



## 60: Ralston Crawford *Whitestone Bridge* (1939–40)

Marjorie B. Searl

*Shocking to me: the solitary man  
perched high on a girder of the Whitestone Bridge,  
until his yellow hard hat bolts  
into sight, his wind-burned face,  
legs that ride a wedge between sky and sea. Closer,  
and more startling still:  
grasping a tiny whisk broom, he dusts the ledge  
with a motion delicate and precise—  
a jeweler brushing a watch's gears.  
—From "Gulls and the Man" by Maria Terrone<sup>1</sup>*



In April 29, 1939, a brand-new New York City icon was dedicated—the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. The bridge, itself heralded by many as a work of art, has inspired or figured in artistic creations in many genres, from the poem above to an exhibition of artworks related to Alfred Hitchcock's films, an exhibition that included Ralston Crawford's painting, *Whitestone Bridge*.<sup>2</sup>

Fittingly, the spare and elegant bridge is also a metaphor for a transitional period in Crawford's career, coming just as he moved from the painterly and peaceful landscapes and still lifes of the early 1930s to more austere works whose bridges, industrial elevators, roofs, and barns were created with a limited palette and linear style, linking him with precisionists like Charles Sheeler (1883–1965) and Charles Demuth (1883–1935).

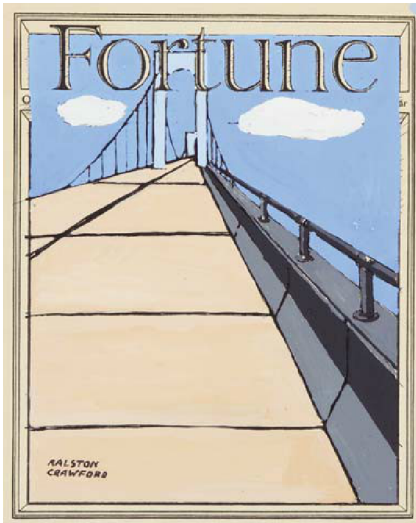
Ralston Crawford's life and career were characterized by change.<sup>3</sup> From California, where he worked as an illustrator for Walt Disney Studios, he moved to Philadelphia in 1927, where he became acquainted with modern art at the Barnes Foundation, and from there to New York City, which became his home base. Study in Europe, married life in Bucks County, and trips to Florida and New Orleans happened in quick succession. By 1938, he had completed some of his most muscular paintings, and the next year saw the creation of the surrealist and much-acclaimed *Overseas Highway* (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, 1939), a sibling to *Whitestone Bridge* in its illusionistic pull of the viewer into deep space, with no certainty of a safe landing at the other end, and only a cloud to reach for.

*Whitestone Bridge* was finished in 1940, the year following the bridge's completion. Given Crawford's interest in the industrial landscape the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge was a natural subject for him: a manmade structure of significant proportions, with startling visual impact and, viewed from the right angle, the potential for psychic unease. The bridge unfolds before the viewer like a fan, with carefully creased pleats made up of narrow slivers of guard rail, roadway, and median.

Using a severely restricted palette of blues, grays, black, and white, Crawford eliminates all but the most essential components of the composition. There is no meandering from foreground to middleground to background—the exaggerated diagonal lines leave the viewer no choice but to zoom ahead, as if one were in reality traversing the bridge by car. The surreal absence of land on the other side of the bridge—in effect, a suspension bridge suspended in space—suggests the memory of an anxiety dream, made dreamier by the cottony cloud drifting by, a counterpoint to the hard-edged surfaces of the painting.

Ralston Crawford,  
1906–1978  
*Whitestone Bridge*, 1939–40  
Oil on canvas, 40 1/4 x 32 in.  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,  
51.2  
Ralston Crawford Estate

By 1936, traffic on the East River bridges, including the new Triborough Bridge, had become insupportable, and one powerful man, Robert Moses, was convinced that a new bridge would solve the problem. A crossing from Whitestone, Queens, to Ferry Point, the Bronx, had been proposed since early in the century, but not until Moses advanced his plan in 1930 was the vision for the complex roadway system that included the Whitestone Bridge fully articulated:



Ralston Crawford,  
1906–1978  
*Study for Fortune Magazine*,  
ca. 1945  
Pen and ink with watercolor  
on paper, 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 5 in.  
Gift of Edith Holden Babcock,  
Peter Iselin, Dr. Ben Shenson,  
Dr. A. Jess Shenson, Emilie  
Wiggin, and Marion Stratton  
Gould Fund, by exchange, 95.50  
Ralston Crawford Estate

Ralston Crawford,  
1906–1978  
*Study for "Whitestone Bridge,"*  
ca. 1940  
Pen and ink with graphite  
on paper, 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 5 in.  
Gift of Edith Holden Babcock,  
Peter Iselin, Dr. Ben Shenson,  
Dr. A. Jess Shenson, Emilie  
Wiggin, and Marion Stratton  
Gould Fund, by exchange, 95.48  
Ralston Crawford Estate

*If the Marginal Boulevard, the Ferry Point-Whitestone Bridge and the Hutchinson River Parkway Extension were built...motorists would be able to leave Manhattan Island on the Brooklyn Bridge and then proceed over broad modern roads, unhindered by a single traffic light, all the way around Brooklyn to the Long Island parkways and parks. In addition, Manhattan and Brooklyn motorists would be presented with a through route to the Bronx, Westchester and New England—and so would motorists from Nassau and Suffolk counties.*<sup>4</sup>

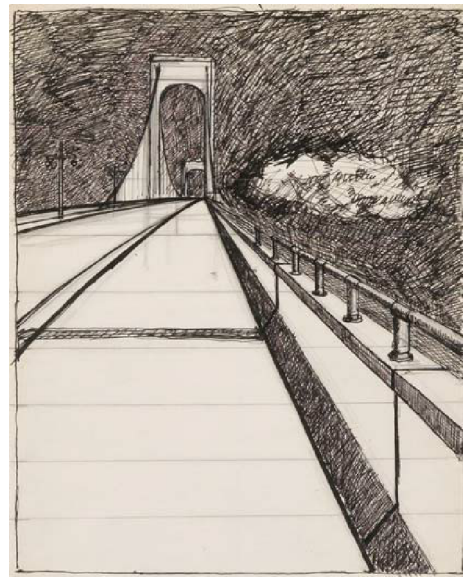
Resistance was strong: New York City's Regional Plan Association insisted that no traffic solution would be acceptable unless mass transit or the potential for mass transit were included as part of the structure. Moses was equally adamant that this not happen, possibly due to his concern that "undesirables" might overrun Long Island. Or, he may have been concerned that the budget would prove inadequate to the project.

As was nearly always the case, Moses had his way, but the city's much-anticipated traffic relief never materialized. Notwithstanding traffic woes, the bridge's design was widely praised. One reporter commented: "The bridge's

freedom from heavy structural lines and ornamentation gives a breath-taking grace to the 2,300-foot center span and 3,770-foot overall length."<sup>5</sup> At the ribbon-cutting, Robert Moses described it as "architecturally the finest suspension bridge of them all, without comparison in cleanliness and simplicity of design, in lightness and absence of pretentious ornamentation. Here, if anywhere, we have pure, functional architecture."<sup>6</sup> Forty years later, Moses was still smitten with the bridge's beauty, as he described the "'airy, gossamer lightness' of the original structure."<sup>7</sup>

New York City viewers in 1940, for whom the bridge was a symbol of innovation and progress, brought an entirely different set of associations to Crawford's painting than their 2005 counterparts. The streamlined Art Deco style of the Whitestone Bridge was a perfect entrée for visitors crossing the East River to the futuristic fairgrounds, whose theme—"Building the World of Tomorrow"—was expressed in its architecture and, especially, in its "Trylon and Perisphere" logo. On April 30, 1939 (in a feat of good planning, the day after the dedication of the Whitestone Bridge), Franklin Roosevelt made the first live television broadcast from Flushing Meadow Park, Queens, in which he declared the 1939 World's Fair officially open.<sup>8</sup>

Crawford's *Whitestone Bridge*, too, excited great interest and functioned as a benchmark against which his future work was often com-



pared. The celebratory atmosphere of the openings of the bridge and the World's Fair may have also given Crawford reason to believe that the bridge would be a well-received subject. He recalled that "The production of the painting 'Whitestone Bridge' was preceded by a series of direct visual stimuli related to this bridge and similar forms.<sup>9</sup> In this painting I have tried to express the sensations and thoughts about the sensations that I have had while driving over such bridges. The simplifications and distortions aim at a distillation of these experiences. Some of the people who have gotten satisfaction from the painting tell me that it clarifies and enlarges their reaction to similar experiences."<sup>10</sup>



Ralston Crawford,  
1906–1978  
*Study for "Whitestone Bridge,"*  
ca. 1940  
Pen and ink with watercolor  
on paper, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 5 in.  
Gift of Edith Holden Babcock,  
Peter Iselin, Dr. Ben Shenson,  
Dr. A. Jess Shenson, Emilie  
Wiggin, and Marion Stratton  
Gould Fund, by exchange, 95.49  
Ralston Crawford Estate

The first published reference to the painting appears to have been in Edward Alden Jewell's review of the 1940 Whitney annual exhibition of contemporary American painting, which includes in an informal list of work "Ralston Crawford's severely simplified perspective device, 'Whitestone Bridge.'"<sup>11</sup> In January 1944, Dorothy Grafty, reviewing the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts salon, described the "cool, precise, engineering emphasis in Ralston Crawford's 'White Stone Bridge.'"<sup>12</sup> In 1943, the dynamic art dealer Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery began to represent Crawford<sup>13</sup> and a year later she sold *Whitestone Bridge* to the Encyclopedia Britannica Collection:



*Incidentally, did you know that we sold your "Whitestone Bridge" to Encyclopedia Britannica just before we closed for the summer. Because of the split commission (on which we charge 40%), I raised the price (and this is confidential) to \$850.00, so that you won't have to take a cut. They are assembling a pretty good collection, slightly on the conservative side, but have been breaking loose lately. I tried to put over a later example, but the committee couldn't quite take it. However, they got a swell picture, and everyone was happy.<sup>14</sup>*

Ralston Crawford,  
1906–1978  
*Whitestone Bridge*, ca. 1940  
Gelatin silver print,  
2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
Gift of Edith Holden Babcock,  
Peter Iselin, Dr. Ben Shenson,  
Dr. A. Jess Shenson, Emilie  
Wiggin, and Marion Stratton  
Gould Fund, by exchange, 95.52  
Ralston Crawford Estate

Crawford answered her from Washington, D.C., on July 23, 1944:

*I am terribly glad about WHITESTONE BRIDGE and I am more than pleased that you were able to arrange the price so effectively. I very well understand their choice of this picture rather than a later example. I also appreciate your effort to provide them with a later example. This procedure of selecting the earlier ones is, I am sure, an old story in your experience and it is becoming*

*an old one in mine. There is no doubt that the productive painter paints faster and develops faster than the public eye can absorb. This, I presume, is for the simple reason that the painter thinks about his work for longer periods than the average gallery visitor. Therefore this lag does not seem disturbing to me, provided the public keeps moving.*<sup>15</sup>

These sentiments echoed a critic's comment in the January 15, 1944, issue of *Art News*, in response to an exhibition of Crawford's work at Halpert's Downtown Gallery: "There are people who will regret the passing of what he did so well, remembering *Whitestone Bridge* where not alone the vanishing perspective but the infinitely remote blue sky created a tremendous sense of suction.... But Crawford must pursue his direction. That direction has resulted in a group of work which now represents one of the milestones of American abstract art."<sup>16</sup> Halpert understood as well that the public had been conditioned to expect a certain "look" from Crawford; he, however, was hoping to interest people in his developing style. About a possible commission for a factory in Buffalo, she wrote to him: "I am sure that what she [the factory decorator] has in mind is 'The Whitestone Bridge', but you can decide for yourself whether you want to bother with the matter at all."<sup>17</sup> He wrote back: "I am slightly disappointed in the development of this project [the Buffalo commission]. And then, 'The Fortune Commissions, and needless to say, the Encyclopedia Britannica sales have been swell. But what do you think can be done with these pictures now in existence?'"<sup>18</sup>

"These pictures" represented the beginning of a shift in Crawford's approach to painting, from a type of ultra-clarified representation toward abstraction. *Whitestone Bridge's* controlled classicism gave way after World War II to explosive bursts of color and line. This was due in no small part to one of Crawford's most intense experiences: being witness to the 1946 nuclear tests at Bikini atoll for a *Fortune* magazine commission.<sup>19</sup>

The *Whitestone Bridge* also experienced changes and modifications. In November 1940, a little more than eighteen months after the opening of the *Whitestone Bridge*, the Tacoma Narrows suspension bridge collapsed into Puget Sound after experiencing vibrations due to high winds. In spite of reassurances by engineer and designer Othmar Ammann that the New York bridge was safe, Robert Moses mandated that precautions be taken to increase its structural strength, which included adding diagonal stiffening cables running from the tower tops to the plate girders. As Darl Rastorfer wrote: "Lost forever were the pure and simple lines of the original structure and unobstructed views its roadway afforded travelers."<sup>20</sup> Fortunately, thanks to the availability of stronger and lighter materials, the bridge is undergoing renovations intended to bring it back to its original form. Belying Rastorfer's dire description, the lines of the bridge will once again correspond closely to "the original structure and the unobstructed views" in Ralston Crawford's painting.

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