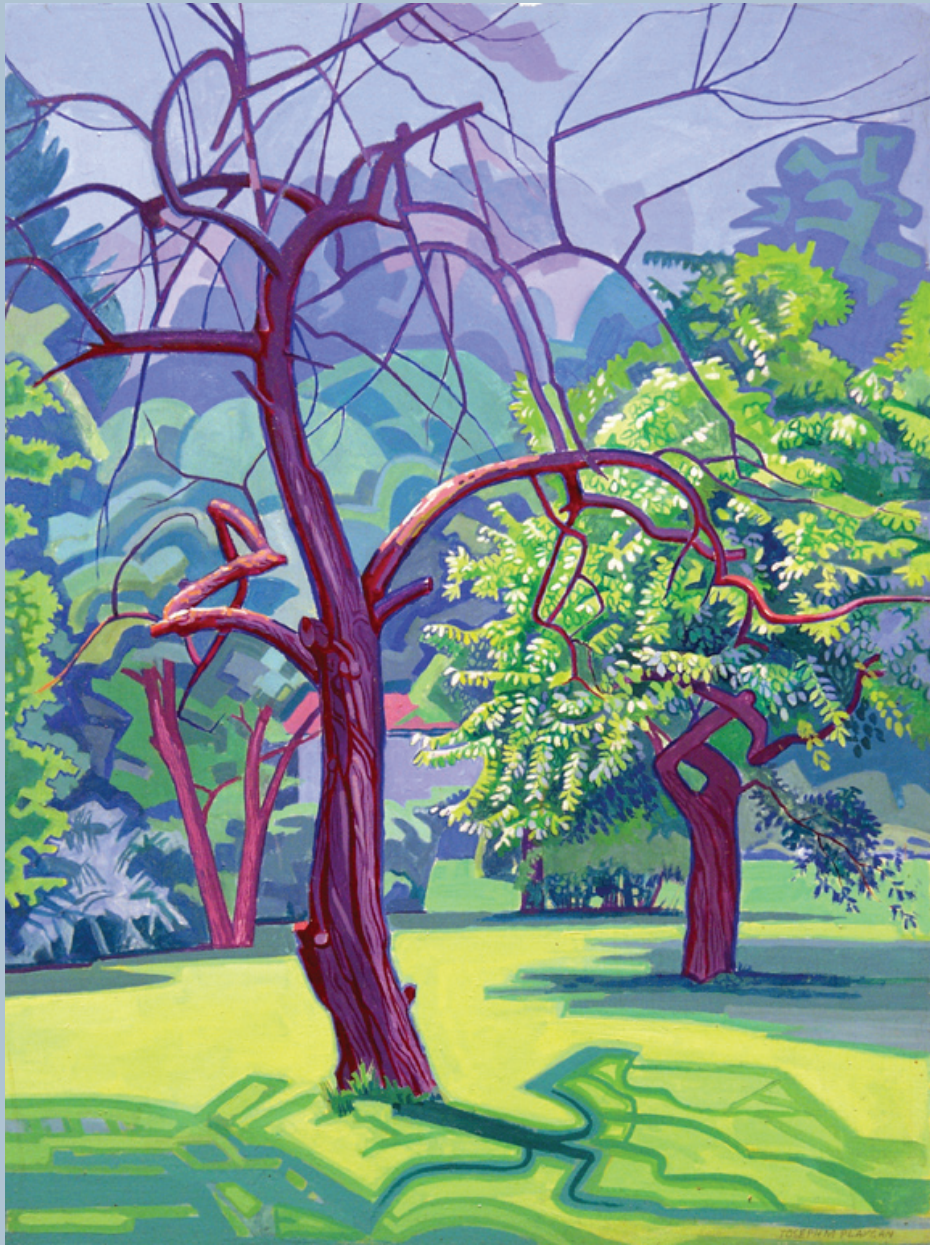
By the 1950s his students were attracting attention nationally, winning prodigious amounts of prizes and scholarships. He had become a respected figure in Erie for his role as a teacher who maintained high expectations and got corresponding results. His influence extended from students to parents, affecting the larger community's ideas toward art and artists.

Plavcan returned to the Corcoran Biennial in 1951 with his painting *Engine House*, and his work was included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Artists for Victory show. At the same time he was honored with more one-man shows, in Washington, D.C., Akron, Topeka, Philadelphia, Charleston, Greenville, Slippery Rock, Edinboro, and Erie. In 1967 the Art Center of Erie (formerly the Art Club, and later to be the Erie Art Museum) hosted Joseph M. Plavcan: Four Decades. Some of his students had attained international recognition by this time.

Plavcan saw art not as a field separate from the rest of human knowledge and endeavors, but as related to and inclusive of science, history, and the rest. His childhood exposure to books and paintings together in the Public Library, and his admiration for Leonardo da Vinci, whom he often quoted to his students, are in keeping with this holistic attitude. For Plavcan, a painting was an arena in which ideas could be articulated, and knowledge set down, just like a book; he believed that paintings can set forth truths about the world, and shape our perceptions of it. As Plavcan once noted, anything once learned becomes fair game in this pursuit: "It is very hard once you've learned additional information not to use that in your art." He was troubled by his feeling that early training in drawing with chalk or pencil had created a subconscious block to truly seeing color, and felt that in a way he spent his career breaking free of this early conditioning.

Joseph Plavcan died in the winter of 1981 at the age of 72. In the summer of that year, the Erie County Historical Society hosted a Plavcan show in the Old Customs House, which was later to house the Erie Art Museum. In 1982 the Erie Art Center and Erie Historical Museum opened Plavcan memorial exhibitions simultaneously with an exhibition of his students' works in Glass Growers Gallery.

At the time of his death, his wife Catherine had 300 to 400 of his paintings, of which the Art Center acquired 40 for its collection. In 2003, a Plavcan Family Treasures exhibition was held at the Bayfront Gallery, made up of works loaned by the artist's extended family.



Plum Tree

Cover: *Last Apples*

Works pictured from the collections of Lisa and Don Drumm, Erie Art Museum, Abigail Adams Greenway and Lauder Greenway, Dr. and Mrs. William Plavcan and Elizabeth Weber .

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The Talking Phone Book proudly sponsors this exhibit.

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