

# UNCOVERING YONKERS: A CASE STUDY

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## ART IN YONKERS by Gabriella Solano

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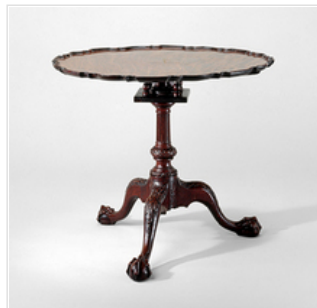
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## TIMELINE OF ARTS SCENE IN YONKERS

### Colonial Period

*Not art, but artisan*

There is not a significant collection of artwork from the colonial period in Yonkers. The majority of artifacts from this time consist of artisan tools and crafts. These objects were for utilitarian purposes and represented the strong ties remaining with Europe because they were created in the European style.[1] Function was the top priority, and there was not a lot of production of art for pure esthetic value. Artists were conceptualized more as craftsmen rather than creative visual artists.[2] This emphasis on function over fine art is indicative of an unstable time in Yonkers when identity was still rooted in Europe and people were not fully established in this new environment. In order to form a relationship with fine art people had to form a relationship with the land.[3]



Tea table 1765 (www.metmuseum.org)



Teapot 1745 (www.metmuseum.org)



Figure 3 colonial craftsmen (www.whatisencyclopedia.com)

### 19th century

*From function to fine art*



Home of Bierstadt (hudsonvalleyruins.org)



Layers of Blue Mountains Hudson Valley (Painter.com)

The 19th century commenced a shift in the identity and function of Yonkers and its surrounding areas. Rather than serve simply as a rural agricultural society, its proximity to the growing industrial city of New York began to make it an attractive oasis for city people who were tired of the crowded streets and felt nostalgic for rural America. This evolution in the conception of Yonkers is represented visually through the surge in artwork produced by artists from the city who found solace in the countryside. Yonkers and other parts of Westchester became a safe haven for a large group of artists who were ready to leave the city but not sacrifice their presence in the New York City art scene. Painters such as George Harvey, Albert Bierstadt, Edward Gay, and Jasper F. Cropsey made Westchester their home. It was an ideal place where the artists could be both immersed in inspirational landscapes and connected to the art market in the city. This was a new frontier for artists and while most built cottages they could enjoy the landscape from, artist Albert Bierstadt took advantage of the vast land to build a luxurious estate. According to his wife's sister the couple and his circle of friends "Had a gay life there...what tales of pleasure it could tell...clever people, beautiful women, talented men-artists, authors, poets." This quote illustrates the huge jump Yonkers made from a rural predominantly agrarian society to an idyllic country setting housing a vibrant and sophisticated artistic community. The 'gay life' described by Bierstadt's sister in law was central to the type of paintings these new artists in residence were creating[4]. The classic theme of nature is the central subject of the work from this time, but how nature is represented is unique and representative of the new relationship urbanites were forming with New York's surrounding areas. Rather than paint natural landscapes per usual connotations and highlight its danger and overwhelming vastness, painters chose to evoke feelings of comfort and luxury they found in their new homes. Fields, forests, mountain ranges, valleys, and hills were no longer on display as land for farming instead artists showcased these natural wonders as quaint venues for picnics, socializing, and creating art. Artists working in this style began to immerse themselves in painting and formed the Hudson River School. This was not an actual university, but a school of thought on painting that was started by English Immigrant Thomas Cole. Cole began depicting the relatively untouched American landscape as beautiful and majestic. After he pioneered this style numerous artists followed and formed a collective group that lasted until the rise of photography and the industrialization of Yonkers and the United States as a whole.[5]



Rainbows on the Hudson (thecityview.com)



New York 1872  
(hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu)

The artistic depiction of the luxurious country setting ran parallel to the transformation of these once agricultural zones. Yonkers within and outside the frame exchanged farms for estates and abandoned crops for gardens, which transformed the land from the great unknown to an ideal safe haven.

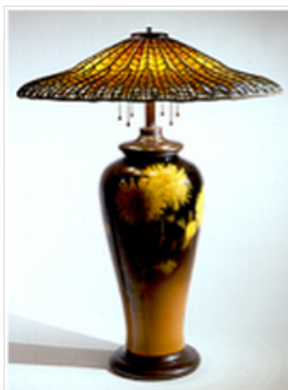
## 20th Century

### *Construction over creativity*



Hudson river painting (hrm.org)

The presence and importance of fine art declined gradually during the 20th century and dwindled almost completely by the 1950s when Yonkers grew into a post-war suburb focused on building cheaper homes quickly instead of idealizing grand manors and classical landscape paintings. Outside of the suburbs the modern art scene was booming and new media was being explored in innovative ways. This period experienced a surge in collage, sculpture, photography, and film, but in Yonkers and other suburban areas the home, tradition, and family values were priority.<sup>[6]</sup> These ideals are represented by the exhibitions displayed during this time at the first art Museum in Yonkers, The Hudson River Museum. From about 1948 till the late 1970s exhibitions focused on classical paintings, Victorian furniture, and decorative arts. The Museum's mission was to preserve history and tradition until the late seventies when a new director advocated for the Museum to incorporate a contemporary wing and begin to connect with the art world outside of the suburbs.<sup>[7]</sup>



Lotus Pagoda Library lamp (hrm.org)



Staffordshire plate (hrm.org)

## Modern Day

### *Pushing boundaries*

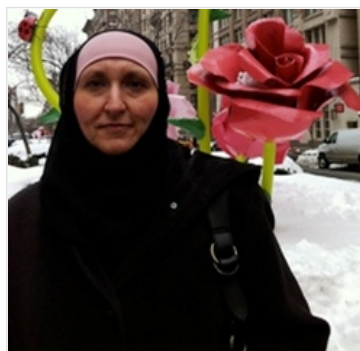


Entrance to yoho studio space (gitar.net)



Meeting of yoho artists (artimesjournal.com)

The incorporation of contemporary art into the Hudson River Museum was a catalyze for change in the art world of Yonkers. The modern artists and art forms that began to emerge from Yonkers mirror the changing identity of the city and the ever-growing diversity. There has been a major shift in the population and landscape of Yonkers since the days of the Henry Hudson School and that is expressed visually through its modern art scene and artist community. The homogeneous artists communities consisting of wealthy Caucasian males has evolved into communities like the Yonkers artist studios association (YOHO), which includes artists with last names ranging from Hughes to de la Cruz and houses every art medium from oil on canvas to modern sculpture.[8] Similar to the 19th century, Yonkers remains a sought out location for artists who want to leave the city without sacrificing a connection to it, however the lifestyle and ideology of modern day artists has changed according to the lifestyle and ideology of Yonkers. Rather than live picnicking and throwing soiree's and experiencing the 'gay life' described by Bierstadt's sister in law the artists of today have expanded their idea of art and use it as a tool for social commentary as well as esthetics. For example, Yonkers artist Haifa Bint Kadi was recently featured in the Yonkers arts and culture blog due to her recent sculpture made for Suny Oneonta that symbolizes an acceptance and embracement of diversity. Bint Kadi is known for her sculptures that explore this theme and stated about her work "Pole sculptures are designed to represent a community committed to the diversity of the world outside...Diversity at its core includes recognizing and embracing the value of 'difference' and that a multiplicity of ideas, voices and perspectives only enriches our social, cultural and intellectual world." [9]



Haifa Bint Kadi (cae-nyc.org)



Pole sculptures (yonkersart.com)

This quote synthesizes the ideology of modern day Yonkers artists that is driving the development of a multicultural artist community. The growth of this community is furthered by an increase in arts events such as the Yoho open artist studios in which artists open their studio doors to the public allowing them to peak into the artistic process and be exposed to new ideas and mediums being explored in modern art. At these events the celebration of the mixture in Yonkers is evident in the range of art displayed. A tattoo graffiti artist like 'Damn nice' follows a painter doing traditional oil on canvas portraits such as artist Kevin Gordon[10]. The co-existence of these varied works of art and artists provides visual evidence of how Yonkers has changed and how that change can be a good thing.



Flyer for open studio (heightsre.com)



Damn Nice Logo (tattoartists.org)

Not only has the type of art being made been influenced by the changes in Yonkers history, but also the amount of art production and visibility has increased. The complicated changes Yonkers has gone through and the cultural divide present makes art a necessary unifying device that will improve the landscape and lifestyle of Yonkers. The local government is now more than ever placing emphasis on cultivating the arts through funding public art, working towards development of arts schools, and encouraging the development of non-profit art organizations. According to mayor Phillip A. Amicone, "this is an opportunity like never before, to get private money for public art and private performing and visual art." Amicone's statement is supported by the recent allocation of \$1.5 billion dollars for the reconstruction of downtown to include public art and artist spaces as well as the development of public art competitions and the Yonkers Cultural Initiative grants program. These developments have benefitted the Yonkers artists who have been struggling to share their work with the community. [11]



Muhheakantuck (lesconcepts.com)



'Ella' (ocatlanta.com)

The funding placed toward public art allowed artists like Barbara Segal to design 'Muhheakantuck,' a public art piece decorating the viaduct on main street and Vinnie Bagwell to build a sculpture of legend and Yonkers native, Ella Fitzgerald. Segal, Bagwell, and others who have been contracted to create public art for downtown are immediate beneficiaries[12], but beyond providing more jobs for

some artists the recent surge in art funding has supported the creation and growth of non profits such as the blue door artists which foster local talent and creativity. This organization is a testament to the ability the arts have to transform the relationship of the diverse Yonkers citizens from culture clash to community. Founded in 2002 the Blue Door Artists association states 'our mission is to bring the arts to local communities throughout the tri-state area, especially those that are ethnically diverse as well as underserved.' They fulfill this mission with help from the recent placement of art as a top priority in local government funding. With help from individual and government donations the association has managed to put on over 20 exhibits featuring local art and exploring important social issues. In addition to galleries the association has reached out to high school students with programs like the 'green wall' project in which students were invited to explore the theme of environmental conservation through creation of murals. The organization has also led public art projects such as painting receptacles downtown, adding mosaic to public planters, and creating a sculpture garden in city hall[13]. The surge in funding and the way artists communities have used it demonstrates Steve Sansone's, president of the Untermyer Performing Arts Council, point that "art is no longer considered a perk, but a necessity... people are thirsty for it, and the city is adapting accordingly." [14]



Blue Door Artist Association Logo (bluedoorart.org)

The art scene experienced a revival and transformation within Yonkers, and has begun to expand beyond the city limits. While the arts have a longstanding tradition and place in Yonkers up until recently the art scene in this area has been overlooked. Art in Yonkers has historically been confined to either producing art for export to the city like it was in the 19th century or creating works that are strictly displayed locally. Recently there has been more attention given to the artistic side of Yonkers and has caused many New York City Artists to join the recently uncovered artist community of Yonkers. For example, The New York Times and the Westchester County Business Journal has featured Yonkers art openings and museums periodically in the last five years. An exhibition featuring the historic landscape paintings from the Hudson River School was advertised in the New York Times[15] and The Westchester Journal called attention to a call for artists to participate in a Yonkers public art project[16]. This not only notifies New York Times readers of the event, but also sends out the message that the arts hold a strong place in Yonkers. Just as landscape paintings in the city and advertisements for suburban homes in the paper changed public opinion on Yonkers, these features of arts happenings have too.



Sculpture garden city hall (vaadia.com)



Painted garbage trucks (gajitz.com)

#### Footnotes

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[12] Enslaved African's Rain Garden, "Biography:Vinnie Bagwell." Last modified 2012. Accessed April 20, 2012. <http://www.enslavedafricansraingarden.org/artist-bio.shtml>

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2012. <http://bluedoorart.org/>.

[14] Hodara, Susan. "Redevelopment in Yonkers Spurs Public Art." *New York Times*, 12 30, 2007.

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[16] 2007. "City of Yonkers Announces Call to Artists for Major Public Art Project." *Westchester County Business Journal* 46, no. 2: A3. Regional Business News, EBSCOhost (accessed April 25, 2012).

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