

## 62: Douglas Warner Gorsline *Bar Scene* (1942)

Marie Via

The Rochester-born artist Douglas Gorsline burst upon the art scene with fireworks.

The first time he ever submitted work for consideration was to the Memorial Art Gallery's Annual Exhibition of Work by Rochester Artists and Craftsmen in 1935. Not only was the painting *Girl's Head* accepted for inclusion but it was awarded the first purchase prize ever offered at the Gallery. "I was still trying to recover from the amazement of winning the prize in your exhibition when I heard you had purchased it for the gallery," he wrote to director Gertrude Herdle Moore. "I assure you that put the finishing touches upon my stupefaction!"<sup>1</sup> A month later, the twenty-two-year-old Gorsline was selected as one of ten artists of special promise enrolled at the Art Students League in New York, and in 1938 was included in the Whitney Museum's prestigious annual exhibition of contemporary art. By 1940, *Art Digest* was following his "steady progress,"<sup>2</sup> and in 1942 his portrait titled *My Better Half* took the Walter Lippincott Prize for best figure painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

It was at this heady juncture that the Memorial Art Gallery acquired its third Gorsline painting. *Bar Scene* had been selected for inclusion in the 1942 Rochester-Finger Lakes Exhibition (the annual juried show of regional art) and was subsequently purchased for the permanent collection through the Art Patrons Fund. Depicting a beefy saloon patron draping his arm over the shoulder of an auburn-haired beauty in a yellow blouse, it was a brilliant example of the genre upon which Gorsline was building his solid reputation: scenes from everyday life in New York City.

As he so often did, Gorsline used his wife as his model. Elisabeth "Zippy" Perkins, the daughter of famed Charles Scribner's Sons editor Maxwell Perkins, was the ideal Gorsline "type"—one part "buxom working gal"<sup>3</sup> and one part "lost soul."<sup>4</sup> She too had studied at the Art Students League, and her marriage to the handsome Gorsline in 1936 marked the beginning of a fruitful artist/model collaboration.

Gorsline incorporated two of his signature devices into *Bar Scene*. First, his subjects, like the woman here, often wear coats or wraps that have been allowed to hang open, revealing the drapery of the blouse or dress underneath. Indeed, he was so captivated by the details of clothing that many of his portraits now serve as documents of mid-century dress.<sup>5</sup> Second, he had a penchant for the far-away gaze. Seldom do his models make eye contact with the viewer, effectively distancing themselves behind an invisible barrier. The woman in *Bar Scene* turns away from the casual possessiveness of her cigarette-smoking companion. Despite her fur jacket and décolletage, she seems less glamorous than wistful.

The critics were quick to recognize Gorsline's talent and potential. One acknowledged his "keen sense of characterization,"<sup>6</sup> which is fully realized in works like *Bar Scene*. Another noted that his portraits were "complete statements equipped with an aesthetic subject, predicate and period."<sup>7</sup> In 1939, *Art News* praised his work as that of "a young artist whose draughtsmanship has real distinction, and who handles his colors with ease."<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, reviewers commented on the influence of the old masters in Gorsline's work. Although his subject matter was completely up-to-date, his time-consuming technique was based on that of Titian and Rubens, in which successive layers of semi-transparent oil glazes were layered over egg tempera that he mixed himself, creating the illusion of depth and inner light. By 1945, he had streamlined his methods a bit. That year, identified as "one of the younger brilliant painters recent-



Elisabeth Perkins Gorsline  
("Zippy"), ca. 1936  
Photograph  
Courtesy John Gorsline



ly honored by the National Academy," he endorsed Grumbacher oils in a national ad campaign: "After seeking the most permanent colors for years, I have come to the conclusion that Grumbacher Finest Oil Colors are my answer, and I always use them."<sup>9</sup>

The setting of the painting has always been a mystery. Clearly, it was a bar set slightly below street level (as indicated by the legs of figures seen through the window) and there was also a dining room (the sign appears on the back wall). But was it an actual place or a generic spot concocted in Gorsline's imagination? The discovery of a creased and faded photograph of a lost Gorsline painting titled *Costello's Bar* suggests that this was also the location depicted in *Bar Scene*, painted in the same year. This supposition is confirmed by a surviving copy of the menu that Gorsline designed for Costello's, illustrated with lively vignettes of the establishment's staff and patrons, one of the original sketches for which is also dated 1942.<sup>10</sup>



Costello's was the legendary home away from home for writers at *The New Yorker*, *The Daily News*, *United Press International*, and *Associated Press* and served as "forward editorial headquarters"<sup>11</sup> for *Yank Magazine* during World War II. Located at Third Avenue and East Forty-fourth Street in New York City, the Irish bar and grill was decorated with murals by James Thurber, one of its regulars, and made famous in John McNulty's *This Place on Third Avenue*. Its habitués were "truck drivers, horseplayers, glamour girls, draftees, has-beens, never-weres, dreamers and despairers,"<sup>12</sup> exactly the sort of characters that captured Gorsline's fancy. In *Costello's Bar*, which hung in the establishment until about 1947, proprietor Tim Costello leans against the mahogany bar while, in the background, an archetypal "Gorsline Girl" chats with a man in a fedora. The artist eventually reacquired the canvas; around 1957, while developing a new, "splintered" visual style, he painted a different portrait of Costello on top of it.<sup>13</sup>

Douglas Warner Gorsline,  
1913–1985  
*Tim Costello*, before 1947  
(no longer extant)  
Courtesy Musée Gorsline,  
Bussy-le-Grand, France

Fortunately, *Bar Scene* has remained undisturbed in the Memorial Art Gallery's collection, still an outstanding example of urban genre painting. In recent years, it has been included in a number of exhibitions: *A Rochester Retrospective* (1980), *The Art of Douglas Gorsline* (1990), *Out of the Drawing Room* (1995), and *Eye Contact: Paintings by Ken Aptekar* (2002). It also appeared in *Amerika: Traum und Depression, 1920–1940*, which was on view in Berlin and Hamburg in 1980–81.

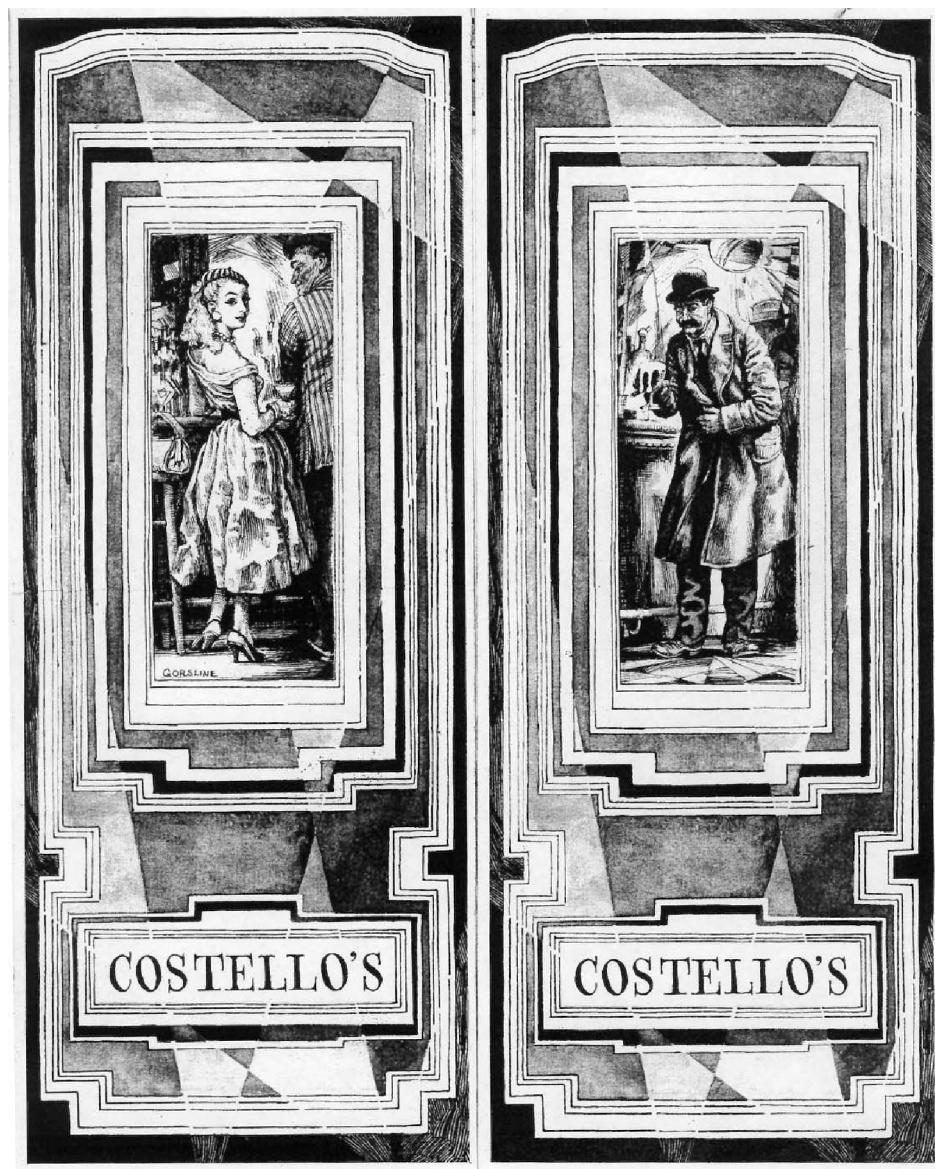
Even as Gorsline was receiving accolades from the critics, he was urged by them to emancipate himself from discipleship to Kenneth Hayes Miller, his former teacher and also a master of the urban scene. "His vocabulary of night clubs, restaurants and subways could be broadened," counseled one.<sup>14</sup> "It will be interesting to see whether this young painter...will be able to dominate a felicitous technique or whether his skill will stand in the way of more mature emotional growth," mused another.<sup>15</sup>

(Facing page)  
Douglas Warner Gorsline,  
1913–1985  
*Bar Scene*, 1942  
Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 25 1/4 in.  
Art Patrons' Purchase Award,  
1942 Rochester-Finger Lakes  
Exhibition, 42.19  
Courtesy Musée Gorsline,  
Bussy-le-Grand, France

Although he never fully rejected realism, by the late 1950s Gorsline had begun wedding it to a cubist sensibility. Inspired by the photographs of Étienne-Jules Marey, his new work was visually fragmented—an exploration of movement and the passage of time. In 1965, he moved to a remote farm in the Burgundy region of France with his third wife, Marie, who had been his artist's representative. Mrs. Gorsline now directs the museum she created to house his work in Bussy-le-Grand, where examples of both his early and late paintings are on view to the public.

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Douglas Warner Gorsline,  
1913–1985  
*Menu, Costello's Bar (recto),*  
ca. 1942  
Courtesy Musée Gorsline,  
Bussy-le-Grand, France



Douglas Warner Gorsline,  
1913–1985

*Menu, Costello's Bar (verso),*  
ca. 1942

Courtesy Musée Gorsline,  
Bussy-le-Grand, France