JAMES GUY (1909–1983)

The Camouflage Man in a Landscape (A Six-panel Mural)

Oil on Masonite, 83 x 216 in.

Signed and dated (on first panel, at lower left): Guy / ’39

EX COLL: private collection, Boston, until 2009; to the trade, until the present

From the mid-1930s until about 1945, James Guy was associated with a coterie of politically inclined artists—among them Walter Quirt and Louis Guglielmi—who used the techniques and iconography of European Surrealism to create vivid paintings that reflected their response to the economic and political conditions of the Great Depression. (The primary source of information on Guy’s life and career is Ilene Susan Fort, “James Guy: A Surreal Commentator,” *Prospects* 12 [1987], pp. 125–48. See also, by the same author, “American Social Surrealism,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 22 [1982], pp. 8–20.) Highly regarded in New York art circles for his insightful melding of representation and fantasy, Guy used his paintings to address issues such as poverty, corruption, unemployment, and the plight of workers, as well as the turbulence of a world

on the cusp of war. His innovative use of surrealist devices—such as ambiguous settings, distorted forms, and illogical juxtapositions—set his work apart from that of the social realists, who employed a traditional descriptive approach in depicting aspects of the American scene. Although the methods of the social realists were more accessible to art audiences, Guy—who admitted that he had "little patience [with] paintings of Kansas wheat fields, Pennsylvania oil rigs and the like"—felt that because Surrealism propelled the viewer beyond mere physical reality, it was a much more effective means of conveying his feelings relative to the conditions of his day (James Guy, as quoted in Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-garde, 1920–1950* [New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995], p. 120). In addition to his choice of subject matter, Guy drew praise for his technical skill; as the critic Emily Genauer pointed out, "his color sense is as brilliant and as striking as his designs are arresting, and his draughtsmanship is hardly surpassed by his contemporaries" (Emily Genauer, *New York World-Telegram*, 1939, as quoted in *James Guy*, exhib. cat. [Jacksonville, Illinois: MacMurray College, 1948], n.p.).

Born in Middletown, Connecticut, Guy received his formal training at the Hartford Art School, where he was taught by the post-impressionist painter, Albertus E. Jones. During his formative years, he painted expressionistic landscapes and still lifes influenced by modernists such as Charles Burchfield and George Grosz. Guy's talent quickly caught the attention of A. Everett "Chick" Austin, Jr., the progressive-minded director of the Wadsworth Atheneum who described him as "one of the most interesting art personalities that the Hartford Art School has produced." (A. Everett Austin to Stanley Lothrop, June 3, 1931, Austin Papers, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut. See also Deborah Zlotsky, "Pleasant 'Madness' in Hartford: The First Surrealist Exhibition in America," *Arts Magazine* 60 [February 1986], p. 60.) Under Austin's guidance, the

Atheneum (which Guy called the "most advanced museum in the country") became one of the first American institutions to exhibit and acquire examples of surrealist painting for its permanent collection, thus providing Guy with the opportunity to view the work of Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, and others, firsthand (James Guy, as quoted in *Walter Quirt: A Retrospective,* exhib. cat. [Minneapolis: University Gallery, University of Minnesota, 1980], p. 11). Austin's pioneering 1931 show, *New Super-Realism*—the first exhibition of European surrealist art in the United States—was especially significant in that it led to Guy's realization that Surrealism, with its power to shock the viewer, was the style most suitable for communicating "the dynamic struggles of society" to the public (Guy, as quoted in Tashjian, p. 120). Austin's support for Guy was such that during the *New Super-Realism* exhibition, a selection of Guy's work was on display in the annex gallery of the museum.

After 1932, Guy began spending most of his time in New York, where he took classes at the Art Students League and viewed the work of European surrealists at the Museum of Modern Art and the Julien Levy Gallery. He was particularly impressed by Dali's precise painting style and bright palette, as well as by his practice of incorporating real and imagined objects into his imaginary environments. (Guy had the opportunity to meet Dali when he gave a lecture in Hartford in 1934. See Tashjian, p. 121.) At the same time, Guy's affinity for social surrealism went hand-in-hand with his involvement with several left-wing political organizations, such as the Unemployed Artists Group, the Artists' Union, and the John Reed Club, whose members believed that art could serve as a vehicle for social and governmental change. For Guy, this idea was reinforced when he went to Mexico, where he spent six months studying under José Clemente Orozco, who painted dynamic murals with political overtones. The exact dates of Guy's visit to Mexico are unknown. However,

his interest in mural painting was such that when Orozco was working on his mural cycle, *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932–34), at Dartmouth College, Guy made several excursions to Hanover, New Hampshire, to view its progress and enhance his knowledge of mural painting. (Considered one of his finest works, Orozco's mural, which was composed of twenty-four individual panels and covered nearly 3,200 square feet, dealt with the history of the Americas.)

During the 1930s and into the following decade, Guy spent the majority of his time painting modestly sized, crisply rendered oils such as *Yachting* (1935, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connectict); *Venus on Sixth Avenue* (1937, Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia); *On the Waterfront* (1937, John and Susan Horseman, St. Louis, Missouri); and *Black Flagg* (1940, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio), all of which exemplify his practice of using surrealist imagery to convey his response to the conditions of his time and place. However, like many artists of his milieu—and drawing on his previous contact with Orozco—Guy was also engaged in mural painting, executing decorations for public schools in Hartford and Meriden, Connecticut, as well as a mural (since lost) for the 13th Street Communist Works School. (For an illustration of Guy's mural of Gloucester fishermen, executed for Hartford Public High School, see Julia Older, "Hartford Public Buildings Richly and Lastingly Adorned as Uncle Sam Becomes Nation's Most Lavish Art Patron," *Hartford Courant*, July 1, 1934.) Guy's forays into mural work also resulted in *The Camouflage Man in a Landscape*, a meticulously rendered surrealist piece comprising six panels, which was closely based on an oil, *Camouflage Man in a Landscape* (private collection) from 1938.

The easel painting that inspired Guy's mural was a notable work, as evident by its inclusion in *American Art Today*, a large survey exhibition held in the Contemporary Art Building at the New

York World's Fair of 1939. (See *American Art Today: New York World's Fair* [New York: National Art Society, 1939], p. 78.) Intended to represent all facets of contemporary American art, from "traditional academicism to surrealism and abstraction," the exhibition included 550 paintings, 250 sculptures and 400 examples of graphic art selected by juries of prominent artists from all regions of the country (Holger Cahill, "American Art Today," in *American Art Today*, p. [32]). Guy was among the contingent of artists who submitted examples of their work to the Committee of Selection from New York, a group of established artists that included Stuart Davis, Philip Evergood, Jonas Lie, and Eugene Speicher, who no doubt viewed *Camouflage Man in a Landscape* as a striking example of Guy's manipulation of surrealist devices to convey his reaction to the complexities and struggles of modern life. A provocative work that suggests a chaotic, prewar world in disarray, the painting reached an audience beyond the confines of the Contemporary Art Building when it was reproduced in the Sunday Magazine section of the *New York Times* on June 18, 1939, the caption identifying it as "an example of Surrealist influence. It shows daring and bizarre juxtapositions and a feeling for the fantastic and mysterious" ("Rotogravure Picture Section," *New York Times*, June 18, 1939, n.p.).

At some point in 1939, Guy transposed the same "daring and bizarre juxtapositions" to his mural. Indeed, *Camouflage Man in a Landscape* and the Hirschl & Adler mural are closely related, the larger format of the latter affording Guy the opportunity to broaden the expansive outdoor vista that serves as the backdrop in the oil. Both works feature the same conglomeration of tableaus composed of odd groupings and idiosyncratic motifs rendered in bold shades of blue, yellow, orange, and red along with somber earth tones. It is presumably the "camouflage man" who appears in the foreground of each piece—a distorted figure dressed in a suit who looks backwards as he runs forward, perhaps hoping to blend into his surroundings as he flees an unseen threat. (A color

reproduction of Guy's oil, which measures 24 x 30 inches, can be found in *Coming Home: American Paintings 1930–1950 from the Schoen Collection,* exhib. cat. [Athens, Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2003], p. 158). The sinister, dream-like environment includes a pair of naked men, interpreted as elongated, rubbery forms, pushing against a wall lit by a nearby spotlight and some paper lanterns, and further on, a mysterious figure escorting a child, their darkened shapes silhouetted against an empty Daliesque vista flanked in the distance by mountains and sky. On the right, the viewer's gaze is drawn to another puzzling detail in the form of a cylindrical metal cannister topped by a pair of loudspeakers and a woman's head at the base of a barbershop pole. (In the mural, the head is prettier and more doll-like than the one depicted in the oil.) The mood is equally strange on the left side of the image, although in the mural, Guy substituted a shapely lady—wearing a contemporary dress and red high heels and carrying a fishing net in one hand while holding a baby upside-down in the other—for the disconcerting wraith-like figure that strides (baby in tow) through the rural setting in the oil, not far from a striped ball wearing a wig.

The genesis of Guy's mural remains a mystery. At present, it is unclear as to whether it was a commissioned work (perhaps used as a set design for a theatre) or a private endeavor inspired by the positive response to his oil. (Guy would also have seen the numerous murals on display at the World's Fair, including those at the Works Progress Administrative Building, which showcased some of the finest.) Suffice to say, *The Camouflage Man in a Landscape* attests to Guy's involvement with mural painting and, like the oil that inspired it, affirms his position as "one of the few American painters whose work can challenge the maddest of the French surrealists and at the same time bristle with human ... significance" ("Cultural Front," *Direction* 2 [July-August 1939], p. [21]).

Nineteen thirty-nine was a memorable year for Guy. In addition to exhibiting *Camouflage Man in a Landscape* at the World's Fair, he had a one-man show at the Boyer Galleries in New York. In the ensuing years, he had solo exhibitions in New York, at the Ferargil Galleries (1941, 1942, 1944) and the Carlebach Gallery (1948), and at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois (1948). Guy likewise exhibited his work in group shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the American Artists' Congress, among other venues. From 1942 until 1945, Guy was employed in an aircraft factory, where he found himself drawn to the planar forms of gliders. So inspired, he changed his aesthetic direction, abandoning Surrealism and social analysis in favor of buoyant and very brightly colored geometric abstractions influenced by the French cubist Ferdinand Léger. At one point during the mid-1950s, Guy took a break from painting and, in keeping with his love of piscatorial pursuits. spent his time fishing. (See Cy Stedman, "Return of an Artist," *Hartford Courant*, January 19, 1958. Guy's numerous articles on fishing appeared in national magazines, often illustrated with his drawings and photographs.) However, in 1958, he resumed his activity as an artist, going on to adapt to changing tastes in the art world by producing assemblages and constructions in which he explored the creative potential of materials such as Plexiglas.

Guy spent most of his time in New York until moving back to Connecticut in about 1940. During the next twenty years, he operated a summer art school in East Hampton, Connecticut, along with his first wife, Clara Skinner, an accomplished printmaker and illustrator who was later associated with the Op Art movement. Guy also held teaching positions at Bennington College (1945–47), MacMurray College (1946–54), and Wesleyan University (1961–75). In 1954, he relocated to

Moodus, Connecticut, where he remained (with the exception of seasonal trips to Florida) until his death in 1983. Guy's paintings have been included in major exhibitions devoted to the surrealist movement in the United States, notably *Surrealism and American Art, 1931–1947,* organized by the Rutgers University Art Gallery in 1977, and *Surrealism USA*, held at the National Academy of Design in New York in 2005.

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